The Battle for China
EsaYS ON THE MILITARY HISTORY
OF THE Sino-Japanese War OF 1937-1945

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There is no instance of a nation benefiting from prolonged warfare.
—Sunzi
Following the Marco Polo Bridge Incident of 7 July 1937, neither the Chinese nor the Japanese high command anticipated the outbreak of a total war that would ultimately spread throughout China and beyond, and would last eight long years. The Japanese high command initially believed that they could contain the fighting while gaining Chinese acquiescence to their demands. The Chinese Nationalists, having decided not to give in to further Japanese demands curtailing their sovereignty in north China, also sought ways to avoid the spread of the fighting, fearful of the unpredictable consequences and devastation of a war against a superior enemy. Both armies had recently commenced programs of military reform and rearmament, the Japanese in 1936 and the Nationalists in 1934 after they had eliminated Communist bases from central and south China. Although these circumstances militated against a wider war with neither side willing to back down, clashes quickly escalated into multidivision engagements.

The Japanese army reinforced its China Garrison Army and soon mobilized reserves to bring three divisions to wartime strength. By the end of July, Chinese forces had been driven from Peking and Tianjin while the general staff in Tokyo had ordered more than 200,000 additional Japanese troops to north China. These developments convinced Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, leader of the Kuomintang Party (KMT) and commander in chief of the Central Army, that he had to fight Japan even though his forces were not fully prepared.

The Japanese hoped to wrap up the campaign quickly through the encirclement and destruction of Chinese field armies in north China, but they lacked an overarching military strategy. Japanese military operations in China evolved in an ad hoc fashion from campaign to campaign with little if any linkage toward a strategic military goal. It still remains difficult to assess the Chinese Nationalists’ strategic thinking in 1937, which
adjusted to meet actual wartime contingencies. In general, to resist Japan the Nationalists hoped to play on Japanese fears of a war with the Soviet Union that would drive Japan to seek a quick solution to any conflict in China. They were willing to trade space for time and fight a war of attrition, but they were also determined to seize the initiative when possible and force the Japanese to fight at times and places of China's choosing.

Following the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, Chiang sent his German-armed and trained divisions of the Central Army north to back up local warlord forces, including those of Song Zheyuan, who faced the Japanese during the incident. Moreover, Chiang had long prepared for the opening of a second front at Shanghai and had also concentrated Nationalist forces between the two fronts around Xuzhou. There the Nationalists had fortified and prepared the battlefield to engage the Japanese, who would be operating at some distance from their supply bases in terrain that would reduce their advantages in mobility as well as naval and air power. Available Nationalist war plans make clear that withdrawal from the coast and retreat inland, even as far as Chongqing, had been contemplated for some time.

This does not mean that Chiang had correctly anticipated the course the fighting took during the first year of the war, nor does it mean that events went according to plan, let alone aspiration. Chiang was repeatedly disappointed with the performance of his armies. It was only when forces in north China crumbled in the face of the Japanese onslaught that he decided to escalate the war, apparently in the belief that the Japanese, concerned about the Soviet Union, would negotiate an agreement favorable to him rather than risk further escalation. But even if Chiang had prepared for a worst-case scenario, he lacked the strategy and military power to evict the Japanese armies from China. The Japanese were likewise without ideas and resources to make him surrender.

The Japanese axis of attack to secure north China followed the two parallel main rail lines—the Tianjin–Pukou route on the east and the Peking–Wuhan route on the west. The First Army drove south from Peking while the Second Army was to move south, then swing west to trap Chinese forces between the two armies north of the Huto River. To control and coordinate the operations of both armies in late August, Tokyo activated the North China Area Army (NCAA).

China's geography both helped and hindered Japanese plans. The theater eventually covered an area equivalent to the United States east of the Mississippi River. Placing Peking just north of Michigan's Upper Peninsula puts Shanghai at Washington, DC, and Guangzhou (Canton) at New Orleans. Wuhan would correspond to St. Louis and Chongqing would be in southwestern Kansas. The vastness of the Chinese countryside rendered a contiguous defensive line impossible, enabling Japanese units to sweep swiftly around or outflank Chinese strong points. Disunion, not just between the Nationalists and the Communists, but also between the Nationalists and various warlord armies in the north, south, and west of China, added to the difficulties of fighting effectively according to a unified military strategy. The Japanese, while often outmaneuvering their divided foes, never had sufficient manpower to seal their envelopments, and the Chinese repeatedly took advantage of gaps to escape encirclement. Thus, Japanese field commanders constantly pressured the army general staff and subsequently Imperial General Headquarters (IGHQ), established in November 1937, for authority to extend the area of operations ever deeper into China.

From the beginning, the conflict would be essentially a struggle between ground forces on the continent. This being so, except for a naval blockade of Chinese coastal cities and support for the Japanese army's landing operations, the principal contribution of the Japanese navy would have to come from its air units, both carrier- and land-based. Indeed, Japanese naval air power was to play a major, though not decisive, role in the first three years of the war.

Responsibilities for operational theaters had been determined between the two services at the outset of the war: the army air force assigned to north China and the navy to central and south China. Since the Japanese army had few air units based in Manchuria or China proper at the outset of the war, with the outbreak of fighting in Shanghai Japanese naval aircraft operating from carriers stationed in the East China Sea and medium bombers flown from bases in western Japan, Taiwan, and the Kwantung Leased Territory effectively opened the air war in China. Their initial targets were Chinese coastal cities and air bases close to the coast. The navy's first long-range, transoceanic strikes by its twin-engined Mitsubishi G3M medium bombers flying from Kyushu and Taiwan took both China and the Western world by surprise. But Japanese inexperience in strategic bombing, faulty organization and tactics, the lack of fighter escort, and the incendiary vulnerability of these unarmored aircraft sustained losses out of proportion to the modest damage they initially inflicted on their targets.

As Japanese ground forces pushed southward, a third major offensive by units of the Kwantung Army and the North China Area Army's strategic reserve, the Fifth Division, occupied Chahar Province to the north and west of Peking. Operations at first went smoothly as Japanese mechanized forces and aircraft opened the way for mobile infantry columns moving along the Peking–Suiyuan Railroad. In mid-September, however, the Fifth Division suffered a tactical setback in the mountainous terrain at Ping-xingguan, where China's Central Army forces and the Chinese Communist 115th Division bloodied the Japanese before being forced to withdraw.

Meanwhile, in mid-August, heavy fighting had erupted in Shanghai when Chiang opened a second front on 14 August, hoping to overwhelm
the Japanese units stationed near the city with a massive blow. Nationalist forces split the Japanese naval infantry and penetrated to the Japanese wharves along Shanghai's waterfront, but then their offensive stalled. The subsequent major fighting in the Battle of Shanghai occurred north of the city after Japan landed reinforcements and the Chinese occupied prepared fortified positions. Both sides avoided combat in Shanghai itself because the great powers had commercial, financial, and administrative interests in the city, including the International Settlement and the French Concession. Japan wanted to avoid a clash with the Western powers at this point, and China could not afford to alienate those powers.

Japan's general staff sent the Shanghai Expeditionary Force (two divisions) to the scene, and Chiang also poured in more reinforcements (eventually seventy divisions) for a showdown. Unable to dislodge the determined Chinese defenders and suffering severe losses, by mid-September Tokyo dispatched three more divisions to Shanghai in hopes of achieving a decisive victory. A combination of natural obstacles and military fortifications turned the Japanese offensive into a meat grinder as both sides fought desperately to advance across a few hundred yards. During October the Japanese lost about 25,000 men in their attacks against prepared Chinese defenses, but Chiang's casualties were also severe. Both sides committed reserves, but neither could break the cycle of attrition warfare. Chiang, however, had successfully dragged Japan into a protracted battle of attrition at Shanghai to relieve pressure on his north China front.

In early October, the general staff in Tokyo ordered the NCAA to destroy Chinese forces throughout Shanxi Province, from where they could harass Japanese flanks and shield Nationalist and Communist bases in northwestern China. The Japanese general staff also commanded two divisions from the NCAA for Shanghai service as it activated the Tenth Army on 20 October for an amphibious envelopment southwest of Shanghai, to be executed in early November. On 30 October, the staff created the Central China Area Army to oversee the campaign. By early November, repeated Japanese assaults had broken through China's last line of defense along Suzhou Creek west of Shanghai, and Japanese forces had landed south of the city, threatening a broad encirclement of Chiang's forces at Shanghai. Chiang withdrew the remnants of his badly battered armies. Total losses for the Shanghai fighting were astronomical, with more than 40,000 Japanese and perhaps 200,000 Chinese casualties.

Although the fighting did not match the ferocity of the Shanghai combat, Japanese columns entering Shanxi from Hebei Province to assault the provincial capital of Taiyuan met stiff resistance around Xinkou in battles that raged from mid-October into November. Simultaneous attempts to the east by the First and Second armies to envelop Chinese field armies near Shijiazhuang on the Peking–Wuhan Railway were again forced to withdraw, but they avoided encirclement, preserved their strength, and left the Japanese overextended with still more territory to occupy. The general staff in Tokyo had repeatedly attempted to limit such operations, but the field commanders insisted that bolder offensives were necessary to annihilate the Chinese armies. By late November, a substantial part of China north of the Yellow River was in Japanese hands, but KMT forces had neither capitulated nor disintegrated. Something else was needed.

Tenth Army's solution was to seize the KMT capital at Nanjing in expectation that this would force Chiang to negotiate. The 170-mile march upriver from Shanghai to Nanjing began in mid-November and moved rapidly as Japanese forces either outflanked or bypassed Chinese troops holding high ground or relied on superior air, naval, armor, and artillery firepower to batter isolated and retreating units and open the way for the fast-moving infantry. The lightning campaign convinced IGHQ that the capture of Nanjing would cause the KMT to crumble, and it gave its approval ex post facto for the attack on the capital. By 10 December Japanese forces were at the walls of Nanjing.

The Nationalists realized that they could not hold Nanjing, but as a symbolic action Chiang ordered his forces to defend to the death the city that was China's capital and the place where the grave of Sun Yat-sen, the Father of the Country, was located. For domestic and international reasons, Chiang needed to demonstrate that he still had the will to resist Japan and that this resistance had national support. One of his erstwhile enemies, General Tang Shengzhi, was willing to take command of the doomed Nanjing garrison, suggesting that past differences were forgotten when the survival of the nation was at stake. Unfortunately, the Central Army's planned staged withdrawal from Shanghai disintegrated when discipline broke down, leaving the defense of Nanjing dependent on unruly warlord troops or raw recruits. Fighting continued in the city for the next three days as Chiang repeatedly changed his mind about the defense of the capital, which was not formally surrendered, and the indecisiveness added to the chaos that overtook the city. Finally, the Chinese defenders retreated in confusion. Japanese troops then perpetrated one of the most horrendous war crimes of the twentieth century: the mass slaughter of Chinese civilians and surrendered Chinese military personnel.

By the end of 1937, Japan had seized the Peking–Tianjin corridor, Shanxi, the lower Yangtze region, and sections of the main railroad lines through these territories. Furthermore, improvements in bombing tactics and formations and the capture of inland air bases, along with the addition of fighter escorts, eliminated most of the defects in Japan's early air campaign by the autumn of 1937 and allowed the air forces to take the fight to the enemy. Taking advantage of these innovations, the navy's air campaign focused on three missions: interdiction of China's communica-
tion and supply routes, support of the army’s ground operations through the destruction of enemy bases and military units, and terror bombing of China’s cities and civilian populations to force the Nationalist regime to capitulate, or at least bring it to the bargaining table. In cooperation with army air units, the first two of these missions were carried out by Japanese naval air forces with relative effectiveness. Land-based bombers from both services relentlessly attacked the road and rail communications in north China that were the avenues for desperately needed Soviet aid. Navy carrier aircraft repeatedly bombed Chinese coastal shipping and road and rail traffic in the southern China interior as well as along the coast.

Despite Japanese conquests, the terror at Nanjing, and the sustained bombing offensive, the Chinese did not submit. The KMT made Wuhan on the Yangtze River in central China its new center of national resistance. The Central Army adopted Fabian tactics as it withdrew deeper into the vast hinterland beyond the immediate reach of Japanese military might and continued the fight. Contrary to the Japanese army’s expectations, the fall of Nanjing had not brought an end to the China war. Instead, the news of widespread Japanese atrocities seemingly hardened Chinese resistance.

After reaching an agreement with General Li Zongren, the leader of the Guangxi Clique, whose forces ranked second only to those of the Central Army, Chiang appointed him commander in chief of the Fifth War Zone headquartered at Xuzhou. As the fighting raged at Shanghai and elsewhere, large numbers of troops were concentrated under Li’s command. The hope was to use the Tianjin–Pukou, Peking–Wuhan, and Lanzhou railways to supply Fifth War Zone forces as they maneuvered to frustrate Japanese efforts to link up their scattered armies in north China and the lower Yangtze. The Xuzhou area was a good location for the Chinese to make a stand. It was beyond the range of Japan’s naval and air units, Japan’s field armies would be at the end of their supply lines, and major rivers and large lakes near the city would hamper Japanese mobility. Thus, the Chinese had set the scene for what would become the decisive battle of the first phase of the Sino-Japanese War.

As for the Japanese, by the end of 1937 the equivalent of Japan’s peacetime army establishment of sixteen divisions and 600,000 men was committed to China operations, which had no end in sight. Moreover, imperial army forces in central China were exhausted: they had been worn down by heavy casualties, insufficient ammunition stocks, and inadequate logistic support. IGHQ stood down major operations in central China in order to reconstitute its forces, refit them, and restore discipline. It also sought time to mobilize ten new divisions in the home islands by mid-1938 and to convert essential industries to a wartime production schedule. But as the fighting expanded and the casualty lists lengthened, the Japanese home front’s expectations of the rewards of the war grew accordingly.

Japanese forces under the command of the North China Area Army, however, pushed for continuing operations. With their forces relatively intact after six months of campaigning, aggressive field commanders demanded greater latitude in conducting offensive operations southward. The NCAA’s Second Army launched its offensive from Shandong Province in March 1938, intending to clear the area north of the Yellow River in anticipation of future operations against Xuzhou or Wuhan. Two widely separated Japanese columns moved from the north and the east against Taierzhuang, on a spur of the Tianjin–Pukou railways and transportation hub on the Grand Canal. Both pincers encountered sharp Chinese resistance when they ran headlong into crack KMT troops of Twentieth and Second army groups. Although Japanese Fifth Division units temporarily occupied a portion of Taierzhuang, they soon found themselves threatened with encirclement and withdrew. Thereafter, in two weeks of close combat between 24 March and 7 April, the Japanese Fifth and Tenth divisions lost several thousand men breaking out of the encirclement. Reinforcements later returned to drive the seriously weakened Chinese forces into retreat. The Japanese setback was celebrated across China as a major victory and greatly enhanced Chinese morale. It was also of great political significance because it coincided with major national and KMT conferences being held in Wuhan to rally the country. For the Japanese, these Chinese claims of victory and heavy Japanese losses further reduced the chances for scaling down field operations.

On 7 April, just as the fighting at Taierzhuang was drawing to a close, IGHQ ordered a massive encirclement campaign to destroy the Kuomintang’s field armies. Conducted from the north by the NCAA and from the south by the Central China Expeditionary Army (CCEA), activated 14 February 1938, the operation involved seven Japanese divisions (200,000 troops). Their north-south envelopment would close at Xuzhou and trap at least fifty KMT divisions. Although the two-month operation during April and May captured Xuzhou, once again the Japanese were unable to trap the Chinese armies, most of which escaped the encirclement with their formations and equipment under cover of a heavy fog and mist that blanketed the area. During the campaign, Japanese field logistics became dangerously overextended, and frontline units suffered from insufficient munitions and rations.

Having failed to achieve a settlement by seizing the KMT capital and being unable to eliminate the KMT’s main armies, the Japanese army switched strategies, forgoing a decisive engagement in exchange for occupying strategic points. This time, the objective was Wuhan, which was an administrative center, a staging and logistic base for Chinese forces defending the central Yangtze region, and a rallying point for the defense of China in the summer of 1938.
By mid-May, Japanese forces crossed the Yellow River and then turned westward along the Longhai Railway toward its junction with the north-south Peking–Wuhan rail line at Zhengzhou. Control of Zhengzhou would secure rail transportation for an offensive against Wuhan. In early June, as China's forces withdrew from Xuzhou and the Japanese threatened a rapid assault on Wuhan, Chiang ordered the breaching of the Yellow River dikes at Huayuankou (in Henan Province) to check the enemy's westward offensive.\(^4\) Massive flooding isolated parts of two Japanese divisions and halted their thrust about sixty miles east of Zhengzhou. Chiang's actions stopped an immediate attack on Wuhan and allowed Chinese troops to retreat and regroup. But the Japanese did not abandon their plans to take Wuhan. They waited until summer when the Yangtze River's high water levels enabled the Japanese navy to support Japanese infantry pushing west along both banks of the great river. Time and again, naval gunboats would thrust ahead, attack Chinese fortifications from the rear, and clear a path for the advance.

Tragically, almost 900,000 Chinese civilians perished in three badly flooded provinces and another 3.9 million became refugees.\(^11\) Moreover, as the Japanese drove scattered Central Army troops out of the region and flooding disrupted enormous swaths of territory, local control and authority collapsed.

Approach operations east of Wuhan along both banks of the Yangtze River and in the mountains to the north during July and August pushed back Chinese defenses, beginning a campaign that eventually involved 300,000 Japanese and 1 million Chinese troops. Poor roads and rugged mountainous terrain bedeviled Japanese logistics, which collapsed under the strain of overextended lines of communication. Operating along the banks of the Yangtze in stifling midsummer heat, both sides were exposed to epidemic malaria and amoebic dysentery. Thirsty soldiers drank any available water, and an outbreak of cholera ravaged Eleventh Army as its ill-supplied units fought and maneuvered in central China's summer heat.

Chiang was certain the Japanese could be stopped and Wuhan held. He threw many of his best remaining units into the protracted fighting. To break especially strong Chinese resistance, Japanese troops selectively used poison gas, euphemistically known as "special smoke."\(^14\) Aside from the hardships of the campaign, IGHQ was disquieted by the outbreak of regimental-size fighting in July and early August between Japanese and Soviet forces at Changkuofeng (Zhangguofeng) on the Korean-Soviet border. Uncertain whether the Soviets intended to enter the war in China or were merely probing Japan's defenses, army leaders placed the Wuhan operation on hold until they resolved the border dispute in mid-August.

Finally, on 22 August, IGHQ ordered Eleventh Army to seize Wuhan in conjunction with Twenty-first Army's amphibious offensive directed against Guangzhou. Capture of these strategic locations would deny the KMT its military and administrative base in central China and a major port and supply base in southern China. These losses and sealing the coast would, the Japanese hoped, cause the Chinese to lose their will to fight. Guangzhou fell to the Japanese on 21 October, followed by Wuhan five days later, the culmination of a ten-month campaign that cost Chiang his best officers and seriously weakened the Central Army forces.\(^13\) To avoid a repetition of the Nanjing massacres, Chiang ordered a general withdrawal before the Japanese reached the city, and relocated his capital at faraway Chongqing in the remote interior of Sichuan Province.

After the fall of Wuhan, the Nationalists also reoriented their military strategy. The first year of warfare had illustrated the futility and costliness of large-scale, set-piece battles, which thereafter the Chinese avoided. Believing the Japanese would not risk a major confrontation with the European powers or the United States, they estimated that the Japanese would not conduct extensive operations in south China. The Nationalists made Sichuan Province, densely populated, agriculturally self-sufficient, and well shielded by mountains, into their base of resistance. Simultaneously, the Nationalists tried to take advantage of Soviet-Japanese tensions in north China by extending the conflict northward. They established war zones across China to protect vital lines of communication to the Soviet Union as well as to the southern coast, French Indochina, and Burma; to defend important strategic or supply bases; and to cut off Japanese routes of advance in northwest or central China. These war zones presented a multiplicity of threats that forced the Japanese to disperse their forces across China's vastness, leaving them unable to concentrate for a single decisive blow. The strategy also allowed the Nationalists to harass the enemy and prevent him from consolidating occupied areas. As part of this plan, the Nationalists created guerrilla zones in the Japanese-occupied rear areas of north China. Finally, the Nationalists reduced their operational field forces by one-third and instituted an intensive retraining program, to reconstitute their armies for a long war.\(^16\)

As for the Japanese, after the Wuhan battles they had reached the limits of their offensive potential and lost the flexibility to conduct large-scale operations.\(^17\) They were also concerned about the imminent possibility of facing far more powerful forces along the Soviet-Manchurian border. After the fall of Wuhan, the Japanese aimed at bottling up the Nationalists in Sichuan and rendering them irrelevant. They would consolidate their grip on the occupied areas and gradually reduce their force structure in China from 800,000 to 400,000 troops. Great effort went into promoting collaborator regimes to serve as alternatives to Chiang Kai-shek.

In March 1939, IGHQ directed the capture of Nanchang in Jiangxi Province, which Japanese forces had earlier bypassed. Located along Lake
Poyang, Nanchang was a major transshipment point for supplies bound for war zones in central and south China as well as the new capital at Chongqing. The Eleventh Army opened its offensive on 20 March and a week later was in Nanchang. Fierce Chinese counterattacks to retake the city continued over the next two months, but without success. In May, Chinese troops from the Fifth War Area under General Li Zongren moved into mountainous north of Hubei Province to establish bases and threaten the Peking–Wuhan rail line. This touched off Japanese preemptive operations that were more typical of this period, designed to disrupt concentrations of KMT armies by rapid envelopments followed by equally quick withdrawals. Just as these operations commenced, however, large-scale fighting again erupted between Japanese and Soviet forces, this time at Nomonhan, a tiny village on the ill-defined Manchuria–Outer Mongolia border. These multidivision battles involving armor and aircraft raged from May through early September, forcing IGHQ to suspend major ground activity in China.

With the land war stalled, the Tokyo high command turned to the skies, concluding that the only way to force the Nationalist regime at Chongqing to surrender was by subjecting the Chinese civilian population, particularly those in the wartime capital, to hardship and terror through aerial bombardment. Once again, the navy’s air arm was to be the main instrument of such a campaign. In September 1939, the navy, in cooperation with the army air service, launched Operation 100, the first of a series of wide winter offensives employing seventy divisions. Heartened by Japanese long-range air strikes against Chinese bases in northern China.

The Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact signed in late August and the subsequent German invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939 convinced Japan’s field armies that the dramatic change in the international situation offered Tokyo a window of opportunity to resolve the China Incident by force of arms. IGHQ directives for limited operations to secure the occupied zones greatly dissatisfied field commanders. Thus, Eleventh Army commander Lieutenant General Okamura Yasuji’s objective during the September–October offensive was to encircle and destroy about thirty Chinese divisions between the Yangtze River and Changsha. Lacking sufficient troops to seal the encirclement, Eleventh Army still inflicted great damage on KMT forces but could not cut off their retreat. A Chinese counteroffensive forced three Japanese divisions to withdraw from the area by early October. Once again the war drifted into stalemate. By November 1939, Okamura saw no way to accomplish IGHQ goals outside of offensive operations.18

In mid-December, however, Chiang stunned the Japanese with a nationwide winter offensive employing seventy divisions. Heartened by Japanese defeats at Nomonhan and Changsha, in the fall of 1939 the Nationalists had developed a plan for war zones along the Yangtze, the north China railroads, and near Guangzhou to harass Japanese lines of communication and isolate Japanese units at Wuhan.19 Even if the winter offensive came as a shock to the Japanese, it nonetheless never developed into the major action its designers hoped. Tensions between the Communists and the Nationalists had escalated in the fall of 1939 while Shanxi warlord Yan Xishan reached an accommodation with Japan.

Japanese divisions subordinate to the Eleventh Army were widely dispersed on 80- to 120-mile frontages that lacked defenses constructed in any depth. Regrouping the widely separated small units into larger echelons for counterattacks was difficult because Chinese forces destroyed railroads and bridges that the Japanese road-bound army depended on for its mobility. Moreover, the imperial army was configured for offensive operations, disdained defense preparations, and suffered correspondingly high casualties. Without a strategic reserve, the Japanese found themselves hard pressed, but logistic and command difficulties hampered the KMT’s ability to exploit its initial successes.

By mid-January 1940, the high command had regrouped Japanese armies and struck back at KMT forces. Chiang, besides having to send his one mobile division to assist in the defense of Nanning, also had to divert reinforcements to relieve pressure by advancing Japanese southwest of Hangzhou. In addition, the Japanese invasion of Guangxi Province in south China, which threatened Sichuan from the south, caught the Nationalists by surprise. The winter offensive turned into a hard-fought series of battles between Chinese and Japanese troops in south China, rather than a Chinese counteroffensive along the Yangtze and in north China. By mid-February, Chiang’s offensive had collapsed, with heavy losses of men and material. Japanese counterattacks drove the Chinese back to their base areas and restored the original zones of control. If nothing else, however, the offensive convinced the Japanese high command that the enemy was still full of fight.20 Demonstrating this at one of the most critical times of the war was perhaps Chiang’s principal objective in launching the winter offensive.

Meanwhile, from late 1938 into 1940 the Japanese army in north China had undertaken a series of pacification and counterguerrilla sweeps. Tokyo needed to secure rear areas in China to prop up Wang Jingwei’s puppet regime, established on 30 March 1940 in Nanjing,21 and thus emphasized control of the occupied areas over continuing offensives.22 In early 1940, the NCAA announced its plan to make the region a model of enforcement of local order for all of China, mainly through a series of suppression campaigns throughout Shanxi Province. To isolate Chinese Communist guerrilla units and other anti-Japanese formations, the Japanese constructed a series of strong points along major roads and railroads. Many were manned by puppet troops while Japanese garrison divisions conducted sweeps in the more dangerous areas. This “point and line” strategy was effective against traditional hit-and-run guerrilla tactics.
Less successfully, the naval air force continued its attacks against Chongqing and nearby bases by launching Operation 101. The lack of Japanese fighter escort initially enabled Chinese interceptors to shoot down large numbers of Japanese bombers. Only in the late summer of 1940 did the appearance of the superb Mitsubishi A6M "Zero" fighter completely change the tactical situation in the skies over Chinese cities. First-line Japanese naval pilots swept Chinese aircraft from the sky, but to no lasting advantage. Even though, by the end of Operation 101, Japanese bombers had dropped 2,000 tons of bombs on Chongqing, reducing the city to rubble, killing thousands of civilians, and forcing the government and civilian population to burrow into the limestone hillsides to survive, the campaign accomplished little else. Certainly, the Nationalist government had given no sign of willingness to surrender or even negotiate. It was a sign of the bankruptcy of Japanese strategy against China that the Japanese air forces could think of nothing else than to undertake Operation 102, simply another round of the bomber offensive against Chongqing. It too failed to achieve anything more than further destruction.

The failure of strategic Japanese air operations in China to bring about victory or even to create a significant operational advantage for Japan prefigured the problems faced by all strategic bombing campaigns in World War II. Western military establishments, however, wrote off the Japanese experience in China because of Eurocentrism in Western thinking, a vested professional interest in validating strategic bombing doctrine, and the conflicting and inflated intelligence reports coming from the China theater.

On 1 May 1940, the Japanese Eleventh Army commenced the Yichang operation, an attempt to dislodge Fifth War Zone forces in north and central Hubei Province, break open the doorway to Chongqing, and secure an operational air base to stage raids against the KMT capital. IGHQ, however, refused to authorize any reinforcements and only approved the plan contingent upon a two-month operation against Yichang, after which the units would return to their original locations. A combination of heavy artillery, tank regiments, and extensive air power support pushed aside Chinese resistance, and by 12 June Yichang had fallen. Five days later, as ordered, Japanese troops were marching out of the city to return to their bases. During this interval, the German triumph in the West caused IGHQ to change its thinking. The fall of France and the Low Countries, together with the anticipated collapse of Great Britain, isolated China from Western support and offered the Japanese army fresh hope to settle the China war. IGHQ ordered the troops to turn around, retake Yichang, and develop it into a major air base to conduct intensified strategic bombing of Chinese cities to break the will to resist. Yichang could also serve as a springboard for movement south and could restore the freedom of maneuver the field commanders sought. A further expression of Japanese inclinations to use force to end the China fighting appeared in September 1940 when the army occupied northern French Indochina in an attempt to seal Chinese borders from outside sources of resupply. Later that month, Tokyo signed a nonaggression pact with Berlin and Rome, placing itself squarely in the Axis camp.

Earlier, in the summer of 1939, the Japanese general staff and war ministry had proposed major reductions to troop strength in China, from 850,000 to 400,000 by 1941. The China Expeditionary Army objected strenuously and finally agreed to reduce its forces to 750,000 by the end of 1939. In March 1940, however, the staff and ministry concluded that if Japan could not defeat China militarily during 1940, it had to make the CEA self-sufficient in order to rearm, modernize, and prepare the army for the anticipated war with the Soviet Union. The only means to accomplish this was through troop withdrawals to begin in 1941 and a corresponding reduction of occupied territory. By 1943, the Japanese would occupy the Shanghai delta and a triangular area in north China. Although some withdrawals occurred, the projected levels were never remotely achieved, and in January 1941 a revised plan called for the reduction of fewer troops over a longer period.

China, however, refused to go away. In a dramatic shift from guerrilla to conventional warfare, Chinese Communist forces in north China launched the Hundred Regiments Offensive in August 1940. Designed to sever Japanese road and rail communications, inflict casualties, and destroy Japanese-controlled factories and mines, the wide-ranging, well-coordinated attacks caught the Japanese and their puppet troops by complete surprise. By mid-September the Japanese had regained their footing and slugged it out with Chinese Communist forces in set-piece battles where superior Japanese firepower and equipment turned the tide. By November, the Communists were in retreat, and the Japanese in murderous pursuit. The scope of intensity of the Communist offensive occasioned a rethinking of counterinsurgency policy in the Japanese army.

In north China during midsummer 1941, General Okamura, now commanding the North China Area Army, moved from a passive strategy of blockade to an active and comprehensive counterguerrilla strategy based on terror, forced relocation, and plunder. The Chinese nicknamed it the "Three-All Policy," "kill all, burn all, loot all," an accurate description of the hundreds of small punitive campaigns that brought destruction and misery to north China well into 1943. Between late January 1941 and March 1945, the NCAA launched at least thirty suppression campaigns of multidivision scale that lasted from a few weeks to three or four months in an effort to stamp out Communist guerrillas, disrupt KMT forces, and secure occupied north China. IGHQ also sought to cut off all supply lines to Chongqing. In July 1940, under Japanese pressure, Britain agreed to close the Burma Road,
China’s overland southern line of communication to the outside world. In mid-September, Japanese forces moved into northern French Indochina to close the Hanoi-Yunnan Railroad. In January 1941, Tokyo mobilized four infantry divisions, one air division, and the Second Expeditionary Fleet to strike major ports from Fujian (opposite Taiwan) to Guangzhou during the first half of the year. In February and March alone, Japanese units executed eight separate regimental-size amphibious assaults against ports all along the Guangzhou–Hong Kong coastline as they tried to disrupt coastal traffic and cut overland supply routes for Chiang’s armies.

In keeping with its designs for troop withdrawals and stabilization of the occupied zones, IGHQ tried to tamp down major operations after January 1941. Henceforth, the Japanese navy used a naval blockade and aerial bombing of China’s cities to break the Chinese will to resist. Chongqing, Kunming, and other major cities were subjected to relentless bombing campaigns that drove their populations into underground shelters and wrecked Nationalist efforts to construct an industrial base and arms industry. By the summer of 1941, with its strategic focus shifting to preparations for a Pacific war, the navy began withdrawing its bomber force from China, giving respite to Chongqing and other cities.

Tokyo also sanctioned limited but bloody ground campaigns. Without sufficient manpower, however, the Japanese punitive campaigns could not hope to achieve much more than preempting Chinese plans and disrupting their troop concentrations. Attempts to destroy Thirty-first Army Group in late January and early February 1941 along the Peking–Wuhan rail line failed when the Chinese traded space for lives. Indecisive campaigns from mid-March to early April against Jiujiang, south of the Yangtze, produced heavy Japanese casualties with no substantive gains.

The Nakahara operation of May–June 1941, for example, involved six divisions and two independent mixed brigades enveloping twenty-six KMT divisions in the rugged mountains west of the Shandong Peninsula between the Yellow River and the Grand Canal. Five weeks of fighting left 42,000 Chinese dead and 35,000 captured at a price of about 3,000 Japanese killed and wounded. The Japanese then withdrew, gaining only an ephemeral tactical success.

These large-scale raids might temporarily scatter Chinese defenders, but once the Japanese departed, as they always did, Chinese forces moved back into the area. Terrain worked in favor of the Chinese as the absence of roads and railroads impeded Japanese progress and stymied logistic support. Major Chinese forces usually concentrated behind natural obstacles like major rivers or mountains, making the Japanese come to them and withdrawing if the odds were too unfavorable. Japanese troops repeatedly reconquered the same places only to withdraw after a few days, knowing that they would soon be back.

This pattern of warfare characterized the major campaigns of 1941. On 25 January Japanese forces opened operations to clear the southern section of the Peking–Hankou Railroad. Chinese forces in the Fifth War Zone gradually withdrew until the Japanese outran their supply lines. Then the Chinese counterattacked the ill-supplied Japanese, cut off their rear and attacked simultaneously from the flanks, and forced the Japanese to fight their way out of the encirclement back to their original positions. In mid-March, another Japanese offensive aimed at Shanggao in Jiangxi Province, where a major base in the Ninth War Zone under General Luo Zhuoying threatened the Yangtze River route and blocked Japanese approaches from the east toward Changsha. Although Japanese forces broke through three defensive lines and entered Shanggao, they too became surrounded, and relief forces from Wuhan had to extricate them. Once again, the Japanese retreated with severe losses. A later campaign did seize the Zhongtiao Mountains in southern Shanxi commanded by General Wei Lihuang of the First War Zone. This was a major shock for the Nationalists because the region blocked communications between Yan’an and Communist bases elsewhere and denied the Nationalists a base from which to pressure the Shanxi warlord Yan Xishan.

In April 1941, the new commander of Eleventh Army, Lieutenant General Anami Korechika, decided these back-and-forth forays were counterproductive and recommended a major campaign against Changsha to destroy the 300,000-strong KMT armies and to seize China’s granary. Anami believed that these twin blows would end the war once and for all, but the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 caused IGHQ to shelve Anami’s proposal until the Japanese government made its momentous decision in July 1941 to attack the Soviets but to move south against the Asian colonial possessions of the Netherlands, Great Britain, and the United States. In the same month, Japanese troops occupied southern French Indochina, both to exert more pressure on Chongqing to surrender and to acquire advance air and staging bases for future southern operations. In late August, IGHQ gave Anami the go-ahead to attack Changsha.

On 18 September, Anami sent four divisions southward against Changsha. Backed by artillery, armor, and air power, they took the city ten days later but withdrew afterward to their original positions. In early October, General Chen Cheng launched a Chinese counteroffensive against Yichang that threatened Anami’s western flank. Chen siphoned troops from the Changsha operations to relieve the surrounded and badly outnumbered Thirteenth Division that had defended the beleaguered city for ten days. A second Changsha offensive by the Japanese, kicked off on 24 December, entered the city a week later only to meet fierce counterattacks from the Chinese Tenth Army Group, whose forces surrounded two Japanese divisions in early January 1942. Outnumbered and outmaneuvered, the
Japanese finally retreated northward by mid-January. The campaign left Japan no closer to a military solution to the China fighting than it had been in July 1937.28

Anami, however, was not the type of commander to give up. In September 1941, Eleventh Army proposed to IGHQ the capture of Chongqing, an operation of unquestioned boldness but limited practicality. The KMT capital was about 270 miles upriver from the westernmost Japanese outpost on the Yangtze and sheltered by narrow gorges and mountains that made any attack a daunting prospect. Those difficulties did not deter the planners, who set to work on a scheme to take the Chinese capital.

At a cabinet meeting on 14 October 1941 War Minister General Tōjō Hideki emotionally rejected U.S. demands that Japan withdraw its troops from China, citing the domino effect it would have on the security of Manchukuo and Korea. He invoked the spirits of Japan’s war dead to reject what he termed the diplomacy of surrender.29 Four days later, Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro’s third cabinet collapsed, and Tōjō became the new prime minister. By that time, four and one-half years of constant warfare had cost Japan more than 180,000 dead (including 48,344 who died of sickness) and over 323,700 wounded (including 36,470 permanently disabled).30 Nevertheless, Japan opted to expand the war into Southeast Asia and the Pacific rather than forsake its China policy.

Japan’s attack on the U.S. fleet in Hawaii on 7 December 1941, and its invasion of Malaya the same day, opened the Pacific phase of the Asia-Pacific war. Japanese units in southern China quickly overran the British colony of Hong Kong in December, conquered Malaya by 15 February 1942, and invaded Burma in March. Despite initial, and for China deeply humiliating, British objections, Chiang sent Chinese troops, including his only mechanized division, to assist in Burma, partly in order to fight alongside his new allies and also to defend China’s one remaining connection with the outside world.31 They, along with their new British and American allies, were routed. The defeat resulted mainly from insufficient air and naval power and from an ill-equipped infantry. Trucks and tanks left the Allied armies dependent on roads while the lightly armed Japanese troops took to the jungle, quickly outflanking and enveloping the defenders. Profound disagreements over strategy, including whether to defend Mandalay in northern Burma or counterattack toward Rangoon, did lasting harm to Allied relations.

The aerial attack on Tokyo and several other Japanese cities led by Lieutenant Colonel James Doolittle’s U.S. carrier-based medium bombers in mid-April 1942 lifted U.S. morale but had a dramatically different effect on China. To prevent future air raids on the homeland, IGHQ ordered the occupation of airfields in eastern China’s Zhejiang and Jiangxi provinces that lay within striking range of Japan. The Thirteenth Army in Shanghai commanded five divisions and three independent mixed brigades. These struck southwestward and, by mid-May, had pushed out from Hangzhou to link up with two divisions from the Eleventh Army at Nanchang. By September, the Japanese had destroyed Chinese air bases, some recently constructed, and laid waste to surrounding areas while clearing the 180-mile-long Hangzhou-Nanchang rail corridor.32 A neglect of logistic planning marred the operation. Shortages of food, ammunition, and transportation left hungry Japanese soldiers mired in the mud during the heaviest rainy season in sixty years. Sickness, especially from malnutrition, accounted for three times the number of the 4,000 battle casualties. Thereafter, the Eleventh Army at Nanchang became responsible for securing the vast area running along the north and south banks of the Yangtze River.

In north China, the NCAA tried to work out a regional truce, offering warlords weapons and money for their puppet regimes in an effort to link them to the Wang Jingwei government. The initiative failed because of the demands of the Pacific theater on Japan’s resources.33 In central China, planning for the Chongqing operation to deliver the knockout punch to Chinese field armies and destroy the enemy’s logistic base areas gained momentum in the spring and summer of 1942 while Japan was near her military apex. By the spring of 1942, the army had assembled sixteen divisions for a five-month campaign to seize Chongqing. In September, the general staff ordered CEA to complete preparations for its offensive, but the U.S. landing on Guadalcanal in August and subsequent fighting in the Solomon Islands forced Anami to abandon the Chongqing plan because Tokyo needed reinforcements for the new theater. By 1943, IGHQ was routinely transferring first-line divisions to shore up hard-pressed Japanese forces in the Pacific and southwest Asia theaters. To replace these units, the army upgraded brigades to division status, although they lacked mobility and artillery support. These ersatz divisions took responsibility for securing occupied zones while the remaining first- and second-line divisions conducted limited campaigns during February, May, and November of 1943.

From mid-February to the end of March 1943, the Eleventh Army, using Japanese and Chinese troops loyal to Wang Jingwei, launched a clearing operation against the Communist New Fourth Army and the weakened KMT Twenty-fourth Army Group on the mountainous plateau along the northern Hebei-Shanxi border. At the cost of a few hundred Japanese dead, counterguerrilla operations killed or detained more than 30,000 Chinese and drove KMT forces south of the Yellow River. The Eleventh Army followed up with a three-division campaign in Henan Province during May and June in western Hubei. Aligning six divisions along a broad 120-mile front running north from Yichang along the Yangtze River to Lake Dongting, the Japanese advanced in converging columns and penetrated to
a depth of one hundred miles into the Sixth War Zone. The Chinese held the northern shoulder of the Japanese salient at the Shipai fortress, but the overall fighting from early May to mid-June inflicted heavy losses on understrength and poorly equipped KMT forces.

The final major operation of 1943 against Changde was the most ambitious, involving six Japanese divisions between early November and mid-December. Four Japanese divisions crossed the Yellow River between Shashi and Lake Dongting and pushed sixty miles west in four columns on an eighty-mile front that converged on the city. Two more divisions attacked from the north, crossing the Li River and advancing through mountainous terrain before swinging south on Changde. The newly established Chinese-American Composite Wing and U.S. Army Air Force units delivered effective air support that forced the Japanese to move and assemble only at night.

Since 1942, the Japanese Army Air Force had taken up the responsibility for air operations on the continent. With the appearance of American air power in China, those operations became largely defensive. But the army air arm responded in mid-December 1943 to the Allied air threat by bombing Chinese airfields along the Xiang River south of Changsha and air bases in southwestern China. Neither Japanese ground nor air efforts, however, could redeem the situation. Chinese forces recaptured Changde on 9 December as reinforcements converged on the city. Despite severe losses, and more than 40,000 Chinese killed or captured, by late December KMT forces had restored their original front lines, ejected the Japanese, and inflicted proportionately high casualties on the enemy, killing 1,274 Japanese in the fighting.

The commonality of the 1943 operations was that the Japanese conducted their offensives along wide frontages, employing converging columns to seize their objectives. In north China, their intent was to wreak as much havoc as possible with military and civilian affairs. Unable to garrison more conquered territory, they invariably withdrew, and the Chinese Communist or central government troops slowly reclaimed the devastated region. At Changde, the objective was to capture the administrative and economic center to disrupt the lines of communication to Chongqing. Unable to occupy Changde for any length of time, the Japanese operation was a failure.

In 1944, U.S.-trained and equipped Chinese divisions in Burma—designated the X-Force—and smaller American units tried to reopen the Burma Road leading into China as part of a general, albeit limited, Allied counteroffensive in north Burma. Chinese success in the Hukawng Valley pushed the Japanese back, and the combined forces reached Myitkyina in mid-May. Although this victory caused the Japanese Thirty-third Army to abandon north Burma, a stubborn Japanese garrison at Myitkyina held out until early August against three Chinese divisions, giving the Japanese time to prepare another defensive line farther south. At the same time, a desperate but bold Japanese campaign had encircled units of the British Fourteenth Army at Imphal and Kohima along the India-Burma border, threatening the Allied supply line in Assam, including that of X-Force. Meanwhile, in early May, Chinese Twentieth Army Group (sixteen divisions) in Yunnan—known as the Y-Force—crossed the Salween River on a broad front about a hundred miles east of Myitkyina in an attempt to open the Burma route from the northeast by ejecting the Japanese Fifty-sixth Division from Longling and ultimately linking up with X-Force at Bhamo, Burma.

On 1 June, Eleventh Army Group joined the fighting on the southern flank that was threatening to isolate the Japanese mountain strongholds. Because the Japanese still held Myitkyina, Chiang could not reinforce Y-Force, and Japanese counterattacks against Chinese river-crossing points, use of the jungle-covered mountain ranges to slow the Chinese drive, the onset of the monsoon season, and a successful Japanese counterstroke against the southern Chinese pincer, halted the Chinese advance in late June. Further counterattacks to drive the Chinese west of the Salween ended in failure in mid-September. By this time, the catastrophic defeat of the Japanese Fifteenth Army along the Burma-India border relegated the Japanese Thirty-third Army to the strategic defensive. Simultaneously, the growing Chinese awareness of the scope of the Ichigō campaign diverted their attention from north Burma.

The Ichigō offensive undertaken by the Japanese China Expeditionary Army along the Peking–Wuhan, Wuhan–Guangzhou, and Hunan–Guangxi railways between mid-April 1944 and early February 1945 was the largest military operation in the history of the Japanese army, using approximately 500,000 troops (twenty divisions), about 80 percent of the China Expeditionary Army's 620,000 troops. Its objectives were to destroy American air bases in China, which threatened the Japanese mainland with air raids, and open an overland route from Pusan, Korea, to French Indochina. Beginning around April 1944 replacements for Ichigō were brought from Korea and Manchuria to the Wuhan sector. Many units had no equipment and only one weapon for several soldiers. Individual items, such as bamboo canteens, were substandard. Soldiers were ordered to arm themselves with discarded enemy weapons.

The first phase of Ichigō (mid-April to late May 1944) witnessed the North China Area Army moving south to clear the southern portion of the Peking–Wuhan Railway and occupy Loyang. The CEA's Eleventh Army simultaneously advanced north along the rail line to link up with NCAA forces to secure the critical line of communication. The Chinese Central Army was slow to react to these opening gambits, being uncer-
tans of Japanese ambitions. Furthermore, the Henan famine had severely degraded its forces, and the starving local population had turned hostile toward the Nationalist army. Japanese aims, which became clear during the second phase (May to December 1944), consisted of massive sequenced offensives as the Eleventh Army captured Changsha and Hengyang (which was desperately defended), combined with the Twenty-third Army to capture American airbases at Guilin, Liuzhou, and Nanning. Chiang's forces, being dispersed over broad frontages, were poorly positioned to concentrate against the attackers. The Japanese Twenty-first Army then moved from northern Indochina to meet these forces, thus opening an overland line of communication running the length of China. By this time, however, the Asia-Pacific war had turned decisively against Japan.

In Burma, the Chinese had made good progress since mid-October, threatening the Japanese Thirty-third Army's left flank by advancing south from Myitkyina. Three divisions linked up at Bhamo and then struck southwest, pushing back the weakened Japanese Thirty-third Army. The Japanese fought doggedly, but by December they had retreated to the east side of the Shwell River. Although the continuing Ichigo operation and the threat posed to U.S. airfields in southwest China forced Chiang to divert troops from Burma operations to protect the airfields, Chinese forces continued their two-pronged offensive in northern Burma. In late January 1945, X- and Y-forces linked up, reopened the Burma Road in February, and reached Lashio in mid-March, thus breaking the five-year-long Japanese blockade of China and culminating a decisive land campaign.

In January and February 1945, Japanese armies in south China again lashed out at American air bases. U.S. aircraft persistently struck Japanese columns, reducing their mobility while supporting Chinese defenders. Subsequent Chinese counterattacks by modern, well-equipped KMT forces inflicted serious losses on the Japanese, who by May 1945 had suffered 15,000 killed and 50,000 wounded. In late June, the Chinese recaptured Guilin, and the Japanese fell back to Guangzhou. Although large Japanese forces still held most Chinese cities and huge swaths of territory, they no longer had the ability to conduct offensive operations and were bottled up in enclaves when the Asia-Pacific war officially ended in September 1945.

All told, in eight years of war in China, Japan suffered 410,000 killed (230,000 after December 1941) and 920,000 wounded. Although no reliable figures are available for Chinese losses, perhaps as many as 10 million Chinese soldiers died during the fighting, and civilian casualties certainly were as high if not double that figure. The protracted fighting also dislocated tens of millions of Chinese who took to the roads in search of survival.

The dry recitation of military campaigns in these general terms renders them equivalent to the blue and red arrows that adorn military campaign maps. It must always be remembered that between July 1937 and September 1945 China endured enormous suffering on a scale so great that no one has yet captured its totality. Even without Japanese reprisals or endemic brutality, the fighting itself shattered China's political and administrative institutions, destroyed the civilian economy, dislocated hundreds of millions of Chinese, and inflicted tremendous collateral damage the length and breadth of the nation. Coupled with an invading army that initially had no long-term occupation policy, Chinese civil administration disintegrated as Japanese troops watched. Japan's inability to supply its far-flung armies led IGHQ to order them in December 1942 to live off the land, in effect institutionalizing plunder. While a general overview of the military operations can place the war in context, it cannot hope to describe the misery and suffering wrought by the continental conflict. Who can describe the panic and horror in a Chinese village as an armed Japanese foraging party approached? The Chinese people lived with that terror for more than eight years as their nation was torn asunder.