

Lecture 6 - History of International Politics (Oriental) [E] - Lecture Notes

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NOTE: The following lecture notes are largely based on the class textbook – Warren Cohen (2000), ‘East Asia at the Center – Four Thousand Years of Engagement with the World’, New York: Columbia University Press.

Lecture Title: China as a Divided Republic (1912 – 1928)

The sudden toppling of the centuries-old Qing regime in 1912 took the foreign powers by surprise. The Japanese in particular were worried about the implications for Japanese interests of republican rule in China, especially with Yuan Shikai, a strong and capable historical enemy, as head of the new Chinese government. The possibility of an increasingly stronger China worried decision-makers in Tokyo. The Japanese therefore took steps to make sure that Japanese interests and possessions in Manchuria in particular could not be threatened. Almost immediately after the new Chinese republic was established on January 1st 1912, **hardliners** within Japan’s Kwantung army in Manchuria started to draw up plans to separate Manchuria and Mongolia from the rest of China. They also discussed possible ways for establishing a puppet Manchu regime in the area. Powerful **moderates** and business elites in Japan however believed that friendly relations with the new China would serve Japanese political, security, and economics interests best and would avoid a possible war. The Kwantung army’s plan was therefore **shelved**. For the US, France, Germany, and the UK, the priority was holding on to the benefits and privileges in China that they had won in the past. Russia used China’s post-1911 vulnerability to further strengthen its position in Outer Mongolia. In exchange for promising that Western interests would be protected, the Western powers came to accept the new republican government. The US **unilaterally** recognized the Chinese Republic in April 1913.

The stability of the new Chinese political system was however **short-lived**. Rivalry between Sun Yat-sen’s **Kuomintang Party (KMT)** (the Chinese Nationalist Party) and Yuan Shikai’s supporters soon descended into violence following KMT protests over how Yuan was using his political power. After China’s first democratic elections in early 1913, the leader of the Kuomintang party within the new republic’s parliament, **Song Jiaoren**, was murdered on March 20th 1913. There was strong evidence to suggest that Yuan Shikai had **sanctioned** the assassination of a political rival. The murder of Song soon resulted in a chain of events that led to a **civil war** between the pro-Yuan Shikai and pro-KMT groups within China. Yuan succeeded in completely defeating his Kuomintang rivals in the power struggle, and by November 1913, Sun Yat-sen had to escape to exile in Japan. In January 1914, Yuan **formally dissolved** the new post-1911 Chinese parliament.

Rivalry for power between influential elites within his own side persuaded Yuan to make a **grab** for total political power within China before his rivals could do so first. The Chinese General spent the rest of 1914 building up his power base by creating a new constitution. He also consolidated his legal and political position as China's number one leader, and strengthened his alliances with regional leaders. In 1915 and 1916, Yuan **even went as far as** taking steps to become a new 'Emperor of the Chinese Empire'. This move was a serious miscalculation by Yuan. He was viewed **at home and abroad** as a **delusional dictator** rather than a democrat who spoke for the people of China. His position had been undermined, international and domestic allies **distanced** themselves from him, and opposition to his rule grew. Due to strong opposition from areas in southern China as well as the **defection** of some of his key military supporters, Yuan could no longer realistically hold power and was politically isolated. When Yuan died in June 1916, his death **heralded** the end of China's brief experiment with democracy. As Cohen observed, '*The age of the **warlords** [1916 – 1928] had dawned; regionalism triumphed. And once again, China was fortunate to survive as a sovereign entity*' (Cohen, 2000:315).

The 'Twenty-One Demands' (1915) and the 'Age of the Warlords' (1916 to 1928)

After Yuan's death, Chinese politics was characterized by a collection of military leaders who competed with each other to become the ultimate or number one leader within the country. While one faction was fighting to take over as the rulers in Peking, another competed with Sun Yat-sen for power in the rival power center based in Guangzhou. On numerous occasions, the Northern and Southern groups fought each other for control of the whole of China. These deep divisions within China created serious political instability and allowed foreign powers such as Japan to reinforce their positions in areas such as Manchuria. The **First World War (1914 – 1918)** in Europe also had major implications for China's security. As expected, the war was a serious distraction for the European powers with interests in China (for example the UK, Germany, France, Italy, and Russia). The Japanese however largely had **a free hand** in the East Asia region during the war and cleverly utilized their 1902 alliance with Great Britain to take possession of the territories of Germany (Great Britain's enemy) in East Asia, most notably on the Shandong peninsula in late 1914. In early 1915, the Japanese sent Yuan Shikai a secret document, which listed '**Twenty-One Demands**.' These demands comprised of five key groups. Amongst the demands, the Japanese wanted the Chinese to recognize and legitimize Japan's new territorial gains in Shandong as well as their pre-existing possessions in Manchuria. They also demanded additional concessions within Manchuria and in central China. The Chinese were also ordered not to permit any other foreign power to acquire or lease any port, island, or bay on the Chinese coast. Within the fifth group of demands, Japan demanded that the Chinese should seek Japan's permission first before allowing any foreign investment into certain areas of southern China. In addition, they told the Chinese to grant Japan additional railway rights and concessions, and to purchase at least 50% of China's required military arms and materials from Japan. Tokyo also demanded that the Chinese accept Japanese 'advisers' within China to supervise the country's military, economic, and political decision-making. Another demand stipulated that China should allow Japan to have joint-powers in terms of police and security activities at major locations throughout

China. As Cohen argues, '*in sum, China was to become a Japanese protectorate, to be exploited much as Japan was exploiting Korea just before annexation*' [in 1910].(Cohen, 2000:316).

Despite the Japanese insistence that the 'Twenty-One Demands' be kept secret from the outside world, the Chinese succeeded in leaking the document to Washington. Under the leadership of the liberal-minded President Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921), the Americans declared that they should diplomatically support China in rejecting the twenty-one demands. Washington also promised not to relinquish US interests in China, nor to pressure the Chinese to accept any more concessions from the Japanese. US opposition to, and British protests against, the twenty-one demands were a significant development for Japan's objectives in China, and Japan's relationship with the West. Japan rulers believed however that the British and Americans were unlikely to use force or diplomatic sanctions to help China because the US and UK were distracted by bigger problems elsewhere (for example, the First World War which the United States entered in April 1917) and because US and UK interests in China were not vital national interests. As a concession to Chinese and foreign protests, Tokyo removed the fifth and harshest group of demands from the twenty-one demands' document. Japan insisted however, under the threat of force, that China immediately accept the remaining demands. Yuan Shikai had no choice but to give in to the Japanese demands in May 1915.

In an attempt to allow the US to send materials and assistance to the Chinese without risking a diplomatic confrontation with Japan, Washington asked China to enter the First World War as an ally of the British and the Americans. The US also argued that if China joined the war effort, China then could enter negotiations at the end of it and perhaps undo the Japanese take-over of German possessions within China. The Chinese therefore decided to enter the war in August 1917. Their main contribution was the sending of about 100,000 laborers who helped the British, French, and American war effort in France on the western front. Chinese deaths in the war totaled about 2,000. At the end of the First World War in November 1918, (with victory for the Allied side – the British, French, and the Americans), the Chinese were confident that their sacrifice in the war would be rewarded with a seat at the negotiating table at the post-war Paris Peace Conference in 1919 (see also the Treaty of Versailles), and a positive outcome for Chinese requests. The United States, whom the Chinese regarded as a friendly state sympathetic to China's position had also become a much more influential world power since the early 1900s. In addition, the liberal US President Woodrow Wilson had written a document called 'the Fourteen Points' which he hoped the negotiating states would use as a guide for a final peace settlement. The Fourteen Points focused on self-determination, anti-imperialism, greater equality, and fair treatment for the world's states. For these reasons, the Chinese believed that they were in a favorable position in which to secure a successful outcome to the Paris Peace Conference negotiations (from January to June 1919).

China's priority at the conference talks was to remove the symbols of semi-colonial status, which the foreign powers had forced upon them since the 1800s. In particular, they aimed to use the conference to regain complete sovereignty over the Shandong peninsula. For China however the Paris Peace Conference was a bitter disappointment. During the negotiations, the Chinese learned that Japan had already

signed secret treaties with Japan's First World War allies. These secret treaties promised British and French support for Japan's claims to the German territories in China on the Shandong peninsula. Under the threat of force in 1915, Yuan Shikai had also accepted the twenty-one demands, which included a Chinese acceptance of Japanese control of the German concessions in the Shandong peninsula. The Chinese were reminded of this again at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. President Wilson, China's sympathetic friend at the conference, had been persuaded that Japan's claims in China were **valid** under international law. He also feared the consequences for world peace and the success of the conference if the Japanese refused to continue to participate in the conference. He therefore did not challenge Japan and abandoned his support for China's position. At home in China, the humiliating treatment of the Chinese and particularly the loss of the Shandong peninsula to Japan caused outrage on the streets. Beginning on May 4th 1919 in Peking, hundreds of thousands of **enraged** students took part in massive **nationwide** demonstrations. **The May Fourth movement** as it was known organized a successful boycott against Japanese goods and products within China. At times, the marchers also attacked Chinese government figures **whom** they perceived to be pro-Japanese. The effectiveness of the movement had impressed the Chinese business community and workers in the country. As Cohen notes, '*They [the May Fourth movement's participants] had become the ingredient necessary for the cementing of what Sun Yat-sen called China's "loose sands" into a powerful nationalist force*' (Cohen, 2000:318). The movement helped to **galvanize** the Chinese people as a force to protest the humiliation of Versailles, and to call on all Chinese to end internal disorder and to unite to resist foreign interference. The movement also proposed a radical change in Chinese society and politics by completely rejecting traditional Chinese and Confucian values and practices. Instead they called for major social and intellectual transformations, which they hoped would help to modernize and 'civilise' China, thus making it more capable to challenge foreign powers. The dean of Peking University, which was central to the May Fourth movement, promoted scientific knowledge and democratic change through symbols such as 'Mr. Science' and 'Mr. Democracy'. By 1919, it was apparent that China was riding on a wave of nationalist-inspired sentiment and **patriotism**.

At the same time, in the late 1910s and 1920s, China was still in a **chaotic** state. China's difficulties in weakening the foreign hold on the country continued. At a nine-nation conference (involving the UK, China, Japan, USA, and 5 other states) held in Washington in 1921 (**the Washington Conference**), the Chinese were **cautiously optimistic** that they might be able to use the opportunity to regain lost sovereignty rights and territories. In this period however, China's negotiation strength continued to be undermined by serious internal divisions as Chinese nationalists, communists, and warlords throughout the country all **plotted** against and fought each other for power. Another consequence of these divisions was that the Chinese delegation to the Washington Conference could not present a united picture nor speak on behalf of all Chinese during their negotiations. The Kuomintang nationalist regime in Guangzhou for example refused to participate jointly with other Chinese political rivals at the conference.

For the US, a key objective was to protect American interests in China by expanding on its concept of the 'Open Door' policy to ensure that China was not divided or its territorial boundaries seriously altered. This objective **clashed** with Japan's hope to

win special interest rights in Manchuria and Inner Mongolia but the Japanese and the Americans reached **a middle ground** on their respective interests in those areas. Internationally, the conference was regarded as a success, especially for the Americans who were now viewed as leading world players. For the Chinese however the conference was another failure. It maintained the **status quo** in that all the participant powers at the conference **agreed in principle** not to interfere in the internal affairs of China, and not to interfere with Chinese desires to reform, modernize, and unite the country as they wished. All signatories agreed '*to respect the sovereignty, the independence, and the territorial and administrative integrity of China.*' From Washington's perspective, this allowed American power and Japanese power to exist together without trouble (at least **for the time being**). The involved powers also promised to deal with their differences over China peacefully in the future. Only post-1917 **communist Soviet Russia** appeared to be a threat to this arrangement. With American influence, the Chinese did succeed in receiving **non-committal** and **vague** Japanese and British promises that they would return certain territories in the future. The US however was not willing to pressure Japan on the issue of Manchuria because it feared that this action could **jeopardize** the success of the conference. For the Chinese, the Washington Conference ended with China still unable to undo any of the humiliations and unequal treaties enforced upon them by foreign powers since the 1840s. In China, there was outrage once again at the result of the conference. 20,000 people demonstrated on the streets of Shanghai. From the Chinese perspective, the conference was not aimed at reaching a fair and just solution but rather to satisfy the objectives of imperialist powers.

Soviet Russia Develops Ties with the Chinese

The **Russian Revolution** of 1917 resulted in the end of Imperial Russia (1721-1917) and the **founding** of the world's first communist government. One of the key objectives of **Vladimir Lenin's** communist government was to spread communism, particularly within the powerful and industrialized West, and to topple **capitalist** governments around the world (whom communists viewed as greedy imperialists). In Europe however, communist attempts to **instigate** communist revolutions were unsuccessful. As a result, Soviet Russia looked to regions such as the Middle East and East Asia to promote communist ideology and communist revolution. In March 1919, the first congress of the **Comintern (the Communist International)** included China's fight against Japanese imperialism as one of the world's major struggles between a colonial people and an imperial power. In July 1920, the Comintern decided to adopt a strategy of actively supporting anti-imperial rebellions and revolts in **oppressed** countries all over the world, including China. As a result, after July 1920, the Soviets started to dispatch Soviet agents to China to develop relations with nationalist and communist Chinese figures and to build up alliances against the Western capitalist states and the Japanese. In response to the pro-Western Washington Conference of late 1921, the Comintern also held its own conference under the title of 'Toilers of the Far East' in January 1922. Soviet Russia used the conference to emphasize that Russia also had interests in East Asia, which should not be ignored by the Washington Conference powers. The Soviets also presented themselves as a **counterweight** to Western and Japanese power, and as a communist state which would defend and speak for the exploited people of Asia (unlike the Washington conference powers).

The Nationalist Revolution in China

The Chinese initially had reasons to be optimistic after the establishment of a communist government in Russia in 1917. For example, in March 1920, Moscow announced under the 'Karakhan Manifesto' (written in July 1919) that they were allies of the Chinese people and that they rejected and condemned imperialism. The Soviets had also declared that they would hand back forestry, railway, and mining interests that had been forced from the Chinese during the era of Imperial Russia (1721 – 1917). There were also **unconfirmed** reports that Moscow would return previous territorial concessions to the Chinese. By the early 1920s, the Soviets and influential Chinese political and intellectual elites had developed close ties. In July 1921, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was founded in Shanghai. Soviet Russia also formed a relationship with Sun Yat-sen and the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party). 1922 had not been a positive year for Sun. He was forced out of his power base in Guangzhou following a dispute with a local warlord. By the early 1920s, his attempts since to unite and stabilize China through negotiations with, and assistance from, the West and Japan had all been largely unsuccessful. When the Soviets made attempts to develop a relationship with the nationalist leader and to provide financial assistance, Sun felt that it was worth at least listening to their ideas and suggestions.

Moscow's motivations for developing ties with the Chinese were not only ideological. The Soviets had major strategic and economic interests in the country. Most notably, Soviet Russia feared the consequences of a powerful anti-communist Japan on the USSR's border in areas such as Manchuria. Moscow's strategy was to strengthen anti-Japanese forces within China so that the Chinese could challenge and resist Japanese power and thus weaken Japan's ability to threaten Soviet Russia. The Chinese Communist Party had been founded in 1921 and was still a **nascent** political organization with little political power and influence within China. Soviet Russia therefore looked to build alliances with Sun Yat-sen's nationalist Kuomintang (KMT), powerful Chinese warlords, and other people with influence in China. A major result of these **endeavors** by Moscow was the signing of a **joint-declaration** in 1923 in which the Soviets accepted Sun's belief that China was not suitable for communism but where Moscow would nonetheless send financial and material assistance to Sun Yat-sen's KMT party. Sun also agreed to form an alliance with the recently established Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and to re-model his own Kuomintang party along the lines of the Soviet Communist Party. Under this new arrangement, Sun sent one of his leading KMT figures, **Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi)**, to Moscow to learn about the Red Army and its tactics before returning to China to set up the **Whampoa Military Academy** in 1924. The Soviets sent **Mikhail Borodin** to Guangzhou where he provided advice on maximizing the Kuomintang's power and on political **propaganda**. In another gesture of Soviet support for China, in 1924, Moscow undid some of the clauses contained within earlier 'unequal treaties' between Imperial Russia and Qing China. Despite these closer Soviet-Chinese ties, the Western powers and the Japanese refused to grant any concessions to China or to undo any of the earlier humiliations forced upon China. In late 1923, when Sun attempted to demand a percentage of the **surplus** money collected by Chinese customs for his own KMT regime in Guangzhou, the US, the UK, and the Japanese used gunboat diplomacy to intimidate him and to force him to cease his demands.

The Soviet leader Lenin died in 1924 and Sun Yat-sen in 1925. Despite this, the Soviet-Kuomintang alliance remained strong. The financial and material aid from Moscow also helped the new leadership of nationalist China, and Sun's successors, such as Chiang Kai-shek, to strengthen and train the Kuomintang army, to defeat local warlords, and to extend KMT control and influence over southern China. The Soviet-Kuomintang alliance was also **boosted** by an incident in Shanghai in May 1925. Following a workers' **strike** at a Japanese-owned textile factory in which a worker died, a sequence of violent and popular demonstrations against foreign rule developed. In **the International Settlement area** of Shanghai, up to a dozen Chinese protesters were shot dead by a foreign-controlled police force on May 30th. Throughout the cities and even some rural areas of China, there was a wave of xenophobic, and anti-imperialist protests in what became known as the **'May 30th Movement'**. This provided the Chinese Kuomintang Nationalists and Chinese Communists with a **favorable** opportunity in which to build their support base within China and to **mobilize** more and more people to support their political objectives. After British soldiers shot dead over 50 Chinese protesters during demonstrations in Guangzhou, the KMT-Communist alliance responded by organizing a popular boycott against British products in China as well as a fifteen month strike in Hong Kong. As a result of such actions, the Kuomintang and the Communists greatly **enhanced** their popularity and **status** throughout China.

From the second half of 1925 onwards, the Kuomintang (KMT) government (which was based in Guangzhou) used its popular support to reinforce its power in southern China. At the same time, the KMT started to seriously develop a plan to send a military **expedition** to northern China to unite all of the country under Kuomintang rule. This idea for a **'Northern Expedition'** had first been proposed by Sun Yat-sen. In the mid-1920s however, the warlords' forces in areas such as northern China were much stronger in terms of numbers than the Kuomintang army. Overall there were five warlord soldiers for every one KMT soldier (a ratio of five to one – 5:1). Amongst the warlords, the most dangerous was **Zhang Zuolin** who was based in Manchuria and who was **rumored** to be receiving Japanese support. Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang nationalists also worried about possible foreign intervention from Japan or the West against them due to the KMT's alliance with the Chinese Communist and the Soviet Union. In the 1920s and beyond, Western states in Europe and North America were increasingly anti-communist, and fearful of communism's spread and influence throughout the world. The KMT party was also **troubled** by internal rivalries and divisions. After Sun Yat-sen died in 1925, opposition amongst powerful Kuomintang elites to close ties with the Soviet Union intensified and this resulted in the nationalist party splitting into two key groups. One faction regarded the Soviet Russians and the capitalist foreign powers as generally the same in terms of their objectives – to maximize their own national interests and gains within China. In January 1926, Chiang Kai-shek and his supporters had isolated the anti-Soviet faction and then expelled them from the KMT. In March 1926 however Chiang accused the Chinese Communists of attempting to win control of the Chinese army. He therefore **demoted** all communists who held powerful positions and arrested some communists as well as all the Soviet Russian advisers who were based in Guangzhou. As a result of these actions, Chiang reinforced his position as leader of the Kuomintang's military forces and thus as the KMT's most powerful figure. The Chinese communists were very angry about Chiang's activities but **the Soviet Union (the Union of Soviet**

Socialist Republics (USSR) since 1922) advised them to wait until a more suitable time before challenging Chiang's leadership.

In July 1926, Chiang Kai-shek launched a military campaign, the Northern Expedition, into the warlord-dominated northern half of China. The campaign was a success with the warlords **routed** from central China and out of the strategically and economical valuable Yangtze valley. By March 1927, Chiang's forces captured the key cities of Shanghai and Nanjing and placed them under nationalist Kuomintang control. The foreign powers, recognizing the power of KMT forces as well as popular Chinese support for the nationalist cause, did little to interfere with Chiang's campaign. Instead, the foreigners chose to reach an agreement with the KMT government. In December 1926, the UK government expressed its desire to **revise** the 'unequal treaties'. The US also **reached a new accommodation** with China in January 1927. The Japanese, whose priority was protecting its interests in Manchuria, showed restraint, and approached the new political situation cautiously. **Controversy** arose however over violent attacks, which had been carried out by Kuomintang Nationalist soldiers against foreigners and their property (including the British, American, and Japanese consulates) in the city of Nanking. These attacks continued until foreign warships arrived on the Chinese coast and attacked the Chinese soldiers involved. For a short time, it seemed as if there would be a major foreign intervention in China. The foreign powers demanded that the Kuomintang accept responsibility for the attacks and to compensate the foreign community for the loss of life and damage to property. They also demanded promises from Chiang Kai-shek that foreigners would be protected in the future. Chiang however denied that the KMT was responsible and instead argued that the attacks had actually been carried out by communist and Soviet-backed '**agent provocateurs**'. At the same time, Chiang ordered his soldiers to arrest and murder hundreds of communists and possible sympathizers (such as labor union leaders) in Shanghai. Chiang's motivation was to remove the communist threat to his power so that the Chinese Communists and the Soviet Russians could not topple him in the future. The Kuomintang leader's strong anti-communism and anti-Soviet Russian stance endeared him to the Western powers, in particular the Japanese, who perceived him to be a leader whom they could work with. The Americans and the British viewed Chiang with suspicion but saw him **as the lesser of two evils**.

In the late spring and early summer of 1927, serious frictions developed between **left-wing** individuals within the Kuomintang and Chinese Communists and their Soviet advisers within China. The Communists and the Soviet advisers were attacked by both the **right-wing** Chiang and his supporters, and left-wing individuals within the KMT. This campaign of pursuit, arrest, and murder against Chinese communists and their supporters was known as the '**White Terror**.' The Soviet advisers escaped from China, and surviving Chinese communists fled into the countryside where many of them regrouped in Jiangxi. At this stage it was apparent that the communist threat to Chiang's power had been removed, at least for the time being. From this position of strength, Chiang negotiated an agreement with the US in March 1928, which addressed Western anger over the anti-foreign attacks of 1927 in Nanking. In general however, the foreign powers were cautious about officially recognizing Chiang Kai-shek's KMT nationalist regime until they knew that he could defeat the powerful northern warlord Zhang Zoulin and his regime in Peking in the Northern Expedition.

In May 1928, Japanese soldiers who were acting against the wishes of moderate statesmen in Tokyo engaged in fighting with the Kuomintang army in Shandong. The Japanese government tried to calm the situation by forcing Zhang Zoulin from the Peking area and into Manchuria. The Japanese army however assassinated Zhang in revenge for his failure to stop and defeat Chiang's 'Northern Expedition.' After Zhang's death, Chiang's KMT army took control of Peking and Shandong, and eventually came to control most of China. As a result, foreign powers started to diplomatically recognize Chiang's regime as the legitimate government of China. The new nationalist government was centered in Nanking. In July 1928, Chiang's government was granted custom tariff autonomy and diplomatic recognition by the US. By late 1928, all of the world's major powers **followed suit** and recognized the nationalists as the new government of China. For the first time in many years, China was united (at least in name) under Chiang Kai-shek's leadership, and the Chinese were experiencing some success in undoing the 'unequal treaties'. By 1928, it seemed as if the era of imperialism and humiliation in China had ended. As we will see in next week's class, these hopes were to be short-lived.

Key Points:

- In the years from 1912 and 1928, internal divisions and rivalries were a major obstacle to unifying and stabilizing China. This was particularly true during the Age of the Warlords. Foreign powers such as Japan in particular took advantage of these divisions (for example, the Japan and 'Twenty-One Demands' in 1915).
- The establishment of Soviet Russia in 1917 was a very significant development for the future of East Asia. In an attempt to weaken Japanese influence in China and to undermine the potential Japanese threat to the Soviet border, the Soviets developed ties and provided assistance to both the Chinese nationalists (the Kuomintang) and the Chinese Communist Party after the early 1920s.
- After the mid-1920s, Chinese nationalist suspicion and fears of the Chinese communists resulted in a very violent and bloody campaign against communists and Soviet advisers in China (note the 'White Terror'). Hostile divisions and uneasy truces between communists and nationalists in China would be a characteristic of Chinese politics for the next twenty years (late 1920s to the late 1940s – see the Chinese Civil War from 1927 until 1950).
- The Kuomintang's successful defeat of the major warlords by the late 1920s brought a certain degree of unity and stability to China, along with international recognition of the new nationalist regime. China however remained very vulnerable to foreign influence especially from Japan and Soviet Russia.