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The Washington Conference

For many weeks, the Washington Conference has been heralded as the great harbinger of peace; with its watchwords of peace, democracy and prosperity it has been acclaimed the one hope of the world. Now, with a characteristic flourish of official trumpets, it has assembled; for weeks it has talked and discussed; its dissolution is spoken of as an early probability, and in so far as the world knows, it has said nothing, done nothing, solved nothing that could not have been accomplished equally well without it.

The Conference was called to discuss possibilities of armament limitations and to find a common agreement on the "problem of the Pacific"—not at all august or equitable reasons, but true. True, because in the first case the burden of armaments has become intolerably heavy; in the second, because failure to reach a mutual understanding involved the continuance of militarism and the practical certainty of a world war in the almost immediate future. So far the relative importance of the two items stated in the reverse order to that named and therefore the key to the situation is the "problem of the Pacific." What is this problem? Precisely the same problem besetting capital everywhere in its growth and development—the problem of trade, the problem of securing markets for the profitable disposal of exploited surplus.

The question is not a new one, nor are the factors in the problem the outgrowth of today. They dovetail into the forgotten things of yesterday and are the related sequence of the trade ambitions of a day when Imperialism was not. The roots of the question go back to 1853, when the American, Commodore Perry knocked at the doors of Japan, demanding admittance. The Japanese—having previous experience of white ambitions for Dominion—were lusty for the "rights" of their own caste. But what availed the war-gear of a primitive people against the science of civilization? Japan learned then, that the mystic East could face the lusting West only on the terms of the West; only with the weapons and psychology of the West. And so thoroughly has the lesson been acquired that in 3 generations Japan has risen from an ancient feudalism to 3rd power in the world. The shogunate is but a memory; The Daimyos has been succeeded by the Genro; and a "god descended" absolutism has given place to the "constituted democracy" of a "god-endowed" oligarchy. To the thundering music of big guns, Britain and America forced an entry into Japan—as into China—but he would be indeed a desperately bold admiral, who, today, would sail into the seas of the Rising Sun and let loose even a squib.

Up to 1890 there was room for development. The race for the world market was not quite so intense. Imperialism was but foreshadowed in the future. More or less "peaceful penetration" was steadily going on in the Orient, the progress of civilization was preparing the field for the coming clash of interests. The 'great powers' were gathered round the council table with jealousy, suspicion and treachery their common and constant companions, considering the partition of China. Britain, foremost in the race of Capital, was firmly established in Asia. By sea and land, from the straits of Suez to the treaty ports Britain owned; controlled; dominated. None was powerful enough to say

her "nay." She had compelled China to open her doors; had prior voice in the dictation of her policies; controlled her customs; had compelled "concessions" in the rich valley of the Yangtze; compelled agreements, that in these concessions none should come before her.

In those days European policies were directed against the expansionist, territory-grabbing ambitions of Czarist Russia. And just as in the later days Britain hemmed in German expansion, so at that time she put a ring against Russian advance. She checked Russia from entrance to the Mediterranean; put her off from Asia Minor; countered her designs on Persia; prohibited her entrance to Afghanistan and India; forced her to the only way open to her—to the far East, to Eastern Siberia and the 18 provinces of the magnificent resources of undeveloped China. So, in brief, matters stood in 1894.

Meanwhile Japan had been steadily developing. She could read the mind of the West. She saw the designs of the West and understood their significance. She saw China—her coveted and natural outlet and market, slipping away; saw the steam roller of Russia creeping down upon her shores—and she resolved to stop the advance. Korea was the bone of contention. Korea almost touches Japan. It is really part of China, but its situation is such that it commands Japan, i.e. commands the trade routes of commercialism. Hence capitalist Japan could not allow that peninsula to fall into "foreign" hands. The seesaw of struggle over Korea, between Japan and Russia (and superficially China), produced internal troubles in Korea, and from those troubles sprang the pretext for the China-Japanese war of 1895. Japan was wholly victorious in that war, but, because of the guile of the "Northern Wooer," acquired little advantage from it. But the war produced two important results. It brought Japan into recognition as a power to be reckoned with in the East, and it completely shattered the day dreams of Chinese partition by the Western Powers.

Ten years later the control of Korea again occasioned the Russo-Japanese War, the result of which definitely created the "problem of the Pacific." It made Japan dominant in the waters of the Orient. It entered Japan in the lists as a world power; it brought her into the arena of international politics; it sharpened the advance of eastern exploitation; quickened the pulse of commerce with the new wine of Imperialism; an accelerated progress towards the insoluble impasse of the present, and by the Treaty of Portsmouth, created "revanche" between Japan and America. For, by American interference Japan considered herself deprived of the full fruits of victory. This victory of Japan also broke the awesome influence of the "Russian bear" in the chancelleries of Europe, and centred politics on its instant successor, "Drang na Osten." Also, it formed the basis of several treaties,—the Franco-Japanese agreement, which brought Japan a loan of 12 million sterling; the Russo-Jap agreement; the Anglo-Russian convention; and the American Treaty of 1908—all more or less "securing Chinese integrity." Also it confirmed the Anglo-Jap treaty of 1902, which, in addition to that "integrity," is a contract by Britain to recognize and safeguard Japanese "rights and interests" in the East.

and is obligatory on Japan to safeguard British "rights" there. How faithfully the bond is observed, we know. In 1910 Japan "annexed" Korea—closing that part of the Chinese Empire to the "open door." Britain has—partly as a result of late Russian influence—practically closed Tibet, and the Yangtze Valley, and other nations have succeeded in reconciling "Chinese integrity" with "special interests." Thus were formed the national combinations, which preceded—and led up to—the Great War. Even then (consciously or not) Germany was becoming an "outsider," and it was in 1908 that the Kaiser crusaded against the "Yellow Peril," probably as an overture against that combination of Western Powers, which already blocked the supremacy of the German empire. Now let us look at what this means, and its bearing on the Washington Conference.

In the heyday of barbaric antiquity, the great plain of Jezreel constituted the battle ground of the nations. There, wave upon wave of armed force clashed and died. Egypt and Assyria, Elam and Hittite, Persian and Greek, struggled there for the mastery of the earth. Because, there, the trade-routes of the world dipped to the shores of the Great Sea. There were the avenues by which wealth came; there were the pathways of the ancient plunderbund, the roads along which armies marched; the bridgeheads between East and West. Thus, whoso controlled them, owned the wealth of the world, and influenced the destinies of its peoples. But when slavery had broken the bonds of the old society, when the economic of exploitation had impoverished and devastated them, one and all, and shut off the means of life from struggling life itself; and developed new needs, new conditions, new necessities, and with them other centres of activity, the sceptre of power passed to other lands and peoples, reorganizing in new form and detail the restless processes of social life. To Carthage and Rome came dominion, and for the same mastery of wealth they too challenged supremacy of the Mediterranean. With the rise of capital, consequent on the discovery of new commodities and markets, and from these new trade and necessities, the battle front surged on fields of the low countries. For there were centred the activities of the new commerce, there were the highways of wealth commanded, and from there could be controlled the growing activities on the waterways of the Baltic and the North Sea.

But from fiefs and towns came nations and centralized authority, and trade expanded from coastal seas. Out across the oceans, nations grew into Imperialist empires with all the panoply of institutions which Imperialist capital signifies. Wealth increased, and with its increase, the means of further wealth. Surplus outflowed in continually increasing volume; primitive countries were invaded; primitive industries destroyed; primitive societies broken up; primitive peoples transformed into challenging trade rivals. Now, on the outskirts of the world, on the line between day and night, the cold world and its institutions, broken down and decayed, its peoples surging in the grip of the greater industry; Imperialism, desperate with increasing necessity; East and West meet, and wait, tense in the pregnant silence of irreconcilables.

The Orient is, thus, the last hunting ground of the
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