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

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Abstract

The leaders of one-party states face a dilemma between building a loyal military to guard against domestic threats and a competent military that can guard against foreign threats. In this paper, I argue that leaders respond to increasing domestic threats by increasing an emphasis on officer loyalty. I draw on a new dataset, the first of its kind, of over 10,000 appointments to the People's Liberation Army of China. The data shows that factional ties to leaders are key for promotion but that leaders generally attempt to balance loyalty with competency. Yet in periods of high domestic threat, civilian leaders promote unusually large numbers of officers with factional ties to themselves. Doing so erodes the competence of the officer corps, potentially leaving the regime more vulnerable to foreign threats. The article challenges the conventional wisdom, showing how autocrats face a trade-off between guarding against internal and external threats.

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> 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 must 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. Since 1945, 35 percent of authoritarian regimes have collapsed in a coup d'etat and 25 percent in a mass uprising. Guarding against either a coup or a revolution requires the loyalty of the military and its elite officers (Svolik, 2012; Geddes et al., 2018).[1] At the same time, leaders require a *competent* military that can defend the nation from foreign threats. Losing a war can also have disastrous political consequences for leaders, making it significantly more likely they will be forced from office (De Mesquita and Siverson, 1995). Unfortunately for leaders, these two imperatives can conflict with each other. Prizing competence over loyalty in the military can make a leader vulnerable to domestic threats such as elite coups; yet prizing loyalty over competence can make a regime more vulnerable to foreign adversaries.

In this article, I provide a theory for how authoritarian leaders address this foreign-domestic threat dilemma when creating their military's elite officer corps. I make two core arguments. First, to balance between loyalty and competence concerns, autocrats

[1] See Geddes et al. (2018, p. 179) for collapse rate data. On the centrality of the military in coups, see data from De Bruin (2019) who shows that 9 in 10 successful coup attempts since 1949 were led by the military. On the centrality of the military in mass uprisings, see among others Barany (2016).

select a mix of senior officers. Ideally, of course, a leader would like to promote officers who are both loyal and competent, but in practice the officer corps, like any pool of labor, is heterogeneous. So authoritarian leaders promote some generals who belong to their factional networks, and are likely to be loyal to the leader, but are on average less-than-competent, and others who have demonstrated competence in their training, but may be less-than-loyal. Second, leaders respond to shifting domestic threats by changing the degree to which they emphasize loyalty in staffing the military. When domestic threats grow in importance, leaders will prize personal loyalty when building the military. This can potentially come at the expense of officer competence.[2]

To develop this theory and supply evidence for its applicability, I draw on a new dataset of over 1,200 officers and over 10,000 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 — provides a rare glimpse inside a secretive organization that has played a pivotal role in Chinese politics, but which has received relatively little scholarly attention in the literature on comparative politics.[3] This new data allows me to trace in fine-grained detail career connections between individual officers and civilian leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping. These factional connections in the military are a key source of loyalty, similar to civilian factions studied extensively by others (e.g. Shih, Adolph and Liu, 2012; Shih, 2004, 2008).

The evidence shows that shifting external and internal threats have shaped how suc-

[2] As I discuss below, this theory is related to but distinct from seminal work by Stepan (1973) on how a focus on external treats leads to an apolitical military and on internal threats leads to a more political military.

[3] As Susan Shirk notes, the PLA has been "crucial for a victory in party power struggles in a way that the support of civilian party and government officials [has] not" (Shirk, 1993, p. 76). There is a more extensive literature on the PLA in international relations, see Fravel (2019) for a recent overview.

cessive CCP leaders approach the competence-loyalty trade-off in the military. The core problem CCP leaders face is that the officers in their factional networks are not always the most competent: senior-rank PLA generals with career ties to CCP leaders are about 40 percent less likely to have gone to college than their peers. Yet with a prior career tie to a top CCP leader are also more than 2.5 times more likely to be promoted to full general.

Consistent with the theory, leaders prize a mix of loyal and competent officers. That is, leaders promote a significant share of officers who have factional connections to themselves and at the same time promote officers who show signs of competence through their training and combat experience. This mix helps them deal with internal threats while navigating growing external threats and military ambitions in the South China Sea, East China Sea, and Taiwan Strait (Fravel, 2019, 2020).

However, increasing domestic threats — especially the threat of an elite split or mass unrest — leads to periods where civilian leaders pack the officer corps with loyalists to protect themselves from political rivals or mass unrest. Two periods of domestic threat in most-Mao China include the 1989 protest movement and elite split as well as the Bo Xilai incident of 2012. Around these two periods of heightened domestic threat, the data shows that CCP civilian leaders attempted to stack the leadership of the PLA with loyalists. Notably, this came at the expense of competence: during periods of heightened domestic threat, the trend of increasing education and training in the officer corps slowed and even reversed.

A key contribution of the article is to challenge the conventional wisdom in the authoritarian politics literature on how autocrats build coercive institutions. The current literature in authoritarian politics generally highlights a trade-off between guarding against two

types of domestic threats: coups and mass revolts. This framework supposes that leaders have a choice between building a strong coercive apparatus that can protect elites from mass threats — but which has the resources to launch a coup — or a weak coercive apparatus that may be less able to fend off popular unrest, but that poses less of a coup threat (Besley and Robinson, 2010; Roessler, 2011; Svolik, 2012, 2013; Greitens, 2016). Svolik (2012, 2013) refers to this problem as the "moral hazard in authoritarian repression."

This paper is among a growing number that points instead to the importance of a foreign-domestic threat dilemma. The existing perspective faces two challenges. First, theoretically even a strong military may defect during mass unrest, meaning that investment in military strength is separable from military loyalty (Paine, 2021*a*,*b*). Second, when authoritarian regimes focus on coup prevention in their militaries, empirical research shows it leads to poor battlefield performance, making them more vulnerable to external threats (Talmadge, 2015). This fact suggests a tension between external threats and the threat of coups that others have noted but which remains less theorized in the recent literature on autocracies McMahon and Slantchev (2015). Building on these insights, I argue that the degree to which leaders emphasize loyalty at the expense of competence in their officer corps depends on the degree to which leaders face significant domestic threats to their rule, which can shift over time.

1 Authoritarian Survival Depends on the Military

The military is central to theories of authoritarian resilience, breakdown, and change. The leaders of non-democratic governments face threats from other elites, from the masses, and from abroad, and to meet each threat, control over the military — and especially the

elite officer corps — is crucial.

Historically, the greatest risk to authoritarian leaders is a military-backed coup. Between 1946 and 2010, coups led to 35 percent of autocratic regime breakdowns (Geddes et al., 2018, p. 179). To individual leaders, the threat of coups is even greater: 68 percent of non-democratic exits from office have been the result of a coup (Svolik, 2012, p. 5). Successful coups almost always require military support. Some 90 percent of successful coup attempts since 1949 were led by or supported by the military, most often by senior army officers (De Bruin, 2019). Notably, the secret police and other non-military security services rarely launch a successful putsch. Ensuring the loyalty of the senior officer corps is for this reason essential for a leader's — and the regime's — political survival.

In addition, leaders face threats from the masses, where again the military is the most important pillar of regime support. In the post-World War II era, mass revolts — whether in the form of mass protest or broad-based insurgencies — caused 25 percent of autocratic regime collapses (Geddes et al., 2018, p. 179). In the case of violent insurgencies, the necessity of a loyal military to achieve victory is clear. But even pro-democracy protests, which may be peaceful, often require military support to achieve their ends. While smaller pro-democracy protests are most often controlled by the police, for larger protests autocratic regimes turn to the military (Brancati, 2016, p. 121). It is often pressure from senior officers in the military that forces leaders to step aside in the face of peaceful protests (Barany, 2016).

Finally, leaders face the threat of foreign war. War can directly influence leader survival when foreign powers seek to coerce regime change. Foreign-imposed regime change is the third most common reason for non-institutional regime collapse after coups and uprisings,

but it is uncommon: it accounts for less than 1 in 20 regime collapse events (Geddes et al., 2018, p. 179).[4] Indirectly, however, foreign threats influence leader survival when an unsuccessful war creates pressure for a coup or popular uprising. As De Mesquita and Siverson (1995) illustrate, autocratic leaders who lose wars are significantly more likely to be ousted by other domestic political players. The indirect threat of war on political survival, through domestic regime change, is likely the greater threat to most autocrats. In China, for example, the nuclear-armed CCP is not meaningfully threatened with an invasion of the mainland, but losing a war — for example over Taiwan — might plausibly have disastrous domestic consequences for regime legitimacy.

2 The Conventional Wisdom Emphasizes a Domestic Threat Trade-off

If the military is crucial for autocratic regime survival, what trade-offs to autocrats face when building the armed forces? To date, the literature has largely focused on how autocrats trade off 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" (Svolik, 2012, p. 124). In this framework, leaders must decide whether to build a strong coercive apparatus that can help them guard against mass threats or a weak apparatus that will insulate them from coups.

This 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

[4]Foreign-imposed regime change is the third most common cause if we exclude institutional means including elections and rule changes and we lump popular uprising and insurgencies into one category as I do above.

elites make a trade-off along these lines. Roessler (2011, 2016) shows how in diverse societies in sub-Saharan Africa, leaders exclude rival ethnic groups from power, reducing the risk of civil war while increasing the risk of a coup. In a study of the Kenyan bureaucracy and coercive apparatus, Hassan (2020, p. 15) shows how leaders "forgo a packed state and introduce a moral hazard problem in an attempt to preempt dangerous elite threats at the expense of popular ones." 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. As De Bruin (2018, 2020), among others, shows, regimes can also create "counterbalancing" institutions such as militias, republican guards, or secret police that can fragment the security services and help to protect leaders.

However, the conventional framework has limits, leading to several important critiques. McMahon and Slantchev (2015) note that increasing external (foreign) 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. Along similar lines, (Paine, 2021*a*,*b*) highlights how the conventional logic assumes that a well-resourced, cohesive, and/or socially exclusive military will be loyal to the regime in a mass uprising, but this does not need to be true theoretically and, indeed, empirically often is not.

Empirical studies of revolutionary regimes and of autocratic battlefield performance pose additional challenges to the conventional perspective. First, the striking durability of "revolutionary regimes" like China poses a puzzle since they have the sort of cohesive and well-resourced armies that might in theory pose an internal threat, and yet in practice many do not (Levitsky and Way, 2013; Lachapelle et al., 2020). Second, autocracies that

focus on coup-proofing their military, or where the military has become an arena for elite political conflict, have poor battlefield performance (Brooks, 2006; Talmadge, 2015). This suggests that when making decisions about officer loyalty and competence, leaders do not just trade-off between the threat of coups and of revolts, but between internal and external threats.

3 Framework: The Foreign-Domestic Threat Dilemma

In this article, I develop an alternative framework for understanding how autocrats build their coercive apparatus centered around a domestic-foreign threat dilemma. As Risa Brooks notes in a review, the literature on authoritarian regimes has yet to satisfactorily address how autocratic regimes balance between the competing imperatives of coups, mass uprisings, and foreign threats (Brooks, 2019, p. 390).[5] The foreign-domestic threat framework builds on work by McMahon and Slantchev (2015), among others, but the theory I develop around officer competence and loyalty is distinct.

In its broad outlines, the logic of the theory is straightforward. On the one hand, leaders would like to have a *loyal* military to deal with *domestic* threats. Most crucially, the would like a loyal senior officer corps that will not defect during a coup attempt or a mass uprising and that will, if needed, order soldiers to repress protest or jail elite opponents.

On the other hand, leaders must balance officer loyalty with officer competence. Officer competence refers here the training, human capital, and talent of the officer corps. Influential scholarship argues that competence is not a first-order concern when leaders

[5] Brooks (2019, p. 390) 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." This is beyond the scope of this framework.

create coercive institutions. For example, Egorov and Sonin (2011) theorize that autocrats will generally sacrifice competence for loyalty to avoid coups. Similarly, Hassan (2017) notes that autocrats often focus on using loyalist agents to control dissent.

While often neglected by the existing literature, military competence is clearly crucial for handling *foreign* threats that may also cause regime instability. Defeating a capable adversary on the battlefield requires an officer corps with the training and human capital to make complex tactical and strategic decisions about how best to equip and train soldiers, how best to deploy them, and how to win battles and wars. (As I discuss below, a competent military can also be important for meeting some domestic threats, especially armed insurgencies.)

A first implication of the framework is that, in general, leaders will attempt to build an officer corps that takes both concerns into account. This leads to the first hypothesis (H1): *across all periods, leaders will promote officers based on both competence and loyalty traits*.

A second implication of the framework is that as the level of one threat rises or declines in importance, leaders will respond strategically by shifting how they staff their coercive forces. Given the immediate importance of domestic threats, and the rare nature of foreign-imposed regime change, leaders are likely to focus on variation in the degree to which they face threats from elites or the masses. In periods of growing domestic threat, leaders will focus on packing the military with loyalists. During these periods, leaders need to fear either a challenge from another political elite, mass unrest, or both. To keep their grip on office, leaders will attempt to place loyal officers in key military positions. (Fravel (2019) makes an analogous argument about party unity being necessary for undertaking a shift in

military strategy in China.)

Importantly, domestic political instability can also induce the primary leader's rivals to attempt to pack the officer corps with their own allies. They may do so in part to preserve their own power and perks. For instance, retired former leaders may want to keep a grip on the military to ensure that they remain an important behind-the-curtain force in politics. In addition, having loyalists in the military can protect elites from potential reprisal from rival elites. This leads to a second hypothesis (H2): *during periods of domestic threat, leaders will pack the elite officer corps with generals that have clear loyalty ties to a leader or his rival*.

On the other hand, when domestic threats have waned, leaders can turn to the problem of professionalizing the military and curbing foreign threats. McMahon and Slantchev (2015) argue that officer competence is "free" at least insofar as they would generally prefer a more competent over a less incompetent officer. However, in practice the heterogeneity of the officer corps, and the fact that the officers known to be loyal are not always the most competent, poses challenges to preferring loyal officers. This leads to a final hypothesis (H3): *during periods of domestic threat, officer competency will decline or stagnate*.

3.1 Related Contributions

The loyalty-competence trade-off in coercive institutions has not been central to the literature on autocracies, but it does relate to an extensive body of literature in civil-military relations and military professionalism. Professionalism and competence are not necessarily the same. Officer competence refers to the human capital and capabilities of the

officer corps; by contrast, professionalism is an ethos that involves some mix of "expertise, responsibility, and corporateness" (Huntington, 1957, p. 8). Professionalism prizes and encourages competence, but a military can be competent without being professional. In *The Soldier and the State*, Samuel Huntington argues that there is a trade-off between professionalism and politicization: "the participation of military officers in politics undermines their professionalism, curtailing their professional competence" Huntington (1957, p. 71). A large literature in the years since has examined the question of military professionalization.[6]

The present article builds on foundational work by Stepan (1973) and Brooks (2006) among others on how internal and external threats can shape military professionalization and readiness. Stepan argued that in Brazil in the 1960s and 70s, a shift from focusing on external to internal security led to increasing politicization of the Brazilian military. Brooks shows how decreasing internal political conflict in Egypt led to an improvement in battlefield performance. In its broadest strokes, these arguments are consistent with the theory I advance in this article. However, my theory is different in crucial ways. Most centrally, the trade-off I highlight is not between politicization and professionalism but between a more loyal (but less competent) and a competent (but still politicized) military.

The loyalty-competence trade-off is the subject of a large literature on bureaucracies outside of the military. This includes a literature on principle-agent models in bureaucracies (Gailmard and Patty, 2012). In an important contribution, Egorov and Sonin (2011) examine a similar but distinct dilemma in the context of a personalist dictator selecting a prime minister or vizier; in contrast to the present theory, autocrats select subordinates

[6]For reviews that touch on this literature, see Feaver (1999) and Brooks (2019).

with varying levels of competence but there are not loyal or disloyal types, rather subordinates with varying levels of competence have differing incentives to be loyal. Zakharov (2016) examines the loyalty-competence dilemma for selecting economic agents.

A vibrant body of work examines how promotion in China's civilian political system prizes a mix of loyalty and competence. Landry (2008) shows how the party balances party loyalty and competence, especially in local politics. Shih (2004, 2008) and Shih, Adolph and Liu (2012) by contrast highlight the overwhelming importance of factions, especially in national-level politics. [7] Jia, Kudamatsu and Seim (2015) and Jiang (2018) suggest that in the selection of city and provincial leaders, the trade-off between political loyalty and competent policy-making may not bind: loyal agents may also be the most able to generate economic growth.

However, the underlying tradeoff between loyalty and competence in the military is quite different than in the civilian realm. The literature on civilian politics largely focuses on a trade-off between economic performance and political loyalty. While it highlights a similar class of problems, it does not help generate clear predictions about when leaders will prize competence or loyalty in the military, which plays a more direct role in regime change.

3.2 Scope Conditions

A likely scope condition for this trade-off to operate is the state consolidation, and the absence of a significant armed domestic threat. If a state lacks a monopoly on violence, it may prize competent officers to put down domestic rebellions. After all, to combat a

[7] Shih (2021) and Bai and Zhou (2019) highlight how personalist leaders like Mao intentionally select weak or less competent leaders to reinforce their power.

cohesive armed insurrection, the state needs a cohesive and capable military (Staniland, 2014).[8]

If we set aside civil wars, however, the role of military competence in winning domestic political struggles becomes ambiguous, as the existing literature suggests (Egorov and Sonin, 2011; Hassan, 2017). Launching a successful coup requires that the military have more firepower than the next strongest coercive actor, which is generally the police; this is generally the case, although leaders can still create counterbalancing institutions like militias that cloud the prospects for military success. When it comes to suppressing unarmed protests, the question is not military competence or firepower, but loyalty.

4 Loyalty and Competence in the People's Liberation Army

This article focuses on the case of China and the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The PLA is a *party* army not a national army.[9] It was founded in 1927 at the outset of the Communist insurgency (during the years leading up to the revolution it was also known as the Red Army (中國工農紅軍党). The PLA played an important role in the war against Japan, using guerilla tactics to fight behind enemy lines and galvanizing peasant support for the Communists, who took over the country in 1949 (Johnson, 1962). The PLA subsequently played a central role in elite power-struggles, notably during the Cultural Revolution, in Deng Xiaoping's rise to power, and in the elite split and student movement of 1989 (Vogel, 2011; Walder, 2019). 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

[8] Consistent with this article's main argument, Gibler and Miller (2014) show that foreign threats lead to increased military capacity and competence, which reduces civil war threat.

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

corps.

The most important political position in China is arguably not the head of state or even the leader of the Communist Party, but the chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC). The CMC, not the civilian government or the Politburo Standing Committee, effectively controls the military — it is the CMC that makes senior officer appointments and controls the deployment of troops. It is the Central Military Commission Chairman, not the head of the party or state, who has consistently been the PRC's most powerful leader. For example, even though Mao relinquished his post as head of government, he maintained his position as CMC chair through his death. (Mao was also, crucially, party chairman.) Deng Xiaoping was never the head of the party or state — yet was recognized as paramount leader, and he exercised his authority in no small part by holding the post of CMC chairman through most of the 1980s.

Figure 1 provides a simplified overview of the PLA prior to a major reorganization in 2016. The PLA has a set of regional commands, general offices, and branch offices. (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, 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. Crucially, soliders stationed in this regions, and the districts below them, are responsible for policing domestic unrest. During the 1989 protests, for example, soldiers were mobilized from across the military regions to repress protest.

Most units in the PLA's upper echelons have a dual structure. On the one hand there

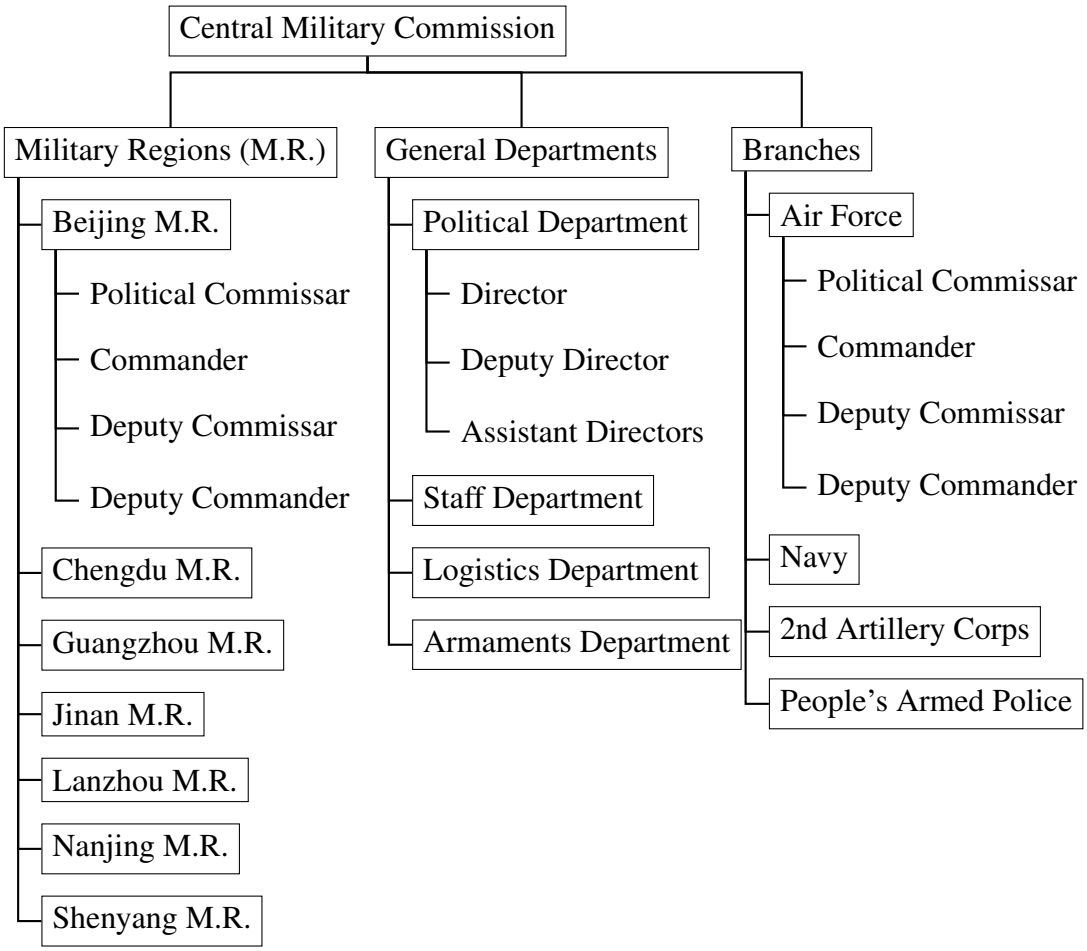


Figure 1: Simplified visualization of the PLA's structure prior to the 2016 reorganization. Each military region and branch has a commissar, commander, and set of deputies. Each of the general departments has a director, deputy director, and assistant director. The number of military regions has shifted over time. The PLA Ground Forces did not have a separate branch headquarters prior to 2016.

are commanders and deputy commanders who carry out the traditional work of military officers. Parallel to these commanders are political commissars, whose primary duty is to ensure the loyalty of the PLA unit to the party. Commissars conduct political training and education, and also monitor soldiers,. The system of commissars goes from the military regions all the way down to the unit level.[10]

While the commissar system is designed to ensure loyalty to the party more broadly, how do individual leaders cultivate loyalists among the PLA officer corps? If so, how? And how does the PLA ensure its officer corps is competent? In the next two sections I briefly outline the importance of factional ties for ensuring loyalty and training for ensuring competence.

4.1 Loyalty: The Importance of Factional Ties

In one party systems like China, factional ties between leaders and subordinates structure political loyalty. In return for political support, leaders channel resources and posts to key allies (De Mesquita et al., 2005). Scholars of elite politics have often argued that factional ties are crucial ties of loyalty and affinity in civilian politics (Nathan, 1973; Dittmer and Wu, 1995; Shih, 2004, 2008, 2021).

How do leaders forge factional ties with potential loyalists? A key way that factional ties are forged is through shared professional experience (Shih, Adolph and Liu, 2012; Jiang, 2018). While a workplace tie does not automatically equate to loyalty, it is crucial because it allows individuals to gather information about each others' "affinities" or types (De Mesquita et al., 2005). Within this pool of co-workers, a leader can identify some

[10]For an overview of this system, see Ji (2015).

subset as a potential loyalist with similar outlooks and beliefs.

The PLA has a unique system that provides a chance for elite civilian officials to develop factional ties with military leaders. In the PLA, the primary *civilian* leader of each province-level unit — the Communist Party secretary — concurrently serves as a first party secretary of the *military* district. This allows civilian leaders, even those with no military background, to develop ties to PLA officers who are rotating through their particular military region. For example, although Hu Jintao had no prior service as a military official, between 1985 and 1992 he served as party secretary of Guizhou and then Tibet. In each post, he was concurrently first party secretary of a military region or district.[11]

These shared factional ties have been crucial for defending party leadership during critical moments. For example, the decision by Deng Xiaoping to declare martial law was most likely made with the assent of four high-ranking army generals who sat on the Central Military Commission: Hong Xuezhi, Liu Huaqing, Qing Jiwei, and Yang Baibing. Each of these four generals had a career tie to Deng. Liu, Qing, and Yang had served under Deng during the civil war in the Second Field Army. Hong had been rehabilitated by Deng — after being purged in the Cultural Revolution — and placed back in the PLA leadership.[12]

[11] Outside of China, such ties have also proved useful to civilian leaders. For example, Nikita Kruschev served as commissar in Ukraine alongside the general Georgi Zhukov. Drawing on this tie, Zhukov would later assist Khrushchev sideline rivals and take power in an effective coup.

[12] There are a number of credible accounts — although given the secrecy around the events, still uncertain — that name Hong, Liu, Qing, and Yang as key participants in a sequence of Central Military Commission and enlarged Politburo meetings from May 18, 1989 to June 2, 1989. See among other accounts of this period: Wu Renhua, *Martial Law Troops and the 1989 Incident*, (Liusi Shijian Zhong de Jieyan Budui), Zhenxiang Press, 2009, p. 11. Dai Qing, *Deng Xiaoping in 1989*. (Deng Xiaoping Zai 1989.) Hong Kong: New Century Press, 2019, p. 146.

4.2 Competence: Officer Training and Combat Experience

How do leaders determine officer competence? As (Talmadge, 2015, p. 13) notes: "The ticket to being a senior officer [in the most effective militaries] is competence, demonstrated by wartime performance or by performance in training." In the PLA, a key marker of officer competence is whether officers have graduated from a university or a specialist military academy. Completing coursework in either 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.

Another marker 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, however, the pool of officers with combat experience became quite small, and while competence in this arena was still highly prized, it became a trait relevant to a dwindling number of officers.

5 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. 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, unclassified U.S. Defense Department rosters of senior PLA officers, media reports, and encyclopedias. Altogether, I collect data on 1,231 officers. More information about the database is included in a appendix. While the dataset covers China from 1949 to the present, I focus most of my analysis on the post-Mao Era, and specifically the period from 1978 to 2019.

I create two key measures of my explanatory variables. My key measure of loyalty are *factional ties* between officers and the country's paramount civilian leader (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 an a civilian leader's network if that officer served in the same military region while that civilian held a post as a PLA First Party Secretary in that region. For example, Jiang Hongquan served as the commander of the Tibet Military District at the same time that Hu Jintao served as the First Party Secretary of that district. I therefore code Jiang as being in Hu's network of ties. These measures are described in more detail in the appendix. My measure of competence is a binary measure of *training*, which takes a value of 1 if an officer graduated from a college, university, or military academy. I create a binary measure for whether an officer has prior wartime experience after the Communist Revolution.

Finally, I examine three key outcome measures. First, I create a dichotomous variable that is coded as 1 if an officer is promoted from deputy commander or deputy commissar to a higher level post, such as commander, commissar, or head of a general department. These higher-level officers are usually promoted to the rank of full officer. Second, I create

a more fine-grained ordinal measure from zero (deputy-level) to three (Central Military Commission member). Finally, I code whether an officer is named to the CCP Central Committee. These outcomes measures are also described in more detail in the appendix.

To complement this quantitative data, I also draw on a collection of internal Communist Party documents to inform my argument. In general these documents focus on the role of the military in the 1989 protests and elite split. These documents include internal speeches by PLA and CCP elites, memos, reports, and propaganda efforts directed at the military.

6 The Loyalty-Competence Balance in PLA Promotion

In Section 3, I hypothesized that leaders would promote officers based on a mix of loyalty (or factional) and competence (or training) concerns. To examine the predictors of promotion, I use ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. Since the main outcomes I examine are binary (and in the appendix, ordinal) binomial (and ordinal) logistic regression would also be appropriate. However, since the results are not as easily interpreted, I present them in the appendix. The results using logit are also robustly significant and of similar substantive magnitude.

I estimate OLS regressions of the form:

$$y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Faction}_i + \beta_2 \text{Training}_i + \beta_3 \text{Combat}_i + \gamma + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

For each individual i who served as a deputy region commander and above in the post-Mao Era, I estimate whether they were promoted to the full central committee or

whether they were promoted to a full general-level position. Alternatively, in the appendix I present results for a more fine-grained ordinal measure of promotion that ranges from deputy commander to member of the Central Military Commission. In the appendix, I also estimate promotion using a fixed-effects framework and a yearly panel of individuals.[13]

Table 1 presents regressions predicting membership in the party Central Committee. As the party's main "selectorate," the Central Committee plays an important role in deciding the composition of the party's top leadership (Shirk, 1993; De Mesquita et al., 2005). The powerful party Politburo (approximately 25 members) and standing committee (7 to 9 members) are all drawn from the Central Committee. Membership in the Central Committee is thus a key way that civilian and military leaders share power. In recent years, around 20 percent of the Central Committee has been made up of current and former PLA officers.

Table 2 presents regressions predicting whether a general was promoted to commander or above, positions which often entail promotion to from lieutenant general to general. In contrast to Central Committee membership, which is a key measure of military-civilian power-sharing, these positions capture promotion within the military.

The results suggest that loyalty to individual leaders is of paramount concern — even in an era when the PLA strategy has focused on professionalization and improving its war-fighting capabilities (Fravel, 2019). Factional ties to a top civilian leader (that is, Deng, Jiang, Hu, or Xi) are paramount for promotion onto the Central Committee or to commander. A prior career connection to a top leader, such as serving the same military

[13]These results, presented in Appendix Table A5, return substantively similar estimates for the effect of factional ties on promotion. However, a fixed-effects framework precludes estimating the effect of non-time-varying characteristics such as training.

Table 1: Predictors of full membership in the CCP Central Committee using Ordinary Least Squares. Logistic regression and an alternate measure including committee alternates are presented in the appendix.

	Dependent variable:			
	Full Member of CCP Central Committee			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Factional ties to top civilian leader	0.317***			0.243***
	(0.068)			(0.067)
College or military academy training		0.142***		0.109***
		(0.031)		(0.030)
Combat experience after 1949			0.311***	0.227***
			(0.045)	(0.047)
Long March veteran				0.170*
				(0.092)
Patron is member of CMC				0.018
				(0.073)
Served as commissar				0.112***
				(0.030)
Ethnic minority				−0.126
				(0.157)
Princeling				0.029
				(0.095)
Rural birth				0.010
				(0.041)
Age when promoted to deputy				−0.016***
				(0.004)
Constant	0.196***	0.130***	0.173***	0.974***
	(0.016)	(0.024)	(0.016)	(0.205)
Observations	704	704	704	684
R^2	0.030	0.029	0.065	0.143
Adjusted R^2	0.028	0.028	0.063	0.130
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

region, increases the chance of promotion by over 30 percentage points. This translates to almost doubling the likelihood of inclusion in the Central Committee and a similarly large increase in the likelihood of promotion to commander. The estimates suggest that only war experience is of equivalent substantive importance when making promotion decisions.

However, different leaders have fared better than others when it comes to putting "their" generals on the Central Committee or in key command posts. Figure 2 plots the bivariate correlation between a connection to a leader and being promoted during that leader's tenure in office. Connections to Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Xi Jinping are all correlated with promotion at statistically significant levels. However, Hu Jintao, who is often regarded as a relatively weak civilian leader (Shirk, 2018) had connections to relatively few generals by the time he took office, and did not have success in promoting them.[14] Although this is beyond the scope of this article, this suggests that power within the military may be an important source of civilian power.

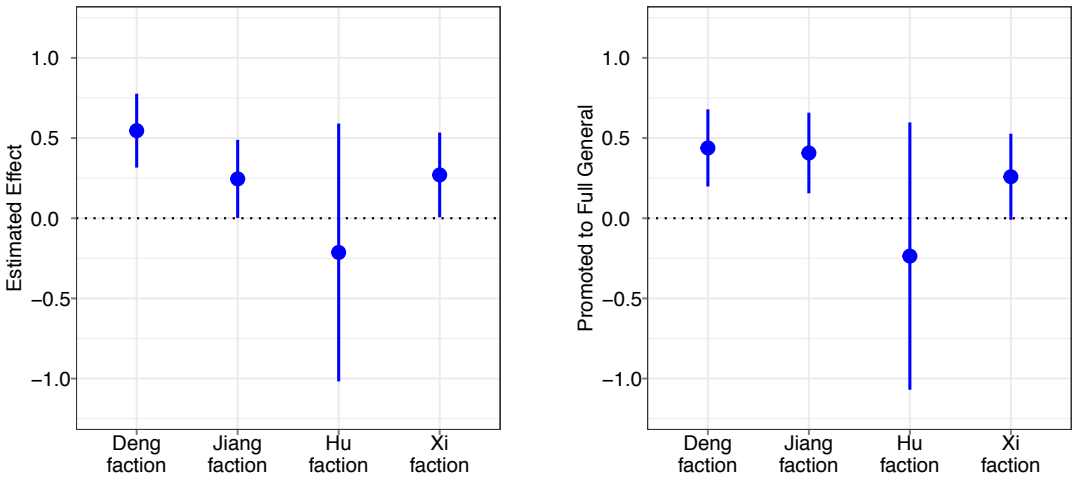
At the same time, and also consistent with the theory, a key criteria for promotion was prior training, an important indicator of competence. College or military academy training is correlated with a 14 percent increase in the probability of promotion to the Central Committee and a 12 percent increase in the probability of promotion to region commander or commissar or higher. Again, these are substantively large estimates, suggesting that training predicts almost a doubling in the likelihood of promotion.

Finally, experience in war is also an important predictor of serving on the Central Committee or being promoted to full general. A general with combat experience is more

[14]Hu did have connections to 23 generals in the dataset, but because of Hu's career path and rapid promotion to a position in the central government, many of these officers retired before Hu actually took office. Many were on the Central Committee when Hu rose to power and was designated Jiang's successor, so Hu's generals may plausibly have assisted Hu's rise to office before they retired.

Table 2: Predictors of promotion to a full general-level position using Ordinary Least Squares. Logistic regression and an alternate ordinal measure of promotion are presented in the appendix.

	Dependent variable:			
	Promoted to full general position (1=Commander or higher, 0=Deputy)			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Factional ties to top civilian leader	0.322^{***}			0.241^{***}
	(0.071)			(0.068)
College or military academy training		0.116^{***}		0.087^{***}
		(0.032)		(0.031)
Combat experience after 1949			0.348^{***}	0.250^{***}
			(0.046)	(0.048)
Long March veteran				0.208^{**}
				(0.097)
Patron is member of CMC				0.146^{*}
				(0.075)
Served as commissar				0.159^{***}
				(0.031)
Ethnic minority				-0.315^{*}
				(0.161)
Princeling				-0.086
				(0.097)
Rural birth				0.059
				(0.042)
Age when promoted to deputy				-0.016^{***}
				(0.004)
Constant	0.219^{***}	0.168^{***}	0.191^{***}	0.974^{***}
	(0.016)	(0.025)	(0.017)	(0.240)
Observations	704	704	704	682
R^2	0.029	0.018	0.075	0.161
Adjusted R^2	0.027	0.017	0.074	0.149
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01



(a) Promotion to Central Committee

(b) Promotion to Full General

Figure 2: Factional connections and promotion by individual leader.

than twice as likely to be selected than at baseline and about 35 percent more likely to be promoted to a full general-level position.

However, the substantive importance of wartime experience has declined over time. From the late 1990s onward, less than 5 percent of newly appointed deputy commanders and commissars had combat experience, making it less relevant. This is in large part because China has not fought in a significant war since the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War.

Overall, the results show that leaders promote on both indicators of competence and loyalty. Of special interest are the measures of factional connections, which show quantitatively for the first time the importance of factional connections for promotion in the PLA.

7 In Periods of Domestic Threat, Loyalty Increase in Importance

Does the importance of markers of loyalty, such as factional ties, increase in periods of significant domestic threat? A key prediction of the theory was that when leaders were threatened from within, they should prize loyalty even more, potentially at the expense of competence.

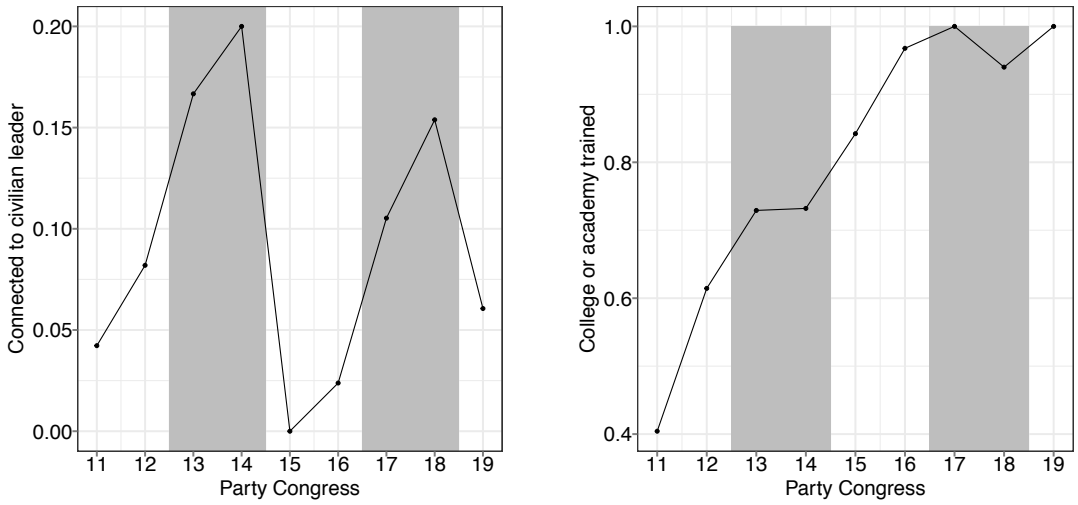
I identify two periods of significant domestic threat in the post-Mao Era. The first period of significant domestic threat coincides with the elite split and mass protests around the 1989 protests. At the start of the 13th CCP Party Congress in 1987, Deng Xiaoping and elders in the CCP leadership forced the nominal head of the party, Hu Yaobang, from his post. Hu was a popular symbol of reform, and his subsequent death from a heart attack was the immediate spark for the 1989 student movement. The student movement exposed a further split between Deng Xiaoping, and the Hu's replacement as party secretary, Zhao Ziyang. The movement and split between Zhao and Deng ended with a military crackdown and the purging of Zhao. In the period that followed, Deng and other elders including PLA leader Yang Shangkun jockeyed for influence, while the third party secretary in three years, Jiang Zemin, attempted to consolidate power. This period lasted into the 14th Party Congress which began in 1992. Overall, this period of significant domestic threat stretched from 1987 until sometime after 1992, or from the 13th into the 14th party congress.[15]

[15] Cheng and White (1993) provide an interesting overview of the role of the military in the 14th party congress. Alternatively, Fravel (2019, p. 199) argues that the "14th Party Congress... marked the restoration of party unity." This characterization is reasonable but debatable. On the one hand, the 14th congress saw the forced retirement of a key potential rival to Jiang, Yang Shangkun, and consolidation behind Deng's economic reform platform. On the other hand, while there was still more party unity than in 1987-92, the 14th party congress still represented a moment of regime fragility, where figures including Yang Shangkun and his brother Yang Baibing, who had retained his Politburo post, were still in a position to undermine elite unity. The Yang brothers' deep roots in the PLA required special attention to retaining control over the military. The 14th party congress was still a period of significant potential threat.

A second period of internal domestic threat occurred during Hu Jintao's second term in office, when party leaders carved out separate spheres of influence and challenged party unity. First, during this period, retired leader Jiang Zemin exerted considerable influence behind the scenes in civilian and military appointments, which undermined Hu's rule (Shirk, 2018, p. 29). Moreover, Politburo member Bo Xilai waged an "open campaign" (Shirk, 2018, p. 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. Bo eventually fell from power in a murder and corruption scandal that exposed further rifts in the elite coalition. Xi would later declare that Bo and Zhou participated in a "political conspiracy" (*zhengzhi yinmou huodong*) to "to destroy and split the party" (*pohuai fenlie dang*) — essentially, accusing the men of initiating a leadership split.[16] The 18th party congress, which began in 2012, saw Xi Jinping purge leaders including Bo and Zhou, while consolidating power. Much like the 14th party congress, it was a potentially fragile moment where the party attempted to unify in the wake of an elite split.

Do periods of elite split lead to significant increases in the number of military loyalists in key posts? Figure 3a presents percentages of PLA generals in each CCP Central Committee with connection to a current, prior, or future CCP leader. Shaded in gray are the four party congresses where the party was either in the midst of a leadership spit or attempting to consolidate power in the wake of one. Consistent with the theory, in each period, the number of generals with factional connections to a civilian leader increased dramatically. Of note, in the 13th and 14th party congresses, many of the generals elevated to the party

[16]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 July 20, 2021.



(a) Factional connections

(b) Training

Figure 3: Shifts in factional connections to a prior, current, or future leader and shifts in percent of officers with college or military academy training, by party congress. Periods of significant domestic threat are marked in gray. Periods of domestic threat include the protests and leadership instability of 1987-92 and the leadership split around the Bo Xilai incident.

Table 3: Difference in means, percent of generals on Central Committee with a connection to a current, prior, or future civilian leader. $p < 0.01$ using either Welch Two Sample t-test or randomizaiton inference.

	Domestic Threat	No Domestic Threat	Difference in Means
CCP Leader Faction	0.156	0.041	0.115***
Education, % Increase	0.041	0.144	-0.103
N	4	5	

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

selectorate had connections to Deng Xiaoping as he attempted to out-maneuver more liberal rivals including Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, and to weaken conservatives including Yang Shangkun who threatened to undermine party unity (Cheng and White, 1993). In the 17th and 18th party congress, by contrast, the selectorate was packed with military allies of Jiang Zemin, who sought to exercise influence behind the scenes, and Xi Jinping, who effectively consolidated power by installing his allies in the 18th party congress. (Interestingly, consistent with the selectorate theory of De Mesquita et al. (2005), which supposes that leaders will drop members of the initial winning coalition, generals with direct connection to Xi were pushed out in the 19th party congress, when Xi had consolidated power.) Even with a very small sample size of 9 congresses, these differences are statistically significant. Table 3 shows differences in means between party congresses with significant internal threats compared to those without. The difference is significant at the $p < 0.01$ level.

There is suggestive evidence that the emphasis on loyalty in these periods eroded the competence of the leadership. Figure 3b plots the college and military training of the elite officer corps in each period. The general trend has been towards increasing training through the 16th party congress. However, this trend towards professionalization stagnated

in the 14th party congress and even decreased in the 18th party congress. Table 3 shows that the percent increase in education over prior congresses is lower in years with domestic threats. However, with only 9 observations the difference is not statistically significant, and ceiling effects make interpretation challenging. Nevertheless, the decline or stagnation in college and military academy training in the 14th and 18th party congress is consistent with the idea that leaders face a trade-off between loyalty and competence that cannot be easily resolved. It is also consistent with the simple descriptive fact that across all periods, officers with connections to top leaders who are promoted to full general are significantly less likely to have college-level training than their peers without such connections.

8 Conclusion

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

Drawing on evidence from China, I showed that leaders promote generals with factional connections to themselves and who show signs of competence. This builds on the literature on civilian factions by demonstrating the importance of factions for military promotion (e.g. Shih, 2004, 2008; Shih, Adolph and Liu, 2012; 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 in-

creased emphasis on professionaliztion. Moreover, I showed the the emphasis on factional loyalty has waxed and waned depending on the degree to which the regime faces internal threats from an elite split or mass revolt. The study is among the first to quantitatively examine the role of the PLA in domestic politics.

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 (Svolik, 2009; Greitens, 2016). This paper 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 (McMahon and Slantchev, 2015; Brooks, 2019; Paine, 2021*a*).

The paper leaves open many important avenues for future research, especially on the PLA — an institution of growing international importance that has received little attention in the comparative politics literature. For example, do the mechanisms of political control common to the civilian realm apply to the military?[17] Are ideology and propaganda key to civilian control over the military? And are connections to the military a key source of civilian power for personalist leaders like Xi Jinping?

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[17] On political control and repression see Fu and Distelhorst (2018) and Mattingly (2020).

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