

Defining and Defending the Open Door Policy: Theodore Roosevelt and China, 1901-1909

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In 1899, before Theodore Roosevelt ran for national office, Secretary of State John Hay orchestrated an international agreement with six imperial powers to collectively guarantee the maintenance of free trade in Chinese ports, a potentially lucrative market for American goods and a primary cause of friction among covetous foreign traders. The idea was simple: if world powers could trade freely and grow rich without impediment, they would not seek territorial aggrandizement that often led to war. The policy – styled as the ‘open door’ to China – soon proved faulty. In 1900, the Boxer Rebellion, a nationalist Chinese uprising intent on dispelling foreigners, reached a crescendo when Peking was overrun by revolutionary violence. Foreign powers ordered an inter-imperial intervention to suppress the Boxers that ended with Russian troops occupying part of Manchuria, a prostrate Chinese state, and foreign expeditionary forces in several major cities for more than a year. The Boxers actually stoked long-standing territorial disputes among foreign powers and, after the rebellion, Hay proposed that the imperial powers who favored open door trade also respect China’s territorial integrity and the sovereignty of the Chinese state. Despite all six imperial countries agreeing to these tenets, the collective guarantee failed to keep the peace. Japan went to war with Russia in 1904, China’s internal sovereignty remained tenuous for a generation, and commercial imbalances accompanied informal spheres of imperial interest. Theodore Roosevelt argued that the open door policy ‘completely disappears as soon as a powerful nation determines to disregard it, and is willing to run the risk of war rather than forego its intention’. Roosevelt inherited the open door idea from his predecessor William McKinley, just as he inherited Hay as secretary of state, and although he observed the policy’s defects, he accepted it as the basis for American relations in the Far East.

Some scholars, particularly those of the Wisconsin School, maintain that Roosevelt expanded the open door, creating an ideology of economic expansion that acted as a general foreign policy capable of perpetuating American power through the competition for international markets. Others, like cold warrior George Kennan, believed the open door had no ‘clear applicability to actual situations in China’, that it merely allowed the United States to attach its policies to a convenient metaphor. Regardless of intent or utility, the open door is without question an idea that continues to inspire attention, and Gregory Moore’s *Defining and Defending the Open Door Policy* is the latest book to consider its impact on immigration, nationalism,

foreign investment, and labor relations. What Moore promises is 'a third approach' to understanding United States foreign policy in the Far East, one between the narrow examinations of a singular issue or a broad survey of the US-Sino relations. What he delivers is an assessment of 'the overall success or failure of the [Roosevelt] administration's China policy' told in a traditional account of foreign relations that nicely condenses and synthesizes previous scholarship. It is not, however, a drastic recalibration. *Defining and Defending the Open Door Policy* settles for sustained coverage of 'a specific issue in Sino-American relations' during Theodore Roosevelt's tenure, namely that of global imperialism, to determine the success or failure of American statecraft. In this regard it is similar to studies of Roosevelt's China policy by authors like Raymond Esthus, Charles Neu, Thomas McCormick, Joseph Fry, and Howard Beale.

Moore sets out to study Roosevelt specifically, an approach that runs contrary to the most recent scholarship on Roosevelt's foreign policy that puts others in a position of power when Roosevelt comes to office. John Taliaferro's biography of John Hay makes a compelling case for Hay's dominance until 1904, and other McKinley administration officials like Elihu Root who played a key role in Roosevelt's education. Roosevelt certainly blustered about a large policy in the years preceding war with Spain; he also discussed foreign relations with luminaries of his time, but he came to office entirely inexperienced in statecraft and was quickly confronted with the Philippine atrocities scandal until 1902. He did not begin to captain Far East policy until Hay's death in 1905. Indeed, Roosevelt features sporadically as the central figure of Moore's book until the Russo-Japanese War when Hay's health declined irretrievably. Moore also promises to pay greater attention to the historical context, but omits reference to many leading historiographical accounts that have shed light on the period. Fewer than a dozen books in his bibliography can be classed as new scholarship (less than five years old), and despite his focus on Roosevelt, when Moore visited Harvard to read the William W. Rockhill Papers he seems to have overlooked the expansive Theodore Roosevelt Collection. Much of the analysis in *Defining and Defending the Open Door Policy* is drawn from official documents, and particularly State Department papers, a rare methodology in the contemporary field of diplomatic history that has 'turned' to cultural and transnational approaches. Moore makes reference to the Japanese and European imperialists, and explains the importance of international perceptions of the United States and the agency of the Chinese, yet there is a noticeable absence of Chinese sources, few references to non-American open door advocates like British Admiral Charles Beresford, and no archival work in foreign libraries.

Where *Defining and Defending the Open Door Policy* best negotiates the history of US-Sino relations is around Russian interpretations of the open door idea, and the Tsar's attempt to monopolize commerce in Manchuria. Moore adds valuable insight into how the Roosevelt administration made decisions by showing how obscure events led diplomatic negotiations. The effect of an individual consul, a minor clash between sailors, dock construction, telegraph closures, and press speculation illustrate the number of moving parts in play. Moore also does an outstanding job explaining Hay's contradictory statements about the open door policy, clarifying that the secretary of state sought assurances from world powers, not obligations, and makes the point that without firm commitments to protect an open door system the policy was entirely toothless.

The first four chapters will please readers with little knowledge about American Far East policy, and frustrate those with greater understanding. Moore chose to provide, or perhaps the publisher requested, an entire chapter on Chinese history with the West. The stage is set as far back as the 15th century, and Moore dedicates more than 20 pages to background that could have been summed up in a few paragraphs. He could have used the space to add context to parts of the book in need of greater explanation. For example, how did Roosevelt's racial ideology affect policy? This aspect of the president's character receives short treatment and does not expand on the existing scholarship. Indeed, Moore's chapter on 'Attitudes and perceptions' makes no mention of Paul Kramer's thesis that America practiced a race war in the Far East, Frank Ninkovich's theory that Roosevelt's ideology was tied to Anglo-Saxon notions of civilization, or contemporary arguments that Roosevelt's immigration policy was more closely related to ideas of class than race. *Defining and Defending the Open Door Policy* rather fixates on the discriminatory insults that Roosevelt and others in his administration make, leaving aside the nuanced intellectual arguments of the day

and the rationale behind the uneven treatment of diverse Asian populations. Other events that get brief mention are the emission of the Boxer indemnity, the Chinese exchange programme, Japanese negotiations with Russia before the outbreak of war (a seven-month period condensed into two sentences), and Roosevelt's negotiation of the Portsmouth Treaty. On the last, Moore insists the 'efforts to bring about peace have been well chronicled elsewhere', and cites Tyler Dennett's *Roosevelt and the Russo-Japanese War*, a book published in 1925. Yet when summing up China's history from the 15th century – an entire chapter of analysis – Moore cites several contemporary sources.

Where the book makes its most significant contribution is on the Taft-Katsura memo and Root-Takahira agreement. Moore does well exhibiting the historiographical debates over the informal/formal nature of the Taft-Katsura memo. He provides a contextualized and balanced view of the American-Japanese relations, and illustrates the diplomacy of Root in 1908 with State Department sources that add to our knowledge of the Takahira agreement. I once complained in a review of James Bradley's *Imperial Cruise*, a book that preposterously claimed that Roosevelt's statecraft caused the onset of the Second World War and the rise of Mao Zedong, that no stand-out analysis of Taft's trip to Asia in 1905 or Root's diplomacy with Japan in 1908 existed. I take it back. Moore's final chapter of *Defining and Defending the Open Door Policy* does a remarkable job of detailing the purpose of Taft's trip, the outcome, and the purpose of the memo. He also demonstrates an intricate analysis of the Root-Takahira exchange that led to a copper-fastening of the open door idea, and particularly of the complicated defense of Chinese integrity that simultaneously overlooked Japanese expansion in the region.

Moore concludes that Theodore Roosevelt's China policy was a failure, that he left the White House in 1909 with China in a position almost identical as he found it in 1901, and that the imperial world powers remained ensconced in the region with spheres of influence that necessarily imposed upon China's integrity. He also chastises Roosevelt for doing little to solve China's problems, and claims the president did 'nothing concrete ... to alleviate or remove the causes of ill feeling' between the nations (p. 200). While Moore recognizes the underlying problem for Roosevelt was the inter-imperial rivalry of European and Japanese states, he does not forgive this context. The United States favored an open door for commerce over an open door that maintained Chinese integrity because they could not achieve the latter, a fact that Moore concedes while complaining that Roosevelt could have done more to protect China from foreigners and domestic zealots that eventually contributed to the Qing Dynasty's downfall. Ultimately, Moore writes, Roosevelt 'did nothing truly inventive in [his] dealings with China as it pursued a reactive rather than a proactive foreign policy in Asia' (p. 207).

And yet the reader can scan the preceding chapters and find several moments in which Roosevelt proved his inventiveness and acted to protect Chinese integrity – while protecting American interests, of course. The mediation of the Russo-Japanese War, for which Roosevelt won the Nobel Peace Prize, undoubtedly ceded Chinese sovereignty to foreign imperialists, but it also ended a conflict that threatened to spill deeper into Chinese territory previously unthreatened by world powers. The Treaty of Portsmouth balanced the ambitions of Russia and Japan so effectively that it would be another decade before further expansion would occur, and only then after the tumult of two Russian revolutions and a World War. Roosevelt and Hay ignored contradictions in the open door policy to achieve peace in the Far East without committing the United States militarily, an act that increased American power in the region, and Roosevelt's unsavory racial stereotyping of the Chinese aside, he encouraged foreign powers to forego the Boxer indemnity and used the indemnity to create a student exchange program that was arguably the most far-sighted attempt at Chinese cultural awareness of any chief executive of the era. It is a truism to say Roosevelt wanted it both ways; he sought to prevent China's dismemberment through balance of power politics while achieving American objectives of commercial expansion. Moore sees this as hubris, and calls for a 'new realism' that is 'built around the recognition and acceptance that the United States cannot dictate solutions to the problems of the world, and that it might not be possible to achieve all of its policy goals' (p. 212). But can we blame Roosevelt, a chief executive entrenched in his era, for trying? The perils of intervention, the growth of the American empire, and the fatigue of constant vigilance did not reverberate as a foreign policy tocsin in the early 20th century. It is only with hindsight from the 21st century that Moore can make this conclusion.

Within two years of Roosevelt's departure from the White House, the Qing government would be toppled, and during the Second World War the Japanese capitalized on German and Russian weakness to expand its empire in China. No 'careful diplomacy, strategic planning' or understanding of cultural differences between China and the United States could have changed this. Moreover, examining the past through the lens of the present assumes certain predestination between Roosevelt's administration and later years, stripping agency from the Chinese nationalists, Japanese imperialists, and successive US administrations.

Defining and Defending the Open Door Policy in parts demonstrates the chaos of geopolitics and how local, seemingly unimportant, events shape policy. These are the most interesting and affirming parts. Frustratingly, it also applies a top-down analysis of Theodore Roosevelt's influence within *the longue durée* of US-Sino relations that is sweeping in its conclusions. It does offer an in-depth study of United States relations with China, but does so from the State Department's perspective. For a book that concludes that we must consider the cultural differences between nations, it does not heed its own advice.

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