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 professional military that can guard against foreign threats. In this paper, 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 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 factional loyalty with professionalism. However, in periods of high domestic threat, party leaders promote unusually large numbers of officers with factional ties to top leaders. In periods of foreign threat, by contrast, leaders 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.

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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 [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 revolts (Svolik, 2012; Barany, 2016; Geddes et al., 2018; De Bruin, 2019). 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 (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 officer corps, the leaders of authoritarian regimes generally select a mix of officers who have markers of competence *and* loyalty. Competence is difficult to observe *ex ante*, so leaders promote officers with traits of military professionalism — that is, officers with significant education, training, and combat experience. Loyalty is also difficult to observe *ex ante*, so leaders will also promote officers in their factional networks — in particular, officers with whom a leader has a prior career tie. These shared career experiences help to

build trust between party and military leaders.

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 on ensuring military loyalty by promoting officers with factional ties to top leaders. This can potentially come at the expense of officer professionalism. When foreign threats grow in importance, leaders will staff the officer corps with more professional officers 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 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 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: the long-lived regimes that come to power in a rebellion or social revolution (Lachapelle et al., 2020; Meng and Paine, 2021).

Drawing on new data on the PLA, I show how successive CCP leaders have approached the foreign-domestic threat dilemma. Consistent with my first central argument, I show how throughout the post-Mao era, leaders have prized both factional ties and markers of officer professionalism. In particular, leaders promote a significant share of generals who have factional connections to a top party leader and at the same time promote officers with higher education and combat experience.

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

However, during periods of domestic threat, party leaders pack the elite officer corps with more factional loyalists. The two key periods of domestic threat that I examine in post-Mao China include the elite splits and mass protests of 1987 and 1989, and the Bo Xilai incident of 2012. Around these two periods of heightened domestic threat, CCP leaders stacked the party Central Committee with PLA generals who had strong career ties to a top party leader: the percentage of PLA generals in the Central Committee with factional ties to a leader nearly doubled from 21 to 39 percentage points.

Increasing foreign threats, on the other hand, led to periods when party leaders promoted officers with significant combat experience. The key period of foreign threat in the post-Mao Era began in the late 1990s, when a series of military incidents around Taiwan led to growing tensions with the United States.[2] I show that in periods of foreign threat, party leaders were more likely to promote officers with prior combat experience to the Central Committee — the number of top generals with combat experience nearly quadrupled, from 6 to 23 percent — and decreased the emphasis on promoting officers with factional ties.

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 some-

[2] I also examine the period during and after China's border conflict with Vietnam.

times referred to as the "guardianship dilemma" (e.g. Feaver, 1999; Svolik, 2012, 2013; Greitens, 2016). However, as Brooks (2019, p. 390) notes, the current literature does not provide clear expectations about how authoritarian regimes respond to mass unrest, elite challenges, *and* foreign threats. My theory and evidence builds on the literature on civil-military relations and shows how authoritarian regimes — in particular one party regimes like the CCP — respond dynamically to counter both foreign and domestic threats.

1 Authoritarian Leader Survival Depends on the Military

The military is crucial for the political survival of authoritarian leaders — and often plays a pivotal role in political crises. Historically, the greatest risk to authoritarian leaders is an elite challenge backed by the military. Between 1946 and 2010, coups in which one group of elites overthrows another led to 35 percent of autocratic regime breakdowns (Geddes et al., 2018, p. 179). 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). In China under the CCP, military leaders have not attempted a coup to take down the regime, but have played key roles in intra-elite conflict within the ruling party; 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" (Shirk, 1993, p. 76).

In addition to threats from other elites, leaders face threats from the masses, where again the military is an important pillar of 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). While smaller anti-regime protests can be often controlled by the police, autocratic regimes most often

turn to the military to control larger mass movements (Brancati, 2016, p. 121). It is often pressure from senior officers in the military that forces leaders to step aside during mass unrest (Barany, 2016). In China, the PLA repressed domestic unrest during the Cultural Revolution and 1989 student movement, guaranteeing the survival of the regime and leadership.

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 extra-institutional regime collapse after elite challenges and uprisings, but it is uncommon: it accounts for less than 1 in 20 regime collapse events (Geddes et al., 2018, p. 179).[3] Yet even when regimes do not face a threat of invasion, foreign threats can still shape a leader's prospects for political survival. As De Mesquita and Siverson (1995) illustrate, autocratic leaders who lose wars are significantly more likely to be ousted from office. In the case of China, unresolved territorial disputes, and the nationalist popular sentiment these issues stir, pose a potential threat to leaders' personal political survival if they are mishandled (Weiss, 2014).

2 The Conventional Wisdom Emphasizes a Domestic Threat Trade-off

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 trade off between protecting against a coup or mass revolt. Svolik (2012, 2013) argues that "authoritarian repression involves a fundamental moral hazard: The

[3]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.

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 be less capable of launching a coup.

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 (2021*b*), 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*a*) also shows how elites threats and mass threats may interconnected, as the elites with the strongest mass support also pose the greatest coup risk.

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 Gläßel (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 rebel and revolutionary regimes — where the coercive apparatus is usually strong and coups rare — also poses a puzzle for the guardianship dilemma framework. Regimes that come to power in a social revolution are durable in part because of what Lachapelle et al. (2020) call "political-military fusion." In these regimes, the military is often an armed wing of the ruling party, and the loyalty of military officers is enforced by embedding political commissars throughout the military ranks. Meng and Paine (2021) examine a similar class of "rebel regimes" that come to power in an internal rebellion, and find that they are also durable and less prone to coups, because they credibly and effectively share power with military leaders.

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.

3 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, p. 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" (Shirk, 1993; De Mesquita et al., 2005). 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 promote officers with connections to other leaders, such as their predecessor in office, in order to co-opt these officers and ease their

[4] 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.

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 are factional ties. A faction is defined as "a personal network of reciprocity [and trust] that seeks to preserve and expand the power of the patron" (Shih, 2008, p. 50).[5] 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 by promoting them (if the civilian has ascended to the top of the political hierarchy); in exchange for present or future benefits, the military officer can provide political support for the civilian's political ascendancy.

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 a military confrontation with a foreign power that could plausibly threaten a country's territorial integrity. (In the case of China, this arguably means a major power like the United States.) Key markers

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

of professionalism include education, training, combat experience, and performance in military exercises, which indicate indicate expertise and corporate identity.[6] Defeating a capable adversary on the battlefield is more likely with a professionalized officer corps with the training and expertise needed to win battles and wars.

The theory leads to three hypotheses about how leaders prioritize loyalty and professionalism. Hypothesis 1 is that 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 factional 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. Hypothesis 2 is that 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 leader factions when compared to promoted officers in other periods.

Hypothesis 3 is that 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. China during the period studied did not face a clear-cut period of sustained domestic and external threat. One possibility is that increased domestic threats

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

may make foreign threats more likely: as Jost (2021) notes, in periods of intra-party 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 70s, 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. The theory also generates different predictions. Where Talmadge (2015, p. 246) argues that in recent years China has "little reason to adopt... coup prevention practices," I show that the PRC has continued to embrace coup prevention practices through the 2010s, motivated by the threat of an elite challenge or mass movement. Finally, Reiter (2020) argues that some leaders are able to avoid a foreign-domestic trade-off by employing coup-proofing strategies that do not com-

promise 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.

3.1 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 revolutionary or rebel regimes such as China.

First, if the military and ruling party bureaucracies are not closely tied together, it calls into question the notion that the loyalty of the coercive apparatus is central for meeting elite challenges. A lack of party-military ties increases the risk of a military-led coup, in part because it makes it more difficult for civilians to monitor the political loyalty of officers. 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, 2021) 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 fifty years — including prominent long-lived autocratic regimes from China to Vietnam, Russia, Mozambique, Uganda, and Angola — making it an important category to understand.

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).[7] Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the PLA has 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 (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.

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

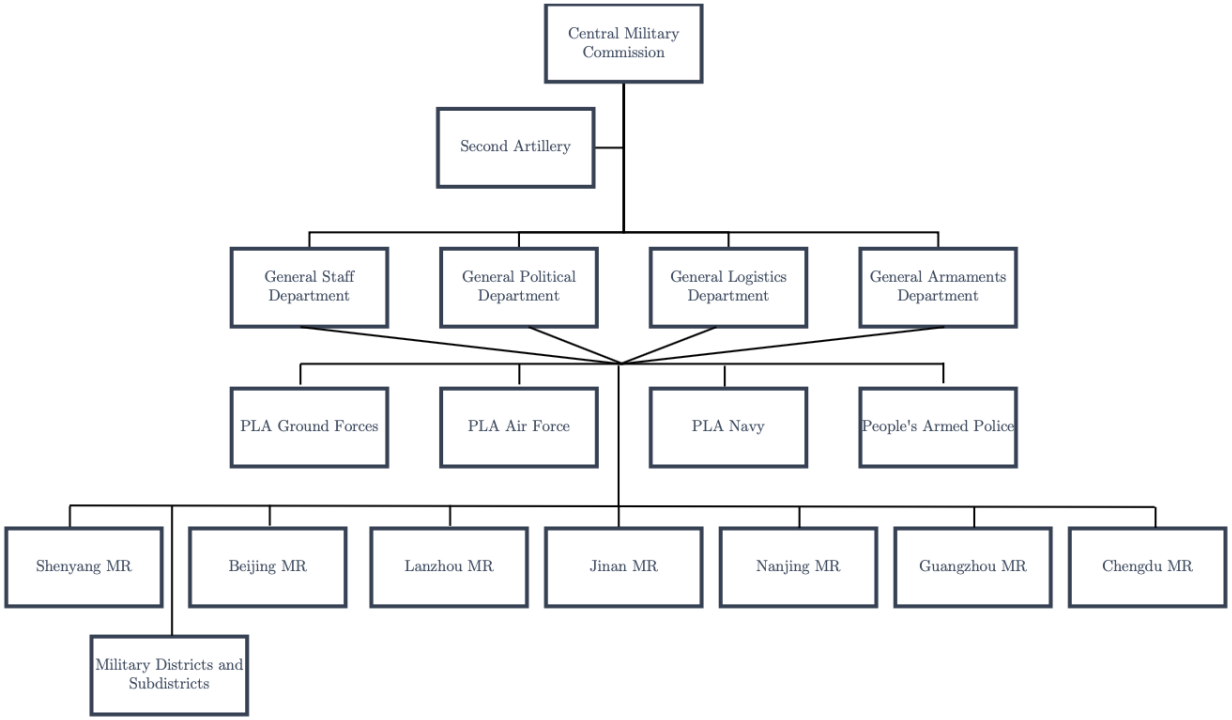


Figure 1: Simplified visualization of the PLA's command structure prior to the 2016 reorganization adapted from Shambaugh (2002, p. 111). Each military region and branch has a commissar, commander, deputy commissar, and deputy commander. Each of the general departments has a director, deputy director,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

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]

4.1 Loyalty: Factional Ties Between Leaders and the PLA

A key marker of loyalty in the PLA are factional ties between military and civilian leaders.[9] As noted in Section 3, a faction can be defined as a network of reciprocity and trust reinforced by the exchange of benefits. A large body of work in political science examines factions or patron-client networks within China's civilian political system (e.g.

[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.

[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.

Nathan, 1973; Shih, 2004, 2008, 2004; Landry, 2008; Jiang, 2018; Chen and Kung, 2019). 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.

Like civilian factions, civil-military factions 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 post-revolutionary leadership generations, the main way that factions are formed is through serving together on regional party and government committees. These ties are almost certainly weaker than wartime ties, but still important. Civil and military leaders serve alongside each other in military district party committees, provincial national defense mobilization committees, and provincial party standing committees, among other bodies. 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 ties with PLA leaders 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

[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.

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 percent, 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. As a provincial party secretary, Xi concurrently

[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.

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 is 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 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 Qu 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

[13]Since he was province governor for his first year in Zhejiang, he briefly served as director 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 Xi Daily* (学习时报), March 10, 2021.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Ibid. See also Cheng Guansheng, "Jiang Zemin Celebrates the 40th Anniversary of the Naming of "Hard" Sixth Company," (江泽民祝贺"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.

Field Army during the Chinese Civil War and was also the Chief of Staff of the PLA from 1975 to 1980. Each of these experiences allowed leaders to build ties to senior military leaders.

4.2 Professionalism: 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 armies] is competence, demonstrated by wartime performance or by performance in training." 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 whether officers have graduated from a university or a specialist military academy. Completing 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.

Another marker of 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 small, and was limited to officers who had served in Vietnam.

[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.

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.

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.[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 encyclopedias. Altogether, I collect data on 1,231 officers. I focus most of my analysis on the post-Mao Era, and specifically the period from 1978 to 2019, for which I have comprehensive data on 674 officers. More

[19] I am able to create detailed biographical backgrounds for 94 percent of officers in the post-Mao Era. The officers I am unable to collect extensive background data on are mostly deputy commissars and deputy commanders from the late 1970s and early 1980s. Since the missing data are generally of unpromoted officers who have no discernible career ties to Deng, their exclusion likely biases the estimates of the effect of factional ties towards zero and a null finding. The results do not change if I begin the analysis in the era after 1982 when coverage is almost complete.

information about the database is included in a appendix.

I create two key measures of my explanatory variables. My key measure of loyalty are *factional ties* between officers a 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 an 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 the National Mobilization Committee. These measures are described in more detail in the appendix. In the appendix 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. My measures of professionalism include a binary measure of *training*, which takes a value of 1 if an officer graduated from a college, university, or military academy, and a binary measure for whether an officer has combat experience in the post-1949 period.

Finally, I examine two 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 code whether an officer is named a full member of the CCP Central Committee. In the appendix I show how the results are robust to considering alternative outcome measures, such as an ordinal measure of promotion, promotion to the Central Military Commission, and promotion to the Central Committee including both alternates and full members.

6 The Loyalty-Competence Balance in PLA Promotion

In Section 3, I hypothesized that leaders would promote officers based on a mix of factionalism, training, and combat experience. To examine the predictors of promotion, I use ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. Since the main outcomes I examine are binary, binomial (and ordinal) logistic regression would also be appropriate. However, since the results are not as easily interpreted, I present them in the appendix.

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 Military 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. In the appendix I present results using alternative measures and specifications, including a panel format using fixed effects and logistic regression.[20] In some specifications I include plausibly pre-treatment control variables (γ) to condition the results on potential confounders. Since Deng is potentially a unique leader given his experience in the Communist Revolution, in the appendix I present separate results for the post-Deng Era. The results remain significant using alternative measures, specifications, and samples.

Table 1 presents regressions predicting membership in the party Central Committee, a body that has around 200 members. As the party's main "selectorate," the Central Com-

[20]Fixed effects results, presented in Appendix Table A12, 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. Alternate measures and specifications presented in the appendix.

	Dependent variable:			
	Full Member of CCP Central Committee			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Tie to paramount leader	0.193***			0.153***
	(0.047)			(0.044)
College or military academy training		0.134***		0.090***
		(0.034)		(0.033)
Combat experience after 1949			0.309***	0.238***
			(0.043)	(0.050)
Long March veteran				0.058
				(0.090)
Served as commissar				0.109***
				(0.032)
Ethnic minority				−0.138
				(0.179)
Princeling				0.015
				(0.102)
Rural birth				−0.017
				(0.042)
Age when promoted to deputy				−0.019***
				(0.004)
Constant	0.213***	0.157***	0.191***	1.238***
	(0.018)	(0.026)	(0.017)	(0.229)
Decade fixed effects				✓
Observations	674	674	674	662
R^2	0.025	0.023	0.070	0.169
Adjusted R^2	0.024	0.022	0.069	0.150
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

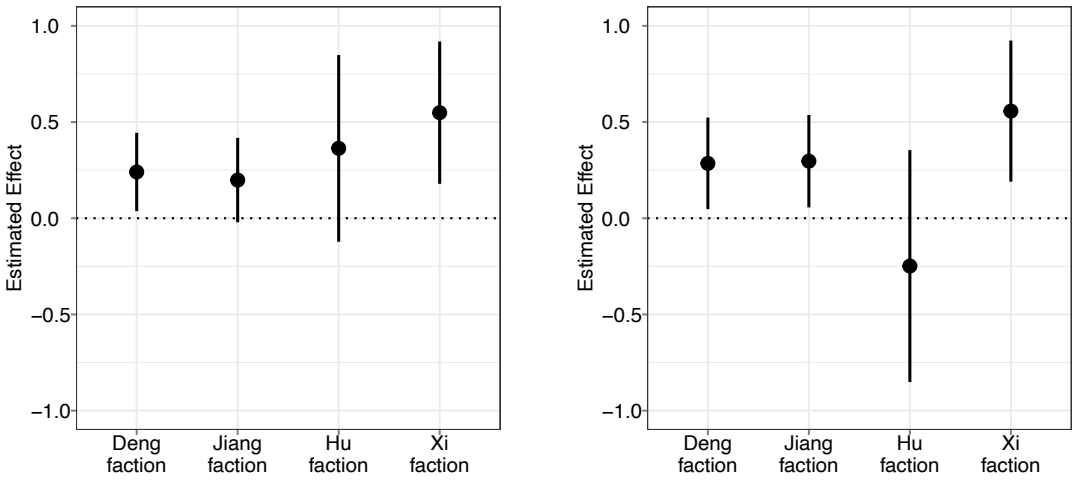
mittee plays an important role in deciding the composition of the party's top leadership (Shirk, 1993; De Mesquita et al., 2005). Membership in the Central Committee is a key way that party and military leaders share power: in recent years, around 20 percent of the Central Committee has been made up 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 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 one of the top party leaders are strong predictors of promotion onto the Central Committee or to commander. A career connection to a top leader is associated with a 19 percentage point increase in the likelihood of promotion to either the Central Committee or to full general. This translates to almost doubling the likelihood of promotion.

However, different leaders have fared better than others when it comes to ensuring generals connected them serve on the Central Committee or in key command posts. Figure 2 plots the correlation between a connection to a leader and being promoted during that leader's tenure in office. The first figure plots the correlation between connections to a leader and promotion to the Central Committee during that leader's term in office. Connections to Deng and Xi, arguably the two most powerful post-Mao leaders, are correlated with promotion to the CCP Central Committee at statistically significant levels ($p < 0.05$). For promotion to general, connections to Deng, Xi, and Jiang are correlated

Table 2: Predictors of promotion to a full general-level position using Ordinary Least Squares. Alternate measures and specifications are presented in the appendix.

	Dependent variable:			
	Promoted to full general position (1=Commander or higher, 0=Deputy)			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Tie to paramount leader	0.192^{***}			0.165^{***}
	(0.047)			(0.045)
College or military academy training		0.122^{***}		0.089^{***}
		(0.034)		(0.033)
Combat experience after 1949			0.317^{***}	0.208^{***}
			(0.044)	(0.050)
Long March veteran				-0.014
				(0.091)
Served as commissar				0.134^{***}
				(0.032)
Ethnic minority				-0.383^{**}
				(0.180)
Princeling				-0.099
				(0.103)
Rural birth				0.039
				(0.042)
Age when promoted to deputy				-0.020^{***}
				(0.004)
Constant	0.225^{***}	0.176^{***}	0.201^{***}	1.449^{***}
	(0.018)	(0.027)	(0.018)	(0.229)
Decade fixed effects				✓
Observations	674	674	674	662
R^2	0.024	0.019	0.072	0.189
Adjusted R^2	0.022	0.017	0.070	0.170
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01



(a) Promotion to CCP Central Committee.

(b) Promotion to general.

Figure 2: Factional connections and promotion by individual leader.

with promotion at statistically significant levels ($p < 0.05$).

The results in Figure 1 show the importance of connections to the sitting leader. However, both Hu and Jiang had to contend with a living and powerful former leader, which required them to share power with generals connected to their predecessor. 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. Appendix Figure A4 shows that Jiang was more successful at promoting his military proteges into office under Hu than he was during his own tenure. On the other hand, Xi has not been constrained by Hu or Jiang in nearly the same way.

Second, college or military academy training is correlated with a 13 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 education nearly doubles the baseline likelihood of promotion.

Finally, combat experience is also an important predictor of serving on the Central Committee or being promoted to full general. A general with combat experience is 33 percentage points more likely to be promoted to the Central Committee and 32 percentage points more likely to be promoted to a full general-level position.

7 In Periods of Domestic Threat, Loyalty Increases in Importance

Does the importance of loyalty increase in periods of significant domestic threat? Drawing on the definitions of elite and mass threats in Section 3, I identify two periods of significant domestic threat in the post-Mao Era. I show that during these two periods, CCP leaders packed the Central Committee with unusually large numbers of generals with factional ties to a paramount leader.

The first period of significant domestic threat occurred during the 13th Party Congress. It coincides with elite splits and mass protests in 1986-1987 and in 1989. From December 1986 to January 1987, large-scale student protests erupted in 150 cities around China calling for democratic reforms. Communist Party secretary Hu Yaobang's failure to control the protests and his expressions of sympathy for some of the students' demands led to his dismissal by Deng Xiaoping in 1987 (Vogel, 2011, p. 576-585). In 1989, student protests again erupted across the country, this time sparked by Hu Yaobang's death from a heart attack. The sitting head of the party, Zhao Ziyang, like his predecessor, expressed some sympathy for the protesters, exposing a leadership split. Deng used the PLA to repress the protests and purged Zhao.

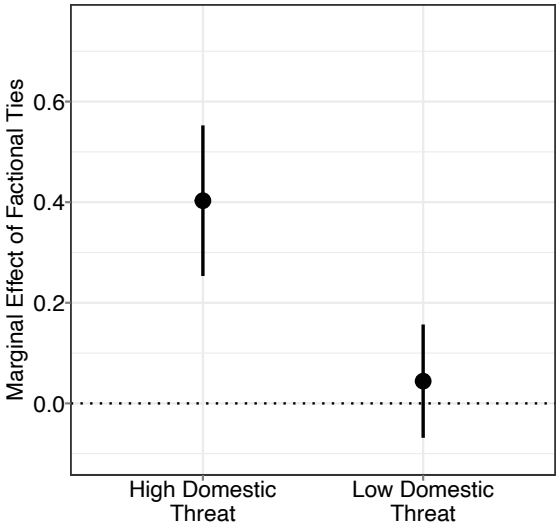


Figure 3: Estimated marginal effect of factional tie to paramount leaders on promotion to the Central Committee in periods of high and low domestic threat. Calculated by interacting indicator that general was eligible for promotion during period of foreign threat and indicator of factional tie to a leader. (See appendix Table A5. Test for difference in marginal effect: $p < 0.01$.)

The second period of significant domestic threat occurred in the run-up to the 18th Party Congress. In this period, 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. Xi would later declare that Bo and Zhou participated in a "political conspiracy" (政治阴谋活动) to "to destroy and split the party" (破坏分裂党) — essentially, accusing the men of initiating a leadership split.[21] The 18th Party Congress, which began in 2012, saw Xi Jinping purge leaders including Bo and Zhou, while consolidating power, making the start of the Congress another moment of domestic threat.

In Figure 3, I present results that show that the correlation between factional ties and promotion is stronger in periods of high domestic threat than in periods of low domestic threat. To estimate these differences, I interact a variable indicating that a general was eligible for promotion during a period of domestic threat — specifically, during the start of the 13th and 18th Party Congresses — with an indicator for whether the general had a factional tie to a paramount leader.[22] The results show that ties to leaders predict promotion during periods of internal threat but not during periods without internal threat. Overall, in periods without an internal threat 21 percent of PLA generals in the Central Committee have a connection to a paramount leader; that rises to 39 percent in periods of internal

[21] 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.

[22] I estimate OLS regressions of the form:

$$y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Faction}_i + \beta_2 \text{Domestic Threat}_i + \beta_3 \text{Faction}_i * \text{Domestic Threat}_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (2)$$

Full regression tables including regressions with controls are presented in the appendix. If a general was eligible for promotion during the period of domestic threat but are not promoted during that congress, I count them as not promoted regardless of whether they are promoted to a later congress.

threat (in a two tailed t-test, $p < 0.01$). In the appendix, I present alternative methods of analyzing these results, such as by subsetting the analysis into threat and non-threat periods.

8 In Periods of Foreign Threat, Professionalism Increases in Importance

Does the importance of loyalty increase in periods of significant domestic threat? In Section 3, 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. I draw on the International Crisis Behavior Dataset (Asal and Beardsley, 2007) to build a list of all crises involving a military confrontation with a major power. (See Appendix Table A3)

The key period of foreign threat in the post-Mao era occurred in the late 1990s, when tensions with the United States over Taiwan, threatened to spill into war. During the Third Taiwan Straits crisis of 1995, the PRC conducted missile tests and mobilized troops in coastal areas, and the United States sailed a carrier group through the strait. (Two later incidents, the American bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999 and the 2001 collision between an American reconnaissance plane and Chinese fighter, kept tensions high throughout the period of the 15th Party Congress from 1997 to 2002.)

In Figure 4, I present results that show the marginal effect of combat experience on promotion to the central committee, in periods of high and low foreign threat. The indicator variable for foreign threat takes a value of 1 if a general was eligible for promotion in the period just around the 15th Party Congress in 1997 and zero otherwise.[23] The results

[23] See Table **??** for full regression results.

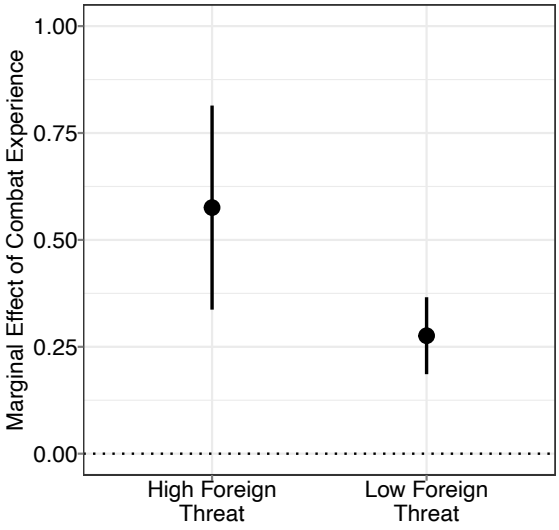


Figure 4: Estimated marginal effect of combat experience on promotion to the Central Committee in periods of high and low foreign threat. Calculated by interacting indicator that general was eligible for promotion during period of foreign threat and indicator of factional tie to a leader. (See appendix Table A6. Test for difference in marginal effect: $p < 0.05$.)

show that during periods of foreign threat, leaders prize generals with combat experience more than in other periods. In periods without foreign threat, 6 percent of PLA generals in the Central Committee have combat experience in Vietnam; that rises to 23 percent in periods of external threat (in a two tailed t-test, $p < 0.05$). Again, I present alternative approaches to analyzing these results in the appendix. Alternative results including the Sino-Vietnamese War as a period of foreign threat (Table A7) are larger and more robust.

9 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 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.[24]

[24]There is a much more work on the role of the police and other organs of repression 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. 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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Online Appendix

Table of Contents

A Descriptive Statistics

Table A1: Sample descriptive statistics, full dataset.

Statistic	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Central committee full member	0.246	0.431	0	1
Central commiteee full or alternate	0.321	0.467	0	1
Full general	0.249	0.433	0	1
Connected to past, current, or future top leader	0.124	0.330	0	1
Xi Jinping network	0.024	0.152	0	1
Hu Jintao network	0.019	0.138	0	1
Jiang Zemin network	0.023	0.149	0	1
Deng Xiaoping network	0.064	0.245	0	1
College or military academy training	0.582	0.493	0	1
College graduate	0.400	0.490	0	1
Military academy gradudate	0.389	0.488	0	1
Combat experience after 1949	0.180	0.384	0	1
Long March veteran	0.268	0.443	0	1
Patron is member of CMC	0.117	0.321	0	1
Served as commissar	0.379	0.485	0	1
Ethnic minority	0.012	0.110	0	1
Princeling	0.017	0.129	0	1
Rural birth	0.275	0.446	0.000	1.000
Age when promoted to deputy	55.065	6.084	27.000	81.000

B Dataset and Coding Rules

B.1 Building the dataset

The full dataset includes information on 1,231 officers who held a position equivalent to or higher than deputy commander or deputy commissar position in a military region, general office, or branch command. Table A2 includes the positions whose officers were included in the dataset. To create and verify information, I consulted a number of publicly available sources. All of these materials are open-source and available in university libraries in the United States and China or through online databases. These source included:

- People's Liberation Army Press, *Biographies of Generals in The People's Liberation Army* (解放军将领传)
- People's Liberation Army Press, *Biographies of High-Ranking Officers in The People's Liberation Army* (中国人民解放军高级将领传)
- The Baidu Baike encyclopedia and the Chinese-language version of Wikipedia
- The People's Liberation Army Daily (解放军报) which is published by the Central Military Commission
- Profiles of generals appearing in Chinese media outlets such as *Pengpai* (澎湃)

In addition I consulted other sources to confirm information, such as party organization histories (组织史资料).

B.2 Coding rules

I code career connections between officers and party leaders and between officers and other officers. To do so, I draw on career biographies collected for each officer down to the level of brigade commander.

- **Tie to paramount leader**: An officer was coded as connected to a party leader if they served in the same military region, military district, or office at the same time. In the case of Xi Jinping, this included service in the Fujian Military District (1998-2002), Zhejiang Military District (2002-2007), Shanghai garrison (2007), and the Nanjing military region between 1998 and 2007; in the case of Hu Jintao, the Chengdu military region between 1985 and 1992 and the Guizhou (1985-7) and Tibet Military Districts (1987-1992); for Jiang Zemin, the Shanghai Garrison and Nanjing Military region between 1985 and 1989; and Deng Xiaoping, the General

Staff Office between 1975 and 1980 and the Second Field Army during the Chinese Civil War.

- **Tie to paramount leader (excluding military region)**: This measure, the results for which appear in the appendix, excludes military region-level ties, focusing on military districts (and for Deng, the Second Field Army and the Chief of Staff office).

- **College or military training**: I code as 1 if an officer graduated from college or a military academy and 0 otherwise. In the case of officers serving in the 17th, 18th, and 19th party congresses, less official information is available, and I cross-reference my data with Victor Shih's political elite dataset.

- **Combat experience after 1949**: This includes service wars and skirmishes with South Korea/The United States, India, the Soviet Union, and Vietnam. Officers were coded 1 if they served in both front line combat or logistical support roles, or if online or official biographies mentioned they had served and it was ambiguous.

- **Domestic threat**: Coded 1 if an officer was an active-duty member of the PLA during the start of the 13th party congress (1987) or 18th party congress (2012).

- **Foreign threat**: Coded 1 if an officer was an active-duty member of the PLA during the start of the 15th party congress (1997).

- **Foreign threat (alternative appendix measure)**: Coded 1 if an officer was an active-duty member of the PLA during the start of the 15th party congress (1997) or during the start of the conflict with Vietnam (1978-9).

- **Age when promoted to deputy**: Age in years when first promoted to deputy commissar/commander.

- **Rural birth**: Coded as 1 if an officer was known to be born in a county city, township, or village, 0 otherwise.

- **Princeling**: Coded as 1 if an officer had a parent who served as a national-level leader, 0 otherwise.

- **Served as commissar**: Coded as 1 if an officer ever held a post as a commissar or deputy commissar, 0 otherwise.

- **Ethnic minority**: Coded as 1 if an officer belongs to a non-Han ethnic group, 0 otherwise.

- **Long March veteran**: Coded as 1 if an officer participated in the 1934-5 Long March.
- **Cohort decade fixed effects**: Fixed effects for the decade of each officer's first year as a deputy region commander/commissar and above.

Table A2: Positions in the PLA Leader Dataset

General Staff Department	Director
	Deputy Directors
	Assistant Directors
General Logistics Department	Director
	Deputy Directors
	Assistant Directors
General Armaments Department	Director
	Deputy Directors
	Political Commissar
	Deputy Political Commissar
Air Force	Commander
	Deputy Commander
	Political Commissar
	Deputy Political Commissar
Navy	Commander
	Deputy Commander
	Political Commissar
	Deputy Political Commissar
2nd Artillery Corps	Commander
	Deputy Commander
	Political Commissar
	Deputy Political Commissar
People's Armed Police	Commander
	Deputy Commander
	Political Commissar
	Deputy Political Commissar
Shenyang Military Region	Political Commissar
	Deputy Political Commissar
	Commander
	Deputy Commander
Beijing Military Region	Political Commissar
	Deputy Political Commissar
	Commander
	Deputy Commander
Lanzhou Military Region	Political Commissar
	Deputy Political Commissar
	Commander
	Deputy Commander
Jinan Military Region	Political Commissar
	Deputy Political Commissar
	Commander
	Deputy Commander

Nanjing Military Region	Political Commissar
(Abolished 2016)	Deputy Political Commissar
	Commander
	Deputy Commander
Guangzhou Military Region	Political Commissar
(Abolished 2016)	Deputy Political Commissar
	Commander
	Deputy Commander
Chengdu Military Region	Political Commissar
(Abolished 2016)	Deputy Political Commissar
	Commander
	Deputy Commander

C Measurement of Foreign Crises

Table A3: Foreign crises involving China (1978 to 2016) from the International Crisis Behavior Dataset Version 14 (Asal and Beardsley, 2007). The Third Taiwan Straits Crisis meets the criteria in Section 3 of being a military confrontation involving a major power.

Year	*Conflict*	*Military Crisis*	*Major Power*
1979	Sino-Vietnam War	✓	
1984	Sino-Vietnam Border Clashes	✓	
1987	Sino-Vietnam Border Clashes	✓	
1988	Sino-Vietnam Island Clashes	✓	
1995-6	Third Taiwan Straits Crisis	✓	✓
2014	China-Vietnam Oil Rig Crisis		

D Regression Tables For Individual Leaders

Table A4: Predictors of promotion to central committee. Generals tied to Deng and, especially, Jiang had success in promotion after their patron had retired. Ties to Hu in the Xi Era cannot be estimated since there are no active generals after 2012 with career ties to Hu.

	Dependent variable:			
	CC: Deng Era	CC: Jiang Era	CC: Hu Era	CC: Xi Era
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Tie to Deng	0.178*	0.319*		
	(0.096)	(0.163)		
Tie to Jiang		0.203*	0.629***	0.021
		(0.112)	(0.170)	(0.297)
Tie to Hu			0.379	
			(0.238)	
Tie to Xi				0.542**
				(0.213)
Constant	0.203***	0.181***	0.121***	0.284***
	(0.033)	(0.023)	(0.027)	(0.041)
Observations	179	317	163	129
R^2	0.019	0.022	0.091	0.062
Adjusted R^2	0.013	0.015	0.080	0.048
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

E Regression Tables for Section 7 and 8

Table A5: Predictors of promotion to the Central Committee: Comparing effect of ties to leaders in periods of high and low domestic threat.

	Dependent variable:	
	Central Committee Member	
	(1)	(2)
Tie to Leader	0.044	−0.007
	(0.057)	(0.055)
Domestic Threat	0.080**	0.050
	(0.040)	(0.043)
Tie to Leader X Domestic Threat	0.359***	0.343***
	(0.096)	(0.090)
Constant	0.193***	1.070***
	(0.020)	(0.235)
Pre-treatment controls		✓
Decade fixed effects		✓
Observations	674	662
R^2	0.066	0.212
Adjusted R^2	0.062	0.190
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

Table A6: Predictors of promotion to the Central Committee: Comparing effect of combat experience in periods of high and low foreign threat.

	Dependent variable:	
	CC Member	
	(1)	(2)
Combat experience after 1949	0.276^{***}	0.182^{***}
	(0.045)	(0.053)
Foreign threat	0.023	-0.035
	(0.048)	(0.059)
Combat experience X Foreign threat	0.293^{**}	0.300^{**}
	(0.129)	(0.128)
Constant	0.177^{***}	1.108^{***}
	(0.018)	(0.232)
Pre-treatment controls		✓
Decade fixed effects		✓
Observations	674	662
R^2	0.083	0.179
Adjusted R^2	0.079	0.156
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

Table A7: Alternative Measure: Foreign threat also includes generals active during the Sino-Vietnam War.

	Dependent variable:	
	CC Member	
	(1)	(2)
Combat Experience After 1949	0.196^{***}	0.138^{**}
	(0.053)	(0.057)
Foreign Threat (Including Vietnam)	0.078^{*}	-0.021
	(0.045)	(0.057)
Foreign Threat X Combat Experience	0.256^{***}	0.310^{***}
	(0.093)	(0.102)
Constant	0.177^{***}	1.245^{***}
	(0.019)	(0.240)
Pre-treatment controls		✓
Decade fixed effects		✓
Observations	674	662
R^2	0.098	0.198
Adjusted R^2	0.093	0.175
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

Table A8: Alternative analysis: Subset analysis by officers active in periods of domestic threat and officers not active during periods of domestic threat.

	Dependent variable:			
	CC Member, Internal Threat		CC Member, No Internal Threat	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Tie to paramount leader	0.272^{***}	0.259^{***}	0.006	-0.059
	(0.074)	(0.078)	(0.051)	(0.048)
College or military academy training		0.097		0.066^{**}
		(0.068)		(0.033)
Combat experience after 1949		0.177^{*}		0.215^{***}
		(0.102)		(0.051)
Constant	0.161^{***}	0.081	0.163^{***}	1.150^{***}
	(0.033)	(0.518)	(0.018)	(0.238)
Pre-treatment controls		✓		
Decade fixed effects		✓		
Observations	180	176	494	486
R^2	0.071	0.160	0.00003	0.218
Adjusted R^2	0.066	0.075	-0.002	0.192
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A9: Alternative analysis: Subset analysis by officers active in periods of foreign threat and officers not active during periods of foreign threat.

	Dependent variable:			
	CC Member, External Threat		CC Member, No External Threat	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Combat experience after 1949	0.569***	0.517***	0.255***	0.182***
	(0.121)	(0.148)	(0.044)	(0.052)
College or military academy training		0.128		0.055
		(0.110)		(0.034)
Tie to paramount leader		−0.112		0.191***
		(0.133)		(0.046)
Constant	0.200***	−0.052	0.166***	1.031***
	(0.044)	(0.757)	(0.018)	(0.239)
Pre-treatment controls		✓		✓
Decade fixed effects		✓		✓
Observations	98	97	576	565
R^2	0.187	0.266	0.054	0.155
Adjusted R^2	0.178	0.190	0.053	0.132
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

F Alternate Specifications: Logit and Fixed Effects

Table A10: Alternate model: Logistic regression. Outcome variable is promotion to a seat on the Central Committee.

	Dependent variable:			
	Full Member of CCP Central Committee			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Tie to paramount leader	0.929***			0.867***
	(0.231)			(0.262)
College or military academy training		0.792***		0.616***
		(0.203)		(0.229)
Combat experience after 1949			1.445***	1.241***
			(0.220)	(0.289)
Long March veteran				0.333
				(0.558)
Served as commissar				0.677***
				(0.207)
Ethnic minority				−0.883
				(1.296)
Princeling				0.014
				(0.615)
Rural birth				−0.114
				(0.274)
Age when promoted to deputy				−0.107***
				(0.027)
Constant	−1.308***	−1.682***	−1.445***	3.911***
	(0.102)	(0.172)	(0.107)	(1.427)
Decade fixed effects				✓
Observations	674	674	674	662
Log Likelihood	−364.044	−363.519	−350.728	−312.137
Akaike Inf. Crit.	732.089	731.038	705.456	656.275
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A11: Alternate model: Logistic regression. Outcome variable is promotion to full general-level position.

	Dependent variable:			
	Promoted to Full General	cc_full_member	general	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Tie to paramount leader	0.901^{***}			0.954^{***}
	(0.230)			(0.266)
College or military academy training		0.792^{***}		0.584^{***}
		(0.203)		(0.224)
Combat experience after 1949			1.452^{***}	1.134^{***}
			(0.219)	(0.292)
Long March veteran				-0.066
				(0.592)
Served as commissar				0.864^{***}
				(0.208)
Ethnic minority				-15.446
				(586.969)
Princeling				-0.710
				(0.716)
Rural birth				0.243
				(0.264)
Age when promoted to deputy				-0.119^{***}
				(0.028)
Constant	-1.237^{***}	-1.682^{***}	-1.377^{***}	5.867^{***}
	(0.100)	(0.172)	(0.105)	(1.669)
Decade fixed effects				✓
Observations	674	674	674	662
Log Likelihood	-373.309	-363.519	-359.119	-311.889
Akaike Inf. Crit.	750.619	731.038	722.238	655.779
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A12: Alternate model: Individual-year panel of generals with individual fixed effects. Connections to current and prior leader vary by year on whether the leader they are connected to is in office or not.

	Dependent variable:			
	Central Committee Member		General Rank	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Connected to current paramount leader	0.173**	0.180**	0.210**	0.265***
	(0.072)	(0.075)	(0.090)	(0.084)
Connected to prior paramount leader		0.042		0.321**
		(0.123)		(0.159)
Individual fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	7,831	7,831	7,831	7,831
R^2	0.711	0.711	0.741	0.743
Adjusted R^2	0.670	0.670	0.704	0.706
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

G Alternate Measures of Factional Ties and Promotion

Table A13: Alternate outcome: Promoted to member of Central Military Commission. OLS Regression.

	Dependent variable:			
	Promoted to Central Military Commission			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Tie to paramount leader	0.071^{***}			0.050^{**}
	(0.027)			(0.025)
College or military academy training		0.074^{***}		0.046^{***}
		(0.018)		(0.018)
Combat experience after 1949			0.096^{***}	0.057^{**}
			(0.024)	(0.027)
Long March veteran				0.050
				(0.048)
Served as commissar				-0.014
				(0.017)
Ethnic minority				-0.087
				(0.095)
Princeling				-0.021
				(0.054)
Rural birth				0.035
				(0.022)
Age when promoted to deputy				-0.008^{***}
				(0.002)
Constant	0.049^{***}	0.012	0.042^{***}	1.027^{***}
	(0.010)	(0.014)	(0.010)	(0.121)
Decade fixed effects				✓
Observations	674	674	674	662
R^2	0.010	0.024	0.023	0.229
Adjusted R^2	0.009	0.022	0.022	0.211
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A14: Alternate outcome: Ordinal promotion measure (3=CMC, 2=General Office, 1=Commander, 0=Deputy).

	Dependent variable:			
	Ordinal promotion measure) (3=CMC, 2=General Office, 1=Commander, 0=Deputy)			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Tie to paramount leader	0.366^{***}			0.255^{***}
	(0.096)			(0.090)
College or military academy training		0.294^{***}		0.195^{***}
		(0.069)		(0.067)
Combat experience after 1949			0.548^{***}	0.280^{**}
			(0.146)	(0.136)
Long March veteran				-0.0004
				(0.181)
Patron is member of CMC				0.283^{***}
				(0.096)
Served as commissar				0.213^{***}
				(0.065)
Ethnic minority				-0.698^{*}
				(0.360)
Princeling				-0.131
				(0.205)
Rural birth				0.113
				(0.084)
Age when promoted to deputy				-0.044^{***}
				(0.009)
Constant	0.405^{***}	0.275^{***}	0.426^{***}	3.863^{***}
	(0.036)	(0.055)	(0.035)	(0.457)
Decade fixed effects				✓
Observations	674	674	674	662
R^2	0.021	0.026	0.021	0.211
Adjusted R^2	0.020	0.025	0.019	0.192
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A15: Alternate explanatory variable: Exclude military region ties from leader tie measure. Outcome is Central Committee Membership.

	Dependent variable:			
	Full Member of CCP Central Committee			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Tie to paramount leader (excluding military region ties)	0.249^{***} (0.069)			0.198^{***} (0.067)
College or military academy training		0.134^{***} (0.034)		0.086^{***} (0.033)
Combat experience after 1949			0.309^{***} (0.043)	0.244^{***} (0.050)
Long March veteran				0.064 (0.091)
Served as commissar				0.111^{***} (0.032)
Ethnic minority				-0.151 (0.180)
Princeling				0.029 (0.103)
Rural birth				-0.021 (0.042)
Age when promoted to deputy				-0.020^{***} (0.004)
Constant	0.226^{***} (0.017)	0.157^{***} (0.026)	0.191^{***} (0.017)	1.257^{***} (0.229)
Decade fixed effects				✓
Observations	674	674	674	662
R^2	0.019	0.023	0.070	0.165
Adjusted R^2	0.018	0.022	0.069	0.146
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A16: Alternate explanatory variable: Leader ties exclude military region ties. Outcome is promotion to a full general-level position.

	Dependent variable:			
	Promoted to Full General-Level Position			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Tie to paramount leader (excluding military region ties)	0.210^{***} (0.070)			0.146^{**} (0.067)
College or military academy training		0.122^{***} (0.034)		0.084^{**} (0.033)
Combat experience after 1949			0.317^{***} (0.044)	0.216^{***} (0.051)
Long March veteran				-0.007 (0.091)
Served as commissar				0.136^{***} (0.032)
Ethnic minority				-0.398^{**} (0.181)
Princeling				-0.086 (0.103)
Rural birth				0.035 (0.042)
Age when promoted to deputy				-0.020^{***} (0.004)
Constant	0.240^{***} (0.017)	0.176^{***} (0.027)	0.201^{***} (0.018)	1.476^{***} (0.231)
Decade fixed effects				✓
Observations	674	674	674	662
R^2	0.013	0.019	0.072	0.178
Adjusted R^2	0.012	0.017	0.070	0.159
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A17: Alternate explanatory variable and outcome: Leader ties exclude military region ties. Outcome is ordinal measure of promotion (3=CMC, 2=General Office, 1=Commander, 0=Deputy).

	Dependent variable:			
	Ordinal promotion measure) (3=CMC, 2=General Office, 1=Commander, 0=Deputy)			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Tie to paramount leader (excluding military region ties)	0.604^{***} (0.142)			0.428^{***} (0.134)
College or military academy training		0.294^{***} (0.069)		0.210^{***} (0.066)
Combat experience after 1949			0.547^{***} (0.090)	0.345^{***} (0.101)
Long March veteran				0.047 (0.181)
Served as commissar				0.192^{***} (0.064)
Ethnic minority				-0.724^{**} (0.360)
Princeling				-0.078 (0.205)
Rural birth				0.113 (0.084)
Age when promoted to deputy				-0.043^{***} (0.008)
Constant	0.421^{***} (0.035)	0.275^{***} (0.055)	0.369^{***} (0.036)	3.707^{***} (0.458)
Decade fixed effects				✓
Observations	674	674	674	662
R^2	0.026	0.026	0.052	0.208
Adjusted R^2	0.025	0.025	0.051	0.189
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A18: Alternate explanatory variable and outcome: Leader ties exclude military region ties. Outcome is promotion to the Central Military Commission.

	Dependent variable:			
	Promoted to Central Military Commission			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Tie to paramount leader (excluding military region ties)	0.151***			0.110***
	(0.038)			(0.035)
College or military academy training		0.074***		0.046***
		(0.018)		(0.017)
Combat experience after 1949			0.096***	0.057**
			(0.024)	(0.026)
Long March veteran				0.053
				(0.048)
Served as commissar				−0.012
				(0.017)
Ethnic minority				−0.090
				(0.095)
Princeling				−0.013
				(0.054)
Rural birth				0.034
				(0.022)
Age when promoted to deputy				−0.009***
				(0.002)
Constant	0.049***	0.012	0.042***	1.026***
	(0.009)	(0.014)	(0.010)	(0.120)
Decade fixed effects				✓
Observations	674	674	674	662
R^2	0.023	0.024	0.023	0.236
Adjusted R^2	0.022	0.022	0.022	0.219
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

H Analysis Excluding Deng-Era PLA

Table A19: Main results: Promotion to CCP Central Committee among post-Deng (post-1989) PLA leaders only.

	Dependent variable:			
	Full Member of CCP Central Committee			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Tie to paramount leader	0.150***			0.105**
	(0.052)			(0.050)
College or military academy training		0.155***		0.112***
		(0.036)		(0.036)
Combat experience after 1949			0.316***	0.178**
			(0.062)	(0.069)
Long March veteran				−0.120
				(0.288)
Served as commissar				0.091***
				(0.035)
Ethnic minority				−0.085
				(0.199)
Princeling				0.019
				(0.105)
Rural birth				0.002
				(0.048)
Age when promoted to deputy				−0.020***
				(0.005)
Constant	0.202***	0.129***	0.195***	1.455***
	(0.019)	(0.028)	(0.018)	(0.300)
Decade fixed effects				✓
Observations	535	535	535	526
R^2	0.015	0.033	0.046	0.149
Adjusted R^2	0.014	0.031	0.044	0.130
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A20: Main results: Promotion to full general-level position among post-Deng (post-1989) PLA leaders only.

	Dependent variable:			
	Promoted to General			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Tie to paramount leader	0.174^{***}			0.150^{***}
	(0.052)			(0.050)
College or military academy training		0.125^{***}		0.110^{***}
		(0.037)		(0.037)
Combat experience after 1949			0.333^{***}	0.161^{**}
			(0.063)	(0.069)
Long March veteran				0.440
				(0.289)
Served as commissar				0.120^{***}
				(0.035)
Ethnic minority				-0.390^{*}
				(0.200)
Princeling				-0.111
				(0.106)
Rural birth				0.053
				(0.048)
Age when promoted to deputy				-0.022^{***}
				(0.005)
Constant	0.204^{***}	0.152^{***}	0.199^{***}	1.518^{***}
	(0.019)	(0.029)	(0.019)	(0.301)
Decade fixed effects				✓
Observations	535	535	535	526
R^2	0.021	0.021	0.051	0.155
Adjusted R^2	0.019	0.019	0.049	0.135
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01