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How the Party Commands the Gun: The Foreign–Domestic Threat Dilemma in China

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Abstract: *The leaders of authoritarian states face a dilemma between building a loyal military to guard against domestic threats and a professional military that can guard against foreign threats. In this article, I argue that leaders respond to domestic threats by promoting loyal officers and to foreign threats by promoting experienced officers. I draw on a new dataset, the first of its kind, of over 12,000 appointments to the People's Liberation Army of China. The data show that career ties and combat experience are critical for officer promotion to key military and party offices. However, in periods of high domestic threat, party leaders promote unusually large numbers of officers with personal ties to the top leader. In periods of foreign threat, on the other hand, leaders are more likely to promote officers with prior combat experience. The article challenges the conventional wisdom, showing how autocrats face a trade-off between guarding against internal and external threats.*

Our principle is that the Party commands the gun, and the gun must never be allowed to command the Party.

> Mao Zedong, Problems of War and Strategy,
> November 1938

The party must command the gun… We [will] enhance the political loyalty of the armed forces [and] strengthen them through the training of competent personnel.

> Xi Jinping, Speech on the CCP's
> 100th Anniversary, July 2021

The leaders of authoritarian regimes face a dilemma. On the one hand, they need loyal military officers who will defend them from *domestic threats* including elite challengers and mass re-

volts (Barany 2016; De Bruin 2019; Geddes et al. 2018; Svolik 2012). At the same time, leaders require competent officers who can defend the nation from *foreign threats*. Maintaining both military loyalty and competence can create conflicting imperatives (Egorov and Sonin 2011; Talmadge 2015). Prizing officer competence over officer loyalty can make a leader more vulnerable to domestic threats; yet prizing officer loyalty over competence can make a regime more vulnerable to foreign adversaries.

In this article, I provide a theory for how leaders in authoritarian states address this foreign–domestic threat dilemma. I make two core arguments. First, when building the military, the leaders of authoritarian regimes generally select a mix of officers who have markers of competence *and* loyalty. Competence is difficult to observe, so leaders promote officers with traits of

military professionalism—for example, officers with prior combat experience, education, and training. Loyalty is also difficult to discern, so leaders also promote officers in their personal networks—for instance, officers with whom a leader has a prior career tie.

My second core argument is that shifting domestic and international threats change the degree to which leaders emphasize loyalty or professionalism in the military. When domestic threats grow in importance, leaders will focus more on ensuring military loyalty by promoting officers in their personal network. When foreign threats grow in importance, leaders will place more emphasis on professionalism and staff the senior-officer corps with generals who have combat experience.

To develop this theory and supply evidence for its applicability, I draw on a new dataset of over 1,200 officers and over 12,000 career appointments within the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China. The dataset—to my knowledge the most extensive officer-level dataset of an autocratic military to date—provides a rare glimpse inside a secretive organization which has received relatively little scholarly attention in the literature on comparative politics, but which has repeatedly played a decisive role in Chinese politics.[1] The focus on the prominent but little-studied case of the PLA illuminates civil–military dynamics in an important category of states: revolutionary one-party regimes (Lachapelle et al. 2020; Meng and Paine 2022).

Drawing on new data on the PLA, I show how successive CCP leaders have approached the foreign–domestic threat dilemma when promoting officers. Consistent with my first central argument, throughout the post-Mao era, leaders have prized both markers of loyalty and markers of professionalism. A revolutionary regime like China is arguably a case where promotions based on factional networks might be least likely. However, I show that officers with career ties to the top leader are two to three times more likely to be promoted than officers without such a tie. Officers with connections to the top leader are also less well-trained than unconnected officers.[2] To balance loyalty with professionalism, leaders also promote officers based on combat experience and education at twice the rate of officers without these markers of competence.

However, during periods of heightened domestic threat, party leaders pack the elite officer corps with more loyalists. The two key periods of domestic threat that I examine in post-Mao China include the elite splits and mass protests of 1989 and the Bo Xilai incident of 2012. Around these two periods of increased domestic threat, CCP leaders stacked the elite officer corps with more PLA generals who had prior career ties to the top party leader.

Increasing foreign threats, on the other hand, led to an increased focus on professionalism such as combat experience. The key period of foreign threat in the post-Mao Era began in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when a series of military incidents led to growing tensions with the United States. I show that in a period of foreign threat, party leaders were more likely to promote officers with prior combat experience, at the expense of promoting officers with ties to leaders.

The key theoretical contribution of the article is to unpack how authoritarian leaders respond to shifting foreign *and* domestic threats. The most influential work on authoritarian regimes generally argues that leaders face a trade-off between protecting against the domestic threats of mass unrest and elite defection. A common argument in this literature is that authoritarian regimes can build a strong military that guards against mass unrest but is more capable of launching a coup, or a weak military that is less likely to launch a coup but also less able to protect the regime from a mass uprising—this trade-off is sometimes referred to as the "guardianship dilemma" (e.g., Feaver 1999; Greitens 2016; Svolik 2012, 2013). However, as Brooks (2019, 390) notes, the current literature does not provide clear expectations about how authoritarian regimes respond to mass unrest, elite challenges, *and* foreign threats. Moreover, it less clear how this dilemma applies to revolutionary regimes like China, where the chance of a military-led coup are significantly lower. My theory and evidence builds on the literature on civil–military relations and shows how authoritarian regimes—in particular revolutionary regimes like the CCP—respond dynamically to counter both foreign and domestic threats.

The Military in Authoritarian Domestic and International Politics

The military is crucial for the political survival of authoritarian leaders—and often plays a pivotal role in political crises. In the post-World War II era, coups caused 35% of autocratic regime breakdowns, mass revolts caused 25% of breakdowns, and foreign invasion caused 4%

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[1]There is a more extensive literature on the PLA in international relations. See Fravel (2019) for a recent overview.

[2]For example, officers with ties to sitting leaders are only about half as likely to have a graduate degree. See also the analysis in Table A21, page A27, in the online supporting information which is discussed in the conclusion and which shows a tradeoff between promoting officers with ties to leader and officers with education.

(Geddes et al. 2018, 179).[3] Military competence and loyalty is crucial for surviving each challenge. Some 90% of successful coup attempts since 1949 were led by or supported by the military, most often by senior army officers (De Bruin 2019). To survive large prodemocracy movements, autocratic regimes also require a loyal military (Barany 2016; Brancati 2016, 121), and the military is crucial for meeting foreign threats. China has been no exception: as Susan Shirk notes, the PLA has been "crucial for a victory in party power struggles [in China] in a way that the support of civilian party and government officials [has] not" (1993, 76).

If the military is crucial for leader survival, what trade-offs do autocrats face when building the armed forces? To date, the literature on the guardianship dilemma has largely focused on how autocrats balance between protecting against a coup or mass revolt. Svolik (2012, 2013) argues that "authoritarian repression involves a fundamental moral hazard: The very resources that enable the regime's repressive agents to suppress its opposition also empower them to act against the regime itself" (2012, 124). In this framework, leaders must decide whether to build a strong coercive apparatus that can help them guard against mass threats but that poses a greater coup risk or a weak apparatus that will be less capable of launching a coup but also less capable of putting down mass threats.

The idea that leaders face a dilemma between focusing on mass or elite threats has animated a fruitful research agenda. Existing research shows that there are several ways that elites make a trade-off along these lines. For example, drawing on cases in East Asia, Greitens (2016) shows that leaders who face significant coup threats create fragmented and socially exclusive security forces, while leaders who face significant mass threats create unified and inclusive security forces. Examining cases in Africa, Roessler (2011, 2016) shows how leaders can exclude rival ethnic groups from power, which reduces the risk of civil war while increasing the risk of a coup. In addition, recent work by De Bruin (2018, 2020) and Blaydes (2018), among others, show how regimes create "counterbalancing" institutions such as militias, republican guards, or secret police that fragment the security services and help to protect leaders.

However, the conventional guardianship framework—with its emphasis on a trade-off between a strong and weak coercive apparatus—has important limits. For one, it does not account for the fact that a strong coercive apparatus may be either loyal or disloyal in the face of mass rebellion. McMahon and Slantchev (2015) note that increasing external threats can actually increase the loyalty of a strong and well-funded military, provided a ruler and military have similar beliefs about the external threat like an insurgency or rebellion. Paine (2022), on the other hand, highlights how a strong, competent military may have incentives to be disloyal to regime elites in a mass uprising, especially when the military believes it may survive beyond the fall of the regime. Paine (2021) also shows how elites threats and mass threats may be interconnected, as the elites with the strongest mass support also pose the greatest coup risk. Egorov and Sonin (2011) examine a similar but distinct dilemma in the context of a personalist dictator selecting a prime minister or vizier, arguing that subordinates with varying levels of competence have differing incentives to be loyal. Finally, Luo and Rozenas (2022) show how autocratic leaders concerned about coup risks can manipulate information to their benefit and rule either by sowing division within the elite coalition or through collective rule.

Recent empirical studies also underscore how leaders prioritize the loyalty of coercive agents, rather than competence or professionalism, especially when faced with significant domestic threats. For example, Hassan (2017, 2020) shows how Kenyan presidents post officers who share the same ethnicity as the president—and who are therefore presumed to be loyal—to regions where the regime plans to coerce its opponents. Similarly, Carter and Hassan (2021) show how presidents in the Republic of Congo and Kenya suppress the opposition by appointing nonnative regional executives who have strong incentives to be loyal to the regime. Finally, Scharpf and Glaßel (2020) show how in autocratic Argentina, the least capable and competent officers joined the secret police, in part because limited career prospects outside of the secret police cement their loyalty to their regime.

The durability of revolutionary regimes—where the coercive apparatus is usually strong and coups rare—also poses a puzzle for the guardianship dilemma framework. Classic work on Communist systems argues that civil–military relations in these systems differ in important ways. Crucially, the system of political commissars and intelligence officers embedded in military units allows elites to monitor the officer corps for party loyalty. As Odom argues, the ruling party's "control apparatus within the military provides an alternative information channel to the top… mak[ing] collusion among [officers] risky" (1978, 37). Yet even a politically tamed military can become an important tool in political struggles within the elite coalition. Perlmutter and LeoGrande

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[3]Even when regimes do not face a threat of invasion, foreign threats can still shape a leader's prospects for political survival (De Mesquita and Siverson 1995).

argue that in Communist regimes, "[o]ne party faction uses the military as an instrument of innerparty struggle, and the military is the ultimate resource… the military acts not to replace party hegemony with military hegemony, but rather to sustain the political hegemony of one party faction over another" (1982, 787).

A final limit of the guardianship dilemma, as noted above, is that the framework does not lead to clear predictions about how leaders might balance between guarding against domestic and foreign threats. In the next section, I outline a framework for considering the trade-off that leaders face between meeting foreign and domestic threats.

Framework: The Foreign–Domestic Threat Dilemma

How do leaders deal with the problem of domestic and foreign threats? In a recent review, Risa Brooks notes that the literature on authoritarian regimes has yet to satisfactorily address how autocratic regimes balance between the competing imperatives of elite challenges, mass uprisings, *and* foreign threats (Brooks 2019, 390).[4] In this article, I develop a new framework that examines how the leaders of one-party authoritarian regimes guard against elite, mass, and foreign threats.

First, I argue that to guard against *elite threats*, leaders prioritize *loyalty* in the senior-officer corps. I define elite threat as a publicly visible leadership split or leadership challenge. In the case of an institutionalized one-party regime like China, the primary elite threat comes from other elites in the ruling party, especially elites who have the backing of key military officers and other members of the ruling party "selectorate" (De Mesquita et al. 2005; Shirk 1993). In the face of an elite threat, leaders adopt two strategies to ensure military loyalty and lessen the chance that they could be replaced or purged by another leader. First, and most important, they promote officers they believe to be loyal to them based on prior career ties. Second, they can promote officers with connections to other leaders, such as their predecessor in office, in order to co-opt these officers and ease their incentives to defect, much as leaders use bodies like parliaments to co-opt potential rivals (Blaydes 2010; Truex 2016).

The key marker of loyalty in a context like China is career ties between leaders and officers. In an authoritarian regime, ties between civilian and military leaders can be reinforced by an exchange of concrete benefits. For example, a civilian leader can aid an officer by providing their military unit with additional resources, by paying them off personally, and (if the civilian has ascended to the top of the political hierarchy) by promoting them; in exchange for present or future benefits, the military officer can provide political support for the civilian's political ascendancy. These ties can form the basis of factions, defined as "a personal network of reciprocity [and trust] that seeks to preserve and expand the power of the patron" (Shih 2008, 50).[5]

Second, I argue that to guard against *mass threats*, leaders will prize *loyalty* in the senior-officer corps, particularly in an institutionalized regimes. When regimes have removed the threat of armed mass opposition, only a minimum of officer professionalism is required to suppress protesters. A core threat to the regime during this type of uprising is that disloyal officers will chose not to crack down on protesters. Moreover, in these regimes, mass threats—defined as a significant mass mobilization that calls for major political reform—are in practice often linked to an elite split. This heightens the importance of officer loyalty.

Third, I argue that to guard against *foreign threats*, leaders will prioritize officer *professionalism*. I define a period of foreign threat as one which there is the threat of a military confrontation with a foreign power that could plausibly threaten a country's territorial integrity. Key markers of professionalism include education, training, combat experience, and performance in military exercises, which indicate expertise and corporate identity.[6] Defeating a capable adversary on the battlefield is more likely with a professionalized officer corps.

The theory leads to three hypotheses about how leaders prioritize loyalty and professionalism.

> *H1*: Leaders will generally attempt to promote both loyal *and* professional military officers.

That is, in the aggregate leaders will attempt to promote officers who have markers of loyalty, like career ties to a top leader, and who have markers of professionalism, such as training, education, and combat experience.

However, shifting domestic and foreign threats lead leaders to strategically shift whether they emphasize loyalty or professionalism in the military.

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[4]Brooks also notes a fourth potential imperative for autocratic civil-military relations: "to retain the authority to make decisions but also to ensure that the military does not compromise their preferred policy and resource-allocation outcomes" (2019, 390). This is beyond the scope of this framework.

[5]See also Nathan (1973, 37).

[6]Huntington (1957, 8) defines professionalism as an ethos of "expertise, responsibility, and corporateness."

H2: In periods of greater threat from elite splits or mass unrest, leaders will place greater emphasis on markers of loyalty.

In other words, during these periods, promoted officers will be more likely to belong to the leader's career networks when compared to promoted officers in other periods.

H3: In periods of significant foreign threat, leaders will place more emphasis on professionalism relative to other periods.

That is, they will promote more officers who have markers of professionalism such as combat experience relative to officers in other periods.

When it comes to periods of heightened domestic *and* foreign threat, the theory is agnostic; it hinges on whether leaders assess foreign or domestic threats as more central to their political survival and the survival of the regime. China during the period studied here did not face a clear-cut period of sustained domestic and external threat. One possibility is that increased domestic threats may make foreign threats more likely: as Jost (2021) notes, in periods of intraparty struggle party leaders may be especially prone to miscalculate, because they create fragmented foreign-policy bureaucracies designed to help them secure power.

This framework challenges the conventional wisdom of the guardianship dilemma in authoritarian regimes, while building on classic work in the civil–military relations literature, and bringing it into conversation with the literature on authoritarian regimes. For example, Stepan (1973) argues that in Brazil in the 1960s and 1970s, a shift from focusing on external to internal security led to increasing politicization of the Brazilian military. Brooks (2006) shows how decreasing internal political conflict in Egypt led to an improvement in battlefield performance. I build on Brooks and Stepan, showing an analogous dynamic at work even in a very different type of authoritarian regime, where an emphasis on rewarding officer loyalty to individual leaders shifts in response to the salience of foreign and domestic threats.

My theory also contributes to more recent debates in the civil–military relations literature. The framework builds on important work by Talmadge (2015), who argues that coup-proofing tactics undermine the battlefield performance of the armies of authoritarian regimes. However, my theory focuses on a different outcome, the composition of the military officer corps, rather than battlefield performance. Finally, Reiter (2020) argues that some leaders are able to avoid a foreign–domestic trade-off by employing coup-proofing strategies that do not compromise officer quality. Consistent with this argument, I show how CCP leaders generally do attempt to promote both loyal and professional PLA officers. At the same time, I show how this strategy becomes difficult to maintain during periods of acute domestic or foreign threat.

Scope Conditions

Two key scope conditions for the theoretical argument to hold are (1) significant ties between the military and the ruling party bureaucracies and (2) the elimination of armed domestic threat. Both conditions are most likely to be met in one-party revolutionary regimes such as China.

First, if the military and ruling-party bureaucracies are not closely tied together, the military may become more of an independent threat to the regime. In revolutionary regimes like China, the military may be called on "to settle inner-party conflicts by force of arms" (Perlmutter and LeoGrande 1982, 787), but the military is unlikely to act to replace the party. A lack of party-military ties increases the risk of a military-led coup to replace the party, in part because it makes it more difficult for civilians to monitor the political loyalty of officers (Odom 1978, 37). In these cases, reducing the strength or competence of the military may be essential for reducing coup risk, as assumed by the guardianship literature. Second, if the regime faces a significant armed rebellion, it calls into question the assumption that officer professionalism is less important than loyalty for meeting mass threats. Where armed domestic threats do exist, leaders require a cohesive and capable military (Staniland 2014).

The scope conditions are most likely to be met in regimes that come to power in a revolution or rebellion. Prior work shows that "rebel regimes" (Meng and Paine 2022) and "revolutionary regimes" (Lachapelle et al. 2020) like China tend to create armies tightly controlled by the ruling party. These regimes also often destroy alternative coercive forces, reducing the possibility of armed rebellion. The set of rebel and revolutionary regimes includes dozens of cases over the last 50 years—including prominent long-lived autocratic regimes including Vietnam, Russia, Cuba, Mozambique, Uganda, and Angola—making it an important category to understand.

Loyalty and Competence in the People's Liberation Army

This article focuses on the case of China and the People's Liberation Army (PLA).[7] Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the PLA has

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[7]See (Fravel 2014; 2019) for overviews of the PLA and its role in security policy.

FIGURE 1 The Structure of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)
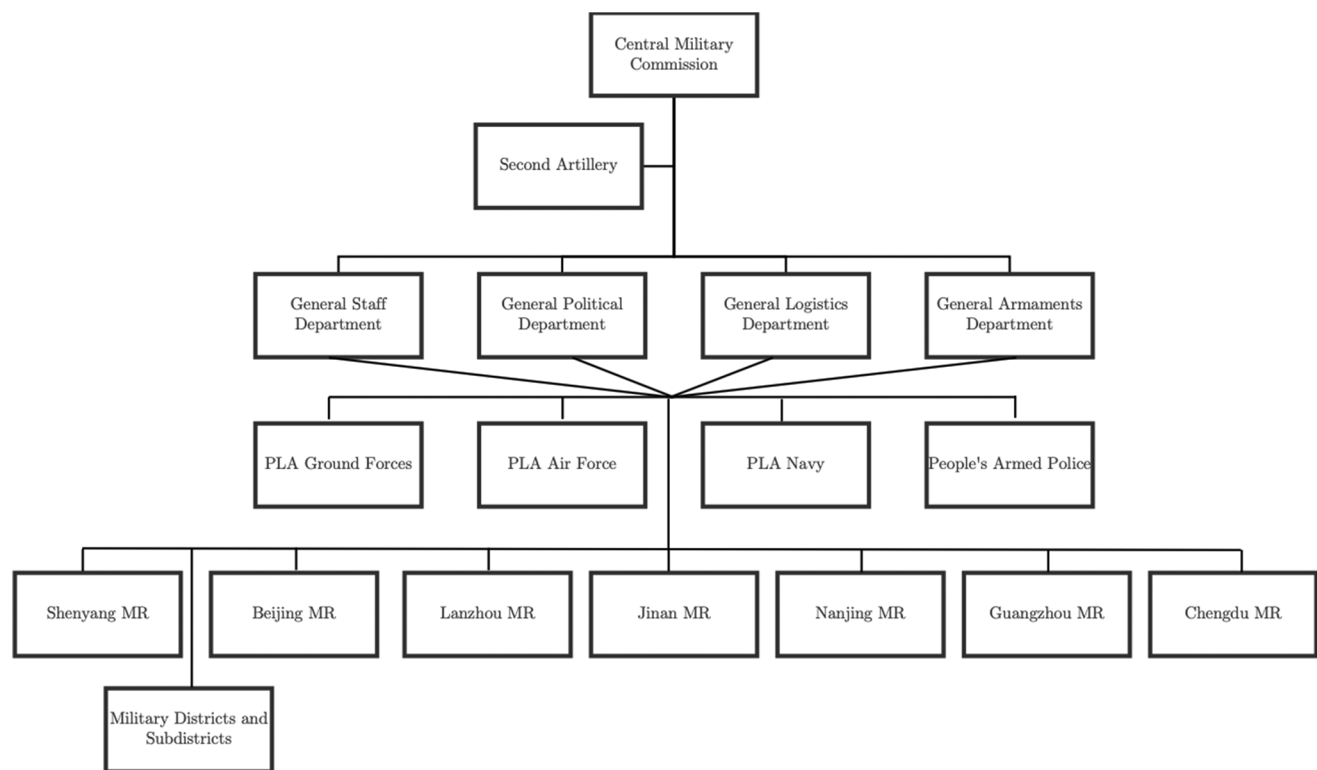
Notes: Simplified visualization of the PLA's command structure prior to the 2016 reorganization, adapted from Shambaugh (2002, 111). Each military region and branch has a commissar, commander, deputy commissar, and deputy commander. Each of the general departments has a director, deputy director, and assistant director. The organization and number of military regions has shifted over time.

played a central role in elite power struggles. During the Cultural Revolution, the PLA played a key role in elite decision-making and elite purges (Teiwes and Sun 1996) and quelled local rebellions and administered much of the country (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2009; Walder 2019). After the death of Mao, Deng Xiaoping's power base in the PLA helped him to oust Mao's designated successor, Hua Guofeng (Torigian 2022; Vogel 2011). Despite the importance of the PLA in Chinese politics, and its rising global profile, there have been few quantitative studies of its organization and officer corps or its role in domestic politics.

The PLA is a *party* army, not a national army, a distinction that is not simply rhetorical. It is the Central Military Commission (CMC) of the CCP—helmed by a CMC Chairman—that controls the military. It is the CMC, with approval of the CMC Chairman, that makes senior officer appointments and controls the deployment of troops. It is the CMC Chairman, not necessarily the head of the party or state, who has consistently been the PRC's most powerful leader.

Figure 1 provides a simplified overview of the PLA prior to a major reorganization in 2016. (Since most of

the data in this article comes from the period before 2016, and the organizational changes do not materially change the analysis, I focus on period.) Of special interest are the military regions, districts, and subdistricts, which station forces across China. Each military region groups together a number of provinces: for example, the Beijing Military Region includes not only the city of Beijing but Hebei, Shanxi, Inner Mongolia, and Tianjin. Under this system, military leaders serve alongside party leaders on local military and party committees, which provides leaders with important opportunities to get to know their military counterparts.

A system of political commissars ensures the loyalty of PLA officers to the CCP. Political commissars serve alongside commanders; they monitor their political loyalty and conduct political training and education. The system of commissars goes from the military regions all the way down to the unit level.[8]

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[8]For an overview of this system, see Ji (2015). See also Saunders and Wuthnow (2019) and Ji (2020) for analyses of party control over the military in the Xi Era.

Loyalty: Career Ties between Leaders and the PLA

A key marker of loyalty in the PLA are career ties between military and civilian leaders.[9] A large body of work in political science examines factions and career networks within China's civilian political system (e.g., Chen and Kung 2019; Jiang 2018; Landry 2008; Nathan 1973; Shih 2004, 2008). One common theme is that in the civilian realm, factional ties can be built through shared workplace experiences, such as serving together in the same province, city, or government bureaucracy.

Analogous to civilian factions, civil–military ties are built through shared career experiences, which provide an opportunity for civilian leaders to provide benefits with PLA leaders and build trust. Leaders such as Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, who served in leading roles in the military during the Chinese Civil War, built ties to soldiers by serving alongside them on the battlefield. For the postrevolutionary leadership generations, the main way that career ties are formed is through serving together on regional party and government committees, such as military district party committees, provincial national defense mobilization committees, and provincial party standing committees. Serving on these committees create the opportunity for the exchange of concrete benefits that are at the foundation of patron-client ties.

Consider the example of Xi Jinping, who built a patronage network within the PLA in the years before his elevation to national leadership. Early in his career, as the Party Secretary of the city of Fuzhou, Xi already prioritized cultivating the military as a potential ally by supplying local garrisons with benefits: he won a national award for his "preferential" treatment of troops and veterans in the city of Fuzhou.[10] Later, as the governor of Fujian Province from 1999 to 2002, Xi had important opportunities to cultivate ties with senior officers in military district and region. While he was governor, Xi simultaneously served as the Director of the Fujian Province National Defense Mobilization Committee and as a Vice Director of the Nanjing Military Region National Defense Mobilization Committee. In these two roles, Xi regularly met with the military leadership of the Fujian Military District leadership and also with the higher-ranking Nanjing Military Region leadership.[11] Xi took visible steps—for which he could take personal credit—for policies that supported PLA soldiers. Most prominently, in 2000, a year when the Fujian government pledged to trim its workforce by 50%, Xi pledged in a public meeting with leaders of the Nanjing Military Region that the province's national defense forces would be spared the ax.[12] One PLA officer that Xi would have come into direct contact with during the regular defense-mobilization meetings was the military region deputy chief of staff, Wang Jiaocheng. The additional personnel, benefits, and equipment Xi provided to the PLA would have helped Wang and others in the chief of staff office perform well in their jobs by protecting loyal subordinates, which may have helped to build a bond of trust between Xi and Wang. As CMC Chairman, Xi elevated Wang to be the commander of the Shenyang Military Region and promoted him to a full member of the party Central Committee.

During his term as the party secretary of Zhejiang Province from 2002 to 2007, Xi continued to cultivate ties to PLA leaders in the military region and district. As a provincial party secretary, Xi concurrently served as the first party secretary of the Zhejiang Province Military District.[13] In this role, Xi frequently met with military leaders, attending on average just short of one workshop on military affairs each month.[14] Again, Xi again is said to have used his civilian position to provide benefits to the PLA that would have earned him goodwill among regional PLA leaders: he allocated benefits to veterans, and he used provincial funds to reconstruct coastal army barracks and to build a new PLA command center.[15] At the same time, this role brought Xi in regular contact with

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[9]In China, it may be more accurate to refer to "party-military" relations rather than "civil-military" relations. However, one potential point of confusion is that since top PLA leaders are also party members and belong to top party bodies like the Central Committee, the term "party leaders" can also include military officers. To avoid this problem, I occasionally use the term "civilian" to refer to party leaders whose primary post is not in the military.

[10]See PLA Daily Staff, "1996 Ten Newsmakers in Building the National Reserve Force" ('96国防后备力量建设十位新闻人物), *PLA Daily*, August 31, 1996. See also Cheng Rongfu and Zheng Songqun, "[Fuzhou Secretary Xi Jinping's] Deep Affections [for PLA Troops]" (厚爱), *PLA Daily*, March 31, 1991.

[11]In recent years, annual military region Defense Mobilization Committee meetings are generally attended by the provincial governors within the military region, the top leadership of the military region (including the commissars, commanders, chiefs of staff, and their deputies), and by the province party secretary of the host province.

[12]Qiu Xueping, "National Defense Mobilization Strength Will Not Be Reduced" (机构缩减国防动员力量不减), *PLA Daily*, June 4, 2000.

[13]Since he was province governor for his first year in Zhejiang, he briefly served as director of the provincial defense-mobilization committee.

[14]Tian Yujue, Xue Weijiang, and Sang Xi, "Xi Jinping in Zhejiang, Part 6: Secretary Xi's Great Contributions to Advancing the Construction of Zhejiang's National Defense and Military," (习近平在浙江(六):习书记为推进浙江国防军事建设的理论与实践创新作出巨大贡献), *Study Times* (学习时报), March 10, 2021.

[15]See Tian, Xue, and Sang 2021 referenced in prior note.

the leadership of the Nanjing Military Region by leading delegations to Nanjing and by hosting the military region leadership in Zhejiang.[16] The leadership of the Military Region in that term included two major generals who were rising stars: Cai Yingting, the deputy of the chief of staff office, and Wu Changde, the deputy director of the political department.[17] Cai and Qu would be among the small coterie of six officers that Xi promoted to the rank of full general near the start of his term as chair of the CMC.

Xi's predecessors in office all had similar opportunities to build ties to the military earlier in their careers. Hu Jintao served as the first party secretary of the Guizhou Military District from 1985 to 1988 and as the first party secretary of the Tibet Military District from 1988 to 1992. Likewise, Jiang Zemin served as the first party secretary of the Shanghai garrison from 1985 to 1989. Deng Xiaoping was the political commissar of the Second Field Army during the Chinese Civil War and was also the Chief of Staff of the PLA from 1975 to 1976 and from 1977 to 1980. Each of these experiences allowed leaders to build career ties to senior military leaders.

Professionalism: Officer Training and Combat Experience

How do leaders determine officer competence? As Talmadge notes: "The ticket to being a senior officer [in the most effective armies] is competence, demonstrated by wartime performance or by performance in training" (2015, 13). Chinese leaders have taken a similar view, with Deng Xiaoping noting that when cadres could not be promoted based on "the test of the battlefield" (战场上考验), they should be promoted based on their "education and training" (教育培训).[18]

In the PLA, a key marker of officer professionalism is wartime experience. The early generations of PLA leaders had served in the fight against Japan during the Second World War and in the Civil War against the Nationalists. Later generations had more limited exposure to wars in Korea, India, and Vietnam. After the 1990s, the pool of officers with combat experience became smaller and was generally limited to officers who had served in Vietnam.

Another marker of professionalism is whether officers have graduated from a university or a specialist military academy. Completing undergraduate and graduate coursework demonstrates a baseline amount of literacy and competence. Historically, the PLA drew heavily from rural and poor households with limited educational backgrounds, which absent further training limited the prospects for professionalization. Beginning with Deng, leaders increasingly prized education in officer promotion.

Internally, PLA leaders and party officials have access to information to assess professionalism and competence that are not available to outside observers. (Indeed, the same is the case with promotion the civilian system.) A notable internal metric that is not available is performance in military training exercises, something which Deng and other leaders have emphasized are an important measure of professionalism. Nevertheless, the available measures of professionalism, which include education and combat experience, correspond to two of the three key measures of professionalism identified by Deng and others.

Data and Measurement

To investigate my theory and its applicability to the important case of the PLA, I draw on a new dataset of the elite officer corps in China. I collect extensive biographical data on nearly all officers who reached the level of deputy military region commander or deputy commissar.[19] The data includes nearly all prior positions that each officer held in the military, party, or state apparatus, ranging from brigade-level officer appointments to membership in the party Central Committee. I also include data on officers' personal details including birthplace, birth year, ethnicity, education, military academy training, princeling status, and combat experience. The data are drawn from open sources including official biographies produced in China, media reports, and online and print encyclopedias. Altogether, I collect data on 1,295 officers and over 12,000 career postings. I focus most of my analysis on the post-Mao Era, and specifically the period from 1978 to 2019, for which I have

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[16]See prior note and also Cheng Guansheng, "Jiang Zemin Celebrates the 40th Anniversary of the Naming of 'Hard' Sixth Company," (江泽民视贺''硬六连'',命名四十周年), *PLA Daily*, January 11, 2004.

[17]Cai had also previously served in Fujian at the same time as Xi.

[18]See Deng Xiaoping, *Collected Military Writings of Deng Xiaoping, Volume 3* (邓小平军事文集【第三卷】), Beijing: Military Science Press and Central Committee Documents Press, 2004, p. 56.

[19]I was able to collect basic biographical information on 99% of officers and detailed career backgrounds for 97% of officers in the post-Mao Era. The officers I am unable to collect extensive background data on are a small number of deputy commanders and commissars. Since the missing data are generally of unpromoted officers who have no discernible career ties to paramount leaders, their exclusion likely biases the estimates of the effect of career ties towards zero and a null finding.

comprehensive data on 779 officers. More information about the database is included in the online supporting information (pp. A3–A7, descriptive statistics appear on Table A1, p. A2).

I create two key measures of my explanatory variables. My key measure of loyalty are *career ties* between officers and a current or past paramount leader—that is, the country's top leader, whether or not that person holds the top position in party and state. I specifically examine connections to Deng, Hu, Jiang, and Xi. To measure this, I draw on the extensive career history I have compiled for each officer. I record an officer as being in a party leader's network if that officer served in the same military region or district while that leader held a post as a PLA First Party Secretary in that region or director of a provincial National Mobilization Committee. These measures are described in more detail in the online supporting information (see p. A4). In the online supporting information, also consider a stricter measure of factional connections: whether an officer was in the same province-level military district. The estimates from this alternative measure provide results that are generally larger, making the results reported here more conservative (Tables A5–A7, pp. A10–A12, in the online supporting information). My key measure of professionalism include a binary measure of *combat experience*, which takes a value of 1 if an officer has combat experience in the post-1949 period, including conflicts and border clashes with Korea, Vietnam, the Soviet Union, and India.[20]

Finally, I examine several key outcome measures. First, I create a dichotomous variable for promotion to a *general-level position*. The position is coded as 1 if an officer is promoted to be military region commander or commissar (正大军区职) or head of a general department. The primary rank for these positions is three-star general. Today, general officers in China have three ranks: *shaojiang*, or a one-star major general; *zhongjiang*, or a two-star lieutenant general; and *shangjiang*, or a three-star general. However, this system of promotion was inactive until 1988, and regular promotions were not made until 1993, so for the period studied here it is more consistent to use promotion to Military Region commander or commissar and above. (In the Table A7, p. A12, I show that the results remain the same if the outcome is promotion to three-star general.) Second, I code whether an officer is named a full member of the CCP Central Military Commission, the top leadership body of the PLA. This outcome is of particular interest because it is the leadership group of the PLA, in recent years

consisting of six military leaders and the party's civilian leader. In the online supporting information, I show how the results are robust to considering alternative outcome measures, such as membership in the party Central Committee and party Politburo (Table A3–A5, pp. A3–A4).

The Loyalty-Competence Balance in PLA Promotion

In the Section entitled **Framework: The Foreign–Domestic Threat Dilemma,** I hypothesized that leaders would promote officers based on a mix of factionalism combat experience and education. To examine the predictors of promotion, I use ordinary least squares (OLS) regression on the cross-sectional dataset of officers. I estimate regressions of the form:

$$y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Leader Tie}_i + \beta_2 \text{Combat Experience}_i + \gamma + \varepsilon_i. \tag{1}$$

For each indvidual *i* who served as a deputy Military Region commander and above in the post-Mao Era, I estimate whether they were promoted to a full general-level position or were promoted to the CCP Central Military Commission (CMC). I focus on the correlation between these outcomes and connections to the current paramount leader (where the coefficient of interest is β_1) and combat experience (where the coefficient of interest is β_2). In some specifications, I include pretreatment control variables (γ) to condition the results on potential confounders.

Table 1 presents cross-sectional regressions predicting promotion to general and to the Central Military Commission. The simple and most transparent test is the bivariate correlation, presented in columns 1 and 4. A career connection to a top leader nearly doubles the predicted likelihood of promotion to general and triples the likelihood of promotion to the elite CMC. Similarly, bivariate regressions in columns 2 and 4 show that combat experience is associated with a doubling of the chance of promotion to general and tripling of the likelihood of entering the CMC. Models that include control variables, presented in Columns 3 and 6, present estimates that are somewhat smaller in magnitude but still substantively large and statistically significant.

In the online supporting information, I present results using alternative outcomes, explanatory variables, and subsamples. For example, I examine promotion to the CCP Central Committee which plays an important role in deciding the composition of the party's top

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[20]This measure includes officers who fought in border clashes with Vietnam after the main conflict ended in 1979.

TABLE 1 Promotion, Career Ties to Paramount Leaders, and Combat Experience

	Promoted to General			Promoted to Central Military Commission		
Career tie to paramount leader	0.200**		0.133**	0.176**		0.128**
	(0.048)		(0.047)	(0.039)		(0.036)
Combat experience, post-1949		0.348**	0.248**		0.153**	0.077*
		(0.052)	(0.057)		(0.042)	(0.039)
College-level education			0.129**			0.049**
			(0.030)			(0.016)
Long-march participant			0.095			0.248**
			(0.095)			(0.075)
Political commissar experience			0.106**			−0.018
			(0.032)			(0.018)
Ethnic minority			0.145			0.070
			(0.124)			(0.070)
Princeling			0.010			−0.005
			(0.080)			(0.043)
Rural birth			0.071†			0.076**
			(0.042)			(0.027)
Constant	0.218**	0.217**	0.325†	0.045**	0.055**	0.250
	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.173)	(0.008)	(0.009)	(0.157)
Birth cohort fixed effects			✓			✓
Observations	764	779	755	764	779	755
R^2	0.029	0.071	0.160	0.061	0.039	0.231
Adjusted R^2	0.027	0.069	0.144	0.060	0.037	0.216

Notes: PLA officers connected to the top civilian leader or with combat experience are more likely to be promoted. Ordinary-least squares regression on cross-sectional dataset of PLA officers in the post-1978 period. The outcomes are a binary indicator for promotion to a general-grade position (military region commander or commissar and above) and promotion to the the Central Military Commission (CMC). Robust standard errors are in parentheses. $^†p < .1$, $^*p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$.

leadership (De Mesquita et al. 2005; Shirk 1993) and promotion to the elite 25-person Politburo (Tables A3–A4, pp. A8–A9). I also present alternate explanatory variables (Tables A5–A7, pp. A10–A12), logistic regression (Tables A8–A10, pp. A13–A15), subsamples (Table A11, p. A16), and results using two-way fixed effects (Table A12, p. A17). The results remain robust to these additional tests and specifications.

Some leaders have fared better than others when it comes to packing the PLA with officers in their career network. Figure 2 plots the correlation between a connection to a leader and being promoted to general-level positions or the CMC during that leader's tenure in office. Figure 2(a) plots the correlation between career connections to a leader and promotion to general-level positions. Connections to Deng and Xi, arguably the two most powerful post-Mao leaders, are correlated with promotion to general at statistically significant levels ($p < .01$). For promotion to the CMC, connections to Deng and Xi are correlated with promotion at statistically significant levels ($p < .01$), while the estimated effect of connections to Jiang and Hu is close to zero.[21]

The results in Figure 2 provide suggestive evidence for how Xi Jinping has consolidated power. Neither Jiang

[21]For regression tables, see A18–A20 and pp. A24–A26 in the online supporting information.

FIGURE 2 Career Ties to Individual Leaders and Promotion Probabilities

(a) Promotion to General

(b) Promotion to Central Military Commission
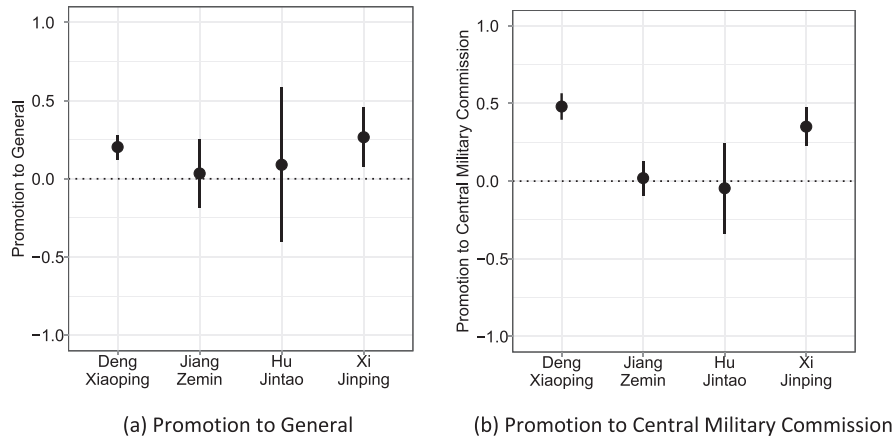
Notes: Estimated marginal effect of a tie to each leader on likelihood of promotion to general-level position (military region commander or commissar and above) or to the Central Military Commission. Estimates are calculated as a simple difference in means, comparing generals with connections to those without, subset to the set of generals eligible for promotion under each leader.

Zemin or Hu Jintao promoted significant numbers of generals connected to them to key command positions. Hu Jintao's inability to promote his clients into key military positions can be explained partly by Jiang's decision to hold onto the CMC Chairmanship for nearly two years after he retired as party secretary. On the other hand, Xi has not been constrained by Hu or Jiang in nearly the same way and has had significant success in consolidating control over the PLA. Xi's control of the party's guns has arguably helped him to consolidate civilian control.

In Periods of Domestic Threat, Loyalty Increases in Importance

Does the importance of loyalty increase in periods of domestic threat? Drawing on the definitions of elite and mass threats in the Section entitled **Framework: The Foreign–Domestic Threat Dilemma**, I identify two periods of significant domestic threat in the post-Mao Era. During these two periods, CCP leaders packed the PLA leadership with large numbers of generals with factional ties to the sitting leader.

The first period of significant domestic threat occurred in the wake of the 1989 protests. In 1989, student-led protests erupted across the country, sparked by concerns over inflation, corruption, and the death of a reformist party leader. In response to the protests,

Deng declared martial law, while the sitting party secretary, Zhao Ziyang, expressed some sympathy for the protesters—exposing a leadership split. Deng and party conservatives purged Zhao and used the PLA to repress the protests. Deng then appointed Jiang Zemin the new leader of the party, military, and state. However, as Fewsmith notes, the party was "dominated by people not well disposed to Jiang's leadership" (2021, 68), and the years following 1989 saw a protracted struggle over the future leadership and policy direction of the party, which lasted at least through the 14th Party Congress in 1992 (Fewsmith 2021; Vogel 2011).

The second period of significant domestic threat occurred in the run-up to the 18th Party Congress and in its immediate aftermath. In this period, Politburo member Bo Xilai waged an "open campaign" (Shirk 2018, 33) for political power by cultivating a popular following and attaching himself to powerful patrons, including the head of China's security forces, Zhou Yongkang. In 2012, Bo fell from power in a spectacular fashion, after his wife murdered a businessman. The exposure of the murder and the subsequent investigation revealed that Bo not only attempted to cover up a homicide, he also violated party norms in a number of other ways, including by spying on party secretary Hu Jintao and other officials.[22] Xi would later declare that Bo and his patron, Zhou Yongkang, participated in a "political conspiracy"

[22] See Jonathan Ansfield, and Ian Johnson, "Ousted Chinese Leader Is Said to Have Spied on Other Top Officials," *New York Times*, April 25, 2012.

TABLE 2 Promotion during Periods of Domestic Threat

	Promoted to General (Mean: 0.295)			
Career tie to current CMC Chairman	0.049	0.053	0.008	−0.006
	(0.034)	(0.034)	(0.036)	(0.048)
Period of domestic threat	0.995**	−0.087	−0.095	0.141**
	(0.060)	(0.060)	(0.069)	(0.053)
Career tie to Chairman × domestic threat	0.129**	0.128**	0.160**	0.170**
	(0.037)	(0.038)	(0.038)	(0.050)
Individual fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Domestic threat × controls		✓	✓	✓
Year FE × birth decade FE			✓	
Year FE × birth year FE				✓
Clusters	720	720	720	720
Observations	4,786	4,743	4,743	4,743
R^2	0.223	0.228	0.278	0.469
Adjusted R^2	0.075	0.080	0.108	0.199

Notes: PLA officers with a tie to the sitting top leader are especially likely to be promoted during periods of domestic threat, here operationalized as the period after the 1989 protests and after the 2012 Bo Xilai incident. See Table A13, p. A18 and Table A16, p. A21, in the online supporting information for alternate operationalizations. Two-way fixed-effects regression on a panel dataset of PLA officers with yearly observations. Outcome is promotion to general-grade position (military region commander or commissar and above). Robust standard errors are clustered by individual. $^\dagger p < .1$, $^* p < .05$, $^{**} p < .01$.

(政治阴谋活动) to "to destroy and split the party" (破坏分裂党).[23] The Bo affair exposed a lack of party discipline that elites agreed needed to be addressed. Nevertheless, the start of Xi Jinping's tenure in office was marked by uncertainty as Xi lacked allies in key positions—as Fewsmith argues, at the start of his term, Xi "did not have a lot of visible support and a lot of the leadership [was]… closely associated with different former leaders" (2021, 137). During this period of elite threat, Xi began a wide-ranging purge of the party, government, and military that helped him consolidate power.

During these two periods of elite threat, did leaders pack the military with generals with whom they had career ties? To examine the time-varying effect of domestic threats on promotion patterns, I turn to a panel dataset of PLA officers using the same data. I estimate OLS regressions of the form:

$$y_{it} = \alpha Tie_{it} + \gamma \, \text{Threat}_t + \beta \, \text{Tie}_{it} \, \text{X Threat}_t$$
$$+ \lambda_i + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{it}. \qquad (2)$$

For each officer i in the data in year t, I examine whether they have been promoted to a general-level position (i.e., leader a military region or higher) in that year or prior.[24] I include individual officer fixed effects (λ_i) to account for unobserved differences between individuals and year fixed effects (δ_t) to capture common temporal shocks. In some specifications, I also interact the year fixed effects with time-invariant control variables and with fixed effects for officer birth cohorts. The key explanatory variables are whether an individual has a career tie to the sitting CMC chairman in year t, which is a time-varying measure, and whether that year is a period of domestic threat. The coefficient of interest is β_3, which captures whether the estimated effect of being connected to a CMC chairman is larger in years of domestic threat.

I code the four-year period after the 1989 protests and the four-year period after the 2012 Bo Xilai incident as periods of domestic threat. Since the inclusion of individual years in the measure of domestic threat is arbitrary—and defining what counts as a period of domestic threat is conceptually challenging—in the online

[23]See Xi Jinping, "Excerpts from Xi Jinping on Strict Party Discipline and Rules." Available at https://web.archive.org/web/20160205124408/http://www.ccdi.gov.cn/xwtt/201512/t20151231_71852.html/. Last accessed on December 14, 2021.

[24]Since promotion to the CMC or the Central Committee most often happen around party congresses, and promotions to *shangjiang* did not occur regularly until 1993, this is the most appropriate time-varying outcome measure.

TABLE 3 Promotion during Periods of Foreign Threat

	Promoted to General (Mean: 0.295)			
Period of foreign threat	0.621**	0.002	0.099	−0.015
	(0.053)	(0.050)	(0.083)	(0.127)
Combat experience × foreign threat	0.074*	0.103**	0.128**	0.113*
	(0.036)	(0.035)	(0.041)	(0.047)
Individual fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Foreign threat × controls		✓	✓	✓
Year FE × birth decade FE			✓	
Year FE × birth year FE				✓
Clusters	720	720	720	720
Observations	4,786	4,743	4,743	4,743
R^2	0.215	0.234	0.280	0.467
Adjusted R^2	0.066	0.087	0.111	0.196

Notes: Officers with combat experience are especially likely to be promoted during periods of foreign threat, here operationalized as the period of rising tensions with the United States in the early 2000s. See Table A14, p. A19 and Table A17, p. A22, in the online supporting information for alternate operationalizations. Two-way fixed effects regression on a panel dataset of PLA officers with yearly observations. Outcome is promotion to general-grade position (military region commander or commissar and above). Robust standard errors are clustered by individual. $^\dagger p < .1$, $^* p < .05$, $^{**} p < .01$.

supporting information, I consider alternative measurement approaches, such as dropping different years from the measure or including the 1978 transition from Hua Guofeng to Deng as a period of domestic threat (see Tables A13–A16, pp. A18–A21). The results remain statistically significant and substantively unchanged.

Table 2, row 3, shows that leaders are more likely to promote officers with career ties in periods of domestic threat than in other periods. The first column reports an interaction between career ties and periods of domestic threat with only individual and year fixed effects and shows an increase in likelihood of promotion for individuals tied to the leader during periods of domestic threat of 0.13 from a baseline mean of 0.295, a substantively meaningful increase. Next, I add control variables (the same used in the cross-sectional analysis) interacted with the domestic-threat variable to account for other time-invariant variables that could confound the relationship. The results remain consistent. To account for potential time-varying age cohort effects, I first interact the year fixed effects with the officer birth decade fixed effect in column 3; next, in column 4, I interact fixed effects with officer birth year.[25] The results, presented in row 3, all remain substantively large and statistically significant. I show in the online supporting information that officers

with career ties to the sitting CMC leader and higher education are less likely to be promoted than connected officers with no such education, suggesting a trade-off between connections and human capital (see Table A21, p. A27).

In Periods of Foreign Threat, Professionalism Increases in Importance

Does the importance of professionalism increase in periods of foreign threat? In the Section entitled **Framework: The Foreign–Domestic Threat Dilemma**, I argued that foreign threats occur during periods of escalating military tension with an adversary that could plausibly threaten a country's territorial integrity: in China's case, a conflict with a major power.

The key period of foreign threat in the post-Mao era occurred in the late 1990s, when tensions with the United States increased markedly. The key spark for an increase in tensions was the accidental 1999 bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, which led to a shift in perceptions of the threat posed by the United States. Behind closed doors, party leader Jiang Zemin is reported to have remarked in response to the bombing that "U.S. imperialism will not die" and to have ordered

[25]This final measure requires that some fixed effects be dropped if there are not enough officers in a given birth-year cohort.

an increase in the PLA budget (Fewsmith 2001, 212, 214). Fravel argues that the U.S. intervention in Kosovo and the Belgrade bombing led to a shift in perceptions in the Chinese leadership, from an assessment that "'peace and development' represented the 'trend of the times'" to the assessment that "hegemonism" was on the rise and China needed "to prepare to resist a 'strong adversary'" (2019, 222–23).[26] Gries shows how the bombing led to a popular view that the United States "actively seeks to prevent China from prospering and gaining status in the world system" (2001, 42).

Using the same fixed-effects framework, in Table 3 I present results that show that officers with combat experience were more likely to be promoted during periods of foreign threat than during other periods. I code the three-year period following the Belgrade bombing as one of increased foreign threat. The coefficient of interest is the interaction between combat experience and foreign threat, the second row of the table. The results show that the combat experience career bonus is greater in periods of foreign threat than in other periods: the combat experience bonus increases by 7–13 percentage points. As with the prior analysis, I first present specifications with just time and individual fixed effects, then gradually add controls. In the case of combat experience, one might be particularly concerned about age-cohort effects, since certain cohorts were more likely to gain combat experience, but columns 3 and 4 show that even when estimating within age cohorts, the estimate remains stable and significant. In the online supporting information, I present alternate measures and specifications (Table A14–A17, pp. A19–A22).[27]

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that the leaders of autocracies face a dilemma. They would like a loyal military that will stick by their side in an elite split or mass movement. But a loyal military can come at the expense of military professionalism, which can leave a regime vulnerable to foreign threats. The degree which autocrats prize personal loyalty or professionalism depends on the degree to which they face pressing domestic or foreign threats to political stability.

Drawing on evidence from China, I showed that leaders promote generals with factional connections to a top leader and who show signs of professionalism. This builds on the literature on party factions by demonstrating the importance of factions for military promotion (e.g., Shih 2021). It also builds on a growing literature on the importance of power sharing with the military for autocratic stability (e.g., Blaydes 2018; Meng 2020). The importance of factional connections for military promotion in China is notable and to some degree surprising given the PLA's increased emphasis on professionalism. The study is among the first to quantitatively examine the role of the PLA in domestic politics.[28]

The findings have important implications for our understanding of authoritarian rule and the military across regimes. The conventional wisdom argues that autocrats face a trade-off between protecting against coups or revolts. This article is among a growing but still nascent body of work that calls for increased attention in the authoritarian politics literature to a foreign–domestic threat trade-off (Brooks 2019; McMahon and Slantchev 2015; Paine 2021).

The article leaves open many important avenues for future research, especially on the PLA, an institution of growing international importance. For example, do connections to military leaders help civilian elites get promoted? What is the role of factions within the PLA itself? Finally, under what circumstances do leaders strategically inflame foreign tensions in order to gain an advantage in domestic politics?

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[26]However, Fravel notes that leaders expected the shift away from peaceful development to be gradual.

[27]The results generally remain statistically significant, with the notable exception that dropping the years immediately following the Belgrade bombing, 2000 and 2001, leads to effects of similar magnitude that are not statistically significant. Substantively, this is consistent with the notion that the immediate period after the incident were key periods of foreign threat.

[28]There is much more work be done on the role of the police and other organs of repression in domestic politics. See among others Wang (2014), Greitens (2017), Mattingly (2020), and Scoggins (2021).

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Appendix A: Descriptive Statistics
Appendix B: Dataset and Coding Rules
Appendix C: Cross-Sectional Analysis: Robustness Tests
Appendix D: Panel Analysis: Robustness Tests
Appendix E: Promotion Patterns by Paramount Leader
Appendix D: Competence-Loyalty Trade-off