A War Within a War: The Road to the New Fourth Army Incident in January 1941*

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Abstract
The New Fourth Army (N4A) Incident is the name given to the destruction by the Chinese Nationalist government of the headquarters of the N4A, one of the two legal armies under the command of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during the Sino-Japanese War, in southern Anhui province in January 1941, together with the killing of about nine thousand CCP soldiers. It was the largest and the last armed conflict between the Nationalists and the CCP during the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). This article argues that this tragedy came from Joseph Stalin’s paranoia toward the West and Mao’s resulting limited pre-emptive offensives against the Nationalist government, as well as their misreading of Chiang Kai-shek during 1939-1940.

Keywords
New Fourth Army (N4A), Mao Zedong, Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Chiang Kai-shek, Nationalist Party (Guomindang, GMD), Xiang Ying, Battle of Huangqiao, Battle of Caodian, Eighth Route Army (8RA), Joseph Stalin, Second Sino-Japanese War, Tripartite Pact, Comintern

Introduction
The New Fourth Army (N4A) Incident is the name given to the battle in which the Chinese Nationalist government destroyed the headquarters of the N4A, one of the two legal armies under the command of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during the Sino-Japanese War, and killed approximately

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nine thousand CCP soldiers in southern Anhui province in January 1941. The N4A Incident was the largest and the last armed conflict between the Nationalist Party (Guomindang, GMD) and the CCP during the Sino-Japanese War of 1937-1945.

The causes behind this incident were controversial and have been a subject of academic discussion and debate ever since. Chalmers Johnson (1962) claimed that the event “is central to an analysis of the Communists’ acquisition of national legitimacy” and assigned blame for the slaughter to both the CCP and the GMD, stating that both parties “were guilty of breaches of the [GMD-CCP] United Front.”¹ Lyman P. Van Slyke challenged this assertion in 1967. He reviewed the origin of the CCP’s policy of the United Front in the early 1920s and its internal contradictions that turned conflict into an “integral part” within the United Front.² Pointing to the CCP’s post-N4A Incident restraint and the image it created both in China and outside, Van Slyke argued that the N4A Incident was a turning point for the CCP’s later success. It was “precisely what the [U]nited [F]ront was trying to achieve: isolation of opponents and creation of the most favorable conditions for [the CCP’s] expansion.” Tetsuya Kataoka (1974) realized that the N4A Incident had connections with the efforts of the Eighth Route Army (8RA), the CCP’s other legal army, in northern China to establish communications with its N4A comrades in the Yangzi Valley.³ He inferred that the N4A Incident was an element of the preparations by Mao Zedong for the “eventual civil war with the KMT”⁴ and was triggered by the CCP-GMD frictions elsewhere in the provinces of Shanxi, Hebei, Shandong, and Jiangsu. Yung-fa Chen (1982), furthering Kataoka’s interpretation, stated that “The actual course of such an important event, however, remains cloaked within CCP wartime propaganda; even Johnson is unable to penetrate it.”⁵ Chen concluded that the N4A Incident was a reflection of the inner power struggle among the CCP leadership: Mao had, unfairly, attributed responsibility for the disaster to Xiang Ying, the N4A leader and Mao’s old rival, blaming Xiang’s refusal to follow the CCP center’s guidance. Mao claimed that the CCP centre had asked Xiang and his headquarters to leave the part of Anhui south of the Yangzi River for the northern bank of the river in an attempt to meet the 8RA. But Xiang did not move early enough.⁶

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¹ Johnson 1962, 139.
² Van Slyke 1967, 130.
⁵ Chen 1986, 64-65.
⁶ Chen 1986, 31, 46 and 72.
As more Chinese reference sources became accessible, Van Slyke (1986) discovered that the N4A had initiated a battle at Huangqiao and destroyed the Nationalists’ local garrison of over twenty thousand soldiers prior to the N4A Incident. However, the Nationalist government had remained silent about this defeat. In the meantime, John Garver (1989) recognized that there had been some kind of connection between the N4A Incident and the supply of weaponry to the Nationalist government by the Soviet Union. Based on his thorough research in accessible sources, Gregor Benton (1999) proved that the N4A Incident was the GMD’s response to the CCP’s relentless territorial expansion against the Nationalist government, which had been underway since the beginning of 1940. In striking contrast to the earlier works mentioned above, Benton focused his attention on the N4A’s battles in central China during 1939 and 1940. Recognizing that these conflicts were closely connected to Mao’s decisions concerning the CCP armies’ strategic movements, Benton called for an “analysis of higher strategy.”

This paper responds to Benton’s call. Based on re-investigation of the published CCP documents and on reference to the only recently accessible diaries of Chiang Kai-shek, it rethinks the causes of the incident by looking at the strategies of Mao and Chiang. Mao’s pre-Pearl Harbor military strategy is an under-explored field that has been identified as a principal obstacle to our understanding of the CCP’s success. This exposition illustrates the significance of Moscow’s influence on Chinese politics, arguing that the N4A Incident occurred as the result of Joseph Stalin’s mistrust of the West and Mao’s resulting limited preemptive offensives against the Nationalist government, whose rapprochement with the Japanese, Mao thought, was imminent.

The Dynamics of the CCP’s Territorial Expansion

The CCP’s relentless territorial expansion before the N4A Incident was a consequence of Mao’s determination to improve the CCP’s position vis-à-vis the GMD by gaining access to the productive Yangzi Valley.

Prior to the War of Resistance, Mao and the CCP soldiers, excluding the remnants of the Jiangxi Soviet who were the forerunners of the N4A, were confined

7 Van Slyke 1986, 667.
9 Benton 1999.
10 Benton 1999, 710.
11 Pepper 2004, 121.
to remote and barren northern Shaanxi province and were dependent on financial support from the Nationalist government beginning in March 1937.\textsuperscript{12} During the period from July 1937 to October 1940, roughly 60 percent of the income of the CCP’s Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region Administration came from the Nationalist government.\textsuperscript{13} Exploiting the chaos created by the Japanese invasion, Mao succeeded in moving his soldiers out of this confinement and establishing a series of base areas in northern China between August 1937 and the spring of 1939. But the CCP’s situation had become dire by 1939 as the Japanese steadily expanded their occupation zones by establishing administrative systems. Mao had predicted this situation as early as February 1938. He observed that the few resource-rich regions in the vast area west of the Pinghan Railway (running from Beiping to Wuhan) were in danger of falling into Japanese hands. As a result, he decided that the CCP must allot a significant portion of its resources to the area east of the Pinghan Railway and establish a series of base areas around Xuzhou, the gateway to the Yangzi valley, before the Japanese could block cross-railway communications.\textsuperscript{14} As early as mid February 1938, Mao began to consider redeploying one of the CCP’s three regular divisions from western Shanxi to southern Shandong, near Xuzhou, although he did not effect this redeployment until early December 1938, a month after the Battle of Wuhan during which Chiang Kai-shek had completed his strategic retreat to the west of the Pinghan Railway via the Yangzi River.\textsuperscript{15}

Until the Battle of Wuhan began in June 1938, the Japanese still had the potential to knock China out of the contest by occupying Wuhan from Beiping via the Pinghan Railway and thus depriving China of the possibility of conducting a total and protracted war of resistance.\textsuperscript{16} Because the direct Japanese

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  \item\textsuperscript{12} Institute of Finance Studies 1987, 91.
  \item\textsuperscript{13} Institute of Finance Studies 1987, 91.
  \item\textsuperscript{14} Mao Zedong, "Li zheng jianli changqi kangzhan de zhuyao zhanlue zhidian" [On establishing a strategic fulcrum for protracted war of resistance], 21 February 1938, MJWJ, vol. 2, 160-61.
  \item\textsuperscript{15} Mao Zedong, "Guanyu 115 shi fen san bu xiang Hebei, Shandong deng di jinjun de yijian" [On deploying the 115th Division to Hebei, Shandong and other places in three stages], 15 February 1938], MJWJ, vol. 2, 157-59.
  \item\textsuperscript{16} Wei-kuo Chiang, Chiang Kai-shek’s son, explained the rationale of his father's strategy against the Japanese invasion and the process of its implementation before and during the war. See Jiang Weiguo 蔣緯國, "Ba nian kangzhan shi zenyang da sheng de" [How was the War of Resistance of Eight Years was won], in Qin 1981-89, vol. 2, 536-75. Because of the overwhelming odds between China and Japan, Chiang Kai-shek planned to take western China, centred in Sichuan, as the home base for a total and protracted war against the Japanese invasion. The key of this strategy was to turn the potential north-south axis of strategic offensives by the Japanese via the Pinghan Railway in the early stage of the war into an east-west one via the Yangzi River so that the Chinese would have time to evacuate into Sichuan. Wei-kuo’s explanation matches the
military threat had not been eliminated, Mao had to work with the GMD and keep his troops in Shanxi province to defend his home base of the Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Area until the Nationalists’ strategic evacuation was concluded. Additionally, Mao had to earn Moscow’s endorsement to become the CCP’s head. Mao’s top priority after the war began had been territorial expansion rather than fighting against the Japanese. This priority worried his patriotic colleagues as well as Joseph Stalin, who was trying to keep China in the war against Japan so as to prevent the Japanese from invading Siberia. Mao’s behavior was in conflict with the security interests of the Soviet Union. After being reprimanded by Stalin for acting on his priority of territorial expansion in December 1937, Mao had adopted a low-profile strategy in dealing with his CCP colleagues and GMD allies before the Japanese launched the Battle of Wuhan in June 1938. That the Japanese began to advance towards Wuhan along the Yangzi River after the Nationalists’ destruction of the Yellow River dikes indicated that they had missed their opportunity to disrupt Chiang’s strategic retreat and would have to resort instead to a protracted war of attrition. The Sino-Japanese War thus entered the phase of attrition. Because China was able to continue to hold off Japan, Stalin no longer worried that Mao’s self-centered strategy would damage Soviet interests. Thus, in the summer of 1938, he appointed Mao as the CCP’s ultimate decision-maker, a status that was changes of mood and agendas in Chiang Kai-shek’s diaries. Chiang Kai-shek was anxious before the Japanese started the battle of Xuzhou in March 1938. When this battle came to an end, Chiang thought that the Japanese had realized that they could not win the war and would have to negotiate for peace. See CKSD, 26 December 1937, Box 39, Folder 18; 25 November 1937, Box 39, Folder 17; Miscellaneous, 1937, Box 40, Folder 2; 22 March 1938, Box 39, Folder 22; 7, 14 and 26 June 1938, Box 39, Folder 25; 1, 5, 9 and 13 July 1938, Box 39, Folder 25; 12 September 1938, Box 39, Folder 28; 18 August 1938, Box 39, Folder 27; 18 October 1938, Box 39, Folder 40. See also Lai 2009.


18 Garver 1989, 64-80.

19 Jin 2004, 521-30. See also Dimitrov 2003. Before the Xi’an Incident on December 12, 1936, Stalin and Dimitrov recognized that the GMD was the only force in China that could be counted on against Japan and that the CCP had to alter its anti-GMD policy. Dimitrov wrote in his diary on November 26, 1936: “Our stance on Chinese affairs will have to be altered. This approach with soviets is not going to work. Form a national-revolutionary government, a government of national defence...Without confiscation.” (Dimitrov 2003, 47-48). Before Lieutenant General Vasily Ivanovich Chuikov, the recently appointed military attaché and soon-to-be chief military advisor to the Nationalist government, left Moscow for China at the end of November 1940, Joseph Stalin interviewed him. Chuikov’s principal task in China, Stalin explained, was to help Chiang Kai-shek and to keep Japan in the quagmire in China so that the Soviet Union could avoid a two-front war in the coming struggle against Germany’s invasion. See Chuikov 1980, 35-36.

formalized at the CCP’s Sixth Plenum, which took place between September 29 and November 6, 1938.\(^{21}\) Mao’s first major decision after the Plenum was the deployment of the CCP division to southern Shandong.\(^{22}\)

As the war entered its attrition stage after the Battle of Wuhan, Chiang Kai-shek was adjusting his strategy to the new situation. His adjustments ranged from turning the underdeveloped southwestern region of China into the country’s home base of resistance with aid from the West to military reorganization, redefinition of GMD-CCP relations, and tentative negotiations with Japan for peace. His military restructuring included the establishment of two theater (\textit{zhanqu}) commands for guerrilla operations in the provinces of Hebei (\textit{Ji}) and Chaha’er (\textit{Cha}) in northern China and the provinces of Shandong (\textit{Lu}) and Jiangsu (\textit{Su}) in central China. Many of Chiang’s key adjustments, especially peace negotiations with Japan and the establishment of the theaters of JiCha (for Hebei and Chaha’er) and LuSu (for Shandong and Jiangsu), were in opposition to Mao’s eastward expansionist strategy.\(^{23}\) The GMD and the CCP were thus on a path towards conflict during their joint war of resistance against Japan.

**Escalation of Conflict in Northern China**

For Mao and his colleagues, the period between the fall of Wuhan in October 1938 and late March 1939 was a time of uncertainty. They were not sure what Chiang’s new CCP policy would be in the attrition stage of the war or whether the new policy would be good for the CCP. The CCP’s rapid territorial expansion across northern China and its nationwide influence during the previous stage of strategic retreat frightened the GMD elites, increasing their concern about the CCP threat.\(^{24}\) Halting CCP expansion was Chiang’s top priority at the beginning of 1939.\(^ {25}\) Nevertheless, the CCP put forward a proposal for the GMD to transform itself into a national coalition headed by Chiang Kai-shek in which the CCP and the GMD would enjoy equal status. Mao expected that the CCP would gradually become dominant in the coalition during the war.\(^ {26}\) Chiang


\(^{23}\) CKSD, 3 October 1938, Box 39, Folder 40; see also Yang 2008.


\(^{25}\) CKSD, Yearly Review, 1938, Box 40, Folder 2.

\(^{26}\) Mao Zedong, “Lun xin jieduan: kang Ri minzu zhanzheng yu kang Ri minzu tongyi zhanxian fazhan de xin jieduan (Mao Zedong 1938 nian 10 yue 12-14 ri zai Zhonggong kuoda de Liu Zhong
Kai-shek rejected this proposal and suggested that the CCP and the GMD be dissolved first and then integrated into a new political identity, but Mao turned down this proposal immediately. The negotiations on the GMD-CCP relationship thus were deadlocked. In late January of 1939, the GMD’s Fifth Plenum was held and a resolution restraining the CCP was passed, a move that increased Mao’s suspicions that the GMD was still hostile towards the CCP and would one day destroy it. However, Mao did not give an outward response because Stalin’s policy towards the Nationalist government and its Western patrons, especially Britain, was ambiguous and difficult to read in early 1939.

Stalin’s suspicions against the West increased rapidly after the Munich Agreement in October 1938. Through the Comintern, Stalin referred to this agreement as “not only a blow to Czechoslovakia” but also “a far wider imperialist conspiracy” against the Soviet Union. He stated further that “[t]o fight for peace means that in each country the liberty of the people must be dependent on the reactionary bourgeoisie. Just as the feudal nobility during the collapse of feudalism plotted against the French Revolution, the reactionary bourgeoisie in alliance with German fascism are brandishing the sword over the heads of their own people. The people cannot entrust the fate of their country to governments that conspire with foreign fascism against their own people.”


27 “Zhongyang guanyu jujue suowei yige da dang wenti gei Zhou Enlai de zhishi” [Central directive to Zhou Enlai about rejecting the so-called one major party proposal], 22 January 1939, ZZWXJ, vol. 12, 5; “Chen Shaoyu deng guanyu yige da dang wenti yu Jiang Jieshi tanpan qingkuang ji yijian xiang Zhongyang de baogao” [Chen Shaoyu’s report about negotiations with Chiang Kai-shek over the issue of one major party], 21 January 1939, ZZWXJ, vol. 12, 6-7; “Zhou Enlai guanyu yige da dang wenti gei Jiang Jieshi de fuxin” [Zhou Enlai’s reply to Chiang Kai-shek on the major political party issue], 25 January 1939, ZZWXJ, vol. 12, 8-11.


Britain and France, however, were essential allies of the Soviet Union in the struggle against Germany, and the Nationalist government was trying hard to bring Britain, the United States, the Soviet Union, and France together to help China. A European war would occupy the attention of the Western powers and the Soviet Union and was therefore not in China’s interests. Chiang Kai-shek expressed relief when the Munich Agreement was signed, and the GMD’s newspaper even lauded this agreement. The Nationalists’ attitude toward the Munich Agreement was responsible for the ambiguity and inconsistency in Stalin’s policies toward the Nationalist government and the CCP. On the one hand, Stalin was dependent on the Nationalist government to defend Siberia by keeping the Japanese in China, so he mediated the GMD-CCP war and created the GMD-CCP United Front. On the other, he was concerned that the CCP would lose its Communist identity in collaboration with the GMD. He was not confident about the CCP’s future. Stalin told Vasily Chuikov straightforwardly, as the latter was about to leave for China as Chiang Kai-shek’s military advisor in late November 1940, “The CCP and the Chinese proletarians are too weak to lead China’s war of resistance. It takes time to win popular support. How long will it take? It is hard to say. In addition, the imperialist powers might not accept the replacement of the GMD by the CCP.” The interests of the CCP, the GMD, the Soviet Union, and the West were not shared, and Stalin’s top priority was the security of the Soviet Union.

As a result, Stalin’s approval of Mao’s status as the CCP’s head was conditional, dependent upon Chiang’s ability to wear down the Japanese, an outcome in which Britain and the Soviet Union had shared interests. Britain, however, did not risk antagonizing Japan lest it ally itself with Germany. Rather than providing direct military aid as the Soviet Union did, Britain provided China with financial aid to stabilize its currency, the fabi. China’s material sustenance during the war thus depended largely on the flow of Soviet weapons and British financial aid. The result was that China’s war efforts were vulnerable to the volatile situation in Europe and Soviet-British relations. Because Britain was a major supporter of Chiang and because Stalin did not trust Britain, suspecting it of encouraging Germany to attack the Soviet Union,
his wariness of Britain’s foreign policy in Europe directly affected his support of Chiang and Mao after the September 1938 Munich Agreement, a large blow to Stalin’s efforts to establish a collective security system against the Axis.

Hitler’s occupation of Prague on March 15, 1939, reinforced Stalin’s suspicions about the West, and he alerted Communists around the world, including the CCP, of the West’s anti-Communist conspiracy.36 At the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, from March 10 to 21, 1939, Dmitry Manuilsky, the chief Soviet representative in the Comintern, was sharply critical of the European Communists’ Popular Front approach, which intended to halt the spread of fascism through alliances with other antifascist factions. He denounced this approach for providing “opportunists a tendency to idealize the role of the so-called democratic states, and to gloss over their imperialist character,” claiming that “The Communists of the capitalist countries are not sufficiently prepared for the abrupt turn of events, and have not yet mastered the forms of struggle dictated by the tense international situation.”37 Manuilsky asserted that the collapse of the Spanish Republic, Nazi Germany’s occupation of Austria and Czechoslovakia, and Japan’s invasion of China were the outcomes of the West’s refusal to accept the proposals for collective security put forward by the Soviet Union.38 He attributed these events to the “capitulators” who “feared the victory of the people’s front more than they feared the victory of fascism” and maintained that “War could still be avoided by isolating these capitulators and destroying their influence.”39 Stalin intended to suspend his collaboration with the West and wanted other Communists to follow his example.

Stalin’s policy change was delivered through the Comintern to the various Communist parties on March 18, 1939. This change reinforced Mao’s suspicions that Chiang would achieve an accord with the Japanese and justified Mao’s previous policy of territorial expansion.40 Stalin’s change also spurred Mao to adopt a more aggressive, even confrontational policy, as he concluded that the Nationalist government was achieving an accord with the Japanese at the expense of the CCP. The tone and content of the directives from Yan’an to its regional authorities concerning the GMD authorities became increasingly antagonistic on issues essential to CCP interests such as revenue sources and

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36 Yang 2003, 89.
40 Yang, 2003, 89.
territorial control. The CCP regular troops also overtly launched revenge offensives against pro-GMD forces in northern China. On May 30, 1939, the Comintern warned that the principal threat to the CCP was a GMD-Japanese accord. On June 7, 1939, the CCP Central Secretariat sent provincial committees a directive echoing that of the Comintern. On June 10 and 13, Mao gave long lectures on how to prevent a GMD-Japanese accord from becoming appeasement at a conference of CCP senior cadres. The fruitless negotiations among the Soviet Union, Britain, and France over European security during the spring and summer of 1939, together with the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact on August 23 and the inaction of the Allied forces during the destruction of Poland, confirmed Mao’s suspicions about the GMD and increased his trust in Stalin’s strategic assessment. Both Stalin and Mao believed that the Western powers were trying to achieve a compromise with the Axis powers in order to direct the latter against the Soviet Union. From their perspective, the Nationalist government was a client regime of the West; it would soon reach a compromise with the Japanese and would then turn against the rapidly growing CCP. The defection of Wang Jingwei was the beginning of this process. The CCP had, therefore, to improve its strategic position before disaster struck.

The CCP’s strategic position in the summer of 1939 was by no means favorable. In addition to its financial dependence on the Nationalist government, the CCP’s base areas scattered across northern China were small, isolated, and unproductive. Its administrative systems in the new territories were primitive and were engaged in deadly rivalries with those of the local Nationalists. The CCP had to justify its defiance in actions such as unauthorized military expansion to the authorities of the Nationalist government. Because the CCP’s army

41 CCP Central Secretariat, “Zhongyang guanyu tongzhan gongzuo de zhishi” [Central directive on United Front work], 20 March 1939, ZZWXJ, vol. 12, 43-44; “Zhongyang guanyu Shandong gongzuo fangzhen de zhishi” [Central directive on work in Shandong], 19 May 1939, ZZWXJ, vol. 12, 74-75.
42 Yang 2005.
43 CCP Central Secretariat, “Zhongyang guanyu fandui touxiang weixian de zhishi” [Central warning on the potential of surrender], 7 June 1939, ZZWXJ, vol. 12, 80-81.
44 “Fandui touxiang tigang” [An outline of countering surrender: Outline of Mao Zedong’s speech for his report to senior cadres at Yan’an on June 10 and 13, 1939], ZZWXJ, vol. 12, 82-130.
was in no way comparable to Japan’s, its expansions were often at the expense of semi-independent regional Nationalist authorities. The CCP’s usual approach to this paradox was to produce a fait accompli. This approach was applied in the provinces of Chahar, Hebei, Shandong, and Jiangsu, where Chiang Kai-shek established the theaters of JiCha and LuSu to command Nationalist forces left behind the front line. Leaders of the two theaters who tried to integrate the CCP forces in their regions into their administrative hierarchies met with stiff resistance. In the summer of 1939, the CCP in Hebei successfully dominated the central and southern parts of the province by destroying local Nationalist forces. At the same time, the CCP forces in Shandong exploited a Japanese pacification campaign against the Nationalists and expanded their territories into central Shandong at the expense of the latter. The CCP-GMD conflicts in Shandong were thus escalated. In the second half of 1939, more than half of the CCP casualties in Shandong resulted from fighting with local Nationalist security forces.

As rural Hebei and Shandong descended into CCP-GMD conflict, a province-wide civil war between the CCP and the Shanxi provincial government broke out in early December 1939 and gradually spread into central China, ultimately resulting in the N4A Incident in January 1941. This escalated CCP-GMD conflict arose from the CCP’s successful infiltration of, and determination to control, a significant part of Shanxi, the gateway for Mao’s eastward expansion strategy. Ironically, the CCP’s success there was the result of the appreciation of Yan Xishan, semi-independent leader of the province, for the CCP’s discipline and efficiency following its invasion of Shanxi in 1936. Yan, confident in the province’s loyalty and the power of his own charisma, decided to hire a capable CCP man, a Shanxi native, to reform his army and government. He selected Bo Yibo, a leader of the local CCP network who had been jailed in Beijing. Yan, who had great influence in Beijing, released him in August 1936 and gave him the mandate and funding to establish a model army soon after the Sino-Japanese War began. Yan began to regret this move months later, when he discovered that Bo had turned his model army into a CCP force. Yan decided to disarm his model army in early December 1939, but Bo took preemptive action and mutinied, asking nearby regular CCP troops for help.

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47 Editorial Unit 1990, 88-90.
49 Xu 1993, 11.
51 Bo 1996, 184-86.
Mao immediately ordered the CCP regulars to engage. They defeated Yan’s army in February 1940 and assumed control of large areas of strategic value.52

Mao’s Ambition, Assumptions, and Preemptive Offensives

Mao’s ambition, concerns about Japanese-GMD compromise, and priorities were well reflected in his immediate and full support of Bo’s mutiny. Mao, who despised the GMD and saw it as representative of the classes of exploiters who were always ready for compromise, was determined to seize national power in China.53 As a GMD-Japanese accord would threaten the CCP’s survival, the CCP’s top priority was to prevent such a compromise.54 Mao and his colleagues therefore thought that their no-compromise policy was the GMD’s principal barrier to an understanding with the Japanese.55 The GMD would have to attack the CCP militarily before achieving an accord with the Japanese. The escalation of Nationalist-CCP friction across northern China was a sign of the GMD’s eagerness to reach a compromise. Because the CCP’s strategic position was so disadvantageous, improving its position became Mao’s highest priority. By coincidence, Yan Xishan’s anti-CCP purge threatened Mao’s gateway to the east.56 By the end of December, Mao concluded that Yan’s purge was a part of Chiang’s nationwide anti-CCP military campaign.57 Mao, however, did not believe then that a GMD-Japanese compromise was imminent.58 It was therefore too early to launch all-out offensives; the CCP still had opportunities to prevent the compromise by improving its strategic positions through limited military offensives according to the domestic and international situation. The war in China was thus linked directly with the volatile situation in Europe. Hitler’s stunning victories in May and June 1940 convinced Mao of the urgency of improving the CCP’s strategic position in preparing for the worst-case

52 Bo 1996, 284-85.
56 Mao Zedong, “Jin xi’nan xin jiu jun chongtu he women de fangzhen” [The conflicts between the new and the old armies in southwestern Shanxi and our policy], 6 December 1939, MJWJ, vol. 2, 497-98.
scenario. Mao then accelerated the CCP’s military expansion into central China. But he misread the domestic and international situation and Chiang Kai-shek’s character. These errors, together with his mistrust of the Nationalists and his tendency toward opportunism, finally culminated in the N4A Incident in January 1941.

While ordering regular CCP troops to engage fully in the civil war in Shanxi, Mao warned Xiang Ying, the de facto commander of the N4A in southern Anhui province, of the possibility of attacks by the Nationalists. In contrast to the 8RA, who were regular troops concentrated in northern Shaanxi province before the Sino-Japanese War, the N4A was a collection of guerrilla forces in various stages of regrouping and reorganization, by the end of 1939 scattered across a vast area from the Yangzi valley and the provinces of Jiangxi, Fujian, and Zhejiang to the western part of Henan province and areas north of Wuhan. The N4A’s most efficient troops, a few thousand soldiers, were with Xiang Ying at his headquarters in southern Anhui, hundreds of miles away from the 8RA in northern China. In addition, Xiang, whose back was against the Yangzi River, was surrounded by regular Nationalist forces to the east and west and would be among the casualties if CCP-GMD frictions in northern China escalated to large-scale civil war. On January 5, 1940, as the 8RA was winning the civil war in Shanxi, Mao assured Xiang that he could escape southward in a worst-case scenario. But he also asked Xiang to send a significant portion of his best troops to the northern bank of the Yangzi River and establish a base area in Subei (northern Jiangsu).

This inconsistent message indicated that Mao’s plan for a central China campaign had begun to take shape. Before the civil war in Shanxi began, Mao’s policy for the N4A was to work with the GMD. He allowed the N4A to operate only in areas with no Nationalist guerrilla forces. Mao began altering this policy in January 1940 because his offensives in Shanxi and northern China against local Nationalists would endanger Xiang Ying’s headquarters force and other N4A regiments widely dispersed in central China and isolated from the 8RA. The N4A therefore had to regroup and establish communications with the 8RA as soon as possible. Subei, the area north of the Yangzi River and east of the Jinpu Railway (running from Tianjin to Nanjing) where no troops from Chiang’s Central Army were deployed, was very valuable to the CCP. It was the midway point between the Yangzi valley and Shandong, where Mao had

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deployed a regular 8RA division. A strategy for the N4A to expand eastward and northward was thus decided. Because the presence of a CCP contingent close to the Shanghai-Nanjing area enhanced the CCP’s prestige and its future bargaining power with the GMD, Mao risked Chiang’s possible retaliation and kept Xiang Ying in southern Anhui as long as possible. Benton has identified precisely the value of keeping Xiang Ying in southern Anhui but has not linked explicitly the N4A operations in central China with those of the 8RA in northern China and Shandong. Nevertheless, this linkage helps us interpret the accessible telegrams sent by Mao and understand the rationales behind his decisions about military maneuver.

As mentioned earlier, Mao read Yan Xishan’s anti-CCP purge as a part of the GMD’s nationwide conspiracy to destroy the CCP and thus began preparing for a nationwide civil war. On December 6, 1939, two days after Bo’s mutiny, Mao ordered the CCP in Shandong to expand its military forces and demanded that they focus on northern Anhui and Subei, emphasizing that this army’s task was to launch offensives to cut off communications between the Nationalists in Shandong and their home base in Sichuan while establishing communications with the N4A moving northward. On January 28, 1940, Mao sent a directive to the CCP in Shandong ordering it to recruit 150,000 soldiers and collect the same number of rifles within that year. He asserted that the GMD would reinforce its military forces in northern Anhui and Jiangsu and that the CCP must complete its military redeployments in this region before the GMD did.

While preparing large-scale offensives against Yan, Mao predicted that Chiang Kai-shek would mediate between the CCP and Yan. This prediction was based on his recognition that Japanese military officials dominated the Japanese government and did not want to compromise with Chiang Kai-shek, a situation that forced Chiang to keep fighting. But the CCP’s offensives in Shanxi would drive Yan to make peace with the Japanese if Chiang stood by. In order to keep Yan in China’s war against Japan, Chiang would have to mediate between him and the CCP. Chiang’s eagerness to avoid civil war became

63 CCP Central Secretariat, “Zhongyang guanyu Shandong ji SuLu zhanqu gongzuo de zhishi” [Central directive on work in the LuSu theater], 6 December 1939, ZZWXJ, vol. 12, 211.
64 Mao Zedong, “Zhongyang guanyu zai Shandong Huazhong fazhan wuzhuang jianli genjudi de zhishi” [Central directive about expansion in Shandong and Central China, and the establishment of armed forces and base areas there], 28 January 1940, MJWJ, vol. 2, 252-54.
Mao’s leverage for blackmail. He tried to convince Chiang that the CCP’s offensives in Shanxi were conducted purely for survival, but warned that he would launch large-scale offensives across northern China and Shandong if the CCP’s survival was in jeopardy. Mao’s plans to launch offensives into central China in the event that the GMD and Japan reached a settlement at the expense of the CCP thus became a component of his blackmail strategy. With the CCP army winning clear-cut victories against local GMD authorities in northern China by March 1940, Mao endeavored to gain Chiang’s acknowledgement of the *fait accompli* of CCP dominance in northern China by diverting his attention to central China, expecting that offensive campaigns into central China would help achieve this goal. Mao told his colleagues that Chiang “had not noticed the value of central China and that if the CCP did not control this region now, it would be more difficult to gain control of it in the future.” On April 5, 1940, Mao reiterated his observation of February 1938 that, because the Japanese were steadily expanding their occupation zones in northern China, the CCP could not survive without moving into central China. “Central China is therefore the most important lifeline to us,” Mao claimed. The implementation of Mao’s strategy became known as the Central China Campaign, of which Benton has done a comprehensive and in-depth study. The culmination of this campaign was the Battle of Huangqiao in October 1940, followed by the N4A Incident in January 1941. The former was a decisive victory for the N4A, laying the foundation of the CCP’s Subei base area for the rest of the war and establishing direct communication between the 8RA and the N4A. The latter, however, was the consequence of Mao’s misplaced opportunism, lack of understanding of the international situation, and misreading and underestimation of Chiang Kai-shek.

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68 Mao Zedong, “Zai Huabei junshi shang zhuan wei shoushi zaocheng zhengzhi shang you li you li diwei” [Improve our political position by adopting a defensive strategy in North China], 16 March 1940, MJWJ, vol. 2, 523-24. This strategy of diversion was revealed for the first time when Mao Zedong junshi wenji (MJWJ) was published in 1993. This strategy might explain partially why Kataoka and Garver described the GMD-CCP disputes over the territory along the western border of the Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Area and the civil wars in Shanxi and central China but did not link them together. See Kataoka, 1974, 175-82 and 207-10, and Garver 1989, 81-82.
70 Annals Unit 1994, 399.
71 Annals Unit 1994, 399.
72 Benton 1999, 31-615.
Moscow’s Help and Mao’s Misreading of Chiang Kai-shek

Mao’s suspicion that Chiang Kai-shek was seeking an accord with the Japanese proved to be well founded. As early as March 22, 1938, when the Japanese advanced toward Xuzhou rather than toward Wuhan, Chiang began to consider peace terms with the Japanese.\footnote{See Note 8; CKSD, Miscellaneous, 25 July 1940, Box 40, Folder 28; see also Lai 2009.} Mao’s speculation that Chiang was concerned about the CCP’s rapid development in northern China since the beginning of the War of Resistance was also correct. Nevertheless, most of Mao’s assessments of Chiang on specific issues were far from accurate. Chiang’s diaries show that unless the CCP took provocative actions, he paid them scarcely any attention from early 1939 until July 1943. Before the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Chiang’s attention was primarily on the volatile situation in Europe, relevant policy changes of the Soviet Union, Britain, and the United States, changes in Japan’s domestic politics and foreign policy, China’s wartime financial situation, the Nationalist government’s economic development programs in southwestern China, relations between the Nationalist government and local strongmen, the GMD’s rapidly growing corruption and its impact upon the public’s morale, and the Nationalists’ military operations against the Japanese in central and southern China, as well as China’s access to the outside world.\footnote{CKSD, General (1939), Box 40, Folder 3.} Although the rapid increase of GMD-CCP frictions and the Soviet Union’s sudden change of attitude caught his attention between March and July 1939, the more urgent and significant issues given above clearly preoccupied Chiang.\footnote{CKSD, Weekly Reflections, May 1940, Box 40, Folder 8. Chiang felt the sudden changes of the Soviet Union’s foreign policy and was confused.} Mao’s offensives into central China did not receive Chiang’s full attention until the Battle of Huangqiao in mid October 1940.\footnote{CKSD, General (January 1940), vol. 2, Box 41, Folder 1.} Chiang had tried to eliminate tensions by persuading the CCP to redeploy its troops in a defined zone of operations north of the Huai River. Mao, however, regarded this effort as a conspiracy to place the CCP army between the GMD anvil and the Japanese hammer and became even more determined to expand into central China.\footnote{Annals Unit 1994, 309.} Chiang was unable to implement his plan of redeploying the CCP troops because the Nazis’ victories in May and June 1940 left him in despair. Nevertheless, when the N4A was winning the Battle of Huangqiao in the autumn, Chiang had made it through the difficult time and was able to handle CCP offensives.
Chiang's difficulties arose from the Nazi victory in Europe. Because China's military capacity and will to wage the War of Resistance were dependent on international assistance, especially from Britain in the form of financial aid and shipments of supplies via the Haiphong-Kunming Railway and the Burma Road, Hitler's victory caught Chiang off guard. Britain was in danger and began to appease Japan, which hankered after European colonies in Southeast Asia, in an effort to gauge whether the United States, the only country capable of rescuing the situation, would alter its no-intervention policy.\footnote{Best 1995.} The Germans' victory thus not only deprived China of valuable assistance from the West but also exposed China's home base of resistance to Japan, outflanking it from the south through French Indochina. Chiang therefore became even more dependent on Soviet overland weaponry supply via central Asia. This dependency, however, limited Chiang's ability to act against the CCP. Even so, the European war put Soviet weaponry supply into question. Moscow suspended its weaponry deliveries to China when China voted to expel the Soviet Union from the League of Nations after its invasion of Finland.\footnote{He Yaozu, “Junshi weiyuanhui bangongting zhuren He Yaozu zi Mosike cheng Jiang weiyuanzhang baogao jia han ci shi bu yi tichu zhi liyou ji Ri Su si you zhujuan jiejin zhi keneng” [The Soviet Union and Japan might achieve rapprochement: Report from Moscow to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek by He Yaozu, the Chief of the Office of the Military Commission], 19 December 1939, in Qin 1981-89, vol. 3, 360; Yang Jie, “Zhu Su dashi Yang Jie zi Mosike cheng Jiang weiyuanzhang baogao yu Fuluxiluofu yuanshuai ji Moloutoufu waizhang shangtan” [The report by Ambassador Yang Jie to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek about his meeting with Marshal Voroshilov and Foreign Minister Molotov on the Soviet Aid and Soviet-Japanese Negotiations], 9 January 1940, in Qin 1981-89, vol. 3, 362-63; He Yaozu, “Junshi weiyuanhui bangongting zhuren He Yaozu zi Mosike cheng Jiang weiyuanzhang baogao qingshi guanyu Moloutoufu waizhang dui wo guoji lianmeng daibiao bu man bing yaoqiu biaoshi yi jie ying ruhe dafu dian (chaiyao)” [Extracts from the report from Moscow to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek by He Yaozu, the Chief of the Office of the Military Commission, about his meeting with Foreign Minister Molotov who was discontent with the performance of the Chinese representative in the League of Nations and asked for China's corrections], 9 January 1940, in Qin 1981-89, vol. 3, 362-63; He Yaozu, “Junshi weiyuanhui bangongting zhuren He Yaozu zi Mosike cheng Jiang weiyuanzhang baogao nidui Sulfian shengming Zhongguo dui Guolian kaichu Sulfian huiyuan ji wei di yuhan dan rong pan neng jixu jie ji dian” [The report from Moscow to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek by He Yaozu, the Chief of the Office of the Military Commission, about a planned statement about China's regret for not supporting the Soviet Union when being expelled from the League of Nations as well as China's hope for Soviet assistance], 13 January 1940, in Qin 1981-89, vol. 3, 366-67; He Yaozu, “Junshi weiyuanhui bangongting zhuren He Yaozu zi Mosike cheng Jiang weiyuanzhang baogao Fuluxiluofu yuanshuai liang ci gai qi yuejian wei zhi shifo dai wo dafu Guolian Zhongguo taidu dian” [The report from Moscow to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek by He Yaozu, the Chief of the Office of the Military Commission, about Marshall Voroshilov's appointment cancellations], 79 Under Japanese pressure, the
French Indochina government closed the Haiphong-Kunming Railway in late June 1940. Shortly after this, Britain closed the Burma Road for three months on the pretext of carrying out maintenance. The war situation was so desperate during this period that Chiang later acknowledged that he was emotionally unstable (心神恍惚) during July and August of 1940.80

As essential international assistance disappeared, from Mao’s perspective the likelihood of an immediate GMD-Japanese accord increased dramatically. He intensified CCP offensives into central China on June 1, 1940, pushing relevant CCP military leaders to move their troops into central China immediately.81 In early July 1940, Mao was sure that Chiang’s compromise with the Japanese was imminent and again urged CCP leaders to move into central China.82 On July 30, 1940, Mao approved the Subei campaign plan drafted by Liu Shaaoqi, the head of the CCP’s authority in central China, the Central China Bureau. The thrust of this plan was to exploit the arrogance of Han Deqin, the governor of Jiangsu province and deputy commander of the LuSu Theater who did not take the CCP seriously, first inviting him to attack the strategic town of Huangqiao and then destroying his forces through outflanking counterattacks.83 In order to divert the attention of Chiang and the Chinese public from Subei and keep Chiang in the war longer, Mao decided in early July 1940 to launch a large-scale raiding campaign on the Japanese-controlled railway system in Shanxi in late August. This was later called the “Battle of the Hundred Regiments” in CCP media and publications.84 Chiang was pleased with the campaign, writing about it in his diary: “That the 8RA raided and disrupted the railway system in Shanxi must be a big blow to the enemy’s morale and operation plans. [This campaign] is the CCP’s expression of its 19 January 1940, in Qin 1981-89, vol. 3, 367; He Yaozu, “Junshi weiyuanhui bangongting zhuren He Yaozu zi Mosike cheng Jiang weiyuanzhang baogao Fuluoxihuofu yuan shu hai du wo sheng jie ji shi zhi da fu qing xing dian” [The report from Moscow to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek by He Yaozu, the Chief of the Office of the Military Commission, about Marshal Voroshilov’s reply to our request for assistance], 20 January 1940, in Qin 1981-89, vol. 3, 367-68. See also Garver 1989, 99-103. Garver attributed the suspension to Stalin’s efforts to achieve rapprochement with Japan after the Red Army’s triumph over the Japanese in the Battle of Nomonhan in September 1939 and the Nazi-Soviet Pact in August 1939. (See Garver 1989, 95-97 and 104-5.)

80 CKSD, 27 September 1940, Box 40, Folder 25.
84 Van Slyke 1996. Although the battle itself was well explained, the explanations of its intention do not connect it with the coming offensives in Subei.
active participation in the war of resistance.” In Subei, Liu’s plan worked well. Han Deqin launched offensives on September 30, 1940, and his forces were destroyed within a week.

While the CCP was winning dominance over Subei, the international situation had changed. On September 27, 1940, Japan signed the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy, hoping to deter the United States from intervening in Asian affairs. However, together with the Nazi successes in Europe, this pact helped Franklin D. Roosevelt achieve a domestic consensus to wage war against the Axis. It also made Britain’s concern about a Japan-Germany alliance irrelevant. The United States and Britain were thus freed from previous constraints in helping China in its war against Japan. China’s War of Resistance was thus entering a new phase. Recognizing that Japan was now on a fast track toward war against the West, Chiang Kai-shek referred to Prince Konoe Fumimaro, the Japanese prime minister at that time, as “Japan’s prince of self-destruction” in his diary on September 27, 1940. A GMD-Japanese accord was now out of the question.

The elimination of the likelihood of a GMD-Japanese compromise and the CCP victory at Huangqiao created a security nightmare for Mao. The Battle of Huangqiao alerted Chiang to the CCP threat and strengthened hard-line GMD factions pushing for strong action against the CCP. Moreover, Mao’s preemptive offensive campaigns were based on his assumption that Chiang would make an accord with the Japanese. This meant that, when the Tripartite Pact was signed and the Nationalist government could not achieve such an accord, Mao could no longer justify these preemptive attacks. As a result, Mao and his colleagues found themselves political outcasts, defenseless against Chiang’s military strikes. The tone of Mao’s correspondence from late October 1940 to January 1941 reflected his desperation following the Nationalist government’s memorandum about the deadline for the CCP to move all its troops north of the Huai River. Further, the contents of his correspondence were contradictory and pessimistic. He predicted that Chiang would stay in the war for a comprehensive victory by allying with the United States and Britain, which would be attacked by Japan. But two weeks later he asserted that Chiang Kai-shek was negotiating with the Japanese and would reach a settlement in three

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85 CKSD, 29 August 1940, Box 40, Folder 24.
86 CKSD, August 1940, Monthly Reflection, Box 40, Folder 24.
87 Annals Unit 1994, 322-33.
88 Annals Unit 1994, 322.
His expectation that China would ally with the United States and Britain reversed over the course of a few days. Nevertheless, Mao's activities between the Battle of Huangqiao in October 1940 and the N4A Incident in January 1941 were focused on the possibility of Chiang's retaliatory military strikes.

Mao's writings from this period are pessimistic. In them he describes the future as "the darkest" and "most dangerous." He preferred military confrontation to inactivity but did not have the strength for it. He sought Moscow's support, including weaponry supply, against the GMD, but Stalin, as mentioned earlier, thought the CCP too weak to replace the GMD in leading China in the war against Japan and so turned Mao down. Nevertheless, Mao did not want to yield. He desperately searched for clues that the international situation was so bad that the GMD was falling apart and that Chiang Kai-shek could not retaliate against the N4A. But Zhou Enlai, the founder and head of the CCP's intelligence services who was serving as the CCP's representative in China's wartime capital Chongqing, told Mao that the mood in Chongqing was positive after the Burma Road had reopened and the United States had provided loans to the Nationalist government.

Meanwhile, Liu Shaoqi was pushing Mao to approve his plan to attack and occupy Caodian, a stronghold where Han Deqin and his followers were waiting for reinforcements from two regular Nationalist divisions coming down from southern Shandong. The destruction of this stronghold at Caodian would consolidate the CCP's military positions in Subei, but it would also exacerbate the

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89 Annals Unit 1994, 322.
90 CCP Central Secretariat, "Zhong xuan bu zhengzhi qingbao di liu hao: Ying Mei tuo Zhongguo jiaru qi zhanzheng jituan" [Central Propaganda Department, political intelligence report No. 6: Britain and the United States are dragging China into their bloc of war], 20 October 1940, ZZWXJ, vol. 12, 521-23.
91 Annals Unit 1994, 88.
92 Mao Zedong and CCP Central Secretariat, "Dui muqian shijie xingshi de guji ji dui Guomindang keneng jingong de duice" [Assessment of the international situation and countermeasures against possible Guomindang offensives], 25 October 1940, MJWJ, vol. 2, 566-68.
93 Mao's message to Zhou Enlai, Peng Dehu, Liu Shaoqi and Xiang Ying on 29 October 1940, in Annals Unit 1994, 325; Mao's message to Zhou Enlai, Qin Bangxian, Kai Feng and Ye Jianying on 1 November 1940, in Annals Unit 1994, 326; Mao's messages on 3 November 1940, in Annals Unit 1994, 327-28. See also CCP Central Secretariat, "Duifu Ri Jiang lianhe fan Gong de junshi bushu" [Strategies against Chiang Kai-shek's joint anti-CCP military deployments with the Japanese], 3 November 1940, ZZWXJ, vol. 12, 569-70.
94 Yang 2003, 100-102.
95 Yang 2003, 99-100.
CCP’s tenuous political situation and justify Chiang’s retaliatory strikes. Mao hesitated, not approving Liu’s plan until November 28, 1940. The CCP began its assault the next day but was repulsed. After suffering casualties of approximately two thousand troops, Mao ordered a withdrawal. The CCP’s assault on Caodian went beyond Chiang’s tolerance and has been criticized by historians in China for damaging the GMD-CCP United Front.96 Yang Kuisong described Chiang Kai-shek’s decision to destroy the N4A headquarters as retaliation for the CCP’s attack on Caodian. There has, however, been little exploration of why Mao disregarded the unfavorable political situation and approved the attack, even though Mao’s concerns and hesitation are recognized in the CCP’s official history and in scholarly works published in China.97 Chiang’s dependence on Soviet weaponry and military equipment, which is revealed in Chiang’s diaries, might help explain Mao’s eventual approval of the attack on Caodian.

After suspending its supply of weaponry for over ten months, a move that increased Chiang’s difficulties considerably during the summer of 1940, the Soviet Union informed Chiang on November 24 that it would soon resume supplying weapons and military equipment to China. The first delivery included 200 pieces of artillery, 250 airplanes, and 500 trucks.98 As the same time, Lieutenant General Vasily Ivanovich Chuikov was appointed as Soviet chief military advisor and sent to China with fifteen other Soviet military experts.99 It is safe to assume that Chiang would have had to take these valuable weapons into account before deciding about striking back at the CCP forces. It is also safe to assume that Mao used the news about the Soviet delivery of weapons as leverage for dissuading Chiang from retaliating against the CCP. Chiang Kai-shek had realized as early as March 1940 that Stalin’s condemnation of the Chinese support for Finland in the League of Nations was only an excuse for the suspension of the Soviet supply of weapons and that he was using the weaponry supply as leverage to influence Chiang’s decisions concerning the CCP.100 CCP representatives in Chongqing also reminded Chiang of his

98 CKSD, November 1940, Box 40, Folder 27; CKSD, Weekly Reflection (Second Week of January 1941), Box 41, Folder 7; Chuikov 1980, 40.
100 Yang 2003, 102; CKSD, 1 March 1940, Box 40, Folder 19.
dependency on the Soviet Union by occasionally mentioning the Soviet supply of weapons to China.\footnote{CKSD, 25 May 1940, Box 40, Folder 21; CKSD, Chronology of 1940, Volume General, Box 40, Folder 16.}

Mao, however, overestimated Chiang’s dependency on the Soviet weaponry supply and underestimated Stalin’s reliance on Chiang’s war with Japan to prevent a Japanese attack on his territory in the Far East and thus avoid a two-front war. Although Stalin was anxious, in the early days of the Sino-Japanese War, that the CCP might lose its identity if it collaborated with the GMD, escalation of the CCP-GMD conflict and the potential for resumption of the civil war between the GMD and CCP was his worst nightmare. As a result, Stalin immediately rejected the proposal in late April 1939 by Georgi Dimitrov, head of the Comintern, to give the CCP direct material aid, including weapons. Stalin reminded Dimitrov, “We have to bear in mind that we are as a state assisting the Chinese state. And we shall have to keep that up; otherwise we shall do harm to the struggle of the Chinese people.”\footnote{Dimitrov 2003, 105-6.} Stalin knew well that the CCP rather than the GMD had started attacking their countrymen, driving their country toward civil war.\footnote{Panyushkin 2004, 225.} He also knew that his suspension of weapons supply as well as Britain’s three-month closure of the Burma Road had cost China its stockpile of weapons and had damaged China’s capacity to wage war.\footnote{Panyushkin 2004, 217-18, 234.} As the Soviet Union and Germany were heading towards war following Vyacheslav Molotov’s visit to Berlin on November 10, 1940, Stalin thought that the Japanese would concentrate their resources and try to knock China out in 1941 so that they could focus on targeting the Soviet Union in a coordinated invasion with Hitler.\footnote{Chuikov 1980, 31-32.}

Stalin was therefore eager to increase China’s military capacity against the Japanese while deterring Chiang Kai-shek from retaliation against the CCP that might escalate to a full-scale civil war. Stalin explained this policy, as well
as the situation in China and the national interests of the Soviet Union in China, to Chuikov:

[The CCP leaders] think that they could become China’s leading force in the war and drive the Japanese out of their country after the Japanese defeat Chiang Kai-shek. They are terribly wrong. Chiang would do as Wang Jingwei did and seek an accord with the Japanese as long as he deems that he cannot have assistance from us as well as from the western powers and that his authority is in danger. He will then work with Wang against the CCP who could by no means survive . . . . Your mission in China, Comrade Chuikov, is not only to teach Chiang and his army to use our weapons but also to consolidate their confidence against the Japanese.106

Marshal Semyon Timoshenko, the People’s Commissar for Defense, also instructed Chuikov: “The CCP leaders are enthusiastic about warring against Chiang Kai-shek regardless of its severe impacts against the Chinese Revolution and Chinese people.”107

Chiang Kai-shek shared this assessment of Soviet-German relations and China’s contribution to the national security of the Soviet Union. He watched Molotov’s visit to Berlin closely and concluded that war between Germany and the Soviet Union was imminent. In a war against such a formidable enemy, the Soviet Union became dependent on China’s war of resistance to deter Japan from invading Siberia. Chiang therefore regarded the Soviets’ resumed delivery of weapons to the Nationalists as part of the preparations for the coming war against Germany. Chiang did consider the potential risk of losing these valuable weapons if he retaliated militarily against the CCP. He felt, however, that if the CCP were not punished it would take further military action. Retaliation was, from Chiang’s perspective, a matter of survival and could not be put aside in exchange for some foreign weapons.108 On December 9, 1940, while elements of the N4A and 8RA were attacking Caodian, Chiang ordered N4A troops south of the Yangzi to move north of the river by December 31 and then north of the Huai River a month later, a tactic he referred to as “a big decision” in his diary.109 Although Mao felt that Chiang would retaliate, he thought it would be a symbolic retaliation to save face. He did not take Chiang’s order seriously and

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106 Chuikov 1980, 34.
107 Chuikov 1980, 32.
108 CKSD, Weekly Reflection (Second Week of January 1941), Box 41, Folder 7.
109 CKSD, 9 December 1940, Box 40, Folder 28.
on December 25, 1940, reiterated his previous assessment that Chiang would not dare wipe out the N4A south of the Yangzi River.\textsuperscript{110}

The N4A Incident caught Mao off balance. Furious, he asked Chuikov (through Zhou Enlai, in Chongqing) what his country would do to punish the GMD.\textsuperscript{111} Mao wanted to revoke the agreement with the GMD and occupy all of Shaanxi province. Because it would be impossible to hold Shaanxi without controlling Sichuan, Mao envisioned striking into Sichuan as well.\textsuperscript{112} But Dimitrov, head of the Comintern, dissuaded him by reminding him of Chiang’s essential role in the war against Japan.\textsuperscript{113} The Soviet Union did ask Chiang about the N4A Incident on one occasion, but it still shipped all promised weapons into Free China by the end of January 1941.\textsuperscript{114} Without Moscow’s support, Mao had to swallow a bitter pill and rethink his grand strategy for securing national power during this phase of the Second Sino-Japanese War. Mao’s assessment of the situation and his prediction that Chiang would reach an accord with the Japanese proved mistaken. As Japan and the United States were heading towards war, China would emerge victorious at the end of the global war. A military campaign by the GMD or the Japanese to destroy the CCP was thus out of the question. Mao therefore revised his strategic vision from fighting for survival to positioning for the postwar period. He soon identified the strategic value of Shandong in controlling central China.\textsuperscript{115} Taking advantage of the nationwide wave of sympathy for the CCP following the N4A Incident, Mao launched a series of successful limited offensives against local pro-GMD strongmen in Shandong and laid the foundation for the transformation of the province into the springboard for the CCP’s national victory in 1949.\textsuperscript{116}

\section*{Conclusion}

The N4A Incident was the result of Mao’s preemptive campaign of offensives between December 1939 and December 1940. This campaign emerged because

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{110} Yang 2003, 106-7.
\item \textsuperscript{111} Yang 2003, 107.
\item \textsuperscript{112} Yang 2003, 108.
\item \textsuperscript{113} Yang 2003, 109.
\item \textsuperscript{114} CKSD, Weekly Reflection (First Week of February 1941), Box 41, Folder 8.
\item \textsuperscript{115} Mao Zedong, “Muqian Huazhong zhidao zhongxin ying zhaozhong yu san ge jiben zhanlie qu” [Our attention should be focused on three strategic zones in central China], 1 February 1941, MJWJ, vol. 2, 621-24.
\item \textsuperscript{116} Lai 2011, xv and 106-10.
\end{itemize}
of Mao’s pursuit of national power and his anticipation of a GMD-Japanese accord at the CCP’s expense. While confined to barren northern Shaanxi, Mao and his colleagues made the shrewd calculation to access the productive areas in the east by relentlessly exploiting the opportunity of the Japanese invasion. Mao’s offensive campaign during 1939-1940 was a kind of insurance for the worst-case scenario at a time when there was much uncertainty in the international and domestic situation. Although this preemptive offensive campaign ended with the N4A Incident, the CCP’s military and political positions improved significantly in China and abroad. Mao’s strategy of distraction that escalated into the N4A Incident was so successful, as Yung-fa Chen suggested during the 1970s, that it not only concealed his intention from Chiang Kai-shek and other contemporaries but also misled historians for decades.

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