The Perilous Autumn of 1945: Chiang Ching-kuo between the Local, the National and the Global in the Early Cold War

Rana Mitter*

In the winter of 1945, the temperatures in the Northeast became bitterly cold. They matched the temperature of the emerging Cold War, which was beginning to freeze Northeast Asia just as it was also chilling Europe.

One person intimately connected with the global processes that were bringing about change was Chiang Ching-kuo. This article analyses that emerging Cold War through the eyes of the Generalissimo's son and trusted confidant, as he spent a portion of that cold autumn in the Northeast, the region then known to the west as Manchuria. Many of the themes that would shape China in the years that followed are visible in the diaries he kept at the time: among them, the difficulty of negotiating with the USSR, who were playing a double game with a treaty of friendship with the Nationalist (Guomindang) government of Chiang Kai-shek, while also implicitly allowing the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to take advantage of any gaps in the power structure in the region. The Japanese empire had collapsed suddenly in August 1945, yet the manifestations of that empire, from shattered economic structures to desperate, abandoned civilians still shaped the immensely difficult decisions that faced China's leaders.

Ching-kuo was sent to negotiate with the Soviet military commanders stationed in the Northeast in 1945. Yet his discussions cannot be examined as if they occurred autonomously, separated from the immense challenges that postwar China faced. Instead, they should be seen as part of a complex matrix. Not only were Chiang Kai-shek and his generals keen to assess the situation in the Northeast in the context of the

* Professor of the History and Politics of Modern China, University of Oxford, UK

military situation, but Wang Shijie, the shrewd and cautious foreign minister, also considered the crisis of the Northeast as a constituent part of his own strategy: to reinvent Chinese diplomacy at high speed, as a sovereign state with a significant role in a fast-emerging international society, at the same time as overcoming the terrible flaws and weaknesses which racked China's state and society.

The Place of the Northeast

In retrospect, the significance of the Northeast in shaping the fate of China has become very clear. Their presence in the region allowed the CCP to regroup their forces in the region and use it as a spearhead for the eventual conquest of the whole country by 1949. However, when the Japanese surrendered in August 1945, it was not so obvious what the most pressing priority for China would be. The last phase of the war against Japan, and in particular, the vicious Ichigo campaign of 1944, had destroyed much of the social fabric of central China, leaving behind malnutrition, homeless refugees, and a lawless atmosphere shaped by constant violence. The central government was still based in its relatively remote southwestern redoubt of Chongqing, and had to deal with everything from refugee welfare, to negotiations with the US, to the basic but complex task of moving their own capital back across the country to Nanjing.

In this context, the developing crisis in the Northeast was an additional concern on a long list of issues. Unable realistically to take command of the situation himself, Chiang decided that he would send Ching-kuo as his trusted representative. Ching-kuo had spent years in the Soviet Union, and had married a Russian woman, Faina, so it was hoped that his fluent Russian would also prove an advantage in this task, along with his intimate knowledge of the psychology of Soviet leader Josef V. Stalin.

The Nationalist government had undertaken significant steps to try to prevent the Northeast becoming vulnerable to Chinese Communist takeover. As the Soviets began their assault on Manchuria in August 1945, senior politicians including T. V. Soong and Wang Shijie were sent to Moscow to negotiate a treaty of friendship. Stalin's diplomacy was brusque, maximizing his demands on issues such as exclusive Soviet control of the port of Dairen (Dalian). He was fully aware that the Nationalist government was immensely weak and that a powerful Red Army could either take what it wanted when it crossed the border into Manchukuo, as it had done in much of Europe in the spring, or empower the CCP to take control. Therefore, for China, even a treaty that made many concessions was preferable to no treaty at all. On 14 August, the USSR and China signed a Treaty of Friendship and Alliance, which Chiang hoped would now neutralize

the Soviet threat, and sever Soviet assistance to the CCP.[1]

Although Stalin did order much official aid to the CCP to cease, he did nothing to prevent the Communists from consolidating their position, often with materiel or equipment that had been left behind at the moment of the Japanese surrender. On 1 September, Chiang placed Xiong Shihui in charge of the region, and General Du Yuming was placed in charge of the regional military on 17 October. However, Chiang swiftly became angry with what he saw as Xiong Shihui's indecisive nature. CCP-affiliated troops continued to seize crucial areas, and on 30 September, Chinese Communist troops occupied Shanhaiguan. Chiang was scathing: "The USSR has already destroyed our alliance, and is determined to support the Communist bandits in invading China. Inevitably, they want to make us the enemy, and are determined to prepare troops to move into the Three Eastern Provinces and Xinjiang." One part of Chiang's response was a conversation with the American ambassador about bringing troops and American weapons to the Northeast.[2]

Yet Chiang was wary of the US. During the war, his showdown with the American chief of staff, General Joseph Stilwell, had led to the General's recall and a souring of relations between the two countries.[3] Furthermore, the US would be wary of doing anything directly to confront the USSR in Asia; the emergent Cold War was already very sensitive in Europe, and the US was determined to prevent the Soviets gaining any sort of presence in Japan. Therefore, sending Ching-kuo to the Northeast was a way of keeping a close eye on the situation through the eyes of a family member whom Chiang could absolutely trust, and who was familiar with Stalin's regime and its way of doing things.

Ching-kuo in the Northeast

Chiang Ching-kuo is ambivalent in his discussion and advocacy of democracy. At times, he recapitulates many elements of the republican and Chinese unitary models. At other times, he emphasizes many facets of the liberal democratic model. At still others, he falls short of democratic concepts in his discussions of democracy. This ambivalence is expressed not in attempts to meld or otherwise join those models, but in conflicting comments made at different times. This characteristic is probably the result of tactical

[1] See, e.g, "Record of Meeting between T. V. Soong and Stalin (2 July 1945)," https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/122505

[2] Wang Chaoguang, "Guogong neizhan chuqi de dongbei zhanchang yu Jiang Jieshi de junshi juece" ["The Northeastern battlefields and Chiang Kaishek's military decisions at the start of the Nationalist-Communist civil war"], in Lu Fangshang, ed., *Jiang Zhongzheng riji yu minguoshi yanjiu* [Chiang Kai-shek's diaries and the study of Republican Chinese History], Taipei, 2012), hereafter Wang, "Guogong," 520-2.

[3] See Hans J. van de Ven, *War and Nationalism in Modern China, 1925-1945* (London, 2003), Ch. 1.

needs of the moment and the influence of various aides on this thought.

His lack of consistency can lead to confusion, particularly with regard to his conception of pluralism. While he generally holds that pluralism is natural, he provides varying assessments of its desirability and its legitimacy as a basis for political action. At times, it is the result of indiscipline. At other times, it is an unfortunate but remediable condition. At still others, it is a result of differing understandings and interests that should be accepted instead of treated as a disease of the body politic. Which is the case? What is the government's attitude toward policy differences? May they be legally expressed? Does the government take them seriously? Is democracy compatible with different understandings and views or must they be subordinated and eliminated, as Sun and Chiang Kai-shek would hold? Are political differences one reason for holding elections, or do such differences make elections too dangerous? Citizens never know what is allowable and what is not. Ultimately, therefore, this problem weakens the emphasis on constitutionalism, the rule of law, and equal protection that Chiang Ching-kuo also embraces.

On the whole, however, Chiang Ching-kuo's discussions of democracy focus less on unity and general will and more on recognition of the reality and legitimacy of pluralism than did those of his predecessors. His discussions of pluralism, uneven and only hesitantly related to multiple parties and competitive elections as they may be, are his most important contribution to the discussion of Chinese democracy. His attempt to meld pluralism with a unitary understanding through a "consensus from above" approach may have anticipated parallel conceptions on the mainland. Though he did less to justify democracy philosophically than did his father, he did do more to introduce particular liberal democratic conceptions into the ROC's political dialogue even if those contributions were sometimes weakened or offset by contradictory statements and often came late in his tenure in office.

This invocation of different conceptions also carries implications for understanding these conversations in the context of the Chinese community. In one sense, Chiang expands the breadth of that discussion, moving as he does from rather empty gestures toward democracy through traditional and unitary conceptions and on to liberal conceptions. Even as he moved, however unevenly and hesitantly, to incorporate more aspects of the liberal democratic model into his discussions of democracy and ultimately embraced that model before his death, Chiang Ching-kuo furthered and deepened his father's attempt to root democracy in Chinese culture and traditions. This association of more liberal aspects with a greater identification of democracy with China and assertions that the *Sān Mín Chǔ Yì* outline a Chinese understanding of democracy is surprising, given that in other hands an emphasis on

Chinese and Asian characteristics generally leads the discussion away from the liberal model on the grounds that the latter is an essentially Western understanding of democracy. One could argue that Chiang's different approach to this question was important to the liberal democratic transition in Taiwan and perhaps something similar must happen on the mainland for a parallel transition to occur there.

Discussing the Northeast in Chongqing

Ching-kuo's difficult days in the Northeast did not happen in a vacuum, of course. While he was navigating the offensive tone in Soviet diplomacy in Changchun, foreign minister Wang Shijie was on the other side of the country in Chongqing, having just arrived back from Europe. Wang had to make the aggressive Soviet diplomatic stance on the Northeast somehow compatible with his expansive view of Chinese foreign policy as a whole. His observations of Molotov, and hardline Soviet stances more generally, at close quarters in Moscow and London had surely shaped his reluctance to give the USSR any chance to strengthen its position. Xiong Shihui argued that a power vacuum in the region would favour the CCP, and that a delayed withdrawal of Soviet forces might therefore be preferable to a swift one. Wang opposed the idea: it opened up the danger that in future, if the Soviets refused to leave, they could use the excuse that their reluctance to leave "had come from our request."[4] [11 10 45] Chiang agreed; whatever the situation, they would not ask their worrisome Soviet liberators to stay any longer (although in the end, they had to change their minds).

For Chiang, Wang and the National Government as a whole, the new 1945 Manchurian crisis took place in the context of a wider set of turbulent disputes about China's borders more broadly. While sovereignty had returned to China in 1943, and imperial holdovers such as the French Concession, International Settlement, and the Maritime Customs service were being brought under Chinese control, there was a new threat to sovereignty: the Soviets had significant influence in the Northeast, in Xinjiang, and on the Mongolian border. Meanwhile, the southwestern borderlands were subject to a different sort of pressure. In Siam (Thailand), ethnic Chinese were being killed in race-fueled clashes. Meanwhile, on 22 October, China sent eight divisions to Vietnam, even though "the military expenses were very high." Wang wanted to make it clear that this was not a colonial grab by China, and suggested to Chiang that China "should prepare a plan for withdrawal of troops as early as

[4] *Wang Shijie ri ji* [Diary of Wang Shijie], ed. Meili Lin; (Taipei, 2013), hereafter WSJR, 11 Oct. 1945, 740.

possible"; Chiang agreed.[5] Still, it was awkward to have ended an anti-imperialist war with a move that would protect the colonial possessions of a European power. Yet the war against Japan had shown how vulnerable China's borders really were. The agonizing over the Northeast was part of a much wider set of anxieties about the map of China as a whole, including those areas of the west and Xinjiang where Soviet occupation and military intervention was also preventing the government consolidating control.

On 23 October, Xiong Shihui flew back from Changchun to Chongqing. The Soviets were behaving appallingly, he told Wang, looting equipment and handing it over to the CCP: but crucially, "he did say that the Soviets were about to withdraw." Wang advised sticking to the existing policy: "We would have to bear it quietly."[6] He was aware that the Soviets would use any excuse to make their displeasure known: just a few days before, they had balked at the use of American ships to transport Nationalist troops, as well as the lack of general progress on talks between the Nationalists and Communists.[7] Wang also sought to allay Soviet concerns: they objected to Nationalist troops landing at Dalian, so Wang told the Soviet ambassador that they would send them to Yingkou and Huludao instead.[8] Meanwhile, CCP troops were moving in alarming numbers; Wang heard that some 100,000 had moved to Suiyuan. "The danger of civil war is very great," Wang wrote in his diary. "I advocate using all our powers to avoid it."[9] A few days later, still thinking of the Suiyuan situation, he cautioned Chiang that he must find

> *A means for a temporary avoidance of conflict with the CCP. Once civil war breaks out, then the situation cannot be halted, and the CCP can use this opportunity, relying on secret assistance from the Soviets, to seize and occupy Rehe, Chahar, or Suiyuan, or the Three Eastern Provinces, and create a country of their own.*[10] [744: 31 10 45]

Wang's diary in the days following 1 November shows the juggling he had to undertake to balance the local, the bilateral and the multilateral relations of the National Government. On that day, he spoke directly to Zhou Enlai about the need to keep tensions down between the CCP and government troops. He also noted a cable from Stalin to Chiang, in which the Soviet leader said that he would act on issues that had emerged from the Foreign Ministers' meeting in London. At the same time, the new Far East conference had begun in Washington. The Soviets had boycotted it,

[5] WSJR 22 Oct. 1945, 742.
[6] WSJR 23 Oct. 1945, 742.
[7] WSJR 19 Oct. 1945, 742.
[8] WSJR 25 Oct. 1945, 743.
[9] WSJR 26 Oct. 1945, 743.
[10] WSJR 31 Oct. 1945, 744.

presumably out of anger that they were being offered only an advisory rather than executive role with regard to Japan, but China suggested that they allow a week's delay for a meeting between the Big Four powers outside the conference, which was agreed. "Our policy," wrote Wang, "is to encourage US-Soviet cooperation."[11] Wang believed that the only hope for Chinese reconstruction was an international situation where the two major powers were both able to leave a sovereign Chinese regime alone. Yet reality intruded into this ideal world; Wang's diary over the following days and weeks comes back to the unavoidable fact that the Soviets and the CCP appeared to be in an unstated campaign to take over the Northeast. On 3 November, Wang and Chiang spoke about the CCP's advance. Chiang was "very gloomy," doubtful that territory north of the Yellow River could really be recovered for "national reconstruction." Wang stressed again that "chaos" could only be avoided if the USSR cooperated with the US and Britain.[12] It was a very long shot, but the National Government had few choices.

The Meaning of the Northeast

Later analysis has made the point that the Nationalist attempts to recapture the Northeast may well have been a stretch too far, and that Chiang's insistence on its recovery was a strategic error which ultimately cost him the whole of China. Debate still continues on how crucial the insistence on the recapture of the Northeast was as a factor in shaping Chiang's ultimate defeat.

However, the Northeast was never just a strategic concern, and the desire to recapture it must be seen in emotional terms as well. This sensibility recurs repeatedly in the words of the Nationalist leaders of the era. "In the fourteen years when the northeast was occupied," wrote Ching-kuo, "although we didn't have the strength to recover it, we swore from first to last not to recognize puppet Manchukuo, and we struggled to the end to recover lost territories." For the Nationalists, the recovery of the region was something more akin to a sworn duty. He added:

> *I think the situation in Chongqing is very tense, but it still hasn't reached the worst point. If we calculate from the worst place, then we have to ensure determination to maintain the struggle for national sovereignty to the end. There is no other path we can go on.*[13]

He wanted to "establish a basis for a century" of stability, he wrote later. "This

[11] WSJR 1 Nov. 1945, 744.
[12] WSJR 3 Nov. 1945, 745.
[13] 6 Nov. 1945, JJGRJ, 141.

is the goal of our struggle."[14]

With this wider task in mind, Ching-kuo put forward a fuller set of proposals on 7 November. He demanded Soviet guarantees of the safety of Chinese troops coming into the region, and proposed sending Chinese troops in, five days ahead of the Soviet withdrawal, as well as using American air support, and Nationalist garrisoning of the region's major cities including Changchun, Shenyang, and Harbin. Pushing for the highest return possible, he also requested that the Soviets disarm "non-governmental" troops – that is, the CCP.

These proposals had come in the wake of agonizing back in Chongqing. The Soviets were implying threats to the Nationalists, telling Xiong Shihui that "The Soviet army cannot guarantee the safety of [the Nationalist] army landing at Yingkou." Two days later, Xiong sent further news; the Soviets had in fact withdrawn from Yingkou but the CCP had immediately taken the city over. Wang observed that this had neatly stymied the Central Government. "We can't now in any way carry out our plan to land at Yingkou, because US transport ships are not willing to enter Yingkou in the situation of a conflict between National troops and CCP troops." The next day, 7 November, Wang went to the official Soviet National Day celebrations, but he could not bring himself "to express any words of congratulations."[15]

Chiang now became keen to call the USSR's behaviour out. He called in key colleagues including T. V. Soong, Zhang Qun, Bai Chongxi, Chen Bulei and Wang Shijie, to discuss the situation. Chiang suggested that Nationalist troops should now withdraw to Shanhaiguan, which would show the "clear, red face" of the USSR's "treaty violation… to the world." Wang, as so often, pointed out that principled gestures did not necessarily advance geopolitical goals:

> *I said that this policy was the most just in principle, but the inevitable result would be that the CCP and Outer Mongolia would receive large-scale Soviet… support, and from this, a large-scale and lengthy civil war would follow. Friendly countries will not see how they can give us effective support, because the CCP problem would still be latent within; and this… [would become] cause of a civil war.* [16]

The next day, there were suggestions that Chiang should visit Stalin. Wang Shijie cautioned that if he did, it should be an "informal" visit, as China was simply not strong enough to resolve the Soviet issue. He warned once again about the damage that a long war would do:

If our country, after the conclusion of the war against Japan, continues with a

[14] 7 Nov. 1945, JJGRJ, 142.
[15] 4, 6, 7 Nov. 1945, JJGRJ, 138, 141, 142.
[16] WSJR, 8 Nov. 1945, 746.

five- to ten-year war, then all reconstruction projects will be indefinitely postponed, and we can't establish the future.

Wang then spelled out an unpalatable but realistic scenario:

If our government makes a big concession to the CCP, seeking peace… and temporarily accepting a policy of 'divide borders and rule,' then that will have many difficulties and dangers, but the major danger will be comparatively smaller.[17]

Similar suggestions have been made to Chiang in the summer of 1937, as the prospect of war with Japan loomed; on that occasion, Chiang had decided that the present danger was so great that further accommodation of Japan's demands was no longer possible. This time, however, his calculation had to be different; there was a possibility of talking to Moscow in 1945 in a way that had not been possible with Tokyo in 1937. Rather than go himself, Chiang decided to send Ching-kuo to Moscow as a personal representative.[18]

For now, Ching-kuo was still in Changchun, becoming increasingly gloomy. Like Wang in Chongqing, he attended a Soviet national day parade on 7 November. There were around 20,000 people there, but was "like a crowd of mourners in form." Ching-kuo then went on to a reception held by Malinovsky, where he finished off three glasses (of vodka, presumably), which led him to wake up with a raging thirst. Insomnia led him back to his old comfort zone of list-making: in the middle of the night, he made a list of where the negotiations needed resolution; it ended up eighteen points long. Many of the points were the same as before, complaining about the Soviet unwillingness to guarantee the safety of Nationalist troops or to help restore infrastructure, but new worries emerged too, such as the CCP infiltration of the Changchun police; on the CCP presence in the city in general, the Soviets baldly said that they could not help as, they sanctimoniously claimed, "they absolutely did not interfere in the field of domestic Chinese politics."[19]

By mid-November, Ching-kuo's health was under further pressure: "Recently my heart has felt troubled, my stomach and mouth aren't well, and I can't eat much of anything." He was also distressed by the violent behaviour of the Russian occupiers, which was similar to their behaviour in parts of Europe that they had conquered. Soviet troops were scouring buildings for money and alcohol. "From this we can know the true face of the Russian army," he noted bitterly. "They have smashed and destroyed all of the houses. This is their so-called 'war.'"[20]

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[17] WJSR, 9 Nov. 1945, 746.
[18] WJSR, 9 Nov. 1945, 746.
[19] 8 Nov. 1945, JJGRJ, 144-5.
[20] 11 Nov. 1945, JJGRJ, 147.

Meanwhile, his father was becoming increasingly concerned that any plan to recapture the Northeast would not succeed. He talked of the plan as "using a dead horse as if it were a live horse" (that is, making out as if it were practical when it was not), but instead suggested concentrating on recovering China south of the wall and Inner Mongolia, and only then turning back to the Northeast.[21] Yet the overall intention was clear: "we cannot let them have an excuse to create a second puppet Manchukuo of pure CCP puppets."[22] China was not then the more clearly bordered and defined state that it became under Mao after 1949. It was still a fluid, geographically vulnerable entity; the fear of a "second Manchukuo," a client state that had only ceased to exist three months before, felt real. On 14 November, Chiang proposed moving the military headquarters from Changchun to Shanhaiguan. Making such a preemptive move, he argued, was like "the decision between 3 and 5 May 1928 to withdraw temporarily from Ji'nan" – or indeed "dealing with the Japanese from start to finish." The strategic retreat was part of Chiang's repertoire, as was historical precedent.[23] Returning to ideas from the Northern Expedition and the war against Japan, when his tactics has been successful, was a comfortable analogy for him. But analogy was not always useful in a world where the geopolitics had changed, and tactics had to change as well.

Now Chiang's government was trying to bluff in a dangerous situation. Wang told the Soviet ambassador Apollon Petrov that the CCP occupation of Yingkou meant that the Chinese government "has no choice but to rethink the whole question of the recovery of the Northeast."[24] Yet in a private meeting between Chiang, Wang, Xiong and the top military leaders, the group discussed withdrawing the 400 men of the Changchun garrison to Shanhaiguan, at the border between the Northeast and intramural China. Wang stuck to his position, arguing that "we should use all our powers to avoid a split with the USSR." If they failed in this, then "within a few months, an army of several hundred thousand CCP troops would arise, equipped with Japanese arms, to fight a civil war with us."[25]

Over the next fortnight or so, Chiang, Soong and Wang plotted to find a way to deal with the Soviets. With a faux-helpfulness which was belied by the Russian arrogance that Ching-kuo had observed in Changchun, the Soviets declared themselves willing to help deploy troops at the airports, and proposed that "Soviet troops can extend for one or two months to help… recovery."[26] On 18 November, a special Sunday meeting of Chiang and his advisers discussed an extension of the Soviet presence until 3 January of the coming year. "Finally everyone agreed," Wang noted, as the previous

[21] Wang, "Guogong," 522.
[22] Wang, "Guogong," 522.
[23] Wang, "Guogong," 523.
[24] WSJR, 13 Nov. 1945, 747.
[25] WSJR, 14 Nov. 1945, 747.
[26] WSJR, 17 Nov. 1945, 748.

position on an extension of the Soviet occupation was reversed, but added that the military still wanted to attack Jinzhou from Shanhaiguan in due course, and to "decide" the question of Suiyuan.[27]

To make matters more complex, there was still a small but influential leftist voice in the Nationalist party, led by Sun Fo, who argued for a policy of relative closeness to both the USSR and the CCP.[28] Wang was clear in his diary that this was not his position; his desire for compromise was pragmatic, not ideological. "In form," he wrote, they should maintain a discussion with the CCP. But the real trigger for change could only be "a good turn in the international situation." The "high-pressure" activities of the USSR were a major obstacle to progress, as they were inspiring the CCP to practice "Power Polities" (sic) – the latter term was one Wang placed in English in his diary.[29]

The Chinese and Soviet sides agreed on various measures to try to calm things on the ground temporarily. At the Supreme Defence Council on 27 November 1945, Wang advocated sticking to the terms of the Sino-Soviet Treaty despite the growing difficulties. Wang was also becoming increasingly alarmed at reports of student demonstrations at local universities and high schools against the details of the Treaty. Still, he reflected, "I think that whether the Northeast becomes a second Outer Mongolia, or Manchukuo number 2" was a consequence of whether the government could stay calm and firm. And he noted that a new intervention might just change things for good. US Ambassador Patrick Hurley resigned on 29 November. But "President Truman has decided to send General Marshall to China as a special envoy."[30]

Despite the increasing sense of concern in Nationalist ranks, the CCP were not yet confident of the future. They realized that they were increasingly facing an enemy with strong capacity to defeat them and an even stronger willingness to try. As Wang Chaoguang argues, Lin Biao's Communist forces were still quite scattered, and many troops were new and untrained, coming from regions below the Wall and still unsure of themselves and their relationship with each other. They also had insufficient weapons and ammunition; they were unsure of the topography in the region; and their communications were dysfunctional. Worse still, the local population was hardly enthusiastic about the CCP presence.[31]

Lin Biao cabled Party Central on 17 November, declaring:

> *Right now, our troops should avoid being attacked by the enemy… We should prepare to leave Jinzhou, and [go] 2-300 li north of there. After the enemy have extended themselves and dispersed themselves, then we can choose their*

[27] WSJR, 18 Nov. 1945, 748.
[28] WSJR, 23 Nov. 1945, 749-50.
[29] WSJR, 23 Nov. 1945, 749-50.
[30] WSJR, 27, 28, 29 Nov. 1945, 750.
[31] Wang, "Guogong," 527.

weak spots and suddenly attack them. But I do not plan rashly to throw myself into battle.[32]

On 23 November, Party Central cabled back in agreement (and under pressure from the Soviets, who did not want a confrontation at that point). They went on to demand that the CCP armies must be retrained. On 7 December, Party Central declared that the Nationalists "had not yet met serious resistance," and that Communist troops under Lin Biao in the Northeast "had not experienced proper preparation, and were almost not capable of doing battle."[33]

Chiang was delighted, observing that the blockade of all of the Nationalists' sea routes was "the major key to our revolution's defeat." But when "the Communist bandits scuttled to the northeast, opening the door to entering the Northeast returned." On 26 November, the Nationalist armies occupied Jinzhou. By early December, Chiang and his commanders were trying to balance their key hopes and fears: to find a way to recapture the Northeast and remove the CCP, but also to make sure that they did not provoke the Soviets. On 12 December, Bai Chongxi told Chiang: "The Northeast and Beiping-Tianjin are as close as lips and teeth… therefore if we wish to protect the Northeast, we have to secure Beiping and Tianjin. If we want to secure Beiping and Tianjin, then we have to firm up Chahar and Rehe… Because of transportation difficulties, there is no way to increase or supplement [troop numbers], and the pacification of [China below the wall] has not yet been resolved."[34] Meanwhile, Bai suggested, they should attack Chengde and hold Rehe. Chiang agreed, telling Du Yuming that by holding Rehe, they could cut the CCP off from China below the Wall. (Other members of the administration, notably Chang Kia-ngau, disagreed.)

The end of the year seemed to be a moment for a pause, yet Wang knew that there were still some hard choices to make; he told a group from the party's left and right, including Sun Fo and Chen Bulei, that China would soon have to recognize Outer Mongolia's independence, "to show that we keep to treaties."[35] On 4 December, Wang noted that there had been a student uprising in Kunming: their slogan is "oppose civil war." "Those in control [of the uprising]," he declared, "were the CCP." But as before, the conclusion Wang drew from this was much more cautious than that of the hardliners such as Chen Lifu and Chen Bulei, who wanted to crack down ruthlessly. "From this, we can see that the CCP problem is in the end a political problem," he noted, "and you can't use pure force to resolve it. If the Chinese government splits from the CCP and USSR decisively, it won't be easy to make out the right and wrong." He concluded:

[32] Wang, "Guogong," 527.
[33] Wang, "Guogong," 527.
[34] Wang, "Guogong," 529.
[35] WSJR, 2 Dec. 1945, 752.

"This is my biggest reason for my caution on the Northeast question."[36] Over the next few days, his balancing act continued. Wang advised against a full economic negotiation with the USSR until the Northeast had been recovered, yet in a meeting with the Soviet ambassador, he confirmed that China would recognize Outer Mongolia by mid-January, as long as Soviet troops in Inner Mongolia were withdrawn by the end of the year. He also confirmed an extension to the Soviet troop presence in the Northeast.[37] Despite the blatant rigging of the referendum on Mongolian independence (which was supposedly won on 20 October 1945 by 487,409 votes to zero), Wang made it clear to colleagues that there was no choice but to acknowledge the loss of Mongolia: this border dispute was not up for negotiation, but it made the resolution of the Northeastern question even more urgent.

By the end of 1945, most of the political oxygen in the government was being sucked up by the arrival of General George C. Marshall. Having spent much of the previous four months thinking about relations with the Soviet Union, Wang would now have to turn his mind to the United States. Chiang told Wang that at dinner on 21 December, Marshall had said that Truman wanted to assist China, "but that he can only do it with the support of American public opinion."[38] At the same time, the Nationalists had to field a series of requests from the Soviets to confirm a plan for economic cooperation, which they were determined to avoid until the Soviets had left the Northeast. Meanwhile, Chiang told Ching-kuo that the point of the latter's trip to Moscow was to "reduce [Stalin's] suspicion of the Nationalists, not to do concrete negotiations" and "on the CCP problem, explain Mr. Chiang's policy and attitude."[39] The next phase of negotiations was being set out.

The Meaning of Autumn 1945

What does Ching-kuo's stay in Changchun in the autumn of 1945 tell us about the wider choices that historical actors made at that time? First, it would be wrong to suggest that Ching-kuo's own choices were decisive. He was in the region at the behest of his father, and was always aware that he would need to account for decisions. Nonetheless, it was clear that he felt a tremendous sense of responsibility, not just because of the task that was before him (helping to create a sovereign China), but also because of the particular skills and experience that he had, in particular the understanding he had gained during his long period in the USSR.

[36] WSJR, 4 Dec. 1945, 752.
[37] WSJR, 7 Dec. 1945, 753.
[38] WSJR, 8 Dec. 1945, 753.
[39] WSJR, 24 Dec. 1945, 756.

Yet even Ching-kuo's limited choices were further influenced by other actors. While Ching-kuo was most usefully employed having to liaise with China's most troublesome international partner, the USSR, Wang Shijie's perspective reminds us that the Soviet connection was only one part of a spectrum of issues. Whereas Ching-kuo had to concern himself with the Soviets' behavior in the Northeast, Wang had to assess it in the wider context of the emergent Cold War globally. He had had the opportunity to observe Stalin at close quarters in Moscow, but also Molotov during the Foreign Ministers' Conference in London, and knew that there would be little chance of a generous settlement from the USSR. Furthermore, the Northeastern question was one of a series of increasingly intractable border problems ranging from the sure loss of Outer Mongolia to the uncertainty over the fate of Xinjiang. Ching-kuo was a shrewd observer and a key player in the dangerous and complex negotiations of autumn 1945. But like China itself, he was by no means master of his own fate.