



An Analyses of Yuan Shikai's Policy towards Japan

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Abstract

From 1912 to 1916, China was under the control of Yuan Shikai. Because Yuan signed unequal treaties, especially his acceptance of the "Twenty-One Demands", presented by Japan, he was considered as a betrayer of China. However, in dealing with the relationship with Japan and other foreign powers, Yuan made efforts to protest against their unreasonable demands and reduce losses. For the economic and military weakness of China, these unequal treaties were compromises made by Yuan's government. Yuan Shikai's domination should be objectively evaluated.

Keywords: Yuan Shikai, Diplomatic policy, Japan

The 1911 revolution overthrew the Qing Dynasty. Instead of Sun Yat-sen, the spiritual leader of the revolution and the provisional president of the new republican government, Yuan Shikai was elected by the Nanjing Assembly to be first president of Chinese Republic in 1912. It was a transitional period of modern Chinese society. With superficial republic political system, China was still a semi-colonial and semi-feudal country, since the defeat of Opium War, but not a substantive modern republic. Most government officials were accustomed to feudalism and the republican government continued to use a certain number of Qing's policies, especially in diplomatic relations. Foreign powers, such as American, Britain and Japan, had a great influence on Yuan's government as before. Under the intervention of those foreign powers, Yuan's government lacked of independence in both internal affairs and foreign affairs.

Among these foreign powers, Japan, as the nearest one, had more geographic advantages in obtaining political and economic benefits from China. In September 1908, Japanese government asserted that in any situations Japan should endeavour to obtain the dominant position and antecedence in Chinese affairs (Su, 2001, p.70). In the years after, the Japanese government continuously confirmed the necessity to maintain the priority in controlling China.

Concerning with the relation between Yuan Shikai and Japan, the prevalent viewpoint of Chinese historians is that Yuan colluded with Japan to consolidate his political power (Zhuang, 1982, p.46). Especially Yuan's acceptance of the "Twenty one Demands", presented by Japan, was considered as the evidence of his traitorous policy. However, some other historians concluded that Japan hold a hostile attitude towards Yuan (Zhou, 1994, p.113). In addition, according to historical records, Yuan Shikai strove against Japan's oppression and defended China's rights in a certain degree during his term of office. To this extent, Yuan deserves an objective judgment.

When the new Chinese republic was founded, the turbulent political scene, conflicts between different factions, and the economic depression caused the enervation of national power. Consequently, in Yuan's mind, the primary task remained in securing his own power, and he was not able to spare his vim and vigour to revive from the diplomatic predicament initiated from the late Qing Dynasty. Under this situation, the best way to defend his rule was utilizing foreign powers to defeat inner rivals (Wei, 2003 p.50). In another aspect, after the 1911 Revolution, China's chaos situation provided foreign powers an opportunity to enlarge their profits in China. UK invaded into Tibet; Russia helped betrayers split Mongol out of China; Japan extended the influence in Manchuria, which pushed China into the danger of division. In order to prevent foreign powers' subjugation, Yuan's government had no other choices but to make compromise with foreign powers and to unwillingly satisfy their demands in economy, military and politics to exchange both economic support and political acknowledgement.

In 1913, Yuan's government asked for a 2500 million-pound loan from a bank group consisted of five banks from UK, Germany, France, Russia, and Japan. The guarantee for the loan included three items: the income salt-sale of the government,

the rest part of tariff, and the taxation from Shandong, Chili, Henan, and Jiangsu province (Lai, 2000, p.259).

Yuan's loan from the foreign powers is popularly considered as a damage of the country's economy sovereignty, which enhance economic dependence on foreign powers. However, at that time, Yuan had no better way to sustain the financial circulation. At the beginning of Yuan's ruling period, the national finance was in a difficult situation. The wars between Yuan and his rivals greatly raised the military disbursement. Simultaneously, the repayment for the pre-loan was a heavy burden on Yuan's government. In order to raise military funds for safeguard his state power, Yuan referred to the financial aid from foreign powers.

Yuan secured the financial stability of the government at a cost of the 2500 million-pound loan. Through this loan, Yuan's government gained the trust and support of the foreign powers.

In dealing with the diplomatic relations with foreign powers, Yuan made full use of the contradictories between them to prevent their invasive demands and reduce losses. Each foreign power sought for more benefits than others. Therefore, they made efforts to reduce and thwart others' acquirement for extra benefits. Because of these contradictories, it was impossible for one single foreign power to monopolize China. During that period, China was not able to strongly protest their invasion and fulsome demands. An uncompromising resistant might change foreign powers' partiality, or even lead to military invasion. For example, Japanese government asserted that if Yuan didn't accept Japan's demands, Japan wouldn't retreat from Shandong and assist Yuan to suppress southern radicals. Even Japan might suborn Zhang Zuolin to accelerate Manchuria's independence (Zhang, 1992, p.154). Thus, Yuan would seek for the other foreign powers' help when one of them endeavoured to acquire more benefits.

Japan proposed the "Twenty-One Demands" in 1914, whose content indicated Japan's motivation of monopolizing China. For fear of other powers' interference, Japan attempted to negotiate with Chinese government without informing other countries. However, during the negotiation, Yuan intensively disclosed the content of the treaty to UK and American governments. He expected them to mediate the negotiation so that Japan would concede. On March 16th, American Secretary sent aide-memoire to Japan to protest the requirement for benefits of police and Fujian province in the Fifth Demand, which disrespected China's sovereignty and the equalization principle in industry and commerce (Ma, 2005, p.63).

Other powers' interference brought oppression on Japan which supported China in denying the Fifth Demand. This "check and balance" policy indicated China's weakness. However, this policy also revealed the diplomatic endeavor made by Yuan's government to maximally protect Chinese rights.

During the World War I, the European powers and American were busy in war and had no spare strength and energy to maintain Chinese affairs. Under this situation, on January 1, 1915, Japanese government presented "Twenty-One Demands" to Chinese government with the goal of making China a virtual Japanese colony. The Japanese wanted the Chinese government to cede Shandong to Japan, an area that it had just taken from Germany at the start of World War 1; allow Japanese investments and troops in Manchuria and Inner Mongolia; give up partial control of several Chinese-owned iron and steel industries; refuse to give other foreign nations additional coastal territory; and allow Japanese advisors to run the Chinese government (Grasso, 2004, p.78).

Confronting with the "Twenty-One Demand", Yuan accepted most demands on May 9th, 1915. Thereafter, Yuan was considered as a traitor by most Chinese, because of his acceptance. However, during the negotiation, Yuan's efforts to reduce losses, which caused by the treaty, were generally ignored by most Chinese. Compelled by Japan's ultimatum and the helpless situation, Yuan accepted the treaty unwillingly.

As president, Yuan was very indignant to Japan's demands. On January 9th, when he met Japanese military advisor, he said that Sino-Japan relationship should base on equality and friendship, and why Japan treated China as savage or slave; as for the demands presented by Japanese ambassador, it was impossible to accept completely (Ma, 2005 p.64).

On the other hand, Yuan was not to refuse the treaty completely. The government of a weak country had few choices in diplomacy. In order to avoid irritating Japan, Yuan was afraid that the refusal of the demands would threaten his dominion. Consequently, Japan kept an uncompromising stand during the process.

From February 2nd, the first meeting, to April 17th, there were 25 formal meetings between the two governments. Yuan's delegacy presented an amendment on February 9th, and Japanese delegacy presented one on April 24th. Both sides didn't make a compromise. On May 1st, Chinese delegacy rejected Japan's amendment. Finally, Japanese delegacy issued an ultimatum, May 7th, and demanded China to reply before 6 p.m. May 9th. Japan declared that if China's reply was unsatisfied, Japan would adopt appropriate measures, alluding to military invasion afterwards (Su Quanyou, 2004, p.136).

After the acceptance of the "Twenty-One Demands", Yuan pointed out that according to the present strength of China, to battle with Japan would lead to China's collapse. He notified his fellow officers to remember this national humiliation and strive for a better future of the nation. On May 13th Yuan permitted Gu Weijun to publicize a declaration which recorded the process of negotiation between China and Japan. Although Yuan accepted the "Twenty-One Demands", in its practical operation process, Yuan still made efforts to protest the treaty's carrying out. He once presented to his secretary that he would use administrative power, instead of legal power, to block the treaty's operation (Ma, 2005, p.63). His protest did not

substantively destroy the treaty, but, in certain degree, it reduced Chinese losses. China had avoided the fate of becoming a Japanese colony, and the ground work was laid for future problems with Japan.

After the negotiation of the “Twenty-One Demands”, the relationship between China and Japan was not improved. Instead, it deteriorated (Zhu, 2004, p.14). Japan government was not satisfied with the result of the negotiation because the Fifth Demand, which is the most substantial item of the “Twenty-One Demands”, was rejected by Yuan. A certain number of Japanese officials proposed that they should change Yuan Shikai for a new leader, who might be more suitable for their acquirement for benefits.

During Yuan’s preparation for restoring the monarchy, Japan supported Yuan’s rivals to instigate rebellion. In January 1916, Japanese government refused the visit of Chinese envoy Zhou Ziqi, in order to embarrass Yuan’s government. These facts indirectly proved that it was impossible for Yuan to exchange his acceptance for Japanese support on his monarchical experiment. Yuan received Japan’s revenge for his protest against the “Twenty-One Demands”.

Considering China’s economic and military weakness, Yuan had to make compromise with foreign powers’ demands and invasions in order to avoid more losses and keep his domination. China has no strength to resist foreign powers’ military invasion. Without strong economic and military power, it was difficult for Yuan, or any other ruler, and his government to make powerful protest. Therefore, the compromises, made by Yuan, with foreign powers should not be considered as traitorous acts.

Under Yuan Shikai’s domination, no matter as president or emperor, China had lost various rights, including economy, and sovereignty. However, during Yuan’s four-year rule, because of the stable political situation and World War I, Chinese economy greatly and rapidly developed. Yuan had enough power and influence to control China as a unity. It was impossible for one signal leader to improve the weak situation of China. Yuan deserves objective judge and evaluation, rather than simply considered as a betrayer.

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