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Although the Comintern continued to attempt to dictate how the CCP should be run and what ideas it should adopt, the Communist base that Mao Zedong created at Yanan provided him with the opportunity to develop his independent political theories and programme. It was from Yanan that the Red Army went out into the countryside to impose Communism on the local people, this despite the base being subject to intermittent attack from the Nationalists. The task of resisting Nationalist pressure on Yanan was made easier for the Communists by the outcome of an extraordinary event, the Xian Incident of December 1936.

To understand the importance of the incident one has to go back five years to 1931 when Japan had committed its first open act of aggression against China with the invasion and occupation of Manchuria. Over the next six years, Japanese forces pushed out into other Chinese provinces, a clear sign that they intended a full-scale occupation (see page 103). Chiang's response to Japan's moves was low-key and defensive. He believed that China was too large a country for the Japanese to occupy without exhausting themselves; a protracted occupation would mean war and the eventual defeat of Japan. He defined his approach as **trading space to buy time**.

The drawback of Chiang's strategy

However, the policy of avoiding direct conflict with the occupier proved uninspiring and brought obvious political dangers. Chiang's supporters frequently found it difficult to maintain their loyalty. Throughout his time as leader of the GMD, Chiang was subject to opposition from within its ranks. In 1933 it took him over a year to suppress a rising among his troops at Fujian (Fukien), who were reacting against his failure to confront the Japanese.

In 1935, Chiang had suffered further damage to his reputation as a defender of China when Japanese troops fanned out from Manchuria into six other northern provinces. Rather than confront the Japanese, Chiang came to an agreement with them. He withdrew the GMD forces from Beijing and accepted that the newly occupied provinces be recognised as 'autonomous regions' to be administered by pro-Japanese officials. What was considered by many Chinese to have been craven behaviour by Chiang led to the **9 December Movement**, an episode in which outraged students in Beijing, Shanghai and Wu Han took to the streets in protest. The slogans on their banners conveyed the nature of their anger: 'End the New Imperialism', 'Stop the Civil War', 'Unite Against the Japanese Enemy'.

Mutiny at Xian

The culmination of this deep dissatisfaction with Chiang Kaishek's response to the Japanese threat came with a mutiny among his own troops in December 1936. During a visit to Xian in Shaanxi province, which, ironically, Chiang had undertaken in

Key question
What effect did the Xian Incident have on GMD–CCP relations?

Xian Incident: 1936
9 December
Movement: 1935

Key dates

Trading space to buy time

Giving ground to the Japanese which would both overstretch their resources and allow the Chinese the opportunity to build up their own strength.

9 December Movement

The title was meant to convey the continuity between this 1935 protest and the movements of 4 May 1919 and 30 May 1925.

Key terms

order to berate his GMD forces for their slowness in crushing the Communists, he found the tables turned; he was seized by troops acting under the orders of General **Zhang Xueliang** (Chang Hsueh-liang). Zhang, whose warlord father had been killed by the Japanese, had been persuaded by the CCP to commit himself to the anti-Japanese struggle and to use his contacts with the Nationalists to embarrass Chiang.

After his arrest Chiang was handed over to Zhou Enlai, Mao's closest colleague, who offered to spare his prisoner's life if he would promise to end his persecution of the CCP and lead a genuine resistance against the Japanese. Finding himself in an impossible position, Chiang Kaishek gave in; in December 1936, he sanctioned the formation of the second GMD–CCP United Front, pledged to wage unceasing war against the Japanese aggressors.

Given the bitter relations between Chiang and the Communists, whom he had been trying for a decade to annihilate, it is at first glance surprising that the CCP did not simply assassinate him. That would have been normal Chinese politics. That the Communists refrained from doing so suggests an interesting degree of subtlety on their part. They took a calculated risk that paid off. By allowing Chiang not merely to survive, but to remain as the recognised leader of China, the CCP had won a major propaganda victory. They had shown remarkable restraint in forgoing party advantage for the sake of the nation. The *quid pro quo* was Chiang's formal commitment to:

- cease all attempts to suppress the CCP
- recognise the CCP as a legitimate party
- lead a new united front against the Japanese invader.

The Communists could now claim that it was they who were the genuine nationalists whose prime motivation was their love of China as expressed in their willingness to fight under Chiang's leadership. At the same time, they had undermined the GMD's claim to be the sole representative of the nation. Moreover, although Chiang eventually went back on his word and renewed his attacks on the Communists, Mao and his followers at Yanan had at least gained a temporary respite which they began to use to good effect in their development of the Yanan Soviet.

Key figure

Zhang Xueliang (1901–2001)
Sometimes known as the 'Young Marshal', the son of Zhang Zuolin, warlord of Manchuria until his assassination by the Japanese in 1928.