

“First Internal Pacification, Then External Resistance”: Chiang Kai-shek’s Response to the Mukden Incident at Home and Abroad

Anatol Klass
Harvard University Class of 2017
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Professor Elisabeth Köll

Abstract:

This research paper compares and contrasts Chiang Kai-shek’s national and international responses to the Mukden Incident of 1931. Chiang’s nationalist government pursued a two-level strategic response to the bombings in Manchuria (the event that most historians recognize as the beginning of the Second World War in East Asia): appeasing Japan by avoiding direct conflict between Japanese and Chinese forces while demanding a decisive international response through the League of Nations. Both strategies would prove unsuccessful, with the policy of domestic appeasement leading to massive public discontent (intensely fueled by Communist Party subversion) and the pleas for international help falling on deaf ears. The failure to respond to the Mukden incident would be a decisive factor in destroying the legitimacy of Chiang’s nationalist government and the international system as defined by the League of Nations. This paper uses a variety of primary and secondary materials to explain why Chiang’s government favored this course of domestic inaction coupled with international diplomacy. It outlines how a combination of internal crises—monumental flooding, rebellion, and general weakness—left Chiang essentially unable to fight the Japanese in Manchuria. The paper also traces China’s misplaced trust in the League of Nations, and the League’s inherent inadequacies that left the international community helpless in the face of Japanese aggression. Ultimately, the paper positions Chiang’s response to the Mukden Incident as an example of Chiang’s general ruling policy: “First internal pacification, then external resistance.” (先安内, 后攘外)

“Confucius saw, just as the illustrious author of the present League of Nations have seen, the danger to civilization and humanity involved in the continued existence of such a sad plight, and therefore spared no effort in emphasizing the need of creating and preserving a new order of things which could ensure universal peace.”

Wellington Koo, *China and the League of Nations*, 1919, pg. 2

When a small explosion went off next to a Japanese railroad track in Manchuria near the city of Shenyang (then Romanized as Mukden) on the evening of September 18th, 1931, few in either China or Japan could have predicted the dramatic and wide-ranging effects that this seemingly insignificant event would yield. Although there were no casualties, no injuries and negligible damage to the train tracks—in fact it would later be proven that the bombing had been orchestrated by Japanese agents—the Mukden incident, as the bombing would come to be called, heralded the beginnings of World War II in East Asia and ultimately damaged the legitimacy of Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist government. The Sino-Japanese conflict that began at Mukden would eventually grow into a full-blown war in 1937, and soon after Japan’s defeat, China’s Nationalist government found itself embroiled in the civil war that would end with the establishment of the People’s Republic of China under Mao.

Mukden marked the beginning of a nearly two-decade period during which Chiang Kai-shek’s government faced constant armed conflict, and that constant threat of war destabilized Chiang’s regime, sapping popular confidence in his Nanjing government. In the international realm, the Mukden incident was the catalyst for the collapse of the Versailles Treaty international system established after World War I. The League of Nations, founded to ensure that the global community would never again repeat the calamities of the First World War, found itself unable to peacefully resolve the aftermath of the Mukden incident. Chiang Kai-shek’s regime and the League of Nations both suffered a severe loss of legitimacy when they failed to

adequately resolve the Mukden incident or the ensuing Japanese invasion of Manchuria. This essay will examine how Chiang Kai-shek responded domestically to Japanese aggression, and what role the Republic of China (ROC) played in the international response orchestrated through the League of Nations. By examining a series of sources in the records of the League of Nations and the Foreign Relations of the United States, it becomes clear that even though Chiang avoided a military response, he was actively pursuing a diplomatic solution to the crisis. A variety of domestic factors caused Chiang to forgo military action against Japan in favor of diplomatic maneuverings in the international system, but Japan's greater status and the system's general dysfunction undermined this strategy. The Mukden incident revealed the internal weaknesses of Republican China under Chiang, while also highlighting the inherent inadequacies of the League of Nations to respond to such a crisis. Ultimately, both institutions underwent a major downfall as a result of the incident.

Domestic Factors and the Lack of Military Response

To understand Chiang's domestic response to the Mukden incident, it is essential to consider several other domestic factors that were placing pressure on his administration in the September of 1931. Although the government had recently brought about the end of the warlord era and consolidated its own power during the Northern Expedition from 1926 to 1928, the regime was far from stable. The Nanjing decade (1927-1937) was the era of Chiang Kai-shek's greatest strength and China's greatest unity during the Republican era, but in 1931 the ROC was scrambling to respond simultaneously to a natural disaster of unprecedented scale, an internal rebellion in the South, and a series of foreign incursions in the North. In 1931, after an extended period of drought, China experienced an unusually snowy winter, followed by heavy rain in the

summer.¹ These weather patterns led to intense flooding of the Yangtze and Huai rivers, destroying 30 percent of farmland in central China and killing almost half a million Chinese citizens.² Such disasters unfolded only weeks before the Mukden incident—on September 2nd Chiang Kai-shek predicted 50 million Chinese flood victims would soon face starvation as a result of the flood damage.³ Historian Lillian Li argues that just as natural disasters were seen as divine judgment upon the government's legitimacy in imperial times, in the Republican era flood and famine relief were important barometers for government effectiveness and legitimacy.⁴ Chiang's government was therefore determined to alleviate the damages of the flood in a proper manner and would spend the next year attempting to deliver emergency supplies to affected areas and rebuilding 7000 kilometers of dikes.⁵

While the Nanjing government was responding to a massive natural disaster in Central China, they were also attempting to resolve a political crisis in the South. Hu Hanmin, a one-time high-ranking official of the Kuomintang (KMT), was leading a rival government based in Guangdong, and the two rival Chinese authorities were engaged in open hostilities during the September of 1931.⁶ In fact, when the Mukden incident occurred, Chiang Kai-shek was directing the military campaign against Hu Hanmin from a regional headquarters in Hunan and

¹ David Pietz, *Engineering the State: The Huai River and Reconstruction in Nationalist China 1927–1937*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 62.

² Lillian Li, *Fighting Famine in North China: State, Market, and Environmental Decline, 1690s–1990s*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 306. Some have estimated the death toll of the 1931 floods as significantly higher, with certain scholars speculating that almost 4 million Chinese died. For one such estimation see Mickey Glantz and Michael Glantz, *Climate Affairs: A Primer*, Island Press, 2002.

³ “50 Millions Face Famine in China,” *The Boston Globe*, September 3, 1931.

⁴ Li, 284.

⁵ Li, 307.

⁶ Werner Levi, *Modern China's Foreign Policy*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1953), 203.

had to fly back to Nanjing in his private airplane.⁷ Hu's "reorganizationalists" in Guangdong were not the only factional threat to the KMT, who also faced resistance from the exiled Communist forces in Southwestern China and the remnants of warlord armies in the North. It was against this backdrop of intense internal turmoil that Chiang and his government formulated a response to Japan's aggression in Manchuria.

The Nationalist response to the Mukden incident and subsequent Japanese invasion of Manchuria was one of the most universally unpopular decisions made by Chiang Kai-shek during his tenure as the political leader of mainland China. Facing an overwhelming docket of domestic crises, many of which posed serious threats to KMT rule, Chiang committed China to a policy of "first internal pacification, then external resistance" (先安内, 后攘外).⁸ In a telegram to US Secretary of State Henry Stimson, Willys Peck, the US Consul General in Nanjing, relayed Minister of Finance T.V. Soong's justification of the KMT position:

'The National and Provincial Governments are destitute financially, a fact that is temporarily excused and explained by the diplomatic troubles of the Government... Popular support of the Government is changing to widespread contempt because of refusal to declare war on Japan... Military concentration in the North would leave the South a prey to chaos and communism and is therefore impossible.'⁹

In practice, this policy meant hardly any military response to Japan's invasion in Manchuria, with the Nanjing government instead choosing to focus resources on quelling and containing threats in the Han Chinese heartland, particularly the Communists. Chiang even formed a tense

⁷ "Chiang Kai-shek Returning," *The North-China Herald*, September 20th, 1931.

⁸ So Wai Chor, "The Making of the Guomindang's Japan Policy, 1932-1937," *Modern China*, Vol. 28, No.2 (2002), 213.

⁹ The Consul General at Nanjing (Peck) to the Secretary of State, December 8, 1931, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1931* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1988), 647.

alliance with his rivals in Guangdong after a dramatic stunt in which the entire KMT cabinet in Nanjing resigned en masse to underscore the point that Guangdong was unable to handle the Japanese crisis on its own.¹⁰ Therefore, rather than transferring troops to Manchuria to fight the Japanese, Chiang kept his forces in the South and, together with Hu's army, aggressively assaulted the Communists.

There is an obvious incongruity in the Nationalist policy that requires a resolution—why should an incident in Manchuria (considered by the KMT to be part of China) be considered external? Certainly, Communists and warlords were closer to Chiang's base of power in Nanjing, but that alone does not explain why he was so willing to give up on defending Manchuria, instead deeming it “external.” Here, it is important to remember that Manchuria was not historically part of the Han Chinese heartland, but was one of the ethnically diverse territories (along with Tibet, Xinjiang and Mongolia) that comprised the expansive Qing Empire (大清国)—Han migration to Manchuria was only legalized in 1907. Professor William Kirby argues that the greatest achievement of Republican China was to rebrand these “multinational and multicultural expanses” as Chinese and then to successfully incorporate them into the boundaries and identity of the modern nation.¹¹ Kirby points out, however, that given their remote locations these regions could not be defended by the military, and therefore, the KMT pursued defensive diplomacy when these areas were threatened by external powers like Russia and Japan. Thus, perhaps the categorization of Manchuria as an external problem can be seen as a result of its peripheral and remote location and the very high costs associated with defending such a position.

¹⁰ Levi, 204.

¹¹ William Kirby, “The Internationalization of China: Foreign Relations at Home and Abroad in the Republican Era,” *China Quarterly*, No. 150 (1997), 434.

Additionally, while the full-scale invasion by the Japanese army was a troubling development in Manchuria, the military campaign and subsequent establishment of Manchukuo could hardly be considered a territorial loss for Chiang's government, given that Republican China had never actually controlled Manchuria. Russia had long been in control of Northern Manchuria, and since the First World War, Japan had drawn most of Southern Manchuria into its sphere of influence.¹² Even the invasion would not have come as a surprise to Chiang, given that John C. Ferguson, an adviser of the executive Yuan of the Chinese Nationalist Government, had predicted this Japanese move weeks earlier. In a telegram to the State Department, Nelson T. Johnson, the US Ambassador to China, relayed Ferguson's warning:

‘He said his information was that Japan would occupy Manchuria within the next three months. He said that a high Japanese official had made a tour in China for the purpose of investigating the situation here and had reported to his Government that the opportunity for taking this action had now arrived and he had recommended it. I told Dr. Ferguson that I thought such action on the part of the Japanese highly improbable.’¹³

Since Ferguson was right, it is therefore safe to assume that the Chinese government was not caught off guard by the Japanese invasion. In fact, much of the population in Manchuria was presumably accustomed to de facto Japanese rule and therefore experienced very little change with the establishment of Manchukuo. The threat to the KMT was not the loss of Manchuria, but rather the aggressive imperialist tendencies that Japan was displaying. Perhaps “first internal pacification, then external resistance” should be viewed as a strategic decision not to fight a costly battle for a territory that was seen as already lost, and instead to focus on consolidating

¹² Kirby, 438.

¹³ Memorandum by the Minister in China (Johnson) of a Conversation With Dr. John C. Ferguson, Adviser of the Executive Yuan of the Chinese National Government, September 11, 1931, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1931*, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1988), 3.

Nationalist strength in Central and Southern China, preparing for the possibility that the Japanese would eventually begin to expand Southward.

One final factor in determining the KMT's domestic response to the Japanese occupation of Manchuria was the collective outrage of the Chinese people. Despite Manchuria's relative unimportance to Republican China, many citizens reacted angrily to Japan's invasion. In a telegram to Henry Stimson, T.V. Soong described the Chinese civil response:

‘At this juncture the demand for direct action against Japan is everywhere increasing. As an example, the boycott of Japanese goods, which is everywhere complete, is a direct result of popular feeling. It has not been inspired by the Government; but no government which attempted to prevent it could remain in power for a day.’¹⁴

Given the KMT's reluctance to engage militarily with the Japanese, it would seem that national leaders were somewhat uneasy about the strength of the popular sentiment against Japan. One possible explanation for the widespread outrage in the wake of the Mukden incident lies in the nature of Chinese nationalism at the time. Some have argued that anti-foreign sentiment was the greatest unifying force in Chinese national identity during the Republican period.¹⁵ It seems possible that the response against Japan was not particularly a reaction to the loss of Manchuria, but more generally a reaction to an incursion by a foreign power. As a result, when Chiang's government chose not to fight Japan in Manchuria, the popular outrage turned on the KMT, branding the government's policy as one of “appeasement.”¹⁶ As the situation deteriorated, public anger at the KMT grew to the point that one party official claimed, “The conquest of Manchuria by Japan [is] the most effective factor in destroying popular confidence in the

¹⁴ Telegram from T.V. Soong to the Secretary of State, October 6, 1931 *Foreign Relations of the United States 1931*, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1988), 126.

¹⁵ Levi, 193.

¹⁶ Levi, 198.

Government and Party...”¹⁷ In an effort to allay some of this public anger and regain some popular confidence, the KMT did briefly deploy a local Manchu army against the Japanese, but this untrained force was hardly more than a token effort at resistance; most military action against Japan was taken by non-governmental forces such as warlord armies, rogue commanders, and the Communist Party.¹⁸

Although the KMT’s military reaction to the Mukden incident was relatively lackluster, this should not be interpreted to mean that Chiang Kai-shek’s government took a laissez-faire approach in its response to the crisis. In fact, in the months following the Japanese invasion, the KMT made an aggressive diplomatic push to curb Japanese military aggression, albeit in the international realm rather than through domestic policies. Considering the numerous factors discussed above, it seems understandable that the KMT considered a unilateral response impractical, but that in no way means that Chiang failed to comprehend the danger of a large Japanese military force stationed 400 miles from Beijing. The Nationalist government in Nanjing pursued an aggressive diplomatic strategy against Japan, attempting to employ bilateral and multilateral forces in the fight to recover Manchuria.

Diplomatic Response

The gravity of the issue thus presented can hardly be exaggerated. A great country with a population of approximately 400,000,000 inhabitants is here virtually staking its national existence on the practical application and enforcement of the League’s Covenant. The supreme test of the effectiveness of the League in a capital emergency is at hand.”

The Republic of China’s Appeal to the League of Nations

The Republic of China attempted to invoke a number of treaties in response to the Mukden incident—Chiang’s diplomatic corps wrote to the various parties involved in the Nine-

¹⁷ Telegram from the Minister in China (Johnson) to the Secretary of State, January 2, 1932, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1931*, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1988), 714.

¹⁸ Levi, 198.

Power Treaty, the Four-Power Pacific Treaty and the Kellogg-Briand Pact, while also appealing to the Council of the League of Nations. In each case, the KMT attempted to argue that the collective security agreements in the treaty mandated a united military response to Japan's aggression, but the treaty organizations declined to act, claiming that the incident was relatively contained and did not pose a significant threat to global peace.¹⁹ Having realized that no international military coalition would come to China's defense, Chiang Kai-shek contacted the Soviet Union and the United States individually to request military assistance. Although both countries had heavy interests in East Asia and bore no love for Japan, neither was willing to risk war with the rising power.²⁰

As it became clear that immediate military support was not forthcoming, the Republic of China attempted to defend itself through the bureaucracy and mechanisms of the League of Nations. On September 21st, Nanjing instructed Alfred Sao-ke Sze, the Chinese representative to the League in Geneva, to bring the Mukden incident to the attention of the Secretary-General.²¹ Sze was also instructed to appeal to the League's Council under Article 11 of the League covenant, which states that "Any war or threat of war, whether immediately affecting any of the Members of the League or not, is hereby declared a matter of concern to the whole League, and the League shall take any action that may be deemed wise and effectual to safeguard the peace of nations."²² The Chinese representative requested that the Council "take immediate steps to prevent the further development of a situation endangering the peace of nations."²³ The League

¹⁹ Levi, 200.

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Manchuria: Report of the Commission of Enquiry appointed by the League of Nations, (Washington: GPO, 1932), 5.

²² Covenant of the League of Nations, June 28, 1919, Accessed through the Yale Law School Avalon Project.

²³ Manchuria Report, 5.

had been created at the Paris Peace Conference with the expressed intent of diffusing international conflicts before they spiraled into global crises; China's appeal to the Council employed language that directly referenced that goal in the hopes of provoking strong action against Japan.²⁴

Despite these conscientious efforts by the Republic of China, it would seem that the deck was stacked against them in the League of Nations. In 1927, a British Foreign Office report commented on the League's inability to respond to crises in East Asia: "Two of the Great Powers with important interests in the Far East, namely, the United States and the Soviet Union, are not members of the League of Nations. The effect of this is that...the League has so far played a very small part in Far Eastern affairs."²⁵ The League of Nations, and particularly the Council of the League, was comprised mostly of European nations with very little interest in Asian affairs and generally amicable relations with Japan. The Council was not eager to discuss a case in which one of the permanent members (Japan) was potentially at fault. When the Council meeting eventually took place after being postponed, the European powers were reluctant to condemn Japanese actions, and only offered vague and non-committal encouragement to China.²⁶ The Secretary-General of the League even privately expressed to the US consul his hope that China would stop bothering the Council and strive to handle the crisis "independently."²⁷ Once the Council began to discuss the conflict, the Chinese representative found himself playing a frustratingly small role in the proceedings. Japan, as a permanent

²⁴ Alfred Sao-ke Sze letter to the Secretary-General, September 21st, 1931 in *League of Nations Publications, 1931*, Vol. VI, 321.

²⁵ British Foreign Office Assessment of British Interest in East Asia, 1927. Quoted in Ian Hill Nish, *Japan's Struggle with Internationalism: Japan, China and the League of Nations*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 20.

²⁶ Telegram from the Consul at Geneva (Gilbert) to the Secretary of State, October 1, 1931, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1931*, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1988), 99.

²⁷ Ibid.

member of the Council, was present for all discussions, but China was left to write memoranda with titles such as “Why China Should be Invited to Discuss Non-Recognition.”²⁸ While being excluded from the Council’s discussion of Japanese aggression, the Chinese representative was constantly called on to report to the League commission investigating the plight of Russian refugees in China.²⁹ Although there is nothing to suggest that this was an intentional distraction for Sze, one can only imagine his frustration.

Ultimately the League of Nations failed to take any meaningful action in response to the Chinese appeal. On September 30th, the Council passed a resolution that did little more than to acknowledge the positions held by both parties and postpone the discussion to a later date. Eventually the League commissioned a comprehensive research expedition to study the incident, but by the time Lytton Commission reached Mukden, it was in the newly formed country of Manchukuo, and when the Lytton Report was presented to the League of Nations, rather than adhering to the report’s suggestions, Japan walked out, never to return.³⁰ China’s only true diplomatic victory in this affair was the nearly universal non-recognition of Manchukuo in the international community. Encouraged by a Chinese diplomatic campaign, every country except Japan and El Salvador refused to recognize Japan’s puppet state in Manchuria.³¹ This complete non-recognition made it possible for Manchuria to be returned to China after World War II, rather than being established as an independent country.³² This was one of the only positive outcomes of the ROC’s diplomatic campaign against Japan.

Conclusion

²⁸ Letter from Chinese Representative to Secretary-General, October 5, 1931.

²⁹ Situation of Russian Refugees in China, in *League of Nations Publications, 1931* Vol II, 241.

³⁰ Thomas W. Burkman, *Japan and the League of Nations*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2008), 184.

³¹ Kirby, 438.

³² Ibid.

On May 4th, 1919, thousands of Chinese students congregated in Tiananmen Square to protest the outcome of the Paris Peace Conference. The Treaty of Versailles reflected very few of the Chinese delegation's requests and created a new international system with China still relegated to a role of minimal power and importance.³³ Twelve years later, Chiang Kai-shek decided to place his faith in that same system when he appealed to the League of Nations to consider the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. Facing a daunting array of domestic crises, Chiang elected not to unilaterally take on the military might of Imperial Japan, electing instead to utilize the mechanisms designed to prevent international conflict. Just as Western leaders had failed to protect Chinese interests in 1919, League of Nations failed to protect international peace in 1931 as well: Whatever faith China might have had in what Wellington Koo referred to as the "new order of things which could ensure universal peace," was shattered. This failure of international diplomacy convinced Chiang that he could not rely on the support of foreign allies, and he spent the half-decade leading up to the outbreak of war in 1937 pursuing policies of extreme self-strengthening and militarization.³⁴ He now realized that China needed the ability to independently ward off Japanese imperialism, but the realization came too late to save his reputation. Chinese public opinion had condemned the KMT for appeasing the Japanese, while Nanjing's political rivals—the Communist Party in particular—gained popularity for simultaneously resisting the KMT and the Japanese. Considering the dire circumstances that Chiang faced at the time of the Mukden incident, his strategy does not seem unwise or unreasonable, but unfortunately for him, his failure to produce any type of meaningful response to the Japanese invasion damned him in the eyes of public opinion.

³³ For a discussion of Chinese reactions to the treaty of Versailles see Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), Chapter 5.

³⁴ Levi, 204.

The incident had also delegitimized the League, with Japan making an utter mockery of the various mechanisms designed to ensure peace. Japan had used its elite status in the Council to deter any unfavorable resolutions or discussions, and once the Council finally arrived at an unfavorable conclusion, the Japanese delegate simply withdrew, blatantly ignoring all requests, suggestions and demands. The United States and the Soviet Union were not members and the great European powers were uninterested in crises on the other side of the globe. If this was truly the “supreme test of the effectiveness of the League,” then it can only be said to have failed. The League of Nations had not delivered on its promise of preventing global aggression, and within a decade, the entire international system established by the Treaty of Versailles would collapse.

In 1931, Chiang, overwhelmed by floods, famine and factionalism, decided to rely on allies, treaties and covenants to protect China from the much greater military might of Japan. In retrospect, it seems clear that sending Nationalist troops to Manchuria would not have ended well either for the troops or for Chiang’s fragile government in Nanjing, but the decision not to engage Japan militarily still had disastrous implications for KMT rule in China. Chiang’s policy of “first internal pacification, then external resistance” is often criticized as a policy of appeasement, while the actions taken by the League of Nation are regarded as an equally dismal, but entirely separate failure. The two must, however, be considered together, as two pieces of one larger strategic response. Instead of “external resistance,” Chiang chose to place his confidence in the international community, and the Mukden incident thus came to mark the beginning of World War II in Asia.

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