

The Open Door Policy and the Boxer War: The US and China

by Warren I. Cohen



West from Ha-Ta-Men Gate, scene of a desperate charge, published by Underwood & Underwood, NY, 1901. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

By 1899, the United States had become a world power. It was not only the world's greatest industrial nation, but in the war with Spain it had demonstrated a willingness to use its power militarily. It had acquired possessions near and far and the sun shone on the American flag in East Asia as well as the eastern Pacific and the Caribbean.

In East Asia, the Chinese government, having resisted reform and modernization, had been severely weakened by defeat in the Sino-Japanese war (1894–1895). It was unable to prevent European and Japanese imperialists from carving enclaves, or spheres of influence, out of its territory. President McKinley was concerned about the potential threat to American interests in China. Nonetheless, he resisted both British overtures for joint action and the lobbying of business interests demanding a more assertive policy. Nor was he moved to action by arguments about the importance of China in the world balance of power as expressed by imperialist ideologues such as Brooks Adams and Alfred Mahan.

His secretary of state, John Hay, looked for advice on China to William Rockhill, an American diplomat who shared many of the ideas of Adams and Mahan. Rockhill believed that the breakup of China would be a disaster—that it would lead to an intensification of imperialist rivalry in the region, possibly to world war. He contended that the interests of the United States in East Asia required a viable Chinese state and wanted Hay to declare Washington's intention to assist China in maintaining its territorial integrity. Neither Hay nor McKinley were persuaded, however, that American interests were sufficient to justify a radical departure from traditional inactivity.

A chance visit to Rockhill by Alfred Hoppisley, an English friend on leave from his post with the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service, led to a limited American initiative. Hoppisley feared that the Customs Service would be driven out of the foreign spheres of influence, depriving the Chinese government of tariff revenues it desperately needed. Without adequate funds the Chinese government would be unable to function effectively and would lose administrative control of its provinces.

Together, Hoppisley and Rockhill drafted a statement that became the policy Hay expressed in the first of his famed "Open Door" notes. Sent in September 1899 as a note to each of the powers that had acquired spheres of influence, Hay asked that they not discriminate against the trade of other countries (to keep the door open) and not interfere with the Customs Service collection of tariff duties. If they agreed, the goods of all nations would be assured equal treatment in all parts of China and the Customs Service would be able to provide the Chinese government with the revenue it needed to function. Rockhill wanted a stronger statement on behalf of China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, but his superiors would go no further. The notes were the ideal means for the administration to satisfy pressures from those who sought the expansion of American economic interests and from romantic nationalists eager to see the United States play a larger role in world affairs—without risking an overseas involvement that would lack broader public support.

Although the Open Door notes served American purposes, the imperialist powers in China perceived little benefit for themselves in endorsing a request that they pursue a policy of self-denial in areas under their control. The United

States was offering them nothing in return. On the other hand, the Americans were not challenging the existence of spheres of influence or interests they considered vital. No country saw any point in insulting Washington by rejecting Hay's request. Most replies were evasive and qualified, as each nation protected its particular interests, but all, in effect, endorsed Hay's principles. He and McKinley announced that American interests in China had been safeguarded. They were convinced also that they had contributed to the preservation of the Chinese empire.

The months that followed Hay's notes were not marked by reforms leading to the modernization of China's government or society. At the time of the American initiative in 1899, opponents of reform, led by Cixi, the empress dowager, were in control in Beijing. She and her supporters were channeling unrest in North China into an antforeign movement led by men known as the Boxers—a loose amalgam of martial arts and invulnerability ritual societies. The destruction of missionary properties and murder of Chinese Christians intensified and could not be ignored.

The United States joined several European nations in demanding that the Chinese government put an end to the outrages, but to no avail. To the magic powers allegedly possessed by the Boxers, Cixi added the modern weapons of the imperial army. She called the Boxers to Beijing and ordered the massacre of all foreigners, including the diplomatic community. The legation quarter became an embattled fortress, subject to incessant attack, cut off from outside contacts.

The war with Spain had brought American troops to the Philippines and suppression of a Filipino insurrection had required their continued presence in East Asia. With the lives of American diplomats, businessmen, and missionaries endangered in China, the McKinley administration had both the resources and the will to protect its people and their interests against the Chinese. Several thousand Americans were among the troops that ultimately defeated the Boxers and lifted the siege of the legation. Long before they reached Beijing, however, Hay had sent off a second round of Open Door notes.

As the Boxer War began, Hay feared the collapse and dismemberment of China. It seemed likely that the powers generally and the Russians in particular would find Chinese provocations sufficient to justify further encroachments on Chinese sovereignty. Once the foreign armies fought their way to Beijing, they would not be removed easily—and it might prove very difficult to protect American interests.

In July 1900, Hay sent off a circular message expressing concern for the preservation of Chinese sovereignty, the "territorial and administrative entity" of China. Hoping to contain the war to North China, Hay defined the situation as a state of virtual anarchy in which power and responsibility rested with local authorities. The McKinley administration worked with high-ranking Chinese officials who controlled southern and central provinces, suppressed the Boxers and protected foreigners and their property. Together they established the myth that the Boxers were acting spontaneously, rebelling against the Chinese government as well as attacking foreigners. Thus the war could be limited in area and intensity and the possible partition of China forestalled.

In his circular notes, Hay had stated American policy for the benefit of the imperialist powers. He sought no commitments from them nor did he make any threats. The United States had no interests in the area great enough to warrant the use of force on the scale necessary to confront any of the major powers. Washington was opposed to further dismemberment of China and recommended a policy of self-denial to the other nations whose troops occupied Beijing. And in 1900, as in 1899, the great powers acceded to American wishes—not out of fear of the United States or out of admiration for the principles the Americans professed, but because of the essential wisdom of the course Hay proposed. The satisfaction of further imperialist ambitions could await a more propitious moment.

Hay's notes of 1899 and 1900 came as the natural culmination of over one hundred years of American involvement in China. After all these years, the United States had concluded that its interests—economic, cultural, and strategic—were best served by the preservation of the Chinese empire. Where Chinese sovereignty had been or would be impaired, within the spheres of influence controlled by outside powers, the United States sought equal treatment of the goods of all nations, presuming such practice to be advantageous to American exports. When one of the great powers was determined both to encroach upon Chinese sovereignty and discriminate against American goods, the United States would express its disapproval. But neither Hay nor McKinley had any illusions about the extent of American interests in China or in East Asia generally. These interests had existed for more than a hundred years. They might become much greater, but they were not vital interests. They were worthy of diplomatic support, but they were not worth the risk of war with a major power. Despite the interest that businessmen and missionaries attached to their activities in China, neither the people nor the government of the United States could focus for long on Asian affairs. There were much more important problems to be dealt with at home.

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