

The Shifting Power Balance

The paramount problem in the Pacific has been the search for a more stable and mutually acceptable balance of power and influence among the big four of the area—the United States, China, the Soviet Union, and Japan. This balance must take into account the evolving roles and often conflicting aspirations of the smaller nations of the region.

Two world wars have brought about the virtual withdrawal of the European colonial powers from the Pacific, culminating in the announced British withdrawal from the Malaysia-Singapore area by 1971. By the end of the Second World War, the fate of European colonialism was sealed and the United States was left the only major Western power in the Pacific area. The next quarter-century witnessed an important evolution in the pattern of power factors—military, political and economic—working through the region from within and without. The thrust of Communism from the Asian mainland, and its confrontation by the United States, produced the basic pressures in relation to which the course of major events has moved.

Today, a very large part of the Asian mainland is controlled by Communist governments of one kind or another. China and the Soviet Union are seriously, even dangerously, at odds with each other over a wide range of disputed questions which are unlikely to be resolved quickly and easily. Always a major influence because of its population and geographical position, China is approaching a technological level at which it may be perceived as a serious international threat to both the Soviet Union and the United States.

North Korea and North Vietnam control their own halves of two divided countries, a situation which in itself both reflects and contributes to structural instability. Added to this is the fact that both have their own ambitions, and attempt to maintain good relations with two big mentors who have fallen out between themselves.

Countering growing Communist power and influence is the sizeable deployment of the military and economic power of the United States. While the United States role as the dominant military power in the Pacific has been dictated to a large extent by strategic considerations, it has also been influenced by the conviction that the doctrines of revolution emanating from China do not represent the only or indeed the best guidelines for the necessary social and economic reconstitution of Asian societies. To provide a shield behind which necessary changes can take place, to buy time, has