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Ann Trotter

Excerpt

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1 BRITAIN'S FAR EAST PROBLEM

Between the dramatic events of the Manchurian crisis and the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war, British policy-makers struggled to define Britain's aims in east Asia and her policy towards China and Japan. It was necessary in 1933 to reassess British policy in the light of Japan's success in Manchuria and her departure from the League of Nations; to take account of Japanese commercial competition in China and elsewhere; and to consider British east Asian policy in the wider context of imperial defence problems. Would British help in the reconstruction of China, or Anglo-Japanese cooperation in China, an Anglo-Japanese political understanding, or some recognition of Japan's naval ambitions be the best way to ensure the maintenance of a power-balance in east Asia which would preserve British interests there? The possibilities were discussed repeatedly in Whitehall where the Foreign Office, the Treasury and the defence ministries each had a particular contribution to make to the debate. In these years of uneasy peace in east Asia the relationship between China and Japan ranged between open hostility and apparently imminent *rapprochement*. This state of uncertainty in Sino-Japanese relations relieved Britain, still the western power which played the largest part in east Asian affairs, of any necessity of declaring a commitment to either China or Japan. The circumstances encouraged debate on British policy and, as the *status quo* in Europe was increasingly threatened by German expansion, Whitehall's urge to discover a solution to Britain's problems in the far east intensified. It is necessary first to consider the basis of these problems.

THE BACKGROUND

In a despatch written in December 1918, Sir John Jordan, the

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British minister in Peking, stated that in his opinion the far east problem might be described as the problem of Japan's position in China.¹ In 1933 this problem remained. When Jordan wrote, Japanese expansion on the Asian continent during the first world war and the temporary distress of the European powers had destroyed that precarious balance in the far east which the imperial powers had hitherto managed to maintain. The war accelerated the decline of British commercial and naval strength just as it accelerated Japan's commercial and political encroachment on the Chinese mainland. As Japan's ambitions grew, so did the clash between her interests and those of Britain in China; and neither the Anglo-Japanese alliance nor the Washington treaties which replaced it solved the British problem of reconciling a desire to check Japan's continuing activities with a need to secure Japanese cooperation in naval matters.² To this problem was added in the 1920s the cross-current of growing Chinese nationalism and, though this in one sense added to British problems, it was, nevertheless, to British advantage in so far as it stiffened resistance to the Japanese in China. Successive British governments after 1918 were preoccupied with maintaining international stability and the *status quo* in order to provide the best conditions for the overseas trade on which the British economy depended. This conservative attitude has been described as

appropriate to a wealthy contented Power, with a larger stake in the external world than it was in fact able to defend, and apprehensive as to the effect on its accumulated interests of violence or revolutionary change almost anywhere.³

Japan's actions in Manchuria after September 1931 threatened stability in the far east and as such threatened British interests and the international order which Britain wished to maintain. In 1933, therefore, Britain's far eastern problem remained essentially the same as it had been in 1918, the problem of Japan's position in China.

In the mid 1920s the far east had remained relatively quiet. Economic considerations took precedence over political and military considerations and this was conducive to an atmosphere of good feeling among the major powers interested in China. For reasons of her own, Japan avoided clashes with Britain in China

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and was consequently assessed by Britain's leaders as 'a weak rather than a strong power'.⁴ It was even possible to contemplate that Japan might be used to maintain stability in China so that international commerce might flourish the better there.⁵ In these circumstances, Britain's influence existed because her strategic situation was not revealed to be perilous. This myth of her imperial power sustained Britain's position in the far east.

Events in Manchuria between 1931 and 1933 demonstrated all too clearly the actual growth of Japanese power, in China in particular, just as they demonstrated that Britain had neither the means nor the heart to oppose Japan there. Japan's overwhelming success destroyed the illusion of co-prosperity among the powers in China and revealed her as the dynamic factor in the far east. In the face of Japanese aggression, Chinese nationalism seemed to lack backbone and both China and the League of Nations were rendered helpless. Most serious for the British, however, was the fact that the unresolved problem of Japan's position in China had exposed the fact that Britain's presence in the far east was sustained by a huge confidence trick.

When, therefore, Japan announced her intention of leaving the League in March 1933, Britain was faced with the necessity of reassessing her own far eastern position and policy and of revising her images of China and Japan. The relationship between China and Japan and the power balance in the far east had to be reconsidered. It was difficult for the British to judge at that stage whether Japan had abandoned the peaceful economic expansion, which had characterised her policy in the 1920s, for military expansionism or whether she was merely attempting to impose some order in that part of China in which Japan was most heavily committed financially. If the first proposition was true, Britain's position in the far east was indeed precarious. If the truth lay in the second, British interests in China could be preserved and the illusion of British power might still be sustained. Moreover, if by 'teaching the Chinese a lesson' Japan had encouraged them to 'put their house in order' at last, she might well have served the interests of all the powers trading there.

Uncertainty about Japan's aims in China added to the problem of reaching a decision about the line Britain should take. The

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question for the British was whether in the new situation Japan was to be regarded as an invincible rival with aims fundamentally opposed to British interests; or whether she might once more be treated as a possible partner interested, like Britain, chiefly in economic goals. If Japan was to be accepted, the obvious place to meet her half-way was in China. The problem was how to give practical effect to this. It had been possible to contemplate bargaining with Japan in China when Japanese weakness, like British strength, had been over-estimated. It was much more difficult to visualise harmonising Japan's policy in China and the Pacific with British imperial policy and Chinese interests when British weakness could more readily be assessed. It was obvious that, whether or not Japan's policy and methods had changed, Japan's ambitions were unlikely to be contained by British moral influence alone.

The difficulties of Britain's situation in the far east after 1933 were compounded by the very success of her confidence trick in the past. She was herself the victim of a false image, the British public on the one hand and the community of nations on the other, having an entirely inflated idea of the role that Britain had the capacity to play in the far eastern area. It was difficult in the interests of security, if not dangerous, to explode this myth in 1933 and, more than any other government department, the Foreign Office was the victim of the situation. Having played a poor hand not unskillfully for so long,⁶ the Foreign Office found itself expected to continue playing great power diplomacy in the far east without any trumps. Japan always held the best cards and any quick tricks taken from her were only too likely to weaken Britain's hand further in the long run. In spite of the difficulties, however, there was no intention of throwing in the hand and abandoning British interests. Politicians and civil servants educated before 1914 to take pride in, and responsibility for, Britain's world-wide interests, assumed that Britain's position in the far east and at the centre of her empire must be maintained, and they were conscious that the British public and the Dominions believed this to be possible.⁷

In formulating principles for the new situation in the far east, British policy-makers obviously could not ignore the sentiments

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at home which had helped shape decisions in the past. Supporters of the principle of collective security and militant pacifists were incensed by events in Manchuria and wanted action taken to bring Japan to reason. In the case of the brief arms embargo which the British government had imposed in February 1933 and had lasted only two weeks because of lack of support from others, the government had been influenced by these sentiments,⁸ but the various other kinds of retaliatory action which were advocated, for example an economic blockade of Japan, were not seriously contemplated.⁹ The chief concern of the British cabinet throughout the Manchurian crisis had been that Britain should act as a loyal member of the League. Whether this was from convictions about collective security, from a preference for the inconspicuousness of the League or from considerations of internal policy was unimportant once Japan gave notice of her intention to leave. By March 1933, Britain had to face the fact that the League and the principle of collective security, the main resort of successive British governments since 1918, could no longer be held up as the shield modestly concealing Britain's nakedness in the far east. With Japan's defection, the far east had, in a sense, to become a separate factor in calculations about foreign policy, for considerations of collective security no longer applied.

On the other hand, the far east had never been more in the centre of foreign policy calculations in London. Japan's action there had finally caused the dropping, in 1932, of the rule which had since 1919 caused British strategic planning to be based on the assumption that there would be no major war in the next ten years.¹⁰ The international disarmament conference which had been meeting at Geneva since February 1932 had made no headway by the end of the year and the issue of rearmament had to be faced. The British government was torn between its consciousness of the continuing support for disarmament in the country, demonstrated by the success of Labour candidates at bye-elections in 1933,¹¹ and its knowledge of Britain's vulnerability in the face of a dangerous situation in the far east and a deteriorating situation in Europe. This paralysing dilemma would have had disastrous implications for Britain's defence strategy in the far east whether or not it had been clear to the British in 1933 that

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Japan was embarked on a policy of military expansionism. If over-all strategic readiness was neither a physical nor a psychological possibility for the British in 1933, the question was whether security in the far east could be achieved in some less expensive way. An Anglo-Japanese *rapprochement* apparently offered such a solution; but implicit in such a *rapprochement* was an acceptance by Whitehall of a change in the power relationship between Britain and Japan in the far east and of Japan's activities in China. Given the government's concept of Britain's world role and its interpretation of the British public's opinion of Japan's actions in Manchuria, this solution did not represent an easy way out of the defence dilemma in 1933.

The government's capacity to reach decisions on defence matters was further impaired by its knowledge of the country's economic problems. These problems, which became compelling after September 1931, also affected the thinking of the body of officials upon whose advice the government had to rely. The effect of the crisis had been to heighten the importance and expand the role of the Treasury in both domestic and international affairs. The defence departments and the Foreign Office both suffered as a result of this. In 1932 the Treasury had warned,

The position and future of this country depend on recovery and maintenance of sound finances and a healthy trading position. Without these we cannot provide resources for Imperial or national defence. . . . What has to be considered therefore is one set of risks balanced against another. . . . today financial and economic risks are by far the most serious and urgent.¹²

Inevitably the Treasury became deeply involved in arguments over defence strategy after 1933. The chancellor of the exchequer recoiled in horror from the level of expenditure considered necessary by service ministries after such a long period of run-down; and the Treasury took the lead in a search for an alternative and less costly defence strategy in the far east. In arguments over defence it was possible for the service ministries to defeat the Treasury on the technicalities of tonnage and range and gun size. In arguments about principles of foreign policy which tended to be based on imponderables, it was less easy for the Foreign Office to make a case against a differing Treasury view. The effect of this was to weaken the Foreign Office voice.

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The Treasury had the further advantage of having as its spokesman in cabinet Neville Chamberlain, the most active and able member of the front bench. Chamberlain played an increasingly active role in policy decisions relating to the far east after 1933. By the time he became prime minister in 1937 he regarded himself as something of an expert in this field.¹³ Chamberlain admitted that 'unhappily' it was part of his nature to try to find solutions to those problems he perceived.¹⁴ This temperament alone would have led him to assert himself in a cabinet in which he regarded the prime minister as 'played out' and his deputy as 'useless';¹⁵ but the persisting conflict between the felt need for rearmament and the necessity for financial recovery must always have given the chancellor a key role after 1933. The priority given to defence requirements in the far east by Britain's defence chiefs meant that Chamberlain inevitably involved himself in the search for a 'solution' to Britain's far eastern problems.

The three foreign secretaries in the period between 1933 and 1937 clearly found it difficult to stand up to the chancellor in matters affecting the far east. Sir John Simon, who was foreign secretary from 1931 to 1935, was the most experienced in far eastern matters as it was he who had guided British policy during the Manchurian crisis. His activities at that time had been criticised at home by those supporters of the League of Nations who felt he had given a half-hearted lead in the application of the principle of collective security; and abroad, particularly in the United States, by those who regarded his response to the Stimson doctrine of non-recognition as inadequate.¹⁶ Simon was, and remains, a controversial figure. In a way he was a victim of the time. To the public, unaware of the extent of the country's strategic and economic weakness, it seemed that Britain's lack of influence during the Manchurian crisis and thereafter must be due to the failings of the foreign secretary. Simon's temperament did not help him. He was apparently wholly unconscious of the effect he produced on others and gave the impression of being 'very pleased with himself'.¹⁷ This did not inspire confidence. Simon's legal training gave him a preference for presenting the pros and cons rather than arguing the case for a particular course

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of action. This gave some of his exasperated colleagues the impression that he had no policy and needed to be 'kicked from behind' by the cabinet and the Foreign Office before he could be persuaded into action.¹⁸ Simon was prepared to disagree with the chancellor over the policy Britain should follow in the far east but, in the last resort, it was Chamberlain who had his way.¹⁹

Sir Samuel Hoare who held the foreign secretaryship from June to December 1935 was more preoccupied in this period with the problems caused by Italy's ambitions in Abyssinia than with the far east.²⁰ He made an early attempt to inform himself of the true value and volume of British trade in China but, having discovered this to be rather less than he had expected, was anxious not to interfere with decisions on aid to China made by the Treasury at that time even when these decisions were criticised by the Foreign Office.²¹

Anthony Eden, who succeeded Hoare as foreign secretary, had considerable experience of foreign affairs and the ways of the Foreign Office. He had been under-secretary of state at the Foreign Office from 1931 to 1933 and minister for League of Nations affairs from June 1935. Perhaps this increased his awareness of the power of the chancellor and the Treasury. Cabinet and Foreign Office records indicate that, at least in matters of far eastern policy, Eden wished to avoid disputes between the Treasury and the Foreign Office.²²

Differences over policy on the far east reopened wounds which the Foreign Office carried from an earlier and unrelated encounter with the Treasury. To the insult of having lost a battle after the first world war to make the Department of Overseas Trade a part of the Foreign Office had been added the injury of having the Treasury, in 1931, veto an attempt to set up a Foreign Office economic section.²³ The Foreign Office was aware of, and sensitive about, its weakness on the economic side. It happened that economic and political affairs were particularly difficult to separate in the far east and the demarcation lines between technical financial matters which might have been supposed to be the Treasury preserve, and the political matters which were the Foreign Office concern, were necessarily blurred. The antagonism which was felt in the Foreign Office as it seemed that control was

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being taken out of the far eastern department's hands was not disguised and the result of Treasury influence and inter-departmental rivalry was a dual diplomacy which in no way solved Britain's problems in east Asia.

Some of the difficulties of the Foreign Office in this particular struggle with the Treasury may be attributed to the place of the far east department in the Foreign Office hierarchy. Whatever the importance of the far east in the eyes of the strategists, Washington, Paris and Berlin were posts of greater political importance in 1933. The head of the far east department was a less powerful figure than his counterparts of the American department, the western department or the central department.²⁴ The far east department had the additional difficulty of trying to create policy for an area whose people and culture were quite exceptionally 'foreign' to members of the Foreign Office, the Treasury and the cabinet. In order to make up for the lack of first-hand knowledge of the far east in the Foreign Office, Sir John Pratt, a man of long experience in the consular service in China, was attached to the far east department as adviser. Pratt's expertise was much in demand, but the information he provided seldom circulated beyond the far east department, and his status as a member of the consular service restricted the amount of influence it was possible for him to wield.²⁵

The head of the far east department was Charles Orde. He had held this post since 1930. Orde could be relied upon for a careful well-balanced account of the issues but his rather pedantic approach was irritating to those outside the Foreign Office who sought solutions to Britain's problems. Inside the Foreign Office Orde seems to have been respected but his unspectacular career suggests that he was not found to be an impressive personality.²⁶

Of the senior members of the Foreign Office, the man who displayed most interest in far eastern affairs was Sir Victor Wellesley.²⁷ By 1933 he was nearing the end of his diplomatic career. He was conscious of the limitations of Britain's position in the far east, convinced of the inevitability of Japanese expansion in China and aware of the threat this presented to Britain's image as an imperial power. When Wellesley retired in 1936, Sir Alexander Cadogan, ambassador in Peking, became deputy

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undersecretary and, on his return to the Foreign Office, took an active interest in far eastern affairs.²⁸

One of the strengths of the Treasury lay in the closeness and continuity of the relationship between the chancellor, Neville Chamberlain, and the energetic permanent under-secretary at the Treasury, Sir Warren Fisher. Chamberlain and Fisher shared the belief that it was idle to arm against a possible challenge from Japan and that Britain's defences in Europe were the first priority. It seems probable that the association between the different foreign secretaries and the Foreign Office was a less easy one. In 1935 Vansittart complained that Simon told him one thing and did another, went behind his back, kept him in the dark and, on occasion, lied to him.²⁹ The relationship between Hoare and Vansittart had an unhappy outcome for both men.³⁰

The Foreign Office felt its view was the 'professional' one which must be allowed to prevail in far eastern policy.³¹ This professional view was that the only solution to Britain's difficulty of balancing imperial security against the problem of Japan in China was to try to antagonise neither China nor Japan. To ardent and systematic minds in the Treasury, particularly to Sir Warren Fisher, this looked like a 'do nothing' policy. It seemed to him that the far east department was unduly cautious and he accused its head, whom he described as a pedant ignorant of human nature, of being 'obsessed' with the idea that original sin was monopolised by Japan and of believing that Britain should have no contact with such impiety.³² Fisher claimed that the 'amateurs' at the Foreign Office were a source of danger when dealing with the complicated issues raised by far eastern policy.³³

Faced with the problem of protecting a valuable British investment in China in the face of Japan's power and China's weakness, the Treasury advocated discarding the traditional tool of British prestige in the far east, the royal navy, and favoured for reasons of imperial strategy as well as for its commercial advantages, the cultivation of Japanese friendship and a return to something like the alliance days. It was debatable whether the Anglo-Japanese alliance had ever had any practical effect in China³⁴ but, as seen from 1933, there was the illusion that, in the period before 1921, Anglo-Japanese friendship had provided a means for the protec-