

The London School of Economics and Political Science

The Threats We Face: British Imperial Defence and the Far East, 1925-1934

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Abstract

From 1925 to 1934, the British Empire in the Far East was menaced by two principal threats. The first – Chinese nationalism, alongside and often in partnership with international communism – was transnational in nature, attempting to make not a revision to the Far Eastern status quo but a revolution in the politics of the entire region. The second – a rising and increasingly militaristic Japan – was international in nature, intent on upsetting the regional balance of power that Britain had helped police for a generation. This thesis makes several arguments. First, that assessments and understandings of British imperial defence and strategy in the era, which heretofore have focused predominately on the international threat of Japan at the expense of the transnational threat of Chinese (and other indigenous forms of) nationalism and communism, must be reframed around a broader understanding of imperial defence efforts against both. Second, that Britain's responses to these twin threats were dissonant. The crisis of Chinese Nationalism from 1925-1927, while transnational in nature, was also an international challenge to the status quo, and thus unique in the way that it afforded Britain the opportunity to synchronize and leverage tools and strategies, employed by both policymakers in the imperial core and officials in the imperial periphery, to counter it. The transformation of that threat from 1927 into a purely transnational challenge allowed Britain to simultaneously soften, with respect to moderate Chinese nationalists, and sharpen, with respect to radical Chinese nationalists and communists, these strategies. This vibrant, nuanced, forward leaning, and often effective campaign against communism and what it saw as malign forces of nationalism coexisted alongside Britain's static and ambivalent efforts in understanding Japan both before and after it emerged as the principal international threat to the British-led Far Eastern status quo in the early 1930s. This dissonance both complicates and builds upon existing narratives of imperial crisis and decline and shows Britain continuing, at times, to exert agency and leadership and shape the regional environment well into the 1930s. Third, and finally, this thesis will demonstrate that such dissonance and complexity more accurately depict the realities, experiences, efforts, and achievements – or lack thereof – of imperial defence officials of all stripes, from the members of the Committee of Imperial Defence in London to the inspectors of the Straits Settlements Police Force in Singapore.

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Introduction

Our strategical security in the Far East may be considered menaced in two ways: –

- (a) By the activities of Bolshevist Russia among the native people of the Far East, and the unrest and upheavals caused thereby...
- (b) By Japan.

The first named danger is by far the greater as regards its imminence and possibly in its ultimate effects.

- General Sir George Milne, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, January 1927¹

In early 1927, British policymakers faced a mounting crisis in the Far East. Chinese nationalist armies, under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek, were marching north from Canton towards the Yangtze River and the heart of British interests in China. Supported by Soviet advisors and the Communist International, the forces of Chinese nationalism were driven by a desire to both reunify their country and expel those foreigners, chiefly British, whom so many felt were responsible for despoiling it. At the same time, in Malaya and elsewhere across the

¹ The National Archives, Kew (TNA), CAB5/6, CP288, Permanent British Garrisons in the Far East, Worthington-Evans Memorandum, 21 January 1927.

region, the forces of communism and indigenous nationalism were on a metaphorical march of their own. Galvanized by Comintern propaganda, a rousing spirit of nationalism that transcended imperial spaces, and a vocal and engaged Chinese diaspora, a radical nationalist and socialist underground was emerging to confront western colonial rule across the region. From Afghanistan to Singapore to Manchuria and nearly all spaces between, this was the threat to Britain's Far Eastern empire that so 'menaced' Milne and his contemporaries.

At the same time, others in London by early 1927 had been observing the maturation of Japan into a regional power, one capable of either supporting or thwarting British interests either in China or the wider region. While many applauded the growth of Britain's former ally into a partner and responsible power, some – particularly in the Admiralty – had been wary of Japanese power from as early as 1919 if not before. Continual Admiralty studies on the makeup and posture of the Japanese armed forces over the course of the decade and deliberations, as early as 1921, weighing the value of potential allies and partners in any future conflict with Japan spoke to the way in which, for many, the latter's growth represented a grave threat to British interests.² Indeed, it was the latent menace of Japan, more than anything else, that drove Britain in the years after the First World War to push for the construction of major a naval base in Singapore and the commitment of a capital fleet to the region in times of crisis.

This moment in time reflects something, then, of the nature of the challenges to Britain's Far Eastern empire that were most prevalent in the minds of British policymakers and officials in the 1920s. Britain's choices on whether and how to respond to those challenges would be the

² TNA, ADM223/815, Confidential Admiralty Monthly Intelligence Report, No. 95, 15 April 1927; ADM1/27401, Advantages and Disadvantages of Having Certain Countries as Allies in a War Against Japan, 9 May 1921.

central driver of British imperial defence efforts in the interwar Far East between 1925 and 1934 and is the subject of this study. The first threat to present itself, Chinese nationalism, emerged in the early years of the twentieth century but metastasized in the mid-1920s, propelled by political chaos in China and a timely partnership with Bolshevist Russia and its international communist attendants. This threat was *transnational* in nature, in that it attempted, both in China itself and through the Chinese diaspora in the states of what is now called Southeast Asia, to not merely revise the Far Eastern status quo but overthrow it entirely. The transnational and cross-border nature of this ideology bred multiple threats to British interests not only in China but across the entire Far East. The second threat, that of a rising Japan, was ever-present in the minds of many in Whitehall. Though in abeyance through most of the 1920s, it always remained a strategic consideration, both informing and warping British diplomatic, naval, and economic efforts throughout the decade. From 1931, however, Japan engaged in a series of increasingly aggressive and militaristic attacks upon the regional order. This threat was *international* in nature, in that Japan, an established power, became intent on upsetting the territorial status quo that Britain had helped police for a generation. The challenge was, largely, a conventional political, military, economic, and diplomatic one.

The policy decisions that guided the British response to these threats represent, however, only half of the story of British imperial defence in the interwar Far East. Equally important and compelling is the way in which imperial officials and colonial administrators navigated the on-the-ground realities within the region and oversaw, usually with little specific direction, the implementation of those policies. These efforts, in both London and the imperial periphery, communicated and framed what kind of empire Britain wanted for itself in the interwar Far East and how it interpreted both the regional situation and its own strengths and weaknesses. If Milne

aptly characterized the threats as understood at the time, then this study seeks to understand how and why Britain responded to them in the ways that it did.

Narrative Structure

This thesis makes several arguments. First, that any assessment of British imperial defence and strategy in the era, which heretofore have focused predominately on the international threat of Japan at the expense of the transnational threat of Chinese (and other indigenous forms of) nationalism and communism, must be reframed around a broader understanding of Britain's imperial defence efforts against both. As will be explored, too often historians and chroniclers of the era have centered their works around either questions of traditional military, naval, and diplomatic strategies and events on the one hand or on questions of imperial administration, policing, and national identity on the other. Consequently, they have created a false distinction between those issues and strategies interpreted as international and those issues and strategies interpreted as transnational. Traditional accounts of British imperial defence and strategy exclude the latter to focus on the former. This thesis will confront this directly and put forward a broader interpretation of imperial defence by following British efforts throughout 1925-1934 to counter both the transnational and international threats. It will also cast aside any teleological understandings of the period as neatly nestled within a pathway to the Second World War or decolonization. It will work, rather, to explore and assess the events and decisions of the day in their own right.

Second, it will argue that Britain's responses to these twin threats were dissonant. The danger posed by Chinese nationalism, while fundamentally transnational in nature throughout the

period in question, reached its crescendo from 1925-1927 as a crisis in which both transnational and international elements challenged the status quo. It was, thus, unique in the way that it afforded Britain the opportunity to synchronize tools and strategies, employed by both policymakers at the imperial core and the colonial, diplomatic, and military officials in the imperial periphery, to counter it. The transformation of that threat from 1927 into a purely transnational challenge allowed Britain to simultaneously soften its approach towards moderate Chinese nationalists inside and outside of China and to sharpen it with respect to radical nationalists and communists throughout the region. This thesis will argue that the campaign against communism and what were seen as the malign forces of radical nationalism was nuanced, forward looking, and often effective. It will also show how and why this energetic campaign existed concurrently alongside Britain's failed effort to counter the rise of an aggressive and militaristic Japan, the era's principal international threat. This dissonance, and the fact that two seemingly contradictory findings can be simultaneously true, both complicates and builds upon existing narratives of imperial crisis and decline.

Third, this thesis will demonstrate that dissonance and complexity most accurately depict the realities, experiences, efforts, and achievements – or lack thereof – of imperial defence officials of all stripes. The success or failure of particular policies or efforts was dependent upon the performance and decision-making of particular individuals. From the members of the Committee of Imperial Defence in London to the inspectors of the Straits Settlements Police Force in Singapore, British officialdom in this era was of mixed quality, ranging from intelligent, focused, and farsighted to ignorant, complacent, and vainglorious. This thesis, therefore, tells a story of both success and failure, as officials struggled to meet the multiple threats presented across the region.

Following an examination of the existing literature, Chapter One will explore the British Empire and the imperial Far East from roughly 1922 to 1925. It will introduce the structures of British policymaking and empire, from London to the colonies. This was a turbulent, if understudied, period of Far Eastern international history, and one in which many of the patterns and paradigms central to this study were either established or became more firmly rooted in the region. These include the ongoing political instability in China, the struggle of British policymakers in London to settle on a strategy for defending British interests, the emergence of a Chinese nationalism that became, to the British, a malignant presence in Southeast Asia, the growth of the Comintern network, and the birth of internal British as well as cooperative imperial policing structures, centered on Singapore, to counter these tendencies.

Chapter Two will explore British imperial defence efforts throughout the 1925-1927 crisis of Chinese nationalism. Too often delimited in the historiography simply as the January-April 1927 crisis surrounding the fate of Shanghai and British concessions along the Yangtze River, this chapter will demonstrate both the depth, from 1925, and the breadth, across the entire Far East, of a larger crisis and the creative and often effective ways that British officials responded to it. It will argue that Britain's responses to this crisis were innovative and broadly successful and represent the high point of British imperial defence efforts in the interwar Far East.

Chapter Three will examine the years 1927-1931, in which the transnational and international threats to the British Far East were, from the perspective of policymakers in London at least, more muted. These were, however, years of transition. British efforts to counter communism and what it saw as extreme Chinese nationalism became more nuanced and deliberate, while at the same time economic constraints at home weakened the ability of British

policymakers to shape events and respond to crisis. These years witnessed the entrenchment of patterns and ways of thinking that set the stage for the tumultuous years that followed.

Chapter Four will focus on Britain's dual imperial defence efforts from 1931 to 1934. First, it will examine the climax of Britain's interwar confrontation with the Comintern in the Far East and the continued maturation of efforts to counter the transnational threat. Second, it will explore Britain's ability to understand and respond to the international threat of Japanese militarism in the era of the attacks on Manchuria and Shanghai. The coverage of these efforts in a single chapter is deliberately meant to highlight the divergent approaches, philosophies, and outcomes that British officials simultaneously, and counter-intuitively, found themselves in as our period in question draws to a close. It will in tandem unpack contrasting British responses and make sense of Britain's contradictory experience of imperial defence in the era.

To help navigate the story in a comprehensible way, this thesis will touch chapter-by-chapter upon two developments in colonial Singapore, the seat of the Straits Settlements colony and center of colonial Malaya, which correlate in time to the period in question. Each relates, respectively, to British efforts to counter its two chief threats. The first, the police organization later to be named the Straits Settlements Special Branch, was created in the years after World War I. As will be explored in full in Chapter One, it grew to become by the end of this period the central instrument through which the British Empire worked to counter communist and malignant nationalist movements in the region. The second, the long-mooted Singapore Naval Base, was the linchpin of Britain's famous interwar 'Singapore Strategy.' Given their centrality to British imperial defence efforts, their proximity to one another in time and space, and their divergent paths of development and utility, the Singapore Special Branch and Singapore Naval Base are ideal guides to help readers make sense of British imperial defence choices and realities during

this period. As such, every chapter will conclude with a snapshot of each. For the purposes of this thesis, they will serve as our totems – figurative symbols and emblems representative of British priorities but also physical and literal manifestations of imperial defence efforts. In revisiting them at each stage of the narrative, this thesis seeks to provide and evaluate tangible, on the ground examples that demonstrated the realities of British imperial defence efforts.

A word on scope is appropriate here. This thesis examines British imperial defence efforts and experiences, from London to the furthest reaches of the Far East. In so doing, it is built upon British government and personal archives and sources that shed light on its strategic culture, colonial administration, and conceptions of empire. While international and interdisciplinary to a degree, this thesis does not purport to be a complete history of the ideological or intellectual movements or of the many complex issues and events roiling Far Eastern societies themselves, except as understood by British officials. It will not attempt, for instance, to fully unpack the convoluted relationship between nationalist and communist thought in China or the complexities of Dutch colonial rule in the Netherlands East Indies (NEI). In the same light, it will not attempt to reinterpret every instance of interwar British naval reform or the intricacies of legal discussions around extraterritoriality, except insofar as those subjects intruded into larger discussions of imperial defence. Additionally, though broad in geographic scope and inclusive of the highest levels of British policymaking, this thesis will not attempt to assess British efforts to formulate and execute any kind of world-encompassing grand strategy in the interwar period, a effort scholars far more capable than this one have undertaken.³ The

³ See N.H. Gibbs, *Grand Strategy. Volume I, Rearmament Policy* (United Kingdom Military Series, History of the Second World War, London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1976) for a foundational assessment and, for

historiographical discussion will introduce the reader to many of the outstanding works that delve into some of those specific subjects mentioned.

The author has chosen the years 1925-1934 deliberately. They are, in comparison to the years immediately following the First World War and immediately prior to the Second World War, understudied. Their relative distance from those titanic struggles mean that these years can be understood and appreciated in their own right rather than as mere corollaries to those preceding and succeeding events. This results in interpretations that challenge more mainstream orthodoxies. They are, archivally, of manageable size. From a historiographical perspective, these years, and the secondary literature concerning them, also represent the purest division of scholarly study – diplomatic and naval strategic thinking vis-à-vis Japan and the balance of power on one hand and the administration and internal policing of the colonies, especially Malaya as a sort of land that time forgot, on the other – on what this author considers to be a single subject: imperial defence. And they are cohesive in that they tell a single, compelling story of imperial defence that links Chinese nationalism and the May 30th Movement of the spring of 1925 with the 1934 conclusions of the Committee of Imperial Defence's Defence Requirements Sub-Committee, which reset British national and imperial defence priorities in the face of rising threats. There is, in short, much ground here fresh for reinterpretation.

Finally, although the term 'Far East' is something of an anachronism in the twenty-first century, its usage here is deliberate. It was, in the 1920s and 1930s, the term used by virtually all British policymakers and officials to describe the polities, politics, and cultures of the world east of British India and inner Eurasia. It connoted not only a region into and of itself but something

more a far more recent examination of the subject, David French, *Deterrence, Coercion, and Appeasement: British Grand Strategy, 1919-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

of an exotic space – remote and extremely distant from island Britain – into which Britons believed their culture, values, and life could be expressed and, in places, imposed upon the environment and those within it. In further following the conceptual framework of the era, this thesis will not seriously touch upon the British territories and interests in the island Pacific and will discuss the Dominions of Australia and New Zealand only insofar as they relate to overall British imperial defence efforts, which varied over time. British India, the second tentpole of the empire, appears for the way in which its administration, in London and Delhi, played a large role in the formulation of British strategic thinking, particularly with respect to the transnational threat of communism and indigenous nationalism.⁴ That being said, despite its important place within the empire, this narrative consciously moves east of India, as questions and issues relating to the Raj were, in the period, considered as distinct from those of the Far East. This is, rather, a story centered on the British imperial defence apparatus and the way in which it related to and understood China, Japan, and the indigenous populations of the region over which western and imperial actors sought to operate, and within which competing ideas and influences struggled for predominance.

The Historiography of British Imperial Defence in the Interwar Far East

This narrative, while being clear about the existing gaps or weaknesses that scholarly literature on British imperial defence efforts in the interwar Far East have left us, seeks to bring

⁴ See Thomas Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Area, 1860-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), for the most complete assessment of the role of India within the larger British Empire in this period.

disparate and too-often distinct historiographies together rather than cast them individually as flawed. That these historiographies have taken divergent paths is not in itself entirely surprising, for the existence of two different strands of thinking about imperial defence begins to be evident in the contemporary records from the 1920s and 1930s, albeit only slowly. Though Milne's conclusion on the nature of the dual threats facing the British Far East was self-evident and went unchallenged by ministers and officials, it is less of an outlier than might be imagined by reading the voluminous historical record of interwar imperial defence. This has focused largely on the international threat of Japan as the foremost issue and concern of imperial defence officials at the expense of the transnational threat of Chinese nationalism and international communism. As an example of this practice, those who examine the official 1926 and 1930 Imperial Defence Reviews, drafted by the Committee of Imperial Defence's Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee and approved by the Cabinet, will find that neither contains any mention of communism or indigenous nationalism among their primary or secondary concerns.⁵ And yet, a careful review of Cabinet and CID records at the same time shows, particularly in the mid-to-late 1920s, the breadth of documents prepared for and assessed by the Cabinet and CID on the questions of Soviet expansion and Comintern subversion in the Far East. These are replete with red-stained maps showing the expanding tentacles of communist penetration and the extent of the

⁵ TNA, CAB4/15, CP701, A Review of Imperial Defence Policy, 1926, by the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee, 22 June 1926; CAB4/20, CP1009, A Review of Imperial Defence Policy, 1930, by the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee, 29 July 1930.

transnational ideological challenge facing Britain.⁶ The historical record, then, demonstrates the validity of Milne's assertion and understanding of the dual-natured threat that the empire faced.

Although policymakers in the interwar era understood the dual nature of these threats, it is also accurate to say that, absent moments of crisis, they viewed efforts to counter the transnational threat as primarily ones for the colonies to manage through internal policing and colonial administration. Continued efforts to counter communism and Chinese nationalism throughout the region, despite remaining ongoing for years, were, given their local management and light resource requirements, not necessarily germane to CID debates on service budgets, multi-ocean naval resourcing, and deterrence and high politics. The CID was, after all, the forum for policymaking at the highest level of empire. Its debates primarily dealt with issues of imperial defence insofar as they related to questions and decisions of resource allocation. Those efforts, chiefly naval and military, that worked to deter and counter conventional threats were resource intensive and, thus, central to all such debates. The raising and provisioning of battalions and the commissioning and deployment of battleships to meet international threats at great remove were, as issues of resource allocation, central to the political and fiscal discussions that dominated the imperial core. At the same time, adjustments to the policing structures or the creation of information-sharing agreements with other colonial powers to meet transnational threats were not matters of resource allocation. They were, thus, largely absent from the London-centric traditional historical record of imperial defence from the spring of 1927 forwards. The failure to understand efforts to counter the transnational threat as central to imperial defence,

⁶ See TNA, CAB4 (CID Miscellaneous Memoranda) for the complete list of reports and memoranda presented to the CID for review and WO32/5916 and WO32/21122 for examples of maps presented to policymakers from the mid-1920s to the early-1930s on the communist threat.

then, was not of interwar-era policymakers but, as will be shown, historians from the 1970s forward who misinterpreted the nature of British imperial defence efforts through an overly narrow reading of archival, chiefly Cabinet and CID, records.

The division in the historical record that this produced, unfortunately, has clouded the historiographical representation of British imperial defence efforts in the interwar Far East. This divergence has its roots in the false notion that the CID was synonymous with imperial defence writ large and that imperial defence efforts were largely confined to the strategic and international, rather than the transnational, space. Such a narrow interpretation of what Milne and his peers understood to be a widely encompassing subject misrepresents the totality of British efforts. Scholars, of course, make choices about where and how to conduct their research and base their conclusions. As has been mentioned, most chroniclers of imperial defence efforts have based their studies on the London-centric traditional historical record, for example the records of the Cabinet Office, Committee of Imperial Defence, Foreign Office (especially FO 371), War Office (especially WO 106), and Admiralty (especially ADM 116). The historiographical record related to interwar diplomacy and strategy, as well as Far Eastern naval and military preparedness, for instance, is based almost completely upon such rich sources. On the other side, scholars concerned with what this thesis refers to as the transnational threat, or those subjects – imperial policing and administration, the emergence of indigenous national identities and ideological change – related to it, do not typically work to place British efforts, usually planned and coordinated at the imperial periphery, within a broader conception of imperial defence and strategy. Put simply, if too many scholars have given short shrift to the Colonial Office records as they relate to imperial defence, those exploring questions of imperial administration and national identity would be rewarded for placing their own narratives within the structures of

imperial defense that the Cabinet and Committee of Imperial Defence records lay out with fullness and precision. Regardless, archival and intellectual self-selection over generations of scholarship has perpetuated the notion that imperial defence efforts fell squarely within the international realm and forgotten how central and real were those efforts by officials and administrators to defend the empire from the transnational threat.

This has resulted in the creation of parallel literatures and understandings that, for the most part, are told separately and in ways that Milne and his colleagues may not have considered useful. As an example, in his otherwise excellent, *Britain's Declining Empire: The Road to Decolonization, 1918-1968*, Ronald Hyam's discussion of British efforts to shape interwar geopolitics – touching on policies of appeasement, the Singapore Naval Base, and Anglo-American bilateral security relations – is treated separately and as distinct from his exploration of the cross-cutting imperial realities such as racism, nationalism, and idealism that suffused the empire and colored British imperial administrative efforts throughout the period.⁷ Hyam's narrative choice exemplifies the unconscious way that too many scholars have looked with unfocused eyes at the convergence and correlation of international and transnational phenomena affecting the empire. This division in the literature has created not only parallel historiographies of Britain in the interwar Far East but parallel dialogues of empire itself.

This is problematic, for two main reasons. First, the literature on imperial defence that ignores Britain's efforts to counter transnational threats robs those on the periphery of their own agency. This thesis aims to demonstrate the flawed nature of that line of reasoning and illustrate both the agency that officials on the imperial periphery enjoyed and the many ways in which

⁷ Ronald Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire: The Road to Decolonization, 1918-1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 90-93.

their efforts were central to accomplishing imperial objectives, stated or unstated. If recent scholarship has begun the hard work of bringing marginalized voices of empire into the light, then those examining the more traditional history of statecraft owe it to our own historical subjects to best assess where agency, ability, and effect lay. Second, dividing a story in two results in only half of it being told at any one time. Holistic assessments of imperial defence based on solely British responses to the international threat, while not wholly inaccurate, are at best incomplete. They leave out whole sections of historiography that are necessary to understanding some of the ways that empires functioned. While not apologizing for, or mythologizing, empire, this thesis will also not run from the successes that interwar British officials in the Far East enjoyed, or from conclusions that might complicate and build upon our deepening understanding of imperial crisis in this time.

This process of historiographical siloing, on both sides, has resulted in compelling but incomplete narratives of empire, one centered in the imperial core and one centered in the imperial periphery. As a result, many scholars of imperial strategy on the one hand and imperial administration on the other have passed up opportunities to create a more comprehensive understanding of British imperial defence in the interwar Far East. This thesis, reliant upon records from all the above, hopes to tell a more nuanced and balanced story of agency and empire in the interwar years inclusive of each of these paradigms.

This review will touch on a limited number of works within the historiographies related to the British Empire in the interwar Far East, each too large to be discussed in full here. Scholarly work on the international threat emerged in the early 1970s following the release of archival material from the interwar period. This is the London-centric narrative that largely explores the debates and decisions around British disarmament and rearmament, the ill-fated

‘Singapore Strategy,’ and how officials in various institutions within Whitehall balanced security concerns in the Far East, especially after 1931, with the economic headwinds created by the Great Depression and the reemergence of a European threat.⁸ Alternative to this is a series of internally focused historiographies that center on the practical administration of western colonial rule in the interwar Far East.⁹ Less London-centric, these works are grounded in the lived

⁸ Several of the monographs in this first wave of the field include, among many others, William Roger Louis, *British Strategy in the Far East, 1919-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971); Correlli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1972); Bradford Lee, *Britain and the Sino-Japanese War, 1937-1939: A Study in the Dilemmas of British Decline* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973); Ann Trotter, *Britain and East Asia, 1933-1937* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Peter Lowe, *Great Britain and the Origins of the Pacific War: A Study of British Policy in East Asia, 1937-1941* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); G.C. Peden, *British Rearmament and the Treasury, 1932-1939* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1979); David McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, 1919-1942* (London: Macmillan, 1979); Haggie, *Britannia at Bay: The Defence of the British Empire against Japan, 1931-1941*; Arthur Marder, *Old Friends, New Enemies: The Royal Navy and the Imperial Japanese Navy, Strategic Illusion, 1936-1941* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); and Ian Hamill, *The Strategic Illusion: The Singapore Strategy and the Defence of Australia and New Zealand, 1919-1942* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1981).

⁹ See, among many others, Richard Aldrich, *The Key to the South: Britain, the United States and Thailand during the Approach of the Pacific War, 1929-1942* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Ian Brown, “The British Merchant Community in Singapore and Japanese Commercial Expansion in the 1930s,” in Shinya Sugiyama and Milagros Guerrero (eds.) *International Commercial Rivalry in Southeast Asia in the Interwar Period* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, 1994), 111-132; Richard J. Popplewell, *Intelligence and Imperial Defence: British Intelligence and the Defence of the Indian Empire, 1904-1924* (London: Routledge, 1995); T.R. Moreman, “‘Small Wars’ and ‘Imperial Policing’: The British Army and the Theory and Practice of Colonial Warfare in the British Empire, 1919-1939,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 19, 4 (1996): 105-131; John W. Cell,

experience of those in the region and interact closely with other historical narratives that permeate the record: national histories of colonial (and post-colonial) states; and the formation of national identity in communities across the region, especially with respect to the influence of international communism and Pan-Asianism on that process.¹⁰

“Colonial Rule,” in *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Vol. IV, The Twentieth Century*, eds. Judith M. Brown and William R. Louis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999): 232-254; Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam & America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Ban Kah Choon, *Absent History: The Untold Story of Special Branch Operations in Singapore, 1915-1942* (Singapore: Horizon Books, 2001); Nicholas Tarling, *Nationalism in Southeast Asia: ‘If the People are With Us,’* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Metcalf, *Imperial Connections*; Frances Gouda with Thijs Brocades Zaalberg, *American Visions of the Netherlands East Indies/Indonesia: US Foreign Policy and Indonesian Nationalism, 1920-1949* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014); Heather Streets-Salter, “The Noulens Affair in East and Southeast Asia,” *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 21, 4 (2014): 394-414; Mary S. Barton, *Counterterrorism between the Wars: An International History, 1919-1937* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); and Geoffrey C. Gunn, *Ho Chi Minh in Hong Kong: Anti-Colonial Networks, Extradition and the Rule of Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

¹⁰ Among numerous works within wide fields of scholarly literature on these subjects, see William J. Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam, 1900-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976); Eduard J.M. Schmutzer, *Dutch Colonial Policy and the Search for Identity in Indonesia, 1920-1931* (Leiden: Brill, 1977); Benjamin A. Batson, *The End of the Absolute Monarchy in Siam* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984); Yong, C.F., “Origins and Development of the Malay Communist Movement,” *Modern Asian Studies* 25, 4 (1991), 625-648; Benjamin A. Batson, “Nationalism and Pro-Japanese Activities in Thailand,” in Sugiyama and Guerrero (eds.), *International Commercial Rivalry in Southeast Asia in the Interwar Period* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1994), 188-213; Anthony Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya: Contesting Nationalism and the Expansion of the Public Sphere* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Jan Aart Scholte, “The International Construction of Indonesian Nationhood, 1930-1950,” in *Imperial Policy and Southeast*

Whether consciously or not, much of the literature in both camps serves to maintain the self-imposed and arbitrary boundaries that exist between those exploring international and transnational threats to empire. Individual works nest, respectively, within the same comfortable disciplinary boundaries, e.g., diplomatic history, military history, cultural history, or post-colonial history, that most historians themselves comfortably reside within. These sub-disciplines, with their own cultures, methods, and priorities, utilize different archival records and often focus their inquiries at opposite ends of imperium – London, for those exploring diplomacy and high strategy, and the colonial periphery, for those exploring the practical methods of colonial rule and indigenous responses to it. Before continuing its own narrative, this thesis will seek to explore some of the broad themes of these fields and assess the degree to which scholars have been able to step back and imagine the British Empire in the interwar Far East within the broader framework as laid out by Milne. It will also argue that, while historiographical divisions have hardened in some places, other scholars, in keeping with wider disciplinary trends in international and transnational history, have begun to break down some of these barriers in

Asian Nationalism, 1930-1957, eds. Hans Antlöv and Stein Tønnesson (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1995), 191-226; Tim Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Nicholas Tarling, *Imperialism in Southeast Asia: A Fleeting, Passing Phase* (London: Routledge, 2001); Robert Bickers, “Shanghailanders and Others: British Communities in China, 1843-1957,” in *Settlers and Expatriates: Britons Over the Seas*, ed. Robert Bickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 269-301; Tim Harper, “Singapore, 1915, and the Birth of the Asian Underground,” *Modern Asian Studies* 47, 6 (2013): 1782-1811; Takeshi Onimaru, “Shanghai Connection: The Construction and Collapse of the Comintern Network in East and Southeast Asia,” *Southeast Asian Studies* 5, 1 (2016): 115-133; and Anna Belogurova, *The Nanyang Revolution: The Comintern and Chinese Networks in Southeast Asia, 1890-1957* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2019).

efforts to better understand contingency and causality in this complex environment. As such, this section will conclude by looking at works that have begun to illustrate more effectively the integrated nature of the transnational and international threats that the British Empire faced in the interwar Far East. This represents the historiographical lineage that this thesis hopes to reinforce and build upon.¹¹

¹¹ For those which most successfully do this, see C.F. Yong and R.B. McKenna, *The Kuomintang Movement in British Malaya, 1912-1949* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1990); Tarling, *The Fall of Imperial Britain in Southeast Asia*; Anne Foster, “French, Dutch, British, and US Reactions to the Nghê-Tĩnh Rebellion of 1930-1931,” in *Imperial Policy and Southeast Asian Nationalism, 1930-1957*, eds. Hans Antlöv and Stein Tønnesson (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1995), 63-82; Antony Best, “Constructing an Image: British Intelligence and Whitehall's Perception of Japan, 1931-39,” *Intelligence and National Security* 11, 3 (1996): 403-423; A.J. Stockwell, “Imperialism and Nationalism in South-East Asia,” in *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Vol. IV, The Twentieth Century*, eds. Judith M. Brown and William R. Louis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999): 466-489; Antony Clayton, “‘Deceptive Might’: Imperial Defence and Security, 1900-1968,” in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Twentieth Century*, eds. Judith Brown and William Roger Louis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999): 280-305; Antony Best, *British Intelligence and the Japanese Challenge in Asia, 1914-1941* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Orest Babij, ‘The Making of Imperial Defence Policy in Britain, 1926-1934,’ Unpublished DPhil. thesis (University of Oxford, 2003); Martin Thomas, *The French Empire Between the Wars: Imperialism, Politics and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005); Anne Foster, *Projections of Power: The United States and Europe in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919-1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Antony Best, “‘We Are Virtually at War with Russia’: Britain and the Soviet Menace in East Asia, 1923-40,” *Cold War History* 12, 2 (2012): 205-225; Martin Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order: Police, Workers and Protest in the European Colonial Empires, 1918-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Phoebe Chow, *Britain's Imperial Retreat from China, 1900-1931* (London: Routledge, 2017) as well as the original, more narrowly focused, PhD thesis upon which it was based, “British Opinion and Policy towards China, 1922-1927,”

Britain, Japan, and the International Threat to Empire

Those scholars who have written about the British Empire in the interwar Far East through the traditional rubric of imperial defence largely center their narratives on one of two subjects. First, the place of the Far East within the larger Committee of Imperial Defence and Cabinet debates on defence policies and rearmament from the early 1930s onwards, particularly focusing, following the 1933 rise of Hitler, on the formation of the Defence Requirements Sub-Committee in 1934 to examine the worst deficiencies of the British defence establishment. Second, the wisdom and efficacy of British diplomatic and naval strategies to counter a rising Japan in the 1920s and 1930s.¹² Though this generalization does not do justice to the distinctive approaches taken by specialists in military, naval, or diplomatic history, in effect they are all asking the same series of questions related to the perilous strategic position Britain found itself in by the early 1930s and how it could or should have responded to it.

As a rule, scholars writing in this field focus their efforts on politicians, officers, and officials in London. Their narratives are detailed and compelling, minutely outlining policy debates within the Cabinet, the personalities of civil servants within Whitehall, entrenched

Unpublished PhD thesis (London School of Economics, 2011); Heather Streets-Salter, *World War One in Southeast Asia: Colonialism and Anticolonialism in an Era of Global Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Christopher Capozzola, *Bound By War: How the United States and the Philippines Built America's First Pacific Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2020); and Harper, *Underground Asia*.

¹² Keith Neilson, "The Defence Requirements Sub-Committee, British Strategic Foreign Policy, Neville Chamberlain and the Path to Appeasement," *The English Historical Review* 118, 477 (2003): 651.

institutions and interests, and much else through examinations of official and private papers. Given their strengths in laying out such a narrative, it is perhaps unsurprising that many historians are often less successful at integrating other, more far flung, voices and movements into their analyses. The emergence of Comintern networks and robust British efforts to counter them, for instance, do not appear in any form in such narratives, given their focus on questions of high strategy and the debates in the Committee of Imperial Defence among Cabinet ministers and civil servants. And yet, in overlooking such voices and movements, traditional military and diplomatic historians implicitly rob those actors far from London of the agency that was theirs. It is not the case, however, that these traditional London-centric histories of statecraft and strategy making are unwise or lack value. It is, rather, that in attempting to tell a story focused almost completely on Whitehall dialogue and decisions by men in high office, they implicitly communicate to their audience that those decisions being made and activities taking place on the peripheries of empire are not central to narratives of imperial defence. This thesis will argue, in contrast, that such decisions and activities are central to the story of British imperial defence, and that they both complement and complicate the strategic narratives propagated from the imperial metropole and most often told by historians.

This is most evident in those studies examining the role of Far Eastern security questions within larger debates on British policy and strategy from the early 1930s forwards. These studies multiplied in number from the late-1960s as the interwar archival records were made available. Historians of the era studied interwar governmental action and, amidst a wave of scholarship on the era, moved quickly to posit their conclusions.¹³ It was from this initial dialogue that schools

¹³ See Louis, *British Strategy in the Far East*, 1, and Michael Howard, *The Continental Commitment: The Dilemma of British Defence Policy in the Era of Two World Wars* (London: Penguin, 1972), 7.

of thought on the question of the appeasement to take shape. Within the context of the Far East, historians such as G.C. Peden and Peter Bell argue that British strategy and resourcing decisions in the 1930s, particularly the policies set forth by the Treasury from 1933-1935, were grounded in realistic understandings of their environment, Britain's fiscal realities, and the military threat the country faced. As Peden argues, "The financial limits set to rearmament by the Treasury were not unreasonable, given industrial limits and a growing balance of payments deficit."¹⁴ As the Royal Navy was the service upon which Britain's Far Eastern resources and strategy rested, this reasoning contends that the Treasury's cuts to the navy's budget and its investment in the Royal Air Force to strengthen the defence of the home islands were actually wise, given the primacy of the European threat and the (ultimately realized) potential for an RAF-centric defence of Britain.¹⁵ Peter Bell, in his dissection of the Treasury during the Defence Requirements Sub-Committee negotiations, argues that it did not forsake the Far Eastern empire so much as work as best it could, under circumstances not of its own making, to seek rapprochement with Japan while laying the foundations for protecting Britain from the greater – 'ultimate' – threat of Germany.¹⁶

Countering such revisionist interpretations are a wide body of scholars who argue that the more continentally focused strategy adopted by Chamberlain was both ill-executed and ill-

¹⁴ Peden, *British Rearmament*, 12-13.

¹⁵ Ibid., 183-184; see as well G.C. Peden, *Arms, Economics, and British Strategy: From Dreadnoughts to Hydrogen Bombs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 150-152.

¹⁶ Peter Bell, *Chamberlain, Germany, and Japan, 1933-34: Redefining British Strategy in an Era of Imperial Decline* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), ix-xi, 23, 175, 177-178; TNA, CAB4/23, CP1147 Committee of Imperial Defence, Defence Requirements Sub-Committee Report, 28 February 1934.

conceived. Corelli Barnett, in one of the first major monographs based on archival sources, cites the slow decay – economically, politically, and militarily – of British power from 1918 as foreshadowing not just its later collapse but also its inability to develop sound military strategies, particularly for the British Army, as tensions began rising in the 1930s. For Brian Bond, a pre-eminent historian of the interwar army, as well as Barnett, the failure of the initial Defence Requirements Sub-Committee process to create an expeditionary capability in the army that could have better served France and deterred Germany in Western Europe, is one of the signal failures of British policy in the 1930s.¹⁷

These contentions about the ill-executed nature of the continental strategy do not go far enough for Anthony Clayton, Greg Kennedy, and others, who argue that the foundations of British imperial defence were fundamentally undermined when Chamberlain and the Treasury pivoted away from defending the Far Eastern empire and refocused defence spending on the home islands. They posit, in response not only to revisionist historians of appeasement but also to Sir Michael Howard – who famously argued that the empire served more to burden than bolster British strength in the runup to World War II – that in pivoting towards continental defence Britain unnecessarily sacrificed one of its greatest assets. Clayton, in his compelling monograph on the interwar British Empire, concludes that, “The holding together of the British Commonwealth and Empire in the period 1919-1939 was of decisive, in the full sense of the word, importance for the outcome of the Second World War,” and yet this was made more difficult by Chamberlain’s continental strategy. Kennedy goes further in stressing the importance of the Far Eastern empire to British grand strategy, arguing that it was there that British and

¹⁷ Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power*, xi, 581; Brian Bond, *British Military Policy between the Two World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 337-338.

American amity and cooperation was most developed. This created, in practice if not in parlance, the special relationship that was to be the foundation of allied victory in the years to come.¹⁸ To this school, the Treasury's efforts to seek agreement with Japan, which the United States had long opposed, was antithetical to British strategic efforts to positively develop the Anglo-American relationship as the clouds darkened at both ends of Eurasia.¹⁹

The historiographical debate on the narrower question of the wisdom and efficacy of British strategy within the Far East itself is equally divided. Most scholars from the 1970s onwards have been critical of British policy as it sought to ameliorate its relatively weak position in the Far East. Central to these efforts was what has since been called the 'Singapore strategy.' Developed in the years after World War I as Britain transitioned its navy from a two-power standard to a one-power standard, it called for the Royal Navy to dispatch the main fleet from home waters to the Far East when stability and imperial interests were threatened (presumably by Japan). Once there it would operate out of the planned naval base in Singapore to deter or decisively engage its adversaries as required, and then return to home waters.²⁰ That was, at least, the concept. As strategists and scholars have noted almost since he made his remarks, the

¹⁸ Howard, *The Continental Commitment*, 101; Anthony Clayton, *The British Empire as a Superpower, 1919-1939* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 517; see also G.C. Peden, "The Burden of Imperial Defence and the Continental Commitment Reconsidered," *Historical Journal* 27, 2 (1984): 406; Greg Kennedy, *Anglo-American Strategic Relations and the Far East, 1933-1939* (London: Routledge, 2002), 2.

¹⁹ Gaines Post, *Dilemmas of Appeasement: British Deterrence and Defence 1934-1937* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 32, 34.

²⁰ Keith Neilson, "'Unbroken Thread': Japan, Maritime Power and British Imperial Defence, 1920-1932," in *British Naval Strategy East of Suez, 1900-2000: Influences and Actions*, ed. Greg Kennedy (London: Routledge (2005): 72-73.

South African soldier and statesmen Jan Smuts articulated the central problem with this strategy at the Imperial Conference in 1923. Smuts argued that Japan would be unlikely to attack Britain in the Far East without assistance from a friendly power in Europe. But, if powers in Europe were assisting Japan in action against Great Britain, how, Smuts asked, could the British, in a naval environment constrained by the Washington Treaties, afford to send a main fleet to the Far East?²¹ British officials at the time dealt with this question by ignoring it.

This conundrum has been central to the traditional critique of the strategy since the first archivally-informed studies were published in the 1970s. Common is the refrain of William Roger Louis, who argued that Britain's naval strategy left it to be buffeted by forces in the Far East that were beyond its control.²² This echoes Ian Hamill's conclusion that the strategic illusion, alluded to in his eponymous monograph, rested on the false notion, notably propounded by Admiral Herbert Richmond, that Britain could maintain a two-hemisphere empire with a one-hemisphere navy.²³ David McIntyre and James Neidpath, in contemporaneous explorations into the Singapore naval base and its associated planning, both conclude that by 1931, when Japanese militarism began to accelerate, the strategy was no longer viable. They each, alongside Paul Haggie, acknowledge the paucity of viable alternative strategies but refuse to exculpate the Admiralty from the disaster to come. In their estimation, unimaginative planning, the failure to question an outdated strategy, and the central role that many leaders, both military and civilian alike, had played in advancing such a strategy in the preceding years, were all abrogations of

²¹ Andrew Gordon, "The Admiralty and Imperial Overstretch, 1902-1941," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 17, 1 (1994): 67.

²² Louis, *British Strategy in the Far East*, 267.

²³ Hamill, *The Strategic Illusion*, 314.

responsibility and signs of failure.²⁴ Ann Trotter, in her piercing account of the tour of Sir Maurice Hankey, Secretary to both the Cabinet and the Committee of Imperial Defence, to the Dominions to communicate updates on imperial defence policy following the conclusion of the (first) Defence Requirements Sub-Committee process in 1934, effectively captures the pessimistic nature of the response he received in Australia, the most vulnerable of the Dominions to the Japanese threat. In a way, it also captures the historical interpretation of the aforementioned scholars, skeptical as they are of British efforts in the period. In private correspondence following Hankey's visit to Australia, the Deputy Prime Minister in Canberra, summarizing the mood of a skeptical nation, remarked that, "It would be a good thing if Great Britain had a more definite policy about Oriental Affairs and the Dominions actually knew what the policy was." Immediately following his visit, the Australian Chiefs of Staff, unsure of Britain's intent despite Hankey's visit and still uncertain of the mother country's ability to protect their own interests and territory, began drawing up plans to refocus their efforts on more local territorial defence.²⁵

A smaller group of revisionist-minded historians, while acknowledging the ultimate failure of the Admiralty's Singapore strategy, argue that the limited nature of Britain's options necessitated making the most of the plan that was already in place. Bradford Lee argues that the

²⁴ McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base*, 215-219; James Neidpath, *The Singapore Naval Base and the Defence of Britain's Eastern Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 217; Haggie, *Britannia at Bay*, 208.

²⁵ Ann Trotter, "Defending the 'Singapore Strategy': Hankey's Dominions Tour, 1934," in *Retreat from Empire in East Asia, 1905-1980: Essays in Honour of Peter Lowe*, ed. Antony Best (London: Routledge, 2017), 94, 97.

ambiguous nature of US strategy and commitments in the region further complicated what was already an insoluble problem for Britain. In this reading, aborted British efforts seeking accommodation, but not appeasement, with Japan were rational.²⁶ More recent historians have, in thoughtful and compelling ways, countered the argument by exploring in more depth Admiralty planning and the Singapore strategy itself. Joseph Maiolo, Christopher Bell, and Andrew Field all argue, in one way or another, that the traditional historiography discounts both the depth of Admiralty preparation for sending a fleet to Singapore and the breadth, and versatility, of the subordinate naval strategy and its tactical basis. While Maiolo recasts British naval thinking within the context of the German threat, Bell and Field argue that the Singapore strategy was in fact multifaceted and flexible, capable of being adapted to suit offensive or defensive operations against Japan in a variety of environments, and much more than simply an end in itself.²⁷ It was a serious strategy that earlier historians did not actually study in detail in their rush to read the sinking of Force Z into preceding decisions and documents.

In that sense, Field and especially Bell can be credited for identifying and arguing against a common weakness in much of this interwar diplomatic and military history, the tendency to walk history backwards. Studies of the Singapore Naval Base, for instance, all tell essentially the same story from the perspective of 1941, the sinking of Force Z, and the British collapse in Hong Kong and Malaya. Louis, and others writing more broadly on British strategy in the first years after the opening of the interwar archives, did so from the perspective of wanting to understand

²⁶ Lee, *Britain and the Sino-Japanese War*, 206-208, 221.

²⁷ Joseph Maiolo, *The Royal Navy and Nazi Germany, 1933-1939* (London: Macmillan, 1998), 3; Christopher Bell, *The Royal Navy, Seapower, and Strategy Between the Wars* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000), 59-60, 71-75; Field, *Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East*, 230.

the origins of World War II. But exploring the interwar years through this lens too often preordains the narratives and conclusions that one can reach and robs actors of the agency that they had and the fact that, in their eyes and at that moment, many different futures were not only possible but plausible.

It is not necessarily to the detriment of these authors that their works have homed in on only the second of Milne's threats, Japan. But in doing so, many have imagined and communicated a limited conception of imperial defence that, as archival records illustrate, simply did not exist. If understandable in those works that consciously explore only limited aspects of the field – such as Brian Bond's (military) and Andrew Field's (naval) service-specific accounts of strategy – it is less defensible in works that purport to discuss imperial defence and interpretations of British decline more broadly, including Louis, Barnett, Clayton, and others in the first generation of scholars working in the field. They have, in a sense, misinterpreted the nature of British imperial defence efforts by narrowly reading Cabinet and CID records. They have, thus, falsely presented the challenges facing Britain in the interwar Far East as neatly divided and distinct from one another, and thus the choices and decisions of policymakers to remedy these issues as entirely divorced from any other pressures.

Chinese Nationalism, Communism, and Transnational Threats to Empire

Meanwhile, the historiographical movement away from the corridors of power and towards peripheral spaces in recent years has increased the number of scholarly works engaging with topics relevant to the first of Milne's threats, international communism and its attendant nationalist offshoots. Generally, those scholars exploring issues of colonial governance and rule,

imperial policing, the rise of communism and indigenous forms of nationalism, and the formation of group identities do a better job of integrating concepts and realities from debates about both international and transnational threats into their writing than scholars focusing on events in the imperial core. Why this is so is beyond the scope of this review, though the need for historians to contextualize actions and decisions from the imperial periphery with contemporaneous political, diplomatic, and military policies from the metropole – in effect, to explain local events through an imperial prism – may have some part to play. This thesis will now, therefore, explore a selection of works from across a range of historiographies that are more diverse, and themselves less culturally unified, than their strategic cousins. These are grouped imperfectly together here merely in an attempt to identify disciplinary similarities and differences. Aspects of colonial administration and rule form one ill-defined grouping; studies of indigenous peoples, cultures, identities, and economies another; and works focusing on the influence of international communism and the development of indigenous nationalism a third. Such division is by nature subjective and insufficient and yet, for the purposes of concision and organization, necessary.

Richard Popplewell's *Intelligence and Imperial Defence*, which explores British intelligence efforts to understand and suppress Indian revolutionary movements in the first two decades of the twentieth century, provides an appropriate entry point for understanding the literature on the administration of the British Empire and its efforts to defeat communist and nationalist movements in the Far East. Popplewell argues that the catalyzing factor in the creation of the modern British intelligence apparatus in the region, one with global reach by the conclusion of World War I, was not Japanese naval capabilities but Indian revolutionaries. This was evident in the Far East through the increased synchronization of intelligence collection

activities in Singapore, the growth in the number of intelligence personnel throughout the region and increased inter-governmental cooperation in combatting ideological and nationalist threats. Given the large communities of Indian soldiers and laborers present across the British Far East, from Shanghai to Fiji, such a regional response proved necessary. While revolutionary Indian nationalism was the initial catalyst for such an expansion in the structures of colonial rule, Popplewell rightly concludes that in the interwar years this intelligence capability directed its efforts towards new objectives, chiefly international communism, as events required.²⁸

While differentiating themselves from Popplewell, scholars such as T.R. Moreman and John Cell, among many others, have approached questions of colonial rule from the perspectives of the military – small wars and imperial policing during the interwar era – and the civilian bureaucracy. Others have delved into more arcane subjects with great return. Among these, Geoffrey C. Gunn's *Ho Chi Minh in Hong Kong* stands out as a recent work that highlights the way in which contrasting imperial values and priorities could easily be in opposition to one another. Gunn masterfully takes the reader through the early 1930s legal world of Hong Kong where Britain, in spite of its robust partnership with French Indochina and its central role as the hub of western anti-communist efforts in the region, refused to extradite the arrested communist agitator and organizer to French custody, given English common law and the political nature of his acts.²⁹ Gunn highlights for the reader just some of the many contradictions that existed simultaneously throughout empires in the region, and which in this case saw Britain sacrifice its short-term interests for what it saw as its long-term values.

²⁸ Popplewell, *Intelligence and Imperial Defence*, 5, 325-328.

²⁹ Gunn, *Ho Chi Minh in Hong Kong*, 1-7.

Other scholars have directed their efforts at furthering some of Popplewell's concepts later into the interwar period.³⁰ Among them, Mary Barton's work on global counterterrorist efforts in the interwar years contextualizes both the way that international communism helped to strengthen extremist ideologies and the way that status quo powers sought to undermine such efforts. Though global in nature, her study illustrates the way that imperial rulers had to contend with not just agitating local forces but also the international structures being created in Moscow to undermine western imperialism in the region.³¹ However, her conclusion, that the status quo powers failed in their efforts, is, within the context of the Far East, undermined by Christopher Baxter's thorough account of the case of Hilaire Noulens, a nom-de-guerre for a Comintern agent whose 1931 arrest by the British in Shanghai that led to the unraveling of the Comintern's entire Far Eastern Bureau.³² Ban Kah Choon, in *Absent History*, follows Popplewell's example more closely by exploring Singapore Special Branch between the wars, providing a broad account of Special Branch activities, its successes and failures in combatting the service's three sequential antagonists: Indian nationalists, Chinese communists, and Japanese intelligence agents.³³ Among the only things missing from his account, aside from its inadequate sourcing of material, is any cognizance of the connection that these actions had to wider British strategies and perceptions of threat. Taken together, though, these works shed clear light on the realities

³⁰ Moreman, "'Small Wars' and 'Imperial Policing,'" 112; Cell, "Colonial Rule," 232-238.

³¹ Barton, *Counterterrorism between the Wars*, 3-6, 53.

³² Ibid., 179; Christopher Baxter, "The Secret Intelligence Service and China: The Case of Hilaire Noulens, 1923-1932," in *Britain in Global Politics, Vol. 1: From Gladstone to Churchill*, eds. Christopher Baxter, Michael Dockrill, and Keith Hamilton (London: Basingstoke, 2013): 137-146.

³³ Choon, *Absent History*, xi-xiv.

that bureaucrats, soldiers, and intelligence officials encountered in their daily life and work, far from London and the central corridors of power.

Colonial literature that helps one understand the indigenous peoples and traditions of the Far East is equally important for the process of comprehending the rising influence of nationalism and communism in the region. In that sense, historians, alongside sociologists, anthropologists, and others have contributed immeasurably to our understanding of the time. Within the confines of this study, works by scholars such as David Marr, Anthony Milner, and Jan Aart Scholte provide us with such an understanding. Marr, in his study of Vietnamese culture and tradition before and during World War II, argues that Vietnamese identity was utterly transformed in the 1920-1945 period by the gradual recognition that French coercion and control had reached unprecedented levels that, alongside its extractive economic model, altered economic and social relations in the country in never-before-seen ways. These changes fueled new generations of literati who, over time, adopted ever more radical – from the perspective of the French – perspectives on how to address societal change. It is through this prism, Marr convincingly argues, that Vietnamese nationalism and communism should be understood.³⁴ Similar studies on Malay and Indonesian culture during the late colonial period reflect their own populations' transformation. In the Malayan context, Anthony Milner outlines how the ethnic Malay population woke up to the feebleness and degradation of its situation and, if not yet openly challenging colonial rule, at least began to see itself as a distinct group with its own oppositional attitudes and grievances. Jan Aart Scholte, building on the work of Benedict Anderson, reflects, in the Indonesian context, that local identity within a larger, decidedly non-

³⁴ David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1925-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 2-5, 8-12.

western, national community was a product of the era, spurred by globalization and the effects of imperialism itself.³⁵ Moreover, in dealing with the European populations resident within the colonial Far East, scholars have correctly discerned that these western settler communities brought and developed their own cultures and customs which, over time, diverged from the those of the metropole. Robert Bickers, in his analysis of the colonial community in Shanghai's international settlement, assesses the importance of political self-government and collaboration with local elites as providing Europeans with a sense of identity distinct from their co-nationals at home. Tim Harper, in his insightful account of British 'Malayans,' assesses deeper insecurities amongst the white settler populations, principally based on race, as being a central factor in the social, economic, and political milieu that developed around the colonies.³⁶ Such assessments, while perhaps of superficial value to discussions of grand strategy in London, illustrate the complexities that colored how officials in the periphery considered their own security and position, and thus the local policies that they sought to enact and worked to enforce.

It was within this environment that international communism, co-mingling with modernizing forms of nationalism, emerged as an almost existential threat to the western imperial system in the interwar Far East.³⁷ So it is that William Duiker and C.F. Yong, in their respective accounts of the indigenous nationalist and communist movements in Vietnam and

³⁵ Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*, 261, 264; Scholte, "The International Construction of Indonesian Nationhood, 1930-1950," 200.

³⁶ Bickers, "Shanghailanders and Others," 270, 278; Tim Harper, "The British 'Malayans,'" in *Settlers and Expatriates: Britons Over the Seas*, ed. Robert Bickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 253-255.

³⁷ See Milton Osborne, *Southeast Asia: An Introductory History* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2013), 132-134, for an insightful analysis of the differences between traditional and modern forms of indigenous nationalism.

Malaya, highlight the melding of existing, if traditional, nationalist sentiments with the universalizing message of communism. In the case of Vietnam, French brutality and repression helped to radicalize what were originally scholarly reformers into, several permutations later, hardened communist guerrillas. Malaya, given its unique ethnic makeup, represents something of an exception. As Yong highlights, ethnic Malay nationalism had been effectively co-opted by the British. This meant that the large Chinese immigrant population, exposed to radical nationalist and communist rhetoric emanating from mainland China, dominated early nationalist and communist organizations despite not representing, and in many cases being physically separated from, the majority Malay population. Yong skillfully demonstrates both the way in which this reality handicapped communist efforts to expand revolutionary zeal across ethnic lines and undermine colonial rule in Malaya and how it facilitated British anti-communist intelligence-gathering and operations, given their well-practiced ability to divide and rule.³⁸

Among much else written on the subject, the place of Siam stands out as unique, as argued by Benjamin Batson in his study of Thai nationalism and Pan-Asianism during the interwar period. Nominally independent, Siam was informally influenced first by Britain and then, in the years immediately before and during the Second World War, by Japan. It was home, thus, to a different set of variables that produced a more positive, and less oppositional, form of nationalism, albeit one that was influenced by the Japanese model.³⁹ For the purposes of this thesis, however, it is Batson's work highlighting the complicated dance that Siamese and British officials engaged in with respect to Chinese and Vietnamese nationalism and communism that is

³⁸ Duiker, *Rise of Nationalism*, 156-165, 227-229; Yong, "Origins and Development of the Malay Communist Movement," 633-638, 643-644.

³⁹ Batson, "Nationalism and Pro-Japanese Activities in Thailand," 190-191, 200-202.

most telling. Batson compellingly demonstrates that Siamese and British officials, as with their political and security counterparts in Singapore, were extremely sensitive to these transnational forces when they considered efforts to suppress foreign political actors within Siam.⁴⁰ This transnational scope is taken further in Anna Belogurova's history of Chinese Communism in the 'South Seas.' Belogurova explores the influence of communism on migrant Chinese communities as they worked, lived, and traveled throughout the 'South Seas' region, from Vietnam and the Philippines through the greater Malay world and Siam. In doing so, Belogurova not only educates readers as to the myriad environments, causes, and identities that were roiling indigenous populations in the interwar Far East, but also demonstrates the interconnected nature of the region and its ideologies – revolutionary, nationalist, imperial – across cultural, commercial, imperial, and linguistic boundaries. In this way, she expands on the notions brought forward by Thomas Metcalf, who, in his monograph exploring the central role of British India within the larger empire, argued persuasively that it was, alongside London, the second center of empire.⁴¹ But whereas Metcalf focuses on those connections heading west to Bengal and Delhi, Belogurova focuses on those heading south from a nationalizing China to the western colonies of modern Southeast Asia. The powerful irony of these narratives is that they demonstrate the ways in which globalization and the interplay of ideas and people in the region were already both undermining and enabling British imperial rule in the Far East at the very same time that British officials in 1930s London were consumed with resource allocation and naval strategies geared towards a rising Japan. In that way, Belogurova's account falls into the familiar trap of

⁴⁰ Batson, *The End of Absolute Monarchy in Siam*, 165-179. See also Aldrich, *The Key to the South*, 48-49, 53, 56-57.

⁴¹ Belogurova, *The Nanyang Revolution*, 5, 8, 35, 39; Metcalf, *Imperial Connections*, 1-2, 9.

neglecting to pull that connective tissue back to the metropole and examine, from London's perspective, the strategic ramifications of the sea changes taking place in the region that she so eloquently lays out.

Towards a More Comprehensive Understanding of Imperial Defence

Those scholars who have been most successful at integrating aspects of the strategic and ideological threats into their works have implicitly come to realize what Milne and his contemporaries did – that the division of threats into international and transnational categorizations is something of a false dichotomy, and that thematic, geographic, or national accountings of empire in place and time must not be bound by specific historical or disciplinary categories. As such, this next set of histories succeeds in doing several things that the aforementioned works struggle with, including accounting for voices and decisions in both the core and the periphery and demonstrating the interconnectedness of life under colonial rule for subject peoples.

A prism that some, including C.F. Yong and R.B. McKenna, Richard Aldrich, and Christopher Capozzola, have used with success is to view these issues through the modern nation-state. Yong and McKenna, for instance, in *The Kuomintang Movement in British Malaya, 1912-1949*, examine not only the causal roots of Chinese nationalism in Malaya but the minutes of the London conferences hastily assembled to provide British policymakers with strategies for undermining and defeating it. Their work outlines, additionally, not only the intergovernmental responses that Britain began considering but also the way in which officers and officials understood that the ideological challenge of Chinese nationalism was both transnational – in the

form of disgruntled Chinese nationalists within Malaya being part of a wider regional community of like-minded individuals – and international – in the form of Republican China foreign policy and its place within the Far East balance of power.⁴² This belies the inaccurate historiographical notion that policymakers at the time believed external and internal threats to be distinct from one another. Similarly, Richard Aldrich, in, *The Key to the South: Britain, the United States and Thailand during the Approach of the Pacific War, 1929-1942*, places British and international policing and intelligence efforts to thwart third-country nationalist agitators from operating within Siam within the context of Britain's Far Eastern empire and strategy. Such an exploration accounts for both Britain's veto power over any attempt to build a canal across the Kra Isthmus while acknowledging the way that British and Siamese officials balanced policing, economic development, and nationalist movements to maintain their cooperative control over the region's only nominally independent state.⁴³ Alternatively, Christopher Capozzola, in, *Bound By War: How the United States and the Philippines Built America's First Pacific Century*, highlights the tensions that existed within and between US and Philippine conceptions of national identity and power projection in the region. Although it was sympathetic to colonial independence, the United States still had to navigate competing desires of nationalism, Japanese-inspired Pan-Asianism, and the reality that a newly independent Philippines would be vulnerable to Japanese economic and military domination from its inception, an outcome hardly in keeping with American strategic goals in the region.⁴⁴ In other words, the local was subordinate to the

⁴² Yong and McKenna, *Kuomintang Movement*, 66, 74-75, 116.

⁴³ Aldrich, *The Key to the South*, 4-8, 10, 13, 56.

⁴⁴ Capozzola, *Bound By War*, 7, 105-108.

global – a perspective lacking, unfortunately, in too many works on the region that choose to focus on either one end of imperium or the other.

Some scholars have found that assessing aspects of the late imperial era through a wider geographic lens allows them to examine in more detail the transnational and inter-imperial realities that governed social and political systems in the region. The late Nicholas Tarling, in his comprehensive, *The Fall of Imperial Britain in Southeast Asia*, demonstrates the interconnectedness of the military and ideological threats to the maintenance of British rule. He, first, inverts the traditional historiography by arguing that British officials saw communism principally as an international threat that they could blunt through effective intelligence and police operations. Second, he effectively demonstrates that officials on the ground did not delineate between the threats they faced, be they from Japan, communist or nationalist fervor, or anything else, as being of this kind or that kind. They were merely problems to be solved. Representing, he argues, a hollowed-out power with limited resources, British officials and officers on the spot did not have the luxury of such choices; they responded to challenges with the limited tools at their disposal.⁴⁵ In so doing, Tarling captures the reality that agency lay with those both in London and on the edges of empire. Phoebe Chow, though her focus is on Britain within China proper, echoes some of Tarling's conclusions about the interconnectedness of military and ideological threats empire. If there is a quibble with her conclusions, it is only that in examining the crucial role that Chinese nationalism played in Britain's imperial "retreat" from China proper, she misses an opportunity to engage with the way that forces of Chinese nationalism outside of China provided fuel for the empire to, in some ways, advance rather than

⁴⁵ Tarling, *The Fall of Imperial Britain*, 101-111.

retreat. Its potency, alongside communism, as a transnational threat through the first half of the 1930s helped force the empire in the Far East to think and act creatively and with decision.⁴⁶

Anne Foster and Heather Streets-Salter, by contrast, focus on how the western colonial powers cooperated, both formally and informally, in their efforts to see off the rising tide of nationalism and communism in the region. Foster, in *Projections of Power: The United States and Europe in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919-1941*, outlines this for the 1920s and early 1930s, tracing some of the ways in which British, French, Dutch, and to a lesser extent American officials collaborated in their efforts to combat the leading nationalists and radicals, and the inter-imperial roots of that effort's successes.⁴⁷ Streets-Salter, in *World War One in Southeast Asia: Colonialism and Anticolonialism in an Era of Global Conflict*, uses the Singapore Mutiny of 1915 to explore the way in which the imperial powers used indigenous nationalism as a tool to further their own ends within an increasingly globalized and connected world. German sponsorship of, and Japanese quiescence towards, Indian nationalism existed alongside the successful British, French, Russian, and Japanese operation to crush the mutiny, which itself was a local manifestation of contemporary global pressures.⁴⁸ Her central argument, that the micro and macro are intimately connected across thematic and temporal domains, is convincingly demonstrated through the thorough examination of a single event that touched, and was felt by, actors near and far in both time and place.

⁴⁶ Chow, "British Opinion and Policy towards China, 1922-1927," 8, 10-11; Chow, *Britain's Imperial Retreat from China*, 234-240.

⁴⁷ Foster, *Projections of Power*, 23-39, among others.

⁴⁸ Streets-Salter, *World War One in Southeast Asia*, 11-12, 14-15, 50, 104-105, among others.

What makes these accounts of imperial policing effective is the way that they place these efforts within the broader context of the European strategies to maintain their imperial holdings in the Far East amidst tension in Europe and the specter of a rising and potentially malevolent Japan. But neither are they perfect. None take the interpretive plunge of examining whether the empire could have attempted to use the tools established in the 1920s to counter transnational threats as a basis for efforts in the 1930s to counter its major international threat. In not taking such steps, Foster and Streets-Salter implicitly bolster the division of understanding that their works otherwise admirably erode. Tim Harper's recently published tome, *Underground Asia: Global Revolutionaries and the Assault on Empire*, dives more deeply into the revolutionary side of the equation in the years after World War I. He lays out the reasons and ways in which individual challenges – through Nguyen Ai Quoc or others – to the imperial system manifested themselves and how such challenges helped not only create many of the region's modern nationalist movements but also shaped the larger international system of the time.⁴⁹ While by far the most rollicking of the works reviewed here, Harper's objective is to shine a light on the underground networks of Asian revolutionaries themselves rather than on the concurrently developing imperial structures to counter them and the world of imperial defence in which they resided. That is not to fault the work so much as to acknowledge a way in which this thesis, and its deliberate approach to the structures of imperial defence, may complement it.

The last approach, one which attempts to see the connections between Britain's foreign policies and regional mechanisms itself, is one that fewer historians have successfully attempted. The reasons for this are unclear, though perhaps the gravitational pull of the National Archives in London and the recent dearth of traditional diplomatic and military histories on the subject,

⁴⁹ Harper, *Underground Asia*, xvii.

especially in the years since transnational history emerged so forcefully within the discipline, play a role. And yet, Antony Best and Martin Thomas, in several works each, as well as Orest Babij and Matthew Heaslip, have succeeded in charting just such a path. Best, in, *British Intelligence and the Japanese Challenge in Asia, 1914-1941*, examines how British intelligence organizations understood and responded to the Japanese challenge in Asia and spends significant time exploring not only Japan but also the way in which Britain's limited intelligence resources in the region interpreted and made sense of ideological challenges, particularly international communism, during the same period. In this sense, his work dovetails with and builds upon Popplewell's study from 1904-1924, though with a much more deliberate, if not comparative, assessment of how Britain understood and responded to each threat. Elsewhere, Best outlines the pivoting of British intelligence activities and resources from a focus on Comintern subversion to Japanese militarism within a strategic context, as well as the way in which the mid-1920s Anglo-Soviet ideological contest in the Far East factored into its regional strategies. Throughout his works, Best eschews the threat dichotomies while demonstrating that these contests – ideological, practical, organizational, and financial – were waged in spaces within and without the British Empire. One of the ironies in this story from 1925-1934 is the shifting way in which Britain saw China, Japan, and the Soviet Union as alternatively buttressing or undermining the status quo that it sought to maintain.⁵⁰ The value of such an observation, for this reviewer, is the way in which is it informed by events, assessments, and processes at both ends of empire. If not a full account, it is a more complete one than that offered by Popplewell.

⁵⁰ Best, *British Intelligence and the Japanese Challenge in Asia, 1914-1941*, 55, 67-68, 102-104; Best, "Constructing an Image: British Intelligence and Whitehall's Perception of Japan, 1931-39," 404-406; Best, "We Are Virtually at War with Russia," 209-210, 213-216.

Martin Thomas, in *Violence and Colonial Order: Police, Workers, and Protest in the European Colonial Empires, 1918-1940*, identifies the central role that commercial and economic enterprises played in colonial decisions to employ force and maintain order, particularly given the large role that industrial and agricultural disputes with indigenous (or imported) labor forces played in moments of instability. Thomas expertly connects the dots between extractive imperial commercial enterprises, aggrieved local labor populations, popular indigenous sympathy for nationalist and communist messages, and imperial – usually police – response mechanisms to those sympathies. In telling this story of coercive policing, Thomas expands our understanding of the similar – but not identical – circumstances in which the Singapore Special Branch and others used similar methods used to target, disrupt, and destroy political subversion in the colonies. If lacking in the drama of London high policy, Thomas’ work nonetheless highlights the economic and commercial interests, in the form of the Rubber Growers’ Association, among others, that served as another thread in the connective tissue linking the imperial core and imperial periphery. Thomas, however, goes further than this to great effect in his accounting of the decline of the French Empire in the 1920s and 1930s, *The French Empire Between the Wars*. There, his thorough chronicling of the distant and ambivalent relationship between French administrators and colonies, and their experiences, on the one hand and the imperial metropole, with its disparate priorities and anxieties, on the other offers an example of how to effectively tell a series of far-reaching imperial stories comprehensively. Though this thesis will not attempt to study the French experience in any such depth, and the

structures and processes of the interwar British and French empires certainly differed, his analysis offers a valuable comparative window into the wider field.⁵¹

Babij, in his unpublished doctoral thesis, “The Making of Imperial Defence Policy in Britain, 1926-1934,” spends a significant amount of time covering similar ground, effectively connecting the Soviet menace in the Far East with its threatening positions relative to India and Great Britain itself – in the form of labor unrest – in the period. Babij misses an opportunity, however, in leaving aside both the threat that communism and nationalism posed to the empire in the years after 1927 and in exploring the subsequent British responses to those threats across the empire. Such an interpretation, as this thesis will attempt to show, is both inaccurate and unfortunate, given the comprehensive nature with which he sets out to document his subject. His exploration of traditional foreign policy and strategy, as determined in London, in the early 1930s is more successful and refers back to his title, given that the ‘making’ of imperial defence policy was a function reserved to those in the imperial core. But in at least acknowledging the multiplicity of issues that Britain faced and how they had to allocate and then reallocate resources over the period, he demonstrates a sensitivity to the historical record that others in the field choose not to do.⁵² In that sense, he, Martin, and Best demonstrate some of the ways in which traditional scholars of British diplomatic and military history can break out of their respective niches and produce more comprehensive works.

Finally, Matthew Heaslip, in his recently published *Gunboats, Empire and the China Station* explores the roles, operations, and importance of the Royal Navy’s China Station in the

⁵¹ Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order*, 2-5, 75, 183-184, 193; Thomas, *The French Empire Between the Wars*, 2-5, 227-232.

⁵² Babij, ‘The Making of Imperial Defence Policy in Britain, 1926-1934,’ 67, 226-230.

1920s. Heaslip expertly turns the typical monograph exploring imperial administration and policing on its head by using the China Station, and by extension the Admiralty – more typically understood as one of the central arbiters of London debates on high strategy – as his lens. Heaslip is strongest in demonstrating two things that the present work hopes to build upon. First, the importance of the interwar period in its own right rather than as a step on a teleological path towards Japan, Force Z, and 1941. The preponderant importance of events in China, rather than Japan, for the British China Station in the era illustrates this point with vigor. Second, that Britain in the 1920s was hardly a spent force. It was, rather, the prime driver and exhibitor of agency, especially during the years surrounding the crisis of 1927. Heaslip's analysis of the growth of the China Station in the years around 1927 and its preponderant force establishes this and provides an example that, at least in diplomatic and colonial terms, the present volume hopes to build upon. In doing these things, Heaslip effectively demonstrates a way in which one can root the implementation of the strategic in the local and bridge existing divides in the historiography.⁵³

Contributing to the Historiography

But why, in conclusion, are such comprehensive works necessary? For one, they more accurately represent the challenges that Milne and his colleagues and subordinates in the era faced every day. To narrowly interpret the records of the Committee of Imperial Defence as many have gives one the impression that communism and nationalism in the interwar Far East

⁵³ Matthew Heaslip, *Gunboats, Empire and the China Station: The Royal Navy in 1920s East Asia* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 7, 118.

were mere gnats to be swatted away as substantive talks of strategy and high politics continued. In fact, a broader reading of such records demonstrates the rich understanding of, and attention to, transnational threats that policymakers of the time had, especially during periods of crisis. Alternatively, a focus on indigenous nationalism or the minutiae of colonial rule can similarly distort perceptions and understandings and imagine a world, so to speak, as free from the strategic constraints or realities of the old Europe and Whitehall's elites.

Such analytical approaches miss the mark. Policymakers in London mattered as much as those shaping events more organically and culturally out in the empire itself. Understanding the duality of agency and understanding across imperial spaces is not to revolutionize the historiography but to reground it in the reality that Milne well understood. To appreciate how policymakers and strategists grappled with the challenges of their day and to draw lessons from their experience, one must contend with the multitude of threats Britain faced – transnational and international – while not binding oneself to easy categorizations. Not doing so produces further unproductive silos of knowledge, stultifies inquiry, leads scholars to draw conclusions about the past based upon a foundation of mistaken assumptions, and entrenches bureaucratic and disciplinary divisions that, thankfully, are beginning to come down.

Those works that bring these two literatures and narratives together, then, are welcome additions to the historiography. This thesis, such as it is, seeks to build on these assessments but in a more straightforward way. The more comprehensively-minded works examined above do not deliberately approach their topics – be it the development of intelligence networks or the growth of inter-imperial cooperation in the interwar years – through the lens of imperial defence. They do not challenge head-on the traditional historiographical understanding of interwar imperial defence – those diplomatic, military, and naval actions Britain took to counter the

international threat of Japan – as originally put forward by Louis, Barnett, Lee, Haggie and others in the first generation of interwar scholars. As a result, the conception of imperial defence as belonging solely to the realms of strategy, high politics, and military and naval deterrence has endured. The role of imperial police and intelligence efforts, inter-imperial cooperation, and colonial administration in defending the empire, and the rich sources that provide us that information from the Colonial Office files and elsewhere, remain absent from this telling. This thesis argues that a new paradigm for understanding imperial defence is needed, one that acknowledges the fact that officials on the periphery, usually but not solely working within the structure of the Colonial Office, played a significant and heretofore underappreciated role in devising and implementing actions and policies that contributed hugely to the defence of the Far Eastern empire. This thesis hopes to shine light on issues such as these and contributing to a new framework for understanding imperial defence in the interwar era.

Chapter I – The British Empire and the Far East in 1925

The courses and consequences of World War I upended British assumptions and power in the Far East. Although the region was not material in deciding the outcome of the war itself, the conflict shaped the Far East's trajectory in profound ways well into the 1920s. It helped produce, among much else, the conditions in which Japanese power and prestige, absent European attention, grew hugely. Additionally, nascent communist ideology, alongside recognizably modern forms of indigenous nationalism that the war years had done much to nurture, spread among much of the Far East's population, undermining the position of western and imperial powers, particularly in China. To careful observers, the events of these years also foreshadowed the imperial defence challenges that Britain would face in the region later in the 1920s and 1930s. Japan's wartime international challenge to the regional status quo came in the form of its Twenty-One Demands to Republican China in January 1915 which demonstrated its determination to monopolize influence in China. The transnational challenge presented by nationalism and ideological fervor during the war came in different forms, though most recognizably in the Ghadr campaign against British rule in India that spanned the 1910s and was

felt across the region. Beneath headlines from the front, then, the structure and realities of the interwar Far East were coming into focus.

This chapter will examine the British Empire in the Far East in the early postwar years, from the conclusion of the Washington Naval Conference in 1922 to the spring of 1925. For our purposes, the war years themselves and the period that followed, culminating in the 1921-1922 conference in Washington, serve merely to set the stage for the tumultuous years that came after. This chapter will briefly assess the impact of the war years and the outcomes of the Washington Conference before pivoting to discuss in more detail events rooted in the Far East itself: the dissolution of the Chinese state from 1916 onwards, the rise of Chinese nationalism as a regional force, and the explosion of communist ideology and propaganda from Moscow and the Communist International (Comintern) that pervaded the region by the early 1920s. It will then review the structure of the British Empire in the Far East, from its policymaking center in London to its instruments of policy on the periphery, as well as many of the personalities and contradictions within that structure. It will explore the often-divergent ways in which officials in London and officials serving out in the empire itself understood their respective roles, responsibilities, choices, and the general questions surrounding Far Eastern imperial defence. Finally, it will explore the relationships Britain had with its western imperial cousins, chiefly France, the Netherlands, and the United States, examining some of the early ways in which these powers worked together – alongside Japan and, to a certain extent, Siam – to shape the region and confront the early challenges posed by instability in China, the spread of nationalism, and what each saw as the malignant threat of communism. In short, this chapter will lay the foundation upon which the remainder of this narrative, beginning with the crisis of Chinese nationalism in 1925, is based.

China, the Soviet Union, and National Identity in the post-WWI Far East

The postwar context in which Chinese nationalism matured and eventually exploded was one defined by China's experience during the war and the settlements reached at the Paris and Washington Conferences. In short, Japan's attempt in January 1915, via its Twenty-One Demands, to compromise Chinese sovereignty backfired, exacerbating the Chinese desire for autonomy and further inculcating within its population suspicion of not only Japan but the other imperial powers.⁵⁴ And yet at the war's conclusion, Chinese national ambitions were largely ignored by the Great Powers, further heightening tension and distrust towards outsiders among Chinese nationalists yearning for recognition and respect. At the Washington Conference in 1921-1922, the existing Anglo-Japanese alliance was replaced by the Four-Power Treaty, in which Britain, France, Japan, and the United States agreed to maintain the geopolitical status quo in the region, to respect the territories of each signatory power, and not to seek territorial expansion. The Nine-Power Treaty, which dealt with China specifically, affirmed the sovereignty and territorial integrity of China and the principles of the Open-Door policy, as first formally enunciated by the United States in 1899, that called for maintaining equal trade and investment opportunities for respective powers within China. A separate agreement between Japan and China allowed for the return of the lease in Shandong Province that the former had captured from Germany in 1914.

⁵⁴ Sochi Naraoka, "Japan's Twenty-One Demands and Anglo-Japanese Relations," in *Retreat from Empire in East Asia, 1905-1980: Essays in Honour of Peter Lowe*, ed. Antony Best (London: Routledge, 2017), 35.

Modern Chinese nationalism had, in various forms, been developing since the nineteenth century. Reformers such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, anarchists, and various revolutionaries were, by the last decade of Qing rule, all propounding different ideas of reform and ideology that would sweep aside tradition in an effort to revitalize and modernize the country. After the collapse of the Qing in 1911-12, the failure of Yuan Shikai in 1916 to create a new unitary regime, and the subsequent breakup of territory into warlord fiefs, the country was left in disarray. Northern warlords, in constant competition with one another, cohered in at least allowing the ministries of the post-Qing Republic to operate. These institutions still contained some measure of prestige and a voice that spoke for China's aspirations. They also provided a modicum of a national government with which British and other foreign representatives could treat. At the same time, in southern China in the area around Canton, the revolutionary leader Sun Yat-sen was slowly building a base of support for his Kuomintang (KMT) movement. Meanwhile, broader conceptions of Chinese nationalism were developing on university campuses and, propelled by the May Fourth Movement in 1919, were popularizing increasingly radical ideas of political change. In 1923, Sun's KMT in the First United Front formed an alliance with the emergent Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and created a partnership with the Comintern, which assisted in propaganda, the creation of a 'Leninist' party organization, and the buildup and modernization of its military wing.⁵⁵

Given the size of China and the political fragmentation of the country, these developments interested British officials but were not, at that time, problems that Britain had the

⁵⁵ Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, third ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), 244-254, 273-278, 304-308; Odd Arne Westad, *Restless Empire: China and the World Since 1750* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), 154-160.

resources or ability to heed in any meaningful way. The spread of nationalist and communist ideologies across the Far East via the Comintern was, though, very much something that Britain and its imperial brethren knew they had to address. These ideologies could be targeted against British interests not just in China but in the wider region via the Chinese diaspora, migrating labor populations, and the growing networks of revolutionaries from states and colonies across the region.

In this context it is important to note that Sun, an itinerant international traveler, had himself founded the first overseas branch of the KMT in Singapore in 1906 before establishing others in Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and elsewhere. More than 27 such branches were founded in colonial Malaya alone by 1915.⁵⁶ At the same time, Phan Boi Chau, one of French Indochina's leading anti-colonial thinkers, shuttled between Japan, Hong Kong, Bangkok, and Singapore in his efforts to organize against the French and build conceptions of Vietnamese identity along something akin to the KMT model. During the war Sun's travels and the rise of indigenous nationalist parties along the KMT model helped shift the base of external revolutionary movements in the Far East from Japan to the colonies of Southeast Asia. This was fueled largely by the Chinese diaspora, whom Sun and others sought to empower, thus harnessing its energy (and accompanying financial power) in support of emerging Chinese national sentiments.⁵⁷ In the years following the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, for instance, expatriate Chinese populations from Singapore to Bangkok, Manila, and elsewhere all aped youth trends in China itself, forming reading clubs, establishing popular presses, and embracing forms of education and

⁵⁶ Christopher Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution: 1885-1954* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999), 32; Yong and McKenna, *Kuomintang Movement*, 66.

⁵⁷ Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks*, 32.

concepts of nationalism that European colonizers disdained.⁵⁸ This contributed to the gradual rise of Chinese immigrant communities throughout the region who conceptualized themselves as self-consciously Chinese, a sentiment that the KMT and CCP sought to capitalize upon during the First United Front, as they worked to 'liberate' not only Chinese but other indigenous Far Eastern peoples from what they saw as empires of oppression.⁵⁹

The spread of communist thought into the region, via the CCP and the Comintern, complemented the growth of Chinese nationalism. Lenin's launching of the Third Communist International in 1919 sought both to speed up world revolution and spread it outwards from Moscow.⁶⁰ This was made easier by the electrifying impact that the October Revolution had on colonial peoples. The Bolshevik regime, as evidenced by its unilateral renunciation of czarist Russia's unequal treaties with China and its consequent rights, privileges, and property in the country, spoke directly to colonial peoples in the Far East when propagating its conceptions of freedom, self-respect, and self-determination. Moreover, utilizing its international arm, the Comintern, it laid the foundations of its own organization in the Far East from 1919, and began establishing communist parties throughout the region's colonies from at least 1920, just as the CCP coalesced within China proper.⁶¹ Although the Comintern organization was fragile and ineffectual at first, it quickly sent agents, propagandists, and provocateurs to the region. In 1922,

⁵⁸ David Steinberg, ed., *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), 253, 263-264.

⁵⁹ Tarling, *The Fall of Imperial Britain*, 98-99; Belogurova, *Nanyang Revolution*, 25.

⁶⁰ Barton, *Counterterrorism between the Wars*, 11, 51.

⁶¹ Sobhanlal Datta Gupta, "Communism and the Crisis of the Colonial System," in *The Cambridge History of Communism, Volume 1*, eds. Silvio Pons and Stephen Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 212-216.

it sponsored the First Congress of the Toilers of the Far East in Moscow, bringing together radicals from China, Japan, Korea, India, the Philippines, Indochina, and the East Indies.⁶² Yet the revolutionary zeal of the era was tempered by Lenin's insistence on united front policies in places not yet tenable for mass communism. The recognition, that nationalist, bourgeois revolutions were necessary precursors to communism, manifested itself in early 1920s Comintern policy when it decided to support nationalist movements in the region, such as the KMT, and to urge local communist parties to work with bourgeois nationalist parties to fight for freedom from imperial control.⁶³

In Malaya, as in colonies elsewhere, the early years after World War I saw the mixing and melding of revolutionary movements and thoughts into a multi-faceted radical ideology. When Goh Tun-ban, a recently immigrated Chinese publisher and newspaper editor, and five other political activists, were rounded up and deported from Malaya back to China in the fall of 1919, in the "six gentlemen incident," they were simultaneously considered nationalists, anarchists, communists, and even anarcho-communists.⁶⁴ Agitators themselves were generally still in the process of sorting out their own beliefs and ideologies. It was a time of intellectual and ideological fluidity, for both the radicals attempting to drive change as well as the nascent intelligence and security forces attempting to stop them. Communism, in that sense, worked

⁶² Serge Wolikow, "The Comintern as a World Network," in *The Cambridge History of Communism, Volume I*, Pons and Smith (eds.), 232-234; Duiker, *Rise of Nationalism*, 199-202; Foster, *Projections of Power*, 19; Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's War in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2013), 4.

⁶³ Andrea Graziosi, "Communism, Nations, and Nationalism," in *The Cambridge History of Communism, Volume I*, Pons and Smith (eds.), 461.

⁶⁴ Yong, "Origins and Development of the Malay Communist Movement," 627-628.

alongside forms of indigenous nationalism but also served as a hindrance to such movements, because it implicitly sought to co-opt the forces of nationalism to the future achievement of its desired ends and thus further tainted them in the eyes of the authorities.⁶⁵ Such uses and abuses went both ways, though, as exemplified by Sun's co-opting of the CCP apparatus and aspects of its ideology to further his own goals of Chinese nationalism and rejuvenation. As such, the radicalism of the 'six gentlemen' reflected a broader mishmash of concerns and grievances. While not necessarily aimed at the British in Malaya so much as at Goh Tun-ban's opponents in China, the British knew full well that the propagation of such language and its focus on the required destruction of oppressive authorities would redound sooner or later onto their own doorstep.

Indeed, British colonial reporting from the early 1920s, predating the 1923 Soviet agreement to support the KMT, details the fearful conclusions they had already reached concerning the prospects for Chinese nationalism in the wider region. A 1922 Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) report, drawn up after representatives toured the Far East with colonial officials in an effort to understand these transnational movements and their relationship, if any, with Moscow, exemplified the alarmist interpretations of the day. The SIS officials likened the KMT to the Irish Republican Brotherhood, characterizing Sun's efforts as primarily aimed against Britain, "the great despotic power tyrannizing over Asia, and that for world democracy England's destruction is essential."⁶⁶ Moreover, Britain blamed the KMT for the 1922 Seamen's Strike in Canton and Hong Kong that had paralyzed commercial traffic for much of the year.⁶⁷ In

⁶⁵ Tarling, *Nationalism in Southeast Asia*, 89.

⁶⁶ TNA, CO537/907, No. 1071 (CX/11361), Far Eastern Summary, SIS report 13 December 1922.

⁶⁷ Best, *British Intelligence and the Japanese Challenge in Asia*, 51.

December 1922 in Malaya, the colonial Governor, Sir Laurence Guillemard, who had hosted and conferred with the SIS team, went further, reporting to the Duke of Devonshire at the Colonial Office that “a vast Soviet organization” was manipulating and centrally controlling Sun, the CCP, as well as the forces of Indian and Javanese communism and nationalism as part of their grand scheme of world revolution. He also argued that, in Malaya at least, the KMT was actively working to establish *imperium in imperio* – a government within a government – through loyalty oaths, terrorism, economic manipulation, and control of Chinese schools for children and laborers alike.⁶⁸ The nascent Political Intelligence Bureau (PIB) in Singapore, in its monthly *Malayan Bulletin of Political Intelligence*, wrote in February 1923, just weeks after Guillemard had recommended the suppression of the KMT throughout Malaya to the Colonial Office, that Sun was an “avowed Communist,” and warned that, “a grave danger to the political peace of both Malaya and Java is imminent.”⁶⁹

These sorts of sensationalist accounts, in which communists lurked behind every tree, were reflections of both the anxieties of the day and the general ideological confusion that met British officials on the ground. Correctly discerning the actual relationship between disaffected Chinese laborers, Dutch communists, Indian agitators, Soviet propagandists, or Chinese nationalists, and the distinction between so-called moderate and radical factions was incredibly difficult for all imperial intelligence and police services, many of which had only recently been constituted. Within this ideological cauldron, it is unlikely that many of the Chinese in Malaya, themselves far from Moscow, saw themselves as exclusively communist, nationalist, anarchist,

⁶⁸ TNA, CO537/907, Guillemard to Devonshire, 6 December 1922.

⁶⁹ TNA, CO537/909, *Malayan Bulletin of Political Intelligence (MBPI)*, 7 February 1923; FCO141/16344, Guillemard to Devonshire, 6 December 1922.

or anything else. They were, more than anything, an aggrieved group of people who believed in their right to challenge the status quo ideologically regardless of government or jurisdiction. It was this transnational fluidity that so scared British and other imperial officials.

The alarmist concerns over communism and nationalism in the Far East built on long-held British fears about Russian designs on India.⁷⁰ In India, Britain was forced to consider the transformation of the Russian threat from the traditional imperialist one, based on potential conquest or subversion via Afghanistan, into a new transnational, ideological one that worked, via political agitation and propaganda, for the penetration of communist thought into the subcontinent and the strengthening of Indian nationalism.⁷¹ The British were shocked to see Soviet political subversion beginning in India from as early as 1919.⁷² It was accordingly the India Office that produced some of the most detailed early reports about the transnational threat, reporting from 1921 on political and ideological developments in the Far East, the establishment of Comintern posts in Peking and then Shanghai, and the danger that these efforts created for Britain and the Raj. More clearly than the Colonial Office or SIS, however, the India Office was aware of its own limitations, advocating not for radical policy changes so much as further research and intelligence efforts to understand the emerging threats.⁷³ This advocacy spurred the

⁷⁰ Keith Neilson, *Britain, Soviet Russia and the Collapse of the Versailles Order, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 55.

⁷¹ John Fisher, "The Interdepartmental Committee on Eastern Unrest and British Responses to Bolshevik and Other Intrigues Against the Empire During the 1920s," *Journal of Asian History* 34, 1 (2000): 4.

⁷² Christopher Andrew, "The British Secret Service and Anglo-Soviet Relations in the 1920s, Part I: From the Trade Negotiations to the Zinoviev Letter," *The Historical Journal* 20, 3 (1977): 685.

⁷³ British Library (BL), India Office (IO), L/PJ/12/45: File 4731/21, Far Eastern Department, 10 August 1921.

creation of new interdepartmental committees specifically to consider these transnational threats. The first, the Interdepartmental Committee on Bolshevism as a Menace to The British Empire, was ad-hoc, meeting only sporadically in 1921 before completing its reports and disbanding. But the second, the Interdepartmental Committee on Eastern Unrest (IDCEU), formed in 1922 and given heft by the presence of Lord Curzon, then Foreign Secretary in the government of David Lloyd George and formally Viceroy of India, was more effectual. The interdepartmental committee, although containing representatives from the Foreign Office, Home Office, Colonial Office, War Office, and Admiralty, was very much a product of the India Office in the way that its conclusions vindicated the latter's fears.⁷⁴ And, yet, its conclusions were sage. Over the course of more than 20 meetings from February to August 1922, it diagnosed the cause of eastern unrest as, "an intense nationalism, which may briefly be described as an attempt on the part of the various eastern peoples to emancipate themselves from any form of control by Europeans."⁷⁵ This, it summarized, was based on, "a prevalent spirit of restlessness, a developing nationalism whose origins lay long before the war but which had been aggravated considerably by it, the collapse of the Russian Empire, economic hardship, the spreading of arms to eastern countries, and Wilsonian idealism," among other factors.⁷⁶ Its August 1922 report argued that, if left unchecked, these forces would present a real source of danger to Britain and that, despite Soviet propaganda and intrigue, the eastern belief in nationalism was sincere, showed no signs of

⁷⁴ Fisher, "Interdepartmental Committee on Eastern Unrest," 6-9.

⁷⁵ TNA CO537/835, Inter-Departmental Committee on Eastern Unrest (IDCEU), report 1922.

⁷⁶ Fisher, "Interdepartmental Committee on Eastern Unrest" 11.

subsiding, and demonstrated an understanding that such beliefs must, in the end, be targeted at Britain because of its preponderance in the region.⁷⁷

As the India Office took the lead, British fears were compounded by events within Britain itself, including the controversial Zinoviev Letter of 1924. This purported to be from the director of the Comintern to the Communist Party of Great Britain, ordering it to engage in seditious activities, and helped create something of a panic that contributed to the fall of Britain's first Labour Government and the return of the staunchly anti-communist Conservatives, led by Stanley Baldwin.⁷⁸ This public scare coincided with Britain beginning to learn of the scale of Soviet arms shipments to Sun's regime in Canton, leading to a shift in the way that the Foreign Office and others in London viewed the KMT. Most notably, in December 1924 the Colonial Office decided to move forward with the complete suppression of KMT branches throughout Malaya.⁷⁹ This decision was taken by the new Secretary of State for the Colonies, Leopold Amery, barely a month into his tenure. In this case, Amery's prudent deliberations on the question of the KMT in Malaya, which continued into 1925, represented, in the form of the Colonial Office, just one corner of the machinery of imperial defence that Britain had at its disposal as it considered how to treat with, counter, and otherwise understand these transnational movements that were threatening its interests and its empire.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 11; TNA, CO537/835, IDCEU report, 1922.

⁷⁸ Best, "'We Are Virtually at War with Russia,' 207-208.

⁷⁹ Best, *British Intelligence and the Japanese Challenge in Asia*, 55; TNA, CO273/526, Amery to Guillemard, 5 December 1924.

The Imperial Defence Apparatus

At the pinnacle of British strategic governance was the Committee of Imperial Defence in London. The CID arose in the first years of the twentieth century in response to British investigations into its poor military performance during the second Boer War.⁸⁰ Ostensibly established to, “co-ordinate the requirements of the fighting services, and to render combined service and civil advice on questions of Imperial Defence,” the CID was a standing advisory body of ad-hoc composition.⁸¹ Chaired by the Prime Minister and composed of the ministers for the Treasury, War Office, Foreign Office, Colonial Office, the Admiralty as well as the Chiefs of Staff of the three fighting services and other select civil servants, it existed to advise the Prime Minister on political-military matters affecting the defence and security of the empire.⁸²

In practice, the committee’s remit meant that its focal point was always on allocating the resources that imperial defence required. Prioritizing, funding, and otherwise sustaining military and naval operations and obligations around the world became, by the time of the interwar period and the contraction of government spending, its most central and salient function. This meant that, while it remained a forum for high political and diplomatic debate, the CID of the 1920s and early 1930s was principally concerned with adjudicating where to allocate Britain’s

⁸⁰ Franklyn Johnson, *Defence by Committee: The British Committee of Imperial Defence, 1885-1959* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 48, 51-58; Maurice Hankey, *Diplomacy by Conference: Studies in Public Affairs, 1920-1946* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1947), 84; TNA, CAB63/39, Lecture at London University: The Origins and Development of the Committee of Imperial Defence, Maurice Hankey, 11 March 1927.

⁸¹ TNA, CAB5/7, CP313, Some General Principles of Imperial Defence, Maurice Hankey, 12 March 1928.

⁸² Clayton, *The British Empire as a Superpower*, 4.

increasingly limited financial and fighting resources to defend an empire that had reached its territorial peak. This focus is important in explaining why, for instance, the CID spent comparatively more time examining international threats to empire – which could often only be countered by military spending and the deployment of forces – than examining transnational threats – which did not usually involve any substantial allocation or reallocation of resources. But that did not stop, in moments of crisis, serious and longstanding deliberations of transnational threats – chiefly international communism and what Britain saw as malignant strains of Chinese nationalism – from entering into and dominating CID debate.

Originally without its own secretariat, under the leadership from 1912 of Sir Maurice Hankey, the CID grew to coordinate and shape all matters of defence and military policy. Although the committee did not wield executive power, by the interwar years it exerted tremendous influence over the formation, resourcing, and implementation of defence strategy.⁸³ In the person of Hankey, who served as Secretary to the Cabinet and CID for most of the interwar period, it had one of the singular figures of interwar British government. Relied on by prime ministers, he was among the most senior and respected British civil servants of his era. Hankey was self-effacing, with, “an uncanny faculty for being present at a meeting while no one is particularly aware of his presence.” He developed, over time, a “powerful influence” over much of the work that the CID and its subcommittees produced and the ways in which they shaped policy. It was Hankey, for instance, who, though not an official decision-maker himself, provided historical context and continuity or outlined available policy options to the CID and Cabinet during their meetings. It was, in other words, not simply his consistent presence across

⁸³ Johnson, *Defence by Committee*, 1-2, 126-127, 359; Joseph Maiolo, *The Royal Navy and Nazi Germany, 1933-1939* (London: Macmillan, 1998), 5-6; TNA, CAB63/38, Hankey to MacDonald, 16 February 1926.

different governments that gave him a voice but his solid yet energetic demeanor, his unyielding approach to his work and duty, and the near universal respect that his contemporaries and superiors had for him and his experience.⁸⁴

From the outbreak of World War I, the Committee's decisions, though formally requiring Cabinet approval, were virtually final. In truth, the large overlap of the most senior ministers, including the Prime Minister, between the CID and the Cabinet neutered the depth of Cabinet discussions on matters already approved by the CID. Under Lloyd George's wartime leadership, it became, second to the Cabinet, the government's most important coordinating authority.⁸⁵ The war also birthed many of the CID sub-committees that handled specific strategic issues. By the time of the interwar years, therefore, the CID was one of the government's principal inter-departmental bureaucratic mechanisms, molded to centrally manage industrial-scale warfare and the implementation of foreign, defence, economic, and colonial policies on a global scale.⁸⁶

The most formidable and important of the CID sub-committees was, from its founding in 1923, the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee, comprising the professional heads of the Royal Navy, British Army, and Royal Air Force. These officers both led their respective fighting services and came together to provide collective military advice to the CID and the Cabinet, a major change from earlier eras in which the services separately advised the Cabinet.⁸⁷ Among the papers they

⁸⁴ Stephen Roskill, *Hankey, Man of Secrets. Vol. 2, 1919-1931* (London: Collins, 1972), 340; French, *Deterrence, Coercion, Appeasement*, 19-20.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 354, 53.

⁸⁶ Johnson, *Defence by Committee*, 53, 354.

⁸⁷ TNA, CAB5/7, CP313, Some General Principles of Imperial Defence, Memorandum by the Oversea Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence, 12 March 1928; Johnson, *Defence by Committee*, 206, 357.

submitted to the Cabinet were, from 1926, an annual review of Imperial Defence, which provided an overview of the potential threats to imperial defence to ministers and officials. In the 1920s, these documents generally focused on the need to maintain command of the seas in general and sea lines of communications in particular, and on efforts to preserve the international status quo.

Given the responsibilities of specific ministries for questions of strategy and resource allocation, the Treasury, the Service ministries and the Foreign Office principally influenced the CID and, at various times, dominated it. They steered it towards issues and threats within their remit, most typically related to budgets, military spending and force posture, and the conduct of diplomacy. Other than questions related to the external security of the colonies, however, the CID did not substantively or frequently discuss colonial administration. Although the Colonial Office was represented on the CID, its interests were often peripheral to the committee's area of focus. In a sense, the priorities of the Colonial Office, issues of administration, internal policing, economic development, and the management of indigenous populations within the colonies – in other words, on people and conditions vulnerable to transnational influence – stood in contrast to the usually-international focus of those ministries that dominated the CID. This contributed to the fact that, as an organ of government, the CID only ever focused on those transnational issues that dominated the lived experience of colonial administrators in time of crisis. For the period in question here, that effectively meant the crisis of Chinese nationalism alone. In practice, this reality meant that the challenges facing the officials and administrators from the Colonial Office were, with few exceptions, not germane to most CID and Cabinet discussions.

Subordinate to the CID were the individual ministries of government. First among equals were the Treasury and the Foreign Office, responsible respectively for Britain's financial,

economic, and foreign policies. The role of the Treasury in shaping these policies is underappreciated. Headed in succession by Winston Churchill, Philip Snowden, and Neville Chamberlain in the decade from 1925, the Treasury was responsible for the oversight of expenditure and, therefore, served as the dominant voice in opposition to service spending plans, particularly those of the Admiralty. This gave it a great degree of leverage and influence over the allocation of resources, as seen most keenly during Churchill's battles with the Admiralty over naval building programs in the 1920s and Chamberlain's efforts to reset British grand strategy in the 1930s. Put simply, the Treasury won more battles than it lost in the Cabinet and CID. Its mark in this era is most often associated with what has since come to be called the Ten-Year Rule. This was an informal rule agreed upon by the Cabinet in 1919 that directed the fighting services to base their spending estimates on the assumption that there would not be any major war in the next ten years. Though given perhaps an inflated post-facto importance, it was a principle that guided successive Chancellors of the Exchequer from the mid-1920s forward in their efforts to rein in service spending.⁸⁸

Equal to the Treasury in prestige was the Foreign Office, headed most importantly, for the purposes of this narrative, by Sir Austen Chamberlain during the second Baldwin Ministry from 1924-29. Chamberlain had a free hand in shaping British foreign policy in a period in which Baldwin and the country were predominately focused on domestic issues.⁸⁹ As Foreign

⁸⁸ Ferris, *Men, Money, and Diplomacy*, 16-18; French, *Deterrence, Coercion, and Appeasement*, 24-25, 53-58.

⁸⁹ Charles Petrie, *The Life and Letters of the Right Hon. Sir Austen Chamberlain, K.G., P.C., M.P.* (London: Cassell and Company: 1943), 246; Robert Self, ed., *The Austen Chamberlain Diary Letters: The*

Secretary, he exerted most of his effort on preserving and strengthening the European peace, through the Locarno and Kellogg-Briand treaties and his unwavering support for the League of Nations.⁹⁰ Foreign Office policy towards the Far East was managed by its Far Eastern Department, and was overseen by Sir Victor Wellesley as Deputy Under-Secretary of State. The department served as the conduit for reporting from the region, which came from its embassies and consulates across the region.

Two salient points are worth raising here. First, the Foreign Office at the time was staffed in such a way that some civil servants spent virtually their entire careers in Whitehall and were thus alive to the political machinations of their minister and the Cabinet. This career path is best represented by Wellesley, who, despite long service, was never posted overseas as a diplomat in the generally understood sense. At the same time, others, perhaps best represented by Sir Miles Lampson, minister to China from 1926-33, spent the majority of their careers overseas as diplomats. This created a dichotomy and fundamental tension within the Foreign Office, in which overseas diplomats were subordinate to civil servants who lacked recent, or sometimes any, actual foreign experience and yet, steeped in the politics and corridors of power in Whitehall, steered policy at the imperial level.⁹¹ As we will see, a common complaint of those

Correspondence of Sir Austen Chamberlain with his Sisters Hilda and Ida, 1916-1937 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 264; French, *Deterrence, Coercion, Appeasement*, 18.

⁹⁰ Richard Grayson, *Austen Chamberlain and the Commitment to Europe: British Foreign Policy 1924-1929* (London: Frank Cass, 1997), ix-x; Churchill Archives Centre (CAC), Papers of Lord Vansittart of Denham (Vansittart papers), VNST I/1/2, The Foreign Policy of the Empire, 26 June 1930.

⁹¹ Ian Nish, "Japan in Britain's View of the International System," in *Anglo-Japanese Alienation, 1919-1952. Papers of the Anglo-Japanese Conference on the History of the Second World War*, ed. Ian Nish (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 50-51.

overseas was that their colleagues in London failed to grasp complex local realities and too often ignored policy recommendations that came in from the field. No less common were the complaints of those in London, bemoaning the inability of overseas officials to understand wider national interests and the political realities in the imperial core.

Second, although responsible for overseeing foreign relations, the Foreign Office's ability to do so was complicated by the heavy colonial presence within the Far East and the willingness of colonial governors and officials to proffer their own policy recommendations. As will be demonstrated in the chapters that follow, if the Colonial Office lacked the heft to counter the Foreign Office in Cabinet and CID meetings, it was able to propagate its own interests and policies in the empire itself. Colonial governors were accorded a degree of prestige that their consular and diplomatic counterparts in the Foreign Office sometimes lacked. They were often figures of domestic political or administrative importance, such as Guillemard, who were sent overseas at the conclusion of a long career to postings as a show of thanks for a lifetime of service to country or otherwise officials renowned for their regional expertise. The prestige of governors thus often leant them a latitude and power in their dealings in the region, both with their subject peoples and those external actors with whom they interacted. Most saliently for our purposes here, British foreign relations with China throughout the interwar years were mediated through and affected by, for better or worse, colonial governors and officials in Hong Kong and Singapore.

The Admiralty, the War Office, and the nascent Air Ministry, the three ministries responsible for overseeing the fighting services, were also represented in the Cabinet and CID, although their parliamentary representatives often lacked the clout and expertise of the service chiefs they nominally supervised. Institutionally, the services competed with one another for the

funds that the Treasury was disbursing, and their individual interpretations of imperial defence priorities therefore aligned with increasing their own profile and budget. Unsurprisingly, the Admiralty viewed Japan as the greatest threat to empire and advocated for the building of a navy capable of countering it, while also preserving British dominance in European waters.⁹² The British Army degenerated significantly in the years after the war, although its presence in the colonies drove the War Office to explore more significantly than its sister ministries any questions of an ideological and transnational nature, concerned as they were with the vulnerability of India and other possessions to both communism and nationalism.⁹³ These ministries, especially when represented by service chiefs such as David Beatty, George Milne, and Hugh Trenchard as, respectively First Sea Lord, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, and Chief of the Air Staff from the mid-1920s, did wield clout and influenced Cabinet decisions over imperial defence strategy, but only most effectively when they spoke with a uniform voice. This often proved difficult.

The final organs of the interwar imperial defence structure were the India Office and the Colonial Office. Of the India Office, its attendance at CID meetings was regular if context dependent. However, given Britain's predominant reliance on Indian soldiers rather than those from the home islands to rush to the Far East in the event of emergency, as happened in 1927, the role of the India Office in larger discussions of imperial defence was often central. This was

⁹² B.J.C. McKercher, "The Politics of Naval Arms Limitation in Britain in the 1920s," in *Washington Conference*, eds. Erik Goldstein and John Maurer (London: Frank Cass, 1994), 36-37; O'Brien, *British and American Naval Power*, 184; Howard, *Continental Commitment*, 86-87; Field, *Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East*, 13.

⁹³ Bond, *British Military Policy*, 8, 102-107.

especially so following the First World War and the desire of many in London to regularize the contributions that India would make to the general security of the empire – much to the chagrin of Raj officials loathe to make such commitments.⁹⁴ From the broader imperial perspective, though, India served as a valuable anchor to Britain's Far Eastern interests. It was also a constant source of information and perspective on both Soviet designs on India itself as well as assessment of the transnational and ideological movements that threatened its security.⁹⁵

The Colonial Office, as has been shown, counteracted punching below its weight in London through its outsized ability to drive and set the tenor for the actual implementation of policy in the imperial periphery. More than anything else, colonial officials were administrators, responsible for internal policing, economic development, and maintaining the prestige of the empire, but preferably at a low cost and without needing to call upon the military to enforce order.⁹⁶ If the responsibilities and powers of those administering the colonies were substantial, those of the Colonial Office civil servants in London were not. Staffed by less than 50 people, morale amongst colonial officials in London was low, and with good reason. Given a lack of funds from the Treasury, colonial officials were limited in both the number of books and pamphlets they were allowed to print and copy as well as the number of volumes they could even

⁹⁴ Stockwell, "Imperialism and Nationalism in South-East Asia," 466.

⁹⁵ TNA, CAB24, CP286, Afghanistan. – Memo: circulated by Lord Birkenhead, 9 June 1925; Metcalf, *Imperial Connections*, 204-205; Bond, *British Military Policy*, 102-105; Barton, *Counterterrorism between the Wars*, 53.

⁹⁶ Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order*, 72; Thomas, Moore, and Butler, *Crises of Empire*, 35.

keep in their offices. To top it off, Colonial Office officials were paid less than their counterparts elsewhere in government.⁹⁷

As with the Foreign Office, careers in the colonial service were typically either in London or a particular overseas colony, rather than both. From the time they entered as cadets, colonial officials serving overseas were employed by their respective colony and governor rather than the British state.⁹⁸ When combined with local language training and the vast differences between colonies, this meant that the individual colonies grew their own officials over the course of years. This produced an incredible depth of local knowledge but also a difficulty in moving personnel and giving officials the opportunity to serve in both London and overseas. As Ronald Hyam has observed, this stationing of officials for much of their career in one colony or region contributed to the emergence, over time, of colonial families which produced, generation after generation, young men desirous of overseas postings and the romantic work of administering the empire, often within the same colony they were tied to or grew up in.⁹⁹ Even at the most senior levels, Colonial Office officials in London were primarily concerned with internal matters. The minutes of CID meetings, for instance, compiled and preserved as they were by Hankey's staff in the CID secretariat, often lack the voice of the Secretary of State for the Colonies.¹⁰⁰ Though Hankey set the CID meeting agenda, the record shows that even assertive Colonial Secretaries,

⁹⁷ TNA, CO885/29/2, Correspondence Relating to Tours of Overseas Service for Officers of the Colonial Office, S.H. Wilson, February 1927; CO885/29/3, Report of the Committee on the Organization of the Colonial Office, R.V. Vernon, 27 February 1928.

⁹⁸ Ibid (CO885/29/3).

⁹⁹ Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire*, 10.

¹⁰⁰ See TNA, CAB2/4-2/8 for the minutes of CID meetings from roughly 1923 to 1939.

such as Amery, were either unwilling or unable to engage with him in ways that deepened CID deliberations on the sorts of transnational issues that Colonial officials dealt with every day. This meant that, outside moments of crisis, such transnational issues were almost never raised within the context of imperial defence.

The View from the Periphery

If the view of the average Colonial Office official in London was, then, a rather gloomy one, the same could not always be said for their counterparts in the colonies. With a clear sense of purpose, the typical colonial official began his service confident in his superiority over the colonial subjects that he administered and in his role within Britain's larger empire. This was buttressed by the self-mythologizing belief that reform and improvement to indigenous lands and lives were best accomplished through British sponsorship, "which recast imperial rule as being guided as much by ethical concerns as by profit or strategic advantage."¹⁰¹ In Malaya, the center of colonial rule in the east, the civil service consisted of only 220 officers overseeing a population of more than 3 million. That this number, shockingly low to observers a century later, was considered a problem of, "ludicrous overstaff[ing]," to Amery, says something about the personnel and financial constraints that the Colonial Office were under during the period.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Martin Thomas, *Fight or Flight: Britain, France, and the Roads from Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 18; Priya Satia, *Time's Monster: History, Conscience and Britain's Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 3.

¹⁰² CAC, Papers of Sir Leopold Amery (Amery papers), AMEL 2/1/16, Colonial Official, Negri Sembilan, to Amery, 22 April 1928.

Relative prosperity allowed district officials to not only fulfill their required duties but also engage in promoting health initiatives, building schools, and fostering sport and the boy scouts amongst local youths.¹⁰³

Malaya was divided between the Straits Settlements colonies – Singapore, Penang, and Malacca – that Britain ruled directly, the Federated Malay States, which were protectorates housing a British Resident who, effectively, governed alongside the Sultan, and the Unfederated Malay States, which Britain indirectly ruled but still influenced through less-powerful advisors. Within these structures, Britain, in essence, separated the indigenous Malay population from the large immigrant populations of Indian and, especially, Chinese who were also in Malaya.¹⁰⁴ The ethnic Chinese population were the most difficult to manage and congregated in the most developed areas. They were administered by the Chinese protectorate, long considered more effective in protecting Malaya from the Chinese than the Chinese from Malaya. While this division strengthened ethnic identity to worrisome levels in the era of Far Eastern nationalism, it also prevented the emergence of any pan-Malayan identity that could have been even more worrying for British prospects.¹⁰⁵

Elsewhere in the region, the view of life in the British Empire in the early 1920s was, if not equally as placid as Malaya – the ‘land that time forgot’ – then at least contented.¹⁰⁶ Australia and New Zealand were, at this stage, years away from feeling the pressure that a resurgent and militaristic Japan would place on them. Their increased responsibility for their own defence and

¹⁰³ Brendon, *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire*, 340, 344, 346; Cell, “Colonial Rule,” 232.

¹⁰⁴ Tarling, *The Fall of Imperial Britain*, 106; Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order*, 181-182.

¹⁰⁵ Stockwell, “Imperialism and Nationalism in South-East Asia,” 469-470.

¹⁰⁶ Tarling, *Imperialism in Southeast Asia*, 161-162; Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order*, 2-5, 8-11.

their legal transition from colony to self-governing dominion was a natural progression and sign of growth, though they continued to press the Cabinet and CID on the question of the Singapore Naval Base. Indeed, the offering of antipodean, especially Australian, opinions on British naval investments and strategy in the interwar Far East was a regular feature of Cabinet and CID meetings in the period. This was principally, however, of import to ministers in London less because they heeded the advice and perspectives coming from Canberra in the formation of strategy than that they needed to appear attuned to intra-imperial politics to give the impression that imperial voices had a voice in CID and Admiralty decision-making. They did not, at least in any meaningful way.¹⁰⁷

For Foreign Office officials stationed in China and Japan, this period was turbulent but not yet one of outright crisis. American and British diplomats in the region found Japan a reasonably close partner in naval limitation talks and in the workings of the League of Nations and any notions of Japanese aggression were negated by the devastating Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923. This presaged both a period of Japanese financial retrenchment and robust parliamentary discourse and civilian government in the years that followed.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, although China was unstable, there was something of a predictability to it. Many Britons in

¹⁰⁷ Clayton, *The British Empire as a Superpower*, 7; Hamill, *The Strategic Illusion*, 4; John McCarthy, *Australia and Imperial Defence, 1919-1939: A Study in Air and Sea Power* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1976), 1-2.

¹⁰⁸ TNA, WO32/5353, Military Intelligence Appreciation of the Military and Political Situation in the Far East from a British Point of View, 1925, War Office, 9 September 1925; Nish, "Japan in Britain's View of the International System," 33; B.J.C. McKercher, "'A Sane and Sensible Policy': Austen Chamberlain, Japan, and the Naval Balance of Power in the Pacific Ocean, 1924-1929," *Canadian Journal of History*, Vol. 21, 2 (1986), 202-203.

China, as neutral observers to the ebbs and flows of the warlord conflicts of the decade, drafted and digested a seemingly unending number of reports on those conflicts. Yet for many, life remained, at least until the middle half of the decade, little touched by them.

For naval and military officials in the region, the early years of the 1920s saw reductions in Far Eastern force strength to figures that would remain roughly consistent until 1927. For the army, this meant approximately six battalions spread between Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Tientsin, though exact force distribution varied with time. These forces came from both Britain and India. Through the Cardwell System, British Army units served in peacetime for up to 16 years before their rotation home.¹⁰⁹ They were, in other words, ‘show forces’ that lacked the size and capability to take part in the small wars that the Indian Army engaged in routinely on the borders of the subcontinent. Neither could they credibly threaten Japan or the forces of Chinese warlords. They provided, rather, a sense of security, superficial though it may have been, and pomp that provided a veneer of credibility to overseas Britons; and a foundation upon which larger forces arriving in the region in the event of crisis could be built around.

For the navy, the China Station already lacked capital ships since before World War I. Nor would they return in the interwar years, although one small aircraft carrier, the *Hermes*, arrived and remained on station from the summer of 1925 at the onset of the Canton-Hong Kong strike. The fleet itself consisted of a small number of older cruisers and destroyers, usually fewer than 10, as well as shallow draught gunboats to patrol Chinese rivers and provide protection for inland British concessions and interests. Longstanding naval concern over the modernization of the Japanese fleet, continually voiced in Cabinet and CID meetings, never propelled the Admiralty to increase the size or the modernity of the China Station fleet, which in any case was

¹⁰⁹ Bond, *British Military Policy*, 90-9; Moreman, “‘Small Wars’ and ‘Imperial Policing,’” 106-107.

built for policing waterways in China, showing a “tooth” when instability arose, and protecting British merchant interests around Hong Kong and Shanghai. rather than contesting Japan on blue waters.¹¹⁰ As the very existence of the Singapore strategy made clear, it was not a battle fleet.¹¹¹

The sanguine views of naval, military, and diplomatic officials, focused as they were in the early 1920s on the remote possibility of international conflict, contrasted markedly with the energy and vigor with which parts of the Far Eastern colonial and intelligence apparatus approached their responsibility for defending the empire from the transnational threats of Chinese nationalism and communism then spreading throughout the region. The fact that such efforts were necessary was acknowledged by the World War I-era tour of the Far East by David Petrie, an Indian political intelligence officer sent to reconnoiter threats to British interests and imperial response mechanisms in 1915. This served as something of a catalyst for the postwar establishment of an intelligence agency in Singapore solely dedicated to countering political subversion and ideological threats, and one whose growth and maturation mirrored the growth

¹¹⁰ Graham Watson, “Between the Wars: Royal Navy Organisation and Ship Deployments, 1919-1939,” <https://www.naval-history.net>, 8 December 2023; Christopher Bell, *The Royal Navy, Seapower, and Strategy Between the Wars*, 68-69; TNA, CAB24, CP139, Far East: Political Outlook in: - Naval Staff memo., circulated by Mr. W.C. Bridgeman, 5 March 1925. See also Heaslip, *Gunboats, Empire, and the China Station*, for the fullest account of the Royal Navy in the interwar Far East.

¹¹¹ Field, *Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East*, 64-68. This changed, however, for a period from 1928, when Admiralty planners directed the fleet to position itself in Hong Kong rather than Singapore (see Neidpath, *The Singapore Naval Base*, 114-115).

and maturation of British intelligence services and capabilities – from the SIS to MI5 and others – in Britain itself.¹¹²

As Foreign Office records indicate, the organization that would go on to become the Singapore Special Branch inherited at its founding many of the functions extant in the multiple arms of imperial intelligence and policing from both Britain and India. The first, MI5, was a metropole-based counter-intelligence organization focusing on detecting espionage and activities of seditious movements, and was particularly associated, at that time, with those aiming to subvert the military. The second, the Indian Political Intelligence Office (IPI), was established in London in the years immediately before World War I. It worked to thwart and undermine Indian revolutionaries abroad and their efforts to radicalize and arm their compatriots within the subcontinent. The third, the Metropolitan Police's Special Branch, countered revolutionary movements, provocateurs, and insurrectionists within Britain itself. As will be shown, in Singapore, Britain built an organization that combined most of these capabilities within a single headquarters.

Although Petrie's tour served as a catalyst for the growth and maturation of British political intelligence capabilities in the Far East, its effects were sporadic in its overall countering of the Ghadr threat. Petrie moved peripatetically within the region from 1915 to 1917

¹¹² Gill Bennett, "The Secret Service Committee, 1919-1931," in *The Records of the Permanent Under-Secretary's Department: Liaison between the Foreign Office and British Secret Intelligence, 1873-1939* (Foreign and Commonwealth Office London: FCO Historians, March 2005), 42-43, 47-48; TNA, KV4/126, A Brief Outline of the Development of MI5, War Office, Department of Military Operations & Intelligence, 3 November 1936; KV4/127, MI5 Organisation Charts and Duties, War Office, Security Service, 1937.

to identify threats and establish networks of agents to counter them.¹¹³ As he was not permitted to conduct intelligence gathering operations within Malaya itself, however, the Malaya General Officer Commanding assumed those responsibilities.¹¹⁴ By the middle of 1916, the GOC intelligence section, seconded by an Indian police deputy superintendent, had already established networks of agents in Java, Sumatra, Manila, and Bangkok.¹¹⁵ This created a situation in which the British ran at least two intelligence networks in the Far East, one in Singapore under the GOC and one built by Petrie and the Government of India, that was resident in diplomatic and consular offices throughout the region. After the conclusion of the war, some looked to solidify the intelligence foundation that the war had made possible, with a particular focus on Singapore.¹¹⁶

In late 1918 the Criminal Intelligence Department (colloquially known as Special Branch since its inception) of the Straits Settlements Police Force was formed, responsible solely for political and security intelligence.¹¹⁷ The term “criminal” was a deliberate misnomer as, although

¹¹³ TNA, FCO141/15519, Paraphrase of Cypher Cable from Secretary of State, Bonar Law, 13 January 1916; FCO141/15518, Paraphrase of Cypher Cable from Foreign Office, Simla, 29 July 1915; FCO141/15524, Rideout to Law, 26 May 1916.

¹¹⁴ Comber, “The Singapore Mutiny (1915) and the Genesis of Political Intelligence in Singapore,” 10-11.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 9; TNA, FCO 141/15521, Memorandum on Mr. Petrie’s Appointment, Rideout report 21 April 1916.

¹¹⁶ TNA, KV1/15, “D” Branch Report. Report on the Establishment of a Special Intelligence Service in the Colonies and Overseas Dominions, MI5 report 1921.

¹¹⁷ It was officially given the name ‘Special Branch’ in 1933. In keeping with that usage and to avoid acronym confusion with the Committee of Imperial Defence (also CID), this narrative will thenceforth refer to it as Special Branch.

the office played no part in investigating ordinary crime, the colony was not keen to publicize this newly dedicated group of police investigators. It took on, from 1919, all of the political intelligence-gathering activities that the GOC and his team had done during the war years.¹¹⁸ Built on Petrie's earlier recommendations and drawing on the model of the IPI in India, Special Branch was led upon its establishment by V.G. Savi, an assistant superintendent of police in Singapore, and employed investigators and inspectors of all stripes, including the notable Prithvi Chand.¹¹⁹ According to René Onraet, the second superintendent of Special Branch, "in addition to security work against political movements and suspects the Special Branch concentrated on all racial, religious and social activities, and kept an eye on the trend in neighboring countries." Its fundamental task was the defence of, "the peninsula from the infection of radical ideas that would stir up its population."¹²⁰ Such language, speaking of the peninsula as needing 'defence' from 'infection' and 'radical ideas' speaks to the paternalistic prism through which officials such as Onraet interpreted their world. To them, the local population would, if not troubled, provide no trouble; sedition and insurrection always had a hidden, foreign, hand. Such a worldview, although problematic, facilitated the tailoring of their work. Immigrant populations, most especially the Indian and Chinese, were threatening to Malaya in a way that Malays themselves could never be. This allowed for a targeting of resources. It also made fighting such 'diseases'

¹¹⁸ Alun Jones, "Internal Security in British Malaya, 1895-1942," PhD. diss. (Yale, 1970), 102.

¹¹⁹ TNA, KV1/15, "D" Branch Report. Report on the Establishment of a Special Intelligence Service in the Colonies and Overseas Dominions, MI5 report 1921; Comber, "The Singapore Mutiny (1915)," 11-12; Choon, *Absent History*, 57, 66-68, 74; René Onraet, *Singapore: A Police Background* (London: Dorothy Crisp and Company, 1947), 81-82.

¹²⁰ Choon, *Absent History*, 75.

easier on their minds, as banishment, deportation, and the elimination of the ‘virus’ could facilitate the return of the country to its natural state of prosperous slumber.¹²¹ This was a multiethnic force that included numerous British, Chinese, Indian, and Malay officers and inspectors. It was, in that way, a reflection of the heterogeneous society that they served.¹²²

In the years after 1919 this system matured, most markedly with the 1922 creation in Singapore of the Political Intelligence Bureau (PIB). This served as a clearing house for political intelligence matters in Malaya. Rather than replace or reframe the focus of Special Branch, the PIB sought to harness its capabilities alongside those of the Malayan Civil Service district officers, the Chinese Protectorate – which was then known to provide some of the best intelligence in Malaya in the form of confidential reports on Chinese political and subversive activity – and the military and naval intelligence sections with the goal of pooling intelligence information into a packageable form and communicating it to all interested partners.¹²³ These included SIS personnel in the region as well as MI5 officers back in London.

Broadly speaking, it was the duty of the PIB to keep the colonial government informed of all political agitation and potential subversive movements in Malaya, to correspond with other British and partner (read: inter-imperial) administrations and consular bodies regarding such movements, to advise the government as to all external political happenings that could affect Malaya, to assist local authorities (read: Special Branch) in their inquiries and investigations, and to publish at regular intervals, usually monthly, an abstract of intelligence containing those items

¹²¹ Ibid., 76.

¹²² Onraet, *Singapore*, 38, 44, 53, 59.

¹²³ Ibid., 99, 138-140; Popplewell, *Intelligence and Imperial Defence*, 326-327.

most of interest to the broader intelligence and government community.¹²⁴ It was also made responsible for, should the colonial government wish, overseeing British propaganda efforts to counter whatever groups or threats it deemed necessary. To do all of these things, it directed that subordinate intelligence organizations should submit weekly confidential diaries for collation with a focus on, among other things:

- (1) Chinese Anarchism
- (2) Mohamedan Agitation
- (3) Anti-British agitation and non-co-operation with the local Government
- (4) Sikh Unrest
- (5) Malay agitations
- (6) Religious movements
- (7) Bolshevik propaganda
- (8) Movements of suspects
- (9) Siamese border troubles
- (10) Indian agitations
- (11) Japanese activities
- (12) Arab activities
- (13) Chinese labour troubles
- (14) Indian labour troubles
- (15) Miscellaneous¹²⁵

These classifications reflected the individual challenges as understood in Malaya and were communicated to the Colonial Office in October 1921 in the request made by Sir Laurence Guillemard, Governor of the Straits Settlements, for approval to officially establish the PIB. This represents the best and most concise contemporary summation of the prototypical view of those from the periphery who were engaged in the ideological and political struggle against the transnational threats of the time that were, to them, real and growing. It reflected a worldview

¹²⁴ TNA, WO32/5628, Extract from a Despatch from the Governor of the Settlements to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Secret, 18 October 1921; WO32/5628, MBPI Report on the First Year (1922), October 1922; CO537/904, Guillemard to Churchill, 18 October 1921.

¹²⁵ TNA, FCO141/16000, The Formation of a Political Intelligence Bureau, 1921.

and interpretation of events largely and consistently agreed upon by officials of all stripes in the Far Eastern colonies throughout the 1920s and into the early 1930s. Whatever the accuracy of such assessments, it was the work of officials who were wholeheartedly engaged in the work of imperial defence. The Special Branch system, coordinated on the ground by inspectors and their partner police forces across the broader colony, relied heavily on paid informers from the Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities, managed by the Sikh, Indian, and Chinese officers serving under Special Branch leadership.¹²⁶ They translated and disseminated as much of the local vernacular press as they could, thus expanding the British understanding of local Chinese, Indian, and Malay activities, as well as interdicting any seditious literature entering into the colony (chiefly from India).

Once functioning, the PIB began releasing in March 1922 a monthly *Malayan Bulletin of Political Intelligence (MCIN)*, which replaced the previous *Secret Abstracts of Intelligence*, that had been published by local military intelligence since 1917.¹²⁷ Regular communication was developed with the Colonial Office Central Security Department, the Home Office, the Metropolitan Police Special Branch, and MI5. The *MBPI* was distributed widely. Every senior civil servant, police, and Chinese affairs official in Malaya, every resident in the Malay States, every military and naval headquarters from China to India, every consulate from Batavia to San Francisco, and all interested Colonial, War, Home, and Foreign Office officials in London

¹²⁶ Jones, "Internal Security in British Malaya, 1895-1942," 137-138; TNA, WO32/5628, Extract from a Despatch from the Governor of the Settlements to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Secret, 18 October 1921.

¹²⁷ TNA, CO537/906, Malayan Bureau of Political Intelligence, Report on the First Year (1922), October 1922.

received the bulletin by the end of 1922.¹²⁸ So successful were these early Special Branch and PIB efforts, if not in actually arresting subversive actors or breaking up seditionist cells then at least in communicating its ability to do so and the new vigor with which the problem was being attacked, that the Secretary of State for the Colonies, the Duke of Devonshire, chastised the Governor of Hong Kong, Sir Reginald Stubbs, in October 1923 for his own colony's inability to match the output from Singapore.¹²⁹ The Hong Kong CID, perhaps not coincidentally, was founded by the end of that year.¹³⁰ The creation of the PIB was, then, the necessary second step taken in Singapore following the 1919 creation of the Special Branch. In isolation, neither organization could leverage the full potential envisioned by Guillemard. Together, although never described in this way in the period, they provided the foundation for British imperial defence efforts against Far Eastern transnational threats.

Onraet, by 1921 established as the head of Special Branch, was, despite the power this afforded him, circumspect in his conclusions, describing Indian unrest in the Straits Settlements in late 1921 as “non-existent,” and had little to report on Bolshevik propagandizing or Chinese nationalist agitation in his end-of-year report. Onraet watched. Rather than move to break up or harass the unofficial KMT reading rooms in Singapore, given that the party was already by that point banned from registering itself in the Straits Settlements, he set about monitoring and

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ TNA, CO537/758, Devonshire to Stubbs, 18 October 1923.

¹³⁰ Colin Crisswell and Mike Watson, *The Royal Hong Kong Police, 1841-1945* (Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1982), 118.

infiltrating them.¹³¹ Such was the Special Branch approach. Early copies of the *MBPI*, written by Onraet, included sections covering the political activities of the Muslim, Chinese, Sikh, Indian Muslim, local Indian, “Japanese in the South Seas,” and the local vernacular press.¹³² They sought from early on to understand before anything else. Defensively, Special Branch expanded its efforts to intercept anti-British propaganda entering the colony from India while also hiring a white British civilian as the manager of the government printer press that physically produced the *MBPI*. Onraet and the PIB were opposed to the allowing of any “non-European” from accessing or printing the publication, given its secret and confidential nature, lest they become aware of its existence.¹³³

Offensively, many of the early cases worked by Special Branch and their partners in Malaya were decidedly undramatic, and yet they underscored the scope of the challenge facing them. As an example, in February 1923 Special Branch received intelligence from northern China about the presence of two Chinese communists in Selangor, one of the Federated Malay States (FMS), working on behalf of the “cause,” seeking converts to communism and illicitly printing a paper critical of British rule, the *Nanyang Critique*. In March 1923 British agents raided the paper’s offices, identified its locally based founders and backers and linked them to a local Chinese night school in Kuala Lumpur. The school, upon request by Special Branch, was raided by the FMS Education Department. The raid, in turn, provided connections to other night

¹³¹ TNA, WO32/5350, Director of Criminal Intelligence, Straits Settlements, to Director of Military Intelligence, London, 3 January 1922.

¹³² TNA, CO537/918, *MBPI*, January 1923.

¹³³ TNA, CO537/918, *MBPI*, October 1923; CO273/525, James (Governor’s Deputy) to Devonshire, 14 January 1924.

schools, the details of unregistered and illegal Chinese secret societies, evidence of other illegal political papers then in distribution within the local Chinese community, and correspondence between the Selangor cell and its communist handlers in mainland China. With evidence now in hand, Special Branch moved against the cell. Of the six persons of interest, all either fled Malaya, were deported overseas, or, having disappeared from the historical record, moved on in some other way.¹³⁴ What Onraet knew, it seems, is that cases such as this one, while perhaps producing localized gains in the short-term, would have little effect on the overall ideological contest then unfolding in the colony. There were simply too many Chinese and Indian laborers willing to listen to messages of grievance, too many linkages between such communities in Malaya and their parent communities abroad, and too much ideological vigor and energy running through the Far East in the early 1920s for anything to be contained for very long. This, then, was the position of the Singapore Special Branch and its partners across Malaya in 1925. They had built a robust organization, complete with the requisite skills, powers, and attributes to make gains in their effort to counter transnational nationalist and communist movements, but in need of humility when considering their ability to shape the broader environment and desirous of more tools to have at their disposal.

Britain and the Empires of the Far East

Chief among the tools that Special Branch and the PIB were beginning to put into use by 1924-25 was the sprawling web of inter-imperial intelligence, consular, and law enforcement organizations and mechanisms that the imperial powers in the Far East were at that time

¹³⁴ TNA, CO537/925, *MBPI*, September 1924.

establishing, given the tumultuous ideological environment of the day. Indeed, the mostly non-European nature of the threat to colonial stability in the aftermath of World War I diminished the rivalries between the Western powers. Common threats created the need for cooperative action among empires that were all opposed to communism and the increasingly modern forms of indigenous nationalism developing across the region.¹³⁵ The war and the political upheavals that surrounded it had roiled, across the Far East, social and class structures, destabilizing societies.¹³⁶ This happened just as indigenous peoples were transforming their nationalist movements into ones based upon the European model, with better organizations and resourcing alongside maturing notions of national identity and idealism.¹³⁷ Given this political turbulence, it is no surprise that the prototypical western imperial response was to increase political surveillance, establish intelligence networks, and partner with one another to slow such ‘forces of progress.’¹³⁸

The NEI, centered on Batavia, was Britain’s chief interlocutor and partner. This was due to proximity, the British interest in the maintenance of Dutch sovereignty over the colony, and the acknowledged inability of the Dutch to defend the entirety of their territory by internal means alone. During this period, the NEI government was confronting many of the same challenges that the British were facing in Malaya: a locally-based communist party, rising Chinese activism, and a proliferation of nascent nationalist organizations bent on non-cooperation and eventual self-

¹³⁵ Tarling, *The Fall of Imperial Britain*, 89-90.

¹³⁶ McMahon, *The Limits of Empire*, 7.

¹³⁷ Foster, *Projections of Power*, 3, 21-22; Milton Osbourne, *Southeast Asia: An Introductory History* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2013), 132-134.

¹³⁸ Choon, *Absent History*, 43.

rule.¹³⁹ The Sepoy Mutiny in 1915 had propelled the British and the Dutch to begin working closely with another, sharing information on Ghadr networks and pan-Islamist movements. Dutch colonial officials established their own intelligence service in 1916, just as Petrie was spearheading British efforts to the same end.¹⁴⁰ Once they began digging, Dutch officials learned to their horror that a single Indian man, Abdul Selam, within the NEI was, in concert with both the German Mission in Batavia and proto-nationalist groups, producing much of the Ghadr literature then making its way into Malaya. Despite not breaking any NEI laws, in a sop to the British, Dutch officials interned Selam on Timor for the remainder of the war, something that they, as neutrals, would never countenance doing to a citizen of Germany.¹⁴¹ The war also spurred on the British colonial partnership with French Indochina. The French Empire, weakened by the war, worked to develop export sectors focused on rice and mining in an effort to increase Indochina's coffers. In so doing, they accelerated the decline of the traditional rural economy and, by placing increasing pressure on the peasantry, contributed to their turn towards nationalist and revolutionary movements, thus mirroring events in the wider region.¹⁴² The state had already founded its own political police force, the *Sûreté Indochinoise*, in 1911, and in 1915 created the *Sûreté Generale*, the more feared general security police. These built atop the existing efforts of French consular officials across the region who had long been responsible for tracking anti-

¹³⁹ Robert McMahon, *Colonialism and Cold War: The United States and the Struggle for Indonesian Independence, 1945-49* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 31-32.

¹⁴⁰ Choon, *Absent History*, 72; Harper, "Singapore, 1915," 1799.

¹⁴¹ Streets-Salter, *World War One in Southeast Asia*, 106-108, 132-135.

¹⁴² Thomas, *The French Empire Between the Wars*, 1; Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1925-1945*, 5.

colonial activists and networks.¹⁴³ As a wartime ally, the British assisted the French, arresting and secretly handing over to the French both the brother and several followers of Phan Boi Chau, the leading Vietnamese intellectual and nationalist.¹⁴⁴ British colonial relations with the US colony in the Philippines were more complex. Although, by the end of the war, the US was a partner of the European powers in their efforts to maintain the existing colonial order, it did not outwardly participate in building the cooperative intelligence structures and networks that so characterized British, Dutch, and French efforts. Given the 1916 passage of the Jones Act, the US, while supportive of Britain, committed itself to an alternative colonial model that promised Philippine independence, “As soon as a stable government can be established therein.”¹⁴⁵

In the years after World War I, the British, French, and Dutch continued their partnership, although only sporadically at first. They cooperated on legal matters, the prevention of opium smuggling, and the regulation of Chinese immigration.¹⁴⁶ As Special Branch established itself more fully in the years after 1920, however, cooperation became more formalized, especially between the British and the Dutch. For example, the British Consul-General in Batavia, Josiah Crosby, oversaw a “small secret organization” that gathered political intelligence in the NEI, including details of individual agitators.¹⁴⁷ Crosby, “the right man in the right place,” would, over the course of the 1920s, become an extremely effective manager and disseminator of

¹⁴³ Harper, “Singapore, 1915,” 1799; Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks*, 28, 42.

¹⁴⁴ Streets-Salter, *World War One in Southeast Asia*, 197-198.

¹⁴⁵ Capozzola, *Bound by War*, 87; Gouda with Zaalberg, *American Visions of the Netherlands East Indies/Indonesia*, 70-72; Foster, *Projections of Power*, 1.

¹⁴⁶ Anne Foster, “Secret Police Cooperation and the Roots of Anti-Communism in Southeast Asia,” *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 4, 4 (1995): 333.

¹⁴⁷ TNA, CO537/889, Situation in the Netherlands East Indies, 1919, 19 April 1919.

intelligence from Batavia and a key Special Branch partner.¹⁴⁸ At the same time, British officials in Hong Kong waxed to the Colonial Office about their close relations with their French counterparts in matters political, intelligence, and otherwise.¹⁴⁹ These were reflections of the larger feelings of shared interests and/or destiny that drove western colonial officials together. As summarized by Anne Foster:

Colonial officials from all the imperial powers engaged in cross-colony learning, sending study missions and advice. The governors-general of all the colonies visited each other several times during these years. Both colonial and foreign relations officials from the United States took steps to combat communism in the region, including the sharing of secret information; they perceived communism as a threat to the whole region and began to devise region-wide approaches.¹⁵⁰

By 1925 information sharing between the colonial powers on political intelligence, subversion, communism, and Chinese nationalism was in full swing. Such information-sharing agreements, given that they were not technically official or between governments, were simply coordinated and carried out by Onraet and his Special Branch team alongside the PIB.¹⁵¹

If the war and the need for a common response to communism and nationalism brought the western colonial powers together, Britain worked with equal diligence to commit Siam and Japan to the postwar regional status quo as well. Siam, wedged as it was between British and French colonies, had remained nominally independent through the period of western imperialist expansion in the Far East. As a semi-colonial state subject to extraterritoriality treaties, foreign concessions, and foreign advisors in the government, it was receptive from almost the start to

¹⁴⁸ TNA, ADM116/2262, Commander-in-Chief, China Station, to Admiralty, 13 March 1924.

¹⁴⁹ TNA, CO 129/488, Cooperation Between British and French Agents, 16 May 1925.

¹⁵⁰ Foster, *Projections of Power*, 7.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 26; Best, *British Intelligence and Japanese Challenge in Asia, 1914-1941*, 68.

British efforts towards partnership.¹⁵² This was, in part, because it too was an imperial power. From the first half of the nineteenth century, the Siamese court had, in effect, expanded outwards from Bangkok to conquer much of the modern state of Thailand, importing from the Western powers many of the same practices and conceptions of sovereignty and the role of the state.¹⁵³ During World War I, the king's own police force apprehended and extradited anticolonial activists to their colony of origin, usually Malaya or Indochina, for imprisonment (usually by the British) or execution (usually by the French). British agents worked actively in Siam during the war, partnering with their local hosts to defeat German plots against India.¹⁵⁴ Although the need to engage in such efforts waned following the war, the preponderant British position in Siam and the concern in Bangkok about the corrosive effects of Chinese nationalism on the indigenous Siamese population meant that partnership, formal or informal, continued into the 1920s.

Japan after the First World War was not a willing partner in intelligence sharing so much as one interested in some of the same fundamental outcomes: regional stability, economic opportunity and growth, and the curbing of communist tendencies. In that respect, Britain and Japan did not develop, in the pre-1925 era, any of the intelligence-sharing mechanisms, formal or informal, that Singapore enjoyed with the Dutch or the French. But Britain did, alongside the French, engage with the Japanese government in efforts to curb the political activities of Indian

¹⁵² Aldrich, *The Key to the South*, 1-2; Batson, "Nationalism and Pro-Japanese Activities in Thailand," 188-190.

¹⁵³ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), 100-106; Tarling, *The Fall of Imperial Britain in Southeast Asia*, 89.

¹⁵⁴ Streets-Salter, *World War One in Southeast Asia*, 143, 157; TNA, FCO141/15521, Memorandum on Mr. Petrie's Appointment, MG Dudley Rideout, 21 April 1916; Comber, "The Singapore Mutiny (1915) and the Genesis of Political Intelligence in Singapore," 10-11; TNA, FCO141/15524, Rideout to Law, 26 May 1916.

and Vietnamese nationals living in Japan. In reporting back to their respective capitals, some British and American officials recommended that Britain and the US work harder to bring Japan, either through the central government in Tokyo or the Governor of Formosa, into the deepening inter-imperial networks of intelligence that they were then creating. While others scuttled such ideas – lingering concerns over longer-term Japanese interests was, in some ways, one of the things that helped bring western imperial powers together in this period – their promulgation in the first place speaks, if nothing else, to some of the ways in which Japan was seen as a normal state and empire in the eyes of western colonial officials.¹⁵⁵

Singapore Totems

Where, then, stood those two symbols of British imperial defence in the interwar Far East, the Singapore Naval Base and the Straits Settlements Special Branch, in the spring of 1925? The progress and development of Special Branch needs no retelling here, other than to say that its growth and maturation represented an inflection point in both the way that officials in Singapore and elsewhere in the imperial periphery understood the transnational threat and the way that they conceived of their own responsibilities and duties to counter it. Other than the Petrie visit nothing, from the establishment of Special Branch or the PIB to the sharing of intelligence with inter-imperial partners to the growth of police and consular investigatory tools and networks to find and eliminate malign actors and cells, came about because of requests from

¹⁵⁵ Foster, *Projections of Power*, 7; TNA, CO129/488, Cooperation Between British and French Agents, 16 May 1925; Harper, *Underground Asia*, 6; TNA, CO273/525, Guillemard to Thomas (Colonial Office), 29 February 1924.

London or Delhi. These were organically local actions and decisions. If they reflected a degree of initiative on the part of colonial officials, they also reflected their sober appreciation of the moment and the ideological environment in which they existed. Absent a crisis, these issues were not germane to CID debates on high politics and, thus, are largely absent from Whitehall-based archival sources (and the secondary sources that flowed from them). As has been demonstrated, though, policymakers in Whitehall remained attuned to the broader trends and patterns as they fit within Britain's wider struggle with international communism.¹⁵⁶

With regard to the Singapore Naval Base, since the formalization of the concept in 1919 and the Cabinet decision to proceed in 1921 (in advance of the Washington Naval Conference), little substantive progress had been made.¹⁵⁷ The collapse of Lloyd George's wartime coalition government in 1922 and the brief Bonar Law, Baldwin, and MacDonald ministries from 1922-24 produced fluctuations in both personnel and policy. The signing of the Washington Naval Treaty in 1922 lessened the urgency to build a new base. Then, under Ramsey MacDonald's first Labour ministry in 1924, the British government decided to pause all work and not request additional funds from parliament, effectively killing the project for a time, as it sought "a policy of international co-operation through a strengthened and enlarged League of Nations, the settlements of disputes by conciliation and judicial arbitration, and the creation of conditions which will make a comprehensive agreement on limitations of armaments possible."¹⁵⁸ In a

¹⁵⁶ See Note 6 (specifically WO32/5916 and WO32/21122).

¹⁵⁷ TNA, CAB5/5, CP197, Establishment of Naval Base at Singapore and its Effect Upon the Foreign and Naval Policy of the Empire, 30 June 1923.

¹⁵⁸ TNA, CAB5/5, CP223, Singapore Naval Base, 31 March 1924; CAB2/4, CP184, CID 183rd meeting, April 3, 1924.

January 1925 CID meeting of Baldwin's newly elected Conservative government, which had earlier reversed MacDonald's decision, Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain argued for the reactivation of the project. However, noting the existence of the Ten-Year Rule and the Foreign Office's opinion that the likelihood of war with Japan was remote, he, backed by Churchill as the new Chancellor of the Exchequer, again stressed the relative lack of urgency. They concluded the meeting by agreeing to slow construction and to establish yet another sub-committee to study the base's feasibility.¹⁵⁹

The CID reaffirmed its decision to move forward slowly and without any serious commitment of funds in May 1925, barely a week before the outbreak of violence in Shanghai and the launching of the May 30th Movement. This reaffirmation, in truth, qualified the British building of the base, stating, "there is no necessity...to make preparations involving additional expenditure for placing at Singapore, for a decisive battle in the Pacific, a British battle-fleet, with cruisers, flotillas and all ancillary vessels, superior in strength, or at least equal, to the sea-going navy of Japan." In essence, they would build a base to house a fleet, but the size and character of that fleet would be based on what Britain might choose, or could afford, to send rather than on any naval calculation on enemy capabilities, force requirements, or mission accomplishment.¹⁶⁰ The Admiralty would not be getting the fleet of its choice. Once this had been settled, the question of the base receded from the political to the tactical level, with

¹⁵⁹ TNA, CAB5/5, CP236, The Defence of British Ports East of Suez, 5 December 1924; CAB2/4, CP193, CID 193rd meeting, 5 January 1925.

¹⁶⁰ TNA, CAB 5/5, CP246, Committee of Imperial Defence, Naval Policy, 19 May 1925.

contentious debates pitting the Admiralty against the Air Ministry on the question of how to defend the base facilities – with heavy guns or fighter aircraft squadrons.¹⁶¹

As the summer of 1925 dawned, then, British officials in London and Singapore could be said to be considering the state of imperial defence in the Far East from different standpoints. In London, the Cabinet and CID viewed imperial security mostly through the lenses of high politics, international diplomacy, and military might. And what did they see? At that moment, they perceived little chance of interstate conflict between the powers. Cordial and friendly, if cautious, relations existed with both Japan and the United States; there was a tacit acknowledgement of British primacy and continued economic cooperation from the French, Dutch, and Siamese empires. The only problem was the unsteady cauldron of politics and chaos in China, though this was neither novel nor unmanageable, given Britain's ability to defend its interests in the fractious Chinese market and security environment and the reticence of Chinese warlords to move aggressively against foreign powers. In short, the view from London was one of economic progress, political stability, and colonial growth. Strategically speaking, and aside from the Admiralty's repeated warnings about Britain's inability to defend its Far Eastern interests, only the specter of creeping Soviet influence in the region worried officials in London. This was crystallized by both the 1923 KMT-Comintern agreement as well as creeping Soviet adventurism across the region. The Cabinet and CID minutes of the time, however, show no great collapse in confidence in India and, with respect to China, the view was that staunchly anti-communist Japan and its preeminent position in Manchuria served as a bulwark against any Soviet threat. Given such conclusions, it is not surprising to see that, amidst domestic turmoil

¹⁶¹ TNA, ADM1/27404, The Garrison and Defences of Singapore: Memorandum by the Chief of the Air Staff, 26 March 1925; ADM1/27404, Admiralty Response to Chief of the Air Staff Memorandum, 15 April 1925.

and repeated changes in government, little progress was made on the Singapore Naval Base. In Singapore, however, the establishment of Special Branch and the PIB demonstrated a greater, or perhaps closer, appreciation of the magnitude of the transnational threats then facing the imperial status quo in the region. They were, after all, on the front lines of the conflict.

If the two poles of empire interpreted the situation thusly, it was neither by design nor delegation. Hankey was not, for instance, apportioning responsibilities for concerns X, Y, or Z to this or that office, ministry, or colony, systematically ensuring that all imperial anxieties were addressed through plans, subcommittees, and the sequencing of steps for decision and action. Officials in Singapore, though desirous of progress on the naval base, for the most part considered the question of the naval and military defence of the empire as a matter to be dealt with in London. To them, secure in their position, the international threat of a foreign power attacking or seizing the colony would have been seen as highly unlikely. The fleet, of course, would come, and then naval power, alongside a healthy dose of British virtue and determination, would make right and all would be as it should.

In the same way, the CID establishment in London did not even consider the routine work of intelligence gathering, police investigation, network exploitation, and the arrest or elimination of subversive actors and their foreign patrons as being matters for its attention. The transnational threat was not, absent a moment of crisis, conceived of as either transnational or threatening. Put another way, although they understood communism's universal nature and the reality of its ability to spill over borders, CID officials did not at this point conceptualize it as a movement that had the potential to destroy the imperial system and status quo that Britain had built. There was, thus, no need to develop a strategy or allocate definite resources to countering it. In other words, to most of Whitehall, it was something that had less to do with the defence of

the empire and more to do with the way that colonial officials, through the routine internal administration of empire, would simply use the resources and mechanisms at their disposal to deal with localized occurrences attributable to individual bad actors. As the next chapter, however, will show, the summer of 1925 and the instability caused by the crisis of Chinese nationalism would force both London and Singapore to reexamine the assumptions in their thinking and their understanding of how much the region was changing beneath their feet.

Chapter II – 1925-1927: Imperial Defence and the Crisis of Chinese Nationalism

The forces of Chinese nationalism, strengthened at least in part by communist ideology and Soviet military support, triggered a Far Eastern crisis in the years 1925 to 1927. This crisis, which reached its crescendo in late 1926 and early 1927, was felt from the plains of North China to the island of Singapore and was the first major threat to British imperial interests and regional stability in the interwar Far East. Typically confined in academic historiography to the January-April 1927 crisis of British security in the Yangtze River region, this chapter will argue that the crisis was longer, more acutely threatening to Britain, and more geographically widespread than is typically acknowledged. If considered international in the way that it threatened to upend Chinese politics and therefore the Far Eastern geopolitical status quo, it was also transnational, rooted in ideology and crossing borders over thousands of miles in varying imperial spaces and territories. The threat it posed, and the robust and nuanced British response it elicited, redefined the political and ideological setting of the Far East. In the process, it scrambled assumptions about both the role of China in the region and the relationship between the forces of Chinese

nationalism and the peoples and polities of the Far East. The crisis, in effect, reset regional politics, reinforced the role of Britain within the region, and laid bare the degree to which transnational forces were threatening the regional status quo.

This chapter will examine the 1925-1927 crisis of Chinese nationalism broadly. First, by exploring the connection between events in the summer of 1925 in Shanghai, Canton, and Hong Kong and then the way in which those events catalyzed the existing social and ideological movements across the region, especially in British Malaya. Second, it will examine the nature of the British policy response to this early phase of the crisis, particularly in the way that events in the Far East in 1925 shaped British attitudes towards the parties of Chinese nationalism and British policy towards China itself. Importantly for our purposes, it will illustrate the way that the British understanding of this crisis as a transnational phenomenon conditioned and shaped the way in which it reacted. Finally, it will use this broader setting as a lens through which to understand the upheavals caused by Chiang Kai-Shek's Northern Expedition, particularly those that erupted along the Yangtze River in early 1927, and the way in which British policymakers and officials reconciled themselves to, and provided tacit support for, the forces of moderate Chinese nationalism by the spring of 1927 in the face of the perceived communist threat. Only by looking at the broader regional crisis can the force of the British response be understood. In characterizing and documenting the crisis of Chinese nationalism in such a way, this chapter will posit that Britain was stronger, more resilient, and exerted more agency over the region's political and military outcomes than is often understood.

1925: May 30th and the Canton-Hong Kong Strike

By the spring of 1925, surging Chinese nationalism and a sense, amongst both workers and the young, that foreign imperialism was despoiling the country created conditions of increasing tension, particularly in those areas of China with the highest concentration of foreign investment. Strikes, lockouts, protests, and public-shaming campaigns in places such as Shanghai were just some of the ways in which frustrated workers and students vented their anger. That May, one ongoing dispute between Japanese textile mill owners and workers culminated in nighttime lockouts and firings. On the night of 15 May, nightshift workers at the Nagai Wata Mills in Shanghai, in a rage at being locked out, charged the gates. In something of a panicked response, Sikh and Japanese watchmen fired on the workers, killing one. In the days that followed, “a wave of public outrage, student demonstrations, further strikes, and a number of arrests,” only strengthened Chinese resolve, culminating in a 30 May “‘war of voice’ designed to flood the international city.”¹⁶² This culminated in throngs of students and workers assembling outside a Shanghai Municipal Police station where several protestors were being held. As the tension mounted, the British police officer in charge of the station shouted for the crowd to disperse and, seconds later, ordered his police to fire. 44 shots rang out, killing 12 demonstrators and wounding many more.

The May 30th Movement, which arose in response to these events, catalyzed the Chinese nationalist movement. A general strike was called in Shanghai and unrest soon spread to other

¹⁶² Harper, *Underground Asia*, 524-526; Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 308-309; Chow, *Britain's Imperial Retreat from China*, 148.

cities across the country. In June 1925, striking workers left Hong Kong and, in concert with KMT and CCP authorities in Canton, began a general boycott of British goods and commerce. The situation was, initially at least, calm.¹⁶³ This changed when, on 23 June, Chinese students, workers, and soldiers – including a young Zhou Enlai – marched to the international concession on Shameen Island, Canton, to protest British and foreign imperialism. Denied entry to the concession itself, they marched past it in a “monster” protest. In a heated moment, shots – from where exactly remains unknown – were fired, causing British and French troops on the island concession to open fire with their machine guns. The British Consul-General, “found bullets splattering all around” him and bid a hasty retreat across the island.¹⁶⁴ When the firing stopped, more than 50 Chinese protestors, and one French civilian, were killed, with dozens more wounded. Coupled with the events in Shanghai, this episode added to the sense of rage then coursing through China and deepened the resolve of the KMT and CCP-led Chinese boycott of British commercial goods. Some 250,000 strikers, fully 45% of the entire Chinese population of Hong Kong, decamped to Canton, forcing the colony’s businesses, ports, and industrial facilities to shut. In Canton strike picketers, essentially khaki-dressed semi-military units created to enforce the strike and watch the Chinese borders – maritime and land – with Hong Kong, were trained and put in place. This resulted in a more than 30% drop in British imports into China and commensurate decreases in orders, insurance and shipping.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ TNA, CAB23/50, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 22 June 1925.

¹⁶⁴ TNA, FO371/10946, F3473/194/10, Jamieson to Palairat, 25 June 1926.

¹⁶⁵ Harper, *Underground Asia*, 529-533; Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 308-309; Chow, *Britain’s Imperial Retreat from China*, 148-149.

Sir Reginald Stubbs, the Governor of Hong Kong, blamed the boycott and social unrest entirely on the Soviet menace, refusing to countenance the possibility that indigenous national pride or any legitimate grievance concerning working conditions could have launched such a movement. Considering Chinese strikers, “half-hearted and only brought out by pressure from Canton,” he argued that, “This is unquestionably [a] communist movement instigated and led by Russia.”¹⁶⁶ In this regard, Stubbs was in agreement with the SIS representatives in the region, who had reported from at least April 1925, one month before the launching of the boycott, that the Soviets were fomenting unrest in China. This continued, they reported, once the strike had been launched as part of a concerted Comintern effort to “prevent strikers from returning to work.” At the same time, intercepted Comintern documents showed “clear proof of the implication of the 3rd International in the present strike movement in Shanghai.”¹⁶⁷

To British Far Eastern officials beyond China and Hong Kong, these events in Shanghai and Canton were part of a wider picture of discontent and national sentiment that had been bubbling away since the war. Although facing what some saw as a unified adversary in the KMT both in China and Malaya, some pockets of British officialdom recognized the fact that Soviet backing had brought together a fragile coalition of moderate and radical groups of Chinese nationalists under the same roof. From as early as the summer of 1923, in the immediate aftermath of the formation of the First United Front in China proper, the Singapore Special Branch had been reporting on the divergence between these two poles of Chinese nationalism in the colony. Moreover, in shutting down illicit Chinese schools and printing presses, and

¹⁶⁶ TNA, CO129/488, Stubbs to Amery, 26 June 1926.

¹⁶⁷ Keith Jeffrey, *MI6: The History of the Secret Intelligence Service, 1909-1949* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 258-259.

reporting on underground KMT cells in both Singapore and the Malayan hinterland, Onraet and his counterparts had built a more nuanced understanding of not only the Chinese national movement beyond its shores but also the nature of the cleavages within it and how these might be exploited.¹⁶⁸ As will be shown, this understanding would prove crucial in driving Special Branch to target its operations against particularly leftist and radical elements of the KMT within the colony.

The growth of the KMT in Malaya through 1925 meant it served as a sort of umbrella movement for a host of other ideologies simmering throughout the colony. Marxists, anarchists, socialists, anti-Japanese, and others found a sort of ideological commonality with their Chinese counterparts and kin. The KMT worked to embed itself within such groups as broadly as it could, promoting the common interests of those “weak nationals” and sojourners living under colonial rule, groups especially vulnerable to subversive propaganda.¹⁶⁹ Simply understanding such patterns and ideological movements, however, did not always allow for Special Branch to anticipate or prevent violent outbursts of grievance or radical nationalism. It was, for example, from these communities of disenfranchised and frustrated Chinese that Wong So-Ying, a young woman of “modern style,” emerged. Known to posterity as “the bobbed haired woman,” Wong was a local anarchist and the “mistress of a Cantonese agitator” who had previously been banned from Malaya. On the morning of Friday, 23 January 1925, Wong entered the office of Daniel Richards, the Protector of Chinese in Kuala Lumpur, and, “with the words ‘I was asked to give you this,’ deposited an attaché case on table.” The explosion that followed, though not fatal to

¹⁶⁸ TNA, CO537/916, *MBPI*, July/August 1923.

¹⁶⁹ Belogurova, *The Nanyang Revolution*, 8, 39; TNA, CO717/41, Memorandum by the Secretary for Chinese Affairs on Anarchism amongst Chinese in Malaya, 5 February 1925.

Wong or Richards, ripped apart the table, blew out the windows, and sent all present sprawling across the room.¹⁷⁰

The Kuala Lumpur bomb outrage, as it became known, and the bobbed hair woman at the center of it, sensationalized the region. As a symbol of modernity, Wong stood out. The French, suspicious of Wong's connections and intent on deepening their inter-imperial policing relationship with Britain, conducted their own investigation into her circles.¹⁷¹ In the Canton-based *Yin Cheong Po* newspaper its Kuala Lumpur correspondent captured the mood of many southern Chinese familiar with life in Malaya in his editorial, condemning the office of the Protector of Chinese in Malaya and British rule writ large as one of "unreasonable oppression" that Chinese in Malaya were forced to bear with shut mouths.¹⁷² Wong, for her part, was convicted of the attack in March 1925 and sentenced to ten years of penal servitude for attempted murder.¹⁷³ Onraet and Special Branch, according to the spring 1925 publications of the *Malayan Bulletin of Political Intelligence*, spent much of the season unraveling what they knew of the conspiracy and the ideological world from which Wong came.¹⁷⁴

The months and weeks before May 30th also saw unrest in the NEI. Crosby reported to the Foreign Office that the Indonesian communists, then already numbering several thousand, were using rallies across the country to recruit railway men, dock workers, and postal employees

¹⁷⁰ TNA, CO 537/930, *MBPI*, March 1925; CO717/41, Straits Settlements High Commissioner to Amery, 28 January 1925.

¹⁷¹ Harper, *Underground Asia*, 517.

¹⁷² TNA, CO537/930, *MBPI*, March 1925.

¹⁷³ TNA, CO717/41, Guillemard to Amery, 23 April 1925.

¹⁷⁴ TNA, CO537/931, *MBPI*, April 1925; CO537/932, *MBPI*, May 1925.

into supporting concerted strike action across sectors.¹⁷⁵ Crosby worked with the Dutch authorities, as well as the administration in British India, to track and report on Javanese students in Lahore, owing to local fears that they would study at Gandhi's feet and return to their native country to agitate against the Dutch.¹⁷⁶ Further reporting in May 1925 showed that the local communists were working, within the bounds of the law, to belittle and humiliate Dutch police and authorities and make "ridiculous" their attempts to silence rising colonial grievances.¹⁷⁷ The ability of Crosby, Special Branch, and others to accurately discern what was happening within these ideological movements was challenged by the May 30th Movement, the Canton-Hong Kong Strike, and the general flourishing of Chinese national sentiment that swept across the Far East in the summer of 1925. However, while the scale of the threat increased across the region, in Singapore, Onraet and Special Branch chose to respond selectively and focus their policing and intelligence efforts against the left wing of the KMT rather than the broader, and more moderate, larger organization. Special Branch, by this point, assessed the left wing of the KMT to be "basically identical" to the CCP. In targeting their operations against those who were most radical within the KMT umbrella, they could more effectively employ their limited resources while seeking to remove or eliminate only those threats that they deemed most dangerous to the colony. Such an approach also implicitly served to communicate, to those more moderate KMT supporters and the broader Straits Chinese population writ large, what forms of nationalism and

¹⁷⁵ McMahon, *Colonialism and Cold War*, 31.

¹⁷⁶ TNA, FO371/11084, W1038/156/29, Native Movement and Political Situation in the Netherlands East Indies Generally, Crosby (Batavia), 3 January 1925.

¹⁷⁷ TNA, FO371/11084, W5354/156/29, Native Movement and Political Situation in the Netherlands East Indies, Crosby, 4 May 1925.

expression the colonial government would and would not accept. For instance, this period saw the expansion of British efforts to separate “old” Chinese families in Malaya from those newly arrived and, thus, more likely to be “infected” with nationalist ideas and sympathy for the KMT.¹⁷⁸

1925-1926: British Understandings and Responses

The British response to the unrest in Canton and Hong Kong and the ideological fervor that swept the region from the summer of 1925 onwards was initially uneven. As will be shown, this reflected divisions within the structures of imperial governance and policymaking about how best to respond. More than anything, the response was conditioned by the changing ways in which the Foreign Office thought about British policy in the Far East. This was evident in March 1925, two months before the eruption of events in Shanghai, when, in a cabinet paper titled “Memorandum on British Policy in China,” Chamberlain and Wellesley summarized British policy towards the Far East as a whole.

The Far Eastern problem is the problem of China...As regards British policy in China, it can be briefly stated as follows: We have no territorial or imperialistic aims. Our first concern is the security of British lives and property, the maintenance of the "Open Door" and equal opportunity for all. Our second is to see that China does not fall under the tutelage of any single Power. For these reasons we desire to see a united, well-ordered and prosperous China, and it is our policy to endeavor to co-operate to that end with the other Great Powers concerned.¹⁷⁹

Wellesley made several cogent arguments in propounding this approach to the region. First, he accepted as reality the fact the Britain was no longer able to dictate events and decide outcomes

¹⁷⁸ TNA, CO537/936, *MBPI*, August/September 1925; Martin, *Violence and Colonial Order*, 77-78.

¹⁷⁹ TNA, FO405/247, No. 30. Memorandum on British Policy in China, Victor Wellesley, 1 March 1925.

in China in the way that it wished. This “constructive” policy, as he critiqued it, which envisaged Britain threatening military intervention in support of its interests, was unsustainable:

On the other hand, we must remember that sooner or later we shall be forced by circumstances beyond our control to grant China full fiscal autonomy in return for nothing. This, I think, is in the long run almost inevitable.¹⁸⁰

In the short term, he argued that any program designed to deal with China through coercion was impractical, given the country’s division and the inability of the powers to impose themselves across such an area. In response, he and Chamberlain essentially settled on a policy of inaction. This was to play for time until, they believed, the “wave of Bolshevism” had spent itself, given their contention that neither British public opinion nor resources would allow them to act “in the Palmerstonian manner.”¹⁸¹ Implicit in this reasoning was their second argument: that Chinese nationalism, seen by so many as antithetical to British interests, could in the long term come to favor Britain. To the Foreign Office, a united, nationalist, and prosperous China would best enable the continuation of British commerce and prevent the collapse of the regional system. In Chinese nationalism, they saw a movement that had the potential to create such an outcome and to serve as a bulwark against both Soviet subversion and any future Japanese incursion. As Chamberlain himself remarked in March 1925, the best response to “Bolshevism in the East is the perfectly above-board method of strengthening the solid and stable elements in a particular country.” They identified these “solid and stable” elements as moderate Chinese nationalists.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Charles Petrie, *The Life and Letters of the Right Hon. Sir Austen Chamberlain, K.G., P.C., M.P.* (London: Cassell and Company, 1940), 360.

¹⁸² Ferris, *Men, Money, and Diplomacy*, 155.

This conclusion highlighted the great dilemma of British policy in the Far East during the Chinese crisis: how could Britain see off the economic and political challenges that the KMT (in concert with the CCP) posed in Shanghai, Canton, Hong Kong, and elsewhere while at the same time nurturing Chinese nationalism to build a modern, unified, and stable future. As will be demonstrated, Britain's eventual answer to this question, over the objection of many within the imperial apparatus, was to work to split the First United Front. They attempted to do this by tacitly supporting and empowering moderates within the KMT while simultaneously attacking – via, on the one hand, moderate Chinese nationalists within China and, on the other, Special Branch and its police and intelligence counterparts across the region – communists and radical Chinese nationalists throughout the Far East. This was not a deliberately communicated and enacted policy, however, but more the actualization on the ground of Chamberlain's belief in the need for a tacit opening towards the KMT alongside local efforts in Singapore and elsewhere in the region to counter the most radical and dangerous communist and nationalist elements facing British officialdom. As will be shown, while at the imperial level Chamberlain and Wellesley created the conditions to bring about this goal, its success was only possible because Onraet and others across the empire understood the dynamics within the KMT and selectively acted to confront only those elements of Chinese nationalism deemed most radical.

In Hong Kong and Canton, one can see several ways in which British actions in 1925 created an environment suitable to such a strategy. On 5 July, just weeks after the launching of the strike and slowdown of work, officials in Hong Kong organized the Labour Protection Bureau, a Chinese pseudo-detective force seconded to the police and tasked to help maintain order and arrest strikers, provocateurs, and political agitators bent on intimidating those Chinese

in Hong Kong still at work.¹⁸³ Led by an “ex-pirate” and KMT general, the 150-man force intimidated the intimidators and assisted in returning order to Hong Kong by the middle of the month.¹⁸⁴ At the same time, the Captain Superintendent of the Hong Kong Police Force reported to Stubbs that, of the 533 members of the force, only seven deserted to the KMT during the period.¹⁸⁵ These actions, supported by a robust counter-propaganda campaign undertaken by prominent Hong Kong Chinese, reflected the broad cooperation with the authorities of much of the ethnic Chinese population in Hong Kong in the months after the strike began, and in the face of the collapse of trade in the colony.¹⁸⁶ Together, measures such as these helped divide the population of southern China and weaken KMT efforts to depict the struggle as one of ethnic Chinese versus the imperialist British. Any KMT efforts to characterize the situation in this way were further damaged by Britain’s willingness to allow the children and family members of KMT elites, including the daughters of the “rabidly anti-British” KMT Foreign Minister, to come from Canton to Hong Kong for safekeeping.¹⁸⁷ They also ran counter, interestingly, to the strident reports and recommendations of Stubbs, who pressed for stronger measures – including public flogging and the financial backing of anti-KMT warlords in China proper – to return order and commercial normalcy to the colony.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸³ Crisswell, *The Royal Hong Kong Police*, 11.

¹⁸⁴ TNA, CO129/488, Stubbs to Amery, 10 July 1925; CO129/488, Stubbs to Amery, 14 July 1925; CO129/489, Stubbs to Amery, 24 October 1925.

¹⁸⁵ TNA, CO129/489, Stubbs to Amery, 15 September 1925.

¹⁸⁶ Carroll, *A Concise History of Hong Kong*, 102; TNA CO129/488, Stubbs to Amery, 14 July 1925; Crisswell, *The Royal Hong Kong Police*, 120.

¹⁸⁷ TNA, CO129/489, Stubbs to Amery, 8 August 1925.

¹⁸⁸ Carroll, *A Concise History of Hong Kong*, 151-152; Harper, *Underground Asia*, 533.

In London, Chamberlain and the Foreign Office were themselves careful not to take steps that would alienate the KMT or push it into a closer embrace with the Soviets. On 9 July, after months of back and forth between the Foreign, Colonial, and India Offices and the Government of the NEI in Batavia, Chamberlain vetoed a Dutch proposal to formalize government-to-government anti-communist intelligence sharing between the Dutch East Indies and British India.¹⁸⁹ Although aware through Crosby and others of the burgeoning inter-imperial intelligence-sharing already bearing fruit, Chamberlain saw no need to formalize, at the imperial level, these relationships that were already so productive on the periphery. For him, the risk of being seen by the Chinese as formalizing an anti-communist bloc with fellow European colonial powers was simply too great, given his interest in not alienating moderate Chinese nationalists or driving the KMT into an even closer relationship with the Soviets. Given the fact that such intelligence-sharing functions were already operating efficiently at the working level, he saw no reason to broadcast such an arrangement to the outside world. As he wrote in a letter to his sister Ida on 11 July, “it would confirm the Bolshies in the estimation of the Chinese in their part of protectors of Chinese nationalism.”¹⁹⁰ In July and August, the Cabinet also vetoed a proposal by Stubbs to finance, to the tune of £1 million, a group of moderate KMT leaders who hoped to use the funds to topple what they considered be to the radical faction of communists and nationalists

¹⁸⁹ TNA, FO371/11084, W5157/156/29, Alleged Communist Plan to Sow Dissension in Colonial Possessions of European Powers, Dirk Fock (Governor-General of the Netherlands East Indies), 9 July 1925.

¹⁹⁰ Austen Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 11 July 1925, in Self, ed., *The Austen Chamberlain Diary Letters*, 278.

then in power. Such efforts, they concluded, would only serve to unite the various factions within the KMT against British imperialism.¹⁹¹

In London, much of the debate within the CID and the civilian bureaucracy centered on whether Britain could or should simply use force, as it had done in the past. On 22 June, in the aftermath of the Shanghai shooting, Chamberlain posed to the CID the question of whether the Chiefs of Staff should “consider the possibility of providing reinforcements if the situation should render joint intervention inevitable.”¹⁹² That such a proposition arose was not surprising to the Chiefs, given their understanding of the chaos in China. Moreover, Hankey had tipped them off that the Foreign Office was considering recommending as much. Beatty and Earl Cavan, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, were both in correspondence with Hankey before and after the CID meeting. They were strongly of the opinion that any British military intervention would be futile. Beatty, who had himself seen action in China as a junior officer during the Boxer Rebellion at the turn of the century, argued that British forces in the region should maintain the “status quo” vis-à-vis the conflict and was clear-eyed about Britain’s inability to successfully or even meaningfully impose itself by force on the Chinese mainland. “The despatch of a few Brigades of soldiers, the bombing of a Chinese city, [and] the strengthening of the River Gunboat force cannot possibly bring into subjection 350 million Chinamen.”¹⁹³ Cavan was equally direct, positing that the action envisioned by the Foreign

¹⁹¹ TNA, CO129/488, Stubbs to Amery, 27 July 1925; FO371/10946, W3531/194/10, Hong Kong Governor Scheme for Restoration of Order in Canton, George Grindle, 27 July 1925; CAB23/50, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 13 August 1925.

¹⁹² TNA, CAB2/4, CID, 200th meeting, 22 June 1925.

¹⁹³ TNA, CAB21/286, Beatty to Hankey, 20 June 1925; CAB21/286, Beatty to Hankey n.d. [June 1925].

Office would not greatly affect Bolshevik activities in China and would instead “mean the removal of the ‘military centre’ further inland, where it would be impossible to reach.”¹⁹⁴ During the CID discussion on 22 June, Beatty remarked that “even if the whole of the British Navy were despatched to the China station they could do little more than was being done at present.” Cavan, at the same time, argued that the War Office could not possibly advise on any such matter because the government had not, and indeed could not, articulate what the definite military objective of such an operation would be.¹⁹⁵ The Chiefs followed up three days later with a report on the situation in China, in which they laid out the strategic case against any British military intervention in stark terms.

From the naval and military point of view, it is essential to realise that offensive action on a large scale is not possible in China for the British Empire acting alone. China is a vast country offering no decisive military objective. Given time for preparation, the necessary troops and the acquiescence of the other foreign Powers, it might be possible to capture Peking, Canton or one of the great towns near the coast. These could be held to ransom or destroyed, or temporarily occupied. But that is the limit of the possibilities of offensive military action, which amounts to no more than a programme of raids. No finality is to be hoped for from it.¹⁹⁶

Critical here was the Chiefs’ envisioning of British imperial power in the Far East as fundamentally limited. The sheer distances involved surely contributed to this conclusion, to say nothing of the limited forces available. Furthermore, in continually asking the Foreign Office to identify the military objective, the Chiefs were subtly communicating to the Cabinet and CID their understanding of the burgeoning crisis as an inherently non-military one. There was simply nothing they could do to turn back the rising tide of Chinese nationalism. Bombarding a

¹⁹⁴ TNA, CAB21/286, Hankey to Cavan and Trenchard, 19 June 1925; CAB21/286, Hankey to Beatty, 22 June 1925; CAB21/286, Cavan to Hankey, 23 June 1925.

¹⁹⁵ TNA, CAB2/4, CID, 200th meeting, 22 June 1925.

¹⁹⁶ TNA, CAB4/13, CP617, Situation in China, Chiefs of Staff report, 25 June 1930.

continent, they understood, would gain them nothing. The staking out of such a position was especially important, both because of the precedent it set for future crises and for the way in which, for Britain's civilian policymakers, it communicated a minimum threshold with respect to operational clarity and feasibility that had to be met before the service chiefs would agree to any action. By the summer of 1925, then, the CID and Cabinet concluded that no military/naval operation could be taken in Canton itself. As communicated by Beatty to the CID in July 1925, "it was inconceivable that any of the military measures...would be of any use."¹⁹⁷

With no viable military alternative on offer, British efforts to mollify Chinese nationalists and undermine joint action against Britain continued into the fall of 1925. At the Special Conference on the Chinese Customs Tariff, which met in Peking from late October, the British delegation, led by the British minister to Peking, Sir Ronald Macleay, supported Chinese efforts to gain tariff autonomy and worked with the latter's delegation to gain assent from the powers to a resolution promising autonomy from 1929. In return, the Chinese delegation promised to eliminate the much-resented *li-kin* tax, an internal Chinese tariff dating from the nineteenth century that had survived the collapse of the Qing Dynasty and served as a major source of revenue for warlords and competing Chinese governments. Although the Chinese delegation was not composed of KMT officials and the central government of China lacked the ability to see such a reform through, Britain's willingness to compromise was noticed within KMT circles. Additionally, on the sides of the conference, Britain first floated to the other powers the idea of granting China control over the Washington surtaxes – tax powers and revenues promised, but never given, to China by the powers in the Washington Customs Treaty of 1922. Revenues from commercial tariffs and taxes were collected by the foreign-controlled Chinese Maritime Customs

¹⁹⁷ TNA, AIR9/52, Canton Situation, September 1925; CAB 2/4, CID, 202nd meeting, 27 July 1925.

Agency and used to repay China's foreign debt obligations. Providing China with tariff autonomy and granting it control over the surtaxes would, in effect, give it, or at least the militarists and regional governments fighting to rule the country, the ability to set their own tariffs and taxes and to keep the revenue from those taxes for internal development and use.¹⁹⁸ Although the conference collapsed in 1926 amid general disagreement among the powers and China, British negotiators had made clear to their imperial and Chinese counterparts their willingness to move further and faster in providing financial relief to China than any of the other powers.

In Singapore, British officials were pursuing similar ends in their efforts to counter what they saw as the rising influence of Chinese nationalism in Malaya. The strengthening of the left wing of the KMT in Canton and throughout Malaya in light of the strike movement and the energy that it added to Chinese nationalism in the summer of 1925 forced British officials in Singapore to act on their long-running concern about the legality of the KMT's position within Malaya.¹⁹⁹ Guillemard, the Governor of the Straits Settlements, had seen his earlier efforts to have the KMT banned from operating throughout the colony frustrated due to the concern – in London, Peking, and Hong Kong – that suppression of the KMT in Malaya, while serving local

¹⁹⁸ TNA, FO405/248, Three Memoranda by John Pratt on the Tariff Conference, 24 November 1925; FO405/248, Memorandum by Mr. Wellesley on the Chinese Situation, 27 November 1925; CAB24/168, CP518, China, 28 November 1925; CAB24/181, CP308, China Customs Tariff Conference at Peking – Present Position in Regard to, 30 July 1926; CAB24/209, CP6, China: British Policy as Regards Situation in, 8 January 1930; Chow, "British Opinion and Policy towards China, 1922-1927," 154.

¹⁹⁹ Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order*, 77.

British interests, would negatively affect its wider position in the region.²⁰⁰ In the aftermath of the May 30th Movement and the Canton-Hong Kong Strike, however, these reservations melted away, given the belief that the KMT, both in China and Malaya, could hardly be any more anti-British than it already was.²⁰¹ On 1 July, the Cabinet agreed to Guillemard's request and authorized him, at the time of his choosing, to suppress the local branches of the KMT, which had, "become a source of considerable embarrassment to the Malayan Governments."²⁰²

If this action superficially complicates the narrative of Britain working to assuage moderate Chinese nationalists while attacking their radical counterparts, thereby strengthening common cause within the KMT, the actual implementation of the measure belies such an understanding. For one thing, Guillemard and the government in Singapore publicly announced the change in policy thirty days before its actual implementation. This was not a series of surprise nighttime raids or dramatic colonial police confrontations with unruly mobs. The closing of the branches went off in an orderly manner throughout the colony and without issue. Furthermore, the KMT was, technically, already banned from openly organizing in Singapore and the Straits Settlements. Although its local branches operated in the open, their "suppression," in the Straits Settlements at least, amounted to little more than enforcement of laws and regulations that were already in force. Only in the Federated Malay States, more heterogeneously

²⁰⁰ TNA, FCO141/16346, Guillemard to Thomas, 21 October 1924; CO129/485, Kuo Min Tang, 8 December 1924; WO32/5350, Macleay to Chamberlain, 24 December 1924; CAB24/174, CP306, Kuo Min Tang: Suggested Suppression of Malayan Branches of: Joint Memo by Mr. A. Chamberlain and Mr. L.S. Amery, June 1925.

²⁰¹ Ibid.; Best, "We are Virtually at War with Russia," 209.

²⁰² TNA, CAB23/50, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 1 July 1925.

populated and with more dispersed Chinese populations, did the order materially change the law.²⁰³

Additionally, the records of the *MBPI*, which chronicle of the work of Onraet and Special Branch, and of the colonial administration itself show a government that was not hell-bent on suppressing all manifestations of Chinese national identity so much as one choosing its battles and its enemies. In the fall of 1925, for instance, Special Branch specifically acknowledged the split in the KMT in Canton and selectively targeted its Malayan operations and raids against KMT members from the Hailam (Hainan Island) Chinese population. Hailam Chinese were, in the context of interwar Singapore, the youngest and most ideologically radical of the Chinese workers and emigres in Malaya. Overwhelmingly male, they formed the basis of the “domestic servant, cook, and water carrier class” in the colony and filled the preponderance of seats in the underground 1920s “night schools” that the radical KMT ran for the Chinese laboring classes. In specifically targeting them and avoiding broad collisions with the “old” and settled classes of Chinese in Malaya, Special Branch continued its practice of deliberately dividing and separating those Chinese considered vulnerable to radical persuasion from those who were not. This fostered division within the myriad groups of Chinese resident in Malaya and helped to keep the ideological temperature of the colony lower than it was in Hong Kong.²⁰⁴

Special Branch continued to target the Hailam Chinese community throughout 1926. Raids on Hailam night schools were regular occurrences during the year. In February, they

²⁰³ TNA, CO273/529, Guillemard to Amery, 3 August 1925; FCO141/16346, Hose (Kuala Lumpur) to Amery, 3 November 1925; CAB24/174, CP306, Kuo Min Tang: Suggested Suppression of Malayan Branches of, Chamberlain and Amery memorandum, June 1925.

²⁰⁴ TNA, CO537/936, *MBPI*, August/September 1925; CO537/938, *MBPI*, October/November 1925.

turned up revolutionary and communist propaganda. In June, it was anti-government screeds and correspondence with the radical elements of the KMT in Canton. In August, it arrested a group of nine suspected assassins, armed by radicals in Canton, intent on carrying out a campaign of terrorism.²⁰⁵ In one case, Britain banished the principal of the Hailamese Yok Bun School at Pulau Brani after he was found with anti-British writings and letters requesting that the KMT in Canton shoot on sight the Special Branch's Hailamese informant, then believed to be in hiding in Canton, who had guided them to the illicit school network in the first place.²⁰⁶ Hundreds more migrants were turned away at the harbor and never allowed entry into Singapore in the first place, as Special Branch officers screened passport and visa holders upon first arrival in the colony.²⁰⁷ Given their interest in rooting out propaganda, Special Branch agents began developing relationships with owners and workers at local printing presses, receiving tips on and conducting seizures of properties belonging to Hailam or other Chinese who sought to print radical posters and sheets for distribution in the colony.²⁰⁸ This usage of "good" Chinese, or those who were more settled and more invested in the commercial activity of the colony, to help Britain understand, target, and ferret out the "bad" Chinese was an increasingly common tactic and one that Onraet and Special Branch would use to great effect moving forward. Throughout the region in 1926, then, Hailam Chinese were on a "short leash," according to official reports. In

²⁰⁵ TNA, FO371/11699, F368/368/61, *Malaya Command Intelligence Notes (MCIN)*, 7 April 1926; FO371/11700, F368/368/61, *MCIN*, 30 September 1926.

²⁰⁶ TNA, FO371/11700, F368/368/61, *MCIN*, 13 August 1926.

²⁰⁷ TNA, CO275/117, Annual Report on the Straits Settlements Police Force and on the State of Crime – Fairburn report, 1926.

²⁰⁸ TNA, FO371/11700, F368/368/61, *MCIN*, 30 September 1926.

Sarawak, the redoubt of Vyner Brooke, latest in the line of the White Rajahs of the Brooke family, 58 Hailam Chinese were deported for protesting the results of a local court case in which one of their countrymen was sentenced to six months in prison for threatening, in retaliation for being struck, his European “master” with an axe.²⁰⁹

Such actions were precipitated upon an understanding of the KMT as a heterogenous but broadly nationalist organization as best characterized by the Canton Consul-General, J.F. Brennan, in 1926. He observed, more accurately than most, that the KMT had become, by the time of Sun’s death in 1925, so large that it contained all manner of people, from conservatives and moderates to radicals and communists. It was, Brennan argued, more a movement than a party in that it included most educated and articulate Chinese throughout the country, united as they were in their notion of national consciousness and rejuvenation. Brennan believed that there was no evidence that Sun had converted to communism and the ideology of class warfare before his death, and that it was British, and other foreign mercantile, opposition to Chinese national aspirations had helped create the conditions for the Soviet-KMT alliance in the first place were far-sighted for the time.²¹⁰ It was this facet of the organization, its sprawling and often ideologically fractious nature, that British policymakers, from Chamberlain to Onraet, sought to exploit in their efforts to moderate Chinese nationalism and eliminate Communist influence throughout the crisis of Chinese nationalism.

Examining the practical workings of the colonial administration in the era around the launching of the May 30th Movement and the Canton-Hong Kong Strike also highlights the ways in which the British Empire in the Far East was in no rush to vilify the KMT writ large. There

²⁰⁹ TNA, FO371/11699, F368/368/61, *MCIN*, 1 July 1926.

²¹⁰ TNA, FO676/39, Kuomintang General Report (Canton), 23 November 1926.

was no appreciable change in colonial censorship efforts or results.²¹¹ While the Straits Settlements Executive Council continued to banish and expel undesirables from the colony throughout the period, there was no discernable difference in banishment data or destination from the period immediately after the launching of the May 30th Movement with the periods before or following. From 1923-1929, in fact, Chinese (they were nearly all Chinese, given the ethnic makeup of Singapore) were banished from the colony at a consistent rate of several hundred per year. During that entire period, September 1924 represents an average month, in terms of overall numbers. In the Executive Council Meeting on 24 September 1924, for instance, 24 “undesirable characters” and one “member of an unlawful society” had banishment orders brought down upon them. They were added to a queue of “habitual criminals,” “gang robbers,” “counterfeiters,” “extortioners,” “house breakers,” and “returned banishees” under order of deportation. The evidence shows that the “crackdown” against the KMT in the fall of 1925 in no way affected these numbers or narrative.²¹² Finally, an analysis of the police budget for the Straits Settlements from 1924-1927 shows that overall police expenditure during the years before and after waxed and waned within the normal expanse of expenditures, finishing, in real terms, only 8% higher in 1927 than it had been in 1924.²¹³ In other words, the business of government and administration in the Straits Settlements continued as normal during the period.

The Comintern, for its part, spent much of 1925 and 1926 working to expand its Far Eastern operations. It reinforced its presence in Shanghai and remade its organization there as its Far Eastern Bureau (FEB), from which it could oversee Comintern operations in China, Korea,

²¹¹ TNA, CO276/99, *Straits Settlements Government Gazette*, July-December 1925 (various).

²¹² TNA, CO275/115, Straits Settlements Executive Council Meetings, 1923-1925 (various).

²¹³ TNA, CO274/17 – CO274/18, Straits Settlements Acts, 1923-1927 (various).

and Japan (and, from 1930, the western colonies of modern Southeast Asia). The Shanghai International Settlement, owing to its size, status as a trade and transport entrepot, and western extraterritoriality and ambiguous law enforcement environment, was the ideal location for such a project. Indeed, as the Comintern began looking south towards Malaya and the European colonies in its vicinity, it turned to the CCP and other radical elements within the KMT to assist its outreach and agent placement efforts in those areas.²¹⁴ In Hong Kong, with a front row to the turbulence of the strike and KMT rule in Canton amidst Comintern expansion efforts, the British correspondingly only granted ten transit visa to Soviet citizens during the entire 1925-1927 period.²¹⁵

The British response to this threat saw the continued growth and maturation of informal police and intelligence-sharing networks across the region, despite, or perhaps because of, Chamberlain's refusal to countenance such formal agreements at the imperial level. In August 1925, Dutch efforts to galvanize colonial-level systems to share intelligence, control, and in time eradicate communist propaganda and movements in the region resulted in the exchange of official memoranda on the subject between Dutch, French, and British officials. The French, having recently arrested the Vietnamese nationalist leader Phan Boi Chau in Shanghai and imprisoned him in Indochina, were enthusiastic participants.²¹⁶ Siamese elites, then leveraging resident British police officers and networks to assist in their own crackdown on émigré-led

²¹⁴ Onimaru, "Shanghai Connection," 116-118, 121-122.

²¹⁵ Michael Share, "Clash of Worlds: The Comintern, British Hong Kong and Chinese Nationalism, 1921-1927," *Europe-Asia Studies* 57, no. 4 (2005), 608.

²¹⁶ Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam & America*, 25; Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam*, 85.

Chinese nationalism, also voiced no objections to participating in such structures.²¹⁷ From the mid-1920s the British in Malaya therefore began exchanging secret police reports with their imperial colleagues and arranging for the meeting of the colonial intelligence heads in Singapore and Batavia.²¹⁸

In Singapore, Onraet spent much of the year gathering intelligence on KMT and communist cells and activities, usually in close partnership with Crosby. In January 1926, Crosby began forwarding Dutch copies of Indonesian communist and Comintern operative Tan Malaka's mail, as the authorities in Batavia sought assistance from Britain in cracking his letter writing codes. Onraet, in fact, had been reading his mail since at least the summer of 1925, when Special Branch had tracked a suspected communist agent to the address through which he routed his correspondence.²¹⁹ This was representative of Onraet's approach to dealing with provocateurs and communists. Special Branch was cognizant of the fact that Singapore was a "communist center" in the region and made use of its centrality to focus and expand its informant network and conduct eavesdropping and intelligence-gathering operations on suspected agents and subversives transiting the city. It then pushed, in the form of the *MBPI*, that intelligence back out into the region, in the process facilitating inter-imperial correspondence and coordination. This was the working-level relationship, facilitated by police and political intelligence officials across

²¹⁷ Aldrich, *The Key to the South*, 56; Foster, "Secret Police Cooperation and the Roots of Anti-Communism in Southeast Asia," 334-335.

²¹⁸ Foster, "French, Dutch, British, and US Reactions to the Nghệ-Tĩnh Rebellion of 1930-1931," 77-78.

²¹⁹ TNA, CO273/533, Communistic Activities in the Far East, Crosby to Chamberlain, 1 February 1926; FO371/11699, *MCIN*, 26 February 1926; CO273/534, Notes on the Native Movement and the Political Situation in the Netherlands East Indies, Crosby, 13 October 1926.

these colonies, that Chamberlain saw no need to formalize at any higher level.²²⁰ The French, long more reluctant than the Dutch to share intelligence with their inter-imperial counterparts, became more comfortable with regular exchanges of intelligence over the course of 1926. As a demonstration of its commitment, in October 1926 France stationed, for the first time, a permanent consul-general in Batavia to work alongside Crosby and his partners in the NEI political intelligence office.²²¹

Elsewhere in the region, despite the widespread fear of Chinese nationalism in settler communities, the relative dearth of Hailam Chinese, most of whom traveled to Malaya rather than elsewhere, limited the effects that radical KMT supporters had on local politics and security. In Siam, for instance, with its large and initially assimilating Chinese population, only 5% of Chinese emigres were Hailam, which allowed the Siamese (supported by British) police to more effectively target and monitor their activities.²²² As more “real” Chinese arrived on Siamese shores bringing wives and families, however, patterns of Chinese assimilation into existing Siamese communities slowed down, as fewer and fewer arriving males came still in need of a bride. This caused concern within the Siamese government, which considered itself vulnerable to the forces of nationalism and communism that were then so powerfully shaping events in the region. Aware of this, the Siamese police – in conjunction with the Bangkok Assistant Commissioner of Police, British Colonel C.B. Follett – worked to monitor strike picketers who

²²⁰ TNA, CO273/534, *MBPI*, April 1926; FO371/11775, N5355/3/38, Exchange of Information Regarding Communist Activities, 2 December 1926.

²²¹ TNA, FO371/11775, N3876/3/38, Exchange of Information Regarding Soviet Propaganda in the Far East, 23 August 1926; FO371/11700, F368/368/61, *MCIN*, 28 October 1926.

²²² TNA, FO422/83, Sino-Siamese Relations, From Bangkok, 21 July 1926.

had left Canton over the course of 1926, watchful for any hint of leftist protest or agitation. Earlier in 1926, Siam signed the Pila Treaty with France, officially demarcating the Siamese-French Indochina border at the Mekong River thus allowing its armed forces, for the first time, to patrol its banks and launch gunboats to interdict smugglers and provocateurs. Siam then agreed to a Treaty of Friendship, Commerce, and Navigation with the Netherlands, opening the door for the deepening of bilateral trade and information sharing. In October 1926 Siamese police and immigration authorities traveled to Penang for a joint conference with their British counterparts in Malaya and an “exchange of views and information that...will lead to closer co-operation in the future” with regards to combating opium and the suppression of illegal immigration from China.²²³ Agreements such as these represented a conscious coupling of Siam to the existing western colonial apparatus of policing and empire. Action along these lines continued into 1927 with the British and Siamese effort to track down the suspected communist agent Slater, a man who likely never existed. The fact that intelligence operatives were chasing a supposed ghost from Paris to Constantinople to Delhi to Singapore to Saigon over the course of 1927 could be construed as a case of overzealous agents ending up with egg on their face. The very existence of Slater is, however, immaterial. The fact of the matter is that British, Dutch, French, and Siamese officials across the globe were working towards a common anti-communist purpose. If nothing

²²³ TNA, FO371/11699, F368/368/61, *MCIN*, 26 February 1926; FO371/11699, F368/368/61, *MCIN*, 3 June 1926; FO371/11700, F368/368/61, *MCIN*, 9 September 1926; FO371/11700, F368/368/61, *MCIN*, 28 October 1926; FO422/84, Foreign Advisors to the Siamese Government, List, 21 January 1927. Of the 122 Foreign Advisors employed by the Siamese state in January 1927, 63 (52%) were British.

else, this reflects the reality and possibility of the British-led anti-communist system.²²⁴ One of the strongest examples of this partnership came in July 1927 when, after hearing rumors about a newspaper-organized solidarity boycott by ethnic Chinese in Bangkok against British commercial interests, Prince Traidos, the Siamese Minister of Foreign Affairs and cousin of the king, had the boycott quashed before it could even be announced.²²⁵ Later that year, in September 1927, Traidos requested British assistance in understanding Chinese labor movements and strike organizations as part of a larger request for intelligence sharing with respect to the problem of communism. The British obliged and helped the Siamese Government steer into law new penal codes and anti-communist measures. These codes, which included restrictions on Chinese night schools, strikes and protests, and the dissemination of propaganda, were taken almost verbatim from the British equivalents in Malaya.²²⁶ Their enactment symbolized the way that the crisis of Chinese nationalism, in spreading far beyond the borders of China proper, was engendering common responses and an imperial solidarity that must be accounted for in considering the broader British response to events in 1926 and 1927.

It was in the NEI, however, that the rumblings of communism, though not explicitly connected here to the Hailamese community, were most acutely felt. In November 1926 the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), with backing from the Comintern, launched the first

²²⁴ See TNA, FO371/12536, F2987/2987/40, for the lengthy series of reports detailing the back and forth between British, French, Dutch, and Siamese officials on the supposed communist provocateur Slater, that require no further detailed information here; additionally, see Batson, *The End of the Absolute Monarchy in Siam*, 166-168.

²²⁵ TNA, FO422/84, Chinese and Communist Agitation in Siam, 2 July 1927.

²²⁶ TNA, FO371/12536, F7777/7777/40, Waterlow to Chamberlain, 13 September 1927; FO371/12536, F7777/7777/40, Contemplated Strike of Chinese in Bangkok, 28 September 1927.

communist-inspired rebellion in the region. The rebellion, centered in Western Java, was woefully premature, poorly executed, and systematically crushed by the Dutch who, in conjunction with Special Branch, had already broken PKI codes and were rounding up and arresting communists in various parts of the archipelago before the rebellion was even launched.²²⁷ More interesting than the rapid crushing of the rebellion was the inter-imperial response, which saw the European colonial powers rapidly close ranks. In January 1927, the Netherland East Indies government forwarded its report on the uprising to its British, French, and American counterparts in the region.²²⁸ PKI leaders, in flight after the failure of the revolt, scattered across the region to Malaya and elsewhere. By December, less than a month after the start of the revolt, “A number of Dutch police officials [had] been loaned to the local Government [Penang] to prevent ingress of known leading N.E.I. communists and to make enquiries as to the whereabouts and activities in Malaya of such as are already there,” among them M. Visbeen, Assistant Commissioner of the Batavia City Police.²²⁹ For all of his efforts to build relationships and collaborate with the Dutch officials in Batavia, even Crosby had not countenanced the joint employment of Dutch intelligence and police officials in Malayan cities and ports for the express purpose of anti-communist cooperation. And yet here, in the face of a common threat, British and Dutch police, with no record of direction from strategic or imperial leaders, worked together to advance their mutual interests on British colonial soil. This was one of the more immediate decisions that European colonizers in the region made – that only through inter-imperial and cross-border collaboration could they effectively stem the tide against the

²²⁷ TNA, CO273/534, *MBPI*, July 1926.

²²⁸ McMahon, *Colonialism and Cold War*, 31; Foster, *Projections of Power*, 27-29.

²²⁹ TNA, FO371/12515, F429/429/61, *MCIN*, 14 December 1926; Foster, *Projections of Power*, 31.

transnational threats then permeating through their colonies. By February, British and Dutch officials had formalized, at least locally, the next round of their intelligence-sharing agreements. The French, though not a party to that agreement, pushed for a more formal accord between the colonial governments. Given the prevalence of “natives” working in colonial consular offices of all the powers throughout the region, and the desire of European officials to keep sensitive information away from them, coordination eventually trickled down to the British-favored plan of using colonial police and intelligence organizations, chief among them Special Branch, as the key interlocutors.²³⁰

As argued by Anne Foster, these informal structures, favored by Chamberlain and put into practice by Onraet and others, were inadequate when the law and the interests of colonial states were in opposition. In December 1926, via tips from their British police counterparts in the Unfederated Malay States, Visbeen confirmed the identity, and sought the extradition, of two of the Javanese leaders of the PKI rebellion, Alimin and Musso, then in British custody in Johor. After moving them to Singapore, however, the British authorities refused to hand them over, given that neither had broken any Singaporean laws. Guillemard, “disposed to regard sympathetically the request of the authorities of the Netherlands East Indies,” remained bound by British law. Alimin and Musso, therefore, could not be extradited to the NEI but were instead banished from Singapore to a place of their choosing. After personally receiving their passports from Onraet himself, in the spring of 1927, they decamped to Canton, with Netherlands Indies intelligence officials in tow.²³¹ By the end of 1926, then, British efforts to regularize intelligence

²³⁰ Ibid., 26, 29.

²³¹ Ibid., 31-33; TNA, CO273/535/1, Guillemard to de Graeff (Batavia), 10 March 1927; Foster, “Secret Police Cooperation and the Roots of Anti-Communism in interwar Southeast Asia,” 338.

sharing and police and consular cooperation across the region, in the era of the Canton-Hong Kong strike and amidst significant concern over the spread of communist and Chinese nationalist thought, had begun to bear fruit.

1926: Chiang Kai-Shek, the Northern Expedition, and the End of the Strike

The first mention of Chiang Kai-shek in Special Branch reports on the KMT situation in Canton came in the fall of 1925 on his becoming the commander-in-chief of the military forces in Canton. Called, “a close supporter of Borodin, who received his military training in Japan,” Chiang was formerly the Commandant of the KMT’s Whampoa Military Academy.²³² Sir Cecil Clementi, the recently appointed Governor of Hong Kong, first mentioned Chiang in a December 1925 note to Amery, remarking, “The forces of the Canton Government are mainly under the command of General Cheung Kai-Shek who is said to be a professional soldier and not a politician. I can get no reliable information concerning him, and I do not know how far he is under Bolshevik influence. His troops have certainly been drilled and equipped by Russians.” Clementi passed further notes and rumors on the situation back to Amery over the winter of 1925-1926, reporting on the possibility that the Chinese soldiers were souring on their Russian advisors, that Chiang was considering abandoning the KMT altogether, and raising, for the first time, the possibility that relations between Chiang and the communist and radical left of the KMT were antagonistic.²³³

²³² TNA, CO537/938, MBPI, October/November 1925.

²³³ Bodleian Libraries, Oxford (BodL), Papers of Sir Cecil Clementi (Clementi papers), MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Box 1, Clementi to Amery, 23 December 1925; Clementi to Amery, 2 February 1926.

This notion was confirmed by officials in Hong Kong as early as the middle of March 1926, when the Hong Kong Director of Criminal Intelligence reported the radical KMT's denouncing of Chiang and the spreading of leftist pamphlets and broadsheets accusing him of being a rightist. Clementi correctly assessed the situation, stating, "Chiang wants to march north against the warlords yet he must clear up the Canton-Hong Kong impasse in order to obtain supplies and money; he can only do this by repressing the pickets and their leaders, a formidable task."²³⁴ That Chiang might become a tacit partner in British efforts to pursue just such an outcome was confirmed by his declaration of martial law in Canton on 20 March 1926, his seizing of Soviet weapons sent to the radical strikers and picketers then occupying the city, and his arrest of Russian advisors and leading Chinese communist officials. The trigger for these actions was the appearance off Whampoa Island, home to the KMT Military Academy, of a Chinese gunboat, the *Zhongshan*, commanded by a communist officer, and Chiang's fear that this movement presaged a CCP move against him. To Clementi, this represented the opportune moment for Britain to work with Chiang to end the strike and replace Russia as chief patron of Chinese nationalism.²³⁵ It should be noted, however, that this telegram came only two months after Clementi had advocated for a campaign of maximum pressure against the Soviets and their KMT proxies, arguing that if British concerns were not to be heeded, then "we cannot think of

²³⁴ BodL, Clementi papers, MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Box 1, Director of Criminal Intelligence Memorandum to Hong Kong Government, 12 March 1926.

²³⁵ Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 312; BodL, Clementi papers, MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Box 1, Jamieson (Canton) to Clementi, 22 March 1926; Clementi to Macleay (Peking), 24 March 1926; Clementi to Amery, 26 March 1926; TNA, CO273/534, *MBPI*, March 1926.

any other line of action than war with Canton.”²³⁶ Clementi now argued, with his usual force, that the moment for decisive British action was at hand and that joint action with the moderates was necessary.²³⁷ Amery and the Cabinet, however, refused to act. As Wellesley had previously argued, British sponsorship of the KMT in Canton would be tantamount to recognizing it as the official government of China. Strategically speaking, this would have two immediately deleterious effects. First was the potential seizure of British assets and property elsewhere in China as warlords in the Yangtze River region and further north viewed Britain as no longer a neutral but suddenly an interested party in the Chinese Civil War. Even more damaging, however, was the likelihood that early British recognition of the KMT in Canton would fuel the balkanization of the country and its descent into competing spheres of interest. This was itself antithetical to the March 1925 Foreign Office policy that affirmed the British desire for a united, well-ordered, and prosperous China.²³⁸

These telegrams from Clementi – forceful, frequent, and full of sudden reversals of policy – ignored London’s broader policy objectives. They reflected his willingness and even eagerness to recommend new short-term strategies upon his political masters regardless of their prior instructions to him, much to their frustration. A career official with the Colonial Office, Clementi was born in British India and was himself the nephew and namesake of Cecil Clementi Smith, a nineteenth-century colonial governor who had spent most of his career in the Far East. The younger Clementi began his own career in Hong Kong and China in the era of the Boxer

²³⁶ TNA, CO129/492, Clementi to Amery, 26 January 1926.

²³⁷ TNA, CO 129/492, Clementi to Amery, 10 February 1926; BodL, Clementi papers, MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Box 1, Clementi to Amery, 6 February 1926.

²³⁸ TNA, CO 537/7567, Foreign Office (Mounsey) to Colonial Office, 28 January 1926.

Rebellion and was deeply experienced in the politics and cultures of the Far East.²³⁹ In the eyes of some in British officialdom, he was a capable administrator, strong and far-seeing, and a man of intense personality.²⁴⁰ To his detractors, chiefly in the Foreign Office, with whom he unsuccessfully battled for primacy in the setting of British policy in China and the Far East during this period, Clementi was a dinosaur, ossified and wedded to outdated Victorian notions and beliefs about British prestige and power in the region. They considered him a man whose ideas were “permanently wrong,” and who was too prone to propounding his own “reckless” and quite “unfounded” prophecies.²⁴¹ Outspoken and forceful, Clementi effectively embodied what it meant to be a senior colonial official in the interwar period.²⁴²

Clementi’s misplaced convictions and his willingness to regularly disagree with his superiors led Amery, in February and again in March 1926, to chide Clementi and remind him that with respect to the communists in Canton:

the general policy is to leave them alone and let them discredit themselves. Our view is that the use of force would tend to prolong their influence and would merely aggravate

²³⁹ BodL, Additional Papers of Sir Cecil Clementi (Clementi Additional Papers), MSS. British Empire s.600/14, “Sir Cecil Clementi Retiring,” *Ceylon Daily News*, 15 March 1934.

²⁴⁰ Onraet, *Singapore*, 33, 108; CAC, Amery papers, AMEL 2/4/12, Amery to Austen Chamberlain, 21 July 1927.

²⁴¹ TNA, FO371/14754, F926/926/23, Anglo-Japanese Relations in the Far East, Orde memorandum, 15 February 1930.

²⁴² BodL, Clementi papers, MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Box 1, Clementi to Amery, 22 December 1925; TNA, CO129/489, Clementi to Amery, 22 December 1925; BodL, Clementi papers, MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Box 1, Clementi to Amery, 23 December 1925; TNA, CO129/489, Clementi to Amery, 24 December 1925; CO129/489, Clementi to Amery, 30 December 1925.

our position and that the right course is to content ourselves with showing them up in the true colors whenever possible.²⁴³

For good measure, especially given Clementi's growing willingness to act independently, Amery sought to keep him on a short leash, and reminded him in writing in April 1926, lest Clementi get any bright ideas:

We are bound by treaty with Russia not to indulge in any propaganda, direct or indirect, particularly in Asia...and it is essential that your Government should not be mixed up in any action which would afford the Bolsheviks an excuse for their anti-British propaganda throughout China.²⁴⁴

Amery and Chamberlain, for their part, carefully oversaw the management of the policy from Whitehall. In February 1926 correspondence with Macleay in Peking, Amery spoke for the Cabinet in concurring with the former's view that, despite the unrest around Canton and Hong Kong and the difficulties – ideological and political – that immigration from southern China to Malaya caused, Britain should not force it to cease. Doing so, all agreed, would only create more difficulties for the KMT authorities in Canton and further divide what Britain hoped would be its soon reunited Far Eastern economic sphere, in which Hong Kong and Canton were important pillars.²⁴⁵ In the name of strategic patience, the Foreign Office also rebuffed efforts by British commercial and banking interests in China to support the warlords in the north in combatting the KMT. Instead, it worked with the Colonial Office to avert a financial crisis among British businesses in Hong Kong through the timely application of loans to the tune of £3 million in the

²⁴³ TNA, CAB24/178, CP104, Hong Kong: Situation in: - Canton Boycott of British Trade, Amery memorandum, 5 March 1926; WO32/2516, Amery to Clementi, 25 March 1926.

²⁴⁴ BodL, Clementi papers, MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Box 2, Amery to Clementi, 2 April 1926.

²⁴⁵ TNA, CO273/533, Proposed Exclusion of Cantonese Immigrants to the Straits Settlements, 26 February 1926.

fall of 1925 thus staving off the colony's economic collapse. If Britain was unwilling to stick its nose too far into the politics of China proper at this time, it was able and willing to provide a modicum of support to sustain British commerce.²⁴⁶

The enactment of these policies of strategic patience and conciliation with Chinese nationalism was reinforced by the timely appointment of sympathetic personnel into key Foreign Office positions in 1925 and 1926. In London, John Pratt, having just returned from a spell as acting Consul-General in Shanghai, joined the Far Eastern Department and worked under Wellesley. The half-brother of Boris Karloff, Pratt was half-Indian and dark of skin. Pratt was noted for his liberal policies and his staunch support for Chinese nationalism. In early 1926, Macleay followed this up by placing Brenan, whom he considered, "one of the ablest and most reasonable of the younger men in the Consular Service, who should make a good negotiator, and is well fitted to pursue a policy of conciliation," in Canton.²⁴⁷ These appointments not only put the Foreign Office in the best position to communicate and advance Chamberlain's policy of conciliation and strategic patience through 1926, but in the forms of Wellesley, Pratt, and Brenan, they also had a team of experts more than willing to obstruct or redirect Clementi's efforts to take hold of and shape British Far Eastern policy along his own lines.

By the late spring of 1926, then, with Chiang consolidating his military power in Canton and starting his preparations for the expedition north, and with the Foreign and Colonial Offices, absent stray voltage from Clementi, operating in unison towards eventual conciliation with the

²⁴⁶ Chow, "British Opinion and Policy towards China, 1922-1927," 115; TNA, CAB24/178, CP104, Hong Kong: Situation in: - Canton Boycott of British Trade. – Amery memorandum, 5 March 1926.

²⁴⁷ Chow, "British Opinion and Policy towards China, 1922-1927," 137; BodL, Clementi papers, MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Box 2, Macleay to Clementi, 1 April 1926.

KMT, the ingredients were in place for negotiations to begin to end the strike. British entreaties to this effect in the spring of 1926, complete with loan offers and the partnership of the Hong Kong Chinese business community, were reciprocated by KMT Foreign Minister Eugene Chen in June.²⁴⁸

By July, as Chiang and his army began the march north from Canton, Chen was advancing negotiations, this time with Foreign Office official Owen O'Malley, the acting counselor of the British legation in China. Chen briskly requested British financial assistance to pay off the striking Chinese laborers, some 40,000 of them, to cool the political temperature and move towards final agreement. O'Malley refused, although he did counter that Britain could lend Canton funds, up to £10 million, for port and railway development once the strike had ended. Amery duly communicated Cabinet approval for the latter and agreed to the Chinese request for an inquiry into the causes and events of the Shameen Island Incident in June 1925.

Having offered a compromise on the question of the Shameen Inquiry and on various financial investments in Canton and the relaxing of the Washington surtaxes upon the conclusion of the strike, British negotiators were content to wait through much of August 1926 for the KMT response, believing that the increased costs of Chiang's march north would eventually force the KMT to concede to British terms. In response to August violence by strike picketers on boats in the Canton harbor, Britain took further steps towards conciliation with the moderate KMT forces in Canton. With approval from the Cabinet, Brennan negotiated a joint KMT-British anti-piracy operation to clear the harbor of strike picketers and resume something akin to normal maritime traffic. On 4 September, working together, British naval vessels cleared the harbor of maritime

²⁴⁸ BodL, Clementi papers, MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Box 2, Clementi to Amery, 10 April 1926; BodL, Clementi papers, MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Box 2, Clementi to Amery, 15 April 1926.

strike pickets, seizing their vessels in the process, while KMT police secured the wharves and took on responsibility for harbor security. By 9 September, a pre-arranged Hong Kong steamer from Jardine, Matheson, and Co., arrived without issue, unloading 100 tons of warehouse material for purchase and taking on roughly 1000 packages for export via Shanghai.²⁴⁹ Trade it seemed, was ready to be resumed.

If a newly discovered spirit of pragmatism was on the rise in September amid hopes that the strike would soon be called off, Chiang's startling successes in his march north created new challenges for the policy of conciliation and patience. Indeed, as his forces reached the Yangtze River, the heart of British commercial interests in China, a sense of dread crept into Clementi and many across the region, fearful that Chiang's newly successful forces would march through central China and occupy British concessions and economic interests. Chiang's ability to control his disparate armies as they moved north was seen as questionable. While nominally subordinate to Chiang, the armies were in essence just as confused politically as the government they had left behind in Canton. The firing of KMT forces on British vessels in the Yangtze in September, for instance, and the general chaos that followed their advance, put new strains on British policy in China at just the time that cooperation between London, Hong Kong, and Canton was bringing an end to the strike. As the threat to the Yangtze materialized, Clementi, so recently crowing about British-KMT cooperation in Canton, again swung in the opposite direction, requesting permission from Amery to demand the immediate lifting of the strike upon pain of naval blockade. "We feel very strongly that unless we now help our friends and strike at our enemies in

²⁴⁹ BodL, Clementi papers, MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Box 3, Brennan to Clementi, 1 September 1926; Brennan to Clementi, 12 September 1926; Clementi to Amery, 12 September 1926; Clementi to Amery, 13 September 1926.

China, British prestige in the Far East will disappear. Immediate action is essential if we are to take advantage of an unusually favourable opportunity," he cabled Amery.²⁵⁰ Amery's immediate response was concise and direct. "You will do nothing until you hear from me on this."²⁵¹ After the fighting services concluded, in a hasty London gathering, that a blockade was implausible given that Britain could hardly seize the commercial property of French, Japanese, American, or any other international enterprise, Wellesley ended the brief debate by arguing that such an action would be anathema to stated British interests and policy in China.²⁵²

As it was, just as the Foreign Office was pulling Clementi back from the ledge, Chiang was directing the KMT to conclude negotiations and end the strike. This was done by early October and, with little fanfare, the sixteen-month long Canton-Hong Kong strike against Britain ended on 10 October. Within a week, British steamers and commercial vessels were plying the route, and dock workers in Canton and Hong Kong were back at work.²⁵³ In a final act of conciliation, Britain looked the other way as the KMT imposed its own surtaxes on all goods arriving into Canton, a practice forbidden by the Washington Naval Treaties, but done in this case to compensate, over time, the strikers for the financial costs of the strike itself.²⁵⁴

²⁵⁰ BodL, Clementi papers, MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Box 3, Clementi to Amery, 16 September 1926.

²⁵¹ BodL, Clementi papers, MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Box 3, Amery to Clementi, 16 September 1926.

²⁵² TNA, WO32/2516, War Office, Admiralty, Air Office Meeting on Potential Offensive Action in China, 16 September 1926.

²⁵³ BodL, Clementi papers, MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Box 3, Clementi to Amery, 12 October 1926; Clementi to Amery, 16 October 1926; BodL, Clementi Additional Papers, MSS. British Empire s.600/28, Clementi Diary 10 October 1926.

²⁵⁴ TNA, CO129/494, Clementi to Amery, 17 October 1926; FO262/1653, Foreign Office Statement on the Canton-Hong Kong Strike-Boycott, 13 October 1926.

1926-1927: Wellesley, Chamberlain, Clementi, and the Christmas Memorandum

Just as the strike was concluding, Chamberlain and his officials began envisioning new ways in which, from the imperial core, they could finesse the ideological and transnational challenges confronting the Far Eastern empire. They focused their efforts on reimagining the bilateral relationship between Britain and China itself. This process had begun earlier, as documented by Wellesley in his March 1925 memorandum on British policy in China. That document had called for a “united, well-ordered and prosperous China,” and acknowledged the reality that Britain and the other powers would need to rethink their approach to China lest, “we shall be forced by circumstances beyond our control” to grant China fiscal autonomy “in return for nothing.”²⁵⁵ In March 1926, with the Hong Kong boycott already nine months in and Chiang beginning to consolidate his grip over the military machinery of the KMT in Canton, Wellesley produced for the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee and Sir William Tyrrell, the Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, a consolidated list of British commitments in the Far East and an updated statement of British policy. This statement, unlike its 1925 cousin, included the caveat that Britain needed China to have a “stable, though not necessarily centralized government.” It characterized policy toward China as one of “conciliation but firmness.”²⁵⁶ Coupled with other official actions, such as the British protest against the US proposal to extend foreign control of revenues from Chinese customs, this memorandum reflects the pattern of

²⁵⁵ TNA, FO405/247, No. 30. Memorandum on British Policy in China, Victor Wellesley, 1 March 1925.

²⁵⁶ TNA, FO371/11701, F1187/G29, List of Commitments in Far East, 19 March 1926.

thought that was emerging within the Foreign Office through the spring of 1926.²⁵⁷ Chamberlain, unwilling to abandon the policy of neutrality in China, seems to have been showing himself as amenable to softening the British stance towards the KMT, at least to the degree that it exercised *de facto* authority over parts of China. This KMT-specific approach was neither repeated nor replicable in other parts of the country, given Britain's official neutrality and the inability of competing militarists to capture (or even attempt to capture) the nationalist urgings felt across much of China. Nonetheless, in Canton and other areas of southern and central China that came under KMT control during the period of the Northern Expedition, this unofficial policy guided those actions and decisions taken by British officials and men on the spot to protect lives and property and to sustain, as much as able, the continued flow of commerce.²⁵⁸

This shift in tone was not universally supported in the region, however. Macleay and a host of other notables, including Sir Francis Aglen, the Inspector-General of the Chinese Maritime Customs, and the Shanghai Chamber of Commerce were pushing for a more unified response from the Treaty Powers. While not directly advocating for the use of arms, *per se*, their argument was that by acting together, the powers could effectively coerce China, resorting only to arms as a last resort. Chamberlain and Wellesley believed that potentially turning back to gunboats and other methods of coercion was anachronistic, given that the Nine-Power Treaty affirmed the sovereignty and territorial integrity of China, to say nothing of it contravening the League of Nations Covenant, upon which the viability of British grand strategy rested. The Foreign Office, over time and in regular consultation with the Chiefs of Staff, understood what

²⁵⁷ Petrie, *The Life and Letters of the Right Hon. Sir Austen Chamberlain*, 363.

²⁵⁸ BodL, Clementi papers, MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Box 4, Foreign Office to O'Malley, 8 December 1926.

many of those on the ground did not – that the era of coercion in China was over, and that Chinese nationalism represented a shift in social and political thinking and organization within the country that Britain could not control. Wellesley, in a 20 August 1926 statement defending conciliation as a policy, argued that, “While it is undoubtedly our intention to act benevolently towards China, it certainly is not to be weak. Weakness is, however, unfortunately inherent in the situation, for our liberty of action is strictly limited.”²⁵⁹ To Wellesley, the use of force, although justified in the short-term defence of British lives or for the protection of British property, was never a long-term practical response. The select use of force, Wellesley argued, in defence of British lives and/or property, could serve to strengthen the broader policy of conciliation. But to do so broadly and arbitrarily would, he knew, in a stroke undermine the very tenets of the the very outside intervention that Britain sought to avoid.

Britain, Wellesley forcefully argued, needed to ignore the desire to solve long-term problems with short-term solutions and instead take a more practical and less confrontational perspective. This could only be built around respect for Chinese sovereignty and the realist understanding that Britain needed to accommodate itself to, and shape its policies around, the fact that anti-foreign Chinese nationalism was coming to the fore. If the eventual outcome was clear, he posited, on which side would we eventually like to find ourselves?

If, therefore, disaster threatens us whichever policy we pursue, then surely it is the part of wisdom not to choose the one which is morally indefensible and highly provocative, and this I believe the whole scheme of debt consolidation and control to be. With all their defects – and they are many – the Chinese, though they may not practice it themselves, have a strong sense of justice, and I cannot conceive anything more fatal in the long run than to play them false in this way. It will surely rankle in the mind of every Chinaman for generations to come, and sooner or later, more likely sooner than later, lead to an explosion. Whatever the dangers of a policy of extrication may be, and I do not wish to minimize them, it is certainly not provocative, nor can we be accused of selfish motives...Personally, I regard the problem as insoluble at the present time, and I feel

²⁵⁹ TNA, FO405/252A, Statement of British Policy in China, 20 August 1926.

quite sure that the only policy which offers any hope of ultimate success is the one which is morally unimpeachable. On this point I feel very strongly.²⁶⁰

Although still in formulation and awaiting debate at the Cabinet level, Chamberlain and Wellesley's policy of conciliation already colored the British diplomatic approach to events in the Far East in the summer and fall of 1926. As has been discussed, in October 1926, following the ending of the boycott, Britain acquiesced to the KMT levying of surtaxes on commercial trade via Canton.²⁶¹ As Amery communicated to Clementi, who himself vacillated throughout 1926 between recommending limited recognition of the KMT on the one hand and military action on the other,

if we persist alone and they ignore us, which they would, we would have to take some kind of action, which would be technically unsound and politically disastrous...it must be appreciated that any policy based on the assertion of treaty rights by force of arms, either with or without the cooperation of the other powers, is entirely impracticable.²⁶²

Brenan, the Consul-General in Canton and a backer of conciliation, justified this approach in a November 1926 report on the Kuomintang to the Foreign Office, characterizing the former as, "the greatest political force now actuating the Chinese people, and that it is likely to increase in power as the only party placing a practicable ideal before the people, and working for the welfare of the state rather than the pockets of individuals."²⁶³ To him and others, including Sir Miles Lampson, who replaced Macleay as British minister in Peking in the late fall

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Chow, "British Opinion and Policy towards China, 1922-1927," 177; BodL, Clementi papers, MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Box 3, Foreign Office to Macleay, 24 October 1926.

²⁶² BodL, Clementi papers, MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Box 4, Amery to Clementi, 4 November 1926.

²⁶³ TNA, FO676/39, The Kuomintang, 23 November 1926.

of 1926, this latent power was one that could be directed in any number of directions.²⁶⁴

Lampson himself was received by Brennan in Hong Kong upon his arrival on 25 November, two days after Brennan's 1926 report on the KMT was sent to London. On the evening of 26 November, in a foreshadowing of their policy debates to come, Lampson and Brennan bandied words with Clementi, himself newly arrived in Hong Kong and at that time an ardent backer of the use of force against the KMT. The best way, they argued, to potentially contain communism in China was to affiliate with the forces of Chinese nationalism and firmly place oneself, to use rhetoric akin to Wellesley, on the right side of history.²⁶⁵ This would facilitate future increases in commerce and economic opportunity under the assumption that, free of the shackles of extraterritoriality and imperialism, China could look to Britain as a friend rather than an enemy as it sought continued development.²⁶⁶ The danger lay in such a policy producing, sooner or later, a China that might bring about crises of sufficient depth to require imperial defence investments beyond the minimum the Treasury were able to provide. Such a crisis could also endanger wider British interests, given the spread of Chinese nationalism and heavy Chinese diaspora in Malaya, especially. A strongly nationalist China, however friendly with Britain, could therefore upset the regional status quo more broadly.

Chamberlain, Wellesley, and their contemporaries understood this as the debate reached a climax in November and December 1926. The formal process began on 23 November, when the

²⁶⁴ Self, ed., *Austen Chamberlain Diary Letters*, 303; Chow, "British Opinion and Policy towards China, 1922-1927," 178-179.

²⁶⁵ Middle East Archives Centre, St. Antony's College, Oxford.(MEAC), Papers of Sir Miles Lampson, Baron Killearn (Lampson papers), Box 1, Diary, 25, 26 November 1926.

²⁶⁶ Fung, *The Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat*, 9, 239-241.

Foreign Office submitted Wellesley's Cabinet Paper (CP) 399 in advance of a special Cabinet Committee on China meeting. Wellesley's memorandum laid out clearly, for the first time, the spirit of the policy changes that the Foreign Office believed Britain must undertake. These included the official granting of the surtaxes agreed to, but never provided, at the Washington Conference; the de jure agreement of the powers to regularize surtax collection alongside KMT authorities in Canton; and the abandonment of protests over minor treaty and legal matters.²⁶⁷ The Cabinet Committee on China, composed of Baldwin, Chamberlain, Amery, and other senior ministers with portfolios relating to imperial defence met on 30 November, to consider the draft policy. For Chamberlain and those supporting the policy of conciliation, the timing was auspicious, as Brenan's recent report on the KMT could be used to introduce and defend the policy. It provided ballast to Chamberlain's argument that "the best he could hope to do was to save something from a crumbling building," and that by initiating such a liberal policy, "it might perhaps serve somewhat to relieve British interests from the burden of nationalist anti-foreign attack," and, even, "offer the southern [KMT] authorities an alternative to their present association with the Bolsheviks." Chamberlain well understood the risks associated with such an approach but, along with Wellesley, saw no other viable course of action.²⁶⁸ Baldwin, always happy to defer foreign policy to Chamberlain, supported him during the debate, arguing that, "in a situation where every possible course was open to objections and difficulties, the one now proposed offered the best hope of a useful result."²⁶⁹ The committee approved the draft policy.

²⁶⁷ TNA CAB24/182, CP399, Memoranda for the Cabinet – British Policy in China, 23 November 1926.

²⁶⁸ TNA CAB27/337, Cabinet – Committee on China, 1st Minutes, 30 November 1926.

²⁶⁹ TNA CO537/768, Situation in China – British Policy, 3 December 1926.

Later that day, Chamberlain forwarded the draft policy to Lampson – then in Shanghai as he neared the end of his two-month journey from London to Peking.²⁷⁰ Chamberlain instructed Lampson to share the draft policy with his counterparts among the powers. He stressed, throughout, that the government was prepared to move ahead along these lines with or without their concurrence and would declare its “readiness to negotiate treaty revision, and all other outstanding questions, as soon as the Chinese themselves have constituted a government with authority to negotiate.”²⁷¹ Together, these documents saw Britain abandon the policy of gunboat diplomacy and foreign tutelage in China.²⁷² This movement was confirmed on 1 December, 1926, when the complete Cabinet approved the policy change and Chamberlain forwarded his final instructions to Lampson.²⁷³ On 2 December, Chamberlain wrote to his sister Ida while enroute to Geneva, remarking, “I leave in a happier frame of mind because after huge labour I have worked out the basis of a policy for China, got Cabinet approval for it & sent the necessary instructions to our new Minister, Lampson, who is already at Shanghai.”²⁷⁴ On 18 December, the British communicated this new policy to the other powers in a document since known as the

²⁷⁰ MEAC, Lampson papers, Box 1, Lampson Diary, 30 November 1926.

²⁷¹ TNA CAB27/337, Cabinet – Committee on China, 1st Minutes, 30 November 1926; CAB24/182, CP403, China: Policy in: - Statement Prepared for use of Mr. Lampson, British Minister-Designate at Peking, 30 November 1926.

²⁷² TNA FO405/252A, Foreign Office to Lampson – Instructions on British Policy in China, 2 December 1926.

²⁷³ TNA CAB23/53, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 3 December 1926; MEAC, Lampson papers, Box 1, Lampson Diary, 30 November 1926.

²⁷⁴ Austen Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 2 December 1926, in Self, ed., *Austen Chamberlain Diary Letters*, 290-291.

Christmas, or December, Memorandum, which became public by the end of the month. In advancing a new policy, characterized alternatively as liberal, conciliatory, or realist, Britain showed that it was still able, without battalions or battleships, to act decisively to shape the regional environment in ways that were conducive to its interests.²⁷⁵

The responses to this policy were, however, not altogether positive. Britain's Japanese and American counterparts in the region made clear their disdain for the shift, as it signaled, to them, too great a respect for the power of the forces of Chinese nationalism. British policy also complicated their own bilateral relations with China, given their unwillingness to take such steps. Britain had, in a sense, set a precedent that they were not yet ready to follow. More broadly, though, they objected to the Christmas Memorandum because it made public the divergence of interests among the Treaty Powers.²⁷⁶

Within the empire, Clementi emerged as a vocal opponent of the policy of conciliation in China. As early as the summer of 1926, Clementi had offered unsolicited recommendations to the Colonial and Foreign Offices on British policy in the region. He advocated, forcefully and continually, for the British to acknowledge what he saw as the obvious reality: the breakup of China into spheres of influence – Japan in the north, Britain in the south, and France in Yunnan (adjacent to French Indochina).²⁷⁷ In October, following the initial success of the Northern

²⁷⁵ TNA CAB24/182, CP403, China: Policy in: - Statement Prepared for use of Mr. Lampson, British Minister-Designate at Pekin, 30 November 1926; Robert Kagan, *The Ghost at the Feast: America and the Collapse of the World Order, 1900-1941* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2023), 319.

²⁷⁶ Hosoya, "Britain and the United States in Japan's View of the International System, 1919-1937," 12; TNA, FO405/252A, US Policy Towards China, 5 October 1926.

²⁷⁷ TNA FO405/252A, Clementi to Amery, 27 June 1926.

Expedition, after British officials in Hong Kong and Canton had worked with their KMT counterparts to quietly end the strike, and as Wellesley and Chamberlain were drafting the initial versions of the Christmas Memorandum, Clementi wrote to Amery, in his patronizingly snobbish way, arguing again for a policy that accepted the breakup of China, the healthy use of force when needed, and a reassessment of British policy that more closely aligned it with that of Japan.

All the same, I cannot help thinking that our Foreign Office has gone completely off the rails in China...A show of British force would compel in almost all cases war lords and Chinese soviets to behave...to sum up, the present situation appears to require - (1) the re-consideration of our diplomacy in China; (2) the re-consideration of our policy towards Bolshevik intrigue in the Far East; (3) an entente, if possible, as regards our Far Eastern affairs with Japan, the U.S.A., and France; (4) a decision as to the independent warlike action practicable to be taken by us for the protection of our interests in China.²⁷⁸

Clementi's views were far from universally shared, either in the Colonial Office or the empire writ large. Murchison Fletcher, then Colonial Secretary in Ceylon, in correspondence with Amery, argued in favor of a close relationship with the KMT, positing, "that they are anything but Bolshevik by nature and really inclined to side with us. They had wanted to train their forces with the help of Indian officers which Curzon had vetoed and it was only after this that they called in the Russians."²⁷⁹ Lampson, now seated in Peking, was friendly with Clementi but opposed his views. These conflicting viewpoints meant that in January 1927 they began what would become more than six years of not always polite debate regarding British imperial defence and foreign policy issues in the Far East. For example, Lampson sent a telegram to Clementi on 2 January in which he pushed back firmly against the Governor's recommended course of action:

To sum up, if your plan succeeds, we formally recognize the disruption of China, antagonize both Chinese and foreign opinion, are accused of breaking the Washington Treaty for our own ends, and perhaps serve our ends inadequately in doing so. If the plan fails, we incur all the suffering and disadvantages of failure altogether to protect our

²⁷⁸ CAC, Amery papers, AMEL 2/4/12, Clementi to Amery, 26 October 1926.

²⁷⁹ Amery, 10 December 1926, *Leo Amery Diaries*, 485.

interests, are left isolated and with semi-recognition on our hands, and suffer great loss of prestige.²⁸⁰

Clementi's views reflected the lens of a man who had worked tirelessly in administering individual colonies within the British Empire but who had no experience in grand strategy. It should not be surprising that his remarks on policy were deemed illogical and impractical by his opponents in the Foreign Office. Pursuing "independent warlike action" while agreeing to a series of ententes with regional partners within China who were fearful of one another was never financially nor diplomatically feasible. His suggestions, therefore, if bold in concept, contributed little to the real challenges that diplomats and officials in the region faced each day. If Chamberlain and Wellesley had now wedded British policy to the Christmas Memorandum, it would be Foreign Office officials such as Lampson and Brenan who would implement it. As the sun rose over Hankow on the morning of Monday, 3 January, 1927, that work was about to get considerably more difficult.

Hankow, Kreta Ayer, and the Crises of Early 1927

The proximate cause of the difficulties that emerged in the Yangtze River region in the winter and spring of 1927 was the unexpected success of Chiang's Northern Expedition. Launched in the summer of 1926 from Canton, it had marched north over the summer and fall of 1926 and defeated the warlord armies of Wu Peifu and Sun Chuanfong. KMT forces took Hankow in October 1926 and were from that point onwards positioned on the Yangtze River, the

²⁸⁰ BodL, Clementi papers, MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Box 5, Lampson to Clementi, 2 January 1927.

heart of British commercial interests and investments in China.²⁸¹ That proximity unnerved British officials, even if many now sensed that Chiang was something of a moderate. However, even if logic dictated that Britain had much to gain from Chiang's success, the movement of CCP and KMT 'radicals' north with the army, and their efforts to rally Chinese voices against foreigners and imperialists threatened not only the economic viability of downstream British commercial interests but also the inviolability of upstream British communities and concessions. This was especially true in cities such as Hankow where, prior to the arrival of meltwaters in the spring, the shallow depth of the river prohibited British gunboats from operating during the winter months, effectively stranding British communities from the protection offered by British forces downstream.

On the morning of 3 January 1927, a mob roused by nationalist rhetoric gathered close to the British concession at Hankow and rushed the barricades. British marines landed to protect the area but were forced to hand over the concession to KMT forces to maintain order. Less than two weeks later, the British concession in Kiukiang, 150 miles downstream, was similarly occupied. These events, coupled with reports of CCP anti-British agitation throughout southern China and the simultaneous communist-inspired PKI uprising in the NEI, rattled British nerves just at the moment when Chamberlain's policy of conciliation was being promulgated.²⁸²

The capitulation of the Hankow concession set off a strenuous debate within London and the empire about the wisdom and efficacy of that policy. Not only were British prestige and interests at stake but, much more practically, the question of how to defend Shanghai from a

²⁸¹ Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat*, 3-4.

²⁸² Chow, 'British Opinion and Policy towards China, 1922-1927,' 192; Steiner, *The Lights That Failed*, 711; Best, "'We Are Virtually at War with Russia'" 209.

similar fate became an immediate concern. To many, especially on the right, Hankow was interpreted as the beginnings of a direct Soviet attack on British interests in China.²⁸³ Lampson in Peking, on hearing of the loss of the concession, immediately signaled his support for retaking it by force if necessary. Although often at odds with Clementi and others who more regularly advocated for a more aggressive military posture in China, in this case Lampson pushed for action. This was in contrast, he said, to the Foreign Office, “who seem determined to throw every British interest overboard!”²⁸⁴ From Hong Kong, Clementi, writing to Amery, implored Britain to stand up for “the whole fabric of British interests in the Far East,” stunned as he was at the “deadly shock” that was the seizure of Hankow. “At the risk of wearying you, I am writing to you again to tell you how fretfully dreadful it all is over here. People coming out fresh from home have no idea of these conditions, are astonished at first and then horrified, as indeed they may well be.” Lady Clementi echoed Lampson’s frustration when, in a letter to Mrs. Amery on 11 January, she wrote, “the common cry is that the F.O. are more hostile to British interests than the enemy.”²⁸⁵ Clementi himself recommended not only “warlike action” but also urged that Britain use this moment to force the Chinese to cede the New Territories in Hong Kong, leased at the moment for only 99 years, to Britain in perpetuity.²⁸⁶ The Foreign Office responded curtly, calling Clementi’s suggestions, “entirely impracticable.”²⁸⁷

²⁸³ Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat*, 122.

²⁸⁴ MEAC, Lampson papers, Box 1, Lampson Diary, 6 January 1927.

²⁸⁵ CAC, Amery papers, AMEL 2/1/13, Lady Clementi to Mrs. Amery, 11 January 1927.

²⁸⁶ TNA, FO371/12399, F577/2/10, Clementi to Amery, 19 January 1927.

²⁸⁷ TNA, FO371/12399, F525/2/10, British Policy in China, Mounsey memorandum, 21 January 1927.

In London, the debate on how to proceed began immediately after the news of Hankow arrived. On 11 January, the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee submitted a report to the CID on the situation. It argued, again, that “offensive action in China on a large scale is not possible for the British Empire acting alone,” and that any military operation, even if done in cooperation with the powers (chiefly Japan and the United States), could very well be counterproductive to British interests. The retaking by force of the Hankow concession was therefore deemed to be impractical. The situation in Shanghai, however, was different, given its size and importance to British commerce, prestige, and the region’s broader settler communities. Located on the coast, it was easier to defend and resupply. The Chiefs, while still advocating for some sort of international force, acknowledged that a British division of troops could well defend the international settlement.²⁸⁸ Accordingly, with respect to Hankow, the Cabinet ignored Lampson, Clementi, and others by refusing to attempt any sort of forced reoccupation. Any such action would have meant a war against the KMT in the interior of China without allies, which they believed was an absurd notion to even consider.²⁸⁹ The Cabinet did, though, direct the COS to explore the possibility of talks with the Japanese about joint defensive action at Shanghai, while others debated the possible effectiveness of sanctions or a blockade of the entire coast.²⁹⁰ In the end, Japan and the United States refused to cooperate. Japan was “unwilling to act rashly or quickly in any way in China,” given its own fear of latent anti-Japanese sentiment. With international cooperation ruled out and Britain unable to effect events upstream, the Cabinet

²⁸⁸ TNA, CAB4/16, The Situation in China, 11 January 1927.

²⁸⁹ Petrie, *The Life and Letters of the Right Hon. Sir Austen Chamberlain*, 364; Vansittart, *Mist Procession*, 334.

²⁹⁰ TNA, CAB23/54, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 12 January 1927; Kagan, *Ghost at the Feast*, 321.

focused its energies on Shanghai, deciding on 17 January that it would reinforce the city with 20,000 troops.²⁹¹ The upstream concessions, simply put, were not worth fighting for. Shanghai was.

To demonstrate the strength and flexibility of Britain's new policy, one need only see that, in late January 1927, Britain officially presented its new policies to the KMT representatives in China, despite the objections of the Japanese Minister, Clementi, and others. As Lampson told his diplomatic colleagues in Peking, "His Majesty's Government has to take the long view," and it would continue to implement the policies that, as Chamberlain argued, "aligned with the spirit of the Washington Treaty" over the word of the Washington Treaty.²⁹² This clarified numerous changes to British policy, including recognizing modern Chinese courts and applying aspects of their laws to British subjects in British courts, amalgamating British concessions with their surrounding Chinese towns and populations, and prohibiting British missionaries from owning land in the interior. It also provided for any "reasonable arrangement in regard to customs revenues such as progressive relinquishment of control over present customs revenues as and when secured obligations are extinguished."²⁹³

Lampson codified the underlying bet that Britain was making, alone among the Powers, when he stated very simply that the KMT, as a movement and organization, contained, and even

²⁹¹ TNA, CAB23/54, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 17 January 1927; B.J.C. McKercher, "No Eternal Friends or Enemies: British Defence Policy and the Problem of the United States," *Canadian Journal of History* 28, 2 (1993), 268; French, *Deterrence, Coercion, and Appeasement*, 182-183.

²⁹² TNA, FO371/12399, F609/2/10, British Policy in China, 18 January 1927; FO371/12399, F706/2/10, British Policy in China, 22 January 1927.

²⁹³ TNA, FO371/12399, F448/2/10, Anglo-Japanese Policy in China, 25 January 1927.

embodied, a national ideal. Because it stood for something, it had a meaning, a value, and a notion that was worth fighting for. This was a feeling he clearly saw as lacking in Peking, where he worked alongside a “façade of Government” that had “ceased to function” and stood for “nothing but the individual aims of a group of militarists, each out for his own hand.”²⁹⁴

These efforts unfolded simultaneously with ongoing British-KMT negotiations over Hankow, throughout which Clementi continued to voice his own frustrations at the Foreign Office’s policy of “scuttle and surrender,” lamenting, “our prestige goes down and down. The Cantonese now talk openly of Great Britain as a paper tiger, a toy made for children.”²⁹⁵ Despite this rancor, the Cabinet continued to back the essence of Chamberlain’s policy of conciliation. It approved the Hankow agreement in mid-February, dissolving both it and Kiukiang as British concessions.²⁹⁶ The closing chapter in this stage of the saga was a 27 February telegram from Clementi to Amery in which, over the course of an amazing 65 pages, Clementi tore into the Foreign Office policy of conciliation and, pointedly, the integrity and capabilities of Brennan himself. Clementi argued that Brennan’s willingness to entreat with the KMT in September 1926, which resulted in the combined British-KMT operations that cleared strike picketers from Canton harbor, was a dereliction of duty, a betrayal of British adherence to the Washington treaties, and the singular cause of all of the “disastrous events” that had since befallen Britain in

²⁹⁴ TNA, CID4/16, Lampson to Chamberlain, 17 February 1927.

²⁹⁵ CAC, Amery papers, AMEL 2/4/12, Clementi to Amery, 18 December 1926; Amery, *The Leo Amery Diaries*, ed. Barnes and Nicholson, 489-490, 495, 497-498.

²⁹⁶ TNA, CAB24/209, CP6, China. British Policy as regards situation in, Henderson memorandum, 8 January 1930; Chow, ‘British Opinion and Policy towards China, 1922-1927,’ 211.

China.”²⁹⁷ Amery, however, did not take the bait, perhaps given his awareness, not least, that Clementi’s regular proposals to embrace spheres of influence were themselves betrayals of the Washington system.

One reality that helped shape the British response to the KMT threat throughout the wider Far East in the winter and spring of 1927 was the understanding, initially operationalized and demonstrated by Onraet and Special Branch in Singapore from 1925, that the ideological, political, and practical division of the KMT between its radical and moderate factions was wide and exploitable. This policy reached new heights in the work that Onraet and Special Branch embarked upon after the attack on the Kreta Ayer Police Station in Singapore, on March 12, 1927, the second anniversary of the death of Sun Yat-sen. That morning, members of the different Chinese communities in Malaya gathered to remember Sun Yat-sen, the father of Chinese nationalism. Something like 20,000 attendees came together over the course of the morning in the Kreta Ayer neighborhood. These Chinese were mostly “well-established and law abiding” according to Straits Settlements reports. The leaders of these communities were long established in the colony. Although Chinese nationalists, they were understood as “petty shopkeepers and [the] propertied class,” and as essentially, “conservative.”²⁹⁸ These communities had, in fact, in registering and gaining approval for their demonstration on 12 March, pledged to abide by agreed-upon conditions – no speeches, no slogans, no parades – and even kept secret from the radical Hailam and communist-aligned Chinese nationalists the actual time and place of the demonstration, ensuring that they arrived separately from the radical

²⁹⁷ TNA, FO371/12504, F4068/4068/10, Clementi to Amery, 27 February 1927.

²⁹⁸ Martin Thomas, “‘Paying the Butcher’s Bill’: Policing British Colonial Protest after 1918,” *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History & Societies* 15, No. 2 (2011): 68-69; TNA, CO273/535/11, MBPI, May 1927.

groups.²⁹⁹ The trouble began in the afternoon, after a group of about 1,000 radical Hailam Chinese commandeered the proceedings, assaulting moderate Chinese leaders, unfurling banners, and generally inciting what had been a previously quiescent gathering. The new arrivals proceeded to lead the larger group into a procession that attacked two police constables, surrounded a trolley bus caught in the area, and then marched on the local police station in which several police inspectors had taken refuge. A series of altercations with police, attempts by the crowd to rush the station, and police shots ensued, resulting in the killing of six rioters.³⁰⁰

Straits Settlements officials, well understanding Hailam culpability in the incident, from that point forward worked judiciously to further split the radical leftist-communist wing of the KMT from what it saw as the more invested and legitimate communities of Chinese nationalists within Malaya. Alongside the Chinese-dominated Singapore Chamber of Commerce, the government immediately affixed responsibility on to the Hailam Chinese, absolving “big” and “small” capitalist Chinese from any responsibility. Special Branch, capitalizing on its intelligence-gathering capabilities, activated its networks and stepped up its raids upon “Revolutionary” and “Left” KMT organizations in Singapore, including the Nanyang General Labour Union and the Union of Overseas Chinese. It shut down further ad-hoc Hailam night schools and seditious publications.³⁰¹ At the same time, from March 1927 onwards, Straits Settlements officials who had tapped into local KMT communications knew that moderate factions throughout Malaya were “disown[ing] the Reds” and reporting on them back to the

²⁹⁹ TNA, CO273/537, Clifford to Amery, 21 August 1927.

³⁰⁰ TNA, CO273/535/11, *MBPI*, February-April 1927; Choon, *Absent History*, 100-102; CAC, Amery papers, AMEL 2/4/12, Clifford to Amery, 2 September 1927.

³⁰¹ TNA, CO273/535/11, *MBPI*, May 1927.

Nationalist Government in Canton. Indeed, it seems that “guarded information,” from moderate KMT leaders in cities across Malaya – Singapore, Negri Sembilan, Selangor, and Perak – allowed Special Branch to carry out raids, arrests, prosecutions, and banishments on KMT radicals and communists.³⁰² As the months went by, the Straits Settlement administration was conspicuous in its tight focus on the radical KMT – no arrests, efforts, banishments, or campaigns against what they considered to be the moderate factions of Chinese nationalists were undertaken. Those moderate branches, rather, became “dormant,” content to ride out the storm. Although they did not, except in the period immediately after the Kreta Ayer Incident, openly cooperate with the Straits Settlements authorities to track down and arrest their radical counterparts, moderate Chinese nationalists in Malaya saw little reward in supporting the latter. Nor did the moderates hesitate to publish, with Straits Settlements Government approval, anti-communist and anti-radical releases and bulletins from Chiang’s National Government, including those seeking to rally the Overseas KMT Branch Departments people to “thwart the instigation” of the masses by the “running dogs” of KMT radicals.³⁰³ The newly installed Straits Settlements Governor, Sir Hugh Clifford, communicated the essence of this approach in one of his early letters to Amery, in which he distinctly separated the moderate KMT from its radical brethren and crowed about “the repressive action taken by the Protectorate and Police” against communists and KMT radicals. If self-congratulatory in style, the assessment depicts something

³⁰² TNA, FO371/13243, F154/154/61, *MBPI*, October-November 1927; FO371/13243, F154/154/61, *MBPI*, December 1927; CO273/537/1, Interim Report on the Kwok Man Tong in the Federated Malay States covering activities during the period 1st January 1927 to end of June 1927, 31 August 1927.

³⁰³ TNA, CO717/56/5, Wolff (Governor’s Deputy) to Amery, 21 August 1927; CO273/535/11, *MBPI*, July 1927; TNA, FO371/13243, F154/154/61, *MBPI*, December 1927.

of the way in which senior colonial leaders understood their approach as aimed not against Chinese nationalism writ large but solely targeted against the radical elements of the movement.³⁰⁴ Of those in leadership positions in Malaya, only A.M. Goodman, the Secretary of Chinese Affairs in the Straits Settlements, dissented from Onraet's policy of a selective crackdown on Chinese nationalists, believing that, in practice, there was no difference between the radical and moderate branches of the KMT. The confirmation and victory of Onraet's policy of conciliation with moderates and crackdown on radicals over an all-encompassing suppression can be seen in Clifford's decision, in late 1927, to send Goodman home to Britain for eight months leave of absence.³⁰⁵

As officials on the imperial periphery recognized and seized opportunities to spur division between factions within the Overseas KMT Departments, they well understood the linkage between their own efforts and those of other officials within China itself, to say nothing of larger British policies towards Chinese nationalism more broadly. In Singapore, these dynamics were understood as early as 1925 and enabled Special Branch to simultaneously arrest and deport those considered extreme while nurturing and occasionally partnering with those moderate Chinese nationalists with vested interests in the economic stability and success of the colony. Officials in Singapore knew that such efforts, admittedly not the major imperial defence concern of policymakers in London at the time, could be significantly set back by any large-scale British crackdown on the KMT in China. Years' worth of copies of the *MBPI*, each with a

³⁰⁴ TNA, CO273/537/1, Clifford to Amery, 31 August 1927.

³⁰⁵ TNA, CO273/570/8, Lampson to Wellesley, 2 May 1931; 'Society and Personal,' *The Malaya Tribune*, Saturday, 11 February 1928, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/page/maltribune19280211-1.1.8>, accessed 7 February 2024.

specific section – usually the leader – on the KMT in China proper, acknowledge this and make clear how intricately linked the two theatres of British-KMT engagement were. They also show that those officials, Onraet and others, concerned with such issues in Singapore, were themselves important contributors to imperial defence, imbued with an agency and possessed with the resources to affect outcomes. If the London-centric historical and historiographical record, replete with CID acknowledgement of the broader Soviet-induced threat to the British Far East, does not scream out in agreement, that is for two principal reasons.³⁰⁶ First, such connections were only explicitly drawn in this period during moments, most especially 1925 and 1930, in which the Government of the Straits Settlements implemented fresh bans on KMT activity in the colony. This, in both cases, would have ramifications on broader British policy in China and so necessitated input from Whitehall. Such action was not, however, under consideration in 1926-1927 when the crisis of Chinese nationalism reached its crescendo. Second, the siloing of Cabinet/CID/Foreign Office, on the one hand, and Colonial Office, on the other hand, research and historiography by scholars in the years since has perpetuated false narratives and notions of separation – between, first, Malaya and China and, second, colonial officials and their contributions to imperial defence.

1927: Britain vs. Chinese Nationalism vs. Communism

The “Nanking Outrages,” as they came to be known, of late March 1927 whipped London and those in the region into frenzy and represented the moment at which the most

³⁰⁶ TNA, CAB4/15, CP724, CID Review of the Communist Movement, November 1925-July 1926, 20 July 1926; CAB4/16, CP782, Soviet Activities in Central and Eastern Asia, General Sir George Milne, 15 March 1927.

serious thought was put into Britain needing to engage the KMT militarily during this period. The event itself consisted of the occupation of Nanking by KMT forces, the outbreak of looting and the targeting of foreign consulates and foreigners themselves by Chinese personnel, military and civilian alike, and the subsequent deaths of at least three British subjects. If escalatory, this experience was at least in keeping with the general experiences of British officials in Hankow and Kiukiang earlier in the winter.³⁰⁷ In London, the COS recommended some kind of action, arguing at the CID on 29 March that Tyrwhitt, Commander-in-Chief China Station, had the capability, alone if necessary, to blockade Canton and prohibit passage across the Yangtze, thus stopping KMT forces from continuing their march north. Hankey was the spur to such action, conferring with Beatty over breakfast in the latter's home on the morning of 29 March and drafting the CID report that was submitted to Cabinet.³⁰⁸ In Cabinet meetings on 30 and 31 March, Chamberlain was predisposed to action of some kind but the Cabinet, playing for time and international support, held off from making an instant decision, against the recommendations of the Admiralty, and instead chose to solicit input from Washington and Tokyo on the matter.³⁰⁹

By 6 April, the Cabinet, aware of the growing rupture within the KMT and eager not to humiliate Chiang in any potential military response, continued its efforts to argue for a unified ultimatum from the concerned Powers – Great Britain, Japan, France, Italy, and the United States – while seeking almost continuous updates on the situation from Lampson and his team of

³⁰⁷ Chow, 'British Opinion and Policy towards China, 1922-1927,' 214.

³⁰⁸ CAC, Papers of Sir Maurice Hankey, Baron Hankey (Hankey papers), HNKY 3/34, Hankey to Lady Hankey, 29 March 1927 and 30 March 1927.

³⁰⁹ TNA, CAB4/16, The Situation in China, 29 March 1927; CAB23/54, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 30 March 1927; CAB24/186, CP111, China: Policy in: - Proposals, Churchill Memorandum, 31 March 1927.

consuls and consul-generals scattered across China. With Chamberlain away, Baldwin delayed action until 12 April, by which point American and Japanese protests had rendered any joint ultimatum null and void. Japan considered Britain's conciliatory policies in China at this time to be "blundering." Chamberlain, in response to US Secretary of State Frank Kellogg's demurring on any sort of joint response, wrote to his sister Ida, remarking, "Kellogg is an old woman without a policy." The lack of international consensus on how to proceed, combined with the concerns that any British military action on the Yangtze might rebound negatively against the northern Chinese armies then marching south to engage the KMT, effectively tabled talk of an immediate British military response.³¹⁰ As it happened, and although debates on the use of force would continue through April and into May, the next moves by anti-communist forces in China entirely changed the contours of the policy debate.

On Wednesday, 6 April 1927, the forces of Zhang Zuolin, the leader of the Fengtian Clique of Chinese warlords and then in control of Peking, raided the premises of the Soviet embassy. Zhang, not a nationalist and perhaps the most pro-western of the various militarist factions in North China, had been in touch with Lampson since at least January 1927 about the possibility of a joint Anglo-Chinese raid on the embassy compound. Lampson, conscious of diplomatic immunity and protocols, to say nothing of the state of peace between Britain and the Soviet Union, was, with good reason, wary of the precedent that such a raid would establish and, thus, hesitant to support it. In the end, Zhang's government presented evidence to the western diplomatic community in Peking that persuaded Lampson to support the eventual raid on the

³¹⁰ BL, IO, L/P&S/10, Tilley (Tokyo) to Chamberlain, 23 March 1927; TNA, CAB23/54, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 4 April 1927, 6 April 1927, 7 April 1927, 12 April 1927; Austen Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 3 April 1927, in Self, ed., *Austen Chamberlain Diary Letters*, 313.

embassy. Lampson, via Harry Steptoe of the SIS, already had a good sense in the years prior to 1927 that the Soviet Embassy was the central hub for Comintern activities bent on “fomenting unrest” in China.³¹¹ The raid resulted in the seizure of documents – subsequently examined by the British in great detail – that “set out the extent of Soviet aid to the revolutionary cause in China,” led to the confiscation of arms, and the arrest and execution of numerous Chinese communists.³¹²

A rupture between Chiang and the KMT leftists and Chinese communists became manifest shortly thereafter, on the night of 11 April. This was also not a surprise to British officials. The united front that had brought together the KMT and the CCP had been understood to be under strain even before the launching of the Northern Expedition, and by March 1927 the British were keenly aware that some kind of split was imminent.³¹³ At the end of March, the Shanghai Defence Force (SHAFORCE) intelligence officers reported that the divisions between the moderates and the extremists in the KMT were “rapidly reaching a climax.”³¹⁴ In the first days of April, SHAFORCE chronicled the sporadic arrest and executions of radical gunmen in the city as well as KMT raids against university protests leaders and labor agitators.³¹⁵ On 7

³¹¹ Jeffrey, *MI6*, 258.

³¹² TNA, FO228/3568, Lampson to Chamberlain, 11 April 1927; Best, ““We Are Virtually at War with Russia,”” 212; TNA, KV3/11, B.M. M.I.2. No: 3908R, China – Raid on Soviet Premises, Peking. April, 1927, 1 September 1927.

³¹³ BodL, Clementi papers, MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Box 7, Teichman to Clementi, 4 March 1927.

³¹⁴ TNA, WO191/1, *Intelligence Summary No. 21*, 30 March 1927; TNA, FO228/3021, Barton to Lampson, 20 March 1927.

³¹⁵ TNA, WO191/2, Telegram/Paraphrase, 2 April 1927; WO191/2, Telegram/Paraphrase, 9 April 1927; WO191/2, Telegram/Paraphrase, 10 April 1927.

April, four days before Chiang took action, moderate KMT officials in the city met with Brennan in Canton and briefed him on the impending crackdown. Brennan consequently acted in support of both moderate KMT aspirations and wider British imperial defence objectives – the strengthening of moderate Chinese nationalism – when he forwarded a request from the moderates that Clementi, who was close to taking action against the local Seamen’s Union, should “prevent any immediate break with Seamen’s Union by Hong Kong as it would place moderate government in difficult position if they were appearing to suppress Chinese workmen in favor of a foreign interest.” Given Chiang’s own impending move against the leftist labor unions in Canton, the moderates wanted to forestall any impression of joint action against the radicals. Fortunately, Clementi concurred.³¹⁶

In addition, on 7 April, Barton in Shanghai cabled to Clementi that some kind of break was underway, with Chiang arresting leftists in the KMT Political Department, ignoring messages from the radicals in Hankow, obtaining loans from local banks, and initiating troop movements. In a corresponding act, the Shanghai Municipal Police, under the control of the International Settlement, began searching all persons entering or leaving the Soviet Consulate.³¹⁷ From 8 April, British diplomatic and consular officials across the region were awash with reports of the impending purge. In Tokyo, officials forwarded information and supposition about the coming crisis from their Japanese counterparts. In Amoy, reports came in chronicling the launching of moderate-led demonstrations and preparations by Chinese merchants, in partnership

³¹⁶ TNA, FO371/12404, F3329/2/10, Canton (via Hong Kong) to Peking, 7 April 1927; BodL, Clementi papers, Box 8, MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Canton to Peking, 7 April 1927; Clementi to Brennan, 20 April 1927.

³¹⁷ BodL, Clementi papers, Box 8, MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Barton to Clementi, 7 April 1927; TNA, WO191/2, Telegram/Paraphrase, 2 April 1927.

with KMT naval forces, for the coming purge. In Hankow, the Consul-General relayed the specific KMT orders as best they were understood. In Shanghai, SHAFORCE reports indicated, on the morning of 11 April, that anti-communist attacks on the Labor Army were imminent.³¹⁸

Lampson was aware of these intimations and followed them as closely as he reasonably could from Peking. On 21 March, with the full knowledge and support of Zhang Zuolin, he had met with the veteran diplomat Dr. Wang Chung-hui, who Zhang was sending south to Shanghai to liaise with Chiang. Lampson duly offered to serve as “a bridge between north and south,” and to facilitate the coming dialogue between Zhang’s Fengtian Clique in Peking and the anti-communist moderate KMT forces under Chiang. Later that day, Lampson instructed Barton to assist Wang upon his arrival in Shanghai and to serve as both an advisor and a go-between, forwarding and receiving messages from Lampson who was liaising with Fengtian officials in Peking.³¹⁹ Over the coming weeks Wang, through Barton and Lampson, secretly coordinated action between Chiang and Zhang. On 21 March, this included passing to Peking the message that Chiang and his supporters were planning “to strengthen their own position vis-à-vis unruly elements” soon.³²⁰ It is clear that at least some of these reports trickled back to London by early April, as one letter shows that the SIS was briefing Churchill on the subject, although how far the

³¹⁸ TNA, FO371/12404, F3422/2/10, Policy of Chiang Kai-shek, 8 April 1927; BodL, Clementi papers, Box 8, MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Amoy to Clementi, 9 April 1927; Teichman to Lampson, 10 April 1927; TNA, FO371/12404, F3461/2/10 – Hankow to Peking, Actions of Chiang Kai-shek Against the Reds, 11 April 1927; TNA, WO191/2, SHAFORCE Intelligence Telegram/Paraphrase, 2 April 1927.

³¹⁹ TNA, FO228/3021, Lampson to Chamberlain, 21 March 1927; FO228/3021, Lampson to Barton, 21 March 1927.

³²⁰ TNA, FO228/3021, Barton to Lampson, 22 March 1927; Barton to Lampson, 24 March 1927; Barton to Lampson, 29 March 1927; Barton to Lampson, 31 March 1927; Lampson to Barton, 4 April 1927.

Cabinet was aware is difficult to establish given SIS's absence from the official record.³²¹

Lampson's willingness to provide a channel of communications for the KMT and promote its interests in north China was in keeping with his understanding of the impending split between KMT moderates and extremists. As evident from his telegrams to Clementi, he blamed the radical elements of the KMT for the outrages in Nanking in March. The split, therefore, could come none too soon.³²²

When the moment came for Chiang's purges to begin, late on the night of 11 April, SHAFORCE units guarding the International Settlement were forewarned and put on high alert. Typical was the warning received by the British 13th Infantry Brigade, posted adjacent to the Shanghai neighborhood of Chapei, where many of the local extremist and communist leaders were located.

At 0415 hours a Cantonese Officer, a Chinese policeman, at the Cunningham Road Post [said] that there was going to be a raid in Chapei that would probably last till 0700 hours and he hoped that the British troops would not be implicated. Firing commenced at 0445 hours and continued till about 0600 hours. A few "overs" passed over the post. There was no direct firing into the Settlement. There was no panic or disorder near the Posts and no attempt was made to rush the Posts.

In the case of the 9th Jhansi Infantry Brigade, instructions were passed down to let SMP and moderate KMT military forces, identifiable by the wearing of a white band on the right arm, to pass through the British lines if needed in their "round up" of communists and to "help them kill Communists" if the latter attempted to get through. This operation, if approved and executed by

³²¹ CAC, Papers of Sir Winston Churchill (Churchill papers), CHAR 2/151/81-82, Sinclair to Churchill, 2 April 1927.

³²² BodL, Clementi papers, Box 8, MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Lampson to Chamberlain, 11 April 1927.

Chiang and the forces of moderate Chinese nationalism, was at least aided and abetted by Britain in pursuit of an improved imperial defence position.³²³

From Lampson to Barton to Brenan and from London to the SHAFORCE intelligence office, British officialdom was aware of the moderate KMT's coming purge of radicals and communists. Within these structures, but absent organized and centrally disseminated plans or operations, officials understood the gravity of events, the potential political gains for Britain that lay at hand, and the importance of tacit assurances to moderate KMT leaders that Britain supported, or at the very least would not interfere with, the purge. These actions were akin to those of Onraet in Singapore and Crosby in Batavia. They characterized the way in which officials in the imperial periphery acted to strengthen the moderate Chinese nationalists, weaken radical Chinese nationalists, and frustrate communist attempts and efforts to overthrow the status quo systems of western imperialism in the region. This victory, such as it was, was not accidental. If Chiang and his supporters achieved it, then Britain can plausibly be said to have contributed to its realization.³²⁴ If Chamberlain and Wellesley, in maintaining the steady policy of conciliation with moderate Chinese nationalists amidst fierce conservative blowback in London, acted in concert with officials such as these, scattered across the periphery as they were, it was not by complex design or grand plan. Closer to the truth is the likelihood that in promulgating such policies from the imperial core, they created the spaces and conditions, and provided the political cover, that allowed lower-level officials to take local actions that they

³²³ TNA, WO191/16, 13th Infantry Brigade, Intelligence Summary, No. 6, Period to 1900 hours, 12 April 1927; WO191/26, 9th (Late 20th) Jhansi Infantry Brigade War Diary, Volume III, 2130 hours, 11 April 1927; WO191/2, Telegram/Paraphrase, 12 April 1927.

³²⁴ Best, *British Intelligence and the Japanese Challenge in Asia*, 70.

thought furthered British policy. Given the absence of SIS files on the matter, however, the exact nature of British involvement in this issue remains unknown.

From as early as 12 April, reports on the purges from sources across the region poured into London. Strike committees were shut down, Russians placed under house arrest, and hundreds of “Reds” killed in Canton and Shanghai. Labor unions were dissolved and the head of the CCP arrested in Shanghai. “Down with Communist” marches took place in Swatow. Successful anti-communist raids in Soochow, Hangchow, Ningpo, and Wusieh. None of this is to say that Britain’s relationship with the KMT, in either China or Singapore, was without tension in this post-purge period. Far from it. Brennan acknowledged that, “we do not expect to hear anything friendly from” Chiang in the immediate aftermath of the purges, given policy differences and the need for the general to maintain political distance from the western powers. On 17 April, Brennan cautioned that Lampson and those in London should understand that “we must not expect any manifestation of friendship towards ourselves. Nevertheless it is the direction we desire and we should show appreciation.”³²⁵

The Foreign Office, aware of the new reality but still juggling the early April requests from Lampson and Clementi to seek redress from the KMT for its actions in Nanking in March, politely requested Lampson reconsider such efforts, “given recent developments.” Lampson, more practical and less reactionary than Clementi, well understood the change, remarking to the

³²⁵ TNA, FO405/253, Brennan to Chamberlain, 15 April 1927; BodL, Clementi papers, Box 8, MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Brennan to Clementi, 15 April 1927; Brennan to Lampson, 16 April 1927; Swatow to Hong Kong, 17 April 1927; Shanghai to Hong Kong, 17 April 1927.

latter on 20 April that he would reconsider his push for military action against Chiang.³²⁶ Brennan was the most circumspect of all observers, remarking to Clementi on 21 April:

I am afraid I do not share your hope that we are on the verge of really friendly relations with the Canton authorities. I shall be glad if I am wrong, but I think you may be expecting too much in the way of labour and propaganda suppression and that in a few weeks you will be saying that with regard to Canton, '*plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.'³²⁷

In this case, he was wrong, at least when viewed from the perspective of London. The Cabinet, which met to discuss the situation in China on at least twenty-one separate occasions in the first half of 1927, did so only twice in the second half of the year – and each of these later meetings was merely to reaffirm the standing guidance that Britain was not to militarily intervene in the ongoing Northern Expedition. The CID, meanwhile, also only discussed the Far East twice during the latter half of the year, with each of these instances coming in relation to the pro-forma drafting and review of the annual Imperial Defence Policy. The last mention of China in Amery's diary for 1927 was in May. In his letters to his sisters Ida and Hilda, Chamberlain's last reference to China, a frequent topic of conversation between them throughout the early months of 1927, was on 1 August.³²⁸

³²⁶ BodL, Clementi papers, Box 8, MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Foreign Office to Lampson, 18 April 1927; Clementi to Amery, 19 April 1927; Lampson to Clementi, 20 April 1927; Admiralty to Officer Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron, 20 April 1927.

³²⁷ BodL, Clementi papers, Box 8, MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Brennan to Clementi, 21 April 1927.

³²⁸ See TNA, CAB23, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, for Cabinet meeting minutes in 1927, CAB2/5, 'Standing Defence Sub-Committee (CID) Minutes,' for CID meeting minutes for 1927, and Barnes and Nicholson, eds., *The Leo Amery Diaries, Volume I*, 490-491, for his 1927 entries on the subject. For Chamberlain's letters, see Self, ed., *Austen Chamberlain Diary Letters*, and Petrie, ed., *The Life and Letters of Austen Chamberlain*.

The crisis, it seemed from the perspective of London, was over. And yet in its passing it is possible to look back, particularly at the spring of 1927, and recognize that where before, earlier in the crisis of Chinese nationalism, there had been localized or ad-hoc efforts by British officials to support moderate Chinese nationalists and divide them from the extremists, from that point there was a new sense of coherence and systemization to British efforts. If bottom-up initially, the ability of the system, be it via Lampson in China or Onraet and Special Branch in Singapore, to adjust and adapt to those challenges in the way that it did demonstrated a degree of flexibility within the wider imperial defence apparatus. In this case, Britain adjusted itself to the realities on the ground and manipulated them in ways conducive to its interests. In an era in which it was no longer able to seriously project military power deep into the country, this was a new way to leverage resources and relationships within China to achieve some of the same goals. If external to the country itself, the efforts of Onraet and Special Branch were along similar lines. They used military, intelligence, policing, diplomatic, and informational efforts to weaken and destroy an adversary. Given the scope of the territory and affected population, this could be done by British forces, civilian and intelligence, within Malaya itself. In China, what was new was the leveraging of partner forces to achieve British goals. Was this, then, an aberration from the avowed British policy of non-intervention in the Chinese conflict? While it might technically have been, the historical record here should more accurately be interpreted as showing British officials keeping in line with the spirit of the policy. Non-intervention was never meant to be interpreted as some kind of official moratorium on acts of engagement and dialogue with Chinese partners, or the pursuit of objectives and partnerships in furtherance of British interests. It was more a statement of the fact that Britain would, and could, no longer countenance the use of military force in China in an effort to achieve objectives that were, at heart, non-military.

Within the context of Britain's global struggle with the Soviet Union and international communism, which was reaching its crescendo in 1926 and 1927, it was not surprising that officials took such steps in increasingly systematized ways, no matter the interpretive contortions required to square such action with policy. Moreover, doing so was not just easier but also deeply necessary given the fact that, by the spring of 1927, British officials had begun to understand that Chiang and the moderate forces of Chinese nationalism were their own masters and not beholden to Moscow. Actions such as those in Shanghai and elsewhere in April 1927 were only possible, therefore, once such conditions were in place and a degree of clarity on such questions could be gained.

What is remarkable about this period is that, notwithstanding the lack of progress on the Singapore Naval Base, the crisis of Chinese nationalism brought about a significant movement of forces through the region. For the navy, the crisis led to an entire destroyer flotilla being sent for special service in the region. This was seconded by an aircraft carrier, *HMS Argus*, that joined the *HMS Hermes* on station. The arrival of these ships roughly doubled the size of the China Station fleet, although the new ships departed in 1928 following the passing of the crisis.³²⁹ For the RAF, this period saw a tacit agreement between Britain and Japan to permit the other to construct aerodromes for defensive purposes – one in Hong Kong for the British and one in Formosa by the Japanese – as such consent was required by the Washington Naval Treaty.³³⁰ For the British Army, the normal garrison strength of three to four infantry battalions, dispersed between Singapore, Hong Kong, and Peking/Tientsin, was greatly supplemented by the

³²⁹ Heaslip, *Gunboats, Empire and the China Station*, 118; Dr. Graham Watson, "Between the Wars: Royal Navy Organisation and Ship Deployments, 1919-1939," <https://www.naval-history.net>, 10 February 2024.

³³⁰ TNA, AIR9/16, Hong Kong – Formosa Aerodromes, 1 December 1926.

deployment of SHAFORCE in January 1927, a division-sized element of various parts – British and Indian Army – whose initially short-term deployment the Cabinet would find difficult to wind down in the years that followed.

These forces, such as they were, were sent to the Far East because officials in London understood that the rise of Chinese nationalism, alongside the attendant communist activity, represented a regional crisis that was both international and transnational in nature. The communist threat in China struck a particular chord given, domestically, the recent scare over the Zinoviev Letter of 1924, the 1926 General Strike, and the May 1927 British raid on the All-Russian Cooperative Society (ARCOS), and, internationally, the Soviet-Afghan skirmishes along the Oxus River, which triggered concerns about the security of British India.³³¹ Coinciding with these events was the Cabinet's decision, short-lived in the end, to reconstitute in 1926 the Interdepartmental Committee on Eastern Unrest, which had last met on a regular basis in 1922. This India Office-backed effort, eventually quashed by Chamberlain and the Foreign Office in the summer of 1927, sought a broad cross-ministerial remit to understand and develop strategies to counter the Bolshevik threat to the British Empire. If short-lived, owing to the duplicative nature and questionable quality of its efforts and reports, its reconstitution in the first place says something about the mood of the Cabinet and CID with respect to the broader Soviet threat, international and transnational, at this time.³³² The characterization of this wider danger to the

³³¹ Babij, "The Making of Imperial Defence Policy in Britain, 1926-1934," 32-33, 63-64; Best, "'We Are Virtually at War with Russia,'" 212; Neilson, "'Unbroken Thread,'" 76; TNA, CAB4/16, CP782, Soviet Activities in Central and Eastern Asia, 15 March 1927.

³³² See Fisher, "The Interdepartmental Committee on Eastern Unrest and British Responses to Bolshevik and Other Intrigues Against the Empire During the 1920s," for a concise summation of the IDCEU history; See BL,

British Empire was perhaps most saliently elucidated in Milne's aforementioned note to the CID regarding the twin threats of Japan and international communism. While acknowledging Japan as a principal "menace," Milne focused his words on international communism, "The First named danger" which was "by far the greater as regards its imminence and possibly in its ultimate effects. The present garrison is insufficient to cope with such an eventuality."³³³ Taken together, these threats show a CID and the machinery of the imperial core that was willing and able, in times of crisis, to understand, react to, and commit resources against the transnational threats to the Far Eastern empire. In promulgating the Christmas Memorandum, withholding from ill-conceived desires to punish China militarily in the winter and spring of 1927, alone committing resources to defending Shanghai, and helping put in motion the anti-communist moves by Chinese moderates in April 1927, the Cabinet and CID together showed that they understood the transnational threat and could, in moments of acute crisis, respond with force and ability. They took the transnational threat seriously because it was a serious threat.

At the same time, Canadian historian J.C. McKercher, in his article studying Austen Chamberlain's policies in the Far East during this time, concluded glowingly, "in the latter half of the 1920s the balance of power in the Pacific was not upset to Britain's disadvantage, and this was at least partly as a result of Austen Chamberlain's diplomacy."³³⁴ McKercher's statement accurately captures the way that most historians of diplomacy and imperial defence have ignored

IO, L/PJ/12/454: File 6866/23 – Inter-Department Committee on Eastern Unrest: Minutes of Meetings (May 1926 – July 1927) for the actual minutes of IDCEU meetings.

³³³ TNA, CAB5/6, CP288, Need for a Permanent Addition to the Far East Garrison, Worthington-Evans memorandum 21 January 1927.

³³⁴ McKercher, "A Sane and Sensible Policy," 187.

the contributions of those police and intelligence, as well as lower-level diplomatic and colonial officials, to broader imperial defence efforts. In other words, not at all. But it does get at the way that Chamberlain's policies of conciliation created space for British officials to navigate the challenges of their day and create local solutions. It also hints at the international leadership and boldness of policy that Britain exhibited during the crisis of Chinese nationalism. In unilaterally announcing its intention to abrogate the unequal treaties with China, and in resolutely sending, again unilaterally, forces to defend Shanghai during the height of the crisis, Chamberlain provided a lead for Britain's imperial and great power counterparts and dictated events and realities on the ground for others to follow. In the same way, in partnering with KMT officials to end the Canton-Hong Kong strike in 1926, in bolstering and strengthening inter-imperial intelligence and information sharing practices to fight communism and nationalism in the region, and in coordinating, however loosely, British acquiescence to Chiang's strike against radical Chinese nationalists and communists in April 1927, colonial officials, from the periphery, demonstrated an agency that was necessary for larger British policies of conciliation to be successful and against which other Far Eastern powers were forced to respond.

As the aforementioned details demonstrate, the totality of Britain's responses to the crisis showed it to be a great power that maintained both the ability and, at times, the ambition to exert itself as the principal arbiter of political and military outcomes in the 1920s Far East. Britain during that decade still maintained the capability – via its fleet, its deployed ground forces, its diplomatic, intelligence, and policing networks, and its ability to marshal and employ all the above – to bring about, in concert with local forces, the political end states that it sought. These collective efforts were the very definition of imperial defence. Too often de-linked from each other and catalogued into separate silos – the work of the Foreign Office, this argument

unconsciously goes, was about diplomacy, the work of the Admiralty was about defending the empire, and the work of the Colonial Office was about policing and administration – such efforts illustrate the connectedness of British efforts in toto, regardless of their archival and historiographical division. To believe otherwise, perhaps, is to fall prey to a too straightforward and limited reading of the Imperial Defence Policy, which had little time for the threat of communism or nationalism. Or to believe that if no such records exist of a Hankey-like figure orchestrating these kinds of imperial defence efforts centrally from Whitehall then they were not part of the same broader effort. A more productive way of assessing imperial defence during this period is not to take on the characterizations of the actors themselves, but rather consider the effects of their actions and decisions on the defence of the empire. From successfully keeping issues of the Chinese conflict and the Canton-Hong Kong strike from the purview of the League to working to build intelligence sharing networks with like-minded partners. From the deployment of a fleet that outmatched any in the region to the isolation and suppression of communists and radical nationalists within the colonies.³³⁵ From acting alone and in defiance of the other great powers to successfully assisting and shepherding the KMT strikes against Chinese communism. Clementi and those who decried such policies and actions as a sign of weakness missed the reality that those responsible for the December Memorandum, the modest but impactful show of force in 1927, and the continuous backing of moderate Chinese nationalists throughout the crisis were, among much else, the real successors to Victorian-era policies of dash and destruction. If Clementi, full of “warlike” ambition, imagined himself as embodying or inheriting such a mantle, he should have looked around him at those, from Brennan to Onraet to Wellesley, who were the leading proponents of Far Eastern imperial defence in this period.

³³⁵ Heaslip, *Gunboats, Empire and the China Station*, 118.

Singapore Totems

And what of the Singapore Naval Base and the Straits Settlements Special Branch in the summer of 1927? As has been examined in detail in this chapter, the growth and maturation of Special Branch during this period was significant. The crisis provided it with an opportunity not only to grow the force's policing and investigative responsibilities but gave it a platform to demonstrate both its ability to target its operations and resources against those threats most inimical to local and imperial British interests, and the importance of nurturing the inter-imperial intelligence-sharing relationships and networks that were fully operational by 1926 and 1927. These efforts were supported by changes in the ways that Special Branch carried out its work. As has been stated, through 1926 the latter had been responsible for passport monitoring and immigration investigations, given its expertise in tracking individuals across imperial spaces. This involved assisting in the immigration process and deciding whether to deny entry to any arriving migrants. From 1927, though, Special Branch gave up this function to focus more on its core responsibility of countering communism and radical Chinese nationalism. This dovetailed with the disappearance of any reference to Special Branch, still technically referred to as the Criminal Intelligence Department, from the Straits Settlements Police Force's annual report on the force and the state of crime in the colony. From 1927 forward, Special Branch's annual report was considered classified and submitted separately from that of the police force.³³⁶ This sensitivity was also evident regarding the new technology of fingerprinting, which had been

³³⁶ See, TNA, CO275 (Straits Settlements Sessional Papers), in particular its Annual Reports on the Colony, on Chinese Affairs, and on the Police Force for aggregate and specific yearly numbers.

brought to the Straits Settlements by way of the Indian Civil Service in the years before WWI. This system was fully matured by the mid-1920s, giving Onraet and his peers access to over 200,000 sets of fingerprints indexed to specifically photographed individuals, each with their own file.³³⁷ These files were put together and accessed by an increasing number of Chinese detectives and linguists who were brought on to the organization over the course of the 1920s, especially in the aftermath of Kreta Ayer.³³⁸

Meanwhile, elsewhere in Singapore, little work had been done by the summer of 1927 at Sembawang on the development of the Singapore Naval Base. In 1925, the Cabinet's Singapore Sub-Committee, which had continued studying the question of the base, issued its Second Interim Report, which discussed aspects of base defences, floating docks, anti-aircraft systems, and the need for the development of an aerodrome. However, the question of how to defend the base from heavy attack, which hinged on investment in either naval (big guns) or air (fighter squadrons) defence, or some combination thereof, was postponed. In July 1926, the Sub-Committee issued its Third Interim Report, which chose to invest mostly in heavy guns to defend the base but in concert with a small air garrison, whose employment was contingent on "The organisation of a chain of air ports throughout the Empire," especially ones to close the air transport gap that then existed between Calcutta and Singapore. This compromise was made possible by, among other things, a gift of £2 million to the project from the FMS. Hankey, ever the master insider, compelled Trenchard to make 'a grateful advance' and agree with Beatty on this compromise position.³³⁹ At the November 1926 Imperial Conference, the importance of the

³³⁷ Choon, *Absent History*, 66.

³³⁸ Jones, "Internal Security in British Malaya, 1895-1942," 113-114.

³³⁹ McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base*, 80-81.

base was again stressed, although that did not stop the Admiralty from, two months later, “reconsidering” conclusions from the interim reports, “in view of the urgent need for reducing the cost of defending Singapore.” The ongoing disagreement between the Air Ministry and the Admiralty over how to defend the base was thus solved by the Cabinet’s decision to avoid deciding and simply invest in both. When this became untenable, a 1927 War Office recommendation carried the day – it launched a fresh investigation of the base defences and agreed to produce a report. And so the wheel spun.³⁴⁰

³⁴⁰ TNA, CAB8/15, The Singapore Naval Base, 1 April 1930; CAB5/7, History of the Singapore Naval Base, 4 June 1930; CAC, Hankey papers, HNKY 4/19, Note by the Chiefs of the Air Staff on the Singapore Defences after 35th Meeting on July 6, 1926, 6 July 1926; Extract from the Prime Minister’s Statement at the Chiefs of Staff’s 35th Meeting on July 6, 1926, 6 July 1926.

Chapter III – 1927-1931:

Dissonance in Imperial Defence

By the summer of 1927, although Chiang's Northern Expedition remained ongoing, the crisis of Chinese nationalism had passed from being a potentially existential threat to the British presence in China and the foundations of its Far Eastern empire. This is the moment, in many retellings of Britain in the interwar Far East, at which the narrative speeds ahead towards the Fall of 1931 and Manchuria, and then on to Shanghai and the British responses to the Japanese militarism of the early 1930s. The years from 1927 to 1931, however, have much to tell those interested in the interwar period, both about the journey of British policymakers and officials towards accommodating Chinese nationalism alongside their ongoing efforts to counter the Bolshevik threat, as well as the way in which their understandings of Japan evolved in the years before the Sino-Japanese conflict dominated international politics in the Far East. These were the years in which a dissonance crept into British imperial defence efforts, in the form of an active, creative, bottom-up effort to counter transnational communism and radical Chinese nationalism on the one hand and a static and ambivalent approach to understanding Japan on the other.

This chapter will examine British imperial defence efforts from 1927 to 1931 through the twin lenses of the transnational and international threats as characterized by Milne in January

1927. It will do this, first, by exploring the continued British efforts to counter communist and other radical ideologies across the region. This effort was accentuated by Britain's simultaneous accommodation to what it saw as the forces of moderate Chinese nationalism and its stringent efforts to target and destroy what it saw as the forces of radical Chinese nationalism. Second, this chapter will examine the way in which Japan fits within broader British conceptions of imperial defence and the status quo during this period. British views of Japan were ambivalent in the years before 1931, and this chapter will explore how this uncertainty affected Britain's ability to advance any kind of centralized or activist policy of imperial defence against the chief potential military threat to its Far Eastern interests. Central to this were competing British interpretations and assessments of Japan in the years before it seized Manchuria and the way in which it navigated the difficult and shifting Sino-Japanese relationship. In exploring these issues, this chapter will argue that the dissonance within British officialdom on the nature of Japan as a state and the role that it might play in the Far East undermined any effort to preempt it as a potential threat to British interests. This chapter, therefore, will serve not only to bridge the narrative between the crisis of Chinese nationalism and the crisis of Japanese militarism, but to demonstrate that Britain's role in such crises cannot be understood except as part of a larger narrative.

Britain and Chinese Nationalism after the Northern Expedition

British thinking about the KMT and Chinese nationalism remained contested in the summer of 1927. Despite the efforts of figures such as Chamberlain, Wellesley, Brenan, and Onraet to create the conditions in which British officials could tacitly assist moderate Chinese

nationalists and selectively target radical Chinese nationalists, not all officials backed conciliation as a policy. Indeed, debates on the wisdom of the conciliatory policy continued until the end of the year and beyond. In July 1927, Lampson, in a note to Chamberlain, outlined not only the virtues of the policy and the mechanisms for moving it forward, but a general frustration at both the frosty Chinese reception of Britain's policy of conciliation and the overall tenor of post-crisis Sino-British relations:

We have made the gesture, but it has met with no response...As it is, our offer has completely failed of its intended effect; we are still fumbling about at the beginning, and it has brought about no apparent change in the atmosphere of Sino-British relations.

Lampson recognized that the ongoing Northern Expedition and the existence of no less than three different claimants to the authority of the central government meant that any sort of official response or change in Chinese perception was not then feasible. But he also understood that those realities were leading some to question the wisdom of Chamberlain's conciliatory approach and ask whether the gains outweighed the costs in prestige and concessions.³⁴¹ In late 1927, Clementi elucidated to Amery, upon his completion of a multi-week trip through the region, complete with stops at Shanghai, Tokyo, Korea, Manchuria, Peking, and Weihaiwei, his vision for British policy in the region. Aside from pouring his usual disdain upon Chamberlain's policy of conciliation, Clementi recommended that Britain should recognize the reality that China was little more than a loose federation of provinces, strike bargains with regional authorities, and "endeavour to approximate our Far Eastern policy to that of Japan, rather than to get Japan to approximate her policy to ours, and that we should thus endeavour to obtain an entente cordial with the Far East between ourselves and Japan."³⁴² To Lampson, who hosted Clementi in

³⁴¹ TNA, FO371/12409, F7269/2/10, Lampson to Chamberlain, 22 July 1927.

³⁴² CAC, Amery papers, AMEL 2/4/12, Clementi to Amery, 22 December 1927.

Peking, the governor was someone who had an antiquated sense of both British capabilities in the region and Chinese desires. His sense that Britain could simply conjure up new realities just because it so wished was misplaced. In the 1920s, that power was found not in the British but in the explosive expressions of Chinese nationalism.

I like Clementi, but he...sometime[s] loses sight of the practical side of questions. He seems to me to take it for granted that what he thinks is right and proper will necessarily go for the Chinese, which of course is by no means so.³⁴³

The Foreign Office continued to brush aside Clementi's policy recommendations. On 1 November, just after the Governor began his Far Eastern tour, Pratt wrote a Foreign Office memorandum in which he disparaged counter-arguments – Clementi's chief amongst them – that anything other than compromise with the KMT was feasible. Pratt presented a counter-factual in which Britain had responded to the KMT seizure of the British concession at Hankow with force. This, he argued, would have resulted in the abandonment of conciliation, the poisoning of British relations with the KMT and a commensurate strengthening of radicals and communists, the collapse of British commercial interests on the Upper Yangtze (itself the rationale for any such attempted recapture), and the stranding of British troops in Hankow during the winter low-water season.³⁴⁴ In December, as Clementi returned from his sojourn, Brenan argued for something more closely resembling a middle-ground approach, falling short of outright recognition of the KMT government in Canton but in favor of strengthening cooperation so as to prevent any potential return of the radicals.

³⁴³ MEAC, Lampson papers, Box 1, Lampson Diary, 18 November 1927.

³⁴⁴ BL, IO, L/P&S/10, Memorandum Respecting the Hankow Agreement, 1 November 1927. See also, TNA, CO129/501/8, General Policy in China, 30 November 1927, for Pratt's memorandum as well as supporting correspondence.

The British now have an opportunity, such as they had rejected in 1923, of befriending the Nationalist cause and taking the sting out of further anti-British agitation by giving the moderate wing of the Nationalist party a little moral support and a few timely concessions. The Nationalist leaders have thrown out the Russians and do not quite know what to do next. What they need are a few political assets to show their followers that they can conduct the revolution in an orderly and decent manner and yet achieve results, but if they are frustrated in all attempts to place China's foreign relations on a new basis, either by negotiation or unilateral action, they will have to make way for those who will do it by more violent means.³⁴⁵

To do this, Brennan cited ongoing cooperative actions to quash labor unrest and facilitate the collection of surtaxes to compensate the last remaining strikers, in addition to the need to reach local agreements on customs revenues and the potential for British investment in KMT-backed railways in southern China.

Chamberlain himself pushed back more forcefully against the anti-conciliation arguments. In a note to Amery in February 1928, he posited that Clementi's whole view of Far Eastern politics was mistaken, given the great divergence in policy goals of Britain and Japan. "Japan's policy in China is strictly a selfish one. She will co-operate with us just in so far as our interests coincide with hers or we are prepared to sacrifice our interests to hers." Britain, "would be best served by a strong, stable, united China," as its interests were not territorial but commercial, and it had little to fear from a prosperous and rising China, especially if the KMT recognized Britain's role in helping create such a reality. Japan, on the other hand, "does not wish to see China either united or strong," given that much of its international strength, wealth, and prestige had come at the expense of China, and the fact that the domination and de-facto control of Manchuria was antithetical to Chinese national interests and conceptions of

³⁴⁵ TNA, CO129/507/5, Brennan to Lampson, 8 December 1927.

sovereignty.³⁴⁶ The fact that such conclusions were reached in concert with the Chiefs of Staff, who continued to recommend against any punitive actions against the KMT as Chiang continued his march north from the Yangtze River, added weight to the Foreign Office policy of engagement.³⁴⁷

Unstated in these debates on British policy in the Far East were two realities that underpinned Foreign Office thinking on the region. The first was its desire to prevent any issues related to the conflict in China from reaching the League of Nations. As has been stated, Chamberlain was not keen to have the League wade into the China situation as he believed that it would be unable to solve any of the challenges facing China and would, thus, come away from any such effort with its authority diminished. This was not in Britain's interests as it needed the League to be seen as a credible and effective "clearing house to help regulate the international system." This was one of the foundations of British grand strategy in the 1920s.³⁴⁸ Second was the fact that in abrogating the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1921 and entering into the Washington treaty system, Britain had effectively cast its lot in the Far East in with the United States. Britain's decision, implicitly if not explicitly, came at the expense of Japan. As best described by Adam Tooze, in the United States, Britain found itself dealing with a mercurial giant, "a novel kind of 'super-state' exercising a veto over the financial and security concerns of the other major

³⁴⁶ CAC, Amery papers, AMEL 2/4/12, Chamberlain to Amery, 27 February 1928; TNA, CO129/507/5, China General Policy – Governor's Despatches, etc., Foreign Office minute, 11 July 1928.

³⁴⁷ TNA, CAB23/55, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 4 August 1927; CAB23/55, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 23 November 1927.

³⁴⁸ TNA, CO129/494, Grindle to Amery, 17 September 1926; Ferris, *Men, Money, and Diplomacy*, 46; Steiner, *The Lights That Failed*, 359, 625.

states of the world,” though one very much at odds with itself and unsure of how it wanted to interact with that world.³⁴⁹ Both the Asquith and Lloyd George governments, before and after World War I, had directed the Admiralty to cease all planning for any potential conflict with the United States and not to base its estimates on the possibility of one. Admiral of the Fleet Earl Beatty, as First Sea Lord in the 1920s, argued for close cooperation between the English-speaking peoples already sharing blood, language, and literature. Others went further, arguing that only a “congenital idiot” could miss the fact that Anglo-American amity was in fact among the greatest guarantors of world peace.³⁵⁰ Indeed, the casting aside of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in favor of American-backed resolutions that neither secured immediate British interests nor contained any measures for enforcement was the price that Britain had been willing to pay in 1921 as it reoriented its policies to fit the American juggernaut.³⁵¹ The vulnerability of Canada, then still an integral part of the empire and of Britain’s self-conception of it, to the whims of the United States meant that Canadian, alongside American, antipathy to the alliance in the runup to the 1921 conference effectively forced the abrogation.³⁵² By the mid-1920s, therefore, despite frustration with and condescension towards the United States and its policies – from naval building programs to the forced repayment of war debts – Chamberlain recognized that accommodating Japan, and even reaching some kind of *entente cordiale* along Clementi’s lines

³⁴⁹ Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War, America and the Remaking of the Global Order, 1916-1931* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 6.

³⁵⁰ Christopher Bell, “Thinking the Unthinkable: British and American Naval Strategies for an Anglo-American War, 1918-1931,” *The International History Review* 19, 4 (1997): 792-793.

³⁵¹ Ian Nish, *Alliance in Decline: A Study in Anglo-Japanese Relations, 1908-1923* (London: University of London, The Athlone Press, 1972), 396-397.

³⁵² Hyam, *Britain’s Declining Empire*, 80.

would damage any future Anglo-American partnership. In both instances, then, local ruminations regarding British strategy ran aground when confronted with the strategic views of the Foreign Office and the Cabinet.

At the same time that British officials in London were reinforcing the direction of British strategic policy towards Chinese nationalism, Britain found an increasingly willing partner in its anti-communist efforts in the form of Chiang's newly established Republican Government in China. In the years that followed 1927, even as official relations between Nanking and the British Empire remained tense, a quiet partnership developed that saw British and KMT officials working together to counter what they saw as their common transnational enemy. This can be seen in the ways in which British and KMT officials worked with one another and the steps that Britain took to not offend the latter. For example, the simple act of accommodating, on days of Chinese humiliation, KMT flag raisings in Malaya and India served as a tangible rebuke to prior British policies that had attacked such outward manifestations of KMT pride.³⁵³ In London, officials downplayed the idea that the small and localized KMT presence in particular areas of British India threatened public safety and refused to authorize any crackdown, despite stringent protests from Delhi.³⁵⁴ When Clementi made an official visit to KMT Canton in 1928 and the British contingent mistakenly saluted the KMT flag with a 21-gun salute (normally reserved for heads of state), inadvertently – if not officially – recognizing the KMT government, no attempt was made to visibly or officially correct this. Indeed, if the moment was a rare one in which Clementi held his breath, the official British report acknowledged that the KMT recognized this

³⁵³ TNA, CO273/567/2, Memorandum on Flag Demonstrations on Chinese "Humiliation Days," 11 July 1930.

³⁵⁴ BL, IO, L/PS/11/276: File 4731/21, Kuo Min Tang activities in India, 31 August 1927.

as something of a feather in their cap. In some cases, Britain could gain by simply not unnecessarily snubbing its KMT counterparts.³⁵⁵

There were also coordinated anti-communist operations and activities between Britain and the KMT. In July 1927, just months after the April purges, KMT authorities in Shanghai apprehended six Russian communists aboard the vessel *Heng Li*, bound for Vladivostok. British police and intelligence officials in Shanghai, already in coordination with their KMT counterparts, not only received access to the seized passports and documents but were invited to participate in the interrogations in advance of the communists' imprisonment.³⁵⁶ That same summer, the KMT directed its overseas branches to assist local authorities in arresting communists and KMT radicals who had fled China during and after the purges. These were the "running dogs" that moderate KMT members and Special Branch worked to locate, arrest, and banish from mid-1927 onwards.³⁵⁷ In Hong Kong, Canton, and Shanghai, British and Chinese KMT authorities warned each other of suspected or imminent communist action and put in place bilateral plans to counter the flow of communist individuals and propaganda through colonies and borderlands.³⁵⁸ Brennan, in Canton, was best placed to capitalize on this newfound partnership and did so with gusto. In early 1929, he facilitated, in conjunction with the British Municipal Police on Shameen Island and KMT authorities in Canton proper, the arrest of a cell

³⁵⁵ TNA, FO371/13166, F1971/7/10, Visit of Governor of Hong Kong to Canton, 28 April 1928.

³⁵⁶ TNA, KV3/145, Six Soviet Agents Imprisoned in the Chinese Military Headquarters, 20 July 1927.

³⁵⁷ TNA, FO371/12515, F429/429/61, *MCIN*, 15 September 1927; FO371/13243, F154/154/61, *MBPI*, December 1927.

³⁵⁸ TNA, FO371/13932, F3988/302/10, Intelligence Bureau, Shanghai, to General Officer Commanding, Hong Kong, 2 August 1929; FO371/13932, F3988/302/10, Alleged Dissemination from Hong Kong of anti-Kuomintang Propaganda by Communist Party, 2 August 1929.

of communists hidden within the Shameen Foreigners' Servants Association. British police, acting on information from their Chinese counterparts, made the arrests within the international concession, walked over the bridge that connected Shameen Island to Canton proper, and handed the suspects over to the KMT on the very spot that British and KMT forces had exchanged gunfire less than four years before. In the spring of 1929, Brennan went further, working with Clementi and British police to locate and arrest, at the request of the KMT Commissioner for Foreign Affairs, 16 Chinese communists who had escaped Canton to the colony. Once apprehended, Clementi approved their deportation and they were turned over to KMT authorities. In many of these cases, the communists were either executed or disappear from the historical record. Brennan himself touted such results in his report on the matter to Lampson.³⁵⁹

I am glad to report that relations between the Canton police and the British municipal authorities are exceedingly friendly...Whilst taking energetic measures against communist agitation in Canton, the local authorities are also working in friendly cooperation with the Hongkong Police and are assisting the latter in the location of possible agitators in the Colony.³⁶⁰

Cooperation was not limited to police activity. In 1931 the British Yangtze Flotilla assisted in Chinese "measures against the communists." HMS *Sterling* of the China Station's 8th Destroyer Flotilla supported KMT raids on Chinese pirate "lair" in Bias Bay to the east of Hong Kong.³⁶¹ In such cases, the larger significance was not in the tactical victories gained but in the cooperation and collaboration between British and KMT forces against a common transnational communist threat. This approach contradicted the more heavy-handed approach that French

³⁵⁹ TNA, FO371/13931, F896/302/10, Brennan to Lampson, 15 January 1929; FO371/13931, F1353/302/10, Brennan to Lampson, 6 February 1929; FO371/13931, F3353/302/10, Clementi to Amery, 21 May 1929.

³⁶⁰ TNA, FO371/13931, F1353/302/10, Brennan to Lampson, 15 January 1929.

³⁶¹ TNA, ADM1/8756/137, Piracies Involving Naval Action, 1925-1932.

Indochina took in its pursuit of relations with the KMT in the years after 1927. This resulted, at least partly, from French mistrust rooted in the KMT-based revolutionary model employed by the VNQDD within Indochina, which France was then actively working to suppress. The French occasionally took anti-VNQDD action within Chinese borders, precipitating diplomatic rows and undermining any possibility of serious cooperation.³⁶² No such actions could be said to characterize British efforts to cultivate its relationship with the KMT from April 1927 onwards.

All of this was bolstered, in December 1928, by the official British recognition of the KMT as the legitimate government of China. This came following the conclusion of the Northern Expedition and the KMT occupation of Peking. With nominal pledges of allegiance from the remaining militarists and the elimination of any notionally alternative government, the KMT could then begin work to establish itself internationally as the representative government of the country. For Britain, it capped a period of quiet support for the KMT and the realization of its principal goals during the crisis of Chinese nationalism – the continuation of economic activity under the auspices of a friendly, if not entirely stable, China.

At just this moment however, the question of whether, or how, the British might recognize the KMT and Chinese national aspirations within Malaya strained British-KMT amity and collaboration. There the Chinese communities continued to be divided between the moderates, drawn largely from the business-oriented Chinese, and the leftist groups affiliated with Chinese communism and the Hailam community. Hugh Clifford, newly arrived as Governor of the Straits Settlements in the summer of 1927, wrote to Amery in September, remarking that Chinese national sentiment “is a matter which has to be seriously taken into account” and warned of his concern that Britain was:

³⁶² BL, IO, L/PS/11/260 P.2626, Kirke to Lampson, 19 May 1930.

adopting toward all Chinese nationalist sentiment and aspirations a too repressive attitude, this tending to alienate thoughtful and moderate men who, though as strongly opposed to subversive and Bolshevik doctrines as we are, are nonetheless animated by strong patriotic feeling.

This colored his appreciation of the British position towards the KMT in Malaya. Although suppressed by Guillemard in 1925, Clifford found upon arrival that, “branches exist in practically every big town in Malaya. I cannot think that the prestige of Government, or its reputation as a Power that is completely master in its own house, can be enhanced by forbidding an organization to exist, and yet failing effectively to suppress it.”³⁶³ Clifford found himself conflicted on this question – if personally sympathetic with the ideals of Chinese nationalists in Malaya, he was uncomfortable with the tacit existence of these organizations in direct violation of British law. Accordingly, he and the Colonial Office firmly opposed any legal recognition of the KMT in Malaya as this would encourage otherwise non-affiliated or non-political Straits Chinese to register as members of the KMT and thus increase de-facto KMT control over much of Malaya at the expense of the colonial government. On the other hand, the Foreign Office, considering the broader regional picture, argued for the recognition of the KMT in Malaya as a useful step towards bolstering the wider rapprochement between Britain and Chinese nationalism. It did not want to embarrass the “infant” nationalist government in China whose success was central to British policies in the region. In early 1929, after further consideration of the matter, Clifford firmly recommended formal suppression and the disbandment of all facets of the KMT movement. Clifford’s proposal raised the prospect of Britain, having supported Chinese nationalists, implicitly from 1926 and explicitly from 1928 both in China and Malaya, now suppressing it as a movement within their own colonies, a contradiction that Lampson and

³⁶³ CAC, Amery papers, AMEL 2/4/12, Clifford to Amery, 2 September 1927.

others at the Foreign Office believed untenable. Pratt, fuming from the Foreign Office in London, remarked in response that, “even Sir Cecil Clementi ha[d] never suggested” such a course of action.³⁶⁴

Clifford’s change of heart and movement towards suppression over the course of late 1928 and early 1929 came just as Special Branch was beginning to understand how the 1927 purging of communists and 1928 conclusion of the Northern Expedition was affecting KMT operations within Malaya itself. Their conclusion was that, although leftist and “definitely anti-British” through 1927, the KMT departments in Malaya had undergone a process of reorganization in 1928 that saw radicals and communists expelled and moderate forces become ascendent, introducing new policies in tandem with Chiang’s newly organized government in Nanking. Indeed, Onraet and the Chinese Secretariats repeatedly reported entire months of KMT inactivity as these processes unfolded. According to Special Branch, if divided ideologically between Chiang and the more leftist KMT faction around Wang Jingwei, the KMT in Malaya stood “little chance” of coming under the influence of extremists moving forward.³⁶⁵ If not courting suppression, the KMT was also not outwardly receptive and friendly with British colonial authorities, again echoing the policies of Chiang within China proper. In the end, the Cabinet took no action, thus choosing to continue the post-1925 Guillemard-era compromise. The Straits Settlements Government, while targeting radical nationalists and communists via Special Branch, therefore refrained from further suppressing the broader KMT movement, although its well understood presence ran counter to colonial law.

³⁶⁴ TNA, CO273/554, Clifford to Amery, 20 February 1929.

³⁶⁵ TNA, FCO141/16321, *MBPI*, ‘An Account of the Kuo Min Tang Movement in Malaya,’ April 1930; Yong and McKenna, *Kuomintang Movement*, 115-116, 123, 128.

This was made more difficult, however, by the formalization of KMT efforts within China to speak for and institutionalize its control over all ethnic Chinese, regardless of their physical location or connection to the country. This claim of ethnic suzerainty dated from at least the Qing period and the establishment of Chinese consulates in 1877 but was amplified and expanded in the first years of the Republican Government.³⁶⁶ Indeed, concerns about the role of the KMT beyond the shores of China echoed across the region in 1928-29. Chamberlain and Amery, respectively, received reports on the subject not only from Singapore, Bangkok, Saigon, and Batavia but from as far afield as Fiji, the Solomon Islands, Vancouver, and Cape Town. In these places, officials questioned the loyalty of resident or immigrant Chinese populations as those populations navigated the internal KMT split and outreach from the nascent Republican Government.³⁶⁷ This pro-KMT sentiment was more complex than the World War I-era spread of Ghadr Movement sympathies across much of the empire. That movement was unmistakably anti-imperial and anti-British. The relationship between Britain and the KMT in the late 1920s, if rhetorically confrontational, was a complex and ambiguous one that neither Chiang nor policymakers in London were interested in severing.

Amery's middle-ground decision in late 1928, to maintain the "present attitude of continuing to refuse recognition to Kuo Min Tang in Malaya as a lawful society" but refrain

³⁶⁶ Yong and McKenna, *Kuomintang Movement*, 128, 129; TNA, FO371/13926, F5982/159/10, Recognition of the Kuomintang, 20 November 1929.

³⁶⁷ See TNA, FO371/13963 and FO371/14749 for numerous items of correspondence on the issue of Chinese and KMT "penetration" in communities across various regions from late 1928 to late 1929, as well as CO 83 for correspondence on the effects of Chinese immigration to Fiji and several of the British administered islands in the Pacific.

from proactively suppressing it, held through 1929. Searches undertaken by colonial authorities of KMT offices in July, October, and November 1929 found, “no indication that the local organization is at present concerned with any anti-British agitation,” and that, “strict loyalty to Chiang Kai-shek is being more strongly insisted on and dallying with the ‘reactionaries’ of the Reorganisation Party means expulsion from membership. The Control remains essentially Right Wing and seems to have ensured for itself at least another year in office.” If intolerable to those such as Clifford who could not countenance any muddying of the colony’s laws and regulations, these findings reinforced the Cabinet’s decision to refrain from suppressing the KMT in Malaya in the hope that some sort of broader understanding could be reached. In that light, the Malayan KMT’s remonstrances to its Chinese parent party urging, “the adoption of a strong attitude against Russia,” presumably were ringing in British ears.³⁶⁸ Amidst these debates, however, Clifford suffered a series of nervous breakdowns, fits of depression and “bouts of insanity that meant he had to be kept from public view.”³⁶⁹

Clifford’s resignation in mid-1929 (“early leave” as it was reported) opened the door for Clementi’s transfer to Singapore. Clementi, true to form, embraced the trappings of his new post, which was a nominal rise within the Colonial Office pecking order. Departing Hong Kong in February 1930, he traveled with his “dressing boy,” his wife Penelope, her “amah,” his aide-de-camp (with his own “dressing boy”), his youngest daughter and her French governess, his four horses, each with their own Chinese groom, along with the necessary provisions: 184 bottles of

³⁶⁸ TNA, FCO141/16321, *MBPI*, An Account of the Kuo Min Tang Movement in Malaya, April 1930.

³⁶⁹ Matthew Parker, *One Fine Day: 29 September 1923 – Britain’s Empire on the Brink* (London: Abacus Books, 2023), 564.

whiskey, 266 bottles of champagne, 1,800 bottles of “Navy Cut” rum, 200 Reina Victoria cigars, 1,200 cigarettes, and 72 bottles of port.³⁷⁰

Clementi arrived in Singapore on 5 February 1930. On that day, as it happened, the Malayan branches of the KMT began a three-day conference, previously approved by A.M. Goodman, the Straits Settlements Secretary of Chinese Affairs. While it is unknown if the KMT delegates believed that the sanctioning of this gathering implied the full legality of their organization, in a practical sense it meant that KMT delegates were not on hand to greet and welcome Clementi upon his arrival. Upon learning of the correlation of events, and the open flying of KMT flags outside of the conference, Clementi became enraged. He immediately requested a briefing on the KMT situation from his senior officials and ordered a raiding party of over 20 policemen, led by Goodman himself, on the KMT conference on 7 February.³⁷¹ After conferring with his executive council, who advised him that, “the Kuo-min-tang was a grave political danger both the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States, and that no branch ought to be allowed to be established in British Malaya,” Clementi met with the local leaders of the KMT on 20 February where, “in quite unequivocal terms [he] directed the local organisation to dissolve.”

I will not allow Kuo-min-tang meetings to be held; that I will not allow Kuo-min-tang propaganda to be published here; that I will not allow subscriptions to be collected for Kuo-min-tang and that I will not allow members of the Kuo-min-tang to be enrolled in Malaya...Is that quite clear? These are not empty words. I mean to be obeyed.³⁷²

³⁷⁰ BodL, Clementi papers, Box 26, MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Clementi to Scott (Officer Administering the Government), 25 November 1929; and Scott to Clementi, 30 November 1929.

³⁷¹ Yong and McKenna, *Kuomintang Movement*, 134-135.

³⁷² TNA, WO32/5350, Clementi to Passfield, 25 February 1930.

Clementi seems to have been acutely stung by the affront to the dignity and prestige of the empire, and by extension to himself as its representative, that he believed the KMT had perpetrated upon his arrival.

Clementi's ferocious reaction produced, in a matter of days, a similarly vociferous response from London that paved the way for the eventual settlement of British and KMT interests in the matter. Lord Passfield, the Colonial Secretary in the MacDonald-led Labour Government from 1929, admonished Clementi, writing on 28 February, that he could only assume that the governor's advisors had failed to inform him that such action had been expressly forbidden by the Colonial Office, and that he must have evidence of the Malayan KMT working "for the overthrow of the lawfully established order" and to forward it to London immediately, "for that could be the only reason that you went ahead with this." Clementi, despite having no such evidence, pressed his point, arguing to Passfield that any embarrassment that his action had caused British relations with China was the fault of the KMT, not himself.³⁷³ A formal Colonial Office rebuke came in March 1930, when Passfield told Clementi unequivocally that, "matters which affect international relations...must be settled by His Majesty's Government and by them alone," and that, "it is all the more necessary...because your experience and knowledge of the Chinese may at times lead you to conclusions apparently so clear and so unquestionable that it may escape your notice that there is any room for doubt or any need for reference to a higher authority."³⁷⁴

By the spring of 1930, KMT-sponsored education in the Chinese vernacular became a catalyst for further efforts by Clementi to oust the KMT from its prominent position within

³⁷³ TNA, WO32/5350, Passfield to Clementi, 28 February 1930; and Clementi to Passfield, 5 March 1930.

³⁷⁴ TNA, CO273/561/13, Passfield to Clementi, 15 March 1930.

Straits Chinese society. This was due to the KMT providing education via the night schools that Onraet and Special Branch had become so adept at monitoring since even before the crisis of Chinese nationalism. These schools used KMT-sponsored textbooks to teach KMT-registered pupils, young and old alike. In this case, Lampson backed Clementi's claims, as did the Dutch in Batavia, who had banned KMT-sponsored textbooks and schools from Chinese communities in their own colony.³⁷⁵

If Clementi was overbearing in his crackdown on the KMT, even the Foreign Office understood that the tangled mess of policies and responsibilities required some sort of unified political response. Although Chamberlain had left office with the outgoing Conservative Government in the summer of 1929, his policy of conciliation with the forces of Chinese nationalism outlived his own tenure in office. Arthur Henderson, his Labour successor as Foreign Secretary, stated in April 1930, "The policy of His Majesty's Government is, in broad outline, to recognize the legitimate nationalist aspirations of the Chinese people and to...enable China to achieve the status of an equal independent sovereign state."³⁷⁶ This approach could not countenance actions such as Clementi's in any coherent way, as referenced by Pratt when he observed, with biting sarcasm that same month, how a "Colonial Governor [could] override the considered policy of H.M.'s Government."³⁷⁷

³⁷⁵ See TNA, CO717/74/4, Lampson to Henderson, 24 April 1930; CO717/74/4, Lampson to Henderson, 15 May 1930, and Clementi to Passfield, 19 May 1930, for several examples of Foreign and Colonial Office correspondence on this subject over the course of 1930.

³⁷⁶ TNA, CO273/561/14, Henderson to Passfield, 3 April 1930.

³⁷⁷ TNA, FO371/14728, KMT Activities in Malaya, 1912-1930, 3 April 1930; Yong and McKenna, *Kuomintang Movement*, 143.

The Foreign Office's frustration brought about broad changes in the way that Britain managed policy in Malaya and strengthened its dominance over foreign and imperial defence strategies in the region. The Foreign Office, in effect, assumed "complete control over Clementi." Via the Colonial Office, it ordered Clementi to communicate, "with Sir Miles Lampson or His Majesty's Government whenever action is taken in Malaya – or preferably if possible before such action is taken – which has any bearing on the foreign policy of His Majesty's Government."³⁷⁸ As Yong and McKenna note, "The FO designated Lampson as its agent to resolve the latent problem of direct conflict with the CO about Malayan policy management, moving the problem from the interdepartmental to the diplomatic sphere."³⁷⁹ The subjugation of Clementi quieted, for a time, what many diplomats in the region considered to be the loudest voice opposing British accommodation with Chinese nationalism. In bringing Clementi to heel, the Foreign Office looked not only to solve the regional issues raised by Clementi's unauthorized suppression of the KMT in Malaya but also to ensure that broader foreign and imperial defence policies were implemented without any local resistance. This move also served to neuter the desire of colonial administrators in either Hong Kong or Malaya to weigh in on debates on British policy in China proper. As the Colonial Office communicated to Sir William Peel, Clementi's successor in Hong Kong and himself long of the Malayan Civil Service, in early 1931, "[your] dispatches deal almost entirely with the situation in China, and are not directly concerned with any effect this has on Hong Kong, which is all we are concerned with." As Passfield observed, Peel was "rather butting into [Foreign Office] business," and needed to, "confine despatches of this kind to reporting events which in your opinion directly

³⁷⁸ TNA, FO371/14730, Orde to Passfield, 8 December 1930.

³⁷⁹ Yong and McKenna, *Kuomintang Movement*, 143.

affect the interests of Hong Kong.”³⁸⁰ Governor of Hong Kong, yes. Proconsul of the Far East, no.

Once Foreign Office control had been reasserted, it wasted little time in addressing the problem of KMT policy in Malaya. Lampson led a delegation to Singapore and met with the Government of the Straits Settlements to resolve the problem. The Foreign Office, which held to the view that, “where Sir C. Clementi is there will be trouble,” pointedly scheduled Lampson’s visit for a time when the former was in England, ostensibly to discuss the very same issue with those in Whitehall.³⁸¹ In a minute on correspondence relating to the issue, Colonial Office officials acknowledged this discourteous slight and their own inability to affect the situation. “Sir M. Lampson’s visit during Sir C. Clementi’s absence is perhaps not very courteous and I think Sir Cecil is quite justified in reading this message.”³⁸² Clementi, then home in Oxfordshire and humiliated by the whole saga, had a series of engagements defined by “general pointlessness” with his masters in Whitehall. “[I am] somewhat anxious about Lampson’s visit,” he wrote to the Colonial Office from his home, pushing them to ensure that the policy of suppressing the KMT in Malaya was continued. The Colonial Office, in a curt response, refused to forward his messages to Singapore and told him that Lampson’s visit was likely already finished.³⁸³

³⁸⁰ TNA, CO129/520/1, Wilson to Peel, 27 January 1931.

³⁸¹ TNA, CO273/570/7, Scott to Passfield – Conference on Chinese Affairs, Government House, Singapore, 25 February 1931; TNA, FO371/14730, Foreign Office Minute, 8 November 1930.

³⁸² TNA, CO273/568/18, Colonial Office Minute, 29 January 1931.

³⁸³ TNA, CO273/568/18, Clementi to Grindle, 27 January 1931; CO273/568/18, Grindle to Clementi, 6 February 1931.

The sidelining of Clementi came at just the time that the Nationalist Government in Nanking, then deeply engaged in negotiations with Lampson over extraterritoriality and the remaining privileges granted in the unequal treaties, began voicing its displeasure with Clementi and the Janus-faced nature of British policy more loudly. This necessitated Lampson finding a rapid resolution to the matter.³⁸⁴ He proceeded to negotiate a compromise. This stipulated that the KMT in Malaya would no longer be suppressed or deemed unlawful, under the fudge that it was organized outside of Malaya itself and, therefore, was beyond the colonial purview. This meant that, although lawful, there could be no local KMT branches. Straits Chinese or others could legally be members of the KMT in Malaya and could meet in private premises to discuss party issues and even pay their subscriptions, but only on the condition that the KMT in China did not seek to control individual members in Malaya. The Malayan Government would not interfere with KMT persons or interests so long as they were not inimical to the interests of the colony.³⁸⁵ In August, the Straits Settlement Government officially removed the KMT from the list of unlawful organizations and reduced in length or reversed entirely several of the more prominent banishments from the colony. The height of the crisis had thus passed.³⁸⁶

Clementi and Lampson represented two competing and antithetical approaches to viewing and implementing British imperial defence policies in this period. Clementi, seeing

³⁸⁴ Yong and McKenna, *Kuomintang Movement*, 154.

³⁸⁵ TNA, FCO141/14547, Lampson to Wang, 1 April 1931; FCO141/14547, Wang to Lampson, 1 April 1931; FCO141/14547, Lampson to Wang, 2 April 1931; CO273/570/9, Lampson to Reading, 30 October 1931; Png Poh Seng, "The Kuomintang in Malaya, 1912-1941," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 2, no. 1 (1961): 23.

³⁸⁶ TNA, CO273/570/8, Lampson to Wellesley, 2 May 1931; Yong and McKenna, *Kuomintang Movement*, 159.

only, “the wreck of British interests in China,” harkened back to an earlier era and envisioned something akin to a muscular reassertion of British primacy over the region and its politics.³⁸⁷ Lampson, on the other hand, if elitist and patronizing to Chinese in some ways, worked to move forward towards a new future that, while uncertain, was at least one in which Britain was consciously attempting to be ‘on the right side of history’ (although rational self-interest, not altruism, was the primary driver of the policy of conciliation). If more of a policy implementer than creator, he possessed a flexibility of mind, patience, and tolerance for change that Clementi lacked. Implicitly if not explicitly, he understood the transformative power of nationalism in and upon China, and the need for Britain to accommodate itself to that phenomenon. He also provided, from the perspective of Whitehall, a trusted voice on this issue. Indeed, Clementi’s actions, while not broadly crisis-inducing, did reawaken London’s interest in transnational issues such as this one. Their responses, via Lord Passfield, demonstrate the way in which Cabinet and CID officials continued to monitor such threats well into the 1930s, even if such instances appear only occasionally in Whitehall’s historical record. This was in line with the features of policy implementation developed under Chamberlain in the 1920s, whereby London would set the strategic context and direction and officials in the colonies had flexibility to adopt and adjust their own local approaches to ensure they fit within the broader framework. Indeed, tacit Cabinet and CID support for, for instance, Special Branch’s policy of selectively targeting the forces of Chinese nationalism in the 1920s can be seen here in their rapid moves to squash any efforts, such as those enacted by Clementi, that attempted to more broadly suppress Chinese nationalism.

³⁸⁷ TNA, CO273/568/18, Clementi to Grindle, 27 January 1931.

Countering Communism in the Far East, 1927-1931

At the working level, far from London, officials across the empire continued to engage the transnational forces that sought to undermine the regional status quo. With the reconfirmation of the overall British policy towards China and Chinese nationalism more broadly, officials such as Onraet were provided with a playing field that, if challenging, at least afforded them a consistent strategic approach within which to work. That task, already years old, picked up quickly again after the events of April 1927. From assessments of the Soviet documents seized during the Peking raid, Special Branch was confirmed in its belief that the Comintern had an extensive network of agents, recruiters, and funding streams that connected communist and radical Chinese nationalist groups across the colonies of Southeast Asia.³⁸⁸ Based on this material, it continued not only monitoring and tracking suspects and intercepting mail and postal items, but also increased film and publication censorship, intelligence-sharing initiatives, and the ways in which it attacked the publication of subversive material, capitalizing on the colonial legislature's amending of laws in ways that expanded the police's ability to conduct immediate, warrantless searches of premises.³⁸⁹ This came alongside an increase in the budget of the Political Intelligence Bureau, which nominally oversaw the Special Branch, of more than 600% between 1926 and 1928, albeit from a low floor.³⁹⁰ These funds allowed Onraet to expand the

³⁸⁸ Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order*, 199-200.

³⁸⁹ TNA, CO275/120, Straits Settlements Legislative Council Proceedings, Seditious Publications (Amendment) Bill, 1928; Choon, *Absent History*, 80.

³⁹⁰ TNA, CO275/117, CO275/119, CO275/121, Annual Reports on the Colony of the Straits Settlements, 1926-1928.

Special Branch fingerprints records and to track and target communist propaganda more effectively. To such ends, Special Branch employed handwriting and calligraphic experts who were able to match propaganda to individual Chinese calligraphers, track their production over time, and enable a more accurate targeting of operations against such individuals and their networks.³⁹¹

The efficacy of British efforts to exploit the division within Chinese nationalism was patent in the events that played out in Singapore in early 1928 around what has since been called the shoemakers strike. Special Branch, which continued to target the radical Hailam Chinese community while seeking common ground with more moderate Straits Chinese, responded over the course of the spring to a series of failed assassination attempts, small bombings, and labor strikes perpetrated by communist Hailams- that sought to intimidate the local Chinese population into compliance with their anti-British and anti-imperial politics. A strike by Chinese shoemakers in April and May 1928 was the central event. Taken together, these actions rattled businessmen and other elements of the local Chinese population who, in turn, sought British police protection. Consequently, many businesses, including shoemakers who did not comply with the strike order, stayed open in the face of repeated communist threats, further distancing communists from the majority population. At the same time as the Inspector-General of Police provided protection for business-oriented Chinese, Special Branch increased the frequency and severity of its raids against the Hailams. On 30 January, 18 February, 8 March, and 12 March, raids targeted the Nanyang General Labour Union, the headquarters of the Malayan Revolutionary Committee of the KMT, and the “Backing Up Society,” a recently formed radical Hailam organization meant to attain redress for the Kreta Ayer Incident. Onraet outlined in his

³⁹¹ TNA, CO273/571/13, *Straits Settlements Monthly Review of Chinese Affairs*, January 1931.

reports the detailed targeting of radicals rather than moderates, the imprisonment or banishment of dozens of members of such organizations, and the way in which such raids exposed the entire structure of the communist movement in colonial Southeast Asia.³⁹²

Chinese politics in Malaya, of course, shadowed those within China proper. The end of the First United Front in 1927 meant that, in many ways, local Chinese populations were fractured ideologically along similar lines throughout the region. While the actions of Wellesley and Brennan facilitated and exploited that division within China, so too did those of Onraet in Malaya. The British did not create the divisions within Chinese society in Malaya so much as recognize and exploit them. Indeed, the collective British efforts heightened these divisions, as evidenced by their interception of Hailam newspapers inbound to Malaya from Shanghai as early as 1930, which attacked the “K.M.T militarists” and urged the masses to oppose them and the British together.³⁹³

The story of Special Branch’s capture and banishment of one Bok Li Yok bears outlining for the window it opens on both the complexity of the radical Chinese networks and the efforts to which Special Branch would go to unravel them. Bok Li Yok was a young Hailam cook in Singapore. As a communist, he was arrested in June 1928 for being a member of an unlawful society, having been identified by an unknown fellow domestic servant as being radical. Special Branch had run into Bok Li Yok before, however. They knew that he was a committee member of one of the radical Hailam night schools that Special Branch had been investigating since the

³⁹² TNA, FO371/13243, F154/154/61, *MBPI*, February 1928; *MBPI*, March 1928; *MBPI*, May 1928; CO275/121, Reports on the Straits Settlements Police Force and the State of Crime, 1928; Choon, *Absent History*, 111-113; Belogurova, *The Nanyang Revolution*, 125.

³⁹³ TNA, FCO141/7588, *Straits Settlements Monthly Review of Chinese Affairs*, September 1930.

mid-1920s. He was also present at the Kreta Ayer Incident, among the group of roughly 1,000 young marchers who commandeered the stage and propelled the larger, and hitherto quiescent, KMT gathering into the much more unruly group that eventually attempted to storm the Police Station. In addition, he served as the treasurer of a firm called Peng Peng Kongsi, a front company that funded communist activities across Malaya and financed the striking Hailam shoemakers. Tipped off about Peng Peng Kongsi, Special Branch raided the premises and confiscated the counterfoil collection slips that catalogued all company transactions to which Bok's name and seal, as treasurer, were affixed. Arrested on 26 June 1928, Bok Li Yok was summarily convicted and banished from Singapore.³⁹⁴ Human intelligence seems to have played a vital part in this case, in both leading to the raid on Peng Peng Kongsi and the original identification of Bok as a radical. The fact that Special Branch was able to gather such intelligence from within the community – considered by observers at the time to be defined by intense intra-Hailam loyalty – is exceptional. On another occasion, a Hailam radical, upon police entering his abode during a raid, “snatched up some important documents and jumped out of a third-floor window. He survived, laying where he fell with the documents, which were all confiscated.”³⁹⁵ Such intelligence would, though, have been of little value if Special Branch had not already built the tools and organizational capability to capitalize on it. As has been discussed, due to the rapid growth of its budget and the expansion of its force (including Straits Chinese detectives), by 1928 Special Branch was well positioned to rapidly use raw intelligence as the basis for operations targeting specific members of radical Chinese communities and then prosecute and deport offenders.

³⁹⁴ TNA, FO371/13243, F54/54/61, *MCIN*, 13 September 1928.

³⁹⁵ Onraet, *Singapore*, 111.

British pressure on the communists of Singapore coincided with the Comintern's decision to disband the regional Communist Party and instead found separate national-based communist parties. Thus, in 1930, the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), with assistance from Comintern representative Nguyen Ai Quoc, was born. The MCP, based in Singapore, was a reconfiguration of the existing Chinese communists under a new umbrella. It remained a largely Hailam organization and, despite its name, lacked any ethnic Malay members of the party in the 1930s. Its Hailam leaders, in a quasi-imperial irony, decided that ethnic Malay and Indian communists had only an "infantile education" and "could not be trusted," thus limiting the nascent party's ability to recruit and propagandize amongst the wider non-Chinese communities resident in Malaya.³⁹⁶ Quoc's role in the founding is not insignificant, not just because of his future notoriety in Indochina but also because his participation formalized the role of the Comintern, then attempting to exert control over the region's newly forming national communist parties from its base in Shanghai.³⁹⁷ However, an April 1930 Special Branch raid against the MCP just weeks after its founding decapitated the organization. All its leaders were arrested and either imprisoned or banished.³⁹⁸ Banishments, indeed, remained a key tactic of choice throughout this era. From late 1928, the Straits Settlements banished roughly 1,500 persons per year, a number that accelerated in the early 1930s. Of those banished, virtually all were ethnic Chinese (the first banishment of Japanese citizens was not until 1932 with the expulsion of Japanese women suspected of being sex workers). Any number of reasons were put forward to justify banishment,

³⁹⁶ Belogurova, *The Nanyang Revolution*, 63-65; Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks*, 81-82; Best, "'We Are Virtually at War with Russia,'" 214; Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*, 33.

³⁹⁷ Yong, "Origins and Development of the Malay Communist Movement, 1919-1930," 646.

³⁹⁸ Belogurova, *The Nanyang Revolution*, 121; Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*, 34.

including: trafficking in various illegal trades - women and sex, liquor, and opium, to name just a few; professional gambling, leprosy, membership of a “dangerous triad society,” counterfeiting, housebreaking/gang robbery, being identified as a returned banishee, habitual criminality or, most commonly, simply being vaguely labeled as a “bad” or “undesirable” character.³⁹⁹

Singapore, therefore, continued to hum as an engine of counterrevolutionary activity and worked to quiet communist and revolutionary impulses across the region. Crosby, still the consul-general in Batavia, continued to partner with the Dutch and source his own intelligence. He remarked in the summer of 1929 that “the communist party in the NEI can barely be said to exist.”⁴⁰⁰ Writing in 1930, at a time when the nascent Indonesian nationalist movement, led by Sukarno, had come to the fore, Crosby remarked that communism could make no headway in the colony. Moreover, British efforts, including the 1930 arrest and deportation of three leading Indonesian communists from Singapore to Batavia dampened any ability that the group had to reorganize itself. The fact that in Batavia, as in Malaya, organized communism was dominated by Hailam Chinese and had little indigenous Malay or Indonesian representation meant that, given the smaller share of the NEI population that were Hailam, let alone ethnic Chinese, the party struggled to connect with the dominant Indonesian population across the countryside of Java and Sumatra.⁴⁰¹ The turning away of indigenous populations from communism and towards

³⁹⁹ See, TNA, CO275/127, Straits Settlements Executive Council Meetings, 1930-1931, and CO275/132, Straits Settlements Executive Council Meetings, 1932-1933, for listings of those banished, overall numbers, and a general description of the overall banishment process and its role as a tool of the state in these efforts; see also, Harper, *Underground Asia*, 617.

⁴⁰⁰ TNA, FO422/85, Waterlow to Chamberlain, 4 November 1927; CO273/558/23, Crosby to Henderson, 17 June 1929; Schmutzer, *Dutch Colonial Policy and the Search for Identity in Indonesia*, 94.

⁴⁰¹ McMahon, *Colonialism and Cold War*, 32; TNA, FO676/48, Crosby to Henderson, 29 September 1930.

nationalism, however, complicated efforts by the Dutch to effectively counter the latter, as evidenced by the groundswell of liberal support, both in Asia and in the Netherlands, for Sukarno and his promulgation of Indonesian nationalism.⁴⁰²

If the Dutch struggled to counter the growth of nationalism in Indonesia, the French found the growth of nationalist sentiment in Indochina to be much more explosive. A quiescent period in the late 1920s, “a period of unparalleled peace and prosperity” without “a single disturbance,” saw the maturation of the *Sûreté Generale* into a force that mirrored Special Branch in some areas (e.g., individual suspect files – some 52,000) but pushed ahead in others, such as the issuance of identity cards to the population. The French saw themselves as undisputed masters of the land, as reflected by newly arrived French Governor-General Pierre Pasquier in the fall of 1928, when he stated, “We alone in Indochina are capable of leading and carrying out amongst these primitive races a policy leading to an ideal owing its origin to humanitarian purposes.”⁴⁰³

Such ideas collided violently with the wave of nationalist and communist sentiment that swept through French Indochina in early 1930. On 10 February, Vietnamese soldiers in Yen Bay, northwest of Hanoi, mutinied as part of a larger effort by the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (VNQDD) to mount a rebellion against French colonial rule. The mutineers cut down several of their French officers and briefly raised their flag, although the reluctance of most troops to support the mutiny, and the willingness of many of their co-nationals to assist French forces in quashing it, meant that by daybreak the uprising had been quashed. Further VNQDD-inspired

⁴⁰² TNA, FO371/16488, F13372/767/29, Fitzmaurice to Simon, 15 February 1932.

⁴⁰³ TNA, FO371/13340, W5567/114/17, Crewe to Chamberlain, 24 February 1928; Gunn, *Ho Chi Minh in Hong Kong*, 20.

uprisings and attacks that night and in the week that followed, some in Hanoi, were contained by French forces, with many VNQDD leaders arrested and others fleeing to the hills. In response, the French colonial government launched security sweeps, rounded up alleged rebels across villages, and initiated Vietnam's first aerial bombing campaigns.⁴⁰⁴ To the British, the French were "caught badly napping."

If the French decapitation of the VNQDD leadership effectively neutered the organization as a potent threat to French colonial rule, as the Dutch suppression of the PKI following the 1926-1927 uprisings in Java and Sumatra had done, then it also opened the door for others to take up the mantle of anti-colonial resistance. Indeed, just as the toppling of the PKI had helped create space in the NEI for Sukarno and voices of Indonesian nationalism to rise, so the suppression of the VNQDD provided opportunities for the communist movement to assume the mantle in Vietnam. Worker strikes and rural unrest across much of northern Indochina spiked from the spring of 1930, culminating in a series of clashes between paddy farmers and French authorities around May Day and the weeks that followed. Disturbances reached a crescendo in September 1930 when peasants and workers within Nghe An and Ha Tinh provinces began establishing soviets across the countryside. While French officials, who had long put a Bolshevik label on all forms of nationalism in Vietnam, saw the hidden hand of the Indo-Chinese Communist Party (ICP) at work, the party itself worked to catch up with events in the countryside that it only marginally controlled or understood. Economic dissatisfaction, the most salient of the causes of unrest across the area, meant that the soviets worked to reform land ownership and the functioning of the economy as best they could. These uprisings, which lasted

⁴⁰⁴ Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order*, 156; Thomas, *The French Empire Between the Wars*, 227; Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam*, 162-164.

well into 1931, if not cut from central casting, at least showed that the ICP had significantly more capability than previously thought, given its ability to coordinate activities and policies through disparate areas of unrest. Although *Sûreté Generale* intelligence efforts and arrests were directed at ICP cadres, some 27, who returned with Comintern instructions from varied overseas locations – Moscow, Berlin, Siam, and Yunnan among them – the rebellions were at heart localized events that relied on the kindling of dissatisfaction and grievance that French colonial rule had brought upon the heads of Vietnamese peasants and workers.

The French response, propelled by foreign legionnaires and troops from outside the provinces, was brutal. Hundreds of Vietnamese rebels were killed, wounded and arrested by the French Foreign Legion. French aircraft bombed crowds of rebels and protesters marching on the provincial capital, reportedly killing 174 on their first sortie and a further 15 when others had returned to the site to tend to the first group of the dead. “Lightly armed peasants were mown down by machine gun fire and Legionnaires swept through rebel villages over successive nights, leaving a trail of devastation.” The rebellions were put down by the summer of 1931, by which point the French authorities had killed, imprisoned, or driven into exile most of the ICP cadres.⁴⁰⁵

These events influenced the way in which colonial authorities throughout the region thought about the changing nature of the transnational threat that they were facing. Casting the blame purely on communists was a convenient way to explain these events. Communists, typically seen as foreign interlopers, could be defeated, imprisoned, killed, or driven into exile. This assessment thus fit well within western colonial conceptions of indigenous populations as

⁴⁰⁵ Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order*, 157-161; Thomas, *The French Empire Between the Wars*, 229-232; Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam*, 219-229; McMahon, *The Limits of Empire*, 7; Foster, “French, Dutch, British, and US Reactions to the Nghe-Tinh Rebellion of 1930-1931,” 64-66, 75.

being too passive or ignorant to launch rebellions themselves. Foreign provocateurs, or in this case returned Vietnamese emigres, therefore provided convenient scapegoats. F.G. Gorton, the British Consul-General in Saigon, was more circumspect, acknowledging that French policies, which breed instability, poverty, hunger, and grievance, had played a part in creating the conditions in which rebellions could fester and grow.⁴⁰⁶ Gorton voiced these views, however, not to the French themselves or any of his inter-imperial colleagues but only to his superiors in the Foreign Office. The vested British interest in demonstrating the superiority of its own systems of colonial administration at the expense of its western peer systems – particularly the French – trumped, in this case, the possibility of mutual efforts to learn from the events. These examples demonstrate the way in which, despite instances of indigenous uprising bringing about increased cooperation, intelligence sharing, and a natural closing of ranks, the western powers only chose to be honest and transparent with their counterparts up to a certain point, beyond which national pride and imperial hubris dared them not to tread.⁴⁰⁷

Fear of the lingering specter of communism continued to grip the colonial states in this era. In the second half of 1929, Soviet forces fought sporadically with KMT-aligned warlord armies in Manchuria over control of the Chinese Eastern Railway, just as Chiang was determined to show his anti-communist bona fides. Further Soviet adventurism along the Oxus River and into the Persian Gulf rattled British officials in India and elsewhere.⁴⁰⁸ In May 1930 in Rangoon, communal rioting and violence gripped the city for weeks when striking Indian dockers returned

⁴⁰⁶ BL, IO, L/PS/11/260, P2626/1925, Gorton to Henderson, 7 May 1931.

⁴⁰⁷ Parker, *One Fine Day*, 299-302; Foster, “French, Dutch, British, and US Reactions to the Nghe-Tinh Rebellions of 1930-1931,” 69-72.

⁴⁰⁸ Steiner, *The Lights That Failed*, 711; Best, ““We Are Virtually at War with Russia,”” 214.

to work, thus alienating Burmese strikers who were angry at the deteriorating economic situation and being displaced by less-expensive Indian labor (Burma was still administered by British India at the time). Hundreds were reported killed. Similar race-based rioting, this time directed against Chinese, occurred in Rangoon in January 1931, killing dozens. In the midst of this a peasant revolt, the Saya San Rebellion, broke out in Burma in the fall of 1930, owing to the economic crisis brought about by falling rice prices and simmering resentments towards British rule.⁴⁰⁹ This quick succession of events fed, if nothing else, a sense of unease and the realization that the empire could be rapidly buffeted by such forces, particularly when seen in conjunction with the numerous difficulties posed by the crisis of Chinese nationalism over the latter half of the 1920s and the Comintern-inspired rebellions in the NEI and French Indochina.

In the face of such circumstances, inter-imperial cooperation to counter transnational communism and radical nationalism continued to expand. From the summer of 1927, the Foreign Office surreptitiously worked with Dutch officials to prevent Mardy Jones, a Welsh miner and sitting Labour MP, from getting a visa to enter the NEI and attend a League Against Imperialism conference in Batavia.⁴¹⁰ Meanwhile, British and French officials spent much of 1927 corresponding about how Indochina could learn from the systems then in place in Malaya to control and monitor immigrants, especially those from China given the exodus of many Chinese

⁴⁰⁹ Michael Charney, *A History of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 13-16, 25-26; Robert Taylor, *The State in Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 198-199.

⁴¹⁰ TNA, FO371/12517, F9207/9207/61, Passport Control Department, Foreign Office to Passport Control Officer, Rotterdam, 22 August 1927; FO371/13243, F154/154/61, *MBPI*, October-November 1927.

communists following Chiang's spring purges.⁴¹¹ In August 1927, less than a year after the PKI uprising in the NEI and the British refusal, on constitutional grounds, to deport senior PKI leaders from Singapore to Batavia, US officials in Manila, operating on a request from the Dutch, located Tan Malaka, one of the senior Comintern agents in the region and among the most respected of the Indonesian communist leaders. This was despite direct guidance from War Department leadership in Washington not to "engage in peacetime surveillance" or "furnish any information" to the Dutch regarding their request. Malaka was, nonetheless, arrested and deported. As Anne Foster has chronicled, the decisions to pursue such actions, "were taken by relatively low-level officials in the United States government, apparently without regard" to stated US policy. "The consuls and colonial bureaucrats who took these initiatives did not expect to be reprimanded, and they were not."⁴¹² Malaka's presence, by then undeniable, simply became too difficult for the American colonial bureaucracy to countenance. The whole episode reflects some of the ways in which local officials, be they American, British, French, or Dutch, could and did make their own policy. Given the day-to-day nature of such work, however, and the absence of crisis-inducing events to draw in Cabinet and CID attention, officials in London seemed to be perfectly content with letting imperial officials continue to pursue such ends.

Further episodes arose as the rapid dissemination of political intelligence between the western powers became widespread and regularized. The *MBPI* was now sent directly to French officials in Hanoi and their Dutch counterparts in Batavia. Its NEI counterpart publication was sent to Dutch officials from Jeddah to Peking, with the expectation that its consular officials

⁴¹¹ TNA, FO371/12517, F9207/9207/61, French enquiry into Japanese and Chinese immigration into the American continent, Australia and Pacific islands, 24 August 1927.

⁴¹² Foster, *Projections of Power*, 34-37.

would share and exchange information in a give-and-take with their inter-imperial counterparts across multiple regions. US consular officials were expected to gather, and disseminate internally, political intelligence that came from their imperial hosts and/or counterparts, and British, Dutch, and French officials at ports and postings along the South China Sea in this period regularly notified each other of the activities of suspected Comintern agents.⁴¹³

Such exchanges of information were given heft by the frequent visits that senior officials embarked upon between colonies in the years after the crisis of Chinese nationalism and before the eruption of Sino-Japanese hostilities. It was regular, for instance, for military officials from the NEI and Malaya to exchange visits, given their proximity and the close nature of British and Dutch cooperation. On occasion, NEI officers even traveled to India to observe training and maneuvers and get a sense of the role of the Indian Army in maintaining internal order within the Raj.⁴¹⁴ In 1928, Clifford traveled to Siam and French Indochina in an effort to bolster and expand formal ties.⁴¹⁵ In the same week that Clifford was touring the ruins of Angkor Wat on his way from Bangkok to Saigon, Clementi, then still in Hong Kong, hosted both Lampson and Henry Stimson, the incoming American Governor-General of the Philippines, to discuss common threats and policy coordination.⁴¹⁶ S.G. Waterlow, the British Minister in Bangkok, spent much of the end of 1927 in Batavia, conferring with Crosby on Foreign Office resourcing and staffing

⁴¹³ Ibid., 38-39; Foster, “Secret Police Cooperation and the Roots of Anti-Communism in Southeast Asia,” 340; Onraet, *Singapore*, 97; Streets-Salter, “The Noulens Affair in East and Southeast Asia,” 405.

⁴¹⁴ TNA, FO371/13962, F199/199/61, *MCIN*, December 1928.

⁴¹⁵ TNA, FO422/85, Johns to Chamberlain, 17 February 1928; FO422/85, Waterlow to Chamberlain, 2 March 1928.

⁴¹⁶ MEAC, Lampson papers, Box 1, Lampson Diary, 28 February 1928.

requirements and with his Dutch hosts on larger questions of policy. His visit overlapped with one by Major T.A. Lowe of the British Army to observe Dutch maneuvers in Java. Waterlow promptly brought Lowe back to Bangkok with him to liaise with the Siamese military authorities.⁴¹⁷ 1929 saw Pasquier visit the NEI, where he sought common action by his western “brothers-in-arms” against communism, in something of a stirring call that well encapsulated the general feelings of colonial administrators and officers across the region in the face of their common transnational enemy.

They – those hostile and noxious forces – have formed themselves into a single front; and the interests at stake are too great for us to remain divided or isolated any longer. Strong in our conviction, strong in our labours and strong in the certainty that we are representing Civilisation and Order - strong in these things, and in opposition to forces which would achieve nothing but destruction and chaos, we must bethink ourselves that our task will be all the better discharged if we discharge it in common.⁴¹⁸

1930 witnessed exchanges between Clementi, then newly arrived in Singapore, and Jonkheer de Graeff, his Dutch counterpart in Batavia, which sealed the formalization of working-level engagements and regularly scheduled meetings between British and Dutch administrators on policing and intelligence issues, Chinese affairs, and international law, all with respect to countering the communist threat.⁴¹⁹ Pasquier went on to visit both Hong Kong and the Philippines, a favor returned by Dwight Davis, then the Governor-General in the Philippines, during his visits to French Indochina, Siam, Malaya, and the NEI in 1931. Although all such visits contained elements of pomp and imperial pride, it seems that the actual meetings were

⁴¹⁷ TNA, FO422/85, Waterlow to Chamberlain, 4 November 1927.

⁴¹⁸ BL, IO, L/P&S/11 Crosby to Chamberlain, 1 May 1929.

⁴¹⁹ TNA, CO273/564/10, Extract from Sir C. Clementi’s Report of his Visit to Batavia, 5 September 1930; CO273/565/23, Fitzmaurice to Henderson, 29 September 1930, Fitzmaurice to Henderson, 3 September 1930; Clementi to Passfield, 5 September 1930.

often characterized by efforts to deepen information-sharing and inter-imperial collaboration, even if only informally.⁴²⁰ The most spectacular of these visits was that of de Graeff to Pasquier in November 1930. After concluding meetings in Hanoi on 7 November, the two Governor-Generals departed early on an overnight train to Hue. Arriving safely the next morning, de Graeff continued from Hue on his journey to Siam, complimenting Pasquier, “on the appearance of calm in the countryside and the fact that the French government continued to run trains at night.”⁴²¹ It was only later that de Graeff learned that the train’s early departure from Hanoi had come as a result of *Sûreté Générale* intelligence which indicated that local rebels south of the city of Vinh, the capital of Nghe An Province and one of the centers of the Comintern-backed Nghe-Tinh Rebellion, were planning to attack a station along the route and then kidnap or murder the two Governor-Generals at the moment at which the train was scheduled to pass through the area. De Graeff, though fuming at the news of such danger, was careful never to utter a public word on the subject. The importance of maintaining and strengthening inter-imperial bonds remained paramount.⁴²² This also helps contextualize the decision of the Government of French Indochina to bestow the Légion d'honneur on Onraet in 1932 in recognition of his

⁴²⁰ TNA, CO273/568/8, Fitzmaurice to Henderson, 3 April 1931, and Smith to OAG Straits Settlements (Scott), 26 January 1931; Tarling, *The Fall of Imperial Britain in Southeast Asia*, 109; Foster, “Secret Police Cooperation and the Roots of Anti-Communism in Southeast Asia,” 342; Foster, “French, Dutch, British, and US Reactions to the Nghe-Tinh Rebellion of 1930-1931,” 73, 76; TNA, FO371/17410, F5279/5279/29, Fitzmaurice to Simon, 13 April 1933.

⁴²¹ Foster, “French, Dutch, British, and US Reactions to the Nghe-Tinh Rebellions of 1930-1931,” 63.

⁴²² Ibid., 64; TNA, CO273/568/9, Crosby to Henderson, 2 February 1931, and BL, IO, L/P&S/11/260, Crosby to Henderson, 2 February 1931.

assistance to them, over the course of multiple visits to Saigon in 1930 and 1931, in their efforts to fight against and eradicate communism.⁴²³

Perhaps more interesting to the story of inter-imperial policing and intelligence cooperation in the years after the crisis of Chinese nationalism is the role that Britain played in facilitating support from non-western powers to pursue such ends. In Siam, Britain's semi-colonial position and dominance over much of the economy and state gave its resident officials – consular as well as those advisors embedded within the Siamese state – broad access and leverage to achieve their desired ends. Such was Siam's role within the informal British Empire in the late 1920s and early 1930s that British officials and businesses in Bangkok had to hide the fact that much of their actions and activities were being directed from London. They did not necessarily want their Siamese superiors to know just how much they had become subsumed within the British imperial system.⁴²⁴ Given the confluence of interests between the British and the Siamese elite, including the continued production and export of rice and antipathy towards communism, Britain was able to wield its influence broadly and cultivate in the Siamese Government a willing and able partner. Siamese fears of cultural and demographic inundation from China, exacerbated by the growing number of migrants, their increasing inability to assimilate into the Siamese culture and countryside, and the strident KMT attempts to control and govern overseas Chinese from 1928, gave further momentum to British efforts to weave

⁴²³ TNA, FCO141/16290, Ballereau to Clementi, 29 February 1932. Unfortunately for Onraet, the Colonial Office, owing to “the provisions of the ‘Foreign Orders Regulations’ applicable to persons in the service of the Crown,” was forced by regulation to respectively decline the French request (Clementi to Ballereau, 30 April 1932).

⁴²⁴ Aldrich, *The Key to the South*, 8.

Siam into the inter-imperial system.⁴²⁵ This led to British-Siamese immigration coordination in the early 1930s, as world commodity markets slid downwards and western colonies attempted to slow or even reverse Chinese immigration patterns.⁴²⁶ The British also worked with Siamese authorities to smooth over issues relating to the 1930 French request for the extradition of more than 30 Vietnamese nationalists from Siam back into French Indochina. Siamese authorities, drawing on British precedent, saw the latter more as political refugees than as communist provocateurs. In the end, the individuals were deported to China rather Indochina. Siam side-stepped official French anger on the issue by clarifying that it would work with its western imperial counterparts to identify, arrest, and deport confirmed communists, while also, with British help, passing additional laws and measures to control and inhibit communist activity and propaganda within the kingdom.⁴²⁷

Britain's relationship with Japan on matters relating to countering communism and nationalism was limited but cordial throughout the period. If divided on the question of China, many British officials at the working level still found relationships with their Japanese counterparts to be warm and productive. The Foreign Office and Scotland Yard, alongside the French, worked closely with Japanese officials, via the embassies in London and Tokyo, to disseminate and share information on League Against Imperialism activities in the Far East

⁴²⁵ TNA, FO422/86, Crosby to Chamberlain, 4 April 1929; FO422/87, Dormer to Henderson, 18 February 1930; FO422/87, Dormer to Henderson, 16 September 1930.

⁴²⁶ TNA, FO422/87, Dormer to Henderson, 16 September 1930; FO422/88, Problem of Chinese Immigration into Malaya via Siam, 24 December 1930.

⁴²⁷ Aldrich, *The Key to the South*, 174-176; Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks*, 72; Julaporn Euarukskul, "Siam and the Vietnamese Anti-Colonialists," *Thammasat Review*, Vol. 1, no. 1 (1996): 47-48; Batson, *The End of Absolute Monarchy in Siam*, 169-171.

throughout 1927.⁴²⁸ British and Japanese naval commanders continued to engage with each other over issues of common concern, most commonly difficulties with piracy in Chinese waters.⁴²⁹ And British officials in the Straits Settlements were quick to clamp down on anti-Japanese protests or behavior within the colony, not hesitating to banish Chinese for printing or distributing anti-Japanese materials.⁴³⁰ Indeed, by 1931, more than 30 percent of all censored publications confiscated and prevented from entering the colony were classified as anti-Japanese propaganda.⁴³¹ The Straits Settlements Government, then under Clementi, who sought closer relations with Japan, protected Japanese interests in Malaya both because of their perception that it was similarly engaged in a struggle against communism and because it was in their economic interests to maintain stability and open commerce in the bustling entrepot.

For its part, Japan shared with British officials in Tokyo the data from its regular waves of communist arrests.⁴³² With regards to intelligence-sharing more broadly, the War Office proposed establishing more robust collaborative mechanisms with Japan. In 1928 and 1929, frustrated at the lack of adequate intelligence on events in China, it worked to establish a Far

⁴²⁸ TNA, FO371/12515, F9207/9207/61, Bland to Liddell, 5 July 1927; and Mounsey to Tilley, 14 July 1927.

⁴²⁹ TNA, ADM1/8724/66, Pearson (Commodore, Hong Kong) to Tyrwhitt (C-in-C, China Station), 13 January 1928.

⁴³⁰ TNA, CO273/553/17, Foreign Office to Chen, 13 April 1929.

⁴³¹ See, TNA, CO273/571 – CO273/572 for the *Straits Settlements Monthly Review of Chinese Affairs*, 1931, in which individual statistics on censorship and propaganda are recorded.

⁴³² TNA, FO371/13965, F6601/18/23, Tilley to Henderson, 8 November 1929; FO371/13185, F2451/32/10, Situation in China and Japanese action in Shantung, 17 May 1928; see, FO371/14757, for the extensive communication between British and Japanese officials on this subject through much of 1929 and into 1930.

Eastern Intelligence Bureau that would be responsible for the entire Far East and liaise with friendly, including Japanese, military authorities on events in China. The Foreign Office opposed this effort, squashing the War Office's desire to receive intelligence free of "diplomatic control and atmosphere" and to establish a regional bureau that would build on the SHAFORCE intelligence section in Shanghai, as it feared its monopoly on foreign policy would be challenged by any such institution.⁴³³ In the end, only piecemeal policing cooperation took place. It was usually limited to non-sensitive topics, such as collaborative efforts to counter the flow of narcotics through the region.

Cooperation with Japan against common transnational threats, thus, never matured for Britain in the way that it did with the western powers and Siam. Why? For one, British officials well understood the antithetical nature of British and Japanese policies in China. Although they could work together cordially, Britons in the region were concerned that closer cooperation with Japan would inevitably complicate their interests in China, given how all-consuming and important Chinese weakness was to Japanese economic and political strength. They did not want to go down a road in which Britain suddenly found itself in partnership with Japan in China to the detriment of its own interests. Secondly, Japan had no colonial possessions in modern Southeast Asia. Its empire was rooted in its occupation of the Korean peninsula and its commercial and political dominance of Manchuria. Only in Formosa, which corresponded with Hong Kong on various issues, was there geographic proximity. This reduced, for practical and logistical reasons, the interplay between the two imperial worlds and reduced the value of

⁴³³ Best, *British Intelligence and the Japanese Challenge in Asia*, 75-76; TNA, WO106/5267, The Future of the China Intelligence Bureau, 13 September 1929; WO106/5393, Intelligence Requirements in the Far East: Minutes of a Meeting held at the War Office (Room 223), 17 April 1928.

Japanese intelligence to British officials. Thirdly, unlike Siam, Japan had industrialized and modernized itself in the nineteenth century, meaning that, although its imperial structures were modeled on those of the Europeans, it needed little of the technical and administrative assistance that Siam required.

In toto, British efforts to counter communism in the Far East were robust and reliant upon several factors. First, the maturation of a stable relationship between Britain and Nationalist China. If not outwardly friendly, this relationship grew into something of a partnership in the years after the crisis of Chinese nationalism. In acknowledging KMT grievances, recognizing Chiang's government as that of China, seeking good faith compromises on questions of ethnicity and national identity, and collaboratively working together to fight a common enemy, Britons in the Far East developed Chamberlain's policy of conciliation into something more substantial and grew the relationship into something that could assist British efforts to combat communism throughout the region. Second, British officials – again acting absent specific guidance from London – built an inter-imperial community of like-minded states, from the NEI, French Indochina, and Siam, Britain's closest inter-imperial partners, to the United States and Japan, who acted in concert with British efforts but preferred to maintain some distance from Singapore. Each was interested in upholding the regional status quo and fighting the transnational threat of communism. Together, they had the ability to identify ideological networks, gather intelligence on them, and then target and execute operations to disrupt or destroy malign groups of communists or radical nationalists who sought to overturn the regional status quo. The use of such military terminology to describe the process as understood is not to portray this phenomenon as some kind of militarization of British efforts. It plainly was not. But framing British efforts in such a way more clearly communicates that our understanding of such

events, if rooted in colonial administration, needs also to be understood within the framework of imperial defence, in whose name such efforts were done in the first place.

Finally, these efforts collectively demonstrate that there was not an interregnum following the crisis of Chinese nationalism and prior to the onset of Japanese military expansionism in 1931, but rather an evolving process of contesting and countering transnational movements that threatened the British Empire in the Far East and the system that it undergirded. This was imperial defence, even if the tools were rooted in diplomatic, legal, and law enforcement traditions. They also make clear the reality that, even if this was done from a position of weakness or relative decline, British colonial administrators maintained a strong sense of agency throughout this process. They possessed an urgency and ability to shape the regional environment to suit their interests and, throughout this period, mostly succeeded in doing so. These were not the last gasps of an empire in terminal decline, but rather a reinvestment in the tools of empire and colonial administration during a time of political and geopolitical flux. One of the great stories, then, of imperial defence is the creativity on the periphery. Or, at least, that is half the story, for it was also during the 1927-1931 period that Britain began to more seriously consider and assess Japan as a disrupter of the regional stability it had fought to maintain, and it is to Japan that this narrative now turns.

The Far East within British Imperial Defence Policy

This narrative has, up to this point, mostly been concerned with the British understanding of and response to the transnational threat to empire that manifested itself in Chinese nationalism, communism, and, from 1925 to 1927, the dangerous coming together of the two. In

shifting to examine how Britain understood Japan and its role as a potential international threat to the British Empire in the late 1920s and early 1930s, we will consciously move away from the actions of Onraet and Crosby and others on the ground towards those guiding and resourcing British imperial defence policy from London. Policy towards Japan was principally made at the level of the Cabinet and Committee of Imperial Defence, with input from the Foreign Office and the fighting services, chiefly the Admiralty. If this narrative argues that British efforts to counter the transnational threats of the interwar Far East deserve inclusion in discussions of imperial defence, then the British attempt to understand and counter the potential international threat, chiefly then considered to be Japan, was understood by interwar contemporaries to be the essence of imperial defence and was taken as such by orthodox historians in the 1970s. This, therefore, represents a more conventional narrative of imperial defence in the interwar Far East, although now seen alongside the context of Britain's robust efforts to defeat communism and counter, and then co-opt, Chinese nationalism. To understand this more conventional approach to imperial defence in the Far East, it is necessary to understand the way that Britain's leaders in London saw and understood their global priorities, policies, and commitments.

The root of Britain's stated imperial defence policy in the 1920s was the government's desire to preserve and protect the British Empire. As made clear by the Foreign Office in the 1926 Imperial Defence Review, British foreign policy for "many years" had been to seek peace and ensure it, "To preserve the *status quo* and the balance of power," and to protect and develop British interests in foreign countries.⁴³⁴ At the Imperial Conference in late 1926, Beatty, then First Sea Lord, spoke of the strategical aspects of the "defensive situation" that arose from the size and breadth of the empire. He focused his remarks on preserving the sea lines of

⁴³⁴ TNA, CAB4/15, CP701, Imperial Defence Policy, 22 June 1926.

communication that connected the empire, defending the ports, bases, and other “terminal points” of the empire upon which those lines were based, and stressed the importance of the proposed naval base at Singapore as first in the “Order of Urgency for Development.”⁴³⁵ These concepts were further codified in the 1928 Imperial Defence Review, which also tasked the antipodean Dominions with providing for their own defence. For the Dominions, chiefly Australia but also more distant New Zealand, this meant that they should proceed with their own service estimates as they considered how best to defend their territories. Including the proviso, “until support arrives from outside,” was crucial, however, in terms of Dominion interests and intra-imperial politics, given the inability of Australia and New Zealand to build navies on any appreciable scale and the reliance of their security on the completion of the naval base in Singapore and the sailing of the main British battle fleet from home waters in a time of crisis.⁴³⁶ This policy, it should be noted, was less a comprehensive one, outlining how Britain would actually defend its bits of red on the map, and more a catalogue of what Britain needed to do simply to keep the empire functioning.⁴³⁷

For the purposes of Britain in the Far East, the markers of imperial defence, if neither new nor novel in the 1920s, were built atop the structures that had been laid down at the Washington Conference in 1921-1922. This conference not only produced, as previously stated, the Four-Power Treaty that governed interstate relations in the region among the powers and the

⁴³⁵ TNA, CAB4/15, CP745, Imperial Defence – Discussions and Resolutions, 10 December 1926.

⁴³⁶ TNA, CAB4/17, CP900, Imperial Defence Policy, 25 July 1928.

⁴³⁷ Dennis E. Showalter, “Plans, Weapons, and Doctrines: The Strategic Cultures of Interwar Europe,” in *The Shadows of Total War: Europe, East Asia, and the United States, 1919-1939*, ed. Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 78.

Nine-Power Treaty that dealt with Chinese sovereignty and instability directly, but the Washington Naval Treaty. The latter capped overall capital ship and aircraft carrier (but not cruiser or destroyer) tonnage limitations at a ratio of 5:5:3 for Britain, the United States, and Japan, with lesser amounts for France and Italy. It also prohibited the construction of additional naval bases or fortifications in the Pacific, with caveats, and settled the question of how Britain, Japan, and the United States would balance their respective fleets and building programs.⁴³⁸ This agreement thus provided structure to the Anglo-Japanese-American relationship and underpinned the fundamental goals of the 1920s Far Eastern status quo – the containment of Chinese instability, the growth of foreign commercial activities within China, and the heading off of Soviet encroachment and the growth of communism – that Britain was looking to defend. And yet Britain’s ability to maintain the status quo relied on the ability of the powers to stabilize the region with a minimum of force. Only this would prevent Britain from actually needing to put its Singapore Strategy into use and sail its main fleet to the Far East in a time of crisis.⁴³⁹ Stability, and British interests, relied therefore on the absence of a hostile power.

British efforts, first through Chamberlain until 1929 and then into the second government of Ramsey MacDonald, to secure the status quo were manifold. These efforts were rooted not only in a desire for imperial self-preservation but also in the British belief that a respected and

⁴³⁸ Ibid., 17; Andrew Gordon, “The Admiralty and Imperial Overstretch, 1902-1941,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 17, 1 (1994): 66.

⁴³⁹ Greg Kennedy, *Anglo-American Strategic Relations and the Far East*, 1-2; Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987), 357; Peden, *Arms, Economics, and British Strategy*, 98; Meyers, “British Imperial Interests and the Policy of Appeasement,” 343.

capable League of Nations would undergird the status quo, resolving disputes through “conciliation and judicial arbitration” and wedding more and more states to a British-friendly international order.⁴⁴⁰ As Wellesley well understood during the crisis of Chinese nationalism, Britain needed the League to be a respected and trusted international body but not necessarily one whose mandate would be called upon to arbitrate conflicts or treaties by force. Absent support from Britain, France, and the other powers, it could do no such thing. British efforts, then, to maintain the wider status quo were interlocking: preserving the empire rested on a stable international environment and the maintenance of the status quo. Alongside a strong Royal Navy, the status quo could be maintained by amity among the powers and a strong and respected League of Nations. The capability of the League would be best strengthened by regional disarmament agreements among the powers that preserved their core interests and reduced the likelihood of unforeseen events precipitating a crisis that jeopardized the League, the status quo and, thus, the empire. All these assurances would create an environment in which a more general disarmament could be discussed, and military and naval spending could be kept in check. Long was the legacy of the First World War.

This helps explain the energy with which Chamberlain and his successors worked to put in place the regional and naval agreements that bound parties to the existing international order. The 1925 Locarno agreement, doggedly pursued by Chamberlain upon taking office, was the first major such effort. This sought to stabilize the borders and postwar relations between Germany and France, among other European states. It had the added benefit of safeguarding British interests in the Far East by reducing the likelihood of a European conflagration and thus

⁴⁴⁰ TNA, CAB2/4, CP184, Committee of Imperial Defence, Minutes of the 183rd Meeting, April 3, 1924, 3 April 1924; Roskill, *Naval Policy Between the Wars, Volume I*, 34-35.

depriving Japan (or anyone else) of the opportunity to meddle in the Far East during any such crisis.⁴⁴¹ The 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact, officially titled the General Treaty for the Renunciation of War as an Instrument of National Policy, consisted of little more than those words. Although not spearheaded by Chamberlain, Britain, alongside most countries at the time, agreed to it, as its spirit built off the Washington and Locarno Treaties in its explicit desire to reduce the prospect of war. If lacking in any mechanism for enforcement, it was at least a statement of intent that was taken seriously by some and seen as aspirational to others. In 1931, in a memorandum discussing the extension of the Ten-Year Rule, the Foreign Office declared it, alongside Locarno, as one of the “corner-stone[s] of our policy, and for the hope of safety for our civilization.”⁴⁴²

If the empire and the status quo relied on such agreements to maintain the peace, British policymakers also understood that a powerful and credible Royal Navy was necessary to protect its overseas territories and the sea lanes that linked them to London, and to project prestige out from the imperial core. From a naval perspective, Britain in the 1920s remained wedded to the Washington Naval Treaty that prescribed force ratios and limited naval and port fortification construction in much of the Far East. As John Ferris has demonstrated, from 1925 the Treasury under Churchill and Warren Fisher sought to impose stricter limits on naval spending, using the Ten-Year Rule to control service spending policies and to curb the Admiralty’s desired naval building program.⁴⁴³ While Churchill well understood the need for a strong, one-power standard fleet, he felt obligated to provide it at the minimum possible cost. He worked under the then

⁴⁴¹ McKercher, “A Sane and Sensible Policy,” 195.

⁴⁴² TNA, CAB4/21, CP1056, Foreign Office Memorandum on the 10 Year Rule, 25 June 1931; Kagan, *The Ghost at the Feast*, 305-309.

⁴⁴³ Ferris, *Men, Money, and Diplomacy*, 159.

reasonable belief that there would be no conflict with Japan before 1935, which allowed for a slower pace of building at significant cost savings. Amid this debate, the Treasury also succeeded in getting the Cabinet's approval to redefine the one-power standard to mean that the Royal Navy could be weaker than either the US or Japanese fleets in their home waters, so long as it remained superior to them in "the imperial seas" upon which the defence of the empire rested. If the Treasury was determined to provide the maximum force that could be reasonably paid for, the Foreign Office was charged with determining what the minimum required force would be, based on its assessments of foreign affairs and the international threat.⁴⁴⁴

It was in naval spending and policy, however, that British efforts to maintain the international status quo foundered later in the decade. The context for this was that the Washington Naval Treaty, while setting force caps and ratios for capital ships, did not cover cruisers, the ships that secured the empire's sea lines of communication. In 1927 at the Geneva Naval Conference, the United States sought to enshrine cruiser parity with Britain and to cap the overall number of vessels. This Britain could not agree to, for several reasons. First, given the centrality of the cruiser to securing the empire's sea lanes, it argued that it had a legitimate need for cruiser supremacy over the United States and Japan. Second, although Britain enjoyed numerical superiority over the American and Japanese cruisers, the newly built cruisers in the United States were significantly larger than the bulk of the older British vessels.⁴⁴⁵ For its part, Britain wanted to cap the size and armaments on vessels classified as cruisers, because it had no need for large ships to secure its maritime communications. It also feared that agreeing with the US would render most British cruisers obsolete and necessitate an expensive naval building

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., 166.

⁴⁴⁵ McKercher, "No Eternal Friends or Enemies," 269.

program. Third, Britain considered cruiser supremacy “on the imperial seas” to be not only a matter of policy and practical need but a matter of prestige. Most policymakers in London simply could not countenance Britain having anything less than the largest fleet in the world. Churchill, as has been argued by Phillips O’Brien, was at one and the same time both the most ardent defender of the supremacy of the Royal Navy and the Chancellor of the Exchequer who refused to countenance the construction programs to ensure such supremacy. Churchill considered complete naval parity with the United States to be “fatal to British naval security,” arguing that, “There can really be no parity between a power whose navy is its life and a power whose navy is only for prestige.”⁴⁴⁶ Baldwin’s reticence to engage decisively in such matters, alongside his impending departure to Canada with the Prince of Wales, allowed Churchill in 1927 to maneuver and undermine the British negotiating position in Geneva and pull the Cabinet back from any potential agreement on parity, either numerical or in tonnage or armaments.⁴⁴⁷

Acrimony and ill-feeling towards the British by the American delegation rebounded on Britain in the aftermath of the conference. American antipathy helped President Coolidge and other American big navy backers pass naval legislation in early 1929 enshrining a new cruiser-building program that would see the United States move forward with the very armaments that British naval strategists and bookkeepers knew they could not match.⁴⁴⁸ These events set the stage for the 1930 London Naval Conference, at which Anglo-American naval parity was

⁴⁴⁶ O’Brien, *British and American Naval Power*, 192; TNA, CAB24/187, Armaments: Reduction and Limitation of: - The Naval Conference, Churchill memorandum, 29 June 1927.

⁴⁴⁷ TNA, CAB2/5, CID, 228th meeting, 7 July 1927; see, O’Brien, *British and American Naval Power*, 186-194, for a complete and masterful accounting of the conference and its collapse.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 200-201.

enshrined, smoothing bilateral naval cooperation and relations after a long period of tension in the post-Washington world. The new force ratios for cruisers and destroyers that were now added to the Washington Naval Treaty, limited, to a certain degree, the threat posed by Japan's enlarged cruiser and destroyer programs. Such programs were, until the 1930 agreement, unregulated internationally and had thus sparked the Admiralty's call for higher spending.⁴⁴⁹ In fact, the treaty's newly emplaced caps on cruiser construction and capital ship construction brought into question the viability of the Admiralty's ability to maintain a fleet of requisite strength to reinforce Singapore in the first place.⁴⁵⁰ Later in 1930, a new Imperial Defence Policy, formally produced in advance of that year's imperial conference, added little to the 1926 and 1928 documents concerning either the strategic context – "It is unnecessary to restate the main principles governing the problem of Imperial Defence" – or the question of the as yet unbuilt Singapore base.⁴⁵¹ This question was put off until the next Imperial Conference met in 1930.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., 214; McKercher, "No Eternal Friends or Enemies," 275; Maiolo, *The Royal Navy and Nazi Germany, 1933-1939*, 186-187; Maurer, "'Winston Has Gone Mad,'" 780-782.

⁴⁵⁰ Neilson, "'The Defence Requirements Sub-Committee, British Strategic Foreign Policy, Neville Chamberlain and the Path to Appeasement,'" 654; Gordon, *The British Navy, 1918-1945*, 164; Maiolo, *The Royal Navy and Nazi Germany, 1933-1939*, 186. See as well, TNA, ADM116/2746, 'Basis of British Strategy,' Madden memorandum 17 January 1930, and ADM116/2746, Memorandum on the Position at the London Naval Conference on His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom, 7 February 1930, for period accounts of the British goals and negotiating positions leading into and during the conference.

⁴⁵¹ TNA, CAB4/20, Imperial Defence Policy, 29 July 1930.

Japan and British Policy in the Far East

This was the strategic and policy context within which British policymakers formulated their views on Japan in the period after the crisis of Chinese nationalism. If, during this period, the British actions to counter communism and co-opt Chinese nationalism as a tool towards such ends were vigorous and demonstrative of aspects of the agency and vibrancy of British imperial defence efforts, the same cannot be said for British efforts to understand and counter the potential Japanese threat. Indeed, although British responses to the transnational and international threats were dissonant in the 1927-1931 period, this section will argue that such dissonance was not a result of Britain failing to respond to a Japanese threat but because British officials could not determine how, or even if, Japan was itself threatening. This internal ambivalence resulted in the larger dissonance that defined British Far Eastern imperial defense in the 1927-1931 era – one of activism, creativity, and local initiative in countering communism and radical Chinese nationalism on the one hand and one of stasis in contemplating both what kind of state Japan was and how Britain might respond to it on the other.

The central question of British policymakers and imperial defence officials as they considered Japan in the years after the crisis of Chinese nationalism was a simple one: was Japan an investor in and helpful guarantor of the British-led regional order and status quo, was it bent on the disruption and destruction of that status quo, or was it a rational actor pursuing some sort of ambiguous middle ground? That, from the fall of 1931 onwards, Japan was destined to be a disrupter was not in and of itself evident to British policymakers, or indeed anyone else – including the Japanese, in the preceding years. It was only in the aftermath of the Japanese attacks on Manchuria and Shanghai in late 1931 and early 1932 that the dissonant nature of the

British response to these threats was shown to be clear. That story, however, awaits us. What does seem to present itself in the 1927-1931 period is that Britain's inability to make up its mind about Japan's role within the region produced a kind of stasis within British officialdom and policymaking circles. With no clearly charted policy path, there could be no great demonstration of imperial defence agency or vibrancy as characterized by the British efforts to counter the transnational threat during and after the crisis of Chinese nationalism. The story of British imperial defence and the international threat during this period, then, is one of static continuity and reaction.

Within Whitehall and the bureaucracy of empire, from at least the early 1920s and the ending of the alliance, officials formed different opinions regarding Japan when considering what kind of state it was and what kind of relationship Britain might be able to have with it. If the Cabinet and CID considered questions or concerns regarding Japan "with vigilance but without rancor," it was the Admiralty that was most troubled about the potentially malevolent role that Japan was capable of playing in the region.⁴⁵² Admiralty concerns about Japan were deep seated for several reasons, and were distinct from the more-broadly felt issues of racial mistrust of Japan that permeated through parts of Whitehall in the era. First, since 1919 and the end of World War I, the Admiralty had used the specter of an antagonistic Japan as one of its chief arguments in justifying naval expansion, the Singapore base, and its general budgetary requirements. Given standing guidance from the Cabinet not to assess force strengths and spending needs on any potential threat from the United States, Japan stood in as the *de facto* aggressor in Admiralty planning documents from even before the Anglo-Japanese Alliance had formally ended. This meant that the Admiralty had an institutional interest in communicating its

⁴⁵² Nish, *Alliance in Decline*, 389.

concerns and fears regarding Japan as doing so was necessary to justify its operational requirements and, thus, its budget.⁴⁵³ Second, many naval strategists believed that Japanese imperial and economic goals would necessitate eventual expansionism that could only threaten the British Far East. This view held that as Japan's economy grew and industrialization continued, its requirement for resources and raw materials, then already outstripping what the home islands of Japan could provide, would force some level of expansion in the name of resource extraction. When coupled with the need of Japan's rising population surplus to emigrate and the western barriers to such immigration, they considered it likely that Japan would seek additional territory, potentially at Britain's expense, somewhere in the Far East.⁴⁵⁴ These strategists needed to look no further than Manchuria to defend such an argument, as even Kijurō Shidehara, the most liberal foreign minister of the 1920s, continued to press for China's acceptance of Japan's special rights and interests in that region.⁴⁵⁵ Though far from being a vital British interest, Manchuria provided a template for arguing that Japanese expansion was neigh inevitable.

Japan, thus, stood as the primary international threat in the Admiralty's strategic plans and, accordingly, it pressed the government to do more to prepare for future conflict. This was the major driver behind the Singapore Strategy and the associated assumptions that underpinned the Admiralty's imperial defence plans and efforts throughout the period. Among many such debates on the issue, Beatty argued in 1925 that if Britain did not sufficiently invest in a building

⁴⁵³ Ferris, *Men, Money, and Diplomacy*, 41-42; 133-136; Bell, *The Royal Navy, Seapower, and Strategy Between the Wars*, 70.

⁴⁵⁴ Maurer, "'Winston Has Gone Mad,'" 778-779.

⁴⁵⁵ Steiner, *The Lights That Failed*, 715.

program for larger cruisers, Japan would likely attack India or Australia. These were actions that, “the navy alone could restrain.”⁴⁵⁶ When Admiralty planners considered basing requirements in any such conflict, they imagined pushing out from Singapore beyond the ‘Malay barrier’ and debated whether or how to defend or utilize ports from Hanoi to Hong Kong to Manila. This hinged on fears that any French or, most especially, American withdrawal from the region would mean the commensurate expansion of Japanese domination into formerly western colonies. Some planners feared that such action might even compel, as a last resort, a defensive British annexation of territories as a preemptive move.⁴⁵⁷ If such concepts are easy to lampoon, many of the concerns on which they were based were widespread. Both Dutch and American officials were concerned in the 1920s and early 1930s about the growth of Japanese interests and investments in the NEI and the Philippines. Policymakers feared Japan’s indirect economic control over those resource markets as potentially undermining their own direct political control.⁴⁵⁸ Furthermore, British fears over Japanese resource constraints accurately reflected the way that Japanese strategists in the era considered their position. In 1929, the Japanese Government had its ministries detail the resource requirements needed to maintain the Japanese

⁴⁵⁶ Ferris, *Men, Money, and Diplomacy*, 132-133.

⁴⁵⁷ Cowman, “Defence of the Malay Barrier,” 399-404.

⁴⁵⁸ Anne Booth, “Japanese Import Penetration and the Dutch Response: Some Aspects of Economic Policy Making in Colonial Indonesia,” in Shinya Sugiyama and Milagros Guerrero (eds.) *International Commercial Rivalry in Southeast Asia in the Interwar Period* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, 1994), 135-136; Brown, “The British Merchant Community in Singapore and Japanese Commercial Expansion in the 1930s,” 111-115; Milagros Guerrero, “Japanese-American Trade Rivalry in the Philippines, 1919-1941,” in Shinya Sugiyama and Milagros Guerrero (eds.) *International Commercial Rivalry in Southeast Asia in the Interwar Period* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, 1994), 165-168.

standard of living during a hypothetical two-year Far Eastern war. Those studies showed that, in aggregate, the resource requirements of modern warfare far outstripped Japan's domestic capacity, highlighting both the importance of Manchuria and Japan's other imperial holdings and where and how the other resource requirements could be met.⁴⁵⁹ The Admiralty itself reported on Japan's 'Industrial Mobilisation Test' in the fall of 1929. This was a practice wartime industrial mobilization that brought together hundreds of civilian and military planners and participants to simulate industrial and resources requirements in the event of war. While Japan was not fully embracing a policy of autarky at that point, the Admiralty was clear in its reporting on Japanese intentions, concluding in 1925 that, "The national policy of Japan is to render herself independent of foreign help for vital necessities, i.e., in time of war to be able to exist on her own resources or those that she knows she can protect."⁴⁶⁰ If not fully supportive of Admiralty conclusions regarding Japan, many, including Chamberlain and Lampson, understood that at the very least these resource requirements potentially made British and Japanese interests in China antithetical to one another.

Just as assuredly as many British imperial defence officials accepted Japan as the principal international threat to the British Far East in the late 1920s, an equal or greater number saw it as a cordial partner, itself invested in the international order and the regional mechanisms that upheld the status quo. Japan was, after all, a signatory to the Treaty of Versailles as well as the Washington Treaties and the Kellogg-Briand Pact. Although intelligence and information

⁴⁵⁹ Barnhart, *Japan Prepares for Total War*, 25-28.

⁴⁶⁰ TNA, ADM223/817, Confidential Admiralty Monthly Intelligence Summary, 15 October 1929; ADM223/813, Confidential Admiralty Monthly Intelligence Summary, 15 June 1925; Barnhart, *Japan Prepares for Total War*, 18.

sharing with Britain was limited in the 1920s, there was at least broad acknowledgement that Japanese and British efforts to counter communism and the Soviet penetration of the Far East were complementary to one another. Indeed, the mid-1920s, the era of ‘Shidehara diplomacy,’ saw the partial curtailment of the military in Japanese public life, the liberalization of culture and society, and a general policy of non-confrontation in China.⁴⁶¹ This helped create for some within Whitehall the perception that Japanese culture and politics were developing along fundamentally western lines.⁴⁶²

Within Whitehall, the specific ministerial arguments for how to treat Japan were, as in the case of the Admiralty, rooted in respective political and bureaucratic interests. As has been discussed, the Treasury under Churchill fought to contain naval spending from 1925 onwards, focused as it was on reducing the government’s deficit while maintaining domestic and social spending programs. It argued against both what it saw as the exorbitant costs of the Admiralty programs and the notion that Britain and Japan were destined for war. As Churchill famously wrote to Stanley Baldwin in 1924, “why should there be a war with Japan? I do not believe there is the slightest chance of it in our lifetime.”⁴⁶³ The War Office and the Colonial Office went even further than the Treasury in their assessments. The War Office had comparably less institutional clout in Far Eastern imperial defence debates, given its minimal presence east of India and its focus on little more than garrison operations and the defence of port cities. Its predominant role in the land defense of the Raj, however, meant that it was an interested party when it came to debates on the nature of the threat, both international and transnational, to the Far Eastern

⁴⁶¹ Kagan, *Ghost at the Feast*, 313, 316.

⁴⁶² Steiner, *The Lights That Failed*, 715.

⁴⁶³ Maurer, ““Winston Has Gone Mad,”” 776.

empire. Given the longstanding fear of a Russian incursion into India via Afghanistan, the War Office saw the Soviet Union as the chief threat to British primacy in the region. This meant that it favored rapprochement with Japan as a means to bolster British anti-communist interests and capabilities and it considered Japan a potential British ally throughout the 1920s and well into the 1930s. War Office staff maintained the position that acknowledging Japanese interests and expansion in Manchuria was a small price to pay for the gains that would come from a broader partnership.⁴⁶⁴ While it might be tempting, in retrospect, to ridicule the army for returning to the great game, the Foreign Office and others in Whitehall also considered the Soviet threat paramount for much of the 1920s. Indeed, they used such arguments to forestall the Admiralty's Japan-centric spending plans during the height of the crisis of Chinese nationalism. Chamberlain considered the danger point, if there was one, to be undoubtedly the Soviet Union.⁴⁶⁵ Such thinking led the War Office to perceive Japan as a fundamentally rational actor in both China and the broader Far East, bent on preserving lives and property in northern China, but serving as a bulwark for peace and order in an otherwise chaotic world.⁴⁶⁶ These sentiments culminated in a series of War Office-internal memoranda circulated amongst senior leaders in 1928 which laid out the military benefits that would come with the resurrection of the alliance. These centered on the strengthening of the British position in India (as Japan's presence in Manchuria would serve to forestall any Soviet intrigues in India), the more efficient defence of British lives and property

⁴⁶⁴ John Ferris, "Double-Edged Estimates: Japan in the Eyes of the British Army and Royal Air Force, 1900-1939," in *The History of Anglo-Japanese Relations, 1600-2000: Volume III: The Military Dimension*, eds. Ian Gow and Yoichi Hiram (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 99-100.

⁴⁶⁵ Bond, *British Military Policy between the Two World Wars*, 82.

⁴⁶⁶ TNA, WO32/2377, Milne to Thacker (CGS, Canada), 19 October 1927.

in China, and the commensurate easing of the burden of home defence in Australia and New Zealand. Underlying all such arguments was the latent British fear that Japan and the Soviet Union could reach some sort of entente, thereby threatening the entire British position east of Suez.⁴⁶⁷

The War Office also voiced concerns about the overall state of British intelligence in the Far East, with respect to conventional diplomatic and military threats. Its reports complained of the lack of a regional organization, or series of organizations, that could mirror the unified structure, purpose, and direction of Special Branch's concurrent efforts in Singapore. Military intelligence officials lamented the "overlapping and confusing boundaries and jurisdictions" of British intelligence structures in the region and an overall lack of coordination. This resulted in almost comical incidents and redundancies, including military and naval commanders not being cleared to read SIS reports, diplomatic officials vetoing military intelligence operations, attachés ignoring requests for information from operational commanders across the region, and the gathering of redundant and duplicative information. In one case, the SIS, Royal Navy, and the General Officer Commanding in Singapore all separately and one after another sent their own intelligence sections to reconnoiter and report on the state of the Balikpapan Oil Fields in the NEI, to the great annoyance of their Dutch hosts.⁴⁶⁸ At the same time, the SIS in China was essentially a "one-man band" in Harry Steptoe, while the SIS presence in Japan in the period was

⁴⁶⁷ TNA, WO106/129, Memorandum on the Desirability, From a Military Point of View, of Reviving the Alliance with Japan, 1 February 1928; WO106/129, Notes for Paper on Desirability of Reviving Anglo-Japanese Alliance, 6 February 1928.

⁴⁶⁸ TNA, WO106/5258, Private Notes on the Far Eastern Intelligence Bureau, 21 February 1928.

“moribund” well into the 1930s.⁴⁶⁹ These structures, convoluted, inefficient, and under-resourced as they were, contributed to the divergent set of viewpoints that ministries and CID officials in London had on the question of Japan and its role in both China and the broader Far East in the years leading up to 1931. Juxtaposed with Onraet’s Special Branch machine and its supporting partners such as Josiah Crosby in Batavia, who took on efforts to counter the transnational threats facing the Far Eastern empire with gusto, it is not difficult to discern the connection between structures such as these and the dissonance within policy circles on what Japan represented in this period. While a robust, streamlined, and effective conventional diplomatic and military intelligence structure would not have provided the pounds, battalions, or capital ships that Britain needed to deter or counter a rising Japan in this period, it could be argued that improvements in intelligence-gathering and analysis might have created space for policymakers to more accurately reflect on the nature of Japan and develop an approach to engaging with it that was more deliberately rooted in conceptions of imperial defence. And yet the ability of the British intelligence community to provide such information, never great, was itself undercut by its own sense of dissonance on both the value and utility of such efforts in the first place. The services disagreed, in the late 1920s, on the basic value of intelligence efforts and investments in Japan. By the 1930s, intelligence assessments aligned with those of their parent service in either seeing Japan as a threat in which intelligence resources must be invested or a partner, in which case any serious efforts at intelligence collections would only redound negatively upon Britain and jeopardize the bilateral relationship that so many were looking to strengthen.⁴⁷⁰ This, to a

⁴⁶⁹ Jeffrey, *MI6*, 259; Best, *British Intelligence and the Japanese Challenge in Asia*, 91.

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 262-263.

certain degree, was the perspective of the War Office, where many considered Japan more of a partner than a target.

The Colonial Office in many ways echoed the War Office perspective on Japan as a cordial partner, with Clementi as the chief advocate of entente. Given his fractious relationship with the Foreign Office and policymakers in Whitehall, such messages became, in the eyes of many, as mistrusted as the messenger. And yet Clementi's words embodied much of Colonial Office thinking on the subject. Unlike the Foreign Office, whose China voices were based mostly in Peking or Shanghai, the Colonial Office perspective was suffused with the perspective of Hong Kong and Singapore, both geographically further from Japan (and the preponderance of its forces) than the rest of China and significantly less threatened by Japanese actions in north China or Manchuria.⁴⁷¹ If Foreign Office officials saw Japan up close, colonial officials, from their remove, had a different perspective. Moreover, one should not be surprised that Clementi and his contemporaries reached such conclusions given the trials brought upon them by communism, Chinese nationalism, and the general dysfunction and collapse that they saw in much of China.⁴⁷² If they looked to Japan and saw an orderly, modern state that in a way resembled Britain, that is because, in comparison to the chaos of republican China, it was such. Those attitudes also colored their appraisal of China itself and the extent of British power there. As Clementi wrote in 1931, "I still think that British and Japanese policy in the Far East might be reconciled and that

⁴⁷¹ William Roger Louis, "The Road to Singapore: British Imperialism in the Far East, 1932-41," in *The Fascist Challenge and the Policy of Appeasement*, eds. W.J. Mommsen and L. Kettenacker (London: Allen and Unwin, 1983), 355.

⁴⁷² Antony Best, "The 'Ghost' of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance: An Examination into Historical Mythmaking," *Historical Journal*, Vol. 49, 3, (2006), 822.

such reconciliation would be the best thing that could happen from both a British and a Chinese point of view. But the present trend of our foreign policy takes us further and further from Japan.”⁴⁷³ To officials in the Foreign Office, the idea that the Chinese would welcome an Anglo-Japanese entente was ridiculous. If Clementi anachronistically embodied the ideals and conceptions of Victorian officialdom, the Foreign Office ground itself in realist conceptions of a diminished Britain in the 1920s Far East.

The Foreign Office perspective was the most nuanced of all the ministries involved in the making of imperial defence policy. It continued to treat with Japan as the normal, cordial state that indeed it was during this period. In 1928, the Foreign Office hosted and entertained Viscount Uchida, a senior Japanese noble and statesmen visiting London for the purpose of deepening “Anglo-Japanese Cooperation” broadly and specifically regarding China. Reluctant to respond to this overture, the Foreign Office concluded the meetings successfully and simply instructed Lampson to informally liaise with his Japanese counterpart in Peking in respect to issues in China.⁴⁷⁴ As it communicated in the preparatory documents it submitted to the Chiefs of Staff in 1930 in advance of their drafting of an updated Imperial Defence Policy, “The relations between Japan and Great Britain have been excellent throughout the past year.”⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷³ BodL, Clementi papers, Box 29, MSS. Indian Ocean s.352, Clementi to Passfield, 14 July 1931.

⁴⁷⁴ TNA, FO371/13167, F2227/7/10, Mr. Yoshida on Potential Anglo-Japanese Cooperation in China, 8 May 1928; FO371/13172, F5073/7/10, Memorandum by Mr. Mounsey, 10 September 1928; FO228/3940, Diplomatic Co-operation in China, 22 January 1929.

⁴⁷⁵ TNA, CAB4/20, CP1008, Papers Prepared for the Use of the Chiefs of Staff in Their Fifth Annual Review of Imperial Defence (1930), 29 July 1930.

If rooted in firm beliefs about the strength of the bilateral relationship or Britain's then-waning ability to nudge Japanese actions in line with its interests, this perspective was also at least partly rooted in the way that some Britons still viewed Japan as something of a second-rate power. Given such a conception, how could Japan possibly be threatening? This was best illustrated by Sir Charles Eliot, the ambassador to Tokyo in his 1924 description of Japan as "a weak rather than a strong power."⁴⁷⁶ Eliot's view was shaped by the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake, which had left some 140,000 dead and much of Tokyo in ruins and heralded the onset of a period of economic instability. Emergency spending in the aftermath of the earthquake forced Japan to raise an international loan on the New York and London markets but on terms that some saw as humiliating. Further banking crises and the unsettled nature of the yen later in the decade, alongside a commensurate decline in defence spending as a ratio to GDP, underscored to many in Britain the fact that Japan could not possibly threaten the Far Eastern status quo given its own internal problems and weaknesses.⁴⁷⁷

With regards to China, many in the Foreign Office understood that Japan's ability to continue Shidehara's policy of non-confrontation with China would become more problematic once the Northern Expedition reached those areas of China more central to its interests.⁴⁷⁸ Given, by 1928, Britain's strategic accommodation with Chinese nationalism, this nominally put it at odds with Japan, which made clear its intention to defend its economic and military interests in the region with force.⁴⁷⁹ Lampson, better positioned in Peking than others to discern this,

⁴⁷⁶ Best, *British Intelligence and the Japanese Challenge in Asia*, 89.

⁴⁷⁷ Tooze, *The Deluge*, 364, 468.

⁴⁷⁸ Tarling, *The Fall of Imperial Britain in Southeast Asia*, 110.

⁴⁷⁹ McKercher, "A Sane and Sensible Policy," 200.

understood the oppositional nature of Japanese and Chinese interests in north China. He knew that Chiang and Chinese nationalists would not countenance, in the ideological milieu of the 1920s, the continuation of the nineteenth century-like privileges that Japan demanded of it.⁴⁸⁰ However, the practicalities of Chinese politics from 1928 allowed for fudging, with specific regard to Manchuria, to continue for a time. Chiang's control over broad swathes of the country was contested throughout the period, given the way that local militarists, including Zhang Xueliang, the 'Young Marshal' of Manchuria, only nominally came over to the nationalist cause while retaining local paramountcy and semi-autonomous rule. Moreover, Chiang's focus following the conclusion of the Northern Expedition was the internal reorganization of the Chinese state and its development. This included not only the centralization of power and efforts to modernize the economy and military, but also ongoing military operations in the form of encirclement campaigns to destroy the Chinese Communist Party as well as further conflicts with warlords, particularly during the Central Plains War in 1929 and 1930. This preoccupation with internal matters allowed Japan under Shidehara to maintain its basic policy of non-confrontation into 1930 and 1931.

In practice, Anglo-Japanese relations in the years before the Japanese occupation of Manchuria were cordial if guarded. In 1928, British gunboats on the Yangtze rescued Japanese civilians in Wuhu from Chinese anti-imperialist protests. This occurred at just the time that military officials in Singapore were offering their help to the white Rajah of Sarawak to defend the Miri Oilfields from "external" attack, should any regional power (i.e., Japan) attempt to seize them. In addition, as noted above, Britain and Japan warily approved, as required by the Washington Naval Treaty, each other's building of aerodromes in Hong Kong and Formosa,

⁴⁸⁰ Louis, "The Road to Singapore," 355.

respectively, even as the Air Ministry breathlessly reported on Japanese military aircraft transiting the East China Sea between the home islands and Formosa for the first time in 1929.⁴⁸¹ These events were concurrent with British reports in 1929 about the 1928 assassination of Chinese warlord Zhang Zuolin, father of Zhang Xueliang, that pinned blame, for the first time, on elements within the Japan's Kwantung Army. The latter episode elicited no immediate response or lasting change in British attitudes or policy.⁴⁸²

The guarded nature of British conceptions of Japan in the Far East also reared its head throughout the 1920s in the form of debates, from those at the working level in Singapore to those in the Cabinet Office in London, over Japanese purchases of agriculture and mining properties in Malaya. Discussions of this issue arose in 1919, 1922, 1926, and 1928. In each case, the view from London was one of suspicion of Japanese landholdings, particularly in the area around Johor not far from the still-developing naval base in Sembawang. As late as 1930, however, colonial officials in Singapore did not feel as though such concerns were sufficient to deny friendly investors and developers an opportunity to grow the colony. It was not until the spring of 1931 that the CID, faced with a Japanese consortium's possible purchase of mining interests across from Sembawang moved to forbid large-scale investments on imperial defence

⁴⁸¹ TNA, CAB2/5, Committee of Imperial Defence Meeting 235, Minutes, 22 May 1928; CAB5/7, CP311, The Development of the Japanese Air Base in Formosa, 28 January 1928; CAB5/7, CP320, Japanese Air Base at Formosa and British Air Base at Hong Kong, 8 June 1928; AIR9/16, Minute Sheet: Aviation, 5 June 1930; BodL, Clementi Additional Papers, MSS. British Empire s.600/13, Imperial Airways Ltd. to Clementi, 4 April 1931.

⁴⁸² Best, *British Intelligence and the Japanese Challenge in Asia, 1914-1941*, 97.

grounds.⁴⁸³ These discussions and debates took place, of course, against the backdrop of the mounting economic crisis and depression that, beginning in the early 1930s, decisively affected both Britain, as it moved away from free trade and towards concepts of imperial preference, and Japan, which accelerated its 1920s explorations into energy, economic, and military autarky into one of the conceptual foundations of Japanese political and military thinking in the 1930s.⁴⁸⁴ And yet, in 1930 the Foreign Office also saw, at the wider level, a degree of convergence with Japan on a number of international issues of far more import than the question of landholdings along the Strait of Johore. The London Naval Treaty, agreed to in April 1930, brought about not the end of Anglo-Japanese naval rancor but Anglo-American naval rancor. It recodified – alongside a civilian-led Japanese government that in agreeing to the treaty, overruled its own military advisors – the commitments signed in Washington roughly a decade before. It also signaled the continuing commitment that Shidehara and other elected leaders had to the regional and international status quo despite the onset of the Great Depression. 1930 also saw the Japanese follow the British precedent and agree to Chinese tariff autonomy, a goal long sought by Chinese nationalists and crucial to their ability to raise funds internally and finance both the

⁴⁸³ TNA, CAB8/13, CP341, Japanese Interest in Malaya, 1 December 1928; CAB2/5, CP251, CIGS (Milne) Aide-Memoire, 1 December 1928; CAB8/15, CP493, Japanese Interests in Malaya, with specific regard to Singapore, 21 June 1930; CAB8/13, CP352, Japanese Interest in Malaya, 31 July 1930; CO273/566/13, Japanese Land Holdings in Singapore, Military Implications, 1930; CAB8/17, CP569, Malaya, Japanese Application for Prospecting Licenses in South Johore, 9 March 1931; FO371/15520, F1381/1380/23, Application by a Japanese Company for Prospecting Licenses in Johore, 11 March 1931. It should be noted that this was not an outright ban on all foreign or Japanese ownership of land in Johor, given later debates in 1932 on the issue in which many local officials continued to profess no concerns over the Japanese ownership of such properties.

⁴⁸⁴ Tarling, *The Fall of Imperial Britain in Southeast Asia*, 112.

unification of the country and its modernization. These were the actions of a Great Power that the Foreign Office thought, with reason, “was unlikely to disturb the peace” in the Far East in the years to come. That such forecasts were, in the not-too-distant future, proved incorrect is more a reflection of the depth of the Great Depression than of British incompetence or ignorance in assessing the Japanese potential threat.⁴⁸⁵ Such actions also colored the way that the Foreign Office interpreted requests from elsewhere – in this case the War Office – to establish new intelligence centers or bureaus in the region. In their eyes, the threat, if there even was one, did not justify such ends.⁴⁸⁶

British diplomatic perspectives on Japan during this period were bound up almost inextricably with its perspectives on China. This was because, as Lampson well recognized, the central threat to the Far Eastern international status quo was instability in the Sino-Japanese relationship. This meant that, as Britain’s accommodation of Chinese nationalism over the latter half of the 1920s deepened, it increasingly colored the way that British diplomats viewed and assessed Japan. Indeed, Sino-Japanese relations quietly underpinned late 1920s Foreign Office ‘Annual Reports’ on Japan, given how linked its economic, industrial, and military prospects were to its investments within China. If other bilateral issues, such as residual tension stemming from “the breaking of the alliance” or “the bogey of Singapore,” to say nothing of western immigration restrictions, complicated the Anglo-Japanese relationship, it was British perspectives on and assessments of Japan and China within the Far East that defined the

⁴⁸⁵ Christopher Thorne, “The Shanghai Crisis of 1932: The Basis of British Policy,” *American Historical Review*, 75 (1969-70), 1623.

⁴⁸⁶ TNA, FO371/13244, F3481/3481/61, Report on Military Intelligence in the Far East with Proposals for Organisation of a Far Eastern Intelligence Bureau, 4 July 1928.

relationship.⁴⁸⁷ In this, Foreign Office officials were essentially attempting to square a circle. They assessed, in the aftermath of the Jinan Incident in 1928, in which KMT and Japanese forces had clashed in the capital of Shandong Province and the Japanese occupied the city, that Japan was “more or less compelled to take action.”⁴⁸⁸ The British reaction to the event was general ambivalence. Lampson spent the days after the outbreak of fighting taking in horse races outside Peking and drafting a cable complaining about Chinese salt production.⁴⁸⁹ Such understanding and tacit sympathy for Japan was no doubt influenced by the recent British experiences with KMT forces marching north through Hankow and Nanking and the 1927 outrages that Lampson so well documented. And although they were well on their way towards resetting their own relationship with Chinese nationalism and the Chinese state, the Foreign Office continued to value good relations with Japan over questions of the ‘open door’ in Manchuria.⁴⁹⁰ This ambiguity allowed the Foreign Office to maintain Britain’s cordial relationship with Japan into 1930-31 even as it wooed Chiang and attempted to moderate and exert some influence over the forces of Chinese nationalism. Indeed, in trying to understand Britain’s efforts to moderate the political temperatures of Sino-Japanese relations in the late 1920s, one should also recognize the fundamental dissonance of British policy – empathizing with and justifying Japanese actions and positions while simultaneously ingratiating itself to Chinese national aspirations. In truth, Britain

⁴⁸⁷ TNA, FO371/12524, F3611/3611/23, Annual Report on Japan for 1926, 15 March 1927; FO371/13249, F2161/2161/23, Annual Report on Japan for 1927, 7 May 1928; FO371/13968, F1767/1672/23, Annual Report on Japan for 1928, 10 April 1929.

⁴⁸⁸ TNA, FO371/14756, F2622/2622/23, Annual Report on Japan for 1929, 13 May 1930.

⁴⁸⁹ MEAC, Lampson papers, Box 1, Sir Miles Lampson Diary, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9 May 1928.

⁴⁹⁰ No. 21 ‘Memorandum by Sir Victor Wellesley,’ 22 December 1931, *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939*, Series 2, Volume 9.

was trying to nudge both sides towards a kind of middle ground. Absent any threat to the League's authority, it had no desire to enter into a Far-Eastern conflict and no public pressure to do so existed.

Never was this dissonance clearer than in the vigorous Foreign Office responses to Clementi's calls, in late 1929 and early 1930, for a reset of British policy in the Far East along decidedly pro-Japanese lines. The Foreign Office made several arguments: that the return to spheres of influence in China was impossible and that doing so would be a renunciation of British grand strategic efforts to bolster the League and the spirit of Kellogg-Briand; that pursuing such a policy would be tantamount to withdrawing from the Washington Treaties of 1922; and that entente with Japan would imperil the larger goal of Anglo-American cooperation. It also argued, with conviction, that the chief disturbance to British policy in China was itself Japan. This was evidenced by the fact that Japan had itself acknowledged that it would continue to "pursue whatever policy it chooses in China independent" of any arrangement with Britain or of wider British interests.⁴⁹¹ And yet the Foreign Office in the same moment acknowledged the legitimacy of Japanese interests in Manchuria, recognized how much Japan appreciated Britain "abstain[ing] from interference" in Manchuria, sympathized with its use of force and occupation of cities within China proper, and advocated "that co-operation should, as far as possible, be

⁴⁹¹ TNA, ADM1/8744/128, Tilley to Henderson, 3 January 1930; ADM1/8744/128, Green Memorandum, 3 January 1930; ADM1/8744/128, Davidson Memorandum, 3 January 1930; CO129/521/4A, British Policy in China, 8 January 1930; FO371/14754, F926/926/23, Anglo-Japanese Relations in the Far East, 15 February 1930.

maintained with other foreign powers with interests” in China.⁴⁹² Such dissonance meant that Britain was unable to move towards either the Chinese or Japanese position for fear of upsetting the status quo at just the period that the space for ambiguity in the burgeoning Sino-Japanese conflict disappeared. The Foreign Office, then, pursued a policy of stasis and reaction in its dealing with Japan in the years before 1931 and retreated from putting forward any bold policy of its own. Its reactive policies robbed officials in the region of the space, by way of Chamberlain’s policy of conciliation, that they had so successfully made use of in their interactions and dealings with Chinese nationalism.

Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that there was no easy solution to safeguarding Britain’s Far Eastern empire. Britain was geographically removed from the region, lacked the capital ships to patrol Far Eastern waters, and was economically exhausted as 1930 turned to 1931 and the deepening Great Depression began to be felt at home. Unlike defending imperial interests against the forces of transnationalism, any kind of conventional military defence of the Far East would be prohibitively expensive, take years to build, and very probably serve to provoke rather than deter just the sort of Japanese aggression that so many feared. Given the preponderance of Japan’s conventional military and naval forces in the region in comparison to the other great powers, there was no realistic scenario in the interwar years in which Britain could have fielded and sent forward any kind of force that could have effectively deterred Japanese action. This effectively ensured that no military or naval action would be taken. Britain, thus, had relatively few levers it could pull. But at the same time, it is accurate to say that

⁴⁹² TNA, FO371/14754, F958/926/23, Tilley to Henderson, 18 February 1930; CO129/521/4A, British Policy in China, 8 January 1930; CAB4/20, Papers Prepared for the Use of the Chiefs of Staff in Their Fifth Annual Review of Imperial Defence (1930), 29 July 1930.

Britain's agency and its ability to shape events and narratives, as it had done so successfully during the crisis of Chinese nationalism, were not present here. This reflects, it seems, less a suddenly incompetent diplomatic corps and more the reality that the international threat was more intangible than the transnational threat. The latter was unique in the way that it afforded British colonial administrators, businessmen, consuls, police and intelligence officials, and those in Whitehall the ability to develop political, economic, and administrative solutions at little cost and in ways that could be felt across borders and spaces. The potential international threat of Japan, if it could even be agreed that Japan constituted such, was much more conventional in nature. Short of a dramatic political reshuffling of the status quo or the intense movement of resources to enable economic and military investments in the region that might materially deter an international threat, neither of which was realistic, Britain had little ability to decisively influence events during these years. And so it was that by 1931 the dissonance over Britain's attitudes towards Japan undermined and defined its efforts to head off the looming international threat in the Far East.

Singapore Totems

What, then, of the Straits Settlements Special Branch and the Singapore Naval Base as spring turned to summer 1931? If the crisis of Chinese nationalism saw the growth of Special Branch, the years to 1931 saw its maturation. As remarked on by Onraet in his memoir, it was under Clifford from 1927 forwards that Special Branch and the entire Straits Settlements police force took "a great leap forward in organization, equipment, and modernization." Following the Kreta Ayer Incident, Clifford increased police pay and modernized police equipment, facilities,

and training exercises and grounds. He also approved the special hiring, training, and employment of Special Branch detectives who never wore a uniform and were functionally separate from the police constables from which, historically, Special Branch recruited its personnel. Having never had a publicly-facing police persona, this enabled newly hired Special Branch officers to operate with greater discretion in their work.⁴⁹³ As has been shown, these changes increased the efficiency of Special Branch as it targeted communists and radicals, especially Hailam Chinese, and broadened its relationships with partner police and internal security organizations across the colonial Far East. While Special Branch was modernizing its workforce, colonial censors supported it through increased surveillance of the radical literature circulating among the Chinese community. During the crisis of Chinese nationalism, 16 foreign publications were banned from import into the Straits Settlements versus only three that were banned in the years to 1931. Concurrently, Straits Settlements police raided and confiscated 10 different illegal printing press operations in the colony, each tied to banned publications. This resulted in 114 charges against individuals. Given that the police had not made any such raids during the crisis of Chinese nationalism, these records suggest a maturation of the anti-imperial – be it communist, radical nationalist, or anti-British – propaganda efforts within Singapore, from those by groups requiring imported tracts to those capable of producing their own.

This helpfully shows some of the limits of Special Branch's abilities and the reach and power of the ideological and transnational movements in this period. A narrative such as that presented here is not meant to advance an argument that Special Branch was uniquely successful in eliminating ideological fervor or anti-British sentiment – the broader story, after all, always ends in anti-colonial efforts succeeding in achieving independence. It does, rather, demonstrate

⁴⁹³ Onraet, *Singapore*, 71, 79-80, 96-97.

that the British actions provide us with an alternative window into the world of British imperial defence in the interwar Far East. Its efforts were creative, vigorous, and supportive of broader patterns and efforts within British officialdom across the region that pushed back against what was collectively seen as transnational ideologies that undermined the British-led status quo. But Special Branch was never capable of eliminating these threats entirely; its work targeted the symptoms rather than the cause of ideological fervor. If, however, as Martin Thomas has argued, repressive policing is usually born out of weakness rather than strength, then the targeted policing employed by Special Branch sits somewhere between competing visions of British imperial weakness or strength.⁴⁹⁴ If weak in the sense that the necessity for such efforts demonstrated their own imperial folly, it was strong in its ability to focus resources on particularly dangerous malcontents. Such selectivity was a luxury afforded to the Britons in the Far East by an underlying strength that is not often explored in the historiography.

In London and Sembawang, more work was done during this period to study the security of the Singapore Naval Base than on efforts to construct the base itself. The army's study of the proposed base defenses and gun positions, completed in 1927 by Lieutenant-General Sir Webb Gilman, proposed relocating certain guns to new positions and making significant investments in troop installations for manning the above. More importantly, however, it argued that, from a spending perspective, the proposals agreed upon by the Admiralty and Air Ministry in 1926 were too generous, given the British belief that naval reinforcements and the presence of fighter squadrons would sufficiently deter any would-be adversary. Amidst further Air Ministry musings about the continual advance of aerial capabilities in late 1927, and in 1928 the unexpectedly poor performance of coastal gun batteries in Malta and Portsmouth in a series of tests which raised

⁴⁹⁴ Thomas, "Paying the Butcher's Bill," 57.

questions about the viability of gun emplacements as a principal means of defense, the entire debate reopened.⁴⁹⁵ When the War Office, which oversaw the land-based guns that the Admiralty wanted as the base's principal means of defence, balked at continuing without further study and improvements in test results, the CID was forced to further delay expenditure of funds on the project. This had several effects. First, it saw the return of Air Ministry efforts to recalibrate the entire base defense system around reliance on locally based RAF squadrons. Hankey, ever astute and cognizant of the desire to avoid relitigating the acrimonious disputes of 1925 and 1926, sought an acceptable middle ground. He proposed that, in the interregnum before any decision could be made, and during which Singapore remained essentially defenseless, that the Air Ministry take up the temporary defense of the colony and in-progress base.⁴⁹⁶ This coddled Sir Hugh Trenchard, the powerful Chief of the Air Staff, into believing that a temporary agreement could be turned into something more permanent in a kind of *fait accompli*, provided a short-term defense for the base, and kept the door open to further options should realities change. Second, it saw the continuation of the status quo – a lack of general progress and consensus on the project, aside from the base's already completed floating dock, and the angst of those interested parties, from the Admiralty and its sister services to the Dominions of Australia and New Zealand, on whose defense strategies the base's completion relied, and on the Malay States, who had already

⁴⁹⁵ McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base*, 81-83; TNA, AIR8/102, Chief of the Air Staff Aide-Memoire on Singapore Defences, 21 November 1927, and, Notes on C.O.S. 119 – Scale of Attack on Singapore, 16 January 1928; AIR9/38, Singapore - Scale of Attack. Note by Chief of the Air Staff on C.O.S. Paper 122, 31 January 1928.

⁴⁹⁶ TNA, AIR8/102, Hankey to Trenchard, 11 June 1929.

generously contributed to the project.⁴⁹⁷ The Labour Government which came to power in the fall of 1929, took its expected course of action and suspended all work on the base not already under contract and in progress. This was done to cut costs but also to contribute to creating a positive atmosphere prior to the forthcoming London Naval Conference in 1930.⁴⁹⁸ A further delay was announced after the conference, given the Cabinet's desire to discuss the matter with the Dominions at the 1930 Imperial Conference at the end of the year.⁴⁹⁹ As stated above, it was then decided to suspend all contracts not already in progress and pause all work on the base for five years.⁵⁰⁰ By 1931, therefore, just as the worst effects of the Great Depression were beginning to be felt in Britain and in the region, little progress had been made on the base and even less agreement had been reached about how to defend it. Although, in January 1931, the Air Ministry finally capitulated to the desire of the War Office and Admiralty to proceed with the gun emplacements, it caveated its agreement with the statement that "tests were being done which could shed light on this debate."⁵⁰¹ The debate itself was, however, moot, given the Cabinet's decision to suspend all work on the base.

Simultaneous to these discussions were efforts to reduce the British force presence in the region. As has been discussed, following the end of the crisis of Chinese nationalism, the British

⁴⁹⁷ McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base*, 89; TNA, CAB 53/3/3, Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee – Minutes of the 78th Meeting, 11 June 1929.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid., 91; TNA, CAB23/62, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 6 November 1929; CAB8/15, CP464, The Singapore Naval Base, 1 April 1930; CAB5/7, CP346, History of the Singapore Naval Base, 4 June 1930.

⁴⁹⁹ TNA, CAB23/64, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 28 May 1930.

⁵⁰⁰ TNA, CAB23/65, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 15 October 1930; McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, 1919-1942*, 98-99.

⁵⁰¹ TNA, CAB53/3/11, Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee – Minutes of the 97th Meeting, 25 January 1931.

naval forces that had augmented the China Station departed the Far East. Withdrawing the Shanghai Defence Force proved more problematic, as Lampson argued that any decrement in forces – there had been 3 battalions in China through World War I until 1927 and 8 after that – would “weaken his hands diplomatically.”⁵⁰² When the War Office offered a compromise and proposed simply reducing the number of battalions to 6 in 1928, Lampson again balked. Given the supremacy of Chamberlain and the Foreign Office bureaucracy over British policy in China, such recommendations carried the day.⁵⁰³ Although often unable to amicably agree on strategies amongst themselves, such decisions greatly frustrated the COS Committee. The Admiralty and War Office lamented in a February 1928 COS meeting that, among other things, “Singapore was not secure,” and that under “the government’s policy, which had completely outstripped strategy...it was a practical impossibility to carry out all these tasks...many of them could not be carried out for at least ten years.”⁵⁰⁴ This was, of course, even prior to the reduction to defense spending that MacDonald’s Labour Government brought in with its return to office in 1929. If the COS were responsible for voicing such concerns, the ambivalence that permeated officialdom concerning the potential threat of Japan ran deep. It was even evident in the Admiralty. To provide just one such example, juxtaposed against its demands for greater naval funding was the grand opening, in November 1929, of the Gunroom Officers’ Club’s Squash and Racquet Courts in Hong Kong. Paid for by the Admiralty and run according to the Royal Navy

⁵⁰² TNA, CAB24/188, CP225, Far East: China: Reduction of Force in: - Note by General Staff, War Office, 19 August 1927.

⁵⁰³ See TNA, CAB24/189, CP279 (9 October 1928) to CAB24/191 (19 November 1928), among others, for examples of the numerous Cabinet Papers and memoranda circulating on this subject.

⁵⁰⁴ TNA, CAB53/2/6, Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee – Minutes of the 65th Meeting, 23 February 1928.

and Royal Marines Sports Handbook, the courts were built for the purpose of enriching maritime life and opportunities for service members.⁵⁰⁵ Small, local, for pleasure, and done at reasonable cost, the construction and anodyne opening of squash courts reflects neither an institution feverishly working to counter an activist international threat in the region nor one unconcerned about the existence of a threat in the first place. It accurately reflects, rather, organizations, in this case the Admiralty and the Royal Navy's China Station, that continued to operate normally for the era. They were simultaneously concerned about the potential of Japanese expansion in the Far East and supportive of sailors working on their backhands. Such realities, of course, coexisted without struggle in this era, and help illustrate for the contemporary audience Britain's dissonant approach to imperial defence in the Far East. If progressive, forward-leaning, and creative when countering the transnational threat of international communism, it was also ambivalent and noncommittal when considering whether or not Japan could even be considered an international threat.

⁵⁰⁵ TNA, ADM125/68, Provision of Squash Courts at Hong Kong, 14 November 1929.

Chapter IV – 1931-1934: Imperial Defence in an Era of Japanese Militarism

From the summer of 1931 to the spring of 1932, events in the Far East challenged British imperial defence efforts in new ways. In that light, the arrest of Hilaire Noulens in Shanghai in June 1931 and the Japanese attacks on Manchuria and Shanghai over the fall and winter of 1931 and 1932 give the modern reviewer the opportunity to see how imperial defence officials made sense of, and acted in response to, fresh shocks to the Far Eastern status quo. These responses illustrate the dissonant ways in which officials had understood and acted to counter the transnational and international threats to that status quo in the preceding years. As this chapter will show, British officials were well prepared for, and capably acted upon, the arrest of Noulens and the exposure of the Comintern's Far Eastern Bureau. This was in stark contrast to their response to the rapid expansion of Japanese militarism in China, which came to define geopolitics and questions of imperial defence in the Far East in the 1930s. Whereas Britain was able to shape and respond to the transnational crisis of Chinese nationalism from a position of relative strength over the course of the 1920s, this chapter will argue that Britain found itself ill-

positioned to do so the same in the face of the more conventional international threat of Japanese militarism in the 1930s.

Broadly, this chapter will examine British imperial defence efforts from mid-1931 to the end of 1934. It will continue to explore these efforts through the twin lenses of the transnational threat – no longer ascendant by the early 1930s – and the international threat of Japan that most clearly manifested itself in these years. It will do this, first, by exploring the British-led effort to unravel the Comintern's Far Eastern Bureau in the summer and fall of 1931. The culmination of British efforts to degrade and destroy communist and malign nationalist efforts in the region since at least the mid-1920s, this chapter will argue that this largely successful transnational effort, although representing but one stage of the longer ideological conflict, was accomplished almost entirely by imperial defence officials far from London utilizing systems and networks largely of their own creation. Secondly, it will explore Britain's responses to the Japanese seizure of Manchuria in the fall of 1931 and the fighting in Shanghai in the winter of 1932. These are the debates and decisions that have come to define the historiographical understanding of British imperial defence in the period and have led to characterizations of weakness or folly. This chapter will argue that, while British material weakness was real, continued strategic ambivalence towards both China and Japan equally contributed to British officials' inability to respond in any meaningful way. Thirdly, it will conclude by assessing the ways in which some officials in the region explored and understood one of the potential nexuses of these challenges – counterintelligence police operations across the region amidst the rise of Japanese militarism. In toto, this chapter will argue that this series of opportunities and crises, from Noulens to Manchuria to Shanghai, ably demonstrate the dual nature of British imperial defence in the interwar Far East. They show a Britain that was concurrently succeeding against a declining

transnational threat in juxtaposition to its ambivalent and resource-constrained response in the face of the rising international threat. This juxtaposition clearly captures the successes, failures, contradictions, and complexities that defined British Far Eastern imperial defence in the wider period.

Britain and the Comintern Far Eastern Bureau, 1931

The summer of 1931 provided the mature and professionalized Singapore Special Branch and its partner organizations across the region with an opportunity to demonstrate the growth in their capabilities on a wider scale. In the months prior, the Comintern's Far Eastern Bureau, under the direction of Hilaire Noulens living under alias in Shanghai, had begun coordinating the party's reorganization of the Malayan Communist Party. As has been discussed, the MCP's 1930 founding was quickly followed by a series of Special Branch raids that decapitated the organization and saw its leaders either imprisoned or exiled from the colony. In December 1930, the Royal Hong Kong Police followed suit, raiding the offices of the Comintern's Southern Bureau, which was meant to coordinate activities in the Nanyang (South Seas) areas under Western colonial rule, and shutting it down. In early 1931, the Comintern duly focused on reestablishing its base of operations in the region. To such ends, in April 1931 Joseph Ducroux, traveling on a stolen French passport in the name of Serge Lefranc, arrived in Singapore from Hong Kong. Ducroux, a Comintern agent posing as a representative from a French steel manufacturing business, was sent to the region with 100,000 Straits Dollars. His tasks were to revitalize the national branches of the earlier Nanyang Communist Party, reorganize both the MCP and the Straits-based leftist labor unions, reestablish linkages between the MCP and the

Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat in Shanghai, and cultivate opportunities for “the proper use of 50,000 dollars (gold) set aside by the PPTUS for work in Malaya and Burma to enrol the native element.”⁵⁰⁶

Ducroux himself had been a Comintern agent for some time. In spite of shifting aliases over a number of years, he was known to the British, having earlier been denied an entry visa into Ceylon in 1930. What is clear is that British and international police and intelligence organizations were aware of his identity from the moment of his arrival in Shanghai in early 1931, at which point the British-led Shanghai Municipal Police put him under surveillance. This continued, under the auspices of the *Sûreté Generale*, during the spring of 1931 as he traveled through French Indochina, before Special Branch, based on information from the IPI office in Calcutta (via its own team of counter-intelligence agents and codebreakers) began monitoring him upon his arrival in Singapore in April. They had little trouble, given Ducroux’s decision to establish himself at the luxurious Raffles Hotel and splash around gold dollars in the acquisition of offices and properties. This seamless handing over of surveillance responsibilities and real-time intelligence about a known communist operative was the product of the development of British-led cooperative intelligence sharing mechanisms across the region. Onraet and his most capable senior inspector, Prithvi Chand, were content to use Ducroux’s arrival as an opportunity to uncover broader Comintern plots and objectives before arresting him. To that end, Special Branch established its own bogus office opposite his, suborned his servants, recorded and

⁵⁰⁶ TNA, WO106/5814, Secret History of the Case of Joseph Ducroux alias Serge Lefranc in its local aspect only, that is to say the history of events in Singapore between 1st May 1931 and 23rd June 1931, 25 June 1931; Harper, *Underground Asia*, 624; Choon, *Absent History*, 146; Onraet, *Singapore*, 113; Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks*, 82.

surveilled all visitors conducting business with Ducroux, and even placed “in his office a peon who was a police spy.” Special Branch’s Chinese section, recently freed – via Clifford’s late-1920s reforms – from oversight by the Straits Settlements Department of Chinese Affairs, decrypted Ducroux’s poorly coded messages, some written in invisible ink and others using basic word and cypher codes.⁵⁰⁷

Special Branch arrested Ducroux alongside two of his MCP collaborators on 1 June. Using documents gleaned from the arrest and the intelligence gathered via surveillance, detective work, and postal censorship, it raided secret MCP offices, confiscated documents and printing presses, and arrested more than a dozen communist agitators. Elsewhere, in partnership with the *Sûreté Generale* and Hong Kong Special Branch, Onraet disseminated information gleaned from Ducroux’s address book to interested authorities across the region. In Saigon, the *Sûreté* arrested “in one fell swoop almost the entire central leadership of the Indochinese Communist Party.” On 6 June, in Hong Kong, the police arrested the Vietnamese revolutionary Nguyen Ai Quoc, the Comintern’s regional envoy and its chief linchpin, theorist, organizer, communicator, and propagandist.⁵⁰⁸ Within hours, French colonial authorities in Hanoi assembled a team of police and intelligence officials to travel to Hong Kong. Indeed, by the end of June the *Controllour*

⁵⁰⁷ TNA, CO273/589/3, Colonial Secretary, Straits Settlements, to Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, 11 January 1933; Harper, *Underground Asia*, 625; Choon, *Absent History*, 148, 150-151.

⁵⁰⁸ Onimaru, “Shanghai Connection,” 128, 130-131; Streets-Salter, “The Noulens Affair in East and Southeast Asia,” 399; Choon, *Absent History*, 148-149. See Gunn, *Ho Chi Minh in Hong Kong*, for the definitive account of the saga of Quoc’s arrest, imprisonment, and eventual release from Hong Kong.

Generale de la Sûreté Generale de l'Indo-Chine was himself in Singapore working out of the Special Branch office as he interviewed Ducroux and sought to connect the Comintern dots.⁵⁰⁹

It was in Shanghai, however, that the British-led police and intelligence-sharing systems achieved its greatest success. KMT police had since Chiang's 1927 purging of communists and radicals found common cause with the British-led Shanghai Municipal Police (SMP) and the French Concession Police, who were themselves focused on anti-communist efforts. This meant that, in the years before 1931, the KMT, SMP, and French police in Shanghai had developed a cooperative relationship that was in miniature akin to the regional anti-communist intelligence-sharing networks that existed in the region. They frequently exchanged intelligence reports with each other. Indeed, anti-communist intelligence gleaned from "less squeamish" KMT military interrogators often found its way into the hands of the international police forces after 1927, which they did not hesitate to use.⁵¹⁰

The system in Shanghai was activated from late May 1931 when Special Branch's postal censorship efforts in Singapore learned of a post office box in Shanghai with which Ducroux was in contact. As the arrests began in Singapore, Harry Steptoe (the Shanghai SIS officer), the SMP Special Branch and French Concession Police jointly surveilled the box. Its owner, Noulens, was a supposed Belgian professor of French and German within the International Settlement who had

⁵⁰⁹ TNA, WO106/5814, Secret History of the Case of Joseph Ducroux alias Serge Lefranc in its local aspect only, that is to say the history of events in Singapore between 1st May 1931 and 23rd June 1931, 25 June 1931; Gunn, *Ho Chi Minh in Hong Kong*, 127; Streets-Salter, "The Noulens Affair in East and Southeast Asia," 400; Harper, *Underground Asia*, 626.

⁵¹⁰ Frederic Wakeman, *Policing Shanghai 1927-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 135-136, 142, 144-146.

first arrived in the spring of 1930. Noulens, the *nom de guerre* of Yakov Rudnik, was the head of the Comintern's Far Eastern Bureau, Quoc's superior, and the man who had sent Ducroux to Singapore in the first place. The authorities in Shanghai had, up to this point, been vaguely aware of the presence of a Comintern agent in Shanghai but did not know his identity or importance. Having identified Noulens, the SMP, in keeping with the actions taken in Singapore and Hong Kong, surveilled him, ascertained the necessary warrants, and raided his properties, arresting both he and his wife on 15 June.⁵¹¹

Noulens' effects rapidly provided the Shanghai Municipal Police with more information and raw intelligence than they could have hoped for.⁵¹² In his office, they found:

three steel boxes containing hundreds of reports, correspondence, handwritten letters, and financial records... These papers, in turn, revealed the connections... to China, Japan and its dependencies, the Philippines, Indochina, and Malaya/Indonesia. Further investigation brought to light five separate addresses connected to the FEB, as well as eight post office boxes, four telegraph addresses, and bank accounts at seven locations... Catastrophically for the FEB, the confiscated papers contained the various pseudonyms (and handwriting samples for decoding them) of the many individuals it employed... documents indicating agents who worked in the Chinese government or in European police organizations, and the key to decoding enciphered documents.

⁵¹¹ TNA, WO106/5814, Secret History of the Case of Joseph Ducroux alias Serge Lefranc in its local aspect only, that is to say the history of events in Singapore between 1st May 1931 and 23rd June 1931, 25 June 1931; WO106/5815, Shanghai Intelligence Bureau to GOC China Command, Report on the Arrest in Shanghai of the Communist Agent Noulens, 27 August 1931; Baxter, "The Secret Intelligence Service and the Case of Hilaire Noulens," 54; Choon, *Absent History*, 151-152; Frederick Litten, "The Noulens Affair," *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 138 (1994): 492; Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asia Networks*, 86; Wakeman, *Policing Shanghai 1927-1937*, 147-148.

⁵¹² TNA, CO323/1931, Communist Activities in China, Federated Malay States, etc., (The "NOULENS CASE."), 7 March 1932; Gunn, *Ho Chi Minh in Hong Kong*, 47.

In the weeks and months that followed, the British and partner intelligence authorities across the region pored over the hundreds of documents in multiple languages and codes. Among the trove of materials discovered were the keys to Comintern cryptographic systems and ciphers, differently coded to correspond with Comintern operatives in the Far East on the one hand and the Comintern leadership in Europe and Moscow on the other. French colonial intelligence broke the ciphers. This helped to reveal the structure of the Far Eastern Bureau and its partner organizations, its finances, tradecraft practices, and the preferred methods and routes of communications from Moscow to Shanghai. Crucially, it also included the names and aliases of Comintern couriers and operatives throughout the region, as well as the identities of communist operatives within the KMT secret services and the SMP. British and other police services used this information to quickly disrupt and destroy the Comintern network in Shanghai and beyond. In 1931, British police alone conducted 95 further raids, arrested 276 suspected communists, and seized hundreds of items of communist literature and nearly 1 million copies of propaganda across the region. The contemporary existence of separately filed, marked, and staffed copies of the 1932 Noulens Report or other documents and observations associated with the case in Colonial Office, Foreign Office, War Office, India Office, and Admiralty archives in Kew Gardens and the British Library goes some way towards illustrating the breadth of intelligence dissemination across the working-level structures of empire in the 1930s.⁵¹³

⁵¹³ TNA, CO323/1931, Communist Activities in China, Federated Malay States, etc., (The “NOULENS CASE.”), 7 March 1932; Streets-Salter, “The Noulens Affair in East and Southeast Asia,” 399-400; Baxter, “The Secret Intelligence Service and China,” 136-138; Onimaru, “Shanghai Connection,” 129; Best, “Constructing an Image,” 404; Belogurova, *The Nanyang Revolution*, 53; Wakeman, *Policing Shanghai 1927-1937*, 148. In addition

There is no indication that at any point during the successful 1931 campaign against the Far Eastern Bureau did the Cabinet, CID, or the Chiefs of Staff Subcommittee received a single Cabinet paper, briefing, update, assessment, or after-action report on any part of the effort. This reflects several truths. First, and as has been stated, the Cabinet and CID were principally focused on those issues and decisions that affected grand strategy and resource allocation, the broad areas of their remit. They were, within the empire, the only ones who could. In the struggle against transnational communism, on the other hand, no one needed them to make decisions. Second, Cabinet and CID focus on transnational issues arose only when parts of the empire found themselves in crisis. From 1925 to 1927, one should not be surprised that their focus centered on these issues routinely. In the summer of 1931, however, no such crisis called out for their attention. As has been shown, the arrest and subsequent advances against the Comintern in the Far East in these years were part and parcel of the robust but normal imperial defence capabilities that Special Branch had helped to build. At the same time, the fact that this imperial defence campaign was being waged at the colonial and working level illustrates two things. First, it explains why so much of the historiography of imperial defence, rooted as it is in its fixation on the budgetary battles and questions of high policy, ignores a subject such as this one. Second, it shows how comfortable Cabinet ministers and senior members of government were with so much regional policy being created and regional activities being planned and executed without

to the already cited Colonial Office and War Office records, see FO 1093 for equally rich Foreign Office documentation on the matter.

the need for direct input or guidance from the imperial core. Absent a crisis, imperial officials were free to prosecute their efforts so long as they aligned with broad strategic goals.⁵¹⁴

It was in those spaces beyond the formal British Empire that the maturation of the Singapore-centric political intelligence and law enforcement systems of the interwar Far East can perhaps best be observed. The Noulens papers showed, in detail, the Comintern liaison network and information on communist movements in China, Japan, Japanese Korea and Formosa, French Indochina, Siam, Malaya, the NEI, and the American Philippines. With each of these partners, however deeply attached they were or were not to Britain's Singapore-based intelligence system, the British passed along intelligence from the Noulens raid. In Japan, raids on communist safehouses came about because of the intelligence gleaned from Noulens and dozens were arrested. In Siam, the monarchy, under the leadership of the British-led police, increased arrests and harried communist agitators and sympathizers. In the NEI and French Indochina, the intelligence partnerships with British Malaya and Hong Kong were deepened and higher-level coordination meetings scheduled. American officials happily accepted the information for internal processing and consumption. With regards to the KMT, British officials shared not just intelligence but Noulens himself, who was convicted of espionage and jailed in Nanking. Given the Far Eastern Bureau's disproportionate focus on developing communism inside China – including monthly payments to the CCP of 25,000 gold dollars – much of the

⁵¹⁴ See CAB23, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes (1931-1935); CAB 24, Cabinet Memoranda (1931); CAB2/5, Committee of Imperial Defence/Standing Defence Sub-Committee Minutes (February 1927 – July 1933); and CAB4/21 Committee of Imperial Defence Miscellaneous Memoranda (March 1931 – December 1932) for records of relevant Cabinet and CID meeting conclusions/minutes and associated memoranda that were presented to each body for deliberation.

information gleaned was gold-dust to Chiang's intelligence services. Noulens's arrest thus delivered a further blow to CCP operational security in China, given that in April 1931 the CCP intelligence chief, Gu Shunzhang, had already defected to the nationalists. In June 1931, in fact, at just the moment that the Far Eastern Bureau arrests were rousing international interest, the KMT was itself arresting and eliminating much of the CCP leadership across China.⁵¹⁵ The British disseminated the Noulens Report widely. In May 1932, the SIS produced for the Foreign Office a sanitized version its original March 1932 report, which was sent in full to the police and intelligence organizations in "Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa, Shanghai (Settlement), U.S.A., France, Belgium, China and Japan." This was done both to protect British intelligence sources and methods in the region and to remove any analysis of the Noulens documents that shed light on British intelligence interests or capabilities elsewhere in the region. Given the frequency of inter-imperial meetings on the combined efforts, the SIS and Foreign Office conveniently stated that the official purpose of the new edition was to ensure that "both parties may have before them copies of the same report and embarrassment may be completely avoided."⁵¹⁶

⁵¹⁵ TNA, CO323/1931, Communist Activities in China, Federated Malay States, etc., (The "NOULENS CASE."), 7 March 1932; FO371/15644, F11678/300/17, Suggested meeting between British, French, and Netherland Authorities in the Far East to discuss concerted movement against communism, 8 October 1931; FO1093/99, Letter to the Far Eastern Secretariat of the Comintern, 10 June 1931; Baxter, "The Secret Intelligence Service and China," 136-138, 146; Onimaru, "Shanghai Connection," 129; Choon, *Absent History*, 153-154; Aldrich, *The Key to the South*, 57; Best, "'We Are Virtually At War with Russia,'" 214; Harper, *Underground Asia*, 626.

⁵¹⁶ TNA, FO1093/92, Addendum to CX/1434, dated 7 March 1932, 11 May 1932.

In the months that followed the initial arrests and at least into 1932, the Far Eastern Bureau effectively collapsed. Indeed, in the summer of 1932 members of the nascent ICP traveled to Shanghai to liaise with the FEB only to find it still moribund. They were instead directed towards underground contacts within the CCP for guidance.⁵¹⁷ Was the Comintern in the Far East, however, as Ban Kah Choon and others have argued, a destroyed and crippled organization? No, at least according to observers at the time. Valentine Vivian, head of counterintelligence for SIS and the principal author of the March 1932 Noulens Report, argued that the raids and arrests, “did little more than administer a temporary and partial check to the communist-inspired centres of revolt or disaffection.” While Comintern sub-stations, liaison networks, and operational channels were “crippled for the time being,” and the nearer objectives of communism would have been rendered more remote, “that seems as much as can safely be claimed.” Supporting this argument was the fact that seven of the nine westerners who worked in the Far Eastern Bureau in Shanghai alongside Noulens and his wife escaped both arrest and positive identification. Indeed, some of them were, according to Far Eastern Bureau financial records discovered at the time, earning more money than Noulens, suggesting the possibility that more senior members of the Comintern may have also been in Shanghai in 1931 and escaped arrest. And yet the documents also showed Comintern efforts in the Far East to be at something of a low ebb in 1930 and 1931. The organization was only spending roughly \$50,000 per year to support communist activities across Japan, Korea, Formosa and the western colonies of modern Southeast Asia, a pittance in comparison to the policing budget in the Straits Settlements alone. In an era of general Soviet retrenchment and the communist failures in the region – from the aborted uprisings in the NEI in 1926 and French Indochina in 1930 to the victory of the KMT in

⁵¹⁷ Wakeman, *Policing Shanghai*, 1927-1937, 151.

China in 1927-1928 and its turning against the CCP – British efforts to strengthen the region against communist provocations hindered Comintern capabilities in the region through the early 1930s. It might, thus, more accurately be argued that the Noulens affair provided Britain with an important tactical victory in its longer war against the transnational threat of communism. As will be discussed, the dearth of effective Comintern activity in the years that followed goes some way towards demonstrating both its own shortcomings and the effectiveness of the British-led response. Yet it is also true that even the British could see by 1931 that overshadowing the Comintern's failure was the slow and continuous growth of indigenous national sentiments across the region. Inspired by the KMT (to say nothing of India), and best exemplified in Indochina and especially the NEI, both the British and the Soviets recognized that local indigenous national movements had the potential to undermine the foundations of western imperialism while also serving as a bulwark against Soviet-imported communism. On the question of whether British-led anti-communist efforts in the region as described here had the secondary benefit of delinking Soviet communism from indigenous nationalist movements and, thus, fostering the growth of those movements in directions independent of communism, further research is required. Of those states and colonies in question here, only in Indochina was the nationalist mantle taken up by communist revolutionaries, and in that case only after the disastrous 1930 VNQDD uprising in Yen Bay was crushed by the French. In China, Siam, the NEI, and the Philippines, the nationalist movements of the early 1930s were preponderantly wary of communism or anti-communist themselves.⁵¹⁸

⁵¹⁸ TNA, CO323/1931, Communist Activities in China, Federated Malay States, etc., (The "NOULENS CASE."), 7 March 1932; WO106/5815, Shanghai Intelligence Bureau to GOC China Command, Report on the

In a certain sense, however, historiographical debates over the relative importance of the Noulens affair within the broader transnational struggle miss the point that a broader reading of the archival record makes clear. This is that the British-led 1931 defeat of the Comintern's Far Eastern Bureau was not an outlier or an exceptional example of investigative sleuthing. It was, rather, a routine operation. If larger in geographic scale or post-facto metaphorical meaning, it remained at heart a police and intelligence operation. This also helps answer the question of why the Cabinet and CID remained aloof from the arrests and succeeding campaign. It was not a crisis. It was routine. Its success was not random and its actors not inexperienced. This was a standard operation that required the employment of skills, capabilities, and communications systems that had been honed over the preceding years. The scale of its success was built not on luck but on diligence. This was imperial defence. Historians in search of continuity between the interwar and postwar years are right to offer this as an example of pre-Cold War western anti-communist intelligence collaboration, but wrong if they characterize it as unique. If anything, this narrative demonstrates that this was but one chapter in a long-running transnational effort that had been ongoing in the British-led Far East since at least the mid-1920s with varying levels of active participation from Japan, the forces of Chinese nationalism, Siam, and each of the western colonial powers. Operations such as this one were the rule, not the exception. Given that, one can imagine Colonial, War, or Foreign Office officials in 1931 reading these reports and not

Arrest in Shanghai of the Communist Agent Noulens, 27 August 1931; WO32/21122, MI2 Memorandum on the Relationship between Communism and Nationalism in the Spread of Unrest in Eastern Asia, 21 September 1931; Foster, "Secret Police Cooperation and the Roots of Anti-Communism in Southeast Asia," 346-348; Onimaru, "Shanghai Connection," 129; Streets-Salter, "The Noulens Affair in East and Southeast Asia," 402-403, 408-409; Baxter, "The Secret Intelligence Service and the Case of Hilaire Noulens," 56-61.

even considering the need to have them discussed at the CID. It was just everyday imperial defence at work.

Britain and the Seizure of Manchuria, Fall 1931

In the fall of 1931, just as Special Branch and its partners were exploiting the intelligence from the Noulens arrest, events in Manchuria unfolded that raised the specter of Japan as an immediate threat to the Far Eastern international order. In early September, SIS and military intelligence sources reported that the patience of Japan's Kwantung Army, responsible for overseeing Japanese interests and railway security within south Manchuria, was nearing exhaustion.⁵¹⁹ In the macro-sense, this frustration was rooted in its inability to formally separate Manchuria from the rest of republican China as the latter moved towards unification in the late 1920s. Japan had long sought to exert preponderant economic and political influence over Manchuria, which it saw as a source for industrial raw materials, a sink for surplus population, a bread basket for a country lacking significant arable land, a marketplace for manufactured products, and a shield protecting Japanese colonial Korea and the home islands from mainland threats.⁵²⁰ This influence, strong but not uncontested in the first decades of the twentieth century, was threatened by the unification of China and the ending of the warlord era. For many Chinese, the establishment of an avowedly nationalist government meant the complete overthrowing of foreign privilege, including the Japanese presence in Manchuria. In response to Chinese

⁵¹⁹ Best, *British Intelligence and the Japanese Challenge in Asia*, 98.

⁵²⁰ TNA, FO371/13250, F7095/7095/23, *Japan's Position in the Far East*, by Sadao Saburi, as read at the Royal United Services Institute, 12 December 1928.

pressure, the Kwantung Army began instituting its own policies to advance Japanese interests in the region.⁵²¹ British observers noted such sentiments at the time. As presciently reported by the British military attaché to China, Colonel G.R.V. Steward, on 8 September 1931 it was, “Now only a question of time and occurrence of a suitable ‘incident’ before the Japanese will be forced to assert themselves.”⁵²²

On the morning of Friday, 18 September, Admiral Sir Howard Kelly, the Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Navy’s China Station, was touring the hill country outside of Peking with Zhang Xueliang, the semi-autonomous ruler of Manchuria. That night, Kelly and the Young Marshal dined at Lampson’s home. The evening went off “remarkably well” according to Lampson’s diary.⁵²³ Late that evening, Kwantung Army soldiers set off a small explosive on a section of the South Manchuria Railroad close to the town of Mukden. Disingenuously claiming that the Chinese had planted the bomb and were attacking Japanese interests, elements of the Kwantung Army seized Mukden and surrounding areas, beginning the process of the army’s occupation of the entire province.⁵²⁴ On 19 September, with Japanese forces on the march, Zhang sent the diplomat Wellington Koo to probe Lampson on the invasion as it related both to the League of Nations, of which both China and Japan were members, and the Nine-Power Treaty signed in Washington in 1922, in which all signatories, among them Japan, agreed to uphold the sovereignty and territorial integrity of China. Lampson, having not received a report

⁵²¹ Barnhart, *Japan Prepares for Total War*, 30-31.

⁵²² Best, *British Intelligence and the Japanese Challenge in Asia*, 98.

⁵²³ TNA, ADM125/69, Report of Proceedings of the Commander-in-Chief, China, 1-30 September 1931, 1 October 1931; MEAC, Lampson papers, Box 1, Lampson Diary, 18 September 1931.

⁵²⁴ Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 351-352.

on the incident, demurred, and spent the day sightseeing. That evening, he attended another party where he again conferred with Zhang and Koo. Outgunned by the Japanese, Zhang had ordered his men not to oppose the invasion and he now probed Lampson on potential international solutions to the crisis. Lampson, lacking adequate information, again stalled for time.⁵²⁵

As British reports on events began to trickle through, they were colored by an understandable sense of confusion. On 19 September, the British Embassy in Tokyo downplayed the incident, noting that the Japanese Foreign Ministry, which was itself unclear about the Kwantung Army's role in the deceit, had described the events in Mukden as "local incident[s]" that would not distort Japan's policy of conciliation of China.⁵²⁶ In London, the Cabinet meetings of 20 and 21 September focused on the decision to take sterling off the gold standard. By the 21st, the news became clearer. As Chinese nationalist groups in Singapore and Hong Kong began flying their KMT flags at half-mast and engaging in demonstrations, Lampson pieced together Japanese culpability. This was rooted in the fact that the Kwantung Army's general staff arrived in Mukden from Dairen at 3:00am on 19 September, only hours after the "attack." This indicated that they must have departed in advance of the very incident that was supposed to have triggered their hasty movement.⁵²⁷ On 22 September, an initial Cabinet discussion on the crisis simply took note of the Foreign Office's request that Japanese forces be pulled back to their previously

⁵²⁵ TNA, ADM125/69, Report of Proceedings of the Commander-in-Chief, China, 1-30 September 1931, 1 October 1931; MEAC, Lampson papers, Box 1, Lampson Diary, 18 September 1931.

⁵²⁶ TNA, FO405/269, Situation in Manchuria, 19 September 1931.

⁵²⁷ TNA, CO273/572/2, *Monthly Review of Chinese Affairs, August-September 1931*, October 1931; Best, *British Intelligence and the Japanese Challenge in Asia*, 98-99.

occupied positions and that observers be allowed into the area.⁵²⁸ The only evidence of British frustration with Japan in the immediate aftermath of the attack came from Kelly, who was upset at lapses in Japanese protocol “due to an Admiral in His Majesty’s Fleet.”⁵²⁹

This lackluster response illustrates that Britain that did not initially see itself as facing a moment of crisis. The Cabinet next discussed China on 2 October, ten days after the seizure of Mukden, but only to draft language for the nascent Anglo-Chinese extraterritoriality treaty.⁵³⁰ The CID met only sparingly over the fall and winter of 1931/1932 and did not address Manchuria at all, instead taking reports on Spanish Morocco, the possible establishment of a monarchy in French-mandated Syria, and the sixth annual report of the Oil Board. According to official records, the Chiefs of Staff Sub-committee, almost unbelievably, did not meet formally between the spring of 1931 and the winter of 1932, a fact confirmed by Hankey’s daily engagement diary.⁵³¹ Consumed by Britain’s own political and economic instability in the fall of 1931 amidst the collapse of financial markets, and the formation of a new National Government, policymakers had little time to consider distant events.

Within government, there was little inclination to question the narrative of events put forward by Japan. There was, indeed, some sympathy with Britain’s old ally, as relayed by the

⁵²⁸ TNA, ADM125/69, Report of Proceedings of the Commander-in-Chief, China, 1-30 September 1931, 1 October 1931; CAB23/68, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 22 September 1931.

⁵²⁹ TNA, CO129/536/6, Peel to Cunliffe-Lister, 12 January 1932; ADM125/69, Report of Proceedings of the Commander-in-Chief, China, 1-30 September 1931, 1 October 1931.

⁵³⁰ TNA, CAB23/68, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 2 October 1931.

⁵³¹ See TNA, CAB 2/5 and CAB 4/21, respectively, for CID meeting minutes and papers. See CAB 53/3 for Chiefs of Staff Sub-committee meeting minutes and associated documents. See CAB 63/59 for records of Hankey’s engagement diary during his service as Secretary to the Cabinet, CID, and Chiefs of Staff Sub-committee.

Director of Military Operations and Intelligence, General William Bartholomew, who remarked, days after the attack, that, “I am glad there are some people left who kick back when their nationals are ill-treated or even murdered.”⁵³² This was a pithy summation of an anti-Chinese and pro-Japanese view that had been taking shape within the corners of Whitehall since the late 1920s. It reflected something akin to Clementi’s notion that Japan, serious in nature and stolid in policy, was more dependable than China. Such feelings were rooted not only in a sense of comradeship and nostalgia for the alliance but in a disdain for Chamberlain’s policy of conciliation towards China from 1926 forward. This view saw Japan’s quest for raw materials and markets on the Asian mainland as rational and viewed its expansion in terms of *realpolitik* – the growth of a vigorous, energized, and modern anti-communist Japan capable of checking the rising power of the Soviet Union in and around Northeast Asia – and the benefits that could accrue to the British Empire from this. The War Office, ever focused on the Russian threat, had formally advanced this argument since 1929. In October 1931, just weeks after the incident, Bartholomew, in a note on Anglo-Japanese relations, wrote that since the Washington Conference in 1922, “Japanese policy, both in Manchuria and in China, has been on the whole remarkable for [its] spirit of moderation...of China, on the other hand, similar moderation cannot be exclaimed in her persistent violation of Japanese treaty rights in Manchuria.” “China has in recent years, consistently pursued towards Japan a policy of intense provocation.” Lampson had acknowledged as much in 1927 shortly after arriving in Peking, in his own notes on the importance of Japan serving as a bulwark against the Russians in Northeast Asia.⁵³³ Indeed, in

⁵³² Best, *British Intelligence and the Japanese Challenge in Asia*, 98.

⁵³³ TNA, WO106/5493, DMOI Note on Anglo-Japanese Relations, 22 October 1931; Barnhart, *Japan Prepares for Total War*, 39.

the aftermath of the incident, Foreign Office reporting on the issue to the League of Nations came only after it had expunged all references to Japanese premeditation and culpability from its documents.⁵³⁴ British officials were in no mood to publicly tarnish Japan. Perhaps the most vigorous defence of the Japanese position in Manchuria came from Sir John Pratt. Writing some months later, in the aftermath of the spreading of the Sino-Japanese conflict to Shanghai, on events in Manchuria, Pratt provided a voice to a British officialdom that was, at most, ambivalent in their concerns for China.

In Manchuria the Japanese as regards the fundamental issues at stake had a great deal of right on their side. The Chinese were almost entirely in the wrong. By their corruption, incapacity and blind conceit they were reducing to ruin one of the wealthiest regions in the world, thus going a long way towards undoing the good work of the Japanese who had made prosperity possible by keeping Manchuria free from civil war. They ignored both Japan's treaty rights and the historical justification for Japan's position in Manchuria.⁵³⁵

These were the thoughts of a bureaucracy little interested in the territorial integrity of distant Manchuria, a province in which Britain had scant commercial interest. As Clementi had argued, Japan was not a threat to the British Far East but potentially its greatest partner and protector. An anti-communist Japan strongly positioned in Northeast Asia would strengthen Britain's ability to contain communist influence and military power across the region and, it could be argued, thus insulate British interests further south from the specter of the communist threat.⁵³⁶ Was Japan not also the country, many argued, that had continued in goodwill to negotiate and update the naval treaties that were the foundation of maritime security? Such interpretations, as well as immediate British self-interest – the Macdonald government was eager

⁵³⁴ Best, *British Intelligence and the Japanese Challenge in Asia*, 99.

⁵³⁵ No. 216, Memorandum, by Sir John Pratt, 31 January 1932, *Documents on British Foreign Policy (DBFP)*, 1919-1939, Series 2, Volume 9.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.*, 97, 99; Nish, "Japan in Britain's View of the International System," 38.

for Japanese attendance at and participation in the forthcoming Geneva Disarmaments Conference – went some way towards overriding the concerns of some with the British establishment who more clearly saw Japanese actions as military aggrandizement.

This mixture of sentimentality and realpolitik conveniently ignored the reality that, whatever political gains might be had at the expense of the Soviet Union, all parties involved had already agreed that Manchuria was in fact sovereign Chinese territory. That China would seek to use the issue of sovereignty – and thus, the League – to its advantage in the dispute was clear from the moment of action, as evidenced by Koo's raising of the matter with Lampson as soon as 19 September. China needed League support, after all, to its claims if it was going to succeed in bringing any significant diplomatic pressure to bear on Japan. It was the linking of Manchuria to the legitimacy of the League, rather than any sense of economic and political calamity, that forced Britain to engage with this distant crisis and which made League meetings on the issue ones of political and strategic importance.

The first robust Cabinet discussions on Manchuria took place on 11 November, when Sir John Simon, just installed as Foreign Secretary the week before, briefed the Cabinet on the ramifications of events with respect to the League. Simon communicated the feeling among League members that “although Japan has undoubtedly acted in a way contrary to the principles of the Covenant by taking the law into her own hands, she has a real grievance against China,” given its treaty rights in South Manchuria and the general lawlessness that she had endured. Although the League had passed a resolution on 24 October mandating Japan to withdraw its troops, Simon and the Cabinet understood that Japan would not comply, and that the League had neither any mechanism to force it to do so nor the political will to introduce sanctions. The danger for Britain lay in the possibility that China would escalate its appeal to the League by

requesting that members invoke Article XVI of the League of Nations Covenant. This, if approved, would require League members to immediately sever all financial, commercial, and interstate relations with Japan. This was an outcome that Britain and other European signatories anxiously wished to avoid, knowing full well that most countries, though signatories to the Covenant, would demur. Simon was equally pessimistic about the idea of holding a League inquiry into the matter to produce its own findings. He argued that Japan would never willingly withdraw its forces from Manchuria until its conditions, which were unacceptable to the Chinese, were met. His reasoning concluded with an assessment that presciently foreshadowed events just over a year later. He surmised that in such a situation, the League “will have failed in its immediate object of putting an end to Japanese occupation of Chinese territory. It will have to look on while its own summons is ignored. It will have to realize that it has failed to enforce the fundamental principle that a State may not, without prior recourse to the recognized means of peaceful settlement, take the law into its own hands.” This, of course, was the stated purpose for the very existence of the League in the first place.⁵³⁷

In truth, then, the Japanese invasion and occupation of Manchuria was not a crisis for British interests in the Far East. The crisis, rather, was induced by the Chinese appeal to the League for assistance, solidarity, and arbitration. Once the League assumed this perceived responsibility for Manchuria, Britain was forced to follow it down a path that none in Whitehall wanted to go. The crisis in Manchuria was, thus, a crisis for the League of Nations. The events of 1931 forced Simon to deal with the same contradiction in British interests and policies that Chamberlain had had to navigate in 1925, namely that British national interests were antithetical

⁵³⁷ TNA, CAB24/224, CP294, Manchuria, 23 November 1931; CAB23/69, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 11 November 1931.

to League policies and regulations. Chamberlain had been able to navigate the morass of Chinese chaos and instability from 1925-1927 by ensuring that the issues of Chinese nationalism then ensnaring the country were considered internal to China and, thus, beyond the remit of the League. In 1931, this was not possible. From 11 November, therefore, the Cabinet worked to accomplish contradictory goals: supporting the League's processes for understanding and resolving the situation – which was perhaps the least-worst League option, given that, if nothing else, it bought time for the issue to recede in importance – and not directly antagonizing Japan. Over the course of November and December, the government, in contrast to its actions during the crisis of Chinese nationalism, decided not to take a unilateral line towards the crisis, as it was “opposed to the British representative taking up a special and separate attitude” distinct from that of the League.⁵³⁸ British reticence to state its own attitude on the subject coincided with the late-1931 departure of a League Commission headed by the Earl of Lytton to investigate the incident. This meant that any League determination on the issue would be much delayed regardless. To Whitehall, the risk of open antagonism between Britain and Japan in the Far East was unthinkable and to be avoided at all costs.

In retrospect, this seems to be something of a rubicon. Britain, heretofore perceived to be one of the principal great powers in the Far East, was willingly relinquishing its role as the central arbiter of events to the League of Nations. The reality was more complex. The crisis in Manchuria, however ill-defined and legally complex, invited League involvement from the start. Although Britain's national interest, as many argued, lay with giving Japan a free hand to maintain formal or informal dominance in Manchuria, doing so would contradict the tenets of the

⁵³⁸ TNA, CAB23/69, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 25 November 1931; CAB23/69, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 10 December 1931.

League, which Ramsay MacDonald and most Britons saw as the principal international bulwark against conflict and, as such, a tool for reducing defence expenditures and alleviating the economic crisis.⁵³⁹ Firmly condemning Japanese aggression and vociferously championing League efforts in support of China would, on the other hand, be equally problematic for Britain. It would potentially invite a firm Japanese response and thus force Britain to defend its interests in the Far East. This could only have been done through the sending of forces to the region. As this narrative has demonstrated, however, no truly substantive work had yet begun on the naval base in Singapore, and no political will existed in Britain to launch such an endeavour.⁵⁴⁰ Stuck between unappealing options, Britain's strategic equivocation can be understood. It voiced overt support for the League to resolve the process in due course – even as the Kwantung Army created new realities on the ground – but issued no individual statements condemning Japan.⁵⁴¹ This policy, while perhaps not inspiring, was at least rational in that the Cabinet well understood that Britain had no real interest in or ability to stop Japan from absorbing Manchuria and much to lose if it attempted to do so. And yet in taking such a course, Britain inevitably weakened its broader policy of supporting and bolstering the League as the ultimate arbiter of international politics. If able, in late 1931, to point to the Lytton Commission, then enroute to Manchuria, as a

⁵³⁹ Steiner, *The Lights That Failed*, 750; Stephen Roskill, *Naval Policy Between the Wars, Vol. 1: The Period of Anglo-American Antagonism, 1919-1929* (London: Collins, 1968), 34-35; Thorne, "The Shanghai Crisis of 1932," 1627.

⁵⁴⁰ John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System, 1830-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 424-425.

⁵⁴¹ TNA, CAB23/69, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 25 November 1931; CAB24/234, CP404, The Lytton Report, Japan, and the League of Nations, Simon memorandum, 19 November 1932; CAB24/238, CP42, The Far East and Geneva, Simon memorandum, 18 February 1933.

symbol of the strength of the League, Simon's Cabinet Paper from November 1931 had already foreshadowed the League's impending failure. To the keen observer, Britain's sacrifice of a long-term investment in return for short-term security demonstrated the hollow nature of conventional British military and naval power in the Far East. It lacked both the confidence and the capability to deter Japan or lead any effort to restrain or sanction it. This is the story of imperial defence so often cited as emblematic of the interwar British Far East. Ironically, it took place concurrent to one of the great, and largely ignored, victories of British imperial defence in its fight against transnational communism.

Britain and the Shanghai Incident, Winter 1932

Whatever stresses the Japanese invasion of Manchuria brought upon British policymakers in the fall of 1931, they were enlarged tenfold by events in early 1932 when the Sino-Japanese conflict spread to Shanghai. In late January, tensions boiled over in a series of disturbances arising from many Chinese boycotting Japanese goods. A series of clashes in and around Shanghai between workers, monks, police, and civilians over the course of the month brought Chinese and Japanese forces into direct conflict on the night of 28 January.⁵⁴²

The fighting at Shanghai presented a different sort of challenge for Britain than that in Manchuria. As the center of British commerce and investment in the region, the city was a hugely important component of Britain's Far Eastern empire, one through which capital flowed and exports were financed. This centrality had spurred the deployment of troops to Shanghai in

⁵⁴² MEAC, Lampson papers, Box 1, Lampson Diary, 29 January 1932; TNA, ADM125/70, Report of Proceedings of the Commander-in-Chief, China, 1-30 January 1932, 1 February 1932.

the winter and spring of 1927 to ensure the defence of British interests as the forces of Chinese nationalism reached the Yangtze River region during Chiang's Northern Expedition. Pratt noted as much in a January 1932 memorandum just before the outbreak of violence. He argued that as Japan increased its military capabilities around Shanghai amidst rising unrest, it would undoubtedly cite the 1927 British-led intervention in defence of its interests as both a precedent and justification for any similar action. Pratt was the first to argue that Britain's major policy objective in the forthcoming crisis should be, in continuation of its approach to events in Manchuria, to "bring a moderating influence on things" and, thus, avoid confrontation at all costs.⁵⁴³

Unlike after Mukden, the machinery of empire swung into action within hours of the fighting erupting, as Japanese air, ground, and naval forces poured into the city and confronted China's 19th Route Army. Brennan began working almost immediately to bring about a ceasefire. On the evening of 29 January, the Cabinet met to discuss the crisis, and the Foreign Office began consultations with Peking, Tokyo, and Washington while simultaneously drafting policy papers on the broader ramifications for British interests for further Cabinet review.⁵⁴⁴ From Geneva, Lord Robert Cecil, the British delegate to the League, wrote to Simon expressing his concern that the new Japanese spirit of militarism in the Far East threatened not only British interests and the regional status quo but also, more fundamentally, the viability of the League as an international institution. Cecil, in effect, cut through the misplaced belief that many officials,

⁵⁴³ No. 120, Memorandum by Sir John Pratt, 26 January 1932, *DBFP, 1919-1939*, Series 2, Volume 9.

⁵⁴⁴ No. 148, Brennan (Shanghai) to Holman (Peking), 29 January 1932, *DBFP*, Series 2, Volume 9; No. 186, Brennan (Shanghai) to Simon, 30 January 1932, *DBFP*, Series 2, Volume 9; TNA, CAB23/70, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 27 January 1932; CAB23/70, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 29 January 1932.

Simon among them, had after Mukden. This was that Britain, in seeking to maintain a pro-League rather than anti-Japan position, could maintain positive enough relations with Japan to muddle through the crisis with both its national and League interests intact. To Cecil, the Japanese attack on Shanghai affirmed that such a choice had always been a false one – Britain would, in the end, lose not only Japan but also the credibility of the League.⁵⁴⁵ One did not need to be an ardent backer of the League to understand that Cecil's assessment accurately reflected the way in which seemingly distant events could create a momentum that undermined an international system based on trust rather than enforcement. He grasped that a sense of grievance, turbocharged by widespread economic difficulty, weakened the precedents and institutions that were charged with maintaining geopolitical order and reduced the scope for inaction. In such a system, the localization of a crisis was no longer possible. A committed internationalist, to Cecil the only possible solution was for the League, via its western backers, to stand up for itself. He called, in other words, for British action and a demonstration of agency in the face of an international threat, and for Britain to protect the League rather than protect Japan from the League. As with Mukden, however, Britain equivocated on how to respond.⁵⁴⁶

The view from the Foreign Office's Far Eastern Department was couched in the language of national interest and realpolitik. Pratt argued, in essence, that there was no policy choice to be made – Britain was powerless to stop Japan in the Far East and could only move forward by accommodating itself to, and attempting to constructively shape, Japanese power. To oppose Japan by wading into the conflict on the side of China or the League would succeed only in

⁵⁴⁵ No. 204, Patteson (Geneva) to Simon, 31 January 1932, *DBFP*, Series 2, Volume 9.

⁵⁴⁶ Lowe, *Great Britain and the origins of the Pacific War*, 6-7.

sacrificing Britain's Far Eastern interests and empire. Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Malaya would fall, and British commercial interests in China and the broader region would be destroyed:

If America and Great Britain severed diplomatic and economic relations with Japan she would proceed to settle accounts with China in her own way and in the process it is safe to assume that she would show her contempt for our gesture of disapproval by riding rough shod over all British interests in the Far East...[In] the end Japan can only be checked by force. Ultimately, we will be faced with the alternatives of going to war with Japan or retiring from the Far East. A retirement from the Far East might be the prelude to a retirement from India.⁵⁴⁷

Wellesley was no less pessimistic. He argued that because Britain's Far Eastern policy relied on the goodwill of Japan in the first place, it had nothing to gain and much to lose by antagonizing it over Manchuria and Shanghai. Given US fickleness over Far Eastern questions in the 1920s, Wellesley argued that the US approach to the Far East was "erratic and inconsiderate," and that Britain should avoid at all costs some sort of Anglo-American anti-Japanese common position. The United States, after all, was not a member of the League, meaning that it would not be bound by any sanctions against Japan. This thinking had already contributed to Britain's refusing to confirm or endorse US Secretary of State Henry Stimson's early January 1932 announcement that the Open Door in China must remain open and that the US would not recognize any changes in territory brought about by violence or conquest.⁵⁴⁸ With an eye towards the League, Wellesley argued that Britain should not economically sanction Japan for its actions in either Manchuria or Shanghai. Instead, he rather optimistically posited that, with regards to Japan, despite her "primitive ideas about victory and conquest...when her fever fit is over, it is to us that she may

⁵⁴⁷ TNA, CAB24/228, Anglo-Japanese Relations and the Present Crisis in China, Wellesley and Pratt Memoranda, 1 February 1932.

⁵⁴⁸ Roskill, *Hankey, Man of Secrets*, Vol. 3, 29.

look for guidance.”⁵⁴⁹ Such assessments, if accurate in their depictions of Britain’s inability to materially shape these events, still clung to the belief that, as it had in the earlier years of the twentieth century, Britain could shape Japan’s actions to suit British interests and the Far Eastern status quo. They also implicitly reflected the policy choice that the Cabinet ultimately made – to protect Japan from the League rather than the League from Japan.

The Cabinet decision was reached with rapidity in the days after the outbreak of violence in Shanghai and solidified in the weeks that followed. Armed with Pratt and Wellesley’s arguments, the Cabinet would not countenance any move against Japan by either the League or Britain itself. Complicating, or perhaps making easier, this decision was the opening on 1 February in Geneva of the Disarmament Conference. The Conference was a long sought after meeting of mostly European states with the goal of accomplishing a general reduction in armaments in accordance with the League Covenant, a project that many in Britain, from MacDonald to Simon and Cecil, had long supported.⁵⁵⁰ Politics and timing thus contributed to a perceived need to encourage the efforts, already well underway in Shanghai itself, to resolve the crisis through some kind of negotiated settlement. Within this setting, on 2 February, a hastily convened Cabinet Committee on the Far East met for the first time. There the Service ministers laid out for MacDonald, Baldwin, and Simon the inability of British forces in the Far East to oppose Japan in any way.⁵⁵¹ This weakness was juxtaposed against the real fear that any false

⁵⁴⁹ TNA, CAB24/228, Anglo-Japanese Relations and the Present Crisis in China, Wellesley and Pratt, 1 February 1932.

⁵⁵⁰ TNA, CAB23/72, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, Appendix II – Declaration of British Disarmament policy, 30 June 1932.

⁵⁵¹ TNA, CAB27/482, Committee on the Far East Meeting Minutes, 2 February 1932.

step – such as the introduction of League sanctions – could bring about immediate war with Japan. As reported to the wider Cabinet on 3 February, the situation in Tokyo was a grave one, “so delicate that a single false step might precipitate a catastrophe.” That month, Sir Francis Lindley, British Ambassador to Japan, likened the feeling of tension and uncertainty in Tokyo to that of a lunatic asylum, a place in which political assassinations and the strength of newly militarist nationalisms were eliminating all forms of liberal opposition.⁵⁵² The French and Dutch, previously ambivalent about the Japanese occupation of Manchuria, also advised caution in the wake of events in Shanghai, given their inability to defend their own Far Eastern possessions from attack.⁵⁵³ Indeed, Britain seems to have gone to great lengths in its efforts not to antagonize Japan in the spring of 1932. As the conflict raged in early February, British gunboats evacuated Japanese civilians from areas upriver from Shanghai and provided them with safe passage to Japanese naval vessels. Later that spring, British, Japanese, and American naval commanders worked together to fortify the foreign concessions in and around Amoy and to coordinate the evacuation of civilians should encroaching communist Chinese forces reach the city. Britain continued to allow Japanese naval vessels to conduct port calls in Hong Kong, Singapore, and elsewhere throughout the conflict. This often came over the objections of colonial governors, including Clementi, who argued that to do so not only violated the spirit of British neutrality but also fueled both anti-Japanese and anti-British protests amongst the local Chinese population, as

⁵⁵² TNA, CAB23/70, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 3 February 1932; Roskill, *Hankey, Man of Secrets*, Vol. 3, 27, 34; Neville Chamberlain to Hilda Chamberlain, 13 February 1932, in Self, ed., *Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters, Volume III*, 309.

⁵⁵³ Best, *British Intelligence and the Japanese Challenge in Asia*, 103; Foster, *Projections of Power*, 153-154.

indeed they did.⁵⁵⁴ Back in Shanghai, the British, French, and American naval commanders unanimously posited that a substantial Japanese victory would best bring about a return to order. This all at a time when Lampson, shuttling between Peking, Shanghai, and Nanking, was furiously working to dispel rumors among his Chinese counterparts that Britain and the powers were actively conniving with, or at least “rooting for,” Japan to emerge victorious in Shanghai. The Chinese gleaned such sentiments from the British press in London and their own interactions with Britons within the Shanghai International Settlement.⁵⁵⁵ Furthermore, when discussions arose in Parliament as to whether to place an embargo on the shipment of British arms to Japan, policymakers waffled. They eventually in 1933 chose, in the interests of objectivity and non-intervention, to temporarily embargo arms shipments to China as well as Japan, infuriating the Chinese. The delayed imposition of the embargo meant that existing transactions were allowed to proceed, with the bulk of the British-exported war materiel being sold to Japan.⁵⁵⁶ At the next Committee on the Far East meeting, on 15 February 1932, Simon reiterated his opposition to any coercive League action, after which the committee asked Hankey to provide his own military

⁵⁵⁴ TNA, FO371/16240, Orde to Sawada, 24 March 1932.

⁵⁵⁵ TNA, CAB23/70, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 3 February 1932; FO371/16192, F3697/27/10, Situation in Amoy and District, 27 April 1932; FO371/16192, F4191/27/10, Situation in Amoy and District, 17 May 1932; No. 425, Vansittart to Patteson, 11 February 1932, *DBFP*, Series 2, Volume 9; No. 583, Lampson to Simon, 26 February 1932, *DBFP*, Series 2, Volume 9.

⁵⁵⁶ TNA, FO371/16240, F1201/1201/61, Export of Arms to China and Japan, 11 February 1932; FO371/16240, Export of Arms to China and Japan, 9 May 1932; FO371/17146, F1471/923/61, Chinese Reactions to British Arms Embargo to the Far East, 2 March 1933; CAB23/75, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 22 February 1933; Neville Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 25 February 1933, in Self, ed., *Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters, Volume III*, 378.

advice on the crisis. Hankey, for once unable to weigh in constructively, simply replied that “he had no concrete proposals” for action or resolution of the crisis. MacDonald accordingly closed the meeting with a decision to do nothing and await the results of League bodies working towards their own solutions.⁵⁵⁷

With policy set, British officials shifted their thinking towards a long-term strategy to deter and potentially counter the international threat of Japan. On 23 February, the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee released its annual Imperial Defence Policy, which almost self-pityingly marveled at the fact that, “The whole of our territory in the Far East, as well as the coastline of India and the Dominions and our vast trade and shipping, lies open to attack.” Although citing the calamitous effects of the Ten-Year Rule and the “shrinking to a dangerous extent” of Britain’s armaments industry, the main target of their discontent was the “spirit of complacent optimism” that they argued had infected not only interwar British society but successive governments, and which warped everything from the ministerial budgetary process to perceptions of life in the services amongst ordinary Britons.⁵⁵⁸ This they followed with a separate report on the situation in Far East in early March, which made for equally grim reading. In Singapore, “Local naval defences are at present non-existent.” Hong Kong, “is, at present, almost defenceless.” Shanghai and British positions in northern China would fall immediately.⁵⁵⁹ What particularly scared British military and naval planners was the successful execution, by the Imperial Japanese Army’s 9th Division, of a combined arms amphibious assault on parts of

⁵⁵⁷ TNA, CAB27/482, Committee on the Far East Meeting Minutes, 15 February 1932; Roskill, *Hankey, Man of Secrets*, Vol. 3, 35.

⁵⁵⁸ TNA, CAB4/21, CP1082, Imperial Defence Policy, 23 February 1932.

⁵⁵⁹ TNA, CAB4/21, CP1084, Situation in the Far East, 3 March 1932.

Shanghai in mid-February. This was conducted over a period of days under sporadic enemy fire both day and night while maintaining strict radio and communications silence and secrecy, demonstrating a level of military capability that surprised British officers and strategists.⁵⁶⁰ Further Cabinet and CID meetings in early March brought about continued hand-wringing on the question of the League but no change in immediate British policy other than the elimination of the Ten-Year Rule as a guide to defence expenditure and a promise to reopen the question of how to complete the Singapore Naval Base. These decisions were agreed upon on 23 March alongside a CID reiteration of the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee conclusion – “Recent events in the Far East are ominous. We cannot ignore the writing on the wall.”⁵⁶¹ These actions helped to resolve the dissonance of 1920s Far Eastern Imperial Defence – the clarity with which British officials, mostly in the region, saw communism and indigenous nationalism as transnational threats and the ambivalence with when having to decide whether Japan was a potential international threat.

In the 1920s, Britain’s policy of non-intervention had suited its Far Eastern interests and helped it accomplish its goals. It kept internal Chinese instability internal to China and removed the possibility of League involvement. It kept the regional status quo intact. In the 1930s, however, none of those things were true. The regional status quo was shattered. Rather than internalize issues of Chinese insecurity, non-intervention forced them onto the international stage, given China’s own inability to independently and successfully push back, either politically

⁵⁶⁰ TNA, ADM125/70, Report of Proceedings of the Commander-in-Chief, China, 1-29 February 1932, 1 March 1932; Best, “Constructing an Image,” 407.

⁵⁶¹ TNA, CAB2/5, CID, Minutes of the 255th Meeting, 22 March 1932; CAB23/70, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 23 March 1932.

or military, against Japan.⁵⁶² Rather than insulate the League from conflict, Britain's refusal to draw on its power ensured that the League was drawn in deeper. While many argued that the Japanese occupation of Manchuria would rebound to the benefit of Britain, few such arguments were made with regards to Shanghai from 1932. Additionally, if non-intervention had allowed Britain to maintain cordiality and tacit partnerships with much of the Chinese elite during the 1920s, non-intervention in the 1930s meant that, despite Chiang's complex relationship with Japan in an era in which he was still battling internal Chinese enemies, British inaction cost it goodwill. In early 1933, the KMT Foreign Minister Luo Wengan encapsulated this feeling in conversations with Edward Ingram, the British Counsellor in Nanking. He observed that since 1931, "Great Britain's Far Eastern policy was based more on the fear of antagonizing Japan than on cultivating the goodwill of China." This came at a time when false stories of Anglo-Japanese partnership were coursing through the Chinese press and Lampson himself was reporting to Simon the way in which these narratives were creating anti-British sentiment amongst the wider Chinese populace.⁵⁶³ If official equivocation and hiding behind the statements of the League brought opprobrium from China, neither did it endear Britain to either the United States, which called for more strident joint statements condemning Japan's attack in Shanghai, or even, as events unfolded, Japan itself.⁵⁶⁴ The latter's withdrawal from the League following the

⁵⁶² Vansittart mocked this later as nothing more than "impotent Nanking appealed to impotent Geneva" (Vansittart, *The Mist Procession*, 436).

⁵⁶³ TNA, FO676/148, Anglo-Japanese Relations, 22 January 1933; FO676/148, Lampson to Simon, 20 February 1933.

⁵⁶⁴ Thorne, "The Shanghai Crisis of 1932," 1616; No. 419, Vansittart to Patteson, 11 February 1932, *DBFP*, Series 2, Volume 9. This was sent to Simon, then in attendance at League meetings on the crisis, via Patteson.

endorsement of the Lytton Report in February 1933 was but one further step on a path towards the souring of the Anglo-Japanese relationship. Britain's unilateral abrogation in 1933 of the commercial treaty between Japan and British India, a major trading partner, and the lack of any place for Britain in a Japan swept along by nationalist and militarist sentiments demonstrates the turn in relations that followed in the aftermath of Manchuria and Shanghai.⁵⁶⁵

And yet Simon's policy was never seriously contested as the appropriate way forward for Britain. Given the Foreign Office's heft in the policymaking center of Whitehall, there was little debate. Cecil's musings from Geneva were dismissed. As remarked by Baldwin, it was Cecil and others who, having long argued for general disarmament and the great reduction of British military and naval expenditure, were now advocating that the League, led by Britain, stand firm, consequences on the ground be damned. Where, Baldwin wondered, would such advice lead them?⁵⁶⁶ The Admiralty, War Office, and Colonial Office voiced no serious dissent. Only Lampson grappled with and contested the policy. From his position in Peking and his many journeys to and engagements in Nanking and Shanghai, Lampson was much more attuned to Chinese attitudes and the way in which the country characterized its national aspirations than his counterparts in the Far Eastern Department. Although understanding Britain's inability to use force, he argued that the Chinese were "not going to admit to the alienation of Manchuria or any other part of Chinese territory." The festering of such sentiments would, with time, increase rather than decrease the pressure on the Far Eastern status quo, leave questions of irredentism

⁵⁶⁵ TNA, FO371/16242, F3420/40/23, Nationalist Spirit in Japan, 14 April 1932; TNA, FO371/16242, F3860/40/23, Japanese Nationalism, 2 May 1932; Hosoya, "Britain and the United States in Japan's View of the International System," 17-18.

⁵⁶⁶ Roskill, *Hankey, Man of Secrets*, Vol. 3, 35.

hanging over the Far East for years, and result in “the sowing of the seeds of international hatred and conflict with imponderable consequences in the future.” However, his own acknowledgement of the paucity of viable policy options available spoke to the position of weakness that officials in both London and the region found themselves inhabiting in the wake of events in both Manchuria and Shanghai. “What the alternative policy may be I do not profess to know, and I do not propose to speculate. I merely wish to record my dissent from the view that Japan’s absorption of Manchuria is going in the long run to do anyone any good or be beneficial to the world at large.”⁵⁶⁷

An alternative policy would by necessity have needed to be one that married a British-led defence of the League as an institution with a closely coordinated Anglo-American response meant both to deter Japan and strengthen the Chinese position. The risks associated with such a choice were, however, monumental. Not only might Japan have attempted to destroy Britain as a Far Eastern power and occupied its holdings east of India, but it could also have menaced the Dominions of Australia and New Zealand, further speeding the shifting of their reliance on and allegiance from Britain to the United States. No power in the Far East could have stopped such action should Japan have taken such a step. It would also have implicitly created an unwieldy Anglo-American-Chinese partnership at a moment when none of those powers had the capability or desire for such an alignment. Despite warming British relations with the KMT, Chiang remained mired in battles with his own enemies within China and did not hesitate, once the League demonstrated its impotence, to agree to a series of truces with Japan and to focus his

⁵⁶⁷ TNA, FO676/118, Lampson to Wellesley, 19 April 1932.

energy on eradicating Chinese communism.⁵⁶⁸ And although Britain had, in the form of large ethnic Chinese populations within the empire in places such as Hong Kong and Malaya, kindling with which it could plausibly stir anti-Japanese sentiment, it well understood that opening such an ideological box would be difficult to control. First, it would have threatened the flow of free trade upon which the Far Eastern empire was built. Additionally, years of battling Chinese nationalists within its own borders, while struggling to create, or even agree upon, a sense of how such people fit within a colonial or imperial sense of Britishness, meant that attempting to hijack such nationalist sentiments for their own ends would more likely than not have come back to haunt them. While an American partnership was attractive, the United States of the early 1930s was consumed with fighting the Great Depression and itself still years away from being politically able or willing to engage more forcefully overseas. Stimson's messages were not calls to war but abstract statements of policy from a distant and mostly disengaged partner that Britain deeply mistrusted.⁵⁶⁹ This helps explain why, despite repeated calls from MacDonald, Simon, and others for the Foreign Office to ensure that British policies and statements were in constant alignment with the United States, they rarely if ever were.⁵⁷⁰ With regards to League, the one thing that British policymakers well understood was that if Article **XVI** of the League Covenant was activated and economic sanctions put in place, Britain itself, with the largest commercial footprint in the region and the most capital at stake, stood to lose the most. Non-League members such as the United States would simply step into the space vacated by Britain while also

⁵⁶⁸ Stephen G. Craft, "Opponents of Appeasement: Western-Educated Chinese Diplomats and Intellectuals and Sino-Japanese Relations, 1932-37," *Modern Asian Studies* 35, no. 1 (2001): 200, 202.

⁵⁶⁹ Thorne, "The Shanghai Crisis of 1932," 1637.

⁵⁷⁰ Roskill, *Hankey, Man of Secrets*, Vol. 3, 29.

rendering moot the stated purpose of economic sanctions in the first place. The loopholes around the effective implementation of such a policy would have made its enactment a farce. Finally, such a policy, some feared, might also push Japan to seek some sort of accommodation with the Soviet Union, still at that point Britain's chief international antagonist. As has been shown, Britain would always have chosen Japanese domination of Manchuria over Soviet domination. Indeed, Britain's acknowledgement that it "ought to try and reach a solution of the Manchurian dispute which will earn [Japanese] gratitude and make co-operation with them possible in the future" implicitly communicates the hierarchy in which it considered, even after Manchuria and Shanghai, the threats that it faced.⁵⁷¹ While Japan remained a rational actor with whom some kind of accommodation could be reached, no such sentiment crept into British thinking about Soviet communism.

Was a realist policy of British accommodation to Japan after Manchuria and Shanghai a tacit abandonment of its policy, since December 1926, of nurturing and embracing a moderate form of Chinese nationalism? To imagine so misconstrues the choices that policymakers had in front of them during both periods of crisis. During the crisis of Chinese nationalism, Britain's choice was either to work to divide the moderate nationalists from the communists or openly oppose them both. Once it became clear, over the course of 1926, that moderate Chinese nationalists such as Chiang could and would stand on their own feet free of Soviet influence, the decision to make was clear. In the early 1930s, however, Britain could plausibly argue that, faced with an ideologically-riven China, it was not in the best interests of the Nanking government to launch a full-scale international war for which it was unprepared. This was, in fact, the choice

⁵⁷¹ TNA, CAB24/234, Military Appreciation of the Present World Situation, Hailsham note covering a Memorandum by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, 28 October 1932.

that Chiang himself made in agreeing to the Tanggu Truce in 1933 and in working to suppress the usage of economic boycotts as expressions of Chinese nationalism.⁵⁷²

The alternative options were fraught with their own complications and risks, and it seems that Britain never seriously considered a course other than the one it chose. This choice also reflected its inability to influence Japanese decision-making or to deter Japanese military adventurism. Those were simply illustrations of Britain's loss of agency and role as the central driver of events and politics in the region that, up through at least the crisis of Chinese nationalism, it could plausibly be said to have been. Without that influence, and in the midst of its own economic and political crisis, the Cabinet simply adopted the least provocative policy. Sir Robert Vansittart, the Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, summed up this perilous position in a minute to Simon atop one of Pratt's policy papers, in which he highlighted the new and uncomfortable position that many Britons saw themselves facing. "By ourselves we must eventually swallow any & every humiliation in the Far East."⁵⁷³

This perspective, one of weakness and isolation in the face of a rising Japan in the early 1930s, is the dominant viewpoint that colors historians' understanding of British imperial defence in the interwar Far East. If not as 'weak and naked' as Churchill is said to have called the British Far East in the aftermath of the initial Japanese attacks in 1941, then it was at least on the road to such. This narrative will not, with respect to British efforts to understand and counter the international threat that Japan had come to pose by the early 1930s, attempt to argue otherwise. But simply because conventional deterrence and an ability and willingness to employ

⁵⁷² Craft, "Opponents of Appeasement," 14.

⁵⁷³ No. 238, Vansittart minute on 'Memorandum by Sir John Pratt,' 1 February 1932, *DBFP*, Series 2, Volume 9.

military force are components of imperial defence does not mean that the latter only involves these factors. As Special Branch and its imperial and international partners demonstrated through 1934, Britain continued to effectively counter the transnational threat of communism through a variety of mechanisms and means.

Special Branch and Imperial Defence Post-Shanghai

Despite the events in Manchuria and Shanghai, there was no ambiguity concerning the continued British efforts to counter the ideological adversaries of the Far Eastern empire in the months and years following the Noulens arrest. From 1932 to 1934, British police and intelligence officials across the region were unrelenting in their efforts to pursue, arrest, and imprison or banish any communist or radical nationalists that could be found. As Alun Jones has highlighted, for the years 1932 and 1933, the police in Singapore conducted, on average, at least two raids per week against communists. For residents this could lead to charges in court – 261 people – and conviction – 237 people. For aliens or immigrant laborers (predominantly Chinese) this could mean banishment from the colony altogether. Although the Malayan Government had been banishing aliens from the colony throughout this period, the passing of the Aliens Ordinance in 1933 allowed it to set quotas and restrict the number of laborers entering Singapore while also singling out communists for banishment – 66 in 1933 alone. From 1933, the total number of raids decreased as Special Branch pressure restricted communist activities and the police shifted their focus from arresting or rearresting low-level suspects to instead targeting those who they saw as holding positions of office or leadership within the MCP or similarly

radical groups.⁵⁷⁴ Particularly successful were a series of repeated raids on the MCP leadership and headquarters through 1932 and into 1933, which netted hundreds of individual communists and reams of organizational documents detailing everything from the financial connection to the Chinese Communist Party to the details of front companies and local payment systems to the aliases and identities of local members. An operation in February 1933 consisted of Special Branch, with support from uniformed officers, raiding 35 separate addresses on a single night and identifying 105 MCP members for arrest and imprisonment/banishment. Special Branch's defenestration of the MCP over the course of the 1930s became something of a routine as the decade wore on – six secretary-generals of the party were arrested over the period in question. Five of them were deported.⁵⁷⁵ Although Onraet and his counterparts continued to monitor (via mail intercepts, among other means) more straightforwardly nationalist Chinese and their underground KMT organizations, they found that their activities, “have not warranted any Government action being taken against it. Kuomintang leaders in Malaya are men of little position or influence and the more influential and wealthy Chinese in Malaya, as also the great bulk of the Chinese population, are not at present interested in the organization.”⁵⁷⁶

The Malayan Government had other tools at its disposal, however, beyond simply arresting and imprisoning communist leaders, as it sought to undermine the anti-imperial

⁵⁷⁴ Jones, “Internal Security in British Malaya, 1895-1942,” 207-210; See TNA, CO 275, “Executive Council” Reports for the years in question to see additional information and annual accountings of banishment proceedings, with some details on individual names, cases, and circumstances for those individuals in various stages of the banishment process.

⁵⁷⁵ TNA, FO371/17147, F1191/1191/61, *MCIN*, 6 April 1933; Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order*, 200-201; Choon, *Absent History*, 140-143.

⁵⁷⁶ TNA, FO371/18161, F601/601/61, *MCIN*, 15 November 1934.

campaign. Throughout the early 1930s it enhanced its censorship tools, intercepting and banning more than 1,500 different books, periodicals, newspapers, and magazines from entry into the colony. These ranged from all manner of anti-British documents, letters, and missives to straightforward communist propaganda as well as those items that attacked its regional partners. Letters urging Chinese in Malaya to agitate against both the KMT and Japanese businesses and citizens, for instance, as well as anti-Japanese postage or anti-KMT pamphlets or publications drew the ire of censors and were banned. A greater percentage – in fact, more than one in five – of censored items from 1932-1934 were selected for censorship based on their anti-Japanese character rather than their explicitly anti-British or communist nature. While the British interest in placating Japan may have played a factor in deciding what to censor, it seems more likely that officials in Singapore had their own self-interest closest to heart in banning explicitly anti-Japanese propaganda from the colony. In censoring such materials, they presumably sought to dampen tensions between the majority-Chinese population of the colony and the smaller, business-minded, Japanese community in order to maintain the colony's open climate for business and investment.⁵⁷⁷

Japanese individuals also seem to have been afforded some measures of protection in Malaya via the censorship and banishment processes of the early 1930s. Of the many hundreds

⁵⁷⁷ TNA, FCO141/7593, 'Monthly Review of Chinese Affairs (MRCA),' January 1932; CO273/579/5, MRCA February 1932; FCO141/7596, MRCA October 1932; CO273/580/8, Wai Chaio Pu to Lampson, 28 December 1932; TNA, FCO141/7600, MRCA October 1933; FCO141/7603 MRCA July 1934. For a detailed examination of the depth of British censorship tools and strategies, see CO 273, Straits Settlements Correspondence, CO 273, Straits Settlements Acts, CO 275, Straits Settlements Sessional Papers, and CO 276, Straits Settlements Gazettes.

routinely banished from the colony, the only Japanese individuals, albeit from a small minority of the overall population, who were caught up in the process through 1933 were Japanese women, and a single man, explicitly associated with prostitution. Amid police offensives against Chinese secret societies and their continued efforts to round up communist agitators and those, nearly all ethnic Chinese, who best fit the catch all sobriquet of ‘undesirable character,’ the Japanese residing in Singapore and Malaya writ large were rarely targeted. Such figures belie the belief that, in the post-Manchuria and Shanghai environment, there was a real sea-change in British strategic thinking amongst officials in the region on the role of Japan and the place of Japanese interests and individuals within imperial spaces.⁵⁷⁸

At the same time, the historical record for the early 1930s also shows that there were notions of growing concern regarding Japanese individuals and interests more widely. The police and intelligence officials across imperial spaces who had worked so closely together to counter transnational communism across the region grappled in their own individual manner with the potential Japanese threat. From at least 1933, the Dutch began voicing regular concerns to the British about the Japanese capture of resources and investments within the NEI and the growing reliance of the colonial economy on Japanese imports and markets. This precipitated legislation in Batavia introducing trade quotas and other measures designed to reduce Japan’s increasing

⁵⁷⁸ See TNA, CO 275, Straits Settlements Sessional Papers. The above information pulls from, among others, Executive Council meetings on 19 February 1932, 23 September 1932, 27 October 1932, 20 February 1933, and 30 August 1933.

influence over the Netherlands' resource-rich but under-defended colonial outpost.⁵⁷⁹ British visits to Batavia as early as the fall of 1932 reflected and communicated this concern. By then the Dutch were convinced that Japan would, at some point in the future, move to annex or assume some more formal type of control.⁵⁸⁰ In a response to British consular reporting on Dutch concerns, embassy officials in Tokyo perfectly captured the way in which diplomatic, police, and intelligence officials, so used to working hand-in-hand in their efforts to counter transnational communism, were in this new world reaching opposite conclusions on the threat of Japan. They posited that it was "perturbing" to see such an argument, as the Dutch should know that all such Japanese actions in the NEI were legitimate and that such expansion was in fact necessary owing to domestic economic factors within Japan itself.⁵⁸¹ There was no good in such fearmongering, they argued. Similarly, British consular reports from Saigon and Hanoi in the early 1930s implicitly communicated, if anything, a lack of French concern about Japanese actions in the region and the possible downstream effects on colonial Indochina. The French were much more concerned with fighting – alongside Onraet and the British imperial policing machine – the enemy within than imagining a future enemy without against whom they had neither the capability nor the inclination to robustly defend themselves. Rather than coming together to discuss issues of Japanese expansion, French and British intelligence and colonial officials

⁵⁷⁹ TNA, FO262/1812, Fitz-Maurice (Batavia) to Tokyo, 10 December 1932; Howard Dick, "Japan's Expansion in the Netherlands Indies Between the First and Second World Wars," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 20, 2 (1989): 250-254.

⁵⁸⁰ TNA, FCO141/16726, Report of Tour of Java by General Staff Officer III, Malaya Command, 12-28 October 1932, 28 November 1932.

⁵⁸¹ TNA, FO262/1839, Tokyo to Fitzmaurice (Batavia), 10 January 1933.

instead continued to focus their joint efforts on countering the threats of communism and indigenous nationalism, with a particular French focus on winning Siamese agreement regarding the extradition of Vietnamese communists and nationalists to colonial Indochina.⁵⁸²

Within Siam itself there were similar tensions regarding the role and place of Japan in the midst of its own British-led anti-communist effort. In the 1930s, all such debates were defined by the June 1932 coup in Bangkok, and the political turmoil that followed in 1933, which ended the country's absolute monarchy and brought in an era of instability and reform. Britain, at first untroubled by the kingdom's transition to constitutional monarchy, witnessed the rise of Japanese influence over successive Siamese governments from at least 1933, when Siam abstained from the League vote on the Lytton Report. Henceforward, British influence in Bangkok and its ability to shape anti-communist operations faded as Siam moved closer towards Japan and took up a very public stance of neutrality that became, over time, anti-western and supportive of efforts to remake the Far Eastern status quo.⁵⁸³

This transformation, if not sudden, demonstrates one of the ways in which the British-led effort to counter transnational communism and indigenous nationalism ran into the shoals of international politics in the 1930s and foundered. Japanese actions in Manchuria and Shanghai compelled each of the states that had cooperated with one another against the ideological threat –

⁵⁸² See BL, IO, L/P&S/11/260, as well as TNA, FO 371/11047, 13340, 14904, and 15644, among much else, for British consular reports/assessments from French Indochina in the 1920s and 1930s, from which such conclusions are tentatively drawn; Martin Thomas, "European Crisis, Colonial Crisis: Signs of Fracture in the French Empire from Munich to the Outbreak of War," *International History Review* 32, 3 (2010): 393.

⁵⁸³ TNA, WO32/3649, GOC Malaya Report on Visit to Siam and French Indo-China, 26 May 1932; Aldrich, *The Key to the South*, 90; Batson, *The End of the Absolute Monarchy in Siam*, 179; Tarling, *The Fall of Imperial Britain in Southeast Asia*, 118; Batson, "Nationalism and Pro-Japanese Activities in Thailand," 200-202.

Britain, France, the Netherlands, Siam, and the US – to consider how to adapt their policies in the wake of events in the early 1930s. This produced, almost inevitably, splits in opinion and interests amongst this ad-hoc grouping, given their political differences, economic malaise, and geographic proximity to Japan. If international collaboration amongst such actors was crucial to the success they enjoyed in countering communism and indigenous nationalism, then their divergence of interests from the early 1930s with respect to Japan meant that there was no scenario which allowed Britain to simply reorient its policing and intelligence apparatus away from the communist threat to the Japan and hope for similar results. The conditions and interests that were present in the 1920s – a stable regional status quo, unanimity of political self-interest, and the marginal financial costs of action, among others – and which allowed for unofficial collaboration against the transnational threat were not present in the 1930s in the face of an international threat. Indeed, it can be debated what any pooling of intelligence and policing resources amongst British, French, and Dutch officials would have accomplished in the face of a rising and common Japanese threat. French and Dutch intelligence capabilities were limited beyond their own colonies. The external nature of the threat meant that even pooled resources would struggle to ascertain information about Japanese naval or military plans without agents in Japan itself.

Several other factors helped make international and inter-colonial cooperation against Japan an inherently more difficult project for Britain to undertake than it had been in the case of the Comintern and radical Chinese nationalism. First, and with many within the British establishment not even convinced that Japan was even an adversary of Britain, was the British desire to avoid at almost all costs any further binding commitments on its depleted resources and military forces. In the case of the Comintern in the 1920s, inter-imperial partnerships could be

shaped and built locally at low cost and without need for ministerial approval. Common ideological cause and cultural familiarity bred similar interests and a proclivity to partner, especially given the open and declared hostility of the adversary. In the case of Japan in the 1930s, none of those things were true. For many, Japan remained a rational actor. Any formal agreement amongst western powers would have, in the case of a conventional international threat, bred military commitments. Notwithstanding both Dutch neutrality and American isolationism, any attempted agreements could only have been negotiated and coordinated in London. This, in turn, would have necessitated the allocation of military and naval forces and the budgeting of monies. Additionally, such steps, it was realistically feared, could have brought about the very Japanese actions that British actions might have hoped to preempt in the first place. Even in the case of the NEI, as late of 1938 Vansittart and the Foreign Office stressed that no formal commitments could be made and that any cooperation that did take place could only be in London (rather than the region) and of a technical, rather than a strategic, nature.⁵⁸⁴ Would not, it might also have been fair for them to ask, a commitment to a colonial power in the Far East also implied one within Europe itself? These were questions British policymakers were anxious to avoid in the early 1930s. Second was Britain's adherence to the interwar era's norms on the maintenance of international order and stability via the League and the investment in notions of collective security. Despite the hollow nature of the League's mandates and capabilities, British grand strategy, as has been shown, rested on the credibility of League members – chiefly itself – to adhere to those values. This further weakened any notion that alliance creation – itself discredited by the path towards war in 1914 – might serve as an alternative path towards maintaining international security and deterrence. In short, no one in

⁵⁸⁴ TNA, CAB2/7, CID – Minutes of the 307th Meeting, 20 January 1938.

London was keen on developing international mechanisms to counter a country that was not yet adversarial, to do so using resources and forces that none of the signatories of any such treaty had available, and in an era where such agreements were realistically seen as events that could just as easily precipitate war as prevent it.

Not that any of that stopped astute officials and operatives in Malaya from, at their level, attempting to shift their efforts from one enemy towards another. As has been shown, Japanese commercial ventures in Malaya were welcome in the 1920s. These ranged from agricultural plantations to industrial enterprises focused on the mining of tin, iron ore, manganese, and bauxite. Although watchful of Japanese interests, especially those along the Straits of Johore that were close to the proposed naval base in Sembawang, the concerns and desires of the few within British officialdom who wanted to proscribe Japanese investment were overridden by the majority who saw the benefit of Japanese investment. The CID itself confirmed as much in June 1932, after events in both Manchuria and Shanghai had somewhat stabilized, declaring that, while “there are numerous Japanese holdings in the State of Johore, they need not be regarded as a menace to the security of the Naval Base. Nor are any of the existing holdings, so far as can at present be foreseen, likely to interfere with any defences that may be decided upon.”⁵⁸⁵ Nearly simultaneous to this was the submission, in August 1932, of a report brought up by the General Officer Commanding in Malaya which outlined Japanese interests and intelligence capabilities and posture within and around the colony. This included British knowledge of the Japanese usage of commercial fishing vessels to map and chart the Malayan coastlines for government purposes, the likelihood that Japanese estates in Johore were keeping watch on the naval base,

⁵⁸⁵ C.A. Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: Britain's Asian Empire and the War with Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005), 7; TNA, CO273/581/2, Hamilton to Clementi, 19 July 1932.

and the assumption that many, if not most, Japanese subjects resident in Singapore were tacitly providing intelligence – typically via Japanese clubs and societies – to consular officials.

“Ulterior motives,” Malaya Command concluded, were almost certainly behind the appointments of “Language Officers” and “Commercial Officers” attached to consulates or cultural or business concerns, the eight months “spent on tour” in Malaya by an officer in the Japanese Army in 1931, and the “frequent cases of Japanese Naval and Military officers wandering about the fortified zones in disguise” when in Malaya for ship visits. This assumption was rooted in the well understood fact that Britain was itself engaged in the same sort of behavior, reconnaissance of civilian and military infrastructure, and the fudging of diplomatic status with its own attachés and consular officers in Japan.⁵⁸⁶ Britain was aware throughout the period of Japanese efforts to learn about the naval base just as it was about Japanese efforts to penetrate the NEI and spread its nascent pan-Asian ideology amongst colonial populations.⁵⁸⁷ Indeed, it even followed Japanese gentlemen photographers as they landed on and explored one of the islands in the Johore Strait that was to be fortified alongside the base.⁵⁸⁸

The most sensational example of Japanese intelligence operations in Malaya in the period in question came from late 1934. This was when an outspoken Japanese resident of Singapore, “a drunken boaster...not trusted by his own side,” under watch from Special Branch from as early

⁵⁸⁶ TNA, CO273/581/2, General Officer Commanding the Troops, Malaya, to the Undersecretary of State, War Office, London, 24 August 1932; WO106/5504, Paraphrase of No. 959100, 12 January 1935.

⁵⁸⁷ Best, “Constructing an Image,” 416.

⁵⁸⁸ TNA, CO273/602, Caldecott (OAG, Malaya), to Cunliffe-Lister, 12 September 1934. According to British reports, Japan seems to have established, strangely or not so strangely, something of a monopoly over the “scenic photography” market in Malaya.

as 1929, succeeded in getting Japanese military intelligence to send two “experts” from Japan to gather intelligence on the colony’s naval and air bases. Under the alias of commercial businessmen, they arrived in Singapore in November 1934. Not authorized to conduct any operation against the agents, who upon arrival had broken no local laws (other than traveling on a false passport), Special Branch simply monitored their activities. When it became clear that they intended to depart Singapore without incident or search in early December, Andrew Caldecott, the acting Governor, approved a Special Branch operation, put together by Inspector Chand, to entice the “experts” to lengthen their stay with the promise, made by an undercover RAF officer, of authentic military intelligence. After further incriminating evidence in the form of wiretaps and confiscated mail had been gathered, the government approved the apprehension of the Japanese intelligence officers. Under questioning, they admitted to their true purpose, had their belongings confiscated, and “were quietly embarked for Japan” late that same evening to prevent any kind of diplomatic crisis. Meanwhile, their belongings, included coded literature, were searched and further items “were discovered in the clothing of a geisha girl” in Singapore whom the officers had visited during their stay. From this, Special Branch discovered and confiscated bundles of cash, a camera and film, as well as “Most Secret” documents and cypher codes. Furthermore, following the arrests of those Japanese residents of Singapore who had assisted them, the intelligence officers confirmed for Special Branch that their local controller was one Yoshio Nishimura, the president of the Japanese Association in Malaya and one of the richest and most well-known Japanese residents in the country. Under questioning by Special

Branch two days later, Nishimura dropped to the floor and died, most likely by self-induced strychnine poisoning.⁵⁸⁹

The surprise was not that Japan was engaged in such activities or even that Britain was aware of this and following Japanese reports throughout. It was, rather, that it took so long for Special Branch and the wider British networks of political intelligence to begin to reorient themselves to face this new international threat. Although, in the case highlighted above, Special Branch had been attendant since 1929 to the outbursts of the drunken Japanese resident, it seems likely that this, the gift of a rube who could play a part in a future counterintelligence operation, was more the exception than the rule. Special Branch did not form its own section dedicated to understanding and countering Japanese intelligence activities in Malaya until 1934 or fully man the section until 1936. As of 1935, it was still without a single “Englishman with a knowledge of the Japanese spoken and written languages” to support such efforts. It had to request the secondment of an army officer with language expertise for duty with Special Branch in the interim.⁵⁹⁰ This reticence was perhaps owing to the political outlook of the Straits officials who were continually eager to pursue successes against communism in the region and who were in general, and as best exemplified by Clementi, more welcoming and understanding of Japan than their Foreign Office and Admiralty counterparts in the region. Thus did Inspector Wynne of

⁵⁸⁹ TNA, KV3/415, D.O. Letter No. 125, 13 December 1934; KV3/416, Thomas to Cunliffe-Lister, 15 March 1935. KV3/415 contains a multitude of detailed files on the case, as does WO106/5504.

⁵⁹⁰ Choon, *Absent History*, 76-77; TNA, CO273/602, Cypher Telegram from Secretary of State to Government of India, 29 December 1934; CO273/602, M.I.1. to Under Secretary of State, Colonial Office, 28 November 1934; KV3/415, Comments on Military Intelligence Officer’s Notes and Local Governments Telegram, Undated (December 1934).

Special Branch receive a “wrap over the knuckles from [Governor] Caldecott, via Fairburn [Inspector-General of the Straits Settlements Police Force], as the result of which he now never publishes anything in the minutes except those items regarding communism.”⁵⁹¹ Certain intelligence reports, it seems, were more convenient than others. Although Special Branch advanced its understanding of the Japanese threat and its capabilities to defeat it greatly in the latter half of the decade, for the purposes of this narrative the evidence clearly indicates that it spent the first several years after the Manchuria and Shanghai incidents focused still on communism and the transnational threat.⁵⁹² However unwise such a determination may seem to posterity, it was not unusual in the moment. The War Office’s MI2, in dialogue with the SIS in 1932, stressed to its intelligence counterparts that its main target for the following year remained the Comintern. This came only a week after the Japanese attack on Shanghai.⁵⁹³ Furthermore, although Special Branch raids, arrests, and banishments of communists and other ideological interlopers dropped precipitously in the years after 1932, there is no evidence that this was compensated for with a corresponding rise in the number of raids, arrests, and banishments of those from Japan. Part of the very drama surrounding the arrest and deportation of Japanese intelligence agents and the exposure of a local Japanese intelligence network in late 1934 was the fact that such a thing had never happened before.

⁵⁹¹ TNA, KV3/415, Comments on Military Intelligence Officer’s Notes and Local Governments Telegram, Undated (December 1934). This reflects on KV3/415, Military Intelligence Officer’s Notes – Japanese Espionage, 5 December 1934.

⁵⁹² Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order*, 201; Foster, “Secret Police Cooperation and the Roots of Anti-Communism in Southeast Asia,” 348.

⁵⁹³ Best, *British Intelligence and the Japanese Challenge in Asia*, 101.

Britain and the International Threat of Japan, 1933-1934

The strategic ramifications of Japanese actions in Manchuria and especially Shanghai did, though, bring about a rethinking of British imperial defence efforts. A meeting of the Chiefs of Staff on 4 February 1932 produced more questions than answers: should plans be drawn up based on the likelihood of a wartime partnership with China, the US, both, or neither; should Britain attempt to defend Hong Kong or simply hold the line at Singapore; should the Foreign Office assist in the development of plans or should it be strictly the services' responsibility to outline potential military courses of action? To help sketch potential options, the chiefs created a Deputy Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee to lead inquiries.⁵⁹⁴ At heart, however, was the fact that the chief questions at that point were ones of policy. With the Ten-Year Rule gone and the commitment, at least verbally, to advance work on the Singapore Naval Base made, the services could embark on developing a sense of their resource requirements and the strategies for conflict towards which such resources would flow. At the policy level, however, the calm that befell the region following the ceasefire agreement in Shanghai in March 1932 came apart in the late summer as the League prepared to receive the Lytton Report in October upon the completion of his commission's investigation into events in Manchuria. With the decision that Britain would not support League sanctions against Japan having already been made in the spring, the Cabinet again addressed the issue in November 1932.⁵⁹⁵ The report concluded that the occupation of Manchuria and the creation of Manchukuo was not due to the "spontaneous action of

⁵⁹⁴ TNA, CAB53/4/2, Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee – Minutes of the 101st Meeting, 4 February 1932.

⁵⁹⁵ TNA, CAB23/70, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 9 March 1932.

Manchuria's inhabitants, but to the organized intervention of Japan." In his brief to the Cabinet on 23 November, Simon acknowledged that the League could do little but accept this conclusion and announce what could only be a condemnation of Japan, potentially forcing it from the League. As to the British course of action, the Cabinet decided to avoid "bringing down on ourselves the condemnation which attach to isolated or prominent individual action...we must explain to Japan that the course we take is pro League and not anti Japan." The decision to avoid "trouble" with Japan was later expanded from not merely opposing any League sanctions on Japan to also opposing any statement by the League that its members states would never recognize Manchukuo. This involved Simon mostly "doing his utmost to avoid having to take a lead" on the issue while in Geneva.⁵⁹⁶ The irony was that such a position well captured both Britain's reluctance to endanger its own imperial interests as well as its shrinking from any position where it had to exert agency or act as an arbiter on the international stage. And yet such hedging, in a way, did help create the conditions for a modicum of calm in the region to set in. Many thought that arguments, such as those made by Cecil, for a bolder stance might well have precipitated a descent into general war that, in spite of Japanese aggression in Manchuria and Shanghai, even Chiang and the KMT did not seek.⁵⁹⁷ In the end, the Foreign Office's predictions came to pass in February 1933 when the League condemned Japanese aggression and Japan walked out, formally withdrawing from the League the following month. Calls for calm

⁵⁹⁶ TNA, CAB23/72, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 9 November 1932; CAB23/73, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 23 November 1932.

⁵⁹⁷ TNA, CAB23/75, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 22 February 1933.

continued, and through the good offices of Lampson, China and Japan agreed to the Tanggu Truce in May 1933.⁵⁹⁸

At the strategic level, the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee's explorations of the situation in the Far East had, by 1933, confirmed the decision that Singapore was to be the focus of British defence efforts in the Far East. There were, though, simply too many scenarios to contemplate – involving belligerents, potential allies, methods and scope of attack and response, etc. – for them to develop detailed plans for any individual contingency.⁵⁹⁹ Indeed, Admiral of the Fleet Ernle Chatfield, the First Sea Lord, remarked as late as 1934 that Britain lacked “a definite war policy” in the Far East.⁶⁰⁰ Even within the region contingency planning was neglected. In the case of the China Station, records indicate that through 1933 the fleet had no operational plans for action upon the outbreak of war. This was a, “standing disgrace to the China Station,” which was assessed by the incoming commander, Admiral Sir Frederic Dreyer, to be little more than a “police force” capable of sailing under arms at three weeks' notice.⁶⁰¹ The Singapore strategy of sending the main British fleet to the Far East to counter the Imperial Japanese Navy remained, at the strategic level – notwithstanding adaptations and improvements by the Royal Navy to its tactical plan – static.⁶⁰² As it is, Dreyer, in 1934, convened a conference of regional British and imperial naval commanders in Singapore to discuss the security situation and the naval defence

⁵⁹⁸ TNA, CAB23/76, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 26 April 1933.

⁵⁹⁹ TNA, CAB53/4/4, Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee – Minutes of the 107th Meeting, 28 February 1933; CAB53/4/5, Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee – Minutes of the 109th Meeting, 11 April 1933.

⁶⁰⁰ TNA, CAB53/5/2, Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee – Minutes of the 132nd Meeting, 24 July 1934.

⁶⁰¹ Caird Library and Archives, Royal Museums, Greenwich (CAIRD), Papers of Admiral of the Fleet Alfred Ernle Chatfield (Chatfield papers), CHT 4/4-4/5, Dreyer to Chatfield, 12 December 1933.

⁶⁰² Bell, *The Royal Navy, Seapower, and Strategy Between the Wars*, 60.

of the Far East. That this had not happened since 1925, and did not happen in the aftermath of Mukden and Shanghai, goes some way towards showing that even the Admiralty, the service most concerned with and wary of Japanese expansion throughout the 1920s, was not as uniformly awake to the international threat as later examiners might have imagined it to be.⁶⁰³

To facilitate naval and military planning in the event of conflict and the launching of such a fleet, and to investigate how the services might more efficiently understand Japanese intentions and capabilities, the Admiralty dispatched Captain William Tait, Deputy Director of Naval Intelligence, to the Far East in the fall of 1933 to study the existing intelligence apparatus and make recommendations as to how it might be restructured.⁶⁰⁴ Through the spring of 1934, Tait engaged with intelligence personnel and regional commanders from across the services as well as partners in Australia and New Zealand to build, “an organisation which can be trusted to function efficiently in the critical days before an actual outbreak of hostilities, and up to such time as the Main Fleet arrived at Singapore.” To do this, Tait recommended the creation of a combined military, naval, and air intelligence center in Hong Kong, later named the Far Eastern Combined Bureau (FECB), that would provide intelligence to the Admiralty and China Station under the leadership of a Royal Navy Captain, the Chief of the Intelligence Staff. The FECB would serve to collate and coordinate intelligence priorities, assess and disseminate intelligence reports, and liaise with partners in the region as the senior military intelligence officer. It was hoped that such an organization would streamline the disjointed intelligence-gathering structures that each of the services and ministries had employed in the region in the years prior and which had “failed signally to produce the requisite information” that commanders needed with respect

⁶⁰³ Haggie, *Brittania at Bay*, 65-67.

⁶⁰⁴ Best, *British Intelligence and the Japanese Challenge in Asia*, 110.

to Japan. Although the work and organization of the SIS in the Far East was outside of Tait's remit, his report also shed light on the poor ability of "C.X." (Steptoe) to provide information of value to those senior officials in the region who had the most need for it. Lampson "had no use at all for C.X.," while Dreyer saw him as "the exact opposite from that which one would wish secret service agents" to be and remarked on his inability to provide any sort of intelligence on Japanese naval plans and defences. Dreyer's facetious pondering that Steptoe might merely be a "blind" and that perhaps the SIS had another agent somewhere in China collecting intelligence speaks to the degree to which trust in the disjointed regional intelligence networks had broken down by 1933.⁶⁰⁵ It was perhaps with some degree of relief, then, that the FECB was officially established in 1935.

Such investment did little, however, to solve the policy problems simultaneously facing the Cabinet and CID in London. As has been discussed, within Whitehall the Singapore strategy had usefully served as a structure around which politics and plans could be based, however loosely or unrealistically, throughout the interwar years. The difficulty for CID policymakers in 1933 was that, for the first time, there existed a likelihood that this strategy would need to be set into motion. The fudge of the 1920s, that the strategy was ill-conceived but adhered to for political reasons because there was no realistic scenario in which it would need to be put into place, was no longer tenable. The lack of investment in the naval base in Singapore over the course of the 1920s and beyond, however, meant that it was something of a zombie policy,

⁶⁰⁵ CAIRD, Papers of Admiral Sir William Eric Campbell Tait (Tait papers), Dreyer to Secretary of the Admiralty, 19 April 1934; CAIRD, Tait papers, Digest of the Report on Intelligence in the Far East by Captain W.E.C. Tait, M.V.O., Royal Navy, and the Remarks contained in the Covering Letter by the Commander-in-Chief, China, 1934; CAIRD, Tait papers, Minute by the DNI on N100543/34, 1934.

unviable in 1933 for two principal reasons – the lack of a base in the region to refit, refuel, and provision the fleet in the first place, and the emergence, in the form of Nazi Germany, of a European threat that called into question Britain’s ability to send a fleet at all. Moreover, the audacity and technical competence exhibited by the Japanese at Shanghai in 1932 challenged the Royal Navy’s ability to achieve even limited aims with the resources at its disposal. The consistent call from the Admiralty, therefore, was for funding for the material power of the fleet so as to make the Singapore strategy a viable one again.⁶⁰⁶ It was in the fall of 1933 that the CID finally grappled with the fact that the combined British fleet was simply not large enough to provide the number of vessels needed to adequately face the Japanese at potentially the same time that a rising German threat necessitated the home stationing of a large number of vessels. This had been the central contradiction that Smuts had raised at the Imperial Conference in 1923, one that a decade of considered naval thought and planning had not addressed. This meant that Britain either had to embark on a costly and time-consuming naval building program – in contravention to the 1930 London Naval Treaty, no less – or rethink its commitment to the Far East. Various solutions to this problem, from rosy estimates of the ability and willingness of the French fleet to help defend the home islands to the participation of the US in combined operations, may have been bandied about but were never seriously pursued.⁶⁰⁷ Hankey, dispatched to the Antipodes in 1934 on a mission to reassure the Australian and New Zealand governments of Britain’s commitment to imperial defence, had the difficult task of

⁶⁰⁶ TNA, CAB53/4/5, Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee – Minutes of the 108th Meeting, 27 March 1933; CAB4/22, CP1103, The Situation in the Far East, 31 March 1933; CAIRD, Chatfield papers, CHT 4/4-4/5, Chatfield to Dreyer, 1 June 1933.

⁶⁰⁷ TNA, CAB4/22, CP1113, Imperial Defence Policy, 12 October 1933.

communicating, in a verbatim text confirmed and approved by Baldwin, British strategic realities. This was that British efforts to complete construction of the naval base at Singapore were only “with the object of enabling the fleet to proceed” to the region rather than an explicit promise that it would actually do so, or any estimate of how large such a fleet might be.⁶⁰⁸ This frustrated the Dominions, especially Australia, and contributed to both the development of their own territorially-based defense strategies and the slow shifting of defence culture and strategy from one based on partnership with Britain to one looking instead to the United States.⁶⁰⁹

The crux of this problem – force posture and resource allocation across wide distances of time and space in a period of geopolitical uncertainty – was also the central problem that faced Admiralty and CID policymakers in the years before the First World War, when the threat of the Imperial German Navy had necessitated the redeployment of much of the China Station fleet to home waters. That the Anglo-Japanese Alliance had allowed Britain to do this without sacrificing its Far Eastern interests was not lost on policymakers in the aftermath of Manchuria and Shanghai, as they contemplated how to defend the empire with limited resources and a fracturing international status quo. This was the genesis of the renewal of calls from some within Whitehall and the imperial bureaucracy for a reassessment of British grand strategy and the consideration of deepening, rather than distancing, relations with Japan in the 1930s. This was rooted not only in a practical analysis of Britain’s vulnerabilities in the Far East but also mythic remembrances of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance and regret at the decision, at the Washington Naval Conference in 1921, to end it.⁶¹⁰ Although Clementi and others had argued almost

⁶⁰⁸ TNA, CAB63/66, Hankey to Baldwin, 30 July 1934; CAB63/66, Baldwin Aide-Memoire, 31 July 1934.

⁶⁰⁹ Trotter, “Defending the ‘Singapore Strategy,’” 94.

⁶¹⁰ Best, “The ‘Ghost’ of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance,” 823-825.

continuously for this policy since at least the mid-1920s and the crisis of Chinese nationalism, it was only in the aftermath of Manchuria and Shanghai that such a shift began to be debated at the highest levels of government. Musings by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff about a rekindling of the alliance in the spring of 1933 were hardly the first. As far back as the spring of 1932, in the midst of the Japanese assault on Shanghai, the Treasury had openly questioned whether Britain had the political will or desire to actually conduct major naval operations in the Far East in spite of its stated policy to do so. And it was from the Treasury, in a concerted push by Neville Chamberlain, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Permanent Secretary Sir Warren Fisher, that a major effort was undertaken to fundamentally reset British grand strategy in 1933 and 1934.⁶¹¹ This, in short, envisaged Britain breaking away from the post-Washington order in which it had tacitly supported Chinese national aspirations and aligned itself to an Anglo-American backed regional status quo. In its place, Chamberlain and Fisher envisioned a stronger Anglo-Japanese relationship that could more profitably secure British commercial and ideological interests in the region, thus allowing Britain to rearm for a potential future conflict with the greater and more dangerous enemy, Nazi Germany.

Although these Treasury efforts were well underway in the aftermath of Manchurian crisis, the deliberations and report of the first Defence Requirements Sub-Committee (DRC), established in 1933 to understand and develop plans to meet Britain's worst military and defence deficiencies, provided the setting for their most forthright exposition. The creation of this committee was spurred not only by Japanese expansionism in the Far East but more importantly

⁶¹¹ TNA, CAB53/4/6, Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee – Minutes of the 111th Meeting, 20 June 1933; CAB4/21, CP1087, Note by the Treasury on the Annual Review for 1932 by the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee (1082-B), 11 March 1932.

by the coming to power of Hitler in January 1933 and Germany's subsequent withdrawal from both the League and the ongoing Disarmament Conference.⁶¹² Chaired by Hankey and composed of the three professional heads of the fighting services, alongside Vansittart and Fisher, the DRC met from November 1933 through to the spring of 1934. It quickly became "the arena in which British strategic foreign policy was threshed out among competing interests with competing views and, most importantly, the body whose decisions largely determined the path that British strategic defence policy took in the years until 1939."⁶¹³ The most crucial questions facing the DRC were against whom should Britain focus its rearmament; how and where should forthcoming reinvestments in defence capabilities be spent; and how, if at all, should Britain adjust its foreign policy in the face of these threats. In practice, this meant deciding which was the greater potential foe, Germany or Japan? Based on that determination and the utility of the different fighting services in the face of those threats, into which service should the most defence spending go? And, with perhaps the most salience for the Far East, should Britain consider Japan to be a potential friend or foe, and how might that determination affect broader British policies towards the United States?

With regards to the first question, Vansittart and Fisher, speaking for the Foreign Office and Treasury, respectively, argued that Germany must be considered the principal threat to Great Britain, given its sheer proximity to the home islands and thus its potential to threaten the core of the empire. This has been characterized by some as a British 'national' perspective of defence. While not downplaying such a threat, Hankey and the Admiralty, in the person of Chatfield,

⁶¹² Post, *Dilemmas of Appeasement*, 32.

⁶¹³ Neilson, "The Defence Requirements Sub-Committee, British Strategic Foreign Policy, Neville Chamberlain and the Path to Appeasement," 653.

argued that the threat of Japan was greater and more immediate to wider British interests and, thus, must have primacy. This 'imperial' perspective highlighted not only British commercial interests in the region but the vulnerability of the Antipodean dominions and India and the centrality of the empire to the economic and material survival of Britain itself. For Vansittart and Fisher, the defence of the home islands from the looming threat of Germany necessitated a preponderant investment of defence spending on the Royal Air Force, whereas Hankey and Chatfield's position focused on the revitalization of the Royal Navy and its ability to project force into the Far East, a traditionally naval purview. Regardless of primacy, however, there was no plausible scenario in which Hitler's Germany was not the adversary central to British military preparations. Though pounds might be shifted one way or another, the services, one and all, were each going to receive new injections of spending and a consequent growth in capability by way of the DRC recommendations. It was only with regards to the question of whether Britain should view Japan as an adversary to be deterred or a potential partner to be wooed that the DRC proved unable to answer.⁶¹⁴

As has been stated, Chamberlain's advocacy for a broad revisioning of British strategy and defence policy in the Far East began before the DRC was formed. These ideas were voiced by Fisher during the DRC debates. Lamenting the lapse of the Anglo-Japanese alliance, the Treasury pushed to improve or stabilize British relations with Japan in the hope of neutralizing its threat. The core of Chamberlain's argument, which by 1934 had grown to become a recommendation for a broad Anglo-Japanese non-aggression pact, was that the signing of some kind of agreement, and the opening of broader discussions on regional security and stability, was necessary in order to allow Britain to invest its resources in defending the home islands from the

⁶¹⁴ Ibid., 670-672.

threat of Germany.⁶¹⁵ As Chancellor, Chamberlain hewed to traditional conservative views on spending and the need for balanced budgets. Given the requirement to both rearm and manage social spending, Chamberlain attempted to scale defence spending appropriately. This meant the prioritization of threats and resources and, to the Treasury, a focus on home defence, a massive investment in the Royal Air Force towards such ends, and a focus on preparedness for war in Europe. This was the position that Fisher advanced during the DRC debates in parallel to Chamberlain in Cabinet. For a time in March 1934, this position had broad support.⁶¹⁶

Hankey and Chatfield, the supporters of a more ‘imperial’ defensive posture, countered in the DRC that such ideas were reckless. Japanese militarism, they argued, threatened the very fabric of the empire. Not only would the proposed realignment subordinate Britain to Japan in the Far East, but it would also be an invitation for Japan to dismantle, through either conquest or cooptation, the Far Eastern empire and threaten Australia, New Zealand, and even India. Rapprochement with Japan would also, according to the Foreign Office, immediately imperil British interests in China by antagonizing Chinese public opinion. Despite Lampson’s efforts to stabilize the Sino-Japanese relationship in the aftermath of the Lytton Report and Japan’s departure from the League, Pratt and others well understood the power of Chinese nationalism and the likelihood that Britain would face a new boycott if it reconciled with Japan. In the event that future Chinese nationalist fury towards Britain could only be held back by Japanese military

⁶¹⁵ TNA, CAB23/77, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 26 October 1933; CAB23/78, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 14 March 1934.

⁶¹⁶ TNA, CAB4/23, CP1148, Defence Requirements Committee Report as Amended, 23 October 1934; Neilson, “The Defence Requirements Sub-Committee,” 677-678.

force, Britain would lose either way.⁶¹⁷ By 1933 and 1934, the Foreign Office was also able to push back against the argument for any kind of rapprochement because of its belief, widely shared at the time, that Japan and the Soviet Union were bound for war, or at least some kind of military stalemate, in the Manchurian theater. For Vansittart and others, Japanese-Soviet antagonism redirected Japanese attention north and away from British interests. Why, in such a case, might rapprochement be necessary in a world in which Japan saw the Soviet Union rather than the British Empire as its primary enemy?⁶¹⁸ Most importantly for those in opposition to the Treasury plan, it would also antagonize the United States and thus jeopardize Anglo-American relations. This, in the eyes of many, was the most important strategic partnership that Britain enjoyed anywhere and would be decisive in the determining the outcome of any future conflict, be it with Germany or Japan.⁶¹⁹ Indeed, the perception of, and role played by, the United States in the DRC deliberations and decisions was significant. To Chamberlain and the Treasury, the US was a fickle partner, unwilling to share the burden of international leadership, or resolve the burning question of the outstanding British debt from the First World War. While Admiralty leaders and senior officers, particularly those in the Far East, had long bristled at what they considered to be erratic and often capricious US policy, they well understood their own inability

⁶¹⁷ TNA, CAB24/248, CP77, His Majesty's Governments Policy in the Far East, Simon note covering Memorandum by Sir John Pratt, 15 March 1934; WO32/2538, Vansittart to Montgomery-Massingberd and Sir Herbert Creedy on Foreign Office View of Situation in Far East, 12 March 1934.

⁶¹⁸ Best, *British Intelligence and Japanese Challenge in Asia*, 125.

⁶¹⁹ See TNA, CAB16/109, 16/110, 16/111, and 16/112 for many hundreds of pages of detailed minutes, conclusions, memoranda, and associated documents, as well as the final report of the Ad-Hoc Defence Requirements Sub-Committee of 1933-1934.

to act in the region absent support from the United States.⁶²⁰ Vansittart and the Foreign Office, with an eye towards British grand strategy, played a crucial role here in blunting the Treasury campaign, even as Simon, the Foreign Secretary, often deferred to Chamberlain in Cabinet. Although in agreement that the threat from Germany was foremost and himself regularly critical of US policy and policymakers, Vansittart recognized the importance of the Anglo-American relationship and made clear that the Foreign Office would not support any revision of British foreign policy in the Far East which jeopardized it.⁶²¹

In the end, the two sides reached an agreement in the winter of 1934. The Treasury and Foreign Office managed to get agreement that Germany represented the “ultimate” potential enemy. Hankey and the Admiralty won acknowledgement that Britain needed to “show a tooth” in the Far East as both a deterrent to Japan and a commitment to its broader empire.⁶²² The need for “closer relations” with Japan that the DRC agreed upon was something of a fudge, inserted by Vansittart, Chatfield, and Hankey in watered-down language that kept open the possibility of cordiality – “friendship through strength” – but downplayed any effort to seek an Anglo-

⁶²⁰ TNA, CAB23/78, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 14 March 1934; Greg Kennedy, “What Worth the Americans? The British Strategic Foreign Policy-Making Elite’s View of American Maritime Power in the Far East, 1933-1941,” in *British Naval Strategy East of Suez, 1900-2000: Influences and Actions*, ed. Greg Kennedy (London: Routledge, 2005), 92-94, 99-101; Neilson, “The Defence Requirements Sub-Committee,” 677-678.

⁶²¹ Neilson, “The Defence Requirements Sub-Committee,” 677-678; Simon Bourette-Knowles, “The Global Micawber: Sir Robert Vansittart, the Treasury and the Global Balance of Power, 1933-35,” *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Vol. 6, 1 (1995), 96-101.

⁶²² TNA, CAB4/23, CP1147, Defence Requirements Sub-Committee Report on Imperial Defence Policy, 28 February 1934; CAB23/79, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 31 July 1934; Howard, *The Continental Commitment*, 106-109.

Japanese rapprochement.⁶²³ Following submission of the report and in advance of the Cabinet considering it, however, Chamberlain continued to advocate his plans for reshaping British grand strategy. His efforts, however, stumbled when, in April 1934, he acknowledged that a broader Anglo-Japanese alignment would only be possible if both the United States brooked no opposition and Japan agreed to safeguard Chinese interests, conditions that almost certainly would have doomed such an approach had not the Japanese concurrently done so themselves. This came by way of their own April 1934 statement, well-publicized by Japanese Foreign Office spokesman Eiji Amau, and thenceforth known as the Amau Doctrine, that Japan would countenance no foreign interference in China – and implicitly the broader Far East – other than its own.⁶²⁴ As regards defence spending, the Cabinet’s Ministerial Committee on Defence Requirements approved a spending plan that aligned with the Treasury’s vision; questions of Royal Navy strength were postponed owing to the upcoming 1935 naval conference in London.⁶²⁵ Chamberlain’s broad objective to reset British grand strategy in the Far East on the basis of Anglo-Japanese accommodation and comity foundered on the rocks of reality in the

⁶²³ TNA, CAB4/23, CP1148, Defence Requirements Committee report as Amended, 23 October 1934; WO32/2538, Vansittart to Montgomery-Massingberd and Sir Herbert Creedy on Foreign Office View of Situation in Far East, 12 March 1934.

⁶²⁴ TNA, CAB4/23, CP1147, Defence Requirements Sub-Committee Report on Imperial Defence Policy, 28 February 1934; CAB24/248, CP223, The Future of Anglo-Japanese Relations, Chamberlain and Simon, 16 April 1934; Gill Bennett, “British Policy in the Far East, 1933-36: Treasury and Foreign Office,” *Modern Asian Studies* 26, 3 (1991), 551; Michael Green, *By More Than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 156.

⁶²⁵ TNA, CAB24/250, CP205, Defence Requirements, Report by the Ministerial Committee, 31 July 1934; Bell, *Chamberlain, Germany, and Japan, 1933-34*, 142-143.

years to come. Japanese militarism, once unchecked, brooked none of the compromises that might have made Chamberlain's rethinking of strategy viable.⁶²⁶ In any case, the workings of the DRC were themselves overtaken by further events, including more rapid German rearmament and militarization, the Abyssinian Crisis, and the Treasury's own ineffectual Leith-Ross Mission to the Far East in 1935. It is, thus, known as the *first* Defence Requirements Sub-Committee. If nothing else, however, it was hugely consequential for the way in which it validated the recasting of global politics as zero sum and increasingly confrontational, and for the way in which it structured British rearmament efforts in the years prior to the Second World War.⁶²⁷

This thesis will not argue for the wisdom or fallacy of the vision of Far Eastern imperial defence as advocated by Chamberlain and the Treasury over the course of 1933 and 1934. It merely posits that, in the context of Britain's abnegation of leadership and agency in the face of an international threat to the Far Eastern status quo in the early 1930s, Chamberlain's strategy, whether for good or ill, represented Britain's last best attempt to reclaim its former strategic primacy in the region and set the geopolitical conditions upon which others would have to respond. The irony is that such a step in the name of British primacy and power, had it been enacted, might well have brought about its destruction. This chapter also hopes to have demonstrated, however, that efforts to counter the international threat of Japan during this period were simply one aspect of British imperial defence in the Far East in the early 1930s. Only when considered alongside the continued and successful British efforts to counter the transnational

⁶²⁶ Neilson, "The Defence Requirements Sub-Committee," 683.

⁶²⁷ Bennett, "British Policy in the Far East, 1933-36," 549-550; Howard, *The Continental Commitment*, 114-115; Peden, *Arms, Economics, and British Strategy*, 161.

threat of communism can one understand fully how Britain did or did not work to defend its interests.

Singapore Totems

Where, then, in the summer of 1934 stood those two symbols of British imperial defence in the interwar Far East, the Singapore Naval Base and the Straits Settlements Special Branch, and what meaning might be drawn from their realities? As has been shown, Special Branch and its inter-imperial partners, buoyed by the success of the 1931 arrests of Ducroux and Noulens, operated most effectively in the years that followed. The conditions for this success relied on both internal reforms and controls in the preceding years and external factors and events beyond Singapore which Onraet and others wisely exploited for their own purposes. This allowed them, via the Dutch colonial police, the *Sûreté Générale*, Siamese constables, KMT intelligence officers, the Indian Political Intelligence system, networks of British consular officials, military and naval intelligence networks, the Royal Hong Kong Police Force, and the Shanghai Municipal Police, among many others, to effectively utilize transnational means and partnerships to counter a transnational threat.⁶²⁸ In expanding the legal authorities and financial support that Special Branch needed over the course of the 1920s, the Straits Settlements incentivized the professionalization and expansion of the force. This brought it additional detectives, new training facilities and hiring authorities, enhanced legal frameworks for the arrest and deportation of radicals and communists, and the refinement of techniques, from fingerprinting and file organization to the monitoring of handbill production and financial transactions, that turned

⁶²⁸ Foster, *Projections of Power*, 151.

individual strengths into systemic of strengths. The novel reforms and advances of the 1920s became routinized. The Noulens affair, thus, was not an aberration but an exemplification of the norm. The story, then, is one that outlines the successful implementation of controls over the most radical elements of political life in the colony. Raids and arrests decreased not because Comintern agents beat the system but because they were beaten by it. Onraet read MCP reports and mail almost at his leisure. As has been discussed, however, the vigor and success with which Special Branch pursued Comintern agents in the years after 1931 seems, as is so often the case, to have left it ill-prepared to adequately grasp the nature of the Japanese challenge and pivot its resources to counter it. The evidence presented here shows an organization still inadequately calling, as late as 1935 – more than three years after the outbursts of Japanese militarism were felt across the region – for resources and capabilities to counter this threat. Onraet himself, who was promoted to Inspector-General of the Straits Settlements Police Force in 1935, struggled with the nature of the Japanese threat, and to the end considered it more of a military challenge than a political one. He remarked as such wistfully in his postwar memoir on the British failure to understand and counter Japanese intelligence efforts in prewar Singapore. “I look back at Japanese activities in Malaya with the conviction of having witnessed a patient and confident preparation for ultimate occupation, all the more easy to organize as no one thought a military success, on which such an occupation depended, was possible.”⁶²⁹ In that way, his own conflicted feelings about the nature of the Japanese threat reflect the ambivalence with which many in early and mid-1930s British officialdom viewed it.

Across the island, in the wake of the Japanese occupation of Manchuria and, especially, its attack on Shanghai, the forces of motion came together to initiate substantive progress on the

⁶²⁹ Onraet, *A Police Background*, 124, 128.

Singapore Naval Base for, what was in effect, the first time. Following the Cabinet's abandonment of the Ten-Year Rule in March 1932, in June of that year the CID returned its focus to the naval base and recommended the resumption of work, forestalled since the Imperial Conference in 1930. This included a series of requests sent to the Cabinet for final approval. First, and over the opposition of the Air Ministry, that the 15-inch, land-based gun would "retain its place as the main deterrent against Naval attack," but also that "aircraft are a most important factor to be reckoned with in considering both forms of attack and forms of defence...In the case of more important naval bases their co-operation is essential." This concluded the Air Ministry's twelve-year campaign to utilize aircraft rather than naval guns as the principal defensive feature of the Singapore scheme. The basic requirement for completing the work was made clear to all when Baldwin, in summation, reminded the CID that the nearest defended base to Singapore and the Imperial Japanese Navy was distant Malta. All this the Cabinet approved in October 1932, as well as additional monies, requested by the Admiralty, to ensure that "the graving dock, at the completion of the contract, should be usable, and not merely a hole in the ground." This last inclusion was offered as something of a reassurance to the Dominions as well as the sultans of the various Malay States who had, in toto, contributed £2 million towards a project that had yet to begin.⁶³⁰

Despite Cabinet approval, Treasury limitations mean that no additional funds had been spent on the project by the spring of 1933 when the Chiefs of Staff again presented a paper to the CID and Cabinet stressing the need for a speedy relaunching of construction. This came between Japan's announcement of its intention to quit the League and the signing of the Tanggu Truce,

⁶³⁰ TNA, CAB23/72, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 11 October 1932; Neidpath, *The Singapore Naval Base*, 126.

thus raising the specter of further unchecked Japanese expansion in the minds of Whitehall officials. Since 1932, they wrote, “nothing has happened to alleviate the situation.” Hankey, ever sympathetic to the COS, followed up their report with a letter to MacDonald that put the security of Singapore and the spending requests within a wider context, both financial and historical, especially in light of government spending elsewhere.⁶³¹ On 6 April, the CID accepted the COS’s recommendations and approved the completion of permanent defences in Singapore within three and a half years (with an estimated completion date of 1936), as well as the movement of an air squadron to the existing aerodrome and the withdrawal of one battalion from Shanghai to Singapore. Six days later the Cabinet approved everything, including the construction of a second aerodrome for the RAF. The final obstacles, negotiations, and approvals, therefore, to the construction of the defences, aerodromes, and naval dock and berthing systems were resolved. With monies allocated, construction could begin, although it should be noted that in December 1941, on the eve of the Japanese attack, work remained ongoing.⁶³² What this narrative hopes to have captured, however, is not the doomed fate of the naval base or the truisms or misconceptions that its fortune laid bare. It is, rather, that the saga of the Singapore Naval Base represents, in miniature, the saga of Britain’s approach to the international threat of Japan in these interwar years. Distracted, ambivalent, ambiguous, and tardy, its conception and eventual construction represented not the best or worst of British policymakers, none of whom were clairvoyants, but rather the encapsulation of Britain’s efforts to understand and, eventually, to

⁶³¹ TNA, CAB4/22, CP1103, Situation in the Far East, 31 March 1933; CAB21/402, Hankey to MacDonald, 5 April 1933.

⁶³² TNA, CAB2/5, CID, 258th meeting, 6 April 1933; CAB 23/75, Cabinet Conclusions/Minutes, 12 April 1933.

counter the international threat of Japan. It is without irony that this narrative proposes, in much the same way, that the methodical investment in, development, and maturation of the Straits Settlements Special Branch best encapsulates in miniature Britain's efforts to counter the transnational threat of communisms and indigenous nationalism.

Conclusion

This thesis has made several arguments. First, that most scholars who have studied and written about Britain in the interwar Far East have done so through one of two lenses – imperial defence, foreign relations, and strategy, usually naval, on the one hand or the administration of, or aspects of life or policy within, the empire on the other. This has led to the creation of two distinct but largely parallel historiographies that too often are not in dialogue with one another. Those works focusing on the more conventional tales of strategy and foreign relations almost always couch their analysis through the lens of British efforts to counter Japan as the rising international threat to the British Far East. Those works assessing the administration of empire focus their analysis on any number of worthwhile subjects, from the machinery of imperial administration to colonial policing to cultural life within the colonies. What too many scholars have struggled to appreciate is that the strategies to understand and counter both the international threat of Japan and the transnational threat of communism and indigenous nationalism were both at the heart of British imperial defence efforts. Neither is more deserving of assessment as a component of imperial defence than the other. This thesis has sought to demonstrate that the dichotomy between these narratives is an artificial construction, a reflection of the siloing of assessments of British policy in the period and the inability or unwillingness of scholars to

expand their terms of reference when assessing the broader subject. This thesis has sought to reframe our understanding of imperial defence as one that is built around Britain's responses to both the transnational and the international threats and to show that such an understanding is a richer, more interesting, and more accurate rendering of the complexity of the period and the challenges that its actors faced. It is only in assessing imperial defence efforts more broadly that one can begin to measure and understand its effectiveness.

How effective, then, were British imperial defence efforts? The second major argument this thesis has made is that Britain's responses to these twin threats were dissonant. First, Britain's efforts to understand and prepare for the rise of Japan as an international threat to its interests, and then to counter it once it had emerged as such a threat, were desultory and ineffective. While much has been said about the emergence of an expansionary and militarist Japan from 1931 forwards, more salient to the British inability to deter or influence Japan actions in the early 1930s was the fact that British officials and policymakers were consistently of two minds as to what kind of state Japan actually was and whether it might serve as a bulwark of, or a threat to, British power. In the 1920s, most outside of the Admiralty viewed Japan as a 'normal' country with whom partnership should be encouraged and deepened. This contributed to the lack of development on the Singapore Naval Base throughout the decade and negatively affected Britain's ability to deter Japan as it moved away from a civilian-led government focused on international engagement and towards a military-led government focused on military security and economic autarky. This ambivalence lasted through to the end of the entire period in question and the meetings of the DRC in 1933 and 1934. Given this uncertainty, British efforts can be characterized by a lack of ambition and an unwillingness to take on risk with respect to Japan. This rendering of British imperial defence in the interwar Far East broadly aligns with the

existing historiography, though stresses the ambivalence of British policymakers more so than many contemporary works.

The dissonance comes from the fact that the transnational threat of communism and Chinese nationalism was one that British officials, particularly those posted in the region, well understood and moved to counter, quickly and without specific direct guidance, from the early 1920s onwards. In this sphere, British actions were vibrant, nuanced, forward leaning, and often effective. Officials recognized the division between moderate and radical Chinese nationalists across the region and selectively targeted operations to exploit that division. Further actions, from working constructively to end the Canton-Hong Kong Strike to tacitly supporting Chiang Kai Shek as he moved north from Canton, were, if in line with broader British policies as laid out by Chamberlain, at least negotiated and put in place by imperial officials in the region. From building an international network of political intelligence entities and capabilities working together to achieve a common purpose to facilitating various crackdowns on the radical and communist elements that were most threatening to imperial stability and interests. The list goes on and on. At the same time that such events were taking place in the region, British officials in the Cabinet and Foreign Office in London were working effectively to reorient British policy towards China (and in the Far East more generally) in a way that was more tolerant of Chinese national aspirations and created the space for those in the field to introduce strategies towards such ends at lower levels. Chamberlain's 1926 reorientation of policy, most notably communicated in the Christmas Memorandum, was the primary vehicle that allowed officials to pursue such policies and build a connection with the forces of Chinese nationalism. This was a threat against which Britain was willing to engage proactively and take actions that assumed risk. Britain was the primary agent and mover in this saga and remained so well into the 1930s even

as the tangible threat of communism faded. The story of imperial defence then is not simply one of failure, then, but rather of dissonance and complexity. The fact that two seemingly contradictory findings can be simultaneously true both complicates and builds upon existing narratives of imperial crisis and decline in the interwar period. Britain, in certain ways then, remained capable of demonstrating agency and leadership to shape the regional environment well in the 1930s.

Finally, this thesis has argued that the dissonance and complexity evident in imperial defence most accurately depicts the realities, experiences, efforts, and achievements – or lack thereof – of British officialdom in the region and the era. Myriad individuals, from Chamberlain, Hankey, Fisher, Beatty, Pratt, Wellesley, Amery, Churchill, Baldwin, MacDonald, Simon and others in London, to say nothing of Onraet, Clementi, Brenan, Guillemard, Crosby, Lampson, Chand, Barton, Clifford, and Tyrwhitt in the region played parts large and small in this narrative. If some were heroic, others (most) were vain. If some were farsighted, others were blinded by their own preconceptions. Most, particularly those posted in the Far East, were simply independently minded officials who saw the problems in front of them and often worked to solve them in ways conducive to British wider interests and in line with the policy direction as set by Whitehall. One could even argue that Clementi, as outspoken and irrational as his ideas often were, fit within this same milieu of regional officialdom – independent-minded, driven, and dedicated to, at least as he saw it, the success of the empire. This thesis hopes to have shown the importance of such individuals and their actions within the wider scope while placing them within the context of the moment, and the way in which their actions and decisions within a single imperial space created conditions and circumstances that forced some to respond and allowed others to thrive. The story of effectiveness and ineffectiveness in British efforts in the

interwar Far East is their story of success and failure and their story of imperial defence. But it is a single story. To attempt to understand imperial defence efforts simply from the perch of Whitehall or the kampungs of Malaya is to misunderstand the contributions and efforts of all such individuals great and small.

Given all of this, however, more questions remain. Why, for one, were British efforts to counter the transnational threat of communism and Chinese indigenous nationalism successful while their efforts to counter the international threat of Japan unsuccessful? As has been stated, by 1926 British officials separately but concurrently reached several conclusions. First, that Chinese nationalism, although then in thrall to Soviet communism, could be a powerful force to moderate against communism and advance British interests in the region more broadly. Second, that the divisions that existed within the heterogenous community of Chinese nationalism provided opportunities for British policymakers and officials to exploit in their efforts to woo moderate Chinese nationalists and weaken and destroy radical Chinese nationalists and their communist backers and brethren. These conclusions, the former most notably reached by Chamberlain, Wellesley, and Pratt at the Foreign Office and most effectively put into practice by Onraet, Brennan, and Lampson in the region, were broad and consistently characterized British policy throughout this period. This consistency of policy allowed Britain to take advantage of certain geopolitical conditions in the 1920s – a divided China, a reticent United States, a friendly Japan, and a Soviet Union not seeking conventional military conflict – to exert agency and leadership in the region in their efforts to defeat communism. Alongside the fact that such efforts could be done far from London and without any significant requirement for resources at the imperial level, this consistency of policy allowed British officials to put in place structures and

systems of internal and external cooperation that would prove crucial to its success combatting communism in the years to come.

As has been stated, however, in the case of the international threat of Japan, the opposite was nearly always true during the 1925-1934 period. Neither policymakers in London nor officials in the region could make up their mind about what type of country Japan was or what kind of relationship Britain should attempt to have with it. This ambivalence was a constant feature in the period. It helped create the ambiguity that defined British policy and saw the empire tied in knots over issues from the League of Nations to the Singapore base to the application of British policy in China. Although other factors, from a lack of financial wherewithal – especially post-1931 – to the tyrannies of distance and cost played a part in moderating and to a certain extent defining Britain's approach to Japan as an international threat, at root it was never going to be successful if it could not come to decide what kind of country Japan was and what it wanted to get out of that relationship. Additionally, while the deployment of naval and military assets in 1927 was sufficient to protect British interests in the region from any transnational threat, the same was not true from 1932 onwards with respect to the international threat of Japan, which, from a military perspective, posed an almost insuperable challenge. This the Chiefs of Staff repeatedly made clear. These were the primary factors, predating questions of finance and strategy, that set the conditions for Britain's interwar experiences in countering the transnational and international threats.

Did Britain's policies change over time or, put differently, should the 1920s and the 1930s be characterized as distinct from each other? There was, to a certain extent, a remarkable consistency to British policy throughout this period, regardless of the threat in question. It usually sought to act in concert with its fellow powers and in ways which were beneficial to the

League of Nations. It sought to oppose and defeat the forces and agents of communism with a continuity that was forceful and striking. In China, it continued to adhere, if selectively, to a policy of non-intervention and conciliation throughout the period. And, with regards to Japan, it sought dialogue and openness above all else in the belief that these two countries could and should work together. The great difference was in the nature of the threat. Chinese nationalism and international communism presented themselves as threats during the 1920s in the years before Japan emerged as expansionary and militaristic. As a threat, and as also repeatedly argued by the Chiefs of Staff, Chinese nationalism was to a certain extent a non-military one and, thus, could not be dealt with by any kind of significant or overwhelming military response. This meant that Britain could be flexible in its approach to the threat and act as something akin to an agent of change. Its willingness to abandon dogma and reform its policies towards China in the mid-1920s reflected that flexibility. Its success in the 1930s in fighting the Comintern was built atop the reforms and growth of Special Branch and the systems of political intelligence collaboration that it represented in the 1920s. Non-intervention allowed Britain to insert itself, in key places and moments, into KMT politics in China while leading efforts, within Malaya and the broader region, to bring capabilities together to oppose the Comintern. In the 1930s, by contrast, the policy of non-intervention meant that Britain became less an agent of change and more of an observer; its actions and responses merely reflections of the changes that had taken place. The Japanese seizure of Manchuria and attack on Shanghai pulled back the curtain, so to speak, on Japanese growth and demonstrated Britain's inability to meaningfully respond. The Singapore Naval Base, long under-invested in, came to symbolize this inaction and the relegation of Britain to no more of an observer of events. In that way, the policy of non-intervention was consistent

but somewhat obsolete by the 1930s, no longer able to defend British interests or maintain the status quo.

What does an analysis such as this say about the structures and organs of imperial defence as employed by Britain, both in London and in the region? This thesis will not attempt to characterize the system as inherently or singly effective or ineffective. In examining imperial defence efforts over the course of an entire decade, there are of course too many moments that could be singled out to argue one way or another. The evidence, anecdotal and otherwise, can be interpreted in any number of directions. If a top-down rigidity to policy worked in the 1920s as Chamberlain and the Foreign Office initiated Britain's acceptance of forms of Chinese nationalism, then it could be argued that the top of the system failed to adjust to the realities of the Japanese challenge in the years before 1931. If the bottom-up creativity and agency seen in efforts to counter communism and radical Chinese nationalism were effective, less so were Clementi's efforts to recast British policy from the fringes throughout the era, whether from Hong Kong or Singapore. One lesson that does seem to clearly communicate itself is that the British system of imperial defence, as messy, imperfect, and simultaneously centralized and decentralized as it was, created spaces for ideas to percolate upwards and policy initiatives to trickle through in ways that seem to have strengthened British efforts. That an accommodation to Chinese nationalism or a willingness to tacitly support attacks on the Comintern could take place largely without documented guidance from the center shows that officials on the ground were comfortable acting on their own in often ambiguous circumstances as long as they had a sense of the overarching intent of the policymakers. This was a system built on trust. Those, such as Lampson, who well understood that intent were effective at navigating this opaque system. Those, such as Clementi, who lacked such an understanding, saw their efforts flounder and fail.

That opacity, then, could be used to advance local initiatives that were in pursuit of larger British interests. In the context of these years and these efforts, such a system seems to have helped more than hindered. At lower levels, those of policy implementation rather than policy formulation, it allowed for a series of bottom-up initiatives from across the region to separate moderate Chinese nationalists from radical Chinese nationalists. This system, it should also be said, was more conducive to battling a transnational threat rather than an international, and heavily militarized, threat far from home. Creative thinking, common cause, the development of trust, and a modicum of resources could be hugely impactful when confronting the Comintern. Against the threat and the might of the Japanese military, such strengths proved to be ineffectual.

Finally, what lessons might such an examination hold for those today interested in the wise employment of power and the development of statecraft? The first is that those systems of statecraft that push a certain degree of decision-making and responsibility – in a word, agency – downwards to lower levels are more likely to both engender creativity in policy development and implementation and to be receptive to changes in policy that conditions on the ground demand. In other words, those systems that reward adaptation and flexibility will themselves take on such characteristics, but only when such flexibility is demonstrated to be in service of policy goals as laid out from the center. The British system of the 1920s was simultaneously one in which policies could be adapted from the top-down and adopted from the bottom-up in ways that were generally beneficial to imperial defence efforts. Policymakers today should consider examples such as this when they think about what they really want their systems and subordinates to be able to accomplish. The second is that Britain spent the entirety of the ten years in question here investing in and professionalizing its forces and equities aligned against the transnational threat of communism. If Britain itself were not at war, some of those on the ground, from Singapore to

Shanghai, very much were. And that constant focus and reinvestment, even if only of trifling amounts in comparison to the grand schemes of policy, was crucial in building the expertise and systems that could capitalize on events, such as the arrest of Ducroux, and in turn make major contributions to the defence of the empire. All well understood that the officials on the fringes of the empire were footmen in a battle that did not start or stop alongside the traditional rhythms of war but was continual and, at heart, a non-military one. Such challenges overflow in the contemporary world, and if nothing else the lesson that this period in question raises is that states with broad international interests who are engaging with transnational threats or adversaries – be they economic, informational, intelligence-related, or anything else – continue to invest in the tools, most of them low cost, to counter them. Finally, the difficulties that Britain encountered in balancing its national interests in the Far East with its role in the League of Nations in the 1920s and 1930s should force policymakers to reassess the way in which their national interests do or not synchronize with their international goals and responsibilities. The fundamental disjuncture here, despite Whitehall's inability to substantively address it, meant that British strategies towards Japan were always likely to struggle absent an entire re-envisioning of British policy. Where, however, Britain sought out friends, allies, and partners to advance a common purpose, and proceeded to deliberately and methodically build and strengthen such relations over several years, it saw great success. States that can build such coalitions of common interests in the face of a common adversary will find themselves with more British information, more resources, more resiliency, and more support for their efforts near and far. In a word, then, if one can internationalize a national interest, and bring other resources and partners to bear to confront it, then great success can be had on battlefields real and metaphorical. In the case of Britain's efforts to counter the transnational threat of communism and radical nationalism, it accomplished

this to great effect. In the case of Britain's efforts to understand and then counter the international threat of Japan, it openly struggled. These realities reflect the ways in which British imperial defence policymakers understood and acted when faced with choices of evils, be they in 1925 or later. These together characterize and tell a single story of British imperial defence in the interwar Far East.

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