A Sketch of the Post-War World

Here, Chen is at his most pessimistic. He doubts if the democratic countries can win the war, and predicts new world wars soon after the end of the present one; there will be no lasting peace, no justice, and no equality, either within nations or between them, whichever side emerges victorious. Imperialism will not weaken but grow stronger and bipolar: the post-war world will be divided between the hostile powers of America and Germany or of America and Britain; the two victors will attack one another and act as magnets for the lesser powers. Unless the ‘leading’ countries go socialist (which Chen thinks unlikely, though he clearly hopes that it will happen), there will be no new independent states, for the Soviet example has shown that imperialism will not fall merely because its weakest link has snapped. Perhaps imperialism’s resilience is in some ways a good thing, for economic unification is progressive even when achieved by counter-revolutionary force, and will inevitably pave the way to socialism. The Chinese people should resist imperialism, but they should at the same time learn from the West. They should seek to expand their industry in order to create the conditions for chiming in with future revolutions in the industrial countries. If the interests of nation and world democracy collide, the latter must take precedence. During his last years in Sichuan, Chen generally made his views known not in public but through letters. This ‘Sketch of the Post-War World’ is an exception. It was published in Dagongbao on 21 March 1942, just two months before Chen’s death. The Guomindang refused to allow it to be published in Chengdu, apparently for fear of offending the Soviet Union, which Chen denounces in the article, and suppressed its sequel (‘Once Again on the World Situation’, the next text below) (see Ren Jianshu and Tang Baolin 1989, vol. 2, p. 298). Source: Zhuanji wenxue zazhi she (eds) 1967, pp. 91–103.

History does not repeat itself, and this present war has already caused huge changes throughout the world, or laid the basis for such changes. It is pointless to try to depict the future with theories drawn from the past.

There are only three possible outcomes to this war: neither Britain and America nor Germany and Japan will prevail, but both sides will talk peace; Britain and America will win; Germany and Japan will win. Least likely is the first outcome, so there is no need to speculate on it here. Of the second and third outcomes, which is the more likely? To judge by present conditions, it seems clear that Germany and Japan have the upper hand. The war has already been going on for more than two years. Having now acquired the support of the Soviet Union, for the last six months Britain has enjoyed a lull in the war, yet even with its entire forces it cannot block the advance of the numerically
smaller German army in North Africa. It is hard to see how in the near future Britain can defeat the main German army. If one accepts that Britain's defeats in the various battle theatres have been due to the outnumbering of its army and its air force, then within a year or eighteen months, after the British and Americans have had a chance to expand their arms production, there may well be a change in the overall situation. But today, although some people are calling for a ‘wholesale reorientation of factory production’ to judge by the past and present behaviour of government officials – which was characterised by inertia – and factory owners, who care only about their own interests, it is doubtful whether Britain and America can succeed in beating Germany and the neighbours under its control in the arms race. And even if we do assume that at some future date they will be in a position to do so, are we also to assume that for some mysterious reason Hitler and his partners win simply bide their time and refrain from launching offensives in that year to eighteen months while Britain and America increase their armaments? Yes, Germany's internal crisis surpasses that of Britain and America, but it will only reach explosive proportions once war-weariness sets in or the German army is defeated. Germany's only weakness is its lack of oil. That is why Germany cannot sustain a long war unless it succeeds in capturing the Caucasus or Iran. For that reason, Germany needs a quick victory. The interest of Britain and America, on the other hand, lies in a protracted war. The main aim of both sides is to fix the time for action in their favour. So in Germany's imminent spring offensive, whether it happens in the Mediterranean or in European Russia, whoever is victorious along the line between Malta, Gibraltar, the Suez Canal, and Singapore or that between Moscow, the Caucasus, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Singapore will have won the key to overall victory in the war. If the Axis powers win, Britain and America will be incapable of sustaining a protracted war. Throughout the history of warfare, space, numbers, and resources have never been the main factor in deciding victory.

If Britain and America win and the Axis powers are finished, new oppositions will arise at the peace table or the international conference to deal with the war's aftermath. It will not be easy for post-war Britain to clear up the situation in Europe, North Africa, the Near East, and the Middle East, and for a while its strength will not stretch to the Far East. The Far East, including Southeast Asia and Australasia, is likely to become an American sphere of influence. Under such circumstances, the friendship of Soviet Russia will be a prize for which Britain and America compete; their fate will hang on the next world war.

If Hitler wins the war, Britain will be finished, and America too will for the time being be forced to withdraw to safety behind the Atlantic and the Pacific.