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### **China, the Manchurian Incident and the Failure of the International System**

In understanding a China view of the situation following the Manchurian Incident, the policy options, and the eventual path taken in dealing with the incident, it is useful to first point out several aspects of the Chinese state and how the Chinese viewed the world at the beginning of the 1930s. Almost a hundred years after the Opium War, the Chinese were acutely aware of the imperialistic subjugation of its autonomy and sovereignty. Combined with a fierce sense of nationalism which had developed since around the May 4<sup>th</sup> movement, China was determined to abolish unequal treaties, regain her sovereignty, and to assert herself as a strong modern nation. Despite this common goal, China was also characterized by internal competition and political fragmentation as ideological differences on how to build a modern state mixed with traditional struggles for power. Additionally, having grown up intellectually and diplomatically, China viewed the diplomatic international system created in the 1920s as a viable avenue in which to pursue her goals. Yet, often failing to benefit from the system and continuing to contend with the manifestations of imperialism, the Chinese maintained a realistic and pragmatic view towards the potential and efficacy of diplomacy.

While the Manchurian Incident can be analyzed from the perspective of particular policies taken by many different actors resulting in a failure of the international system, China, as the weak victim of a stronger aggressor, merely played the role of the catalyst and venue for this failure. In the aftermath of the Manchurian Incident China, constrained by its domestic weakness and international apathy, had few opportunities to choose between policy options. Instead, she found herself running through a wide range of diplomacy, ultimately revealing the failure of the international system, and forcing China to capitulate to Japan.

### **Implications of the Manchurian Incident and Competing Concerns**

To the Chinese, the Manchurian Incident and the subsequent conquest of all of Manchuria constituted a very serious and negative development in a longer trend of Chinese erosion of rights and sovereignty to the Japanese beginning with the first Sino-Japanese war, and highlighted by the 21 Demands. Japanese aggression being the unifying focal point of nationalism and anti-imperialism for the Chinese, the Manchurian Incident became the central concern of the government and the populace alike. However, this situation was augmented by several other competing concerns occupying the Nationalist government. Of primary concern to Chiang Kai-Chek was the territorial and political unity of the country. Having recently completed his Northern Expedition and achieving nominal territorial unity, Chiang was not only concerned with the competing ideology and party-system of the CCP residing in Jiangxi province, but also had to contend with a rival KMT faction that had set up a rival regime in Canton. This not only threatened the tenuous unity that Chiang had achieved, but more importantly, challenged his power and authority.

A lesser concern was the continuing assertion of sovereignty and negotiations towards abolishing the unequal treaties and regaining sovereign rights such as tariff autonomy and extraterritoriality. In some cases, these concerns were to be compromised in addressing the Manchurian Incident, and in other cases, these concerns actually took precedence to the successful resolution of the Manchurian Incident, as can be argued when considering Chiang's "Policy of Internal Pacification before External Resistance".

### **Exhausting Diplomatic Options**

As the Japanese Kwantung Army began moving beyond Mukden and the surrounding South Manchurian Railway areas, Chiang made no attempts at retaliation, but instead pursued an earlier set policy of nonresistance. Not only was Chiang keenly aware of the relative weakness of his military and its inability to stand up to the Japanese army, but he was also concerned about implications of open military conflict for his own hold on power. To face Japan militarily would reduce the ability for Chiang to confront the internal "bandits" of the CCP, and would also expose him to a military defeat to either the CCP or the Canton regime. Chiang therefore adopted a diplomatic strategy in responding to the Manchurian Incident by attempting to appeal to the international system for intervention.

Chiang saw various other benefits to using diplomacy to respond. First, as the general populace demanded action, it allowed him to formulate a strong response to the Japanese aggression without compromising his military strength. In addition, Chiang had reasonable belief that diplomatic action would produce desirable results. Because the Western powers still retained imperialistic interests in China, Chiang felt that the Japanese aggression would be seen as a direct threat to their interests. If Chiang could at least maintain China's international standing while diplomatically isolating Japan, he could keep Japan in check, declare a nominal victory domestically buying himself time to consolidate his power against his domestic rivals, and build a military capable of repelling the Japanese.

### *Appealing to the League of Nations*

Immediately following the incident, Chiang sent his delegate to the League of Nations to request that the League force the Japanese to withdraw, based on Article 11 of the League Covenant. Eleven days later the League responded with a resolution "calling on Japan to withdraw all its troops 'as speedily as may be.'" (Sun 22). However, instead of withdrawing, Japan continued its conquest of Manchuria, while disputing facts of the incident in the League. Avoiding direct confrontation with Japan, the League instead agreed to the Japanese representative suggestion by sending a commission of inquiry directly to Manchuria (Schmidt). When the Lytton Commission of Inquiry finally returned its ambiguous recommendation of recognition of special rights to Japan, yet nonrecognition of Manzhouguo and continued Chinese sovereignty over Manchuria, Japan walked out on the Assembly and announced its withdrawal from the League. After months of negotiating with the League of Nations, the best the Chinese were able to extract was a document which "the press considered ... as legalizing Japan's aggression. (Sun 34)"

### *Appealing to the United States*

While working through the system of the League of Nations, the Chinese simultaneously approached the United States who, while not a member of the League of Nations, was thought to uphold her own ideals of international cooperation through participation of the Nine Power Treaty and the Kellogg-Briand Pact. Additionally, the US had been a long time supporter of the Open Door policy in China and was therefore assumed to have vested interest in the continued nominal sovereign control over its territory and resources. However, because of a now ambiguous attitude towards China, and a preoccupation with domestic problems, the US refused to “go beyond moral indictments of Japan. (Neu 140)”

### *Reestablishing Relations with the Soviet Union*

Although the Soviet Union had long been considered a potential northern rival with whom the diplomatic situation had recently soured as a result of the CCP-KMT split in 1927, the border war in 1929, and the anti-communist stance, by the middle of 1932 Chiang was forced to reach out to the Soviet Union as a diplomatic last resort. While Chiang and many in his camp saw as many risks to cooperation with the Soviet Union as benefits, Chiang was pushed to reach out to the north by the KMT leftists with whom Chiang had reconciled, and also by the public who were protesting Chiang’s passivity and diplomatic failures. While historically the Chinese were as suspicious of the Soviet Union’s “Red Imperialism” as they were with traditional Western imperialism, Chiang realized that they could appeal to the communist concept of a “national revolution” while rejecting a “social revolution” (Sun 8). The Chinese strategy was to first secure a tripartite nonaggression pact between China, the Soviet Union, and Japan before restoring diplomatic relations. This would bring in the Soviet Union as a balance of power to the region. At the same time including Japan would reassure the West of the security nature rather than the Soviet nature of an agreement. However, Soviet Union refused to be drawn into the conflict with a tripartite pact, suspecting the Chinese motives, and eventually restored diplomatic relations with China without condition.

## **Resistance and Capitulation**

### *Increasing Levels of Resistance*

While the Nanjing government practiced a passive policy of nonresistance as it brought its grievances to the international community, the Chinese masses brought its own grievances into the streets, indignant at the Japanese for once again trampling on their sovereignty, and upset at the government for responding with such weakness. Responding to this domestic pressure, Chiang’s nonresistance policy soon evolved into a “resist while negotiating” tactic. However, this was soon proven to be a merely nominal policy change. This was evidenced when the Chiang regime pushed for a local settlement after fighting in Shanghai broke out, fearing escalation into a bigger outbreak that he would not be able to win.

### *Bilateral Negotiation*

Chiang was finally forced to change his military posture not from increased domestic pressure, but rather from continued encroachment of the Japanese threatening

the Beiping-Tientsin region. Fearing that further loss of territory would undermine his legitimacy, and that the loss of the Beiping-Tientsin region would destroy his revenue base, Chiang began a dedicated resistance campaign along the Great Wall border. Facing mounting losses, the Chinese needed to find a way immediately to end the hostilities and advance of the Japanese. Chiang was forced to enter into unmediated bilateral negotiations with Japan, resulting in the Tanggu Truce. By negotiating and signing a truce bilaterally, however, China at the same time effectively nullified the previously bilaterally gained League of Nations resolutions.

### **The Failure of the International System**

With an inferior military and a fragmented domestic situation, the Nationalist regime was faced with few policy options with which to react to the Manchurian Incident. Relying on the international system was China's most optimistic option, however, as each diplomatic option was exhausted, more and more weaknesses of the international system were revealed. The League of Nations, especially without two key nations, the US and USSR, had neither the will nor the ability to enforce its own resolutions. Similarly, America's indifference and refusal to intervene undermined the Kelloggs-Briand pact as well as the Nine Power Treaty. Finally abandoning the mechanisms of the international system and signing a bilateral treaty China signaled the utter failure of the international system to prevent hostilities and war in the region.

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