American Policy in the Far East

Mike Mansfield 1903-2001
Many of us are disturbed by the situation in the Far East. Things have happened there which have shocked and confused us. We are faced with an almost constant necessity of adjusting our thinking to new developments in that area.

We cannot retreat from these developments. Nor can we strike out blindly at them in the vain hope that precipitous action will alter their course. Either way is the irresponsible way. And the gravest danger of the moment lies not so much in the situation in Asia itself but in the irresponsibility in our own midst--the irresponsibility that ignores complex problems and feeds confusion; that spreads panic where the need for calm is greatest; that hampers efforts to cope effectively with difficulties abroad.

If we can get beneath the smokescreen raised by this irresponsibility, I think we will find that the basic problem of American Far Eastern policy is the same problem that
confronts us in all foreign policy. It is, first, the problem of identifying our own national interests—not the interests of the British or the Indonesians or the Chinese—but the interests of the United States. Then, having done that, it is a problem of acting as a group—a bipartisan group, I hope—in a manner best calculated to safeguard those interests.

It is important, therefore, to restate the fundamental reasons for our concern with the Far East. We are interested in that area, in the first place, because all of us realize that it has a very important relation to our own security. Security, however, is not merely a question of whether we have one base off the mainland of Asia or two or three or four. Bases are factors—important factors in security—but except to the inflexible armchair strategists, they are by no means the whole story.

It is possible to have all the bases and still lose a war as the Japanese discovered in China. On the other hand, it is possible to begin with practically none of them and win one as we lately demonstrated in the Pacific. I say this, not because I wish to minimize the importance of military considerations in foreign policy, but because it is necessary that we do not fall into a Maginot Line type of thinking about Formosa or any other position in Eastern Asia. Our peacetime Far Eastern policy, of course, must aim in part at the maintenance of an integrated defense system in the Western Pacific. But our policy cannot be expected to give us

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If we keep these facts in mind, we shall find, I believe, that the policy followed in turn by General Marshall and Secretary Byrnes during the Administration of President Truman, followed by administration after administration—Republican and Democratic—during the past half-century, should be kept on that track despite the efforts of those, who for reasons of sentimentality or politics, would derail it.
there, anymore than it can give us elsewhere, absolute security in a military sense.

In the long run, it seems to me that we stand to gain much more in terms of national safety if our policies in the Far East are directed towards retaining the faith of Asia's voiceless millions in the integrity and the friendship of the United States.

In addition to considerations of security, we also have long-standing economic and cultural interests in the Far East. We must not overlook them because in a world of growing interdependence they should assume increasing significance.

If we are to pursue policies which safeguard our interests in the Far East it is essential that we understand the situation as it now exists in that part of the world. Not the situation which wishful thinkers like to believe exists. Not the situation as it was in the 19th Century or even as it was as late as 1945. But the naked reality of the Far East in 1950.

The keynote of Asia today is change—change compounded in almost equal parts of a determination to end foreign domination and a revulsion against misery as the normal condition of life. Asians are sick and tired of having their countries run for them. They are sick and tired of unnecessary privation and suffering. They insist upon the right to control their national lives. And they insist that their own leaders show a willingness and a capacity to deal with such basic questions as mass hunger and sickness.
That is the substance of the situation in the Far East today. It would be readily evident to all except for the intrusion of the Soviet Union. The Russians did not create the changing circumstances in Asia, but they are fishing in the confusion to see what can be caught in the way of material aggrandisement and increased world power. The actions of Soviet imperialism have already reversed the trend in China from national independence back toward foreign domination.

In calculating our Far Eastern policy, it is necessary to recognize that the black shadow of Soviet imperialism obscures the entire situation. But we must not, because of the shadow, lose sight of the substance. We must not be content merely with blind opposition to communism in the Far East. We oppose that ideology because we know only too well from what has happened in Eastern Europe and what is happening in China that it is wholly inconsistent with the goals of independence and progress.

We have traditionally given positive support to these aspirations in the Far East—in the Philippines and China, and more recently, in Indonesia and elsewhere in Asia. We have supported them not merely because we believe that they are worthwhile and decent objectives in themselves, but also because we believe that it is in our own interests to do so. Free peoples who are striving peacefully to improve their lot are friendly peoples. They are peoples who may be counted on
in promoting genuine collective security and a more stable and fruitful world.

The basic principle of our Far Eastern policy, therefore, should remain what it long has been—support of the peoples of Asia in their desire to obtain or to protect their independence and to improve their way of life. In giving such support, however, we must consider the total needs of the Free World and the limited resources which we have available for meeting them. We must also choose the type of support—whether it be diplomatic, financial, military or any other—to fit the specific need. And finally we must be certain that the native governments through which aid is extended possess the capacity to use it effectively.

We need only to review events in China during the past few years to realize such assistance as the United States can give in itself is not sufficient to guarantee the triumph of freedom in the Far East. During the war and immediate postwar period, the United States poured to billions of dollars into China. We sent General Marshall to help the Chinese straighten out their difficulties. He went to assist in achieving what had long been the Generalissimo's own policy—the peaceful solution of the internal Chinese problem of unity. Even when peace proved impossible we continued to support the National Government with a military mission and with some half billion dollars more of economic and military aid. Some have charged that Chiang's collapse was due to the inadequacy of American aid or to the Yalta Agreement. The fact is that largely through the influence and help
of the United States, China enjoyed, at the end of the war, a
greater degree of freedom from foreign control and a more eminent
international position than ever before in her history. Furthermore,
our military intelligence reports tell us that in December, 1945,
the Government of Chiang Kai-shek had obtained, with American assistance,
an overwhelming advantage over the Communists. Yet, exactly three years
later, this preponderance had been lost and the defeat of the Nationalist
armies on the mainland had become inevitable.

Was this colossal failure due to any lack of American aid?
Or to the Yalta Agreement? We have the answers not only from our civilian
officials in China, from our expert military observers--from Generals
Marshall, Wedemeyer and Barr. The primary responsibility for the collapse
unquestionably rested upon the inability or the unwillingness of the
Chinese Government to make the necessary reforms which alone could
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There would be no point in underscoring these unhappy develop-
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what we can and what we cannot do in our relations with the Far East.
There is no virtue in doing in foreign affairs just to be doing. And
there are situations in which inaction is preferable to ill-advised action.

The first thing that we cannot do is to assume primary res-
ponsibility for the solution of the internal problems of any major
Far Eastern country. The peoples of those nations do not want and
will not acquiesce in solutions which come about primarily through foreign intervention. For the United States to intervene in Formosa, for example, would be resented by the Chinese people at this time just as they are learning to resent Soviet intervention. It might win for us the gratitude of a few hardpressed leaders of the Kuomintang, but in the last analysis, it would evoke the same enmity that the Russians are creating for themselves by their domination of the Peking Government and by their activities in Manchuria, Sinkiang and Mongolia.

By the same token we cannot make ourselves responsible--militarily or otherwise--for regimes which, because of their failure to deal effectively with the problems of their peoples, have only the most dubious popular support.

What we can do in the present circumstances is to continue to support in an appropriate manner desirable changes which are taking place in the Far East.

We can assist those governments which command the reasonable respect of their citizens to strengthen the internal stability of their countries and their capacity to resist aggression.

We can keep the attention of the world focused relentlessly on the unscrupulous, self-seeking Soviet imperialism in the Far East.

We can seek appropriate ways to frustrate the effort of the present Communist masters in Peking to push the peaceful Chinese people into aggressive adventures beyond China's borders.
We can encourage movements of the Far Eastern peoples designed to promote regional unity.

Finally, we can keep our thinking on general foreign policy flexible. Only in this way will we be able to act appropriately in any given circumstances. Above all, we must avoid the fallacy of believing that consistency in foreign policy lies in acting precisely in the same manner in every part of the globe. It is, for example, fantastic to suggest that what we have done in Greece we must also do in China, which has 25 times as many people, 60 times as great an area, and a vastly different set of political and strategic problems.

The only consistency we need be concerned with is that with which we devote ourselves to the protection of the security and all the legitimate interests of the United States. That is the basic ingredient of a nonpartisan, nonpolitical approach. Beyond it let us exercise a little imagination and a great deal of discretion.
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