Tibet, Korea, the Taiwan straits, Vietnam, Sumatra and the Hill States of Burma were the open sores of this painful transition from empire to nation, the glaring evidence that post-imperial state-making was only rarely consensual. Asia's immersion in the expanding Cold War masked the bitter reality of these local and regional conflicts.

As so often before in Eurasian history, China's role was crucial. By the end of 1950 its mainland had been unified under Communist rule. Mao's remarkable victory may have owed much to the 'peasant nationalism' of China's rural masses (kindled by hatred of Japan's occupation),[19] as well as to the appeal of the party's land reform programme. The proportions are still disputed.[20] But there was no doubt that China had once more resumed a premier place in East Asia, with a huge battle-hardened army. Under certain conditions, this might have resulted in an inward-looking policy of domestic reform that left China's Asian neighbours to their own devices. In the actual climate of the early 1950s, such an outcome was unlikely. Instead, the newregime's leaders adopted the viewof their republican predecessors, and the Ch'ing before them, that their rule would be safe only if the landward approaches to China were in trustworthy hands. They forcefully reasserted Beijing's authority in Tibet. When it seemed likely that northern Korea might fall under non-Communist control, they intervened massively in the Korean War. Two million Chinese served in Korea, and more than 150,000 died there.[21] Mao took a similar viewof China's frontier in the south. At the critical stage of the struggle between the Viet Minh and the French in northern Vietnam, Chinese military help and strategic 'advice' played a crucial part in France's crushing defeat at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954, the prelude to the end of its colonial power in Indochina.[22] Beijing's fear of encirclement sprang from the fact that its Kuomintang enemies had survived (on Taiwan) and with American help might resume the political struggle. For, despite the scale of their victory, Mao and his colleagues were all too aware that it had not been total. They faced the challenge of building a

newindustrial state on China's agrarian base – which would have to pay the bill. They had to anchor their power in a new social order – which would have to be fashioned. They had to defend a revolution.

The sense of threat from without as well as within precluded retreat into the splendid seclusion favoured by newdynasts in previous eras. It was dramatically symbolized by the denial of membership of the United Nations, instigated by America and reversed only in 1971. At first Chinese policy mixed caution and hope. The obvious urgency of an industrial programme, as well as the need to balance American help to the Kuomintang foe, drove the People's Republic into alliance with Stalin. In Korea and Vietnam in 1953–4, Beijing accepted a compromise peace of partition. After France's defeat in the First Indochina War, Chou En-lai sought to disarm regional fears (and stifle American influence) by soft-voiced diplomacy. But by the late 1950s Mao was convinced that harsher methods were needed. He mistrusted Moscow's call for coexistence with capitalism, and saw the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's summit diplomacy as a betrayal of China. Sino-Soviet solidarity lasted barely a decade. Faced with the hardening of American support for the Taiwan regime, Mao raised the military stakes by bombarding Quemoy, a close-in offshore island under Kuomintang rule. He countered the loss of momentum in China's transformation at home with an aggressive new strategy of rural collectivization, the so-called 'Great Leap Forward'. The redistribution of land from landlords to peasants turned out (as in Russia) to be only the prelude to the state's taking control. And in 1960 he approved Hanoi's insistent demand to resume the armed struggle (suspended since 1954) for a Communist victory in South Vietnam.[23] Mao's newcourse was to make China the sponsor of revolutionary violence against surviving colonial states, or those successor regimes that colluded with capitalism. His message was simple. Imperialism's overthrowwas far from complete. Decolonization must come – if it was to be real – by a great rural revolt of impoverished peasants: a global 'people's war' against the world's bourgeoisie.[24]

Mao's drastic programme for a post-imperial world aroused wide enthusiasm, intellectual and political, not least among those who hoped to savour its victory from a comfortable distance. In the 1960s and '70s it offered a hopeful alternative to the failures and compromises of post-colonial regimes. It attracted those who still hoped to reverse capitalism's unexpected revival in the post-war world. As we shall see in a moment, it achieved its most striking success in the special conditions of South East Asia. But on a wider view it was the containment of China and Maoist anti-imperialism that was really significant. In part this arose from the disruptive effects of Mao's political doctrines – especially his 'Cultural Revolution', a form of massive purge – on the Chinese economy. In part it reflected the revival of tension with China's great northern neighbour. But the most serious obstacle to Mao's ambitions grewout of the dramatic divergence between East Asia's two great states.

If China's turn towards Communism confounded most wartime predictions, no less surprising was the readiness of Japan (in John Dower's striking phrase) to 'embrace defeat'.[25] At the end of the war, Japan had been occupied by a large American garrison, military and civilian, nearly a million strong.[26] For more than six years, an American viceroy (for most of that time General Douglas MacArthur) held executive power, and his approval was needed for any major decision. Japan's sovereignty was suspended; Japanese were forbidden to travel abroad; no criticism was allowed of the occupation regime. A raft of reforms was designed to root out what were seen as the sources of Japan's militaristic imperialism. Women were enfranchised and the voting age was lowered, more than doubling the electorate. A new constitution prescribed by the occupiers barred the armed forces from a seat in the government and renounced war as an instrument of national policy. The great family-ruled business combines or *zaibatsu* were broken up. Land reform reduced the power of the landlords and doubled the proportion of those who farmed their own land to some 60 per cent.[27] Trade unions were encouraged. New textbooks were written,

persuade a huge newconstituency of potential supporters that his version of nationalism, with its social and moral content, would meet the needs and wants of India's rural masses, and that Indian problems required Indian answers. He created, in short, an Indian rather 'British-Indian' nationalism. Thirdly (and partly in consequence), Gandhi made nationalism – and the Congress – a grass-roots movement, drawing in peasants, women, industrial workers, the 'tribal' peoples of the forests and hills, and the untouchables. Of course the level of popular interest and the scale of Congress membership could rise and fall (as they did after 1922). But the cadre of Gandhians pursuing 'village uplift', or promoting Gandhi's schemes of education and hygiene, formed a network of activists ready and waiting for the next *satyagraha* campaign. It remained to be seen when their chance would come.[23]

For the time being, however, even nominal self-rule of the kind granted to Egypt remained a distant prospect. Gandhi had shaken British self-confidence badly. But the 'steel frame' of Britain's Raj – the army, police and bureaucracy – with its tens of thousands of loyal Indian servants, was still in place. The religious and social divisions that Gandhi had been so anxious to bridge made a grand nationalist coalition against alien control something to hope for, not a practical basis for political action in the immediate future.

China was different. Between 1919 and 1922, against all the odds, Chinese leaders successfully asserted China's right to full sovereignty that had seemed at such risk after 1890. They won China a place on the newLeague Council, the steering committee of the League of Nations. By refusing to sign the Treaty of Versailles (because of the clause on Shantung), they eventually forced a newsettlement for East Asia in the Washington treaties of 1921–2. They even secured what had seemed almost impossible before 1914: a programme to reverse the 'unequal treaties' – winning tariff autonomy, abolishing extraterritorial privilege, and shutting down (gradually) the numerous foreign enclaves on Chinese soil. China's revolt against a global order in which empire was the norm was far

more complete than almost anywhere else in the Afro-Asian world.[24]

Of course, part of the reason was that, although the West had encroached upon China's independence in the nineteenth century (a number of Western countries enjoyed extraterritorial rights, including the USA, Brazil, Peru and Bolivia), the Chinese had fiercely resisted reduction to a form of semi-colonial dependence in the crucial decade before 1914. Instead, the need to turn China into a nation state (not a dynastic empire) with a republican government to express the popular will was accepted with astonishing rapidity among the educated class. The explosion of feeling in May 1919 when China's claim to Shantung was rejected in Paris showed that this new style of patriotism had not stopped there. The May Fourth movement began among students in Peking. But it quickly became a much wider protest, enlisting merchants and artisans in its demonstrations and boycotts, and spreading far beyond the capital. It was graphic proof that foreign business interests could be badly damaged by popular outrage, and that the angry crowds would take their cue from the nationalist rhetoric of the newliterati. Yet this newpopular mood was not translated into a strong national government. Between 1919 and 1922, China had a government in Canton as well as one in Peking. The Peking government was a cockpit of factions, and its writ hardly ran beyond the walls of the city.[25] Across much of China, the real voice of authority was the provincial *dujun*, the military commander or (a hostile translation) 'warlord'.[26] By 1922 the simmering hostility of these provincial bosses and their factional groupings had set off the civil wars that dominated China's politics until the capture of Peking by Chiang Kai-shek in 1928. The enthusiastic endorsement of China's sovereign statehood and the solemn promises to respect it in the Washington treaties are thus somewhat puzzling. If anything, the domestic turmoil of post-imperial China seemed to invite the interference of the foreign powers as much if not more so than before 1914.

It had certainly seemed so during the First World War. In January 1915, as soon as they grasped the gigantic scale of the European conflict, the Japanese presented their famous Twenty-One Demands to the Chinese government, on War Office paper 'watermarked with machine guns and dreadnoughts'.[27] They proposed the mother and father of unequal treaties. China was pressed to agree to a Japanese takeover of German claims in Shantung, to extend Japanese concessions and leases in Manchuria for the rest of the century, not to borrowforeign capital without Japan's permission to develop Fukien (a coastal province far to the south of Japan's usual sphere), and to take on Japanese advisers 'in political, financial and military affairs'.[28] To all intents, they proposed a virtual protectorate. Without allies or arms, the Chinese government gave in, and the treaty was signed. It opened the way for the rapid entrenchment of Japanese influence in the Chinese north, and the increasing dependence of the Peking government on loans from Tokyo. The fall of the tsar and the break-up of his empire ended the last real check upon Japanese dominance: neither Britain nor the United States was willing to challenge Tokyo at this stage of the war. When they did agree to intervene in Siberia to stop Russia falling under German control (the expected result of the Brest-Litovsk treaty in March 1918), it was Japan that supplied much the largest force, and expected to reap much the largest gain: extending its influence deep into Inner Asia. The Shantung decision in 1919 was thus of a piece with the massive shift of power in wartime East Asia. As China's unity fractured (the rival Canton government had appeared in 1917), and its provincial bosses took the Japanese shilling, it seemed that it might become part of a vast informal empire whose centre was Tokyo.

Yet this was not what happened. The explanation lies in a powerful convergence between China's politics and the conflictual relations of the great powers in East Asia. It was true that Peking could not impose its will on the provincial dujuns. But there was little doubt that on questions of 'rights recovery' the nationalist programme of its intellectual elite (centred in Peking's newuniversity)[29]

commanded mass support in the treaty-port cities of maritime China. That was the significance of the May Fourth movement. By the end of 1920, the Peking government had revoked the extraterritorial privileges of Germany and Austria–Hungary, its wartime enemies. The Bolshevik government had renounced Russia's claims. It seemed more than likely that Peking would go on to denounce the privileged status of the treaty powers that remained, including Britain, Japan and the United States.[30] It was easy to imagine the explosive effect of such a move in Shanghai and elsewhere, and the enormous difficulty of defending foreign interests and property against the mass demonstrations and boycotts that seemed certain to follow. It seemed safer by far to enlist Peking's support for a gradual change. The British and the Americans had an added reason to come to terms with Peking. They had watched with alarm the growing power of Japan, and mistrusted the 'militarist clique' that directed its policy.[31] Throughout 1920 they pressed the Japanese government to pool its commercial concessions in an international consortium, and opposed its claim to a special position 'beyond the Wall' in Manchuria.[32] This Anglo-American pressure was feared and resented in Tokyo, but Japanese leaders had other reasons to change course in East Asia. They faced domestic unrest, the outgrowth in part of the economic strains of wartime.[33] The Siberian expedition, with its costs and its losses, was deeply unpopular.[34] Without the old Russian threat, it was even harder to justify. In Korea, where an independence campaign had been brutally crushed in 1919, political tranquillity was urgently needed.[35] And the Japanese shared the Westerners' alarm that anti-foreign feeling might get out of hand in China and inflict big losses on their business interests, especially by Chinese boycott of their textile exports.[36] The case for conciliation had become overwhelming.

The upshot was the remarkable settlement embodied in the Washington treaties of 1921–2. The Western powers and Japan guaranteed the independence and integrity of the Chinese republic.

Provision was made to reform the unequal treaties. No power was to seek any special concessions or make exclusive deals. China, it seemed, had recovered the national dignity painfully surrendered in the chaotic 1890s. But the status revolution was not the end of the story. From 1922 onward, foreign interests in China faced militant nationalism on a growing scale. A second revolution, social and political, made the Washington treaties' leisurely timetable for the recovery of China's full sovereignty look strangely complacent. The epicentre was Canton, the southern metropolis. Canton had been the centre of anti-Ch'ing politics. The Cantonese, said an old China-coast diehard, were the 'Irish of China' (it was not meant as a compliment).[37] Canton was less than eighty miles from Hong Kong, which served as its outport, and a safe haven for dissent in imperial times. It was where Sun Yat-sen had struggled before 1911 to build up his revolutionary party, later the Kuomintang, or Nationalist Party (KMT).[38] But, without a mass following, Sun was poorly placed to exploit the growing antagonism of merchants and artisans towards the exactions and oppressions of the newprovincial rulers (many of them military) who had pushed aside the mandarin-scholars of the old imperial system. Nor could he appeal to the educated class (a category that included the young Mao Tsetung), who bitterly resented their displacement from power by warlords and soldiers. In 1922 he was even chased out of Canton by a warlord faction. But the next three years brought an astonishing change. For in 1923 Sun made an epic compact with an agent sent from Bolshevik Russia. He accepted the offer of military aid and a corps of Soviet advisers[39] to rebuild the KMT on the Leninist model, in partnership with the infant Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The KMT–CCP began to build a mass base among peasants and town workers.[40] And with its own party army it at last had the means to defeat the warlords and build a new state.[41]

The revolutionary year was 1925. It started badly for the KMT, which lost control of Canton (briefly), and its leader Sun to a premature death. But on 30 May labour tension in Shanghai (where

foreign enterprise was concentrated) burst into violence when the British police force in the International Settlement shot dead twelve Chinese during a large demonstration. A huge wave of protest swept up the Yangtze valley and along the coast to Hong Kong. On 23 June there was further shooting in the European enclave of Shameen in Canton. A general strike and boycott of British trade was organized in Hong Kong, in a direct challenge to the British authorities. The KMT now reaped the reward for its new credibility as a nationalist movement with the physical power to govern effectively. Soviet support, the anti-foreign mass movement and a bloody civil war between the warlords in the north suddenly opened the way to reunify China under a national government pledged to expel all foreign power.[42] In July 1926 the KMT army set off from Canton on the 'Northern Expedition', destination Peking. By the end of the year it had reached Wuhan, the great crossroads city in the middle of China. Nanking and Shanghai lay within its grasp. China's titular sovereignty – hailed with enthusiasm at the Washington conference – had become frighteningly real. For the British, whose stake in the old order was largest, there began a race to withdraw from the most vulnerable outposts before the shooting started.[43] What the future held for the large foreign presence (Japanese and Western) in Shanghai, the greatest treaty port of all, was anyone's guess.

There is a strange but important epilogue to this tale of revolution and empire in the aftermath of war. Across much of Northern Eurasia, what mattered most was the fate of imperial Russia, apparently dissolving in chaos in 1918. As tsarist rule collapsed, the subject peoples of what Lenin had called the 'prison of nations' had a glimpse of freedom. In the Ukraine, the Caucasus and Central Asia, and among the ethnic minorities of Russia proper (like the Bashkirs and Tatars), independent regimes made their bid for power. On the face of things, their chances were good. In 1918–19 the Bolsheviks were struggling to survive in a civil war. Moreover, the Bolshevik view had favoured liberation for Russia's subject nationalities,

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 Kuomintangregime, 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 drewback 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, nowbased 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 policywas 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 newpolitical 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