

The 18 March Incident of 1926 Revisited: Looking at the Wider Context

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INTRODUCTION

In early March 1926, North China was engulfed by the war between Feng Yuxiang's National Army (*Guominjun*, or known by the contemporaries as the Kuominchun, KMC thereafter) and the allied army of Wu Peifu and Zhang Zuolin. On 3 March, a small fleet consisted of the largest troopship of the Chinese Navy *Hua Jia*, set sail from Qingdao to Dagu, carrying over 5,000 soldiers of the Zhili-Shandong Army for a daring mission. They were to land behind the National Army's line, disrupt the KMC's line of communication, divert troops from the front, and more importantly (and unknown until now) to seize the port to prevent shipment of arms from Russia to the KMC. In a few days, the troops were able to land unhindered, but they were soon surrounded after blowing up a railway bridge. By 10 March, this force was repulsed.

The impact of this raid, however, was enormous. To prevent their enemies from landing more troops, the KMC laid mines off Dagu and deployed artillery pieces to guard the entrance of the waterway to Tianjin. The Powers protested, as they saw it as a violation of the 1901 Protocol, which forbid the Chinese from disrupting Beijing's traffic to the sea. On 12 March, a Japanese destroyer exchanged fire with the KMC ashore. After that, an ultimatum was sent to the Beijing Government, demanding the immediately removal of mines and withdrawal of the KMC from Dagu. The Provisional Government complied, but its acceptance of the powers' demand sparked off a massive rally in Beijing on 18 March.¹ The crowd, led by Li Dazhao and Xu Qian (George Xu), demanded rejection of the powers' ultimatum and expulsion of the diplomatic corps. After the rally, a smaller group marched to the office of the Provisional Government, and after some confusion the guards opened fire on the group, killing forty-seven and injured another hundred. Among the dead were several female students, including Liu Hezhen, to whom Lu Xun wrote his famous "In Memory of Miss Liu Hezhen".

¹ Currently, there are only a few works and published sources concerning the actual events, such as Beijing difang dangshi yanjiuhui, *Sanyiba canan cimo*, (Beijing, 2000) and Jiang Changren (ed.), *Sanyiba canan ziliao huibian*, (Beijing, 1985). For a recent revisit of the details during the event, see Xiao Jian, "Chongkan "sanyiba"," published in the *Minjian lishi* of the China Research Service Centre of the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

The place of the 18 March Incident in modern Chinese history was secured by Lu Xun's writing in memory of Liu Hezhen. Since then, the "18 March Massacre" has been remembered as part of the nationalistic outburst against the imperialism and warlordism, and an event between the May Thirtieth Movement and the "national revolution" between 1926 and 1928 (this revolution was seen by the communist historiography as a failure, only to be revisited recently by the new generation of Chinese historians). It was also seen as one of the first movements led by the communists, as it was led by Li Dazhao and other early Chinese communists in Beijing. The event was also long seen as a proof of the oppressive nature of the *beiyang* warlords and the Beijing Government, as well as their connection with the imperialist powers. Such impressions were reinforced by subsequent historiography, which were much influenced by the KMT (Guomindang, or Kuomintang, KMT) and the Chinese communists. With new sources, the details of the events and the role of the major participants such as Li Dazhao and Xu Qian were revisited. However, more questions surfaced as our understanding of the event improved.

Studies Chinese politics between the end of the Second Zhili-Fengtian War (November 1924) and the beginning of the Northern Expedition (Jul 1926) usually focus on the development of the KMT in Canton and the activities of the Chinese communist party. Instead, this article tries to shed new lights on the 18 March Incident as well as the period by looking at the interplay between strategic design of different parties and the geopolitical and strategic situations in Northeast Asia between late 1924 and early 1926. It suggests that the incident was the result of the Soviet Union's geopolitical and strategic failure in Northeast Asia. It also attempts to put a "Chinese" event in geopolitical and international contexts. However, this paper does not attempt to downplay the shooting of students or to judge the individuals' action during the incident, nor is this merely an attempt to "rehabilitate" figures such as Duan Qirui, Zhang Zuolin, or the Beijing Government. Rather, it tries to show the opportunities presented by new sources and new perspectives in challenging the Revolutionary narrative by looking at the events from regional and international perspectives.

1 SOVIET-KMT'S REVOLUTIONARY STRATEGY, 1925-6

Feng Yuxiang and the Soviets on Offensive, Jan-Jun 1925

In 1924, the Zhili Clique, which had controlled the central government in Beijing since 1922, was about to launch its final push to unify the country. Stood in the Zhili Clique's way was the Manchurian warlord Zhang Zuolin, Duan Qirui, the leader of the Anfu Clique, and Sun Yatsen in Canton. In August, the war between the Zhili-military governor of Jiangsu and the Anfu military governor of Zhejiang led to the outbreak of a large-scale civil war in North and Central China. Forestalling a Zhili invasion of Manchuria, the Fengtian forces under Zhang Zuolin moved into Rehe and attacked Shanhaiguan. After weeks of bloody fighting that led to heavy casualties on both sides, the bulk of the Zhili army was trapped in Shanhaiguan in late October.

Feng Yuxiang, a Zhili general who had secretly cooperated with Zhang Zuolin and Duan Qirui, returned to Beijing and staged a coup d'état on 23 October.²

When Feng Yuxiang's troops entered Beijing, he first installed a government, which was ignored by all parties and the powers. Desperately needed an ally, Feng cooperated somewhat reluctantly with the KMT, and invited Sun Yatsen to Beijing.³ The Japanese and the Russians were anxious to influence the new government. The former had provided the money to bribe Feng, and now hoped to see the establishment of a government led by Duan Qirui and supported by Feng's army to counter Zhang Zuolin's growing influence.⁴ Meanwhile, through Li Dazhao, Feng met Lev Karakhan, the Soviet Ambassador to China.⁵ By then, the KMC had no source of armament because it was evicted out of Tianjin by the Fengtian troops and its advance towards Hubei was blocked by Shao Yaonan, the ex-Zhili military governor. To obtain arms, Hu Jingyi, a leader of the KMC, also approached the Soviets through Li Dazhao. In December, the Soviets promised Feng to provide arms and financial assistance in his attempt to drive Zhang Zuolin out of China, but Zhang soon escaped from the capital.⁶

Geopolitical consideration was one of the most important considerations in Moscow's alliance with Feng. In April, the newly formed China Committee of the Politburo, formed to organize Soviet aid to the KMT and KMC, demanded Feng to recognize the Soviet Union's position in Mongolia and to allow the establishment of concessions within the area under KMC control.⁷ It was difficult to know the exact demands and to what extent had Feng agreed to them, but arms were sent from Siberia to Kalgan through the Chita-Urga-Kalgan caravan route since April. Soviet instructors trained Feng's troops, and KMT political activities and propaganda were allowed within the KMC.⁸

² The Second-Zhili Fengtian War has been comprehensively studied by Arthur Waldron. See Arthur Waldron, *From War to Nationalism: China's Turning Point, 1924-5*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Also see Kwong Chi Man, "Character and Circumstances: Wu Peifu and the Second Zhili-Fengtian War of 1924," unpublished M. Phil Dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2007.

³ "Sir R. Macleay to Mr. Austen Chamberlain," 29/11/1924, in Robert L. Jarman, *China Political Reports (CPR), 1911-1960*, Vol.5, (Slough, 2001), 102; Liu Manrong, "Sun Zhongshan "Zhongyang geming" jihua yu Feng Yuxiang Beijing zhengbian," in *Zhonghua minguo shi yanjiu sanshinian*, (Beijing, 2008), 1403.

⁴ James Sheridan, *Chinese Warlord: the Career of Feng Yi-hsiang*, (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1966), 141.

⁵ Yang Yuqing, "Guominjun yu e-gong (Bolsheviks) zhongyang zhengzhiju zhongguo weiyuanhui," in *Jindaishi Yanjiu*, 2000, No. 3, 118.

⁶ Sai Tianshin sōryōji Yoshida, "Kimitsu yū hō dainigou," 8/1/1925, GK, JACAR, B03050057900, slide 20.

⁷ "E-gong (bu) zhongyang zhengzhiju zhongguo weiyuanhui huiyi diyihao jilu," 17/4/1925, in Zhonggong zhongyang dangshi yanjiushi diyi yanjiubu, *Liangong (Bu) gongchan guoji yu Zhongguo guomin geming yundong, 1926-1927*, (Beijing, 1998), 603; "Yoshizawa kōji den," 11/5/1925, Gaimushou kiroku (GK), Japan Centre for Asian Historical Records (JACAR), B03050057900, slide 138.

⁸ Yang Yuqing, 129; "Sir R. Macleay to Mr. Austen Chamberlain," 28/10/1925, in Kenneth Bourne and Cameron Watt (eds.), *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print (FOCP)*, Part II, Series E, Vol. 30, 64; "Sir R. Macleay to Mr. Austen Chamberlain," 31/10/1925, FOCP, Vol. 30, 67-9; "Sir R. Macleay to Mr. Austen Chamberlain," 24/11/1925, FOCP, Vol. 30, 99-100; Sanbō honbu, "Feng-Ro kankei," 29/6/1925, GK, JACAR, B02030818800, slide 575.

The Soviet moves in China were also part of their grand strategic arrangement against its main perceived enemy, the British Empire. The establishment of friendly regimes in North and South China would establish a pro-Moscow regime that controlled the area from the Northwest to the Eastern and Southern seaboard of China. If this succeeded, the Soviets' eastern flank on Eurasia would be secured. A successful "national revolution" in China might also spread the revolution to the Asian colonies, particularly India, causing much trouble for the British, seen by the Soviets as their greatest enemy.⁹

After securing an alliance, Feng Yuxiang and the Soviets became more active. Contrary to the Sino-Russian agreement in 1924, the Soviets intensified their activities in China and Manchuria. The Soviet embassies in Beijing and Harbin became the hub of communist infiltration to China, distributing agents and money from Harbin and Kalgan to the rest of the country. Karakhan himself participated in the agitations by giving inflammatory speeches in Beijing.¹⁰ The Soviets also acted high-handedly in the Chinese Eastern Railway (thereafter as CER). In April, M. Ivanov, the new Soviet director-general of the CER Bureau, ordered to dismiss all non-Soviet Russian staffs of the railway. As the Chinese authority refused to acknowledge Ivanov's order, Karakhan protested to both Beijing and Mukden.

The Soviets also seek rapprochement with the Japanese, who had adopted a more conciliatory attitude towards the Russians since 1924. In January 1925, the Soviets signed a treaty with the Japanese recognizing the latter's special interest in South Manchuria in return for Japan's recognition of the Soviet Union's position in the CER. A month later, the Soviets even recognized the Twenty-One Demand in another agreement. Once again since 1907, Manchuria was divided into two spheres of influence between the Russians and the Japanese.¹¹

With Soviet support, the year of 1925 witnessed the rapid expansion of Feng Yuxiang's KMC. In early 1925, troops under Feng Yuxiang, Sun Yue (Commander of the KMC Third Army), and Hu Jingyi (Commander of the KMC Second Army, his post was succeeded by Yue Weijin after his death in May 1925) had occupied in, Beijing, Kalgan, part of Zhili, Henan, and Shaanxi. In less than a year, the KMC extended its control over Chahar, Inner Mongolia, Shaanxi, Gansu, and Henan. The number of the KMC armies increased to around 300,000 in Henan alone before the war started in October 1925.¹²

The Fengtian Clique's Strategic Dilemma

As the result of his victory, Zhang Zuolin faced a particularly difficult strategic situation in 1925. The victory created a formidable opponent in the form of the National Army, in Northwest China, intensified Fengtian-Soviet conflicts, and alienated the Japanese. Zhang

⁹ Erickson, John, *The Soviet High Command: a Military-Political History, 1918-1941*, (London, 2001), 238.

¹⁰ "Mr. Palairet to Mr. Austen Chamberlain," 22/5/1925, F 2794/144/10, FOCP, Vol. 29, 167-8.

¹¹ Bruce Ellemen, "The Soviet Union's Secret Diplomacy Concerning the CER, 1924-1925," in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 2, (May, 1994), 478-9.

¹² Wen Gongzhi, 106-7; 184; Ding Wenjiang, *Minguo junshi jinji*, (Shanghai, 1926), 59-67.

could not even secure a dominant voice in the government he had helped to create. To regain strategic initiative, the Fengtian Clique expanded into North China, but everyone saw this as an aggressive move.

By early 1925, Zhang Zuolin was convinced that he was being encircled by a KMC-Soviet alliance and that Karakhan was the man behind it. Zhang's relation with the Soviets also worsened because of the railway question. Zhang offered to buy the CER from the Soviets using the ruble banknotes issued by Tsarist government, but the Russians rejected. As Zhang was determined to take the railway, goodwill between Zhang and the Soviets quickly dissipated. The Soviets also refused to sell arms to Zhang as promised before the Second Zhili-Fengtian War because they would not arm Zhang to fight against their ally Feng Yuxiang.

In retaliation, and as a gesture of goodwill to the Japanese, despite Soviet protest Zhang Zuolin consented to the extension of the Taonan railway to Qiqihar and the Jilin line to the eastern end of the CER in spring 1925.¹³ However, Zhang could find little support from the Japanese. In January, the Japanese Consul-General in Mukden Uchiyama Kiyoshi expressed his worry about Zhang's growing influence in China.¹⁴ The British Ambassador to Tokyo Sir Charles Eliot reported that the Japanese "did not want to see him [Zhang] sweep the field and establishing himself as the master of Peking, where he would have been out of their control." Zhang also tried to enlist British support; Consul-General Frederick Wilkinson of Mukden suggested that Zhang "never abandoned the hope of allying with Britain."¹⁵

Zhang Zuolin tried to strengthen his position in Northeast Asia by controlling the Beijing Government's policy towards Japan and Russia. When the Provisional Government renewed the Sino-Russian negotiations that promised to be held after the conclusion of the 1924 Sino-Soviet Agreement, Zhang opposed the appointment of the pro-KMT diplomat Wang Zhengting (C. T. Wang) as the chief negotiator, and demanded that he had the final say on the matters concerning Manchuria.¹⁶

To check the expansion of the KMC and break the perceived isolation, Zhang Zuolin even considered a preventive strike against Feng, but the idea was soon dropped, fearing further alienating the already hostile people. Instead, Zhang consolidated and expanded the Fengtian Clique's control over the provinces in China. In March, facing a possible KMC invasion of Anhui, Zhang proposed to send Fengtian troops there to support the civilian governor appointed by the Provisional Government. After the KMC's invasion of Henan, the Fengtian military governor of Zhili ousted the KMC Third Army from Zhili province, cutting the connection between the KMC First Army in Beijing and the rest of the KMC armies in Henan. Zhang

¹³ "Consul-General Wilkinson to Mr. Palairet," 4/9/1925, FOCP, Vol. 29, 156-7.

¹⁴ Sai Hōten sōryōji Uchiyama, "Shina jikuoku no shōrai to Tōsanshō no tachiba nikansuru ken," 19/1/1925, GK, JACAR, B03050056600, slide 72.

¹⁵ "Sir C. Elliot to Mr. Austen Chamberlain," 16/1/1925, FOCP, Vol. 29, 6.

¹⁶ "Consul-General Wilkinson to Mr. Palairet," 4/9/1925, FOCP, Vol. 29, 157.

himself even moved to Tianjin in May in the hope of checking Feng's moves. Zhang also pressured the Provisional Government to appoint his subordinate Zhang Zongchang as the military governor of Shandong in the same month.

However, these inherently defensive moves, together with his careless remark about the need to use force to unify China in February, had irreversibly shaped Zhang's image as the aggressor.¹⁷ With the help of KMT propaganda, Zhang was portrayed as a warmonger who wanted to conquer China throughout the year.

Meanwhile, although the Provision Government rested its foundation on the precarious foundation on the alliance of expedient between Feng and Zhang, it had achieved some success, including the hosting of the Reconstruction Conference (*xianhou huiyi*), the preparation of the National Conference (*guomin dahui*) and the settlement of the Gold Franc Case with the French. Now most of these events went down in history as vain attempts by Duan to restore the central government. The last event allowed the Provisional Government to request the powers to attend the Tariff Conference in late 1925 as stipulated in the Washington Treaty. A possible outcome of this Conference would be the restoration of tariff autonomy of the central government, thus providing it a sizeable stable income. As Karakhan noted in Moscow, it was in the Soviet Union's interest to prevent the success of this conference (see below).

The May-Thirtieth Movement in the context of the struggle in the North, Jun-Aug 1925

The outbreak of anti-British movement after the May-Thirtieth Incident was by no means sudden and unexpected. The nationalistic fervour after the shooting in Shanghai on 30 May was certainly the result of the shooting itself and growing national awareness since the May Fourth, but it was also the result of continuous Soviet and KMT agitation from early 1925. When Sun Yatsen was travelling to Beijing to meet Duan Qirui, he blamed the "imperialist powers" for China's problems. With Feng Yuxiang controlling Beijing and a large part of North China, Soviet agitation against the British intensified. Only a week before the shooting, the British Minister to China Ronald Macleay noted in a report about the danger of the agitation and growing xenophobia.¹⁸

Zhang Zuolin and Feng Yuxiang's attitude towards the shooting on 30 May was very different. Zhang was disturbed by the spread of radicalism in China, while Feng tried to profit from it. Zhang was convinced that the Soviets, the KMT, and Feng were behind the agitations. The arrest of Soviets agents with instructions about organizing anti-foreign agitation in Shanghai after the shooting reinforced Zhang's idea.¹⁹ Zhang told the British that had he reached Beijing he would expel Karakhan, but he was warned that this meant war with the Soviet Union. Zhang

¹⁷ Chenbao, 12/2/1925.

¹⁸ "Mr. Palairet to Mr. Austen Chamberlain," 22/5/1925, FOCP, Vol. 29, 167-8.

¹⁹ "Mr. Palairet to Mr. Austen Chamberlain," 5/7/1925, FOCP, Vol. 29, 307.

was so anxious to understand the powers' attitude that his emissaries even went so far to ask the Italian Minister about the powers' possible attitude in a war between China and the Soviet Union.²⁰

Zhang Zuolin shared the genuine anger of the Chinese against the foreigners but he remained convinced that continuous agitation and strike was "suicidal". Zhang and the Fengtian leadership feared that Feng and the Soviets were using the upsurge of nationalist sentiment for their interest.²¹ Because of Zhang's attitude, no incident occurred in Manchuria and Shandong, and the mass rallies there were conducted peacefully. From retrospect, although he shared the patriotic sentiment, he had underestimated the power of nationalism and propaganda. As the British Consul General to Mukden William Wilkinson noted, Zhang's action of sending troops to Shanghai and suppression of agitation irreversibly damaged his image and made him prone to accusation of being the powers' "running dog".²²

On the other hand, Feng Yuxiang passionately attacked the "imperialist powers" and urged to declare war on Britain.²³ His utterances found much support from the young radicals, but were criticized by more sober figures such as Liang Qiqiao and Ding Wenjiang, who pointed out the emptiness of Feng and his allies' rhetoric.²⁴ At the same time, he was also anxious to avoid being seen as a communist, as he openly suggested that communism was not suitable for China.²⁵ This revealed the considerable apprehension, at least among some of the Chinese, about the Soviet motives in China.

The Soviets also seized the opportunity presented by the incident to delay the Sino-Soviet negotiation and regain her concessions. According to the Sino-Russian Agreement of 1924, the new round of negotiation would soon begin in 1925. The Russians refused to renew the negotiation on the pretext of Mukden's unwillingness to disband the White Russian units in the Fengtian Army and Mukden's decision to construct the Taonan-Qiqihar Railway.²⁶ Karakhan accused Mukden of sheltering the White movement, and threatened to treat Zhang Zuolin as enemy.²⁷ Zhang was unmoved, and refused to allow the flow of Soviet currency into Manchuria before the Soviets had compensated the Chinese for their losses when the old tsarist

²⁰ "Mr. Palairet to Mr. Austen Chamberlain," 5/7/1925, FOCP, Vol. 29, 307; "Mr. Palairet to Sir Austen Chamberlain," 18/7/1925, CPR, Vol. 5, 243.

²¹ "Zhang Zuolin fu Wang Yongjiang deng dian," 11/6/1925; "Zhang Zuolin fu Wang Yongjiang dian," 16/6/1925, in *Fengxi junfa midian* (FM), Vol. 2, (Liaoning, 1985), 160-1, 166.

²² "Consul-General Wilkinson to Sir R. Macleay," 27/11/1925, F 419/10/10, FOCP, Vol. 30, 128.

²³ "Mr. Palairet to Mr. Austen Chamberlain," 5/7/1925, F 3914/194/10, FOCP, Vol. 29, 307.

²⁴ Liang Qiqiao, *Yinbingshi heji*, (Beijing, 1989), Vol. 3, No. 42, 38; Ding Wenjiang, "Gaodiao yu zeren," in *Chenbao*, 19/6/1925.

²⁵ Liu Jingzhong, et al, *Guominjun shigang*, (Beijing, 2004).

²⁶ Sir R. Macleay to Mr. Austen Chamberlain," 28/10/1925, FOCP, Vol. 30, 65.

²⁷ Banzai Rihachiro, "dai 68 den," 3/6/1925, GK, JACAR, B03050148700, slide 41.

notes were disused.²⁸ Although the Sino-Soviet negotiation was officially renewed in August, Karakhan soon left China and the negotiation was delayed indefinitely.²⁹ Immediately after the shooting the Soviet Union demanded the Beijing Government to return the concessions of the Tsarist Russia, but it was unnoticed by the public.³⁰

2 SETTING THE STAGE FOR THE 18 MARCH INCIDENT: WAR IN NORTHEAST ASIA, OCT 1925-JAN 1926

The “anti-Fengtian War”, Nov-Dec. 1925

Throughout the summer, the expansion of the Fengtian Clique and the KMC continued. By October, military commissioners of Zhili, Shandong, Jiangsu, and Anhui were Fengtian generals. Feng Yuxiang’s position in North China was also strengthened. As the Japanese Minister to China Yoshizawa Kenkichi noted, although on surface Feng was on the defensive, he was waiting for the moment to strike and was secretly creating an anti-Fengtian alliance.³¹ To resist both Feng Yuxiang and Zhang Zuolin, the provincial military leaders along the Yangtze River formed defensive alliances, and Karakhan suggested in October in Moscow that the Soviets should use the anti-Fengtian alliance to eliminate Zhang Zuolin’s influence (thus the British and Japanese influence) in Beijing, end the Tariff Conference, and establish a KMT government there.³² This decision set the stage for the struggle between the KMT, KMC, and the Fengtian Clique for the control of Beijing from late 1925 to March 1926.

Events between the outbreak of the Zhejiang- Fengtian War and Guo Songling’s rebellion were very confusing. During the period saw Zhang Zuolin, who remained suspicious to the Provisional Government, fought to maintain the *status quo* while Feng Yuxiang and his Soviet and KMT allies tried to overrun North China and Beijing while secretly fighting for the control of the government among themselves.

On 10 October, provincial forces in Anhui, Jiangsu and Zhejiang led by Sun Chuanfang attacked the Fengtian garrison in Nanjing. To prevent the Tariff Conference from being interfered by the war, Zhang Zuolin gave up Jiangsu and Anhui, but he was determined to hold Zhili and Shandong.³³ Zhang, who continuously received reports about increased Soviet military action in North Manchuria and Mongolia, feared that Feng and the Soviets would seize the chance to attack his position in the north. In response, he suppressed the communist

²⁸ “Hōten jōhō dai 72 gō,” 17/8/1925, GK, JACAR, B03050402700, slide 315.

²⁹ “Mr. Palairet to Mr. Austen Chamberlain,” 18/6/1926, FOCP, Vol. 29, 375; “Sir R. Macleay to Sir Austen Chamberlain, Annual Report 1925,” 342.

³⁰ Bruce A. Elleman, “The Soviet Union’s Secret Diplomacy Concerning the CER, 1924-1925,” 479.

³¹ “Shina seihō nikansuru sankō shiryō,” 31/7/1925, GK, JACAR, B03050059900, slides 93-4.

³² Sai O (Austria) Akatsuka Shōsuke kōji, “Kyokutō hakenin hōkoku fū (Feng Yuxiang) to Rokoku (Russia) to kōshō no nikansuru ken,” 29/10/1925, GK, JACAR, B02030817700, slides 176, 178-179.

³³ Chenbao, 20/10/1925.

activities in his domain, but the Soviet threat tied down the Fengtian forces deployed along the CER.³⁴

Feng Yuxiang watched closely at the events in Central China. The KMT leftists in Beijing persuaded Feng to cooperate with them and overthrow the Provisional Government, but he refused.³⁵ He wanted full control of the central government so that he could dominate the gain of the coming Tariff Conference.³⁶ Before that, he had to destroy the Fengtian Clique. On the other hand, Karakhan hoped to use Feng to create a revolutionary government in Beijing, and ordered the Soviet agents in China to sabotage the incoming Tariff Conference. He believed that a major war in the north would destroy the Japanese-backed “Zhang-Duan” alliance and provide a stage for revolution. To prepare for a coup in Beijing, agitators were sent from Canton as delegations, ready to cooperate with the Soviets agents already there.³⁷

Hard-pressed by Sun Chuanfang, Zhang Zuolin was compelled to negotiate with Feng Yuxiang. Zhang had shown so much restraint that the Japanese believed that a major war could be averted.³⁸ In fact, both sides were buying time. Despite his peaceful appearance, Feng Yuxiang was planning a knockout blow against the Fengtian Clique.³⁹ On the other hand, Zhang was willing to cooperate with Feng only because he needed a secured flank when dealing with Sun Chuanfang. However, unlike Feng Yuxiang, Zhang only saw war as only a means to restore the pre-war situation.

In early November, the KMC mobilized.⁴⁰ Feng Yuxiang demanded Zhang Zuolin to withdraw from Baoding, to allow the KMC to use the seaport of Tianjin, and to reduce the size of the Fengtian forces in North China. In return, Feng guaranteed that he will support the restoration of Fengtian position in Jiangsu and Anhui.⁴¹ As the Japanese observed, Feng was demanding unchallenged position in North China. Still, however, the leaders of the KMC Second Army were not satisfied, and the radicals within Feng’s camp (championed by Zhang Zhijiang and Li

³⁴ Morioka sōryōji, “dai no. gō,” 14/10/1925, GK, JACAR, B03050749300, slide 264; Kantōgun sambōchō, “dai 364 gō,” 17/10/1924, GK, JACAR, B03050749400, slide 294; Nakano ryōji dairi, “dai 24 gō” 24/10/1925, GK, B03050749600, slide 369; Kantōgun sambōchō, “dai 401 gō,” 3/11/1925, GK, B03050750000, slide 12; Takahashi chūsa “Shina jikyoku kyū rokoku daishi undō ni kansuru Chō Hon Shō chūshō no iken,” 22/10/1925, GK, JACAR, B03050149200, slide 304.

³⁵ Yoshizawa kōji, “dai 1007 gō,” 21/10/1925, GK, B03050749500, slide 340.

³⁶ Yoshizawa kōji, “dai 1008 gō,” 21/10/1925, GK, B03050749500, slide 350.

³⁷ Sai O(Austria) Akatsuka Shōsuke kōji, “Kyokutō hakenin hōkoku fū (Feng Yuxiang) to Rokoku (Russia) to kōshō no nikansuru ken,” 29/10/1925, GK, JACAR, B02030817700, slide 176; “Sir R. Macleay to Mr. Austen Chamberlain,” 28/10/1925, F 6107/2/10, FOCP, Vol. 30, 65.

³⁸ Fujita sōryōji, “dai 96 gō,” GK, JACAR, B03050749600, slide 403.

³⁹ Arita sōryōji, “dai 134 gō,” 25/10/1925, GK, JACAR, B03050749600, slide 381.

⁴⁰ Kantōgun sambōchō, “dai 180 gō,” GK, JACAR, B03050750100, slide 56.

⁴¹ Sai Shi kōshikan fu bukan, “dai 388 gō,” 5/11/1925, GK, JACAR, B03050750000, slide 26.

Liejun, veteran *tongmenghui* member and now a pro-Soviet KMT envoy to the KMC Second Army) urged Feng to seize Zhili and Shandong immediately.⁴²

Meanwhile, the Fengtian Clique lost Xuzhou to Sun Chuanfang, an event that emboldened the radicals among the KMC leadership. The leaders of the KMC Second Army talked openly about occupying Shandong, while KMC troops started to move towards Shandong and Zhili.⁴³ According to Mo Dehui, Zhang's representative in Beijing, soon after Xuzhou was lost, Feng's troops infiltrated into Beijing and put Duan Qirui in practical house arrest.⁴⁴

To deter the KMC, Zhang deployed the best part of the Fengtian Army (commanded by Zhang Xueliang and Guo Songling, Xueliang's close associate) along the Beijing-Mukden Railway from Tianjin to Qinhuangdao.⁴⁵ Zhang's defensive attitude was shown in his acceptance of Duan's urge for peace and his decision to move his forces away from the capital.⁴⁶ However, the KMC continued their advance. On 17 November, troops of the Second KMC from Henan attacked Fengtian outposts near Baoding and invaded Shandong.⁴⁷ This stiffened Zhang's resolve to fight.

Guo Songling's Rebellion and the KMT's First Attempt to Seize Beijing

After the Baoding incident, Zhang Zuolin ordered Guo Songling to return to Mukden to discuss future moves, but Guo rebelled with the bulk of his army and marched towards Mukden on 23 November.⁴⁸ As the war between Guo Songling and Zhang Zuolin is well documented, this paper will only focus on Feng Yuxiang's takeover of Beijing and Japan and Russia's actions during the rebellion.⁴⁹

Guo Songling's rebellion was part of Feng Yuxiang's plan against Zhang Zuolin. The war in November-December 1925 was one of the rare occasions when Feng risked his army. He had almost won the gamble. As the Soviet advisors and British observers pointed out, Feng's army was clearly not ready.⁵⁰ However, Feng feared that the Soviets might eventually withdraw their support. Feng was resentful to the spread of communism among his troops and the "excessive

⁴² Yoshizawa kōji, "dai 1032 gō," 7/11/1925, GK, JACAR, B03050750000, slide 38.

⁴³ *Chenbao*, 19/11/1925; Sai Shi kōshikan fu bukan, "dai 401 gō," "dai 402 gō," 9/11/1925, GK, JACAR, B03050750100, slides 62-3.

⁴⁴ Yoshida sōryōji, "dai 178 gō," 13/11/1925, GK, JACAR, B03050750100, slide 95; this was confirmed by a contemporary account, but Gu Tiaosun suggested that this happened after Guo Songling rebelled. See Gu Tiaosun, *Yuexiu junfa bianluan jishi*, (Beijing, 1926), 159-62.

⁴⁵ Arita sōryōji, "dai 139 gō," 12/11/1925, GK, JACAR, B03050750100, slide 94.

⁴⁶ Yoshizawa kōji, "dai 1043 gō," 13/11/1924, "dai 1045 gō," 14/11/1925, GK, JACAR, B03050750200, slides 103, 115; Li Xin (ed.), *Zhonghua Mingguo dashi ji*, (Beijing, 1997), 395.

⁴⁷ Arita sōryōji, "dai 143 gō," 19/11/1925, GK, JACAR, B03050750300, slide 146.

⁴⁸ Many troops were actually deceived that they were fighting back because the Japanese had invaded Manchuria. See Yao Dongfan, et al., *Guo Songling fanfeng jianwen*, (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008)

⁴⁹ For a thorough discussion of Guo's rebellion, see Gavan McCormack.

⁵⁰ Yang Yuqing, 131; "Sir R. Macleay to Mr. Austen Chamberlain," 31/10/1925, F 6020/2/10, FOCP, Vol. 30, 70.

Soviet influence” in the area under his control.⁵¹ Feng was appalled by the situation in the Russia after receiving reports from his military mission to Moscow. In late summer, Feng made some “clumsy gesture of friendship” towards the Japanese. He invited the Japanese reporters to Kalgan and claimed that he welcomed the Japanese to settle in the Northwest.⁵² This aroused some concern in Moscow, and Karakhan had to acquit Feng’s action by saying he was “driven by necessity”.⁵³ With Zhang’s influence within China rapidly diminishing and Guo Songling willing to cooperate, Feng finally decided to fight.

Feng immediately invaded Zhili after Guo’s had broken through the Shanhaiguan and entered the Fengtian province.⁵⁴ The KMC also seized complete control of the capital, after which pro-Fengtian politicians of the Provisional Government were dispersed or arrested. However, the KMC leaders were divided over how to deal with the situation. The KMT leftists led by Xu Qian and the leaders of the Second and Third KMC armies immediately seized the chance to stage a coup to overthrow the Provisional Government. On 28 November, after staging a so-called Citizen’s Conference (*guomin dahui*), the KMT members in Beijing marched to the executive’s palace to threaten Duan Qirui to resign and an immediate end to the Tariff Conference.⁵⁵

Feng Yuxiang did not approve of the coup on 28 November as he refused to share the power with the KMT. Those in control of Beijing were divided between the radicals led by Xu Qian, Li Dazhao and Li Liejun and moderates such as C. T. Wang and Huang Fu.⁵⁶ Feng refrained from taking drastic action, and still favoured the restoration of Huang Fu’s government.⁵⁷ The radicals were relevant to Feng’s plan as long as they can help Feng to seize the control of Beijing. Thus, although Feng controlled the capital, its means to achieve it (allying with the Soviets and the KMT, starting a war and stirring up radicalism) prevented him from putting up with any viable solution to the political problems. The Tariff Conference was also brought to a halt because of the war.

⁵¹ “Sir R. Macleay to Mr. Austen Chamberlain,” 31/10/1925, FOCP, Vol. 30, 67.

⁵² “Sir R. Macleay to Mr. Austen Chamberlain,” 28/10/1925, FOCP, Vol. 30, 64.

⁵³ “Chūō shikkō iinki tokubetsu kaigi sekijō ni o kuru Karakhan no Shina nikansuru kōtō hōkoku (Karakhan’s oral report on the Special Meeting of the Central Executive Committee about China),” 11-14/9/1925, GK, JACAR, B03050060100, slide 177.

⁵⁴ Shina chūtongun shireikan, “dai 255 gō,” 28/11/1925, GK, JACAR, B03050750500, slide 242.

⁵⁵ Sai Shi kōshikan fu bukan, “dai 478 gō,” 27/11/295, GK, JACAR, B03050750500, slide 241; Yoshizawa kōji, “dai 1075 gō,” 28/11/1925, GK, JACAR, B03050750500, slide 245.

⁵⁶ Yoshizawa kōji, “dai 1113 gō,” 5/12/1924, GK, JACAR, B03050751100, slide 407; Sai Shi kōshikan fu bukan, “dai 486 gō,” 30/11/295, GK, JACAR, B03050060400, slide 329; Tienshingun shireikan, “dai 265 gō,” 30/11/1925, GK, JACAR, B03050060400, slide 330; Sai Shi kōshikan fu bukan, “dai 501 gō” 1/12/295, GK, JACAR, B03050060400, slide 331; Yoshizawa kōji, “dai 1102 gō,” 4/12/1925, GK, JACAR, B03050060700, slide 15.

⁵⁷ Shina chūtongun shireikan, “dai 254 gō,” 27/11/1925, GK, JACAR, B03050750500, slide 239; Sai Shi kōshikan fu bukan, “dai 478 gō,” 27/11/295, GK, JACAR, B03050750500, slide 241; Yoshizawa kōji, “dai 1077 gō,” 29/11/1924, GK, JACAR, B03050750500, slide 267.

The Soviet Union was active in supporting Guo and Feng. As mentioned, Karakhan had encouraged the anti-Fengtian alliance. During Guo Songling's rebellion, the Soviet-controlled CER refused to carry the Chinese troops to the front, Soviet troops threatened the Sino-Russian border in Heilongjiang, and according to the Polish military attaché, the Soviets handed 200,000 *yuan* to Guo.⁵⁸ Money was also sent to Harbin in the hope of bribing the Chinese garrison and officials immediately before the rebellion. After all, long before the war the Soviets had trained, funded and armed Feng's army, and had sent agents to stir up anti-foreign sentiment throughout 1925.

Despite the money and effort, however, Karakhan's scheme to North China failed. Feng Yuxiang refused to be restrained by the radicals in a committee government, while his Soviet-trained and armed force suffered irrecoverable losses during the attempt to seize Tianjin, which was finally captured by the KMC forces on 23 December, the day when Guo Songling was defeated and killed by Zhang Zuolin's troops. Zhang was not defeated, and he was more determined than ever to curb the Soviet influence in Northeast Asia as he had attributed Guo's rebellion to Soviets and Feng.⁵⁹

3 MUKDEN STRIKES BACK, JAN 1926-DEC 1926

Strategic Situation after the Guo Songling Rebellion

Although Guo Songling failed to overthrow Zhang Zuolin, the rebellion allowed the KMC to occupy most of the Zhili and Rehe provinces. The KMC was now in control of Beijing, with the Provisional Government became nothing more than a hostage. Tianjin was also brought under KMC control, thus allowing import of arms from Vladivostok. However, the KMC's position was precarious. Tianjin was captured only after a costly campaign, while a considerable part of the defeated Fengtian forces was able link up with Zhang Zongchang's forces in Shandong. Moreover, the KMC Second Army's invasion of Shandong had failed, and after Wu Peifu allied with Zhang Zuolin, Feng had to face a three pronged attack against him.

Although his army was bloodied and disorganized, Zhang Zuolin insisted on eliminating Feng. As Feng and his allies were still controlling Beijing, Zhang remained isolated in Northeast Asia. Zhang could turn to the Japanese, but it was the last thing he wanted to do. Thus, although the Fengtian army was drastically weakened and the financial situation in Manchuria was more chaotic than ever, Zhang still decided to enter North China. Zhang was going to repeat his strategy in 1924: he was to secure his position in Manchuria by securing a voice in the central government of Beijing.

⁵⁸ Colonel Piggot to Sir C. Eliot," in "Sir C. Eliot to Sir Austen Chamberlain," 18/1/1925, F 613/10/10, FOCP, Vol. 8, 7; Gavan McCormack, 296; according to Zheng Dianqi Guo received 400,000 from the Dalbank. See, Zheng Dianqi, p. 281.

⁵⁹ "Consul-General Wilkinson to Sir R. Macleay," 26/11/1925, F 419/10/10, FOCP, Vol. 30, 128.

Immediately after the rebellion, Zhang Zuolin instructed Zhang Zongchang to retake Zhili from Shandong.⁶⁰ The rest of the Fengtian army, now commanded by Zhang Xueliang, was reorganized and sent to North China through Shanhaiguan and Rehe.⁶¹ Despite KMC resistance along the way, the Fengtian forces advanced steadily throughout February, and were approaching Tianjin by March. Wu Peifu, who had recently allied with Zhang Zuolin, was besieging Xinyang (信陽), a stronghold of the Second KMC in Henan. Meanwhile, the White Russian contingent under Zhang Zongchang planned to capture Kalgan and Russian Far East after storming Beijing for money and supplies. As the Soviets Union only maintained a small garrison (30,000 men in March 1926) in the Far East, it was not impossible.⁶² The Chinese, however, rejected their plan.

In January 1926, Feng Yuxiang “resigned” again in the hope of dividing his enemies, but this only intensified the division in his own camp. Zhang Zhijiang, Feng’s successor, was more sympathetic to the KMT. On the other hand, however, Feng ordered Lu Zhonglin, the commander of the Beijing garrison, to suppress the “Bolsheviks”.⁶³ Feng’s successors, all brigadiers in less than a year ago, were clearly overwhelmed by the situation. They tried to make separate peace with Zhang Zuolin, Zhang Zongchang, and Wu Peifu in the hope of playing them against one another. Pro-KMT press in Beijing spread rumours about the collapse of the anti-National Army alliance, and orders were given from Beijing in the name of Duan Qirui to attack Wu Peifu.⁶⁴

Lev Karakhan still hoped to preserve the KMC’s position in and around Beijing and urged Moscow to send money, arms and even troops to China.⁶⁵ The KMC leaders in Beijing decided with Karakhan that they would defend Tianjin in order to receive the arms from Vladivostok.⁶⁶ However, Rehe and Shanhaiguan were soon lost to the Fengtian army, and the Fengtian armies were marching towards Tianjin. In response, KMT leftists tried to stir up anti-foreign sentiment and provoke the Japanese to take action. The Japanese were accused of supplying the Fengtian army with arms; incidents between the Japanese military and civilians and the KMC occurred

⁶⁰ “Zhang Zuolin zhi Zhang Zhongchang diangao,” 26/1/1926, FM, Vol. 3, 2; “Zhang Zuolin fu Zhang Zhongchang dian,” 11/2/1926, FM, Vol. 3, 5.

⁶¹ “Zhang Zuolin zhi Zhang Zhongchang diangao,” 14/2/1926, FM, Vol. 3, 6.

⁶² Chōsen sōtokufu keimu kyokuchō, “Roseia (Russia) hakutō gunjin no Sai-nan shūchū setsu nikansuru ken,” 19/2/1926, GK, JACAR, B03050150600, slide 421; Fujita sōryōji, “Chō Sō Chō kika no hakutōkei rokoku gunjin no kōdō nikansuru ken,” 27/3/1926, GK, JACAR, B03050154800, slide 148-50.

⁶³ Tanaka ryōji, “dai 33 gō,” 23/1/1926, GK, JACAR, B03050150100, slide 166; Sai Shi kōshikan fu bukan, “dai 32 gō,” 19/1/1925, GK, JACAR, B03050150000, slide 97.

⁶⁴ Tienshingun shireikan, “dai 48 gō,” 30/1/1926, “dai 46 gō,” 30/1/1926, GK, JACAR, B03050150200, slides 202, 205; Tienshingun shireikan, “dai 67 gō,” 10/2/1926, GK, JACAR, B03050150400, slide 325; “Rinji shūsei rei,” 22/2/1926, GK, JACAR, B03050150900, slide 560.

⁶⁵ Pekin kōshochō, “Kokumin dai ichi gun no jōkyō,” 15/3/1926, GK, JACAR, B03050151600, slide 143.

⁶⁶ Yoshida sōryōji, “Hō-koku ryōgun saikin no taishi jōkyō nikansuru ken,” 6/2/1926, GK, JACAR, B03050192100, slide 41; Sai Shi kōshikan fu bukan, “dai 191 gō,” 18/3/1925, GK, JACAR, B03050152000, slide 208.

continuously since January.⁶⁷ The Sino-Japanese tension created by the KMC accumulated to the shelling of the Japanese destroyers in Dagu on 12 March.

As mentioned in the introduction, Fengtian troops under Zhang Zongchang from Shandong tried to land in Dagu near Tianjin in early March. After that, the Shandong vessels patrolled outside the port, hoping to intercept Soviet shipping to Tianjin. To cover the Russian shipping, the KMC mined Dagu and closed the port. On 12 March, the KMC shelled a Japanese destroyer, which retaliated by bombarding the KMC's position. After the shelling, an ultimatum was sent from the powers to the KMC demanding the end of blockade before 18th. This incident was quickly picked up by the radicals in Feng's camp. The KMT and pro-KMC press attacked the "imperialist intervention", and Li Liejun advocated war against Japan.⁶⁸ On 18 March around 700 agitators, students, and citizens from all walks of life marched to the Office of the Provisional Government demanding the formation of a "Nationalist Government" and defiance against the powers, but they were fired upon by the troops guarding the Office.⁶⁹

As a report received by Zhang Zuolin (written by Ye Gongzuo, who worked for both Zhang and Duan) pointed out, the Incident was clearly infighting within the KMC.⁷⁰ After the failure of Guo Songling's rebellion, Feng was anxious to shake off the accusation of being a communist. On the other hand, the KMT leftists and radicals within the KMC still stuck to their original strategy and wanted to repeat the 28 November coup. Since the KMC had full control of the capital and its intervention had averted bloodshed in the previous agitations and rallies, it was inconceivable that the KMC could not prevent the 18 March Incident. Moreover, after the shooting the Provisional Government ordered the arrest of the leading KMT leftists and CCP leaders such as Xu Qian and Li Dazhao, a move that could be seen as the KMC's attempt to curb their influence and prevent them from staging further coups.

The so-called 18 March Incident did not save the KMC or the radicals. The division of the KMC became open after the shooting, while the expected mass uprising against the Provisional Government and the powers did not occur. In fact, the long-awaited Soviet arms supply ship "Oleg" was captured by the Fengtian navy off Dagu on 17 March.⁷¹ As the result, the KMC abandoned Tianjin, and those in command again turned to Wu Peifu and Zhang Zuolin. Perhaps to show their sincerity, Cao Kun was released on 9 April. A week later, Lu Zhonglin expelled Duan Qirui from Beijing, ending the short-lived Provisional Government. Nonetheless, both

⁶⁷ Sai Shi kōshikan fu bukan, "dai 143 gō," 3/3/1925, GK, B03050150900, slide 547; Pekin kōshochō, "Kokumin dai ichi gun no jōkyō," 15/3/1926, GK, JACAR, B03050151600, slide 142.

⁶⁸ Sai Shi kōshikan fu bukan, "telegram 188," 18/3/1925, "dai 189 gō," 18/3/1926, GK, JACAR, B03050152000, slide 209, 211; Tienshingun shireikan, "dai 152 gō," 19/3/1926, GK, JACAR, B03050152000, slide 214.

⁶⁹ Sai Shi kōshikan fu bukan, "dai 195 gō," 19/3/1925, "dai 196 gō," 19/3/1926, GK, JACAR, B03050152000, slide 215.

⁷⁰ "Ye Gongzuo dian," 21/3/1926, FM, Vol. 3, 65.

⁷¹ Tienshingun shireikan, "dai 177 gō," 24/3/1926, GK, JACAR, B03050150700, slide 324.

Zhang and Wu refused to negotiate and demanded the KMC be disarmed and disbanded.⁷² The KMC then abandoned the capital and withdrew to Nankou, where they prepared to make another stand with Soviet support.

4 CONCLUSION

With new sources, the 18 March Incident can now be understood from wider perspective. Instead of being merely a patriotic or student movement, the 18 March Incident was a showdown of the two wings within the National Army, and was part of the struggle for mastery in Northeast Asia between China, Japan, and the Soviet Union. This article tries to explain the warring sides' decisions and put them in the geopolitical and international contexts. It shows the central importance of geopolitics in political development in Republican China, and the necessity to look at the wider context of the revolution when trying to understand the causes of the "success" of the Northern Expedition from 1926 to 1928. The period of so-called "national revolution" was essentially a period of continuous and confusing wars. The outcome of these wars was by no means preordained, and they usually led to consequences unforeseen by those who planned them. Thus, an understanding of the strategic and international dimensions of these wars is always necessary.

⁷² "Zhang Zuolin zhi Zhang Zhongchang deng diangao," 8/4/1926, FM, Vol. 3, 52; "Zhang Zuolin fu Zhang Zhongchang dian," 14/4/1926, FM, Vol. 3, 53; Wang Yuchao, 122-4.