

its cohesion, as Stalin knew, could not be taken for granted. He was anxious to seal the Soviet Union's frontiers: after 1930, border populations with uncertain sympathies were brusquely relocated.⁶² He feared an attack from the east by Japan, whom he sought to appease (by selling Russia's railway rights in Manchuria) while rebuilding his military and naval presence.⁶³ But he feared even more an attack from the west, where the loss of Poland and the Baltic provinces had drastically weakened Russia's strategic position, not least in relation to the doubtfully loyal Ukraine. Hence Soviet policy was above all to keep on good terms with Germany. Economic and (discreet) military cooperation had been close in the 1920s. Hitler's rise to power forced a reappraisal: Stalin entered the League (1934) and made a pact with France. His preference, however, was to guard Soviet safety by avoiding a break with the Nazi state. There was no serious intent to align with the League, whose motives he mistrusted. In Europe (by covert intervention in the Spanish Civil War, 1936–9) and in East Asia (by military help to the Kuomintang) Stalin played a lone hand.

The fourth zone was East Asia. Its post-war settlement was a tripartite arrangement between Britain, Japan and the United States. But it quickly became obvious that its fate was to be a contested sphere where neither the League nor any great power would have decisive authority. By the mid-1920s the British (who had the largest foreign stake in East Asia) were on the defensive, fearful that an insurgent nationalism would bundle them out of their treaty-port enclaves and make even Hong Kong a heavy liability. They sent a force to Shanghai in 1927, but were anxious to parley with the Kuomintang. The United States, with much less at stake (in 1931, American investment in China was only 6 per cent of the foreign total, far behind Britain with 37 per cent, Japan with 35 per cent, and even Russia with 8.4 per cent),⁶⁴ preferred to rely upon good relations with the Kuomintang regime, some of whose leading figures had strong American links. The Americans were keen to draw the Kuomintang away from its Russian connections. The same antipathy to Soviet influence made them reluctant to antagonize Japan, the

Soviet Union's main enemy in North East Asia. When Japan occupied Manchuria in 1931, the United States expressed strong disapproval, but drew back from active opposition, hoping that the politicians in Tokyo would restrain the army.⁶⁵ The cooling of Anglo-American relations after 1931 – the result in part of economic friction – removed the main guarantee that the 'Washington system' would be upheld in East Asia.

After 1931, what mattered most was the triangular rivalry of the Kuomintang government, now based in Nanking, the Soviet Union, anxiously reinforcing its colonial presence, and imperial Japan. The Nanking government had emerged victorious from the civil wars of 1928–31 that combined with famine to cost the lives of 6 million people.⁶⁶ But it fell short of enjoying a monopoly of force (the acid test of effective rule) across China proper. It was powerless to prevent the savage Japanese attack on Shanghai in 1932, when Chinese anger at the occupation of Manchuria spilled over into violence against local Japanese interests. Under Chiang Kai-shek, in 1928 the Kuomintang leadership had broken decisively with the Communist elements of the party and had driven them out. But although the Kuomintang onslaught on the Kiangsi/Jiangxi 'soviet' forced Mao and his followers into an epic withdrawal, the 'Long March' to safe havens in north-west China in 1934–5, the Communists survived to fight another day under Soviet patronage. Soviet action in East Asia was designed to shore up Moscow's influence, prevent the destruction of the Chinese Communist Party, and check Japan's incursions into Inner Asia and its domination of China. But it was hampered by military and logistical weakness, Kuomintang animosity, and (as we have seen) fear of provoking a war on two fronts.

The initiative in East Asia was held by Japan. Japan's strength was disparaged by the Western powers in the 1920s: 'a weak rather than a strong Power' said the British ambassador in 1924.⁶⁷ In fact the Washington treaties, which forbade new fortifications in the western Pacific (including the British base at Hong Kong), had made Japan

less vulnerable to a naval attack than before 1914. Tokyo's policy was to avoid confrontation with the British and Americans, but to consolidate its grip in Manchuria by a virtual protectorate over its warlord ruler.⁶⁸ Manchuria was the centrepiece of Japanese thinking. It obsessed the army, whose reputation had been made there. It was the great bastion against Russia's regional comeback. Its economic importance as a vast frontier region was taken for granted. After 1928, however, Japan's informal predominance came under growing pressure from a more assertive China. There was more and more friction with the South Manchurian Railway – Japan's commercial octopus – and with the Kwantung army that guarded the 'railway zone'. When the Kwantung army staged a violent incident and then occupied Mukden, the Manchurian capital, in September 1931, Tokyo gave its reluctant assent. The severity of depression and the united opposition of army and navy to the disarmament clauses that Japan had accepted at the London Naval Conference of 1930 had created a new political mood.⁶⁹ Japan left the League of Nations (in 1933), repudiated the Washington treaties by creating the puppet state of Manchukuo, and was drawn deeper and deeper into northern China. As the Kuomintang government prepared for the struggle,⁷⁰ the real uncertainties were when war would break out, who else would take part, how it would end, and what effects it would have on a fractured world order.

The failure to build a post-war system through which the most powerful countries could settle their differences and build coalitions against rule-breaking states might have been mitigated by economic good feeling. In the mid-1920s it looked as if the great commercial recovery would do this, and more. A dynamic world economy would draw America towards Europe, encourage liberalism in Germany, disarm Japanese fears, and keep the door ajar between the West and Russia. The fierce contraction of trade that had set in by 1930 had the reverse effect. Much the hardest hit were those who relied upon primary products as their main source of income: as their incomes collapsed, so did their buying. As markets slumped and prices fell