

Going their separate ways: The British Empire, Japan, and Reordering Asia between the World Wars

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In March 1932 the British government accepted the recommendation of their principal military advisers, the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COS), that the policy by which defence spending had been regulated since August 1919 should now be set aside. This policy stipulated that the armed forces should assume the British Empire would not face a major war against a significant enemy for the next ten years. This so-called ‘Ten Year Rule’ was placed on a daily renewal basis in 1928. But the COS persuaded the government that this assumption was now dangerous, and a new approach to defending the British Empire was necessary.¹ The event that finally triggered this recommendation was the outbreak of serious fighting between elements of the Chinese National Revolutionary Army (NRA) and the armed forces of Imperial Japan in Shanghai in January 1932. This appeared to many Britons to be deliberate escalation by Japan of a military conflict provoked in September 1931 in Manchuria by elements of its own Kwantung Army (*Kanto-gun*). Thirty years earlier, in January 1902, these two empires concluded a military alliance. They fought together as Allies during the Great War, and sat together as victors at the conference table in Paris in 1919. But by 1932 the British now saw Imperial Japan as a threat to order in East Asia, and thus to their own strategic interests. And by 1936 Japanese planners identified the British Empire as a putative enemy against which strategic plans for war must now be made. The question this paper will address is the most basic one involved: what happened? Why did two allied empires go their separate ways?

The Anglo-Japanese Alliance was never problem free. The British were happy to see their ally defeat the Russian Empire in 1905 and neutralize that threat to British interests in Asia, but not thrilled by the pragmatic compromises Japan soon made with Russia to reorder Manchuria. Nor were the British happy to see Japan quickly intervene in autumn 1914 in what became the Great War, although they could hardly reject their willing ally’s offer to help scoop up the German presence in the Asia Pacific. Japanese behaviour towards China during the Great War provoked British concern, but the pressure of the war in Europe also prompted them to request, and be grateful for, Japanese naval assistance—and that compelled them to climb down somewhat from criticizing Japanese ambitions towards China.² Neither ally was pleased with the outcome of the 1919 peace conference as far as East Asia was concerned. The British remained worried about Japanese ambitions towards China and began to discuss, in strategic planning circles, the possibility that Japan would one day threaten British Empire security in

¹ N.H. Gibbs, *Grand Strategy, Volume 1: Rearmament Policy*, London, HMSO, 1976, chs. 2, 3.

² Phillips O’Brien, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance, 1902-1922*, London, Routledge Curzon, 2004; Ian Nish, *Alliance in Decline: A Study of Anglo-Japanese Relations, 1908-23*, London, Bloomsbury, 2012 (1972); Hiram Yoichi, ‘The Anglo-Japanese Alliance and the First World War,’ in I. Gow et al. (eds.), *The History of Anglo-Japanese Relations 1600-2000, Volume III: The Military Dimension*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

the 'Far East'; the Japanese resented British Empire rebuffs to their plea for a racial equality clause to be inserted into the Covenant of the League of Nations. Yet both partners saw some continued utility to their ongoing alliance and at first expected it would in some shape or form be renewed. But in fact, by 1919, that was already unlikely.

The British, not the Japanese, turned away from the alliance. The direct reason for this was the attitude of the United States of America (USA) and the implications this suggested for British security in Asia. But the underlying reason, which drove this American factor, was the biggest question of all: the future of China. In 1902 there did not appear to be any conflict between British and Japanese interests in China. Both signed the Boxer Protocol and neither expected Qing China to cease to be a space for externally driven globalization anytime soon. British economic and political interests focused on the Yangtze Valley and the Pearl River delta areas, while Japanese interests aimed towards the area north of the Great Wall. But the Xinhai Revolution in 1911, and the Great War, set everything adrift. In 1915 the Japanese tried to impose the infamous 21 Demands on a now weak post-imperial government in China. Both the British and the Americans regarded this as revealing Japanese ambitions to become the dominant power in China, something neither Western power was prepared to accept. The conditions that made the Anglo-Japanese Alliance a good idea in 1902 were gone by 1919.³ Many British Empire decision makers now feared Japanese ambitions in China and, even more, the possibility that they would provoke a conflict between Japan and the USA. This was the deepest problem: well before the Great War, most British decision makers agreed that the British could never accept any commitment that might entangle them in a conflict against the USA. For these two reasons, China and the American attitude, the British set the alliance aside at the Washington Conference in 1921-22 and persuaded a reluctant Japan to allow it to lapse, in favour of the Washington Agreements.

This new approach to Great Power relations in the Asia Pacific—spanning the area from the South China Sea to Siberia, and from China to the Central Pacific—did not at first seem doomed, by any means. At the time the Five Power Agreement to limit the size and strength of navies attracted most of the public attention of an excited world. The long and complicated series of negotiations by which the naval powers tried to expand this process, running eventually into 1936 before it collapsed, remained one major trajectory along which the British and Japanese Empires tried to reorder their relationships and protect their interests. The Four Power Agreement that most directly replaced the Anglo-Japanese Alliance was if anything a gain for Japan, at British expense. Japan received something concrete: delineation of a large area surrounding the home islands inside which no existing bases or fortifications could be improved, nor any new ones constructed. This created a tangible buffer zone around Japan, a clear naval advantage. In return the British received some American goodwill, but no promise to support the British in any conflict; the British set aside an alliance in order not to annoy a greater power. They would not have done this had the main issue around which the conference really revolved not emerged the way it did: the China question. Any future

³ Ibid.; David Steeds, 'Anglo-Japanese Relations 1902-23: A Marriage of Convenience,' in I. Nish, Kibata Y. (eds.), *The History of Anglo-Japanese Relations 1600-2000, Volume 1: The Political-Diplomatic Dimension, 1600-1930*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.

war between the main naval powers might well be fought in the Pacific, but would not be fought about the Pacific; it would be about China. The British were no longer comfortable with Japanese policies towards China; this ultimately sank the arguments made by those who hoped to renew the alliance with Japan. Change in China turned the alliance from being a useful insurance policy into a dangerous liability.⁴

The decision to allow the alliance to lapse did offend the Japanese. They rightly saw it as a vote of uncertainty, if not no confidence, in the ability of the British and Japanese to manage their future relationship without conflict. This plus the deeply felt humiliation of rejection was worrying, but the very shaky compromise reflected in the final agreement produced in Washington, the Nine Power Agreement regarding China, was the real cause for concern. The signatory powers, including now Republican China, promised to respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of China, prevent any further unilateral impositions on it by any power, and begin to negotiate the termination of the so-called treaty system by which the Great Powers had globalized China—starting with control over tariffs, and including extraterritorial privileges, territorial enclaves, and a host of other penetrations into China’s territory, state, and economy. Neither the British nor the Japanese really wanted to discuss the China question at the conference, and in the end the Japanese bowed only to heavy pressure from the Americans to include China on the agenda. For Tokyo there was real cause for concern. It is true that the Great Powers did not think they would have to surrender their dominance over China, which they had carved out since the 1840s, anytime soon. China was now mired in civil war that involved numerous factions, and had no central government that could effectively command the country. The Powers stipulated that such a government must emerge, and restore order, before negotiations could actually end the treaty system. But the Japanese rightly saw the writing on the wall. The Nine Power Agreement publicly committed the Powers to change in China and ruled out any further expansion inside China. This was a potentially fatal problem. Japan joined the external penetration into China during the era of ‘high imperialism,’ when the Great Powers all cast ambitious eyes on a Sinic order falling into disarray. From the beginning the Japanese insisted that geography and economics gave Japan both a special interest in China, that no other power could share, and therefore the right to reserve a special position in China, that must always be taken into account. China was important or potentially lucrative to other Great Powers, but existential to an Imperial Japan. That claim was sidestepped at most by the Western Powers in 1917; but now, in 1922, it seemed to be denied.⁵

⁴ The National Archives UK [hereafter TNA], FO412/116, Washington Conference on Limitation of Armaments: Conference Records, Vol. II, Pacific and Far Eastern Questions, November 1921-March 1922; R. Butler et al. (eds.), *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939*, First Series, Volume XIV, *Far Eastern Affairs April 1920-February 1922*, London, HMSO, 1966 [hereafter *DBFP*, Vol. XIV]. The British decision to build a new main naval base at Singapore did not contradict this policy. It was designed to be the platform from which the British Empire could project strategic power in the Asia Pacific if that became necessary. And that contingency rested, ultimately, on the China question. Brian P. Farrell, *The Defence and Fall of Singapore 1940-1942*, Stroud, Tempus, 2005.

⁵ TNA, FO412/116, Washington Conference on Limitation of Armaments: Conference Records, Vol. II, Pacific and Far Eastern Questions, November 1921-March 1922; *DBFP*, Vol. XIV; Erik Goldstein, John Maurer (eds.), *The Washington Conference, 1921-22: Naval Rivalry, East Asian Stability and the Road to Pearl Harbor*, New York, Routledge, 1994.

These developments framed what became the ‘parting of the ways.’⁶ For as long as the treaty system in China continued to operate the problem might be postponed. But if change in China brought these matters to a point of decision then something must give way. The British Empire view of their interests in China could not accommodate any assertion by Japan of any special position that made the situation in China more volatile than it already was, directly compromised established British interests there, or, above all, provoked a negative reaction from the USA. For a time this did not seem to be a pressing problem. The Calvin Coolidge administration in the USA showed little interest in the China situation. China’s internal turmoil continued, allowing the Powers to stall negotiations to terminate the treaty system. And successive Japanese governments appeared to the British to be pursuing a conciliatory policy towards China, seeking closer economic ties without trying to impose any further advantages. This looked to be part of a broader policy to try to work within the framework of the Washington System, a policy usually identified with Baron Shidehara Kijuro, Foreign Minister in several administrations from 1924 onwards.⁷ But then China began to change.

From 1924 the one force that threatened to pull China together, if it could pull itself together, the Guomindang or Nationalist Party of China, started to make real progress. With Soviet assistance, the Guomindang began to evolve from a loose coalition of squabbling factions, trying to coalesce around national aspirations, into a somewhat organized political movement--developing a national program, building an army and the political networks required to implement such a program. In the summer of 1926 the NRA launched the so-called Northern Expedition, moving north from its base in Guangdong province to use military force and political power to unify China under its leadership. The Northern Expedition was a volatile surge of energy into central China, sparking widespread confusion and much faction feuding.⁸ But by late autumn 1926 it reached the Yangtze Valley, overran Wuhan, and forced the Great Powers to confront the main question: whither China and the Washington System?

This Guomindang advance forced the Powers to reconsider their policies towards China and thus each other. If the advance produced an effective central government of China then they would have to either negotiate in good faith or expose their promise to do so as deception. Given the dramatic increase in national feeling in China, a nationalism driven by resentment of the foreign presence and demands for the end of the treaty system, there really would not be any choice. Soviet involvement also made the Powers concerned that this was a Bolshevik plot to plunge China into social revolution at the expense of all their interests. But the most high-profile foreign power in China, especially South and Central

⁶ The subtitle of a section of Chapter I in the landmark study by Iriye Akira, *After Imperialism: The Search for a New Order in the Far East 1921-1931*, New York, Atheneum, 1969 (1965).

⁷ Iriye, ch. I; Bamba Nobuya, *Japanese Diplomacy in a Dilemma: New Light on Japan’s China Policy, 1924-1929*, Vancouver, UBC Press, 1972, chs. 1, 4; Goto-Shibata Harumi, ‘Anglo-Japanese Cooperation in China in the 1920s,’ in Nish and Kibata (eds.), *The History of Anglo-Japanese Relations 1600-2000, Volume I*; William Roger Louis, *British Strategy in the Far East 1919-1939*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971, ch. IV; J.V. Fuller (ed.), *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1923-1926*, eight volumes, Washington, USGPO, 1939-41 [hereafter *FRUS*].

⁸ D.N. Jacobs, *Borodin: Stalin’s Man in China*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1981; Donald A. Jordan, *The Northern Expedition: China’s National Revolution of 1926-1928*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1975.

China, was the British Empire. It became the target of a sharp rise in anti-foreign feeling, one that expressed itself by an escalating series of threats, strikes, boycotts, riots and vandalism. This raised what, to the British, became the fundamental question: would the treaty powers stand together to resist a violent Chinese assault on the treaty system in China—or were they already too divided to do so?⁹

The Guomindang advance forced the British to confront that question, when it triggered a full-blown crisis in January 1927 that began in the riverport city of Hankow. The Guomindang first entered the city the previous September. As the NRA began to push the forces of what the British called the Northern Warlords out of Central China, the Guomindang seemed to veer sharply to the ‘left.’ Soviet support—which included sending high profile political and military advisers, military and other supplies, and brokering a united front by steering the young but expanding Communist Party of China into a ‘coalition for national revolution’ as a junior partner—produced a much more aggressive political campaign, dominated by inflammatory propaganda and organizing urban labour, that focused rising popular anger against the British in particular. On 5 January a large and angry human wave swarmed into the British Concession area. The Guomindang forces that had been trying to contain this wave now appeared, to the British, to be joining it, using it as a weapon. The small Royal Marine contingent sent in from warships to protect the area decided to evacuate their nationals and abandon it, rather than stand and fight. The British government endorsed this decision but also shifted into crisis mode.¹⁰ The threat now looked daunting, because the next target was the centre of gravity of British interests in China, indeed the lynchpin of the whole treaty system: Shanghai.

The fear that some combination of organized NRA forces, semi-organized warlord forces, and massive crowds aroused to fever pitch by nationalist propaganda might overwhelm the International Settlement and French Concession at Shanghai forced the British government to act. The actions they took to manage the crisis at Shanghai in the first half of 1927 produced what became the turning point in British-Japanese relations, within the larger drama of accelerated change in China. Three principal reasons turned this crisis into that hinge of fate. First, Shanghai was the one place in all China where British and Japanese interests seemed so entangled that the argument they must either stand together or fall divided seemed very strong. Second, the British made this crisis in Shanghai the test of both their policy and the intentions of the other Powers—and in their eyes, Japan ‘failed’ this test. Finally, Guomindang pressure compelled the Great Powers to take stock of where each could go from here regarding China—and based on what they saw in Shanghai, the British and Japanese moved in different directions.

Despite the fact it was not a Crown Colony or even a Concession, the International Settlement in Shanghai, transnational though it was, remained the flagship of the British

⁹ TNA, CAB24/174/26, Cabinet Memoranda, CP(327)25, 6 July, CAB24/176/17, CP(518)25, November 28 1925, CAB24/181/3, CP303(26), 6 July 1926; Robert Bickers, *Out of China: How the Chinese Ended the Era of Western Domination*, London, Allen Lane, 2017, ch. 2; Meyrick Hewlett, *Forty Years in China*, London, Macmillan, 1944, chs. XVIII-XX; Louis, chs. IV, V.

¹⁰ TNA, CAB23/54/1, Cabinet Minutes, 12 January 1927; FO371/12449, Correspondence, China, January 1927; Louis, ch. IV; H.R. Isaacs, *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*, Stanford, University Press, 1961 (1938), chs. 5-7; Jacob, chs. 14-15; Jordan, chs. 9-11.

presence in China. British nationals dominated the Shanghai Municipal Council and Shanghai Municipal Police; the majority of British investments, enterprises and financial interests in China were based in or operated from Shanghai; the Royal Navy China Station policed the Yangtze and its tributary system from its base at Shanghai; and the British community in Shanghai was as large as the British communities at all other treaty ports in China combined. Hong Kong was the cornerstone British colonial territory in the region, but the British presence in Shanghai was imperial, and fundamental to China policy. As for Japan, while Japanese interests and investments were much greater up north, in Manchuria and in Tientsin, the Japanese presence in Shanghai grew rapidly during and after the Great War. By 1926 significant investments in cotton mills, banking, shipping and other industries produced an expanding Japanese community and an important presence in the International Settlement.¹¹ The British concluded that Shanghai now mattered to Japan and the Japanese would act accordingly.

The British Foreign Office (FO) took this argument a step further. Shanghai was also a major French interest, with a separately run Concession, and the largest concentration of Americans and American financial and economic investment in China, as well as the main base for the extensive American-dominated missionary activity in the interior. Shanghai was the centre of the modern publishing industry in China, a hive of Chinese political activity, and the sixth most important port in the world. For all these reasons, the British assumed they would not have to stand alone to defend the International Settlement, and all it represented, from being overwhelmed by a sudden rush, as happened to the British Concession in Hankow. That assumption was not totally disappointed by what now took place. But the British did find themselves standing out front, with no other Power willing to stand next to them in the very front line. This caused them to react strongly when the crisis faded in Shanghai itself. However, one important reason they found themselves alone in front was a cardinal decision the British government made even before the fiasco in Hankow triggered a crisis.

This British government, a Conservative Cabinet led by Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, boasted a core of very experienced ministers who faced the situation squarely. They included Austen Chamberlain at the FO, Winston Churchill as Chancellor of the Exchequer, and former Prime Minister Arthur Balfour (who as Plenipotentiary signed the Washington Agreements on behalf of the British Empire). The government was committed to the Nine Power Agreement, but also intended to maintain a strong British presence in the Far East. And it was crystal clear as to the fundamental nature of the British global position: the British Empire was a satisfied power, which did not seek further territorial expansion or influence; its most vital interest was to stabilize the global political economic order it did so much to build, and on which its position in the world rested. Major war or significant revolution anywhere was a real threat to British Empire interests. The British presence in China was not fundamental to British global economic power but it was important, and China was the one place where something truly dangerous to British interests could erupt: a major war between Japan and the USA. The

¹¹ TNA, CAB24/181/8, Cabinet Memoranda, CP308(26), 30 July 1926; Isabella Jackson, *Shaping Modern Shanghai: Colonialism in China's Global City*, Cambridge, University Press, 2018; Bickers, *Out of China*.

British were not unhappy that turmoil in China delayed the Washington promise to negotiate, but were also well aware that this status quo could only hold while China remained weak and divided. The explosion of mainly anti-British feeling in China, driven by what appeared to be Soviet manipulation, provoked the FO to carry out a major review of British policy in China, when the Northern Expedition surged forward in summer 1926.¹²

That review produced a policy statement that the Foreign Secretary announced to the world in December. The British reaffirmed their commitment to the Washington promise to negotiate the end of the treaty system. While they repeated that this could only be accomplished by working with a stable and effective central government of China, they expressly promised to do what they could to help realize one, and to treat Chinese requests as sympathetically as possible. More provocatively, they invited the other Powers to join them in declaring that ‘they desire to go as far as possible towards meeting the legitimate aspirations of the Chinese nation.’ Chamberlain insisted this was a firm British commitment to helping bring about change in a reunified China. That seemed to be affirmed when the Baldwin government decided to cede the Concession in Hankow to the Guomindang, rather than demand its return or try to recover it by force. Change must come before the treaty system could be terminated, but the British would now do what they could to manage that change. This was indeed a turning point in national policy. It was prompted by a careful diagnosis: other Great Powers were dragging their feet so visibly that there was now a real threat the whole treaty system in China might be overwhelmed by the explosion of mass nationalism, focused by a new national army. China was changing, other Powers were not responding, and the result might be regional chaos—which could then produce a Great Power war.¹³ This policy guided the British through what became a sober and successful response to the crisis over Shanghai—but at some cost.

The decision the British government had to make in January 1927 was how to defend the British presence in Shanghai, and thus in all China, without provoking either open war with Chinese armies or a de facto war with the Chinese population. Led by Chamberlain and the FO, the government sought to balance military and diplomatic initiatives. Their most important decision was their first: Hankow would be ceded, but the British Empire would stand and fight for Shanghai, preferably as part of a coalition but if necessary by itself. However, it would fight not just to protect the International Settlement, but to compel the Guomindang and all other political forces in China to accept a British carrot and stick offer: the British would work to help bring about political change in China, but they would not be driven out of China physically by either mob violence or organized military force, or both combined. A strong but calibrated defence of Shanghai, coupled with continued diplomatic pressure, would drive home that policy.

The military strategy within this new policy emerged in response to the crisis itself. Before the fiasco at Hankow, British policy was to use force to prevent territorial enclaves

¹² TNA, CAB24/181/8, Cabinet Memoranda, CP308(26), 30 July, CAB24/182/5, CP380/26, 4 November 1926; FO371/11653, Correspondence, China: Special Tariff Conference, July 1926; Lionel Curtis, *The Capital Question of China*, London, Macmillan, 1932, chs. XX, XXV; Louis, ch. V.

¹³ TNA, CAB24/182/28, Cabinet Memoranda, CP403(26), 30 November 1926; Curtis, ch. XXI; Louis, ch. V.

from being overrun by disorganized mobs or roving bands of semi-disciplined ‘warlord’ forces, and to maintain order in these enclaves—but not to resist a determined effort by an organized Chinese military force to enter, not even at Shanghai, in order not to be dragged into openly siding with one or another party in the Chinese civil wars. The British government was also prepared to contribute to any international force that might be organized to defend treaty areas, especially Shanghai, and worked actively to try to organize such a force. But after the shock at Hankow, which triggered a major political uproar in the United Kingdom, the senior officer on the spot, Vice-Admiral Reginald Tyrwhitt, Commander-in-Chief China Station, sent a telegram on 12 January warning the government that to prevent such an outcome in Shanghai they should immediately send at least a full division of ground forces to the city. This was a much larger force than the international formation the British were already trying to organize. But British diplomats on the spot supported Tyrwhitt’s appeal, arguing that the Guomindang agenda, working in tandem with the Comintern, was now to stampede the British out of China. This plus the backlash over Hankow persuaded the Cabinet to change strategy.¹⁴

On 17 January the British government authorized the immediate dispatch of significant military forces to Shanghai, to protect British lives and property and deny entry into the International Settlement to ‘any Chinese force, organized or disorganized’—preferably in coalition with other Powers, but if necessary alone. This Shanghai Defence Force (SDF) ended up being a full infantry division with some of its artillery, two cruiser squadrons and supporting vessels to reinforce the China Station, and a small air element to provide reconnaissance and ground support capability. Drawing on forces from the United Kingdom (UK), the Mediterranean and India, these British reinforcements moved out well before NRA elements neared Shanghai, or any agreements were reached with the Guomindang or other Powers, for a simple reason: they were so far away. If they did not move quickly, they could not arrive in Shanghai in time to deter or if necessary defeat anyone.¹⁵ But while this motive obviously could not be denied, this decision to send out such strong forces, with a more robust mission, did have important consequences, intended and unwanted.

The British COS and British commanders on the spot in China both hoped they could reach agreements with at least the Americans and the Japanese to deploy a strong unified international military force, to prevent Shanghai from being overrun. As the SDF moved towards China, negotiations between commanders, attaches and diplomats on the spot in China made the British optimistic, for a time, that large scale joint action could take place. American and British naval forces worked together to evacuate Hankow, and in March to evacuate Nanking, when a similar situation erupted on a larger scale as NRA forces overran the city. In Nanking shots were fired, on the ground and from warships evacuating the foreign communities. American diplomats and naval officers in China advised their government to

¹⁴ TNA, CAB23/54/1, Cabinet Minutes, 12 January, CAB23/54/2, 17 January 1927; CAB24/184/4, Cabinet Memoranda, CP4(27) Revise, 15 January 1927; FO371/12449, Correspondence, China, January 1927; C.W. Gwynn, *Imperial Policing*, London, Macmillan, 1939, ch. VIII; Louis, ch. IV.

¹⁵ TNA, CAB23/54/2, Cabinet Minutes, 17 January, CAB23/54/11, 17 February 1927; CAB24/184/41, Cabinet Memoranda, CP41(27), 3 February 1927; FO371/12449-12451, Correspondence, China, January-February 1927; Gwynn, ch. VIII.

send an infantry division to support an international effort to protect the treaty ports. But while American warships and Marines were sent to Shanghai, and the Marines did deploy to help defend the International Settlement, they were strictly restricted to providing internal security only. The Coolidge government saw the British deployment as a premature escalation and refused to commit to any international military response, pushing instead for accelerated negotiations to implement the Washington promises.¹⁶ But the really consequential response came from Tokyo.

Conversations with Japanese counterparts in Shanghai, Tientsin, Beijing and even Tokyo led the FO and the COS to believe, into February, that there was a real chance the Japanese would send significant reinforcements to defend Shanghai and other treaty ports. Given the Japanese advantages of being much closer to the scene, with their main bases and principal forces available, the COS spoke optimistically about being able to limit their commitment to a British brigade in Shanghai, which they would place under Japanese command in a large international military force dominated by the Japanese. They also hoped the Japanese would assume the burden of defending Tientsin and the lines of communication to the Legations in Beijing, should they be threatened.¹⁷ But when the British asked for staff talks to discuss these proposals, they soon realized that neither the Japanese government nor armed forces were considering doing any such thing. In fact the Japanese government told the British ambassador that the British were overreacting to the situation in China and their military response might well make matters worse. This put something of a damper on British hopes, and for a time London debated whether or not to send the troops into Shanghai or keep them in Hong Kong, expressly because they did not want to provoke any breach with the Japanese. But the British opted to deploy in Shanghai after all—pointing out to Tokyo that they did not enjoy the luxury of being close by, thus had to do this as a matter of prudence, and assuring the Japanese that the SDF would restrict itself to a purely defensive mission.¹⁸

The SDF duly deployed, from 14 February onwards. It remained a self-contained force, occupying separate positions from a much smaller international force that manned a line of checkpoints along stretches of the boundary line of the Settlement itself. The Shanghai Volunteer Force led that formation, augmented by naval landing parties and marines provided by garrison warships stationed at Shanghai. Despite this arms-length posture, the two ad hoc formations cooperated reasonably well on the ground when the need arose. The SDF fought several light skirmishes in March, with shots fired and casualties, but no major confrontation

¹⁶ TNA, CAB53/13/4, COS Memoranda, COS69(27), 29 March 1927; FO371/12449-12452, Correspondence, China, January-March 1927; *FRUS*, 1927, Volume II, China; Bickers, ch. 2.

¹⁷ TNA, CAB23/54/1, Cabinet Minutes, 12 January, CAB23/54/2, 17 January 1927; FO371/12449, Correspondence, China, January 1927; Gwynn, ch. VIII.

¹⁸ TNA, CAB23/54/4, Cabinet Minutes, 27 January, CAB23/54/7, 4 February, CAB23/54/20, 30 March, CAB23/54/22, 1 April 1927; CAB53/13/4, COS Memoranda, COS72(27), 4 April 1927; FO371/12449-12452, Correspondence, China, January-March 1927.

took place.¹⁹ Such a confrontation seemed imminent when Communist-led labour and popular elements took over the Chinese areas of the city in late March, as the NRA moved into Nanking and approached Shanghai. But an x factor now changed the situation decisively. Serious frictions inside the Guomindang exploded into a decisive rupture. On 6 April, forces commanded by Manchurian warlord Chang Tso-lin raided the Soviet Embassy in Beijing and arrested dozens of Chinese Communists and Soviet operatives, also seizing weapons and documents that incriminated Comintern operations in China. Emboldened, the more conservative Guomindang factions, led by Chiang Kai-shek, turned violently against both their Chinese Communist ‘allies’ and the Soviet advisers.

From 12 April, NRA units, assisted by gangland elements, brutally purged Communist forces in Shanghai and other central Chinese cities, chased the Soviet advisers out of the country, and, over the following months, sundered the alliance with the Communists. The crisis started to wane, as the British slowly began to see Chiang Kai-shek not as a radical threat to their own interests but as the kind of nationalist leader with whom they might be able to work.²⁰

In that same month of peak strain in Shanghai, however, events moved decisively in Tokyo. On 20 April the Wakatsuki government was forced to resign, giving way to a new administration led by Tanaka Giichi. The government was shattered by the Showa financial crisis, the onset of which, from January onwards, seriously compromised Japanese efforts to formulate any policy towards the crisis in China. Tanaka now changed Japanese policy towards China, shifting from trying to avoid confrontations with Chinese nationalism to assertively confronting perceived threats to Japanese enclaves and interests. Steadily, perceptibly, the focal point of friction between the ongoing Northern Expedition and the foreign powers shifted from the British to the Japanese. Guomindang advances into northern China produced in 1928 a serious Japanese military response to what appeared to be a threat to the foreign presence in the region. This time Tokyo called for treaty power solidarity in the face of Chinese nationalist pressure.²¹ And this time the British decided not to step forward.

Despite some accurate evaluations from their diplomats in Tokyo, the British government did not grasp that confusion at home was the principal reason the Japanese responded so cautiously to the threat to Shanghai in spring 1927. There were, to be sure, elements of a desire to let the British bear the brunt of Chinese anger. But the real problem was not that there was a Japanese policy to deflect that anger towards the British and exploit the situation, but that

¹⁹ TNA, CAB23/54/11, Cabinet Minutes, 17 February 1927; FO371/12449-12452, Correspondence, China, January-March 1927; Gwynn, ch. VIII; J.R. Colville, *Man of Valour*, London, Collins, 1972, 60-63; Brian Bond, *British Military Policy between the Two World Wars*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980, 88-90; The Royal Institute of International Affairs, ‘The Shanghai Crisis,’ in *International Affairs*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 1932; ‘Shanghai 1927: 2nd Battalion Gloucestershire Regiment,’ <http://www.redcoat.info/shanghai1927.htm>.

²⁰ TNA, CAB23/54/27, Cabinet Minutes, 13 April 1927; FO371/12453-54, Correspondence, China, April 1927; Keith Stevens, ‘Duncan Force: The Shanghai Defence Force in 1927 & the Career of Captain Ronald Spear,’ in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch*, Vol. 48, 2008; Jay Taylor, *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the Struggle for Modern China*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2009, ch. 2; Bickers, ch. 2; Jacobs, chs. 15-17; Isaac, chs. 11-13; Louis, ch. IV.

²¹ Iriye, chs. IV-VII; Bamba, chs. 5-7; Louis, ch. V; Goto-Shibata, ‘Anglo-Japanese Cooperation in China in the 1920s.’

there was not really a settled Japanese policy at all. Japanese forces at Hankow, Shanghai and elsewhere were ordered to stand firm if attacked, but what the British needed, and expected, was the kind of dramatic rallying to defend a shared international interest that the Powers carried out in Beijing in 1900. Those days were long gone. The Japanese particularly resented the British declaration of policy in December 1926 that put them on the spot regarding the Washington promises; the French and Americans, somewhat less intensely, shared that feeling. All saw this as the British stepping out of ranks before outstanding problems were resolved by all parties together. From Tokyo's point of view it was this British promise that triggered more aggressive Chinese nationalism. That being the case, the deteriorating political situation in Japan persuaded decision makers in Tokyo that the wisest response was to sit tight and wait to see what happened in Shanghai. Where the British saw calculation, there was in fact indecision produced by caution. This Japanese failure to step up at Shanghai prompted London to reconsider in turn.²²

As the Guomindang advanced into what Japan considered to be its sphere of influence, the Tanaka government sent reinforcements into Shandong province to deter any move against Japanese interests there. Despite efforts to prevent one, the predictable clash occurred in May 1928 in the city of Tsinan. But this time, not only did the British decline to help bolster international defences in northern China, they also now identified the Japanese as an emerging threat to their general interests in China. More than half the reinforcements sent to Shanghai were withdrawn before the end of 1927. But in the annual review of developments affecting the defence of the British Empire in 1928, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff urged that the remaining ground forces be retained in China to support the Royal Navy, which was principally responsible for protecting British interests there. He argued that the threat was now changing, from the prospect of Chinese onslaughts against British enclaves to the possibility of Japanese pressure on British interests—and that ground forces were needed to provide something of a deterrent, to make Tokyo pause. This change of focus was certainly dramatic. And it was influenced by the British decision that same year to recognize the Guomindang under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek as the national government of China, and try to work with it along the policy line laid down in December 1926.²³ But it was also driven in no small measure by British conclusions that the Japanese decision not to stand in solidarity in 1927 was calculated to exploit British difficulties, and that Japanese policy towards China was now aggressive and fraught.

What happened at Shanghai in 1927 was important. The underlying causes of the drift from alliance to enmity between the British and Japanese Empires remained fundamental changes in their approaches to China, and British concern for the impact of all this on American policy. And there is no doubt whatsoever that the principal driver of change, the agent that forced this disconnection out into the open, was the Guomindang. The increasing pressure generated by ever more focused Chinese nationalism, especially when it appeared to be aligned with Soviet

²² TNA, CAB23/54/28, Cabinet Minutes, 27 April 1927; FO371/12453-54, Correspondence, China, April 1927; Bamba, chs. 5-7.

²³ TNA, CAB53/14/10, COS Memoranda, COS140(28), 23 July 1928; CAB23/58/11, Cabinet Minutes, 24 July 1928; Iriye, ch. VI; Bamba, ch. 7; Gwynn, ch. VIII; Bond, 90-91.

troublemaking, compelled the treaty Powers to reconsider their approaches to China. But how and when things happen does matter. And there had been room for some co-operation in trying to navigate these turbulent waters of change.

The British assumed in early 1927 that the Japanese would share their concern for the security of Shanghai—especially given Soviet involvement—and hoped that Tokyo, following its generally moderate policy in China at the time, would agree that trying to move towards the Washington promises was the most prudent policy. The change in government in Tokyo did not at first seem to rule out any cooperation. When the British Ambassador assured Tanaka in early May that the UK still hoped to cooperate with Japan, Tanaka replied that ‘although our Alliance no longer existed the spirit of it did, and he hoped to keep it alive with frank conversations;’ Chamberlain immediately replied that he felt the same way. And at first the British were even willing to place their forces under Japanese command, for a very clear reason. When the British government and COS decided to stiffen their policy and defend Shanghai come what may, they agreed that this was as far as they could go. Without determined multinational commitment, led by the Japanese, the treaty system itself could no longer be maintained against concentrated Chinese pressure. The British Empire could not take the lead in any such policy, let alone take it on by itself. This was not 1859, nor 1900. Any policy that required a major and sustained military commitment in China was now beyond British power, unless that power was a contribution to a larger force led by Japan. So when the Japanese declined to consider even the first step in any such policy, the British, directly triggered by this event, began to reconsider.²⁴

This was in the end a dialogue of the deaf. To Tokyo the Washington promises were contingent on recognizing a special position for Japan in China. The other signatory powers recognized no such caveat. To London the British decision in December 1926 was a sensible and pragmatic adjustment to change that could no longer be prevented, a good faith response to dangerously escalating nationalism. The other foreign signatory powers, especially Japan, saw it as an effort to make them look like the villains, and get the British out of the crosshairs of Chinese national anger. The British call for a military commitment to defend Shanghai caught Tokyo unable to respond, caught up in its own crisis at home. But that Japanese failure to respond struck the British as a deliberate decision to leave them standing alone in front of Chinese anger. This was not uncomplicated. The FO remained exasperated at the stubborn refusal by the Guomindang to see things as London saw them: that it was in everyone’s interest for a new central government of China to ‘be on terms’ with Japan.²⁵ But the subsequent turn to a more confrontational Japanese policy in China persuaded London that Japan was now the threat to its policy to manage change there. British suspicion in 1928 became scepticism in 1930, concern in 1931, and alarm in 1932. The ‘why’ was China. But the ‘how’ and the

²⁴ TNA, CAB24/184/4, Cabinet Memoranda, CP4(27) Revise, 15 January, CAB24/185/22, CP73(27), 28 February, CAB23/54/30, Cabinet Minutes, 4 May, CAB23/55/1, 11 May, CAB23/55/18, 4 August 1927. While Chamberlain saw no harm in trying to entice Tanaka to cooperate, he was not however very optimistic he could. The FO followed up by sending the Japanese a list of questions about specific scenarios in which there could be practical cooperation, but this produced no useful results.

²⁵ TNA, FO371/13889, Correspondence, China, No. 21 Confidential, Lampson to Chamberlain, 4 January 1929.

'when' began when the first challenge came, at Shanghai in 1927, and the two powers failed to connect. It is true that British hopes to coexist with Imperial Japan without war persisted into at least 1939, and perhaps beyond. But what began in Shanghai in 1927 was the parting of the ways, making that less and less likely. The bottom line was this. British and American interests were aligned well enough that the relationship could survive disagreements over policy towards China without dire consequences. After the Great War, this was no longer the case for British relations with Japan.

