One Hundred Years after the Paris Peace Conference: A Welcomed Change in Mutual Perceptions*

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Abstract
The First world war and its sequels had long term consequences at the global level, including in Asia and its perception in the world. The Versailles Treaty established the premices of a value-based liberal international system. For the first time, a non-European nation, Japan, fully participated and played a major diplomatic role in the debates and negotiations of the peace conference. However, the Western centric dimension of the Paris Peace Conference and the Versailles Treaty as well as the opposition of the United States to racial equality clause also resulted in frustrations and future strategic instability related to the refusal of Western nations to fully integrate Japan, one of the allies, as an equal and legitimate power in the new concert of nations.

Western historiography has long neglected the importance of the Versailles Treaty for Asia. When there was an expression of interest, it was often exclusively focused on the consequences for China, including the issue of the 21 Demands made by Tokyo to the Chinese authorities of the time and the emergence of an anti-Japanese nationalism with the May 4th Movement in 1919.

In Asia itself, the focus was at the time also very much on the disillusions, both in China and in Korea, but also in Japan, that followed the settlement of the Versailles Treaty and the establishment of the League of Nations.

However, the Versailles Treaty signed on June 28, 1919 also played a significant role in the constitution of a new international order, based on liberal values, and the establishment of an international organization to solve international relations issues, in which Japan had initially fully participated. It was also the first time that, in a departure from the traditionally exclusively Eurocentric posture of the Great powers, Asian powers became full actors of the global international system.

Different perceptions of the Versailles Treaty in Europe and in Japan

One hundred years after that event, the interest expressed in Japan for the Versailles Treaty, however, has been growing and is particularly significant in a contemporary context where the international liberal order is under threat. For Japanese analysts today, the participation of Japan in the Paris Peace Conference constitutes the first manifestation of Tokyo's engagement alongside the powers that defend multilateralism and a liberal international order threatened by the temptation of some states to use coercion to change the status quo as well as by the rise of populism and temptations of isolationism in Western democracies.

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However, one cannot but note the differences in the assessments of the consequences of the Treaty in Europe and Asia. In Europe, among politicians as well as historians, the analysis of the consequences of the Versailles Treaty is more negative.[1] For most of these analysts, the Versailles Treaty bore the germ of the Second World War. The will to "punish" Germany as the only responsible actor for the war, the financial demands, followed by French occupation of the Ruhr in 1923 contributed to the emergence of Nazism and the rise of Hitler. The League of Nations is often criticized by some for its intrinsic weaknesses, while, for others, it is the "idealism" that presided over the Paris Peace Conference, and particularly the issue of "punishing" the defeated nations as "culprits" of the war that led to lingering enmities and tensions.

In Japan, the only non-Western power among the signatories, however, the rediscovery of the Versailles Treaty and the significant role played by Japanese diplomats at the time, is an essential element of contemporary historiography. It shows that, as early as the 1920s, Japan could assert itself as a legitimate actor of the post-First World War concert of nations.

However, the deficit of understanding of the international role of Japan under the Taisho Democracy (1912–1926), including its role as one of the signatories of the Versailles Treaty and its participation—contrary to the United States who never ratified the Treaty—in the League of Nations, still dominates European historiography. This lack of knowledge weighs not only on past appreciations but also on the understanding of contemporary issues and possible cooperation between Europe and Japan. It results from an analysis of the building process of the international system after the First World War that remained almost exclusively Western-centric.

The importance of the Versailles Treaty for Japan and the ambiguity of Western powers

Japan was a critical player at the Paris Peace Conference, after taking control, as a legitimate actor alongside the Allies, of Germany's concessions in the Shandong Peninsula in China and the Pacific Islands that were part of the German Empire in the Pacific.

Concerning Asia, the Versailles Treaty is often considered through its most damaging consequences that led to growing tensions with China. However, that approach is an anachronism and Japan's position at the time, differed little from that of the other great powers, whose primary objective was also in preserving their own interests in Asia, and especially in China.

The United States, in particular, initially fully supported Japanese claims on the Shandong Peninsula, as well as the mandate given to Tokyo on the Pacific Islands under the control of the League of Nations. Nonetheless, when Japanese demands on Shandong were subsequently rejected, it was mainly because they contravened the interests of other Western powers present in China, worried by the emergence of a new competitor in the region.

Despite these limitations, the Versailles Treaty marked for the first time the entry of an Asian actor in the diplomatic concert hitherto monopolized by the European powers. Japan's participation in the Paris Peace Conference constituted a paradigm shift with the first steps of a globalization process that still expands to our days.

However, from the very beginning, this globalization, which was based on the concept of universal values, was tainted with limits that became the source of future frustrations.

The first and most important of these limits was the refusal by some Western powers, and more specifically by the United States in spite of the principles defended by President Wilson, to accept the amendment of article 21 of the constitution of the League of Nations imposing the principle of racial equality proposed by Japan and supported by China. The rejection of the amendment, defended by France, was particularly damaging as it had received a majority of

[1] Georges-Henri Soutou, *La grande illusion, quand la France perdait la paix, 1914-1920*, Paris, Tallandier, 2015.

votes.

Similarly, while in Europe, the Washington Conference of 1923 is still perceived as the first step towards arms control mechanisms, for Japan it translated into the will of the United States and Britain to deny the legitimacy of Japanese positions and to contain the development of Tokyo naval capacities.[2]

In both cases, it was the very principle of common values and equal rights that had been encouraged and at the same time ignored by Western powers. However, despite these initial failures, the question of common values remains critical for the international community despite the evolutions of great power relationships and political systems since the Second World War and the end of the Cold War.

The contemporary relevance of the issues raised at the Paris Peace Conference

In Asia today, the challenge of ideological bi-polarization, amplified by the increased overall power of the People's Republic of China, remains an essential part of the strategic calculus of democracies. On one side there is a qualified system of liberal democracies, attached to a set of principles based on the attachment to the universality of specific values, the rules of international law and the rejection of the use of force to change the status quo; on the other side authoritarian systems reject these principles of universality and common values. In that context, it is worth remembering that, contrary to the expectations raised by the theories of the end of history 30 years ago, these fundamental issues—and these constraints—are still relevant and cannot be ignored in Europe, despite the geographical distance that separates the two continents.

Moreover, the lessons of the Versailles Treaty are also pertinent when addressing the issues of appeasement and pacifism. The First World War, its destructions and its industrial-size number of victims opened the way to pacifism and the temptation of appeasement at any cost. This also led to the Munich Conference, the annexation of the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia by the Third Reich and the emergence of an uncontrollable German power, animated by a desire for revenge and ready to destroy the post-First World War status quo. In Asia today, the situation is less dramatic than in 1938. However, the fear of being involved in any conflict and the temptation of disengagement or appeasement could also lead to more severe tensions resulting from miscalculations on the part of certain powers, also driven by a revanchist posture and a desire for "reparation."

To answer these threats, taking into account the ideological dimension of the shared values that underlie the liberal world order, we witness the emergence of new concepts. These concepts must be inclusive and open to all States and entities that support these universal values.

The need for a value-based order and new concepts

This is the case with the concept of "free and open Indo-Pacific," which establishes a bridge between Asia and Europe, the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean, and is also an answer to the more grandiose projects of the Belt and Road Initiative whose objective—beyond economic interests—is to be used as an instrument of China's great power policy in its region and beyond. There again, history, with references to the Chinese traditional tributary system, as well as contemporary international strategy, is at the almost exclusive service of a policy whose first and most important goal is to preserve a regime in needs of legitimacy.

However, this "free and open Indo-Pacific" concept also poses several challenges, that are also opportunities for cooperation. The first of these challenges is that of inclusiveness.

The inclusion of Europe—despite its limitations—is necessary, not only because this it is in Europe that the universal values that establish the liberal order emerged, but also because

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[2] Pierre Grosser, *L'histoire du monde se fait en Asie*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2017.

Europe possesses, by itself and through some of its States, capabilities that go far beyond "soft power."

The inclusion of all States bordering the Indian Ocean, from South East Asia to South Asia and the shores of Africa, is also a necessity. These territories, particularly in Africa, open new prospects for external powers looking for economic opportunities, easy access to resources but also a source of support for the ideological battles fought in international institutions for the control of globalization and the imposition of a set of new norms challenging the liberal order.

However, for a country like Japan—in cooperation with other partners—these challenges are also an opportunity. It is the opportunity to play a more significant and more active role, on the basis of common values, in favor of a more balanced model of development. This is what would constitute the first element of long-term stability, especially in Africa.

This opportunity also supposes a capacity for opening up, including opening up to new partnerships, as is already the case with countries like France. Japan has a strategic partnership with France, based on the sharing of common values and fueled by a yearly 2 + 2 dialogue between foreign and defense ministers of both countries. Beyond France and the United Kingdom, in 2018, the European Union and Japan have also signed a strategic partnership, alongside a free trade agreement, which also expands Tokyo's margin of manoeuver.

This, of course, does not question the preeminence and the essential role played by the United States, Japan's most important security partner since the 1950s. However, as at the time of the Versailles Treaty and the League of Nations, the United States seems to be again tempted by isolationism and an "America First" posture. This posture can be particularly uncomfortable for its allies, even if we can be confident that this would not withstand a direct and immediate threat to the United States interests or those of their allies, particularly in Asia.

The principle of "openness" also applies to Japan, with all the risks of uneasiness it can involve. It is precisely the strength of democracies, on the domestic as well as on the international scene, to be able to accept and feed on the debates they may involve. It is at this price that real partnerships, based on mutual understanding, can be put in place. In the case of Japan, these partnerships can also be based on the fact that Tokyo remains the only power in Asia to have followed, from the end of the nineteenth century to the present day, a path very similar to that of its European partners.