

War Aims and War Aims Discussions (China)

By [Lukas K. Danner](#)

Summary

This article discusses China's war aims during the First World War, as well as the intra-Chinese discussion over which side to enter the war on. It surveys the extent of the different aims, most of which were related to regaining control over foreign occupied territory, such as the German (then Japanese) territory around Jiaozhou Bay, among others. The article also highlights the evolution of the discussion in China over which side to support in the Great War, which lasted until 1917, when China finally declared war on Germany. The article concludes with an assessment of the extent to which China achieved its war aims.

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Introduction

[China](#) officially entered the First World War quite late, in 1917. However, even while neutral, it participated by offering contingents of Chinese [laborers](#) to the Allies. Discussions over whether or not to even enter the war were ongoing in the beginning years of the Great War and also partially postponed due to domestic turmoil and discord, as well as frequent leadership changes within China itself, though the Allies were for the most part the favored side. 1917 came to be the decisive year for the question of [war aims](#), when China ended up declaring war on [Germany](#) in August of that year. Interestingly, many within the Chinese [government](#) also saw opportunities in the Great War to unite the nation and regain some of its colonized territory.

Recovery of Shandong

Even though the Chinese government did not decide to enter the war until very late, there were discussions about multiple aspects of the war and how it affected China. First, as Germany was seen as the main aggressor and, incidentally, also held Chinese territorial possessions in its Jiaozhou Bay (*Kiautschou Bucht* in German) colony in today's Shandong province and with the main city of [Qingdao](#) (Tsingtau), one central aspect of the war aims discussions included how to recover this territory. At the outset of the war, President [Yuan Shikai](#), “[i]n secret, ... lobbied Britain to let China to enter the war ... offer[ing] the British ambassador 50,000 Chinese troops.”¹ Yuan was hoping to recover the German territory in Shandong quickly, as the Germans were likely more occupied with the French and Russian fronts. However, the British did not agree to this. Yuan's recovery plan was soon complicated by [Japan](#)'s quick action in laying siege on the German colony in China and, after conquering it, presenting the Chinese government in January 1915 with the infamous “[Twenty-One Demands](#),” effectively giving Japan much greater influence in Shandong and Manchuria, as well as over the Han-Yeh-Ping company in Wuchang. China, having accepted the demands for the most part five months later, in May 1915, then had little choice but to wait for the war to end and hope to achieve the recovery of Shandong diplomatically at the [Paris Peace Conference](#). This aspect of China's discussions and war efforts has come to be known as the “Shandong Question” (also sometimes “Shandong Problem” or “Shantung Issue”), which some scholars identified as “China's key war aim”² during the First World War. Interestingly, Japan would be an inhibiting factor to China's war entrance a second time during the war, that is, on 23 November 1915, when [France](#), [Great Britain](#) and [Russia](#) “approached the Japanese government with a request that Japan would join them in bringing China into the Alliance[.] Viscount [Ishii Kikujirō \(1866-1945\)](#), on behalf of the Japanese government peremptorily refused his consent.”³ It is relatively safe to say that Yuan Shikai would have approved of China's entry into the war in late 1915.

National Renewal

Second, while realizing the dangers, China (like Japan) also saw the Great War as an opportunity, as [Xu Guoqi](#) asserts. Since belligerent countries on both sides had colonies and interests in China, the danger that battles could happen on Chinese territory was very real to Chinese officials. “Moreover, with the collapse of the old international system, China could easily be bullied by Japan.”⁴ The opportunity was perceived by the Chinese government to lie in the effect the Great War could have in opening the door for China to enter the international community as an equal of the established powers.⁵ But some government officials (such as [Liang Shiyi \(1869-1933\)](#), [Liang Qichao \(1873-1929\)](#) and Liu Yan) saw the Great War not just as an opportunity to better China's external standing in the world, but also one possibly

useful within the country itself, that is, an “opportunity to renew their country and get it on track to recover its national sovereignty.”⁶ This was due, among other things, to warlords splitting off territory within China in rebellion (e.g., Xinjiang in the north-west), Tibetan independence attempts, the Guomindang in southern China, as well as the western foreign powers’ and Japan’s colonies along the Chinese seaboard and in Manchuria. The government in Beijing thought that a sign of strength—even just a symbolic one—could help it unite the nation: “If China managed to get into the war, if they got to sit at the negotiating table, it would cement its claim to power. [While] Europe ... didn’t need ... soldiers[,] ... they certainly needed workers, reasoned ... Yuan’s advisor, Liang Shiyi.”⁷ During the period of official neutrality, China organized the export of Chinese laborers for supporting tasks for French, British, or Russian armies via private companies that were *de jure* not affiliated with the government.

China’s Entrance into the War in 1917

After Germany announced its policy of unrestricted [submarine warfare](#) in 1917, China decided to declare war. Prior to that, in 1916, a German submarine had bombed a ship with tens of thousands of Chinese laborers bound for Europe via the Mediterranean Sea. Resentment due to incidents such as this was certainly a contributing factor; however, the official declaration of war against Germany had also become a war aim in itself by now. As the Shandong Question still needed to be resolved, the Chinese government placed its hopes in a solution at the diplomatic conference following the end of the war. The only way to be at the negotiating table at that conference was to have declared war against the losing side.

While the trigger of the eventual declaration seems to have been Germany’s unrestricted submarine warfare, China’s declaration was stalled due to multiple factors: On the one hand, it had come to develop such an emotional enmity with Japan that it simply did not want to be on the same fighting side as its eastern neighbor. On the other hand, rationally thinking government officials such as Chinese Minister to the [U.S.](#) and Cuba, [V. K. Wellington Koo \(1888-1985\)](#), pointed out four reasons why it would work to China’s disadvantage to enter the war on the Allies’ side: First, China had committed to following the U.S.’s lead in staying neutral in the Great War; second, it would provide Japan with reason to consolidate its colonial possessions in China in the name of the Allies; third, “the Allied countries such as Britain and France needed China’s help in the form of human and material resources, and they would try to win that support by every means in their disposal, including pressure[;]”⁸ and, fourth, due to the European powers’ blind trust in Japan and tacit acceptance of Japanese *de facto* suzerainty over China, Japan might exploit this and make China its vassal state.⁹ Still, Koo also presented another four reasons for China to join that could work in its

advantage: “[Freedom of action in helping the Allies[,] ... more support from the United States in ... economic aid[,] ... the United States could help stem the Japanese invasion of China[,] ... [and] the United States would (...) have a great impact on China’s future

international status.”¹⁰ The latter tipped the balance to make China enter the war, together with the hope of becoming an equal player in the international system and regaining full territorial sovereignty, primarily over Shandong, but also the other western and Japanese imperial possessions such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, Manchuria and Macau.

[Sun Yat-sen](#), whose foothold in southern China was becoming more pronounced at the time, actually weighed in against China’s entrance into the Great War. Sun argued “for strict neutrality and stat[ed] that since Germany had done less harm to China than the Allied countries, it would be better to declare war on the latter.”¹¹ He was also concerned that abandoning [neutrality](#) could contribute to further internal discord in China and thus open the door for Japan to annex more Chinese territories.¹²

Despite being splintered among several entities—some controlled by foreign intruders, others controlled by army generals or warlords (generally speaking, military-controlled regimes)—China declared war on the German and Austro-Hungarian [Empires](#) on 14 August 1917. Because an attempt at an imperial restoration led by General [Zhang Xun \(1854-1923\)](#) (along with political support from President [Li Yuanhong \(1864-1928\)](#)) was not successful, President Li’s office was taken over by General [Feng Guozhang \(1859-1919\)](#) on 1 August 1917, and General [Duan Qirui](#) was installed as Prime Minister.¹³ “General Duan ... was keen to improve China’s international standing by joining the war, despite the fact that he was negotiating secret loans to pay his army from Japan, in exchange for offering Japan the right to station troops in Shandong.”¹⁴ The latter fact, of course, would not work in China’s favor in the ensuing diplomatic negotiations in France. China’s actual participation in the war remained minimal—constrained to confiscating some German ships along the Chinese seaboard and continuing to support the Allies with laborers—but, “despite repeated offers of naval and military assistance, no Chinese troops were deployed by the Allies anywhere.”¹⁵ This is relevant for China’s war aims (and their realization) insofar as “both Britain and Japan ... accused China of having chosen not to contribute to the Allied cause during the war.”¹⁶

Conclusion: Versailles and (Non-)Fulfillment of War Aims

China was represented at the Paris Peace Conference by envoys from the two main governments at the time, that is, the Beiyang northern government and Sun Yat-sen’s

southern government. Lou Tseng-tsiang headed the northern delegation, consisting of V. K. Wellington Koo, [Cao Rulin \(1877-1966\)](#), [Hu Weide \(1863-1933\)](#), [Alfred Sze \(1877-1958\)](#), as well as advisors to the delegation. Because of Sun Yat-sen's rising influence in southern China, [Wu Chaoshu \(1887-1934\)](#) was sent as his delegate (though, at first [C. T. Wang \(1882-1961\)](#) was nominated and continued to be present there).¹⁷ Though Lou Tseng-tsiang was the official head of the delegation, V. K. Wellington Koo—a master of rhetoric—came to be China's main negotiator.

China's demands at the conference were of a territorial, economic, and political nature. In regards to Chinese territory, the "delegation proposed the internationalization of the Manchurian railways and rivers"¹⁸ and of the foreign treaty ports and communities for the short-term in order to transition them back to Chinese ownership in the mid- to long-term. Politically, China wanted the "elimination of all legation guards, removal of all foreign troops stationed in China, and the abolition of extraterritorial rights;"¹⁹ and, economically, it sought to regain the full sovereignty over tariffs and railways.²⁰ The overarching aim of these proposals was the dramatic improvement of China's international standing (in essence, an [alternative vision of world order](#)), that is, more or less copying the actions that Japan had taken in the mid- and late 19th century to achieve equal footing with the great Western powers. Given [Woodrow Wilson's \(1856-1924\) "Fourteen Points"](#), including the self-determination of peoples, the Chinese delegation was quite sanguine about realizing many of its goals at the negotiation table.

Problematic for the realization of these demands were a number of secret treaties between the Great Powers, as well as China and Japan, which effectively predetermined the outcome of the conference. There were two secret Sino-Japanese agreements in which China agreed to grant Japan several of the sovereign rights which it proposed to regain, including occupation of the Shandong Peninsula, though with the qualifier that it would be given back to China eventually. One of these secret treaties, dated 1915, was widely known as the Yuan Shikai government had leaked it to the public to pressure Japan to water it down somewhat. The treaty was therefore known to the Chinese delegation, and Koo argued that it had been an unequal treaty, imposed on China in a time of weakness. The second Sino-Japanese treaty was agreed upon in September 1918—a month after China's official war entry—in which the Beiyang government again agreed to support Japan's occupation of Shandong, along with other rights in China, in return for financial help from Japan. This treaty was completely new to the Chinese delegation ²¹

Perhaps most significantly, the Allies had each separately agreed to secret treaties with

Japan at the beginning of 1917 in which they guaranteed their backing of Japan's rights to Shandong, whilst Japan supported them with ships and weaponry for the European war effort.²² The result of the negotiations was that the Chinese delegation could not annul the secret agreements it had made with Japan, while two out of the "Big Four" were bound by their own secret treaties with Japan, and, thus, China ended up empty-handed in regards to its war aims. Moreover, due to the publication of the Versailles negotiations favoring a handover of Shandong to Japan with the approval of the great Western powers, civil unrest erupted in China on 4 May 1919 ([May Fourth Movement](#)), awakening Chinese [nationalism](#) and the laying the basis for intensified Sino-Japanese enmity. Under these circumstances, the Chinese delegation was reluctant to sign the Peace [Treaty of Versailles](#). And even though the Chinese delegation asked to sign while voicing reservations regarding Shandong, the "Big Four" forbade this in order to not encourage other nations to do the same. The result was that the treaty was not signed by the Chinese delegation at all.

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Notes

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External Links

- [Boehler, Patrick: The Forgotten Army of the First World War. How Chinese Labourers Helped Shape Europe \(South China Morning Post\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Japanese Government, "Twenty-One Demands", 26 April 1915 \(USC US-China Institute\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Leonard, Matt: Eastern culture on the Western Front \(World War I Centenary\) \(Article\)](#)

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