# How Internal Elite Conflicts Affect Counterinsurgency Warfare: Evidence from the First Chinese Civil War (1927–1936)

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## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my grandfather, Changwan Xu (徐长万), who passed away during my master's studies. His absence is deeply felt, and I miss him immensely.


## Acknowledgements

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**Abstract**

What explains sub-national variation in counterinsurgency strategies? During civil war, state military forces often employ a mix of strategies to defeat rebel groups. Yet, existing studies mainly focus on the effectiveness of certain strategy combinations and overlook the role of intra-elite conflicts in shaping counterinsurgency military decisions. Building on prior scholarship, this article argues that counterinsurgents in authoritarian regimes strategically deploy troops in ways that balance threats from both elites and the civilian populace. Specifically, they (1) send troops connected with rival elites to less critical but more hazardous battlefields while (2) deploy loyal forces to more critical war zones. I test the argument using the example of the First Chinese Civil War (1927–1936), drawing on an original dataset on state military deployment collected from archives. The findings support expectations: troops connected with rival regime elites were deployed to counterinsurgency battlefields earlier but were less likely to engage in major encirclement campaigns. Overall, this work illustrates that counterinsurgency military deployments are shaped not only by military efficiency considerations but also by political considerations related to intra-elite conflicts within an authoritarian ruling coalition.

*The insurgent ..... enjoys an obvious advantage over his opponent, ..... whose army is the nation's army, reflecting the consensus or the lack of consensus in the nation.*

— David Galula, 1964

*If we want to defend the foreign invasion, we must first secure the inside and see where our greatest internal unrest lies. First, it is our internal political disagreements, and second, it is the disturbance of the communist bandits.*

— Chiang Kai-shek, 1932

# 1 Introduction

During civil wars, governments employ different counterinsurgency (COIN) strategies to defeat armed insurgents. For example, the Columbian government implemented large-scale land reform only in areas with high guerrilla activity while pursuing less intense reform where elite interests were not severely endangered (Albertus and Kaplan, 2013). Similarly, the U.S. military's aerial bombing was more concentrated in areas controlled by insurgents during the Vietnam War (Kocher et al., 2011). What determines the subnational variation of COIN strategies?

Existing studies mainly focus on the military effectiveness of certain strategy combinations (Millett and Murray, 2010), implying that the government chooses a specific combination that maximizes COIN efficiency (Lyall, 2010; Kocher et al., 2011; Albertus and Kaplan, 2013). However, either implicitly or explicitly, this assumes that the government is a *unified* actor merely driven by *military* objectives of counterinsurgency. In so doing, existing works overlook divisions within the government or the COIN alliance (Mack, 1975; Ladwig III, 2016). Additionally, these works do not always account for domestic political considerations that alter elites' cost-benefit evaluation of military operations, as scholars

of interstate warfare have already demonstrated (Fearon, 1994; De Mesquita et al., 1999; Weeks, 2012).

While intra-elite conflicts and their impact receive relatively little attention in the COIN literature, they do play a critical role in real-world conflicts. A typical example is the failure of COIN in Afghanistan. As former U.S. Ambassador Michael McKinley (2021) wrote: "Afghanistan's national political leadership never fully cohered on how best to fight the Taliban. There were tensions between regional power brokers and Kabul ……" Moreover, many policy analysts have noted that political conflicts between President Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah brought political partisanship into the ANDSF and thereby undermined its battlefield performance (International Crisis Group, 2017; Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2023).

This article investigates how intra-elite conflicts in an authoritarian government affect state military deployment in COIN. I highlight two key features of intra-elite conflicts in autocracies. First, the predominant elite conflict exists between the dictator and other regime elites in the ruling coalition (Geddes, 1999; Svolik, 2012; Pepinsky, 2014). A dictator must be cautious with other ruling elites since disloyal ones may act against him. Second, the struggle for state military power is of great salience in elite conflicts. Because military forces in autocracies are often factionalized (Geddes et al., 2018), disloyal ruling elites could exert influence in part of the state military and utilize such power to stage a coup. Given the two features, the dictator has motivation to weaken disloyal elites' influence within the state military to ensure political survival.

In this paper, I argue that dictators could balance elite coup threats and mass insurgency threats by strategically deploying troops. While dictators could prevent coups through counterbalancing, promoting loyalists, and political infiltration (De Bruin, 2020; Hassan, 2017; Casey, 2020), these strategies reduce coup risks at the expense of military effectiveness (Quinlivan, 1999; Pilster and Böhmelt, 2011; Talmadge, 2015; Narang and Talmadge, 2018), which makes them less desirable during conflicts. Instead, authoritar-

ian counterinsurgents can rely on two approaches to balance threats from both internal elites and external insurgents. First, they can send troops connected with rival elites to more hazardous battlefields. Authoritarian leaders deploy disloyal troops to the war zone earlier: they are both less prepared and more likely to bear the weight of casualties from insurgents' early counterstrikes. Second, dictators can deploy their loyal troops to more critical battlefields, where they will be responsible for crucial military operations. This helps dictators reduce potential agent problems and avoid significant military failure.

This paper tests the arguments using the First Chinese Civil War (1927–1936). During that period, the Republic of China was an authoritarian state under the single-party rule of the Kuomintang (KMT). Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the KMT, faced both armed rebellions led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and potential challenges from disloyal ruling elites who had influence in the state's National Revolutionary Army (NRA). Based on historical archives, this paper constructs a unique dataset on NRA deployment during the KMT's counterinsurgency warfare against the CCP, which includes factional connections and deployment records of more than 500 NRA divisions.

My empirical analysis finds two patterns in the KMT's military deployment that are consistent with theoretical expectations. First, the NRA divisions connected with rival elite factions were deployed into COIN battlefields earlier, even after controlling for their size and geographical location. Specifically, these potentially disloyal troops were deployed into battlefields 14 months earlier on average than Chiang Kai-shek's loyal forces, and this result is mainly driven by elite factions with moderate military power, such as Guizhou, Hunan, and Guangdong cliques. Second, empirical results also show that Chiang Kai-shek's loyal forces were, on average, 39% more likely to engage in major encirclement campaigns targeting communist strongholds.

This article makes a number of contributions. First, while there is a growing literature evaluating the effect of COIN strategies (Lyall, 2010; Albertus and Kaplan, 2013; Kocher et al., 2011; Blair, forthcoming), this paper focuses on how political factors, such as elite

politics, affect COIN military decisions. This helps us better understand the determinants of the sub-national variation of COIN strategies, especially some seemingly counterproductive military decisions. Second, this paper advances the discussion on authoritarian government behavior during wartime. Traditional wisdom argues that engaging in interstate warfare can help autocrats reduce coup threats (Lai and Slater, 2006; Belkin and Schofer, 2005), while ongoing civil conflicts are associated with higher coup risks (Bell and Sudduth, 2017). However, this article demonstrates that domestic COIN warfare can also facilitate coup prevention. Finally, this paper highlights strategic military deployments during COIN warfare as a coup-proofing tactic, adding a new method to the dictator's coup prevention toolkit and speaking to some recent literature on bureaucratic reshuffling in authoritarian regimes (Hassan, 2020; Zeng, 2017).

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the theory of strategic military deployment during COIN warfare, discussing its implications and scope conditions. Section 3 briefly introduces the empirical context of this paper—the Republic of China during the First Chinese Civil War. Section 4 then introduces the empirical design and a unique NRA division dataset. Section 5 reports the main results and robustness checks. Section 6 concludes.

# 2 Theory

## 2.1 Intra-elite Conflicts in Autocracies: Structure and Consequence

This paper's theory begins in an authoritarian context. In traditional works on democratic transition, the structure of elite bargaining and conflicts in autocracies is either among socioeconomic elites or between them and regime elites (Wood, 2001; Boix, 2003; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006; Slater, 2010). While this approach shows how the interaction between regime insiders and external elites shapes the trajectory of regime transition, it pays relatively little attention to the interaction and conflicts among regime elites them-

selves.

In fact, the predominant political conflict in autocracies is between the dictator and other members of the ruling coalition (Geddes, 1999; Svolik, 2012; Pepinsky, 2014), which constitutes the first defining feature of authoritarian intra-elite conflicts. For the dictator, elite challengers within the ruling coalition are one of the critical threats to political survival. As Geddes et al. (2018, 179) show, between 1946 and 2010, coups initiated by regime elites can explain 35% of autocratic breakdowns, which is 10% more than popular uprisings and insurgencies can. Therefore, the dictator must carefully manage the deal of power-sharing with other ruling elites and be extremely cautious with potential elite challengers.

On top of that, the second feature of intra-elite conflicts in autocracies is the salience of elite struggles for state military power. Military power is crucial to the dictator's political survival. On the one hand, he relies on competent military troops to defeat external insurgents. On the other, he must ensure the loyalty of troops as successful coup attempts always involve military forces (De Bruin, 2019). However, military forces in autocracies are often factionalized (Geddes et al., 2018), which means that the dictator can only control part of the coercive apparatus while the rest may express greater loyalty to other ruling elites. While the factionalization of the state military provides disloyal regime elites with opportunities to utilize their influence in the military to stage a coup, the dictator will correspondingly try to weaken such influence and strengthen his own control of the state military.

The two features discussed above lay out the fundamental structure of intra-elite conflicts in autocracies: the political struggle over state military power between the dictator and ruling elites who have connections in military forces. One consequence of this elite conflict structure is that it motivates the dictator to weaken the power of potential elite challengers within the state military with a variety of strategies. For example, the dictator can introduce institutional reforms to the military to enhance his political control. Sim-

ilarly, he can also strategically appoint military officers or deploy different troops. As a result, even in civil conflicts, the dictator still has the incentive to weaken disloyal elites with military power. Thus, military decisions during conflicts may not be purely driven by military considerations but also reflect the dictator's political incentive to reduce internal elite threats.

## 2.2 Strategic Military Deployment: Benefits and Costs

The dictator has various strategies to weaken potentially disloyal elites and their military troops. Existing work documents different tactics in the dictator's coup prevention toolkit, including counterbalancing (Greitens, 2016; De Bruin, 2020), promoting loyalists (Harkness, 2016; Hassan, 2017), and infiltrating the force with political commissars (Casey, 2020). However, packing military officer corps with loyalists increases the exclusivity of the force and raises the risk of civil war in the long run (Roessler, 2011, 2016). Furthermore, institutional reforms like counterbalancing or political supervision reduce coup risks at the expense of military effectiveness because they raise the coordination costs among officers and fracture bonds of trust between officers and soldiers (Quinlivan, 1999; Pilster and Böhmelt, 2011; Talmadge, 2015; Narang and Talmadge, 2018).

The costs of coup prevention on military effectiveness are acceptable for the dictator during a relatively peaceful period because suppressing unarmed civilian protests does not require a highly competent army (Mattingly, 2022, 4). Nevertheless, these costs become less bearable in the context of civil war or counterinsurgency since the dictator must fight against armed rebellion groups. In conflict situations, internal coup threats and external rebellion threats coincide, and it is difficult for the dictator to prioritize military over effectiveness or vice versa. Therefore, those traditional coup prevention tactics are less practical when the civil conflict is ongoing, and the dictator needs an alternative that helps him balance elite threats within the ruling coalition and the mass threats from armed insurgents.

This paper argues that the dictator can strategically deploy different types of troops to balance elite and mass threats. First, the dictator can deploy disloyal military units to more hazardous battlefields to leverage the insurgents' power to weaken these disloyal troops. For instance, the dictator can deploy those disloyal troops to COIN war zones earlier, making them less prepared and more likely to bear the casualties from insurgents' early counterstrikes. Second, although it seems to be more efficient to weaken disloyal forces by deploying them to attack rebel strongholds, this can lead to significant agent problems and, highly likely, military failure. Therefore, the dictator is more inclined to deploy his loyal troops to more critical battlefields, where they will be responsible for crucial military operations.

Strategic military deployment has three unique advantages. First, deploying disloyal forces to hazardous battlefields weakens disloyal military forces utilizing insurgents' power. Thus, it avoids the cost of military competence brought by restructuring the entire coercive apparatus. Second, this strategy can reduce the battle losses of loyal troops because disloyal units are deployed on the front line to face insurgents' early counterattacks. This helps the dictator retain his loyal troops, his last resort against not only insurgencies but also challenges from the regime elites. Finally, by deploying loyal troops to more critical battlefields, the dictator can also deter insurgent activities and prevent disloyal troops from winning military honors in these key battles. By contrast, one major limitation of strategic military deployment is that it effectively balances elite and mass threats in the short term but may affect the efficiency of military operations in the long run. Since loyalist troops have fewer agent problems and are often better equipped, the use of disloyal troops during the war makes the whole military operation less efficient compared with fully relying on loyalists.

## 2.3 Observable Implications and Scope Conditions

My theory connects authoritarian intra-elite conflicts with military deployment decisions during COIN warfare. I argue that the dictator balances elite and mass threats by strategically deploying disloyal troops to more hazardous battlefields while deploying loyal troops to more critical war areas. Though the loyalty of one military unit, as a latent variable, is hard to detect directly, the dictator can still anticipate the loyalty of elites and troops using their faction connections as a shortcut (Jia et al., 2015; Chen and Hong, 2021). Thus, the theory generates two main observable implications for empirical analysis:

**Hypothesis 1** *Military forces connected with rival factions (disloyal troops) are* ***more*** *likely to be deployed to counterinsurgency battlefields earlier.*

**Hypothesis 2** *Military forces connected with rival factions (disloyal troops) are* ***less*** *likely to be deployed to more critical battlefields facing more powerful insurgents.*

I underline two scope conditions of my theory: First, the coexistence of elite and mass threats is at the heart of the theory since the dictator chooses strategic military deployment as a result of balancing the two threats. On the one hand, if the elite threat is minimal (e.g., the dictator fully controls the military), then there will be no need for the dictator to secure military loyalty. On the other, if the mass threat is absent (e.g., there is no armed rebellion), the dictator may adopt traditional coup prevention tactics other than strategic military deployment. The theory best applies to the context where both elite and mass threats exist, and none are considered dominant. Second, the theory requires that the dictator obtains a certain level of power to command the military, which is a common assumption in the studies of authoritarian coercive apparatus (Greitens, 2016; Mattingly, 2022). When a competing elite faction monopolizes the control of military troops, strategic military deployment becomes impractical to the dictator, and this is exactly what he tries to avoid.

Finally, although I mainly focus on civil and COIN warfare in this article, the theory of strategic military deployment can travel to other types of conflicts as long as the scope

conditions are met. For example, on the Eastern Front in World War II, Stalin deployed non-Russian soldiers away from critical battlefields. Similarly, in the Korean War, Mao Zedong sent former KMT troops to North Korea first but kept most of them away from crucial military operations. Therefore, the theory of strategic military deployment may also apply to the context of interstate warfare, which is worth further empirical investigation.

# 3 Background

The First Chinese Civil War (1927–1936) was fought between the Kuomintang (KMT)-led government of the Republic of China and the armed forces of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Chiang Kai-shek, the authoritarian leader of the KMT, commanded the National Revolutionary Army (NRA) to fight against communist insurgents. This paper examines the military deployment of the NRA during the civil war to show how Chiang Kai-shek strategically deployed military troops to balance external threats from insurgency and internal threats from rival KMT elites.

## 3.1 The National Revolutionary Army

The NRA was initially the party army created by the KMT in 1924 to end the party's dependence on warlord military power. It received its official name in 1925 and by mid-1926 included eight armies of nearly 100,000 soldiers. During most of the late 1920s and early 1930s, the NRA consisted primarily of the Army, and its Navy and Air Force were limited.

From late 1926 to 1927, the KMT launched the military campaign named the Northern Expedition, which resulted in the nominal reunion of China and significantly impacted the force composition of the NRA. As the KMT's troops advanced northward, many warlords were co-opted into the Republican government, and their armies were also ab-

sorbed intact into the NRA (Lieberthal, 2003). While the inclusion of warlord troops expanded the size of the NRA nearly ten times (Taylor, 2009), it also turned the NRA into a highly factionalized force whose different troops were loyal to different political elites and factions. As Lieberthal (2003, 33) described: "The NRA itself became a jerry-built concatenation of largely independent military units."

The factionalization of the NRA generated significant coup threats to Chiang Kai-shek. On the one hand, NRA forces that transformed from warlord armies had a thin loyalty to Chiang, and they maintained strong connections with their old superiors who were used to be warlords but now KMT elites (Lieberthal, 2003, 35; Taylor, 2009, 69). Meanwhile, Chiang Kai-shek's loyal forces, known as the Central Army (中央军) troops, comprised only one-fifth of the entire NRA troops after the North Expedition. Therefore, the conflict between Chiang Kai-shek and other disloyal political elites constituted the intra-elite dynamics within the KMT.

Chiang Kai-shek gradually gained control of the NRA since he served as the first commandant of the Whampoa Military Academy in 1924. In fact, most Central Army troops were under the command of Whampoa graduates. In June 1926, Chiang was named the commander-in-chief of the NRA and then became known as the Generalissimo. This position allowed Chiang to dictate the military command in the central government, and Chiang's loyal followers also had firm control over state financial and other material resources (Tien, 1972), which provided Chiang enough leverage to command and deploy different NRA troops.

## 3.2 The Communist Insurgency and Encirclement Campaigns

In April 1927, after a brutal purge of communists within the KMT, the CCP started its armed rebellion, which posed a significant mass threat to the KMT government. By early 1928, the CCP's armed insurgency had spread to more than 12 provinces and 140 counties. Meanwhile, the CCP's military power proliferated in a relatively short period. By June

1930, the Red Army of the CCP had already raised over 70,000 soldiers and consolidated more than ten revolutionary Soviet Zones in rural China.

To deal with the communist challenge, Chiang Kai-shek and the KMT government launched a series of encirclement campaigns targeting the CCP's operation bases. Among them were five major campaigns targeting the Central Soviet Zone (中央苏区), the political and military headquarters of the CCP. Chiang deployed both his loyal forces and other NRA troops to fight against communist insurgents. Historians' work on the Chinese Civil War shows some anecdotal evidence that Chiang strategically deployed former warlord troops in the NRA against the communists in a war of attrition to "kill two birds with one stone" (Ch'en, 1983, 204).

Finally, it is worth noting that this paper does not incorporate the Japanese invasion launched in 1931 in the analysis. This is because Chiang Kai-shek adopted a "first internal pacification, then external resistance" strategy to address foreign invasions. It was not until the Xi'an Incident in 1936 that Chiang Kai-shek agreed to pause the COIN warfare against the CCP and started to prepare for the Anti-Japanese War.

# 4 Research Design and Data

## 4.1 Data

The primary data source of military deployment is a volume entitled *History of the National Revolutionary Army* (国民革命军陆军沿革史), compiled by a team of Chinese historians based on extensive historical documents from the Second History Archives of China. The volume includes a list of all NRA armies (军), divisions (师), and brigades (旅) established between 1928 and 1950 as well as detailed information about their factional connections, deployment records, and commanding officers. Specifically, deployment records indicate when and where these military units were deployed and briefly describe their operation. A sample of raw data in Figure **??** shows the deployment records of the 30th

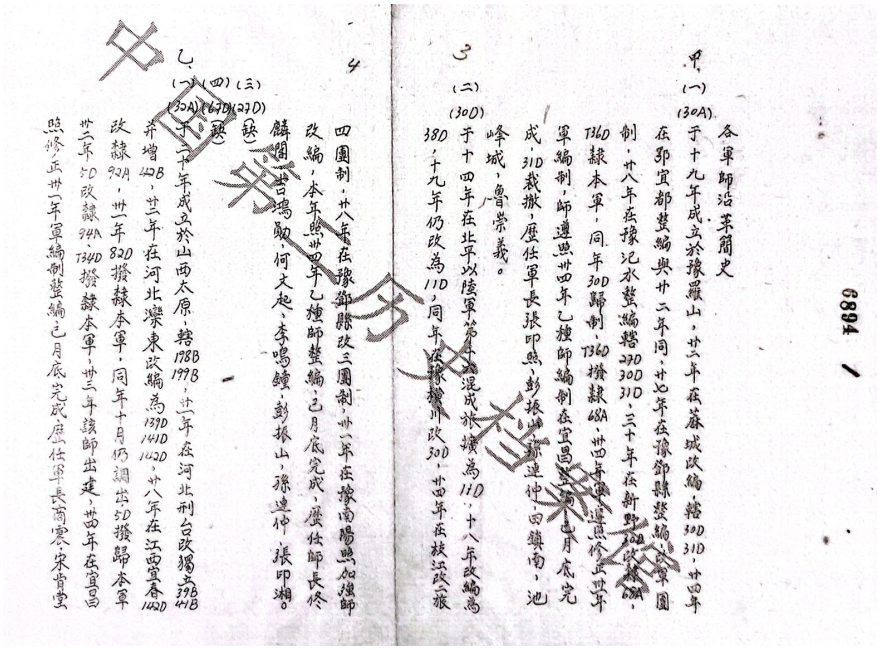
Infantry Division.

I digitalize the information in the volume and then construct a unique NRA dataset at the division level. A division is a suitable unit of analysis for two reasons. First, divisions were basic units implementing military operations during the First Chinese Civil War. Divisions in the same army were often deployed to different war zones, and sometimes, a division might be transferred from one army to another. Therefore, focusing on the division level can capture more temporal and spatial variations in military deployment compared to the army level. Second, although brigades were also independent military units in the NRA, most were transformed into divisions after 1928 and can easily be captured by the division-level data.

The final division-level dataset includes information on more than 500 NRA divisions from 1928 to 1950. Among them, I identify 205 divisions for empirical analysis within the First Chinese Civil War period of interest. It is worth noting that although some recent articles also pay attention to the Chinese military, their data collection and empirical analysis occur mostly at the individual level, focusing on the political selection of military elites in post-1949 China (e.g., Mattingly, 2022). Therefore, this article could be a preliminary attempt to collect organizational-level data on the Chinese military force before the CCP took over.

## 4.2 Measurement

I measure ***Factional Connection***, the main explanatory variable in my theory, following the convention of historians' identification. Historians define the factional connection of an NRA division with a consistent and comprehensive standard, centering on the formation process of the division and the personal background of the first commanding officer. In total (including Chiang Kai-shek's own faction), historians identify 13 factions within the NRA. In the following analysis, I first use a binary variable that indicates whether a division belongs to Chiang's loyal faction or not. I then use a series of dummy



**(a)** Original Archives

**第 30 师(整编第 30 旅)** Name of the division

①西北军(1928.10—1929.5)

1928 年 10 月，第 2 集团军第 11 军缩编为第 30 师，驻扎河南平西地区，下辖三旅。1929 年 5 月，因参加反蒋被取消番号。

历任师长：

佟麟阁(1928.10.8—)

②西北军(1930.10—1949.5) Faction affiliation

Deployment record (Encirclement Campaign)

1930 年 10 月，吉鸿昌率西北军第 2、第 10 师等部投蒋，在河南潢川恢复第 30 师的番号，辖三旅九团及特务旅①。11 月 5 日，驻淮阳。1931 年在潢川、商城，参加对鄂豫皖苏区的“围剿”(1931 年 1 月中旬至 9 月下旬)。9 月下旬驻信阳、武胜关，10 月末由信阳移防鄂东，参加对鄂豫皖苏区的“围剿”(1931 年 9 月下旬至 12 月)。1931 年，缩编为三旅六团及一特务旅。

1931 年底，编入第 30 军。1935 年，在湖北枝江缩编为二旅四团，是年冬，特务旅隶属武汉行营编整。1939 年 11 月，在河南邓县裁撤旅部，改辖三团。1941 年 5 月，改隶第 68 军。1942 年 3 月，改隶第 30 军。1945 年 10 月 24 日至 11 月 2 日，在河北邯郸以南被歼灭，师长王震被俘。1946 年 5 月，整编为旅，改辖两团。1948 年 5 月 17 日，旅部及两个团在山西临汾被歼灭。旋重建。1948 年 8 月，所属第 89 团由西安空运太原。10 月，恢复师的番号。1949 年 4 月，所属第 89 团在太原被歼灭。5 月 22 日，该师主力在陕西凤翔被歼灭，师长王敬鑫阵亡。

历任师长(整编旅旅长)： List of commanding officers

吉鸿昌

李鸣钟(—1932.1.31)

彭振山

**(b)** Records in the Volume

**Figure 1: Raw Data Regarding the NRA Deployment**

*Notes:* This is an example of the raw data regarding the deployment of the 30th Infantry Division. Source of (a): The Second Historical Archive of China, file 787-2642.

variables to indicate which specific faction a division belongs to.

For the outcome variable, I first define ***Deployment Incident***, a binary variable that equals 1 if a division had at least one COIN deployment during the civil war. Among divisions with COIN deployment records (***Deployment Incident*** = 1), I first measure the sequence of their first COIN deployment by creating a variable named ***Formation-deployment Interval***, which equals the time difference, measured in months, between when the unit was formed and when it was first deployed to fight against insurgents. I then capture the spatial variation of deployment by creating a dummy variable, ***Encirclement Campaign Deployment***, indicating whether a division's first COIN deployment was an encirclement campaign targeting communist strongholds where insurgents had greater military power.

I also include two control variables in my analysis. First, I control for the size of divisions, using the number of regiments within each division as a proxy. This is because the size of each division could correlate with both its factional connection and COIN deployment. Meanwhile, the size of a division also partly captures the competence of the division because divisions with more regiments were advantageous in terms of human resources. Second, since geographical factors may also affect both the factional connection and COIN deployment, I use information on each division's deployment location to examine whether a division was deployed across provinces. I control for cross-provincial deployment to reduce concern about geographical confounders. Finally, it is worth noting that although scholars argue that less mechanized forces are more suitable for COIN operations due to their higher information collection capability (Lyall and Wilson III, 2009), this paper does not control for force structure because all NRA divisions in my dataset are infantry divisions.

### 4.3 Estimation

In this paper, I restrict my analysis to NRA divisions with COIN deployment records (***Deployment Incident*** = 1) to examine the relationship between factional connection and actual COIN deployment outcome. In other words, this paper focuses more on when and where troops were deployed once they participated in COIN military actions. I use the following two specifications:

$$\Pr(Y_i|\text{Deployment Incident}_i = 1) = \alpha + \beta\text{Central Army}_i + \delta X_i + \epsilon_i \tag{1}$$

where $Y_i$ is the formation-deployment interval of division $i$, Central Army$_i$ is a binary variable indicating whether division $i$ is a Central Army division (Chiang Kai-shek's loyal troops), and $X$ is a vector of control variables.

$$\Pr(Y_i|\text{Deployment Incident}_i = 1) = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-(\alpha+\beta\text{Central Army}_i+\delta X_i+\epsilon_i)}} \tag{2}$$

where $Y_i$ indicates whether division $i$ engaged in an encirclement campaign and the other variables are identical as above. A linear probability model is also employed for this outcome variable.

## 5 Results

### 5.1 Descriptive Evidence

I begin with descriptive evidence to illustrate some empirical patterns in my data. Table 1 presents the summary statistics of all the variables included in the empirical analysis. Figure 2 shows the distribution of the year of force formation, the first COIN deployment, the formation-deployment interval, and the encirclement campaign deployment between Central and Non-Central Army divisions.

The top left figure identifies when the 205 NRA divisions in my dataset were estab-

**Table 1: Summary Statistics**

| | N | Mean | Std. | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Formation-deployment Interval (Months) | 205 | 7.082 | 13.727 | 0 | 75 |
| Encirclement Campaign Deployment (Binary) | 89 | 0.270 | 0.446 | 0 | 1 |
| Central Army | 205 | 0.127 | 0.334 | 0 | 1 |
| Number of Regiments | 205 | 5.429 | 2.046 | 2 | 12 |
| Cross-Provincial Deployment | 89 | 0.449 | 0.500 | 0 | 1 |
| Local Troops | 205 | 0.132 | 0.339 | 0 | 1 |
| Ma Clique (Ma Family Army) | 205 | 0.020 | 0.139 | 0 | 1 |
| Sichuan Clique (Chuan Army) | 205 | 0.083 | 0.276 | 0 | 1 |
| Fengtian Clique (Northeastern Army) | 205 | 0.093 | 0.291 | 0 | 1 |
| Guizhou Clique (Qian Army) | 205 | 0.024 | 0.155 | 0 | 1 |
| New Guangxi Clique (Xin Gui Xi Army) | 205 | 0.020 | 0.139 | 0 | 1 |
| Hunan Clique (Xiang Army) | 205 | 0.078 | 0.269 | 0 | 1 |
| Yunnan Clique (Dian Army) | 205 | 0.015 | 0.120 | 0 | 1 |
| Guangdong Clique (Yue Army) | 205 | 0.083 | 0.276 | 0 | 1 |
| Shanxi Clique (Jinsui Army) | 205 | 0.112 | 0.316 | 0 | 1 |
| Northwestern Army | 205 | 0.156 | 0.364 | 0 | 1 |
| Other Cliques | 205 | 0.059 | 0.235 | 0 | 1 |

lished. Although more Central and Non-Central Army divisions were established in 1928 and 1933, the formation of NRA divisions occurred across the range of years, alleviating the concern that new divisions' establishment was heavily concentrated in specific years. The top right and lower left figures together indicate that compared with Non-Central Army divisions, Central Army divisions were deployed to COIN battlefields later (after 1931, with the peak in 1933), and their formation-deployment interval was larger (most Non-Central Army divisions were deployed within six months after their establishment). Finally, the lower right graph shows that most Non-Central Army divisions' first COIN deployments were not major encirclement campaigns. The descriptive evidence aligns with my hypotheses. While Chiang Kai-shek deployed potentially disloyal forces to COIN war zones earlier, he still relied on his loyalists to deal with more challenging battles.

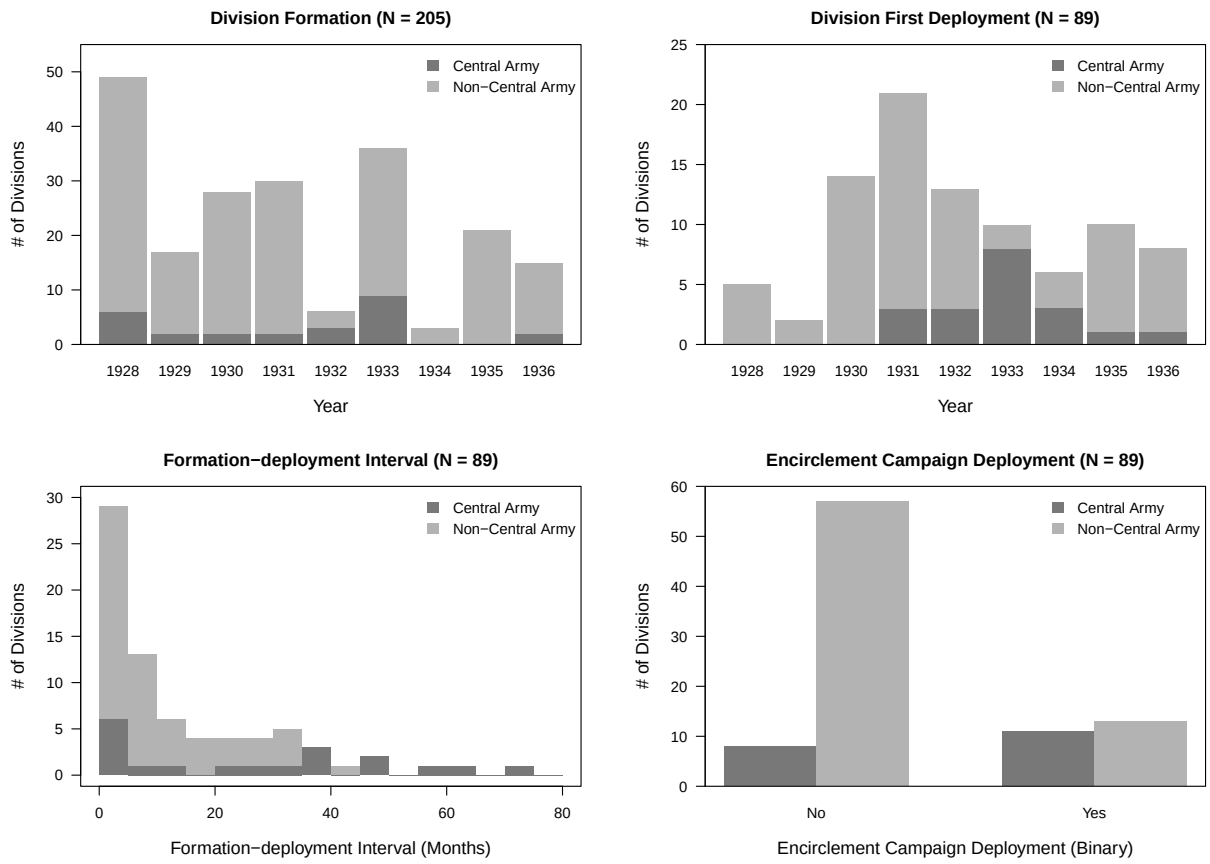



**Figure 2: Descriptive Pattern**

## 5.2 Baseline Regression Results

Table 2 presents the baseline regression results. Using the ***Formation-deployment Interval*** as the dependent variable, Column (1) shows the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression results without controls and among observations with COIN deployment records. Column (2) reports the results controlling for the size and location of divisions. The coefficients for the variable ***Central Army*** are significantly positive either with the control variable or not. In line with Hypothesis 1, results from the two OLS regressions indicate that, within NRA troops with COIN participation, on average, Chiang Kai-shek's loyal Central Army divisions were deployed into battlefields 14 months later compared to Non-Central Army divisions. In other words, results show that potentially disloyal troops were more likely to be sent into the war zone earlier, confirming Hypothesis 1.

**Table 2: Baseline Regression Results**

| Outcomes | Formation-Deployment Interval | | Encirclement Campaign Deployment | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | (1) OLS | (2) OLS | (3) LPM | (4) LPM | (5) Logit |
| Central Army | 14.05** | 13.65** | 0.39*** | 0.39** | 1.85*** |
| | (5.60) | (4.85) | (0.12) | (0.13) | (0.57) |
| # of Regiments | | 0.13 | | -0.03* | -0.20 |
| | | (0.78) | | (0.02) | (0.14) |
| Cross-Provincial Deployment | | -11.42*** | | -0.09* | -0.61 |
| | | (3.28) | | (0.09) | (0.55) |
| Constant | 12.31*** | 16.85*** | 0.19*** | 0.39*** | -0.19 |
| | (1.58) | (5.17) | (0.05) | (0.13) | (0.85) |
| Observations | 89 | 89 | 89 | 89 | 89 |

Robust standard errors in parentheses
* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Moving to the ***Encirclement Campaign Deployment*** outcome, Columns (3) and (4) report the results from a Linear Probability Model (LPM). The estimates for the variable ***Central Army*** are significantly positive, either with or without controls, showing that in terms of the first COIN deployment, Central Army divisions were, on average, 39% more likely to be deployed to major encirclement campaigns than Non-Central Army divisions. Results in Column (5) with a Logit model point in the same direction. These findings provide supportive evidence for Hypothesis 2.

## 5.3 Disaggregating Factions

In the baseline regressions, I only use a dummy variable distinguishing the Central Army division from the Non-Central Army division. To further investigate whether the results are driven by one or multiple factions, I disaggregate Non-Central Army divisions into more detailed factions. Here, I follow the OLS model setup mentioned above, focusing on divisions from which factions were more likely to be deployed earlier. I add a series of dummy variables of factions to the right-hand side of the equation and use the Central Army division as the benchmark. Figure 3 presents the outcome of this disaggregated estimation, where statistically significant results are displayed in the blue color. It shows that the results of Hypothesis 1 are mainly driven by four factions: Guizhou, Hunan, Guangdong, and local troops. For troops connected with these factions, estimates indicate that they were deployed into COIN battlefields more than 20 months earlier than were Central Army divisions. Meanwhile, the results also show that coefficients for the two most militarily powerful factions, the Northeastern and Jinsui Armies, are not statistically significant. One possible explanation is that Chiang Kai-shek lacked commanding authority over these powerful factions.

## 5.4 Robustness Check

To assess whether estimates of the same magnitude as those in Table 2 could be obtained by chance, I re-estimate the models in Columns (2) and (4) with alternative assignments of ***Factional Connection*** across units. For each of the 5,000 simulations, I randomly reallocated the number of Central Army divisions (19 out of 89) and re-run the two specifications. Figure 4 reports the resulting distribution of coefficient estimates, along with my original estimates (red lines). The results of the randomization inference show that over 99% of the estimated placebo effects were smaller in absolute value than my original estimates in the main specifications. This means that the main estimates in Table 2 are unlikely to be achieved by coincidence.

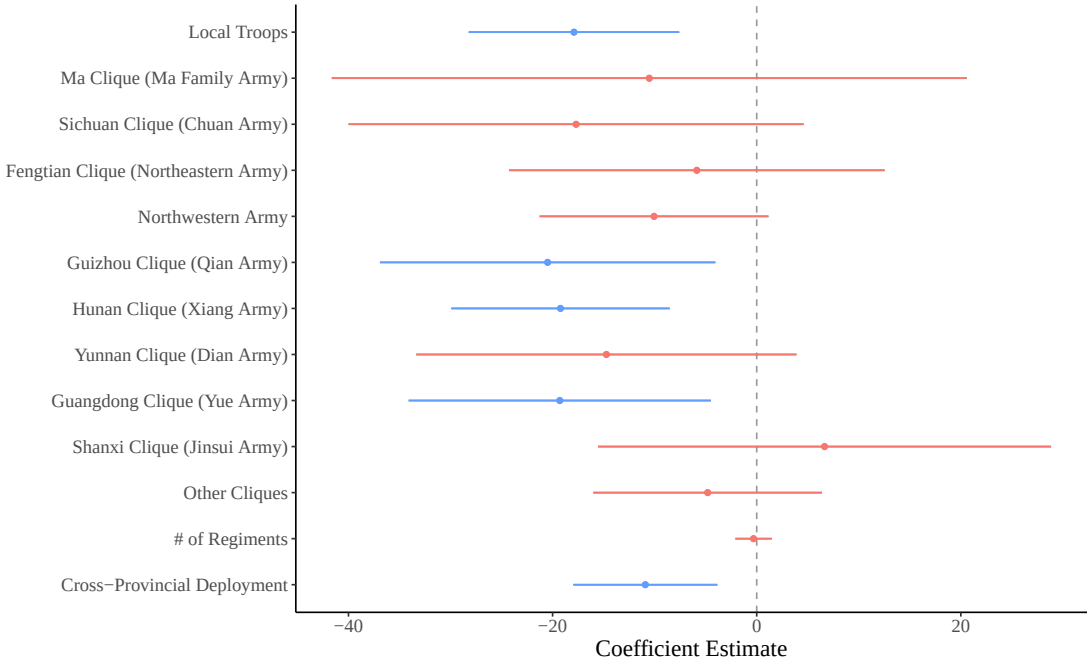



**Figure 3: Disaggregating Non-Central Armies**

*Notes:* A blue line means the estimate is statistically significant at a 95% confidence level.

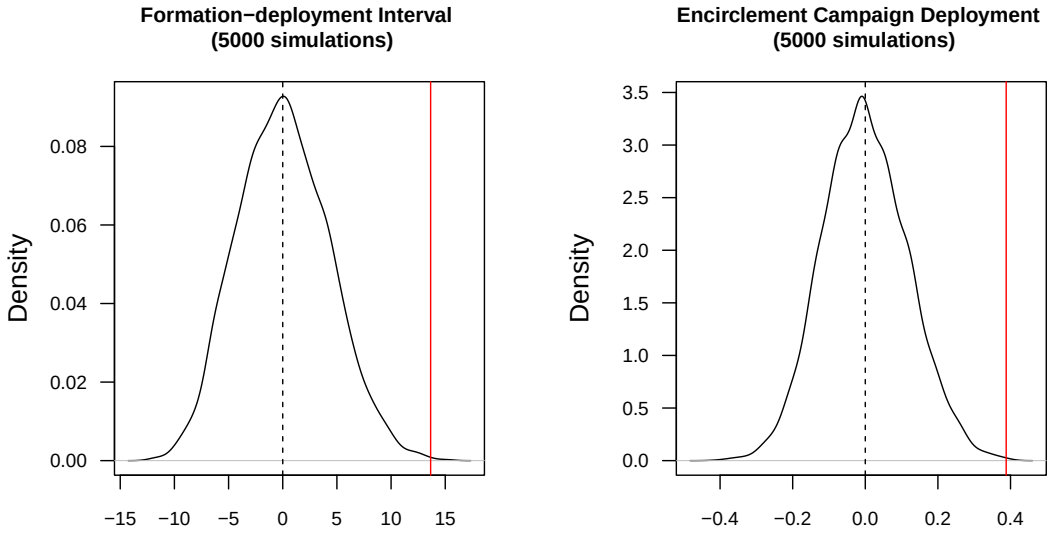



**Figure 4: Distribution of Placebo Effects across Simulations**

*Notes:* Vertical red lines represent estimates reported in Table 2. Vertical dashed line is 0.

# 6 Conclusion

Governments employ different COIN strategies as they seek to defeat armed rebellions. Scholars on civil conflicts have demonstrated that these strategies have critical consequences on conflict outcomes (Hazelton, 2017), rebel groups' resources and behavior (Kalyvas, 2006; Huff, 2023; Blair, forthcoming), and long-term state development (Lu et al., 2020; Liu, 2022). While these studies provide deep insights into the effect of COIN strategies, they often treat those strategies as given and pay less attention to explaining the sub-national variation of COIN strategies in the first place.

To explain the sub-national variation of COIN strategies, this paper unpacks the authoritarian government by focusing on the conflict between the dictator and other ruling elites. I argue that the intra-elite conflict within the authoritarian government can have a downstream effect on military deployment decisions during war. This is because the dictator can balance internal elite threats and external mass threats by strategically deploying disloyal troops to more hazardous but less critical battlefields while sending loyal troops to more critical war zones. I provide empirical evidence in support of my theory using the First Chinese Civil War as a case. Utilizing a unique dataset on the deployment records of the state military, NRA, based on archives, regression analysis shows that Chiang Kai-shek, the authoritarian leader of the KMT government, deployed potentially disloyal troops earlier to the COIN battlefields, but relied more on the loyal Central Army troops to implement major encirclement campaigns targeting communist strongholds.

By focusing on the civil conflict between the KMT government and communist insurgents, this paper investigates how the authoritarian state deploys military troops to suppress revolutionary rebel groups. This clarifies the dynamic of counterrevolutionary activities, which receives far less scholarly attention than revolutionary movements themselves (Slater and Smith, 2016). While existing studies highlight that revolutionary rebel groups (e.g., CCP) develop their strength during intense armed conflicts against counterrevolutionary forces (Levitsky and Way, 2022; Lachapelle et al., 2020), this paper

describes an alternative explanation: rebel groups survive and have the chance of further development due to the less militarily efficient COIN strategy that results from intra-elite conflicts within the counterrevolutionary group.

This paper leaves two questions for future research. First, how will these disloyal troops behave after their deployment to more hazardous areas? Some may gradually realize that the political leader is utilizing the insurgents' hands to weaken their power and, thus, become reluctant to fight against insurgents, or even defect on the battlefield. However, some disloyal troops may also seek to signal their loyalty and gain the leader's trust. Therefore, they may demonstrate their loyalty by treating the insurgents more brutally, resulting in indiscriminate violence and killing. Future research can collect more micro-level data to investigate how strategic military deployment alters military behavior differently. Second, how will the rebel group respond to the government's strategic military deployment? One possibility is that rebel forces will also strategically choose their opponents, leveraging the distrust between different types of state military troops to achieve battle victory. Researchers can further study the strategic interaction between rebel groups and different COIN forces using both formal modeling tools and new empirical data.

Republican China from 1912 to 1949 has received very little attention in the study of conflicts and authoritarian politics. Nevertheless, there has been a protracted history of conflicts during those three decades, including civil wars between the central government and regional warlords, COIN warfare with armed insurgents, and the interstate war against the Japanese invasion. This paper only focuses on the First Chinese Civil War to show the role of intra-elite conflicts in military deployment decisions, but the entire Republican China period provides not only a suitable scenario but also extensive data resources for scholars to theorize and analyze the interaction of elite politics, conflict dynamics, and state-building.

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# Appendix A

In this appendix, I examine the relationship between factional affiliation and formation-deployment interval with the two-part model (Belotti et al., 2015). The rationales behind using this model are twofold. First, the decision on military deployment consists of both the considerations of whether or not to deploy a division and when and where a division should be deployed. Therefore, our observed outcome is first a binary indicator and then a positive random variable. Second, as mentioned in the main text, this paper focuses more on modeling the actual outcome, that is, when and where the divisions were sent once they participated in counterinsurgency warfare, rather than the outcomes that might have occurred for divisions without counterinsurgency deployment records. Following the guideline by Vance and Ritter (2014), I choose the two-part model instead of the Heckman model.

The specification is as follows: The first equation deals with the binary response.

$$\phi(y > 0) = \Pr(y > 0|\mathbf{x}) = S(\mathbf{x}\delta) = \frac{1}{1 + \exp(-\mathbf{x}\delta)} \tag{3}$$

where $\mathbf{x}$ is a vector of explanatory variables, $\delta$ is the corresponding vector of parameters to be estimated, and $S$ is the standard logistic cumulative distribution function.

The second equation handles the positives:

$$\phi(y|y > 0, \mathbf{x}) = g(\mathbf{x}\gamma) \tag{4}$$

where $\mathbf{x}$ is a vector of explanatory variables, $\gamma$ is the corresponding vector of parameters to be estimated, and $g$ is an appropriate density function for $y|y > 0$.

Table 3 below shows the results. In Model 1, I only include a dummy explanatory variable, *Central Army*, on the right-hand side of the equation. Model 2 includes the Number of Regiments in a division to control for military competence. The coefficient for *Central Army* is significantly positive either with the control variable. In line with the

first hypothesis, results from the second part of the model indicate that, on average, Chiang Kai-shek's loyal military forces were deployed later compared to divisions connected to rival elites. Then in Model 3, I add a series of dummy variables of factions in the second part and use the Central Army as the benchmark. The results are similar to those in the main text.

It is worth noting that although results from the second part of the model support hypothesis 1, estimations from the first part show a different picture. In all three regression models above, the coefficients for the Central Army in the first part are significantly positive, showing that the Central Army divisions were more likely to have counterinsurgency deployment practice (while they were often deployed later than non-central military forces. This could point to a more complicated picture of the KMT's military deployment during counterinsurgency warfare and needs further investigation.

# Appendix B


**Figure 5: The Distribution of Warlords in China, 1929**

*Source:* Taylor (2009, 87)

**Table 3: Two-part Model Results**

| | (1) | (2) | (3) |
|---|---|---|---|
| *First Part: Logit* | | | |
| Central Army | 1.44*** | 1.44*** | 1.44*** |
| | (0.47) | (0.47) | (0.47) |
| Number of Regiments | | 0.01 | 0.01 |
| | | (0.07) | (0.07) |
| *Second Part: OLS* | | | |
| Central Army | 14.05** | 14.09** | |
| | (5.60) | (5.57) | |
| Number of Regiments | | 0.59 | 0.24 |
| | | (0.80) | (0.98) |
| Local Troops | | | -18.49*** |
| | | | (6.62) |
| Ma Clique (Ma Family Army) | | | -8.49 |
| | | | (5.27) |
| Sichuan Clique (Chuan Army) | | | -24.64*** |
| | | | (5.46) |
| Fengtian Clique (Northeastern Army) | | | -1.44 |
| | | | (8.40) |
| Guizhou Clique (Qian Army) | | | -17.73** |
| | | | (7.46) |
| Shanxi Clique (Jinsui Army) | | | -0.02 |
| | | | (14.46) |
| Yunnan Clique (Dian Army) | | | -21.03*** |
| | | | (6.15) |
| Guangdong Clique (Yue Army) | | | -18.53*** |
| | | | (7.13) |
| Hunan Clique (Xiang Army) | | | -20.23*** |
| | | | (5.91) |
| Northwestern Army | | | -11.82 |
| | | | (7.28) |
| Other Cliques | | | -2.34 |
| | | | (7.67) |
| Observations | 205 | 205 | 205 |

Robust standard errors in parentheses. The New Guangxi Clique is omitted.

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$