

Chapter 11

Characteristics of Foreign Policy During the Sui-Tang Period

To the Sui and Tang Chinese, the world around their Middle Kingdom was much enlarged compared to earlier times and their knowledge of that world was more intimate and solid. The Sui and Tang royal houses were heirs of the alien rulers of North China, not just in the mixture of non-Chinese and Chinese blood that ran in their veins, but also in their political, economic and military systems, as well as in their religious beliefs. The Sui and Tang emperors, while proclaiming themselves Sons of Heaven in the Confucian tradition, relied heavily on Daoism and the foreign religion of Buddhism to enhance the legitimacy of their rule, and the early Tang rulers from Taizong on also assumed the title of Heavenly Qaghan. The two titles presented them as legitimate rulers of both the Chinese of the Middle Kingdom, and the non-Chinese on the steppes and in the Western Regions.

Within the ruling class there were not only officials from non-Chinese families of the Northern dynasties, but also foreign generals and chiefs recruited during the Tang period. At least 372 identifiably foreign generals served in Tang armies, including both those from states which had submitted to Tang as well as Tang's allies.¹ The number of non-Chinese soldiers in Chinese armies must have been many times larger.

This non-Chinese component in both the ruling and ruled classes, together with the importation of foreign goods and ideas from countries all over Asia, gave China an open, cosmopolitan air during the Tang period, especially before the An Lushan rebellion.

At the same time there were always many advocates of the inward-looking attitude, the attitude of "having all the Chinese within and keeping all the barbarians without" and drawing a clear line between the "civilized Middleland" and the "savage, useless" land of the "barbarians," and between the Chinese as "roots" and the non-Chinese as "branches and leaves." Among the Tang Chinese, the idea always prevailed that Confu-

¹ For a list, see Zhang Qun 1986, pp. 37-95.

cian norms could be applied only to insiders, the Chinese, and not to outsiders, the non-Chinese. And yet, distrust or hatred of foreigners coexisted with a love of exotic things.² In early Tang, there were anti-Buddhist scholars such as Fu Yi, and in the post-rebellion time, the Confucian polemicist, Han Yu, attacked Buddhism in his famous memorial on the bone of Buddha in 819 as a “barbarian” importation that must be rejected in order to restore the traditional sinocentric doctrine.³

Both ideological purity and pragmatism were at work in foreign policy all through the dynasty's tenure, but generally speaking, to those responsible for making the decisions, the basic principle underlying foreign policy was the pragmatic assumption that the best strategy was to adapt plans to the actual situation at the time, since circumstances changed frequently and the balance of power did not remain the same. Pragmatism was most in evidence at the beginning of the Tang dynasty under Gaozu and during the post-rebellion time, when the government had to accommodate itself to the foreign powers and recognize them as equals in reality. The Sui-Tang regimes followed policy measures which fit into the same five categories discussed above in Chapter 1 as characteristic of earlier times—aggressive military expansion, frontier defense, alliance, appeasement and settlement and incorporation—and, in accordance with circumstances, made adjustments, changes and innovations in policy whenever they were necessary.

1. Aggressive military measures to expand Chinese territory.

Military aggression was carried out on a much larger scale than in earlier times. Since there were no well-defined physical boundaries between China and its neighbors, aggression and defense were fluid concepts. All Chinese governments claimed that it was their objective to maintain security on the frontiers and to achieve political prestige in the world known to them. In reality, they varied in the degree to which they used aggressive military force to reach their goals.

Under the pretext of achieving national security, the Sui Emperor Yang attempted to expand Chinese power to the Western Regions, to the islands off the South China coast, and to Korea in three disastrous wars against Koguryō.

The Tang emperor Taizong started his reign with a cautious atti-

² Schafer 1963, p. 23.

³ Hartman 1986, pp. 84-6; p. 153.

tude towards military campaigns, but cherished the ambition to be a real universal ruler, and to restore an empire on the Han model. After the conquest of the Eastern Turks in 630, he steadily carried out his program of empire-building using the militia system, then in its full vigor, and the incorporation of nomadic cavalry generals and soldiers into the Chinese armies.

The momentum of aggressive expansion under Taizong carried on into the early years of Gaozong's reign, and succeeded in stretching Tang administration far beyond previous limits, including the Mongolian steppe land, the Western Regions and beyond, and the major part of the Korean peninsula. In Xuanzong's time, although Tang switched its foreign policy from aggression to frontier defense, with huge armies of both Chinese and non-Chinese generals and soldiers permanently stationed in the frontier regions, passive defense led to aggressive defense and new or revived expansionist adventures.

The An Lushan rebellion abruptly halted Tang's foreign adventures. Seriously weakened by the fragmented internal situation, the Tang rulers were forced to turn to accommodation in their dealings with neighboring peoples. Any aggressive use of military force was likely to be directed against the autonomous Military Commissioners in the provinces, rather than foreign powers.

2. Strengthening frontier defense.

While active aggression was a major feature of the conduct of foreign affairs during Sui and the first half of the Tang dynasty, for practical reasons, the Sui-Tang rulers always attached great importance to building strong frontier defenses. The two Sui emperors several times repaired the Great Wall and built frontier fortifications, while inside China, following the practice of the Northern Zhou dynasty, the Sui government strengthened the *fubing* militia system so as to exercise better central control over the armies of the state. Sui established regional commands in control of military affairs in several prefectures in areas of major strategic importance in order to ensure secure and trouble-free frontiers. Emperor Yang abolished the regional commands but Tang Gaozu reinstated them. The militia system was further rationalized and improved under Taizong.

After the success of Tang expansion in the 650's, the area to be defended was greatly enlarged. Under Gaozong and Empress Wu, efforts were made to maintain Chinese control through suppression of rebellions and readjustment of the *jimi* administrative system. From 670 on, Tang

was seriously challenged by the powerful Tibetan kingdom, whose territorial ambitions led to its annexation of the Tuyuhun and to its swallowing of some of the oasis states.

While the court persisted in competing with Tibet for control over the Western Regions, under Empress Wu, China turned from aggression to building up a strong defense line along the northern frontiers through construction of fortifications manned by large numbers of stationary troops. The court withdrew its administration from the Korean peninsula in 676, and in 682 when the Turks broke away from Chinese control, China ended its administration in the steppe.

The policy of building strong frontier defenses continued under Xuanzong. By now the system of rotating *fubing* militiamen for frontier service had collapsed and larger numbers of permanent, professional soldiers than at any earlier time in history were stationed on the frontiers. The frontier armies were organized into regional commands under Military Commissioners. Successful for a time, this system was developed at the devastating cost of a weakened domestic defense for the capital. At the same time, the power of the Military Commissioners also increased inordinately, creating the conditions that led to the rebellion of one of their number, An Lushan.

After the rebellion, challenged by strong internal regional powers, the court had no choice but to cope with external threats by passive defense: it recognized Tibetan occupation of the He-Long region and concluded peace treaties with this powerful kingdom on an equal basis, and it maintained at enormous cost the alliance with the Uighur empire for the sake of its military assistance. Meanwhile the court relied on the loyal Military Commissioners for frontier defense and made efforts to build strong Palace Armies with the Shence Army as their backbone. From 786 on, Tang developed a new frontier defense system of four frontier lines in the northwest: outer garrisons, major strategic walled towns, Shence garrisons near the capital, and Shence armies in the capital. In the southwest it was the Military Commissioners who dealt with the Nanzhao kingdom.

3. Alliance strategies.

In military encounters with foreign powers, the Sui-Tang rulers did not just rely on their own armed forces; in most cases, in fact, success was achieved more often by alliance strategies. Compared with their Han predecessors, the Sui-Tang rulers were much more familiar with nomadic society and had more intimate knowledge about what was going on among

the nomads through more frequent interactions with them. Alliance strategies were responsible for the successes of Sui Emperor Wen in bringing the Eastern Turks into the tributary system, and for Tang Taizong's series of successes in defeating the Eastern Turks and the Xueyantuo. Without the alliance with Silla, Gaozong would not have conquered Paekche and Koguryō. Alliance with the Uighurs was a prominent feature of Tang times both before and after the An Lushan rebellion.

Marriage alliance was more widely and frequently used than in other periods of Chinese history: altogether six marriages were concluded during the Sui dynasty with the Turks, Tuyuhun and Gaochang; during the Tang period before the An Lushan rebellion, about twenty such contracts were made with the Turks, Tuyuhun, Tibet, Gaochang, Xi, Khitan, Türgish, Khotan and Ferghana.⁴ Even from the sparse records on these marriages, we see that some of these princesses, such as the Zhou Princess Qianjin and the Sui Princess Yicheng, who married Turkish qaghans, and the Tang Princesses Wencheng and Jincheng, married to rulers of Tibet, played important roles in international politics and in cultural exchange.

Before the An Lushan rebellion, the Sui and Tang courts utilized marriage alliances in a more positive way than did Han. The marriages were for the purpose of using "barbarians against barbarians" or as rewards to the non-Chinese. Several times the court refused the requests of non-Chinese rulers for marriage alliances when they would not benefit Tang. The courts had a quite open, and positive view of the policy of marriage alliance, and did not consider it a policy of humiliation.

The royal families of the Sui and early Tang had both intermarried with non-Chinese. Taizong once remarked that among the northern "barbarians" decisions were often influenced by the wives of the rulers, and that if these women were from China and had children, their sons would be grandsons of the royal family and would not invade China.⁵ In at least two cases, however, China was forced into agreeing to marriages. One was the marriage of Princess Wencheng to the Tibetan ruler, which was agreed to by Taizong only after the Tibetans had made a military demonstration on the border. The other was when the Turkish qaghan Bāg Chor in 698 requested a marriage between his daughter and a Chinese prince.

⁴ Kuang Pingzhang 1935; Zhang Zhengming 1987, pp. 6-7. For marriage alliances with the Turks, see also Lin Enxian 1988, pp. 183-224.

⁵ ZGZY 9, p. 6a.

It is interesting to note that marriage between Chinese men and non-Chinese women for political purposes was common during the Northern dynasties, and continued to be common during Sui and Tang, although such marriages had much less importance then. In 584, the Turkish qaghan, Ishbara, gave the hand of his cousin to a Sui envoy.⁶ Another such marriage occurred under empress Wu, as mentioned above. In 756, when the Tang court was faced with the crisis of An Lushan's rebellion, it sent a prince to marry an Uighur lady as a step toward forming an alliance.

The An Lushan rebellion switched Tang China into a disadvantageous position vis-à-vis its neighbors. The policy of marriage alliance continued, but only with the Uighurs. Among the seven dynastic marriages with the Uighurs that took place, an unprecedented three princesses (Ningguo, Xian'an and Taihe) sent to the Uighurs were the true daughters of Tang emperors. Two others were daughters of Pugu Huai'en, a descendant of a former Uighur chief who had submitted to Tang in Taizong's time.

4. Appeasement policies.

When China was weak, the Chinese rulers demonstrated a remarkable flexibility in adapting their policies to the situation at hand, and did not hesitate to resort to open appeasement. In dealing with powerful foreign rivals, Taizong while still a prince formed a relationship of sworn brotherhood with a Western Turkish prince and with Tölgish Qaghan of the Eastern Turks. Faced with a Turkish challenge, Tang Gaozu assumed a humble attitude toward the Turks. During the An Lushan rebellion, China was definitely in a weak position. Appeasement, therefore, had to play a major role in its foreign policy. Appeasement was necessary to ensure Uighur assistance in suppressing the rebellion and to maintain a balance of power in China's relationships with Tibet, the Uighur empire and the Nanzhao kingdom.

The court adopted several other measures besides marriage contracts to appease the Uighurs and keep them as allies, including political investiture and payment of lavish subsidies. Also, despite the great strain on the economy, the Chinese kept up the horse-silk trade. These measures achieved their intended effect of purchasing military assistance and peace with the Uighurs in the frontier regions. There was also an unintended side effect: they contributed to the gradual economic and social transition of

⁶ *SUIS* 84, p. 1869; *ZZTJ* 176, p. 5477.

the Uighurs from a mobile and nomadic society to a settled semi-agricultural society, and made the Uighurs rely more on the Chinese economy than had any previous nomadic power, so that they found it as necessary to maintain peace with Tang as Tang did to preserve good relations with them.

For the sake of peace, the Tang court concluded several peace treaties with the Turks, one in 794 with the Nanzhao kingdom, and on a more frequent basis with Tibet. Seven sworn covenants were made with the Tibetan kingdom. The two before the An Lushan rebellion were violated by the Chinese. The specific terms of the first treaty are not available but it is clear that the Tang court insisted on explicit recognition of its superiority of status in the treaty of 732. After the rebellion, however, when Tang was in a weakened position, the next four treaties concluded were all soon broken off by the Tibetans and only the last had any effect at all in maintaining peace. The Chinese official attitude also changed. Especially in the last treaty of 821, they recognized Tibet as an equal. At the same time, however, the Tang Chinese retained the traditional Chinese view that the conclusion of a sworn covenant reflected an unstable situation and deterioration of the state, and a belief that sworn covenants were concluded mostly when trust was in doubt.

Nevertheless the act itself was remarkable in history. Throughout the period from the founding of the Qin empire in 221 B.C.E. to 1689 C.E., when the Qing government concluded the treaty of Nerchinsk with the Russian empire, the Chinese entered into many treaties with non-Chinese states. However, in no case did they conclude as many sworn covenants as late Tang did with the Tibetans: the Xiongnu and Han made frequent peace agreements but the only sworn treaty between them was an unofficial one concluded in 43 B.C.E. between the Xiongnu and Han envoys on the latter's own initiative and without the previous approval of the court; the Khitan-Liao (916-1125) concluded two sworn treaties with Northern Song (960-1127), and the Jurchen-Jin (1115-1234) three with the Southern Song (1127-1279) governments.⁷

5. Settlement and incorporation.

The policy of settlement and incorporation of non-Chinese into the Chinese state and their gradual assimilation to Chinese ways, was actively pursued by the Sui-Tang rulers before the An Lushan rebellion. Even

⁷ For a study of the treaties of the Song period, see Franke 1970.

though the history of Western Jin had shown that settling non-Chinese, especially nomads, close to or within Chinese territory, could cause disaster for China, and even though there were constant objections from critics at court, the Sui-Tang rulers persisted with the policy of resettlement.

The Tang frontier administration made impressive innovations in the systemization of institutions. Non-Chinese who submitted to Tang were organized into *jimi fuzhou* with the aim of pacifying and gradually sinicizing them while using their military strength. Through this kind of arrangement, Tang administration of non-Chinese expanded to cover more people and a much larger area than during the Han dynasty. In the frontier regions, the highest office in charge of the resettled non-Chinese was the Protectorate, which had its precedent in the Han Protectorate of the Western Regions. Six Protectorates of major importance were founded during Tang plus several others of lesser importance. Up to Xuanzong's time it was these Protectorates that assumed the main responsibility for Chinese frontier defenses.

Incorporation of non-Chinese was given moral justification by the concept of universal kingship. In his resettling of Turks and Koreans, Taizong does indeed reveal something of an ambition to be a true world emperor who did not distinguish between his Chinese and non-Chinese subjects. It was partly the non-Chinese background of the Li-Tang family that evoked such formulations. But the extent to which Taizong really believed in equality of Chinese and non-Chinese is open to question.

From a practical point of view, it was often the case that the Chinese rulers could not afford to refuse non-Chinese offers of submission and requests for resettlement, particularly when such practices were less costly than engaging in wars for the purpose of keeping peace on the frontiers. Also, the Chinese rulers could then utilize the considerable military force of the nomads. In this respect, both Sui and Tang rulers, especially the latter, made much more active use of non-Chinese forces in their military campaigns, and showed less compunction in doing so than had Han.

Such a defense system was, however, severely challenged in the closing decades of the seventh century when the Turks earlier placed under the *jimi fuzhou* system rose in rebellion. The policy broke down almost altogether after the An Lushan rebellion. Towards the end of the Tang dynasty the policy of resettlement was no longer favored by Tang even when the non-Chinese favored it. When the Uighur empire collapsed and the Uighurs asked the Tang court to arrange some kind of resettlement for them, the court accepted the Uighurs under Ormīzt only after his group

was weakened by internal disputes and refused the Uighurs under Ögä Qaghan, while keeping up relations with the Kirghiz, the enemy of the Uighurs, who finally helped Tang to crush Ögä Qaghan.