

# U.S. Gunboats on the Yangtze: History and Political Aspects, 1842-1922

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## THE PROBLEM

From the date of the first American treaty with China—1844—to World War II, the diplomatic relationships of the two countries often seemed to revolve around the idea of protection of American citizens and their property. During much, though by no means all, of that time, we assumed that the Chinese government was unable or unwilling to carry out its part of the treaty guarantees. Technically our several treaties were not forced upon China, but they did come out of weakness rather than out of equality, usually following a British or international military victory, and always carrying the most-favored-nation clause which gave us the fruits of victory whether we participated or not.

For my generation—young and adventuresome in the late twenties and early thirties—news stories from China were very confusing, but one thing we understood clearly: Americans were often in serious trouble—some lives were lost, and much property was destroyed or confiscated. The slogan "Yankee, go home" had not yet been coined, but the intent of the Chinese to run their own country became increasingly clear. In the middle of all the strife engendered by the rise of the nationalist movement in the late twenties, we often heard of a force of American gunboats rescuing businessmen or missionaries from places of danger. This was a rather remarkable unit known to the Navy as the Yangtze Patrol

(YangPat), a small command of shallow-draft gunboats covering the Great River from Shanghai to far beyond Chungking. The right of this patrol to be there was often hotly debated, usually by American residents, some of whom felt that loss of life and property would have been much less if our ships had been withdrawn long before the twenties; others equally confident that only the Yangtze Patrol, working in cooperation with the British, enabled our government to protect its interests and the lives of its citizens.

I should like to consider how this policy came to be—why did we maintain the Yangtze Patrol of eight or ten gunboats, often supplemented by half a dozen destroyers and a few cruisers, in the home waters of a foreign country? If the situation could be reversed today and the American government were unable to protect Chinese in the Middle West, the navy of Mao Tse-tung, perhaps aided by the Russians, would have a dozen fast gunboats covering the Mississippi Valley from New Orleans (Shanghai) to Natchez (Nanking), to St. Louis (Hankow), to St. Paul (Chungking), with occasional visits to Louisville, Chicago, and, if the water were high enough, perhaps Kansas City.

It all started in 1842 with the Treaty of Nanking, which granted to the British the right to trade in five ports to be opened along the coast. Article XIV of the regulations drawn up the following year to govern trade specified that "an English government cruiser will anchor within each of the five ports that the Consul may have the means of better restraining sailors and others, and preventing disturbances."<sup>1</sup> A more innocuous statement appeared in the same year in the Treaty of the Bogue, but it must have been perfectly clear to the Chinese that Britain intended to protect her citizens.

In 1844 Caleb Cushing arrived to negotiate the American treaty, which some regarded as unnecessary because most American traders were getting along very well as it was. The Treaty of Wanghia did include the most-favored-nation clause, but it had already appeared in the Treaty of the Bogue, so that technically we were assured of any rights granted to the British. What Cushing actually did was to establish an attitude toward the protection of our citizens quite opposite that of Britain. Whereas the Nanking treaty declared that British subjects shall be allowed "to reside without molestation or restraint"<sup>2</sup> (and with a cruiser in each port), the Treaty of Wanghia in Article XIX stated in part: "the local authorities of government—shall defend them [the Americans] from all insult or injury on the

part of the Chinese" and also must defend dwellings or property from attacks "by mobs, incendiaries, or other lawless persons." Article XXXII provided that American ships of war should enjoy all suitable facilities on arrival at any of the ports of China—the usual treaty provision quite unrelated to protection of citizens.<sup>3</sup>

The respective treaties of Tientsin, negotiated in 1858, maintained the same position, with the American document (Article XI) repeating Article XIX of the Wanghia treaty and adding a statement on extraterritoriality.<sup>4</sup> Likewise Article XXXII is repeated in 1858 with an added sentence about the right to suppress piracy, presumably along the coast. In any event, when in later years it seemed necessary to justify our presence in the Yangtze, we always referred not to our treaty but to Article LII of the British treaty because it covers so much more geographical territory. This reads:

British ships of war coming for no hostile purpose, or being engaged in the pursuit of pirates, shall be at liberty to visit all ports within the dominions of the Emperor of China, and shall receive every facility for the purchase of provisions, procuring water, and, if occasion require, for the making of repairs. The commanders of such ships shall hold intercourse with the Chinese authorities on terms of equality and courtesy.<sup>5</sup>

Gone is the idea of a cruiser in every port, but precedent dies hard in China. In 1871 the captain of the *USS Benicia*, one of the earliest American warships to ascend the Yangtze as far as Hankow, reported that he found a British gunboat in every treaty port, but none of any other country.<sup>6</sup>

All of this helps explain why through the early years of relations with China, we relied heavily on the British for naval protection of our citizens—we had twice said in treaties that it was the responsibility of China, and frankly, we didn't have the ships to do the work. An 1866 report from the commander-in-chief of our Asiatic Squadron of five vessels told the Secretary of the Navy that the British had forty-five warships, including twenty-nine gunboats, on the China station.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, the Navy never used our treaty engagements as an excuse for not helping citizens in need. As early as 1854, Secretary of the Navy J. C. Dobbin wrote in his annual report: "The vessels of the [East India] squadron, owing to the civil war existing in Asia have had frequent calls made upon them for the

protection of American citizens and property and have been of great service to our countrymen in that remote region."<sup>8</sup>

In the following year, he pointed out that untiring efforts and activity were required on the part of the East India squadron "to afford protection to the lives and property of American citizens."<sup>9</sup> He then added: "I deem this a proper occasion to suggest the purchase or building of one or two steamers of light draught, to be used in Chinese rivers, as indispensable for the protection of the immense property belonging to citizens of the United States of America."<sup>10</sup>

From this recommendation eventually came the Yangtze Patrol, though it was not fully developed for another half-century and not formally named until twenty years after that. Nothing came of this first appeal to Congress, but in succeeding years there were many similar pleas from admirals, diplomatic representatives, and businessmen for light-draft war vessels to be used in river service either on the Yangtze or in the hinterland of Canton on the West River and its tributaries.

#### THE 1858 TREATIES

At this point further reference is needed to the treaties of 1858 negotiated at the close of the Arrow War involving Britain and France on one side, China on the other, and Russia and the United States as interested spectators. Following the occupation of Tientsin by the British, the representatives of the four foreign powers met with Chinese diplomats to prepare new treaties. The accounts of the various maneuvers of Lord Elgin, the British envoy; Mr. William Reid, the first American minister to China; and the French and Russian representatives make fascinating reading, but all I can do here is to deal with those sections of the treaties relating to the Yangtze River.

In the American treaty nothing was said about trade with the interior. However, Britain demanded and received the right of its subjects to travel and trade throughout the empire, with the designation of four cities on the Yangtze River as new treaty ports. Of these, Chinkiang, at the junction of the Grand Canal and the Yangtze, was to become available within one year, while the other cities would be added after the Taiping Rebellion was finally put

down. Hankow, the principal city in central China, Kiukiang, and Nanking were eventually named, though Nanking was not formally opened as a port until 1899.

The American minister, Mr. William Reid, had made no move to include in our treaty a section dealing with interior trade. He notified the State Department of the contents of the British treaty, saying that "any foreigner may go anywhere in China for pleasure or for purposes of trade, and may hire vessels for the carriage of his baggage or merchandise."<sup>11</sup> In a further comment he said: "Some of our countrymen . . . see in the establishment of open ports and consulates in the interior, and with them the constant interference and presence of European and especially English men-of-war, the inauguration of a system of European interference which they especially deprecate."<sup>12</sup> This attitude on the part of Mr. Reid explains why in Article XII of the American treaty United States citizens were to be permitted "to rent houses and places of business, or hire sites on which they can themselves build houses or hospitals, churches, and cemeteries"<sup>13</sup> *only at ports open to foreign commerce*. Actually, this section was meaningless in light of the operation of the most-favored-nation principle, by which we obtained all the rights on the Yangtze that the British did, but Mr. Reid apparently thought the Chinese would appreciate our restraint, and doubtless they did.

Meanwhile, the foreign powers had been acting as though the Yangtze were as fully open to navigation as the Pacific itself. In 1853-1854, Britain, France, and the United States all sent warships to Nanking. U.S. Commissioner McLane took the steam frigate *Susquehanna*, one of Perry's ships used in the opening of Japan, as far as Wuhu, fifty miles above Nanking. The record did not stand for long, for the aggressive Lord Elgin, British negotiator of the Tientsin treaty, demanded permission to take a squadron up the river to Hankow "in order that, by personal inspection, he might be the better enabled to judge what ports along its shores it would be most advisable to open, in conformity with the Treaty of Tientsin."<sup>14</sup> His secretary, Lawrence Oliphant, frankly adds:

His excellency had long previously determined to make this expedition before leaving China, not merely for the purpose above alluded to, but with the view of creating a wholesome moral impression upon the minds of the people upon its banks, one which should be felt throughout the length and breadth of the empire.<sup>15</sup>

Elgin started in November, 1858, with three steam frigates and two small gunboats. On board was a Manchu official who hid himself at every Taiping-controlled port. The largest ship went only as far as Wuhu, but the others, one with a draft of sixteen feet, made it safely to Hankow and returned to Shanghai after narrowly averting spending a winter five hundred miles from Shanghai because of low water. Two years later an even larger squadron repeated the trip and went as far as the entrance to Tungting Lake, beyond which is Changsha. Harry Parkes, one of the first "old China hands," accompanied the expedition for the purpose of drawing up temporary rules for commerce on the Yangtze. With little change these were promulgated as permanent regulations in 1862 and remained in force until 1898.

#### CIVIL WAR TO 1900

Closely following on the exchange of ratifications of the Treaty of Tientsin, the American Civil War shifted our attention from foreign to domestic matters. Usually only one man-of-war was kept on the China station during those years, and her principal task was to look out for Confederate cruisers. Immediately after the war, in fact by the end of 1865, the former East India Squadron had been reestablished with several steam frigates and smaller vessels, and its name changed to Asiatic Squadron. From that time until 1900 we did what we could for American citizens in China and Japan but for the most part leaned upon the British, as already noted.

The first American commander-in-chief of our Asiatic Squadron of five vessels, Commodore H. H. Bell, made a strong plea for "six gunboats drawing from six to eight feet of water, mounting not more than three guns, and manned by not more than 30 souls."<sup>16</sup> A few old Civil War gunboats were sent out; but there is no evidence that they did much river work, and three were condemned and sold within two years of their arrival.

The annual reports of the Secretary of the Navy do show that some of the larger vessels made the six-hundred-mile cruise to Hankow, the first apparently being the sloop *Alaska* in 1870. This visit was made annually until 1873, but after that time only three ships went to Hankow until 1890. This does not mean that there were no river

patrols on the lower Yangtze to places like Nanking and Wuhu, but that there was no deep penetration in those years.

In 1891 a succession of anti-Christian riots broke out in the Yangtze Valley all the way from Chinkiang to Ichang, and beyond.<sup>17</sup> To learn how much American ships aided in these troubles would take extensive research in logbooks and missionary correspondence, but Shanghai journalists were scandalized that in the moment of need at Kiukiang only Germany had a gunboat available. In a few days French, British, Russian, and American vessels were on the scene; but since the European sailors had the situation well in hand, our men landed at Kiukiang but did not take part in the action.<sup>18</sup> From then on, one or more fairly large ships went to Hankow annually except in the Spanish War year of 1898; and beginning in 1895 these were all ships of the new navy with one historic exception, the ancient side-wheeler *Monocacy*, which had been in Chinese waters since 1866.

#### 1900-1920

The statement is frequently made that the Yangtze Patrol of the United States Navy began either just after the Spanish-American War or in connection with the Boxer Rebellion. Navy historians do not pinpoint the time, but one can safely say that neither operation had much to do with the U.S. decision to establish shallow-draft gunboats on the West River above Canton and on the Yangtze. As far back as 1893 the Congress authorized three river gunboats "for service in China or elsewhere,"<sup>19</sup> perhaps because of the flurry resulting from the riots of that decade. Two of these did go to China, both reaching there in 1901 and both cruising independently to Hankow during that year. The next year, the *Helena* went all the way to Ichang, one thousand miles from Shanghai, the largest man-of-war to reach this point up to that time.<sup>20</sup>

I might also point out that the Boxer activities were largely confined to North China, and there was little or no trouble in the Yangtze basin, thanks to the influence of the two viceroys then in power there. No U.S. warship went to Hankow in 1900 until mid-October, several months after the height of the trouble.

So we must accept as the time of stepped-up interest on the part of the United States either the year 1890, when the annual visits to

Hankow began, or the year 1903, when three former Spanish gunboats—one captured by Commodore Dewey in the battle of Manila Bay and two purchased by the Army from speculators and later turned over to the Navy<sup>21</sup>—were commissioned in the Philippines for river service in China, along with the two larger American-built ships previously mentioned. Lacking concrete evidence in reports or correspondence, I favor the later date, though I cannot give a reason for this particular time or arrangement except the simplest: American interests were rapidly growing in China, and the Navy had the ships available.

The two small ex-Spanish gunboats assigned to Yangtze River duty reached Shanghai in March, 1903, and were immediately sent on fact-finding missions to all ports along the river as far as Ichang. These included visits to Changsha, in the Tungting Lake region, not a treaty port until the following year, and to Nanchang, on the Kan River beyond Poyang Lake, likewise not a treaty port but with American residents. It was this latter expedition that set the stage for a diplomatic hassle within the American official family that finally put our gunboats on some kind of legal basis.

The gunboat involved in this incident was the *USS Villalobos*, whose long years of service have been widely publicized in the late Richard McKenna's novel *The Sand Pebbles*, in which she was called the *USS San Pablo*. When the *Villalobos* entered Poyang Lake enroute to Nanchang, a report was sent to the taotai of Kiukiang, who complained to the American consul general at Hankow. The consul general passed along the complaint to Edwin Conger, American minister in Peking, saying that he had been asked to bar American gunboats from Poyang Lake. Mr. Conger politely referred the whole matter to Rear Admiral Robley D. Evans, commander-in-chief of the Asiatic Fleet. Admiral Evans lived up to his nickname of "Fighting Bob" by approving the action of the young commander of the *Villalobos*. I quote the concluding paragraph of Admiral Evans' letter on the subject:

It is expected that the *taotai* and other officials of China will suppress all disorder and give ample protection to the lives and property of Americans, but if these officials fail to do so, the question of adequate and proper protection will be taken in hand by our gunboats. In order to satisfy ourselves that the various local officials are properly affording protection, our gunboats will continue to navigate the Poyang Lake



and the various other inland waters of China wherever Americans may be, and where, by treaty with China, they are authorized to engage in business or reside for the purpose of spreading the Gospel.<sup>22</sup>

Upon receiving this statement of aims, the American Minister promptly challenged Admiral Evans to name the treaty article that gave the American rights he had outlined. In reply the Admiral said he could not do that . . . he only knew that other nations were sending their gunboats into every port, and the most-favored-nation clause gave us a corresponding right. Whereupon Admiral Evans sent the entire correspondence to the Secretary of the Navy. To make a long story short, it went from him to the Secretary of State, John Hay, who wrote in October, 1903:

The Department is inclined to the opinion that Rear-Admiral Evans is right in his contention that our gunboats may visit the inland ports of China, including those which are not treaty ports. Even if this right were not explicitly granted to us by treaty, Rear-Admiral Evans is unquestionably right in using it when like ships of other powers are constantly doing so.<sup>23</sup>

The Secretary went on to say that Article LII of the British treaty of 1858, quoted earlier in this paper, gave full authority for the Admiral's position.

From then on, American warships made many trips to Hankow, Ichang, and intermediate ports, including Changsha and Nanchang—over fifty separate visits being made to Hankow in the ten-year period between 1904 and 1914. But through those years we never had a vessel powerful enough to overcome the current of the Yangtze gorges between Ichang and Chungking. The British first navigated this stretch in 1898, and the French took at least one gunboat through by use of steam winches and Chinese manpower; but not until 1912 did our Congress authorize the construction of two new river gunboats with powerful engines,<sup>24</sup> and not until 1914 were they commissioned in Shanghai and assigned to the upper reaches of the Yangtze.

### CONCLUSIONS

During all that time, 1900-1920, the now famous name of "Yangtze Patrol" was never used, though there is no question that the Navy regarded these small ships as an operating unit. In the

first report of the Secretary of the Navy after the ex-Spanish gunboats began patrolling, they are listed as the Gunboat Division of the Battleship Squadron of the Asiatic Fleet. In that same year, 1903, the double-turreted monitor *Monadnock* is listed as the station ship at Shanghai, and the Secretary of the Navy wrote that "her commanding officer has had general charge of gunboats operating on the Yangtze River and its tributaries." From then on, the work of these gunboats is variously described as "Chinese river service," "protection of American interests," and "Yangtze River duty." In 1912 the commander-in-chief of the Asiatic Fleet referred in his annual report to the Yangtze Valley Patrol, and in 1914 the Secretary of the Navy used "Yangtze River patrol" with a small *p*. The first official recognition is given in the Secretary of the Navy's report for 1920 when Josephus Daniels said that the Yangtze Patrol had been reorganized—a statement that implies more than previous annual reports reveal.<sup>25</sup> Finally, the Yangtze Patrol obtained full maturity when Secretary of the Navy Denby, son of the well-known minister to China in the 1890's, reported:

On August 5, 1921, the Yangtze Patrol force was organized under Rear-Admiral W. H. G. Bullard as a part of the Asiatic Fleet. The mission of the Navy on the Yangtze River is to protect United States interests, lives and property, and to maintain and improve friendly relations with the Chinese people.<sup>26</sup>

That this was not simply an ideal expressed in Washington far away from the civil war in the Yangtze Valley is evidenced in the following statement from a commander of YangPat in 1927, Rear Admiral Yates Stirling:

The command of the Yangtze Patrol was more of a diplomatic position than a naval one. The Admiral of that force, in a way, is an important part of the diplomatic set-up on the river. His naval force is small and weak, merely a police force against banditry. The principal duty is in dealing with the Chinese officials and persuading them to help in maintaining friendly relations between China and our country.<sup>27</sup>

It must be noted that Admiral Stirling also saw the practical side of his task when he defended the presence of American warships as a matter of principle: "It was the maintenance of our right to free navigation on the river, given us by treaty."<sup>28</sup>

With this new organization lasting, as it did, for the next and last

twenty years of its history, little more needs to be said. The troublesome times of the 1920's are well known to all. It was not too difficult to persuade the Congress that six fast and powerful light-draft ships were needed to replace the old Spanish gunboats and two World War I minesweepers which had been added in 1923. These new ships were built in Shanghai in 1926-1927 and formed the backbone of the Yangtze Patrol until World War II. The ill-fated *Panay*, sunk by Japanese aerial attack in 1937, was one of these. It is interesting to note that one early commander of the Yangtze Patrol set forth his observations in 1921 in a lengthy report in which he added a new reason for its existence, namely, "to watch the Japanese."<sup>29</sup>

From the cruise of the *Susquehanna* in 1854 with U.S. Commissioner McLane on board, to the sinking of the *Panay* in 1937, the Navy often acted first and was questioned afterward, but I think we must admit that the State Department usually agreed by authorizing the protection of what Secretary of the Navy Dobbins had called in 1855 "the immense property belonging to the citizens of the United States of America."<sup>30</sup> The principle that Americans legally resident by treaty were entitled to protection has spread to other parts of the world. It may not even have begun in China, but the clearest evidence of its implementation seems to be in the Yangtze River valley with the Yangtze Patrol. That day is now over, but one cannot help wondering how far precedents set there have been carried over into State Department policy in Latin America—Santo Domingo, for example. But research on that subject I will leave for another.

## NOTES

1. *Treaties, Conventions, etc., between China and Foreign States* (Shanghai, 1917), I, 389.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 352.
3. Hunter Miller, ed., *Treaties, and Other International Acts of the U.S.A.* (Washington, 1934), IV, 565, 569.
4. *Ibid.*, Vol. VII, Article XI of Treaty of 1858.
5. Lawrence Oliphant, *Narrative of the Earl of Elgin's Mission to China and Japan* (New York, 1860), p. 620.
6. Commander L. A. Kimberly, "Log of the *USS Benicia*, September-October 1871," National Archives, Washington, D.C.
7. Commodore H. H. Bell, Letters, No. 60, July 20, 1866, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

8. *Report of the Secretary of the Navy, 1854* (Washington, D.C., 1854) p. 387.
9. *Report of the Secretary of the Navy, 1855* (Washington, D.C., 1855) p. 7.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
11. Tyler Dennett, *Americans in East Asia* (New York, 1922), p. 319.
12. Miller, *Treaties*, VII, 893.
13. *Ibid.*, Article XII of Treaty.
14. Oliphant, *Narrative*, p. 489.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 489.
16. Bell, Letters, No. 60.
17. Kenneth S. Latourette, *A History of Christian Missions in China* (New York, 1929), p. 470.
18. *USS Palos*, "Official Log," June 7, 1891, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
19. Act of Congress, March 3, 1893.
20. Robley D. Evans, *An Admiral's Log* (New York, 1910), p. 181.
21. *Report of the Secretary of the Navy, 1905* (Washington, D.C., 1905), p. 678.
22. *Houst Doc. No. 1: Foreign Relations of the U.S.* (Washington, D.C., 1904), pp. 88 ff.; see also note 20, above.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Acts of Congress, March 4, 1911, and August 22, 1912.
25. *Report of the Secretary of the Navy, 1920* (Washington, D.C., 1920), p. 34.
26. *Report of the Secretary of the Navy, 1922* (Washington, D.C., 1922), p. 5.
27. Yates Stirling, *Sea Duty* (New York, 1939), p. 214.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 207.
29. Captain D. M. Wood, "Report to Commander-in-Chief of Asiatic Fleet, 1921," National Archives, Washington, D.C.
30. *Report of the Secretary of the Navy, 1855* (Washington, D.C., 1855), p. 7.