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**Sally Burt. "High and Low Tide: Sino–American Relations and Summit Diplomacy in the Second World War." *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 29:2 (2018): 167-186. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2018.1452426>.**

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Review by **Charles W. Hayford**, Independent Scholar

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The ‘high water mark’ of China’s World War Two diplomacy, or so it is written, was the Cairo Conference in late November 1943.<sup>1</sup> Sally Burt’s thoughtful, well-focused, resonant article re-examines English language sources and secondary literature to argue that in fact the preceding Foreign Ministers’ Conference in Moscow accomplished more for China’s long-term interests. At Cairo, President Franklin D. Roosevelt treated China’s President Chiang Kai-shek and his wife, Soong Mei-ling, as leaders of a Great Power and promised naval support for an amphibious campaign to retake Burma and re-open supply routes to China. The Chiangs went home in triumph. The tide turned at the following Tehran Conference, however. Roosevelt gave in to British and Soviet pressure to open a Second Front in Europe, which preempted the promised naval support and effectively scuttled the Burma campaign.

Burt has elsewhere described Roosevelt’s bureaucratic mismanagement and foxy diplomacy in more detail,<sup>2</sup> but here she concludes that Roosevelt’s mismanagement, “lack of commitment,” and “broken promises” led to “inconsistent and inefficient policy decisions” and toward the deterioration of Sino-American relations after his death. (174) Secretary of State Cordell Hull’s “diligence and perseverance” in Moscow, on the other hand, overcame British and Soviet resistance and made China a signatory to the Moscow Declaration (170). This established China in post-war planning and led to its permanent seat on the United Nations Security

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<sup>1</sup> Keith Sainsbury, *The Turning Point: Roosevelt, Stalin, Churchill, and Chiang-Kai-Shek, 1943: The Moscow, Cairo, and Teheran Conferences* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Ronald Heiferman, *The Cairo Conference of 1943: Roosevelt, Churchill, Chiang Kai-Shek, and Madame Chiang* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), 1; Sally Burt, “Review of Heiferman, Ronald, *The Cairo Conference of 1943: Roosevelt, Churchill, Chiang Kai-shek and Madame Chiang*.” H-War, H-Net Reviews. July 2012, <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35423>.

<sup>2</sup> Sally Burt, *At the President’s Pleasure: FDR’s Leadership of Wartime Sino-US Relations* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 1-6; Sally Burt, “The Ambassador, the General, and the President: FDR’s Mismanagement of Interdepartmental Relations in Wartime China,” *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 19:3-4 (2012): 288-310.

Council. Hull received the 1945 Nobel Peace Prize for his role in founding the United Nations, but Burt finds that he is generally “underappreciated” by historians and that his role in Sino-American relations has been little noticed (170, 178). True, Roosevelt took foreign policy into his own hands after Pearl Harbor and kept those hands close to his chest, but Burt joins those who see little evidence that this hands-on style left Hull “merely a figurehead” (169).

Roosevelt’s Cairo promises festered; Hull’s Moscow accomplishments endured. Yet among the Allies Roosevelt had the most favorable view of China. The president saw China as an ally during the war and as a balance against Japan and the Soviet Union after it. The China in Roosevelt’s mind, one might add, was like those sub-atomic particles that are in two places at once: China was a romantic once-and-future Great Power and a real place that could not defend itself. He resolved this cognitive dissonance by sending more dollars than the Chinese economy could absorb and grandly promising more matériel than the United States could deliver.

Chiang Kai-shek stationed his Foreign Minister—his wife’s older brother, T.V. Soong—in Washington, where he spoke with cabinet members most days and Roosevelt most weeks.<sup>3</sup> China felt humiliated to be excluded from wartime planning boards, Soong warned, and resentful that Roosevelt’s grandly-promised aid did not arrive. When Soong intimated that domestic politics might force Chiang into a truce with Japan, Roosevelt responded with flattering platitudes designed to save ‘face,’ which he thought to be important to Orientals (and Congress). Burt quotes Hull’s August 1943 reassurance that the United States

looked upon China as having great potential strength and development, politically, economically, et cetera, and that that development is reasonably certain in the not distant future, and that, therefore, we are showing China every consideration at all practicable (175).

She contrasts this “clear articulation” of the American position with the President’s “gushing statements” (175). I wonder, however, if Hull’s lawyerly “reasonably certain” and “every consideration at all practicable” were any more comforting to Soong’s realistic ear than presidential “gushing statements.” Though it is outside Burt’s focus, when Soong returned to China to brief Chiang for Cairo, the Generalissimo was so enraged at their policy disagreements that he placed T.V. under virtual house arrest.<sup>4</sup>

The ailing Hull, then well into his seventies, made his way to Moscow in October to meet with British and Soviet foreign ministers and develop plans for the post-war world. China was not invited, since British Prime Minister Winston Churchill ridiculed Roosevelt’s notion that China was a Great Power and was infuriated by Chiang’s support for Indian independence, while Soviet leader Joseph Stalin feared that Japan would find China’s presence an excuse to seize Soviet territory bordering Manchukuo. British and Soviet ministers asserted that because its Foreign Minister had not participated in the negotiations China could not sign the Declaration. Hull dug in his heels and won agreement that China’s ambassador to the Soviet Union could sign. The Declaration, though not a formal treaty, created the underpinnings for the United Nations and

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<sup>3</sup> Tai-Chun Kuo, “A Strong Diplomat in a Weak Polity: T. V. Soong and Wartime US-China Relations, 1940-1943,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 18 (2009): 219-231.

<sup>4</sup> Jay Taylor. *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-Shek and the Struggle for Modern China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 238-239.

being a signatory led to China's participation in the planning conferences at Dumbarton Oaks and San Francisco. Hull ensured that China would have one of the five permanent seats on what became the Security Council, conferring a veto power that changed China's role in Cold War diplomacy. The President cabled Hull: "I am made very happy by your splendid achievement in putting things through. I know the China part of it was due to your personal insistence" (177).

Cairo then began well. Stalin declined to attend. On 22 November Roosevelt, who had by then met with Churchill at least nine times, met Chiang Kai-shek for the first time (after Cairo, Chinese and American heads of state would not meet until 1972). He was well acquainted with Madame Chiang, who had lodged at the White House earlier in the year and shared dinners (though not cocktails) with the Roosevelts.<sup>5</sup> The Generalissimo, says his recent biographer, had an "almost reverential feeling" for Roosevelt and his prime goal in coming to Cairo was to create a personal relation.<sup>6</sup> Chiang and Roosevelt, the two Pacific leaders, both wanted to dismantle European empires in Asia, and outnumbered Churchill, who did not. The presumed necessity of bogging down perhaps a million Japanese troops in China outweighed doubts about China's political unity and military effectiveness as well as the logistical impossibility of increasing deliveries to China.

Roosevelt's smile worked overtime. He tried to keep China in the war, as Burt well puts it, by "feeding Chiang with rhetoric about China's greatness" and "building up Chiang's 'face' and stringing him along with promises . . ." (181). He wheedled Churchill into promising British naval support for a major amphibious landing to retake Burma and re-open supply lines to China. This campaign would also distract Japan from the Pacific War and indirectly protect American lives, as well as ginning up public support in both China and the United States. The Cairo Declaration was not a legal document but essentially an American-drafted press release that promised the return of Chinese territories that Japan had stolen and called for the end of imperialist rule in Asia. The official photos were stage-managed to create headlines in China by seating Generalissimo and Madame Chiang as equals alongside Churchill and Roosevelt. The Chiangs returned home convinced that they had won the greatest victory in the history of Chinese diplomacy and had ended the Century of Humiliation. The Generalissimo awarded his wife the Order of the Flying Cloud, the nation's highest civilian honor.<sup>7</sup> 'High tide' indeed!

At Tehran, all smiles stopped together. China and Hull were not invited. Churchill backed Stalin's demand for a Second Front in Europe to relieve pressure on Russia, and Stalin agreed to join the Pacific War within ninety days of German surrender. Burt concludes that "Roosevelt *preferred* to compromise on his commitment to Chiang" rather than risk further tension with Stalin (181; italics mine). Other scholars quote the President's claim that he had "fought as stubbornly as a mule" for British naval support and the Burma campaign and say that the exhausted Roosevelt finally capitulated to Churchill, Stalin, and strategic

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<sup>5</sup> Grace C. Huang, "Madame Chiang's Visit to America," in Joseph Esherick and Matthew T. Combs, ed., *1943: China at the Crossroads* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press; 2015), 41-74.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor. *The Generalissimo*, 247.

<sup>7</sup> Hsiao-ting Lin, "Chiang Kai-shek and the Cairo Summit," in Esherick and Combs, eds., *1943*, 426, 449.

necessity.<sup>8</sup> Roosevelt cabled Chiang from Tehran that British naval power would be used in Europe, effectively sinking the Burma campaign.

Burt persuasively criticizes Roosevelt's "fragmented approach" and lack of a coherent plan for the China theater (180) but wisely leaves open the question as to whether Roosevelt toughened his attitude toward Chiang in late 1943 because he had become disillusioned with the Chiangs in Cairo, or because the promise of Soviet intervention made China less vital, or because China lost its strategic importance when the American navy took island after island as bases for bombing and invading Japan. In any case, China was left in the mouth of the tiger. Operation Ichigo, a brutal campaign to connect Japanese bases in North China to Southeast Asian sources of supply, devastated Chiang's American-trained troops and cleared the North China plain for Communist expansion. The firing of General Joseph Stilwell and the failed American mission in China after Roosevelt's death are outside the article's scope, as are Chiang's major losses in earlier Burma fighting that Stilwell had urged.

Giving Roosevelt low grades supports a recent trend of awarding China's wartime diplomacy higher marks and to question the conventional view that Chiang was the man who lost China. Chiang had been weakened when he lost troops he committed to Burma at American urging.<sup>9</sup> Still, to say that Roosevelt's "rhetoric and false promises" fed Chiang's "unrealistic expectations" and "eventually led to difficulties in Sino-American relations" (182) is to place more weight on American responsibility than on Chinese agency and implies that good faith could have prevented the breakdown. But could even the best manager have met zero-sum demands from Europe and China before American factories hit their stride? Could an American leader who believed that 'honesty is the best policy' have maintained the Allied coalition that won the war?

The Generalissimo was no passive naïf. He had not survived decades of fighting rivals and resisting Japan and Russia by being sincere, trusting, and magnanimous. He and Roosevelt both did whatever was necessary to promote their nation's interests and both told necessary lies, sometimes to themselves. If Chiang's expectations were unrealistic, he himself had created them. How would Chiang, Chinese public opinion, or Chiang's rivals have responded if Roosevelt had honestly declared that Europe was strategically more important and less costly to supply? Who would have benefitted from heedless candor? Further, if, as Haruo Tohmatsu recently reaffirmed, by 1943 the war in China was no longer strategically essential to the wider Pacific War, then accepting Chiang's demands would not have defeated Japan more quickly.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For instance, Heiferman, *The Cairo Conference*, 117-119, 131-138.

<sup>9</sup> Hans van de Ven, *China at War: Triumph and Tragedy in the Emergence of the New China, 1937-1952* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 162-166. For wartime diplomacy, see Hans J. Van de Ven, Diana Lary, and Stephen R. MacKinnon, eds., *Negotiating China's Destiny in World War II* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), which, however, has no chapter on relations with the United States.

<sup>10</sup> Tohmatsu Haruo, "The Strategic Correlation Between the Sino-Japanese and Pacific Wars," in Mark R. Peattie, Edward J. Drea, and Hans J. Van de Ven, eds., *The Battle for China: Essays on the Military History of the Sino-Japanese War of 1937-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 423-445.

Burt mentions Roosevelt's astute handling of emotions (170) and might weigh Chiang's emotions as well. Like many scholars she accepts without question his outrage and humiliated surprise on receiving Roosevelt's Tehran cable. A recent study of Chiang's diary, however, finds that he did not fly off the handle when he read the bad news but chatted with his family and went to bed early. He had always doubted that Roosevelt could assure British support and he was not enthusiastic about committing further troops in any case. His outrage was justified but he waited three days to deploy it and exploit Roosevelt's guilt. His tone-deaf demand for a billion dollar loan is akin to post-1949 guilt-tripping charges that foreigners "hurt the feelings of the Chinese people."<sup>11</sup>

Chiang's other consequential emotions include adulation for his wife and the thunderbolt rage against T.V. Soong that deprived him of inside knowledge of Washington planning. In the absence of her brother, Mei-ling became her husband's favored translator, cultural interpreter, policy adviser, emotional support, go-between, schmoozer, and social secretary. This confusion of uxorial and diplomatic roles was unique in modern diplomacy and quite imprudent. True, Mei-ling was smart, shrewd, and capable of flashing useful charms, but neither she nor her husband were up to speed on the military ramifications of their proposals or the diplomatic hurdles they faced. They needed professional help (as did Roosevelt). As interpreter, she was fluent in both languages but not in the specialized vocabulary for simultaneous translation of military negotiations. She may have misunderstood or mis-translated key points and after their unrecorded one-on-one conversations have reported Roosevelt's genial evasive speculations to her husband as executable promises.<sup>12</sup> In any case, Mei-ling also fed what Burt rightly calls Chiang's "unrealistic expectations" (182).

When Roosevelt got back to Washington in December 1943, he introduced the American public to 'Dr. Win the War.' The hard-driving doctor then took the wheel and relegated 'Dr. New Deal' to the crowded back seat, along with support for Asian independence movements and the president's wishful promises at Cairo. Burt's findings imply that China was not a forgotten ally or even a needlessly alienated one, but a fractious and distracted future Great Power whose wartime needs Roosevelt could not afford to meet. Burt has a good eye for material and a talent for lucid argument; this article, which is limited in scope, could easily be expanded, perhaps with a book-length treatment of Cordell Hull's achievements, and elaboration and clarification of issues such as American vs. Chinese responsibilities, perceptions and misperceptions of changing military situations, and the roles of personality and emotions.

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<sup>11</sup> Lin, 453-455; William A. Callahan, *China: The Pessimist Nation* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Paul A. Cohen, "Remembering and Forgetting National Humiliation in Twentieth-Century China," *Twentieth-Century China* 27:2 (2002): 1-39.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor, *The Generalissimo*, 248.

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Littlefield, 2014); “Open Recipes Openly Arrived At: *How to Cook and Eat in Chinese* (1945),” *Journal of Oriental Studies* 45:1 and 45:2 (December 2012).

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