



## Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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Study Acceptance Date: November 2023

Study Sequence No. 5

### China 1945–49

#### Executive Summary

The Chinese Civil War was a military conflict fought between the Kuomintang (KMT or the Nationalist government), and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Following the Japanese defeat in the Second Sino-Japanese War, during which mainland China was divided by the KMT and CCP, the two parties sought complete control of China.<sup>1</sup> Initially following the Japanese surrender, the two sides agreed upon peace talks and a ceasefire, but armed conflict ensued shortly after.<sup>2</sup>

Fighting began in Manchuria, an area controlled by the USSR until their departure in March–April 1946, and another temporary ceasefire was brought about by US General George C. Marshall, who was sent to bring the two parties together for diplomatic discussion. The entirety of the conflict in 1946 was consistent with a mix of diplomatic efforts and instances of conflict in areas such as Chengde and northern Jiangsu, most of which at this stage saw Nationalist successes. After the KMT captured Kalgan on October 11, 1946, another ceasefire was attempted, but a final opportunity for diplomatic solutions vanished following the Nationalists' adoption of a new constitution on December 25 which allowed the KMT to remain in power.<sup>3</sup>

While desultory peace talks continued, there was a resumption of the Communist offensive in Manchuria, and government forces continued to pressure CCP positions in Shaanxi and Shantung. A difference in strategy proved vital for the shift of momentum between the two parties, where the CCP emphasized the importance of rural securitization over the cities. The years 1947–48 saw few, if any, important gains by the Nationalist government but substantial CCP gains in the rural areas of central China. Despite the Nationalist government's growing military strength at the end of 1947, the Nationalist army had lost momentum on all major fronts, shifting to a defensive posture and trying to maintain a grip on North China.<sup>4</sup>

By mid-1948, the Yangtze River stood as the last remaining line of defense from the CCP offensive. The Communist forces had grown in strength, and their territorial control increased from 10 percent of the country in 1946 to around 33 percent in late 1948, encompassing 200 million inhabitants. In 1949, the Nationalist government reached out unsuccessfully to the "Big Four" leaders in hopes that they would mediate or intervene. Final peace discussions fell through, and the fall of Nanjing on April 24, 1949, was the beginning of the end for the government forces. For the rest of that year, the CCP offensive charged through areas like Changsha and Lanzhou, and after the Nationalists moved their capital to Chongqing, this city, too, fell on November 8.

This defeat led the Nationalist government to retreat to the island of Taiwan, and by the end of 1949, virtually all of mainland China was under CCP control.<sup>5</sup>

## Assessing the Five Factors

### 1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

**Yes.** Although this civil war was fought between the Communist CCP and the Nationalist KMT, it was largely fought over political divisions rather than ethnic ones—essentially a battle between democracy and Communism. CCP leader Mao Zedong drew this line clearly, and much of his rhetoric attacked the illegitimacy of the Nationalist government as a political entity, which he called an obstacle for the new China.<sup>6</sup> Although not an entirely peaceful alliance, the second United Front saw the KMT and CCP work together during World War II, prior to Mao's realignment of the CCP.<sup>7</sup> The vast majority of the inhabitants of China identified as Chinese.

### 2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

**No.** Immediately following Japan's surrender in World War II, and prior to the Chinese Civil War, Mao Zedong, the leader of the CCP, succeeded in widening political divisions between his own party and the Nationalist government through extreme rhetoric and mass movements. This division left the population of China devoid of a third option and created a wide gap between the two parties, where the Nationalist government represented conservative values and the CCP represented progressive themes and nationalistic ideals, with the former losing their previously centrist position. The Nationalists failed to establish themselves as a party of the people. This failure is seen in the nature of the Nationalist army, which remained a professional army (as opposed to the Communist People's Army) and instances of petitions for local militia organizations being rejected by Nationalist leaders for lacking in merit.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?

**No.** The Communist insurgents made significant territorial gains from the middle of the conflict through their various offensives from 1947–48. Virtually the entirety of mainland China was under the insurgents' control by the end of the conflict, and the government in power lost its ability to maintain or achieve security over any of the mainland population following its relocation to Taiwan.<sup>9</sup>

### 4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

**Yes.** At the start of the war, the CCP and the League for the Independence of Vietnam (Viet Minh) began cross-border military cooperation, with CCP guerillas on the southern border of China crossing into Vietnamese territory where the Viet Minh provided training, concealment, and financial and materiel support. This cooperation included smaller guerilla groups in September 1945 and the establishment of a military base for the first regiment of the (Communist) southern region People's Liberation Army inside Vietnam in December 1945, thus allowing insurgent forces in militarily significant numbers to maintain external sanctuary until the war's end in 1949.<sup>10</sup>

5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

**Yes.** The Nationalist government had a self-sustaining and reasonably competent army, the National Revolutionary Army, which had grown exponentially from the late 1920s to the early 1930s, and by the onset of direct conflict between the CCP in 1946, its military strength stood at three million soldiers.<sup>11</sup>

CHINA 1945–49	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	YES
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	NO
POPULATION SECURITY	NO
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	YES
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES

## Outcome

Governmental defeat. Mao declared the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949 (gaining immediate recognition by the USSR), but the actual conflict had yet to cease, as the KMT relocated their capital again to Chongqing in October. Mainland China was almost entirely under CCP control by December 1949, when Nationalist leadership either relocated to Taiwan or switched allegiances, and any remaining Nationalist military forces were either defeated or simply disintegrated.<sup>12</sup> This case supports the Five Factors theory.

## Endnotes

1. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. “Chinese Civil War,” n.d., accessed September 10, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Chinese-Civil-War>.
2. Rebecca Cairns, “The Chinese Civil War,” Alpha History (website), n.d., accessed September 20, 2019, [alphahistory.com/chineserevolution/chinese-civil-war](http://alphahistory.com/chineserevolution/chinese-civil-war).
3. *Britannica*, “Chinese Civil War.”
4. *Britannica*, “Chinese Civil War.”
5. *Britannica*, “Chinese Civil War.”
6. Xing Lu, “Mao Zedong’s Rhetorical Constructions of Chinese Nationalism,” in *The Rhetoric of Mao Zedong: Transforming China and Its People* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2017), 138–56, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv6sj7jh.13>.
7. Sophia Maroulis, “The Second United Front: A KMT and CCP Alliance in Name, but Not in Practice,” *Pacific Atrocities Education* (blog), August 8, 2022, [www.pacificatrocities.org/blog/the-second-united-front-a-kmt-and-ccp-alliance-in-name-but-not-in-practice](http://www.pacificatrocities.org/blog/the-second-united-front-a-kmt-and-ccp-alliance-in-name-but-not-in-practice).
8. Pichon P. Y. Loh, “The Politics of Chiang Kai-shek: A Reappraisal,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 25, no. 3 (May 1966): 431–51, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2052000>.
9. *Britannica*, “Chinese Civil War.”
10. Jiayi Gao, “Fighting Side by Side: Cross-Border Military Exchanges and Cooperation between the Chinese Communist Party and the Viet Minh, 1945–1949,” *China Review* 19, no. 3 (August 2019): 123–48, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26838901>.
11. *Oxford Reference*, s.v. “National Revolutionary Army,” n.d., accessed September 15, 2023, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110810105450123>.
12. *Britannica*, “Chinese Civil War.”



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