

Strategic War-Making and the Chinese Civil War in Manchuria, 1946–1947

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Extended Abstract

War has always been the subject of social analysis. Arguably, the most influential paradigm on war is what scholars have called the bellicist, or the fiscal-military model. According to such a model, war-making and state-making are mutually constitutive: by making war, states increase their extractive ability; by extracting more resources, states eliminate potential rivals within a given territory, and thus are able to harden their boundaries and wield violence more effectively. Analytically, the bellicist model treats the state as an actor of resource extraction in the context of war. As such, there are room for theorizing different kinds of states because there are different ways in which resources are extracted, but rarely discussed is how wars differ. Curiously, then, the bellicist model largely treats war-making as a black box.

In this paper, I use the case of the Four Linjiang Campaigns (January–April 1947) in the Chinese Civil War (1946–1949) in Manchuria to theorize the state actors' *military-strategic thinking* as a critical aspect of war-making. The empirical puzzle is the reversal of military balance of power in the Four Linjiang Campaigns between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Chinese Nationalist Party (GMD). Through the Four Linjiang Campaigns, the CCP in Liaodong went from being militarily defeated to the brink of collapse in December 1946, to successfully enduring the GMD's continued military offensives, and to being able to launch counterattacks in April 1947.

My argument is that the CCP was able to reverse the military balance of power because they strategically combined guerrilla and mobile warfare. In so doing, the CCP was able to turn a defensive campaign into offensive battles, and in these battles, achieve attrition, which would otherwise be impossible, with the GMD forces that had much better equipment and training. To be

sure, such a strategy must be juxtaposed with the GMD's strategy, which was based predominantly on positional warfare along the transportation networks and around cities. It was less the two parties' respective *capacities of resource extraction*, but rather *the dialectical processes of strategic war making* that help explain the gradual reversal of military balance of power in Liaodong. Theoretically, this suggests a shift away from looking at *how and how much states extract resources for war making*, and instead to looking at *how states adopt different military strategies for war making*, namely, *how armed forces are allocated and used in engagements for the purpose of war*.

In October 1946, after four months of truce, the GMD started its offensive on Liaodong. Du Yuming gathered 8 divisions with 100,000 forces aiming to crush the CCP. The GMD troops advanced along three major rail lines: the Zhongchang railway (the New 6th Army), the An-Feng railway (the 52nd Army), and the railways connecting Shenyang and Tonghua (the 91st and the 195th Divisions). The GMD's strategy was to force one part of the CCP forces south to the vicinities of Lüshun and Dalian (two cities still under Soviet occupation) and the other part of the CCP forces to the Changbai Mountain region. After consolidating their positions on these two strategic lines of blockade, the GMD forces would then concentrate on attacking the CCP's base in the north to recover all of Manchuria. Operationally, the GMD was to leverage their control of the major rail and road networks to rapidly deploy regular armies and seize control over cities and counties. From October to December 1946, the GMD forces won a series of battles using their better weaponry and tactical mastery of infantry-artillery coordination in positional warfare.

By mid-December 1946, the CCP's retreated to the Changbai Mountain region, with only 4 counties left—Linjiang, Mengjiang, Fusong, and Changbai—and with about 250,000 population. The two columns had less than 30,000 soldiers together; each division was reduced to about 4,000. By the CCP's own estimation, a base area can support about 3% of its population to be full-time

soldiers and cadres. By such a standard, the 4 counties could only sustain a force around the size of 7,500, not to mention that no substantive land reform had been enforced in this region previously. Given the harsh winter, moreover, the CCP forces would freeze to death before they starved.

How and why did the CCP manage to survive and even launch counterattacks in April 1947? I argue that the CCP in Liaodong, through the Four Linjiang Campaigns from January to April 1947, was able to reverse the military balance of power by fighting a defensive and asymmetrical war through a combination of guerrilla and mobile warfare—what I will refer to as the “guerrilla-mobile strategy.” Guerrilla operations were used to eliminate or neutralize police forces and local militias while distracting regular armies; mobile operations were used to turn a defensive war into various offensive battles and, in so doing, achieve attrition with an enemy which had better weaponry and training.

On the other side of the war, the GMD’s military advance and territorial expansion were accomplished in a specific way: by moving the regular troops along the transportation networks (lines) and occupy major cities and counties (points). This point-and-line strategy had two major strategic implications. First, as the GMD expanded further into the Liaodong region, it had to allocate more and more forces to secure the cities it occupied and guard the transportation lines for supplies to be delivered to the front. Second, the further the GMD expanded, the more rural and mountainous regions the GMD needed to effectively hold, and the more vulnerable the GMD troops were to the CCP’s guerrilla and mobile operations.

Whereas the outcome of a specific military engagement can never be predicted ahead, the effectiveness of military strategy can nevertheless be explained. The CCP through the strategic combination of guerrilla and mobile operations, gradually *amplified* the GMD’s weakness in geographical extension, soldier recruitment, army morale, and the economic foundations of war making. Throughout the campaigns, the GMD forces found it increasingly hard to defend its vast

areas and transportation networks, to replenish its units and maintain fighting capabilities, and to prevent newly recruited soldiers from defecting. The GMD-CCP power balance was not determined by their pre-given resource extraction capabilities but was gradually reversed in the *dialectical processes of strategic war making*.