

Hundredth Anniversary of the Treaty of Versailles: Meanings and Implications*

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Abstract

The year 2019 marks the centenary of the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in Paris. The First World War, which the Treaty arose from, does not present a palatable and easily digested set of issues. Despite this, it is worth attending to what the Versailles Treaty meant, and what lessons might even today be drawn from it. One of the often neglected aspects of the First World War was that it did involve Asian partners. Japan's involvement in the Versailles Treaty discussions may not have been prominent, but that it was there at all showed a shift in geopolitical forces. It showed that Japan and Asia had an irrevocable role in European affairs, rather than it simply being the other way around. The second issue to reflect on when one looks at the meaning of Versailles in the present is how to assess and understand alliances, and their advantages and disadvantages. The complex mishmash of different alliances and treaty obligations across the continent in 1913 has been one of the issues frequently blamed for what unravelled in 1914. It was probably to this issue that Prime Minister Shinzo Abe referred when he spoke in 2014 of the dangers of Asia today duplicating the situation of Europe almost a century before. The Treaty, moreover, addressed issues which continue to have importance today—migration is one such issue, and that of values is another. In the 21st century, reflecting on the Versailles Treaty signed a hundred years ago finally allows us to reflect on the journey over the period between then and now that globalisation has taken. The legacy of Versailles is alive and well.

The year 2019 marks the centenary of the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in Paris. It will be a low-key event in Europe. The Treaty is associated with a complex period of history which is still not properly understood. Whereas the moral and geopolitical issues that arose from the Second World War a generation later have been more widely and easily assimilated into public consciousness, the First World War, which the Treaty arose from, presents a far less palatable and easily digested set of issues. Its origins such as historian Christopher Clark and others have shown in recent years, were multifarious and hard to explain in an easily comprehended way.¹ We understand better the causes of the European 1939 war. For the 1914–1918 war, the widespread carnage, the often static quality of the conflict, and the ways in which it rose from an intricate and hard to unpick set of alliances and the commitments they involved make for a far less neat account of history.

Despite this, it is worth attending to what the Versailles Treaty meant, and what lessons might

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¹ Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).

even today be drawn from it. At the time, participants like the economist John Maynard Keynes were rightly critical and sceptical of the sustainability of the Treaty.² And yet, the settlement had been entered in good faith, and it gave rise to the era of multilateralism which was, painfully and slowly, to emerge in the following decades, and which lies at the heart of the world we still live in.

One of the often neglected aspects of the First World War was that it did involve Asian partners. Japan after all was an ally of the British through the Anglo-Japanese Treaty of 1902. It was also one of the key participants of the Versailles meeting itself. The symbolic importance of this, whatever its actual practical meaning (Japan's inheritance of the formerly German concessions in China was to prove short-lived in their enjoyment, and created a legacy for Sino-Japanese bilateral relations which stretched over the following decades), is what is worth attending to today. The peripheral nature of Asia in Western intellectual and cultural life at the time was striking. Japan had only started to figure as a country to understand and know better on its own terms after the 1860s' Meiji Restoration. It started to matter more as a geopolitical player with the military victories over China in 1895 and Russia a decade later. These events showed the ways in which Japan had progressed as an industrial, modernising country, and one that represented a new phenomenon—Asian modernity. It also illustrated the ways, particularly through the victory against Russia, that this was able to impact directly on European interests and had visibility in their worlds.

Japan's involvement in the Versailles Treaty discussions may not have been prominent. But that it was there at all showed a shift in geopolitical forces. An Asian nation was no longer viewed as passive, and relegated to the sidelines. It was able to take an active part in international diplomatic discussions. The ways in which Asia had figured almost as a place which existed simply to passively receive Western attention, be it commercial or political, which had been the case since the first waves of colonial attention in the 16th and 17th century, were disrupted by the existence of a Japan which was able to exercise more active agency. And it showed that Japan and Asia had an irrevocable role in European affairs, rather than it simply being the other way around.

The second issue to reflect on when one looks at the meaning of Versailles in the present is how to assess and understand alliances, and their advantages and disadvantages. It was probably to this issue that Prime Minister Shinzo Abe referred when he spoke in 2014 of the dangers of Asia today duplicating the situation of Europe almost a century before.³ The complex mishmash of different alliances and treaty obligations across the continent in 1913 has been one of the issues frequently blamed for what unravelled in 1914. Small events, because of the architecture of obligations and commitments around them, escalated quickly. It is probably for this reason that a hundred years later the region now looks at two very different major powers—that of the US and the People's Republic of China—with radically different views of alliances. America, at least until recently, maintained a strong commitment to perhaps the most extensive set of security and trade alliances across the Asia Pacific but also globally. It enjoys treaty-based arrangements with Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, and New Zealand. The predictability this gives is, of course, balanced by the ways in which it ties Washington into obligations that sometimes restrict or curtail its options. It is perhaps for this reason that the presidency of Donald Trump has been keen to start working outside the framework these provide.

For the People's Republic of China, the situation is the opposite. It has only one current treaty—that with North Korea, signed in the early 1960s. Otherwise, it operates on a level of

² John Maynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920).

³ See, *Abe comments surprise Chinese at Davos*, January 23rd 2014, Financial Times, at <https://www.ft.com/video/1d28bc50-ea9f-3b83-b41b-3c001d6c093d>

informality, disliking the impositions and restrictions placed on it by obligations spelt out in treaties. That does give it great flexibility in the way in which it arranges diplomatic space around it, setting up abstract ideas like “strategic partnership.” But it also lays it open to complaints that it is not a full stakeholder, that it is parasitical on a rules-based system put in place by others, and that it operates as a free loader. As the world’s second largest economy, these are obviously not good characteristics, and its future as a treaty-averse power has to be questionable.

The Versailles Treaty addressed issues which continue to have importance today, and mean that it is easier to relate to and understand the world in which this agreement grew. Migration is one such issue, something that carries the same potency in the domestic affairs of Europe, and now increasingly in Asia. This relates to the ways in which the Treaty reinforced the notion of what it is to be a nation state, and what belonging to such an entity actually meant, in a geographical area where the conceptual history and understanding of this term were not deep. While an island nation such as Japan understands well the importance of boundaries and had a stronger and clearer identity, this was less so for a collection of states which were to emerge through the rest of the century, many of them working off the influence of colonisation and other forms of external influence. Political scientist, the late Benedict Anderson captured this process in his term “imagined communities.”⁴ Unlike in Europe, where from the 1648 Westphalian Treaty, there had been a stronger sense of what a nation was, and what its political and economic identity might be, the concept at the heart of this, “sovereignty,” was not one that had properly existed in Asia, and in particular North East Asia, where the notion of vassal states and tributary relations flowing from the dominance of imperial Chinese entities had prevailed. Versailles can be seen as a key moment when China at least, or the Republican version of it that existed in 1919, started to wrestle with this issue. The emergence of a Chinese version of nationalism through the May 4th Movement which occurred just after the Versailles Treaty as a reaction to some of its stipulations and of what China was as a modern nation state has been an unfolding story since this era. It has also reordered the political geography of the region, embedding a more bounded sense of what the powers, and responsibilities, of nation states are, and what it is to be a member of these.

The other issue that Versailles allows us to contemplate is that of values. It was, after all, a treaty which was meant to exemplify the victory of one set of values over another—the facing down by a free market, laissez-faire set of alliances around Great Britain and its allies against German militarism and statism. That the Treaty was an attempt to embed these values in international practices, whatever its shortcomings, is an important thing to recognise. That process of how to accommodate very different legal and civil society values in the international community also continues to this day. With the rise of China it has perhaps grown even more urgent. Versailles wrestled with an emerging sense of multilateralism, giving birth to the League of Nations which is often seen as the precursor to the United Nations in the 1940s. It also marked the emergence of the US after the Second World War as a global player again after its years of “splendid isolation.” The one clear lesson one can draw about this whole area from Versailles is that the issue of values is one of immense complexity, but it cannot be ignored. In 2019, with the US and China now involved in an increasingly fractious trade war, and the underlying strategic competition between the two based on different views of the world order and the principles that underlie it, the contentiousness about which values in the end prevail, and how very different visions can co-exist beside each other without conflict has come back with vengeance.

The forces and processes of globalisation and the painful and often tragic route that the global order today emerged from, involve taking Versailles’s contribution into account. Liberal order, after all, was what the Treaty was meant to defend and embed in a young global system. Over

⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

the ensuing decades, of course, there were many setbacks to that process. But that does not invalidate the mission that the conference tried to achieve. The language of multilateralism, of self-determination and of what a liberal order means remains with us.

In many ways it is the legacy of this order that China now stands accused of disrupting. Often figured as a contestator of the status quo, issues are perhaps not so straightforward. One can broadly categorise state actors in their relationship to the global set of largely US-led norms as norms observers, norms contesters, or norms entrepreneurs. The US and its allies have, at least until recently, sat in the first group. Russia in recent years, and of course an outside player like North Korea occupy the second. But for the People's Republic things are evidently more complex. In the years since under President Hu Jintao in the 2000s it was a norms observer through its successful desire to join multilateral forum like the World Trade Organisation (WTO) which it became part of after a 14-year-long epic of negotiation in 2001. It also remained an important member of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank. But with the onset of the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 eroding some of the prowess and prestige of the global rules-based system in China's eyes, it started to move towards a more distinctive posture. In the era of Xi Jinping since 2012 it has been more proactive in trying to create what some have seen as a parallel order—a kind of shadow international system, around the Belt and Road Initiative and organisations it has proactively set up such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). These have served to carve out a world away from the US, where China has more strategic space and autonomy, and we can see what an order based on Chinese values might look like.

China's attitude as a norms entrepreneur shows a pragmatic acceptance that the ability of it to relate to others with its unique political system, and its distinctive geopolitical space and stance, is not straightforward. Versailles can be seen in some ways as an act of public diplomacy—an attempt to rectify and address core international issues that had arisen from the First World War. It occurs in the narrative of attempts to create a liberal, multilateral order. China's rise now contests that—seeming to usher in an era after the high tide of multilateralism when the global situation is more complex, and a country is emerging that does not sit easily into the structures that already exist. In the categories of soft and hard power too, China does not slot easily. Its attempt to address this issue of how to communicate its values to the wider world as it has become more prominent and a more important player has led to the need to talk of a new concept—"sharp" power. This falls somewhere between the already extant categories, something falling short of overt use of military power, but definitely not soft, persuasive and reassuring because of the ease with which it is willing to use covert and overt threats and pressure points to those outside on issues that matter to it, like the South and East China Sea, and Taiwan.

In the 21st century, reflecting on the Versailles Treaty signed a hundred years ago finally allows us to reflect on the journey over the period between then and now that globalisation has taken. It has not been an easy path. The narrative of globalisation, however, continues, as much by necessity as desire. This is something that places restraints and parameters on China too. Like it or not, the options for its future are to be dominant in a contested global order where it finds itself exposed, unable to convince partners around it of the attractiveness of its visions for order and progress, or through inner transformation and a change of attitude in the world around it able somehow to occupy a more stable, and accepted place. The history for the reasons why Versailles happened, and what its impact on history was are therefore ones that the PRC needs to reflect on. The fact that the Treaty was also occurring in the year in which the May 4th Movement in China occurred, with its student-led call to promote Mr Science and Mr Democracy, with the unease that this creates in the contemporary country stands as an issue rich in symbolism. In that respect, at least, the legacy of Versailles is alive and well. It should be better understood and contextualised, certainly, but it is still there.