

Delegated Diplomacy: Why China Uses the Military for Face-to-Face Exchanges

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Abstract

Why do states engage in face-to-face diplomacy? Existing research finds that diplomatic meetings allow statesmen to assess intentions and maintain interstate relationships. We instead argue and empirically demonstrate that states can use face-to-face diplomacy to improve material capabilities. Specifically, heads of state can acquire and distribute defense information and technology by delegating face-to-face diplomacy to military actors, leveraging the latter's expertise during the meeting. Introducing original, individual-level data on China's diplomatic exchanges, we provide the first systematic evidence on why states opt into military diplomacy. Our data further show that China's military was responsible for nearly *half* of all its high-level public diplomacy in recent years, illustrating the importance of examining the Chinese case. We extend our statistical analysis by examining recently declassified government materials and meeting transcripts from the United States and China.

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1 Introduction

In December 2017, the United States released a new National Security Strategy, voicing rising concerns that China seeks to “challenge American power, influence, and interests” and “erode American security and prosperity,” in part through “building the most capable and well-funded military in the world” (White House 2017). For years, an important component of US apprehension regarding China’s military modernization stemmed from its “increased military-to-military exchanges” (Department of Defense 2007) that allowed China to “observe and study foreign military command structures, unit formations, and operational training” (Department of Defense 2017). Indeed, China now assigns such importance to military exchanges that party ideology includes an official interpretation of Xi Jinping’s “Military Diplomacy Thought” (习近平军事外交思想) (Li 2014).

China’s military diplomacy presents a puzzle for political science: why do states delegate face-to-face diplomacy to non-diplomats, such as the military? Existing research argues that states use “cheap-talk” diplomatic exchanges to allow statesmen to tease out intentions through social or psychological cues or to maintain routine dialogue through bureaucrats, such as foreign ministers and career diplomats. Yet, if states only derive benefits from exchanges in these ways, face-to-face meetings should remain the bailiwick of the head of state and her diplomatic envoys. Put another way, existing frameworks struggle to explain why states delegate diplomatic responsibilities to the military—or any other non-diplomatic bureaucrat for that matter. This is not for lack of observation; political scientists have long noted the existence of military diplomacy (Morgenthau 1948). Even Machiavelli described how military officers disguised as valets would accompany the ambassadors of ancient Europe (Machiavelli 1965). However, political science lacks a systematic explanation for why military diplomacy occurs.

In this paper, we make two contributions. First, we develop a theory that explains how states can use face-to-face diplomatic exchanges to improve their military capabilities through specialized information transfer. Connecting the literature on interstate diplomacy

and bureaucratic politics, we argue that heads of state have incentives to delegate to non-diplomats when the latter possess expertise that improves the quality of information transmitted during the exchange. Diplomatic delegation to military actors allows the state to gather specialized information and knowledge regarding foreign military technologies, doctrine, and strategy. As state demand for these types of information increases, military agents are more likely to participate in face-to-face exchanges.

Second, we introduce an original, individual-level dataset on China's diplomatic exchanges that provides the first systematic evidence of why states engage in military diplomacy. Compiling information from foreign-language materials released by the Chinese government, our sample records all public diplomatic exchanges between 2002 and 2010 conducted by any national-level Chinese official—civilian or military. For each exchange, we code the status (civilian or military) and bureaucratic affiliation (head of state, foreign minister, or military) of participating actors. Increased data granularity improves on past empirical studies diplomatic travel, allowing us to show how military diplomacy evinces patterns distinct from that of the chief executive and other civilian bureaucrats. In addition, these data reveal the scope of China's colossal military diplomacy regime. Remarkably, in recent years a few dozen senior Chinese generals participated in nearly as many public face-to-face encounters with foreign officials as all of China's national-level civilian leaders combined.

Consistent with our theory of diplomatic delegation, our results show that China is more likely to bring military bureaucrats into diplomacy with target states possessing three characteristics that require the military's expertise: advanced military capabilities that China might emulate, demand for US or PRC military arms exports, and—to a lesser extent—propensity for interstate crisis with China. While data availability restricts our statistical analysis to the early-2000s, we leverage recently declassified archival records, government documents, and aggregated articles in Chinese official newspapers to show that our theoretical framework remains valid across a broader time period. Our theory and results contribute to our understanding both of the material reasons why states opt into face-to-face

diplomacy, as well as the implications that China’s impressive military diplomacy program has for its political, economic, and military rise.

2 A Theory of Diplomatic Delegation

Why do states engage in face-to-face diplomacy? Existing research explores various facets of this question, including: (1) how cheap-talk diplomacy can engender credible communication between states (Sartori 2005; Trager 2010; Kinne 2014; Trager 2015; McManus 2017; Trager 2017; McManus 2018); (2) how leaders leverage emotional and behavioral cues during diplomatic exchanges to assess intentions (Holmes 2013; Hall and Yarhi-Milo 2012; Rathbun 2014; Holmes and Yarhi-Milo 2017; Holmes 2018); and (3) when states are likely to opt into diplomatic exchanges,¹ which we define as a bilateral event in which an incumbent state actor visits or hosts her counterpart from another state for purposes of face-to-face communication (Kastner and Saunders 2012; Potter 2013).

In contrast to previous research, we shift the analytical focus from *when* states opt into diplomatic exchanges with certain countries to *who* they utilize as representatives in the exchange. Apart from a few exceptions, this diplomatic division of labor remains unexplored in the existing literature. While recent scholarship notes the role that agents play in interstate diplomacy, these new and important studies center on career civilian diplomats, namely foreign ministers and civil servants. For example, Lindsey (2017) argues that interstate credibility concerns incentivize states to use career diplomats to send signals during crises. Lebovic and Saunders (2016) examine differences in the patterns of diplomatic exchange executed by the US President and the Secretary of State. We build on this theoretical intuition that agents matter for diplomacy, but instead examine the set of incentives for

¹In our definition, diplomatic exchange does not include phone calls, telegrams, or other official forms of communication between heads of state or their civilian or military delegates (e.g., a *démarche*). Our definition also restricts military activities often associated with “coercive diplomacy” (Fearon 1994), such as military mobilizations or demonstrations, including deployment of peacekeeping forces, military trainers, and naval vessels (port calls).

heads of state to delegate diplomacy to non-diplomatic agents.

Our theory makes three assumptions.² First, following the existing literature, we assume there are informational incentives to conduct diplomatic exchanges. Heads of state participate at least in part to send and receive information. Second, we assume that heads of state face time and resource constraints. Time invested in a diplomatic exchange decreases time that might otherwise be invested in re-election campaigns or other domestic political agendas. Consistent with the literature on organizational design (March and Simon 1958; Cyert and March 1963) and principal-agent models (Bendor, Glazer and Hammond 2001; Gailmard and Patty 2012), resource constraints incentivize chief executives to delegate responsibilities, especially for routinized exchanges of information to actors with similar sets of expertise and responsibilities.

Third, we stipulate that heads of state can choose between two types of agents to whom to delegate: diplomatic and non-diplomatic. The first option is perhaps the most straightforward. Heads of state can delegate routine exchanges to a professional diplomatic bureaucracy, such as the foreign ministry. The diplomatic bureaucracy can thus maintain a broader set of interstate relationships than the head of state could alone. The more routine a diplomatic exchange, the more likely the head of state is to delegate it to the diplomatic bureaucrat. This intuition mirrors the empirical finding in Lebovic and Saunders (2016) that the US Secretaries of State have historically engaged with a more diffuse set of diplomatic partners than the President. As such, we expect that the pattern of exchanges conducted by professional diplomats will be widely dispersed, rather than correlated with states possessing particular political or economic characteristics.

H1: Diplomatic bureaucrats are more likely to conduct exchanges with a broad range of states.

Alternatively, heads of state can delegate diplomacy to agents other than diplomatic

²Our theory of diplomatic delegation is not intended to be comprehensive. In the conclusion, we preview how future research might explore other explanations for why states delegate diplomacy.

bureaucrats. We argue that heads of state are more likely to pursue this strategy when non-diplomatic agents possess expertise relevant to the exchange that professional diplomats lack. States possess a panoply of bureaucratic actors—such as defense, intelligence, trade, and environment—whose position within the bureaucratic division of labor creates informational advantages (Bendor and Hammond 1992; Carpenter 2001). Such expertise improves the reception of specialized information transmitted during some types of diplomatic exchanges. For example, the US Trade Representative routinely negotiates trade deals in coordination with, but apart from the US State Department. Other US bureaucracies, such as the Drug Enforcement Agency, Department of Energy, and Environment Protection Agency all participate in diplomatic exchanges—but typically when the substance of the talks relates to the organization’s expertise.³

Military actors constitute one set of “non-diplomatic diplomats.”⁴ Why would heads of state delegate diplomacy to military actors? We argue that delegation is more likely when states need defense information or technology, the collection of which the military’s expertise helps to improve. Specifically, in contrast to diplomacy by the head of state or other civilian diplomats designed to assess intentions and maintain relationships, military diplomacy helps assess the military balance of power and gain material advantages. As the substance of the desired interstate exchange shifts from the expertise of civilian diplomats to specialized expertise in defense affairs, heads of state should be more likely to seek out military officials to lead the exchange.

This intuition is at the core of what historians of military organizations have long noted about military diplomats. For example, Alfred Vagts observes how states began to

³For an overview on different types of diplomacy, including economic, business, environmental, and educational, see Constantinou, Kerr and Sharp (2016).

⁴Military diplomacy has not received a systematic treatment in the existing literature. However, related and notable work includes: (1) Atkinson (2006), who examines the effects of military-to-military contacts on the propensity for democratization; (2) Zisk (1999), who provides a descriptive overview of the persistence of post-Cold War military-to-military ties between the United States and Russia; and (3) Henke (2017), who examines the role of US multilateral military coalitions.

bring military officers into embassies in the nineteenth century to supplement the information collection activities of civilian ambassadors:

Under simple conditions the ambassador was able, actually or presumably, to do the necessary spying himself, but when military and naval developments came to demand greater expertise, governments either send out military men as ambassadors or provided the civilian ambassador with expert assistance, the “spy of the spy” [...]. (Vagts 1967, p. 3)

In his description of interstate diplomacy, Morgenthau (1948, p. 510) similarly notes how “high-ranking members of the armed services are delegated to the different diplomatic missions” where they would collect “information about actual and planned armaments, new weapons, the military potential, military organization, and the war plans of the countries concerned.” Even Machiavelli described how European military officers would accompany civilian ambassadors, but “dressed like the rest of their attendants” in order to covertly assess the “strengths and weaknesses” of adversary militaries (Machiavelli 1965, p. 171).

In the modern context, the scope of military diplomacy is wider still. For example, the permanent members of the UN Security Council have all developed diplomatic initiatives that leverage defense and military actors. In 2017, the UK Ministry of Defense and Foreign Office released an *International Defense Engagement Strategy*. France’s 2013 *White Paper on Defence and National Security* describes its defense dialogues, exchanges, and general cooperation efforts in the Middle East, East Asia, South America, and Europe. In the case of the United States, Krieger, Souma and Nexon (2015) show how “formal mechanisms for the practice of diplomacy” extend to senior US military officers, who frequently lead diplomatic delegations. Indeed, the 2014 US *Quadrennial Defense Review* describes that the Defense Department aims to “positively influence global events through [its] proactive engagement.” Even the 2014 Russian *Military Doctrine* describes a defined responsibility for “military-political and military-technical cooperation” with other states.

When exactly might military expertise improve a diplomatic exchange? First, delegating to military agents may assist the head of state in gathering defense information. Military exchanges often feature tours of foreign military bases, briefings on foreign military doctrines, and demonstrations of foreign military technologies. In November 2000, the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Chinese Navy, Rear Admiral Zhang Zhannan, toured an Aegis-equipped cruiser at a US naval base in Honolulu. At roughly the same time, the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Henry Shelton, observed a People’s Liberation Army (PLA) brigade training exercise at the Combined Arms Training Center in Nanjing (Kan 2014, p. 64). Outside of US-China relations, one Russian military officer suggested that military contacts with the United States in the 1990s provided an opportunity to acquire “useful practical experience” (Zisk 1999, p. 589). The exchange provides an opportunity to learn from other military organizations. As such, we expect that heads of state should delegate diplomacy to military actors more frequently when the target country possesses more advanced military technology and doctrine.

H2a: Military bureaucrats are more likely to conduct exchanges with countries possessing advanced defense technologies.

Second, delegating to military agents may assist the head of state in negotiating military arms transfers. States may pursue military arms sales to improve their own material capabilities or to selectively improve the material capabilities of strategic partners (Kinsella 2002; Golde and Tishler 2004). Alternatively, they may simply seek to profit by exporting military technology and supplies to less advanced militaries. In both cases, because arms sales have such important consequences for the balance of power, they often require careful negotiation and implementation by experts. Consider just a few examples. In the mid-1990s, South Korea and Israel signed a Memorandum of Understanding establishing a Korea-Israel Joint Defense Industry Cooperation Committee to regularly meet to exchange defense information and support the Israeli sale of approximately 187 million USD worth of defense equipment to the Korean side (Ningthoujam 2017). Bilateral defense exchanges between

Indian and Iran in the early-2000s helped the latter maintain and upgrade military aircraft (Hathaway 2004). Finally, during the 1980s, senior US officials, including Defense Secretary Casper Weinberger, conducted military exchanges with China to discuss the sale of transport helicopters, naval destroyer engines, artillery production facilities, torpedoes and radars (Kan 2014). Thus, we expect that heads of state should delegate diplomacy to military actors more frequently with countries to which it exports or from which it imports military arms.

H2b: Military bureaucrats are more likely to conduct exchanges with countries that are military arms trade partners.

Third, delegating to military agents may allow both parties to enter into formal or informal agreements on mutually acceptable military operations during peacetime. For example, the 1989 *Dangerous Military Activities Agreement* signed between the United States and the Soviet Union after rounds of military diplomacy established protocols and rules of engagement for naval and air patrols and exercises during peacetime—as well as standard operating procedures for communication between military commanders conducting such operations. As the principal Soviet negotiator, General Anatolii Boliatko, described, the purpose of the agreement was to “reduce the possibility of incidents which result from dangerous military activities” (Zisk 1999). After a 1987 Indian military exercise was mistakenly perceived by Pakistan as a mobilization for war, both sides signed a mutual agreement for future notification of operational training events “in order to prevent any crisis situation arising due to misreading of the other side’s intentions.”⁵ As the propensity for military crises increases, states have increased in incentives to opt into such agreements. As such, we expect that heads of state should more frequently delegate diplomacy to military actors for bilateral relationships in which there has been a recent militarized dispute.

H2c: Military bureaucrats are more likely to conduct exchanges with countries with which they have had recent militarized disputes.

⁵*Agreement on Advance Notice on Military Exercises, Manoeuvres and Troop Movements.*, April 6, 1991.

In most countries, the division of expertise between diplomats and military officers remains relatively constant over time. Military officers will generally possess more professional training and expertise related to defense information, arms sales, and procedures for military operations than the chief executive or foreign ministry personnel—much less other government bureaucrats. We thus expect that underlying trends in a state’s demand for defense information or technology, as well as propensity for interstate military crisis, will drive temporal variation in the frequency of military diplomacy. That is, the above hypotheses collectively provide general predictions regarding when we would expect to observe shifts in the frequency of diplomatic exchanges featuring military actors. If our hypotheses are true, we would expect the overall level of military diplomacy to rise in step with a state’s demand for defense information, military arms sales, and propensity for interstate military crises.

Finally, we consider two alternate hypotheses. First, when heads of state lack political power to monitor or punish agents (Feaver 2003; Saunders 2017), military actors may use bargaining advantages to pressure heads of state to approve diplomatic exchanges that improve individual or organizational benefits, such as economic profits, professional promotion, or social prestige. Military agents might even make unilateral decisions regarding diplomacy. In a well-known example, Douglas MacArthur took unauthorized meetings with Taiwan’s head of state, Chiang Kai-shek, in August 1950 during the lead up to China’s intervention on the Korean peninsula (Cumings 1981). This type of behavior may be even more likely in authoritarian regimes, where military elites often play a more influential role in politics (Weeks 2012; Geddes, Frantz and Wright 2014). A second alternative hypothesis is that heads of state may prefer to maintain consistency across agent type. For example, the existing literature argues that the decision to opt into diplomatic exchange communicates meaningful information (Trager 2010; Mastro forthcoming). As a result, heads of state may prefer to keep these signals uniform. If true, we would expect to observe similarity in the pattern of exchanges conducted by the chief executive and all her agents.

3 Data and Empirical Strategy

We test these hypotheses using an original dataset of Chinese civilian and military diplomacy from 2002 to 2010. In this section, we discuss case selection criteria, describe data collection procedures, and provide a brief descriptive overview of the data. We then employ these data in regression analysis, and complement our statistical analysis with archival and documentary evidence that supports our interpretation of the results.

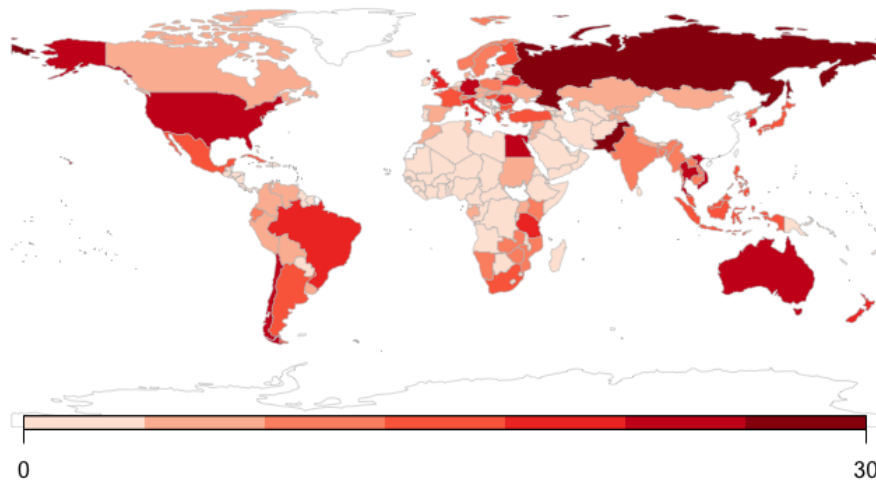
We focus the analysis on China for three reasons. First, our assumptions limit our theoretical scope to countries with at least minimal national defense requirements and in which military actors possess a reputation for expertise (our theory does not explain patterns in Costa Rica’s diplomacy). However, with a rapidly modernizing, but already professional military, China meets both scope criteria (Shambaugh 2002). Second, China’s military diplomacy displays salient temporal and cross-national variation that begs for explanation, highlighted in Figure 1.⁶ Finally, selecting China presents the additional benefit of improving empirical understanding of an increasingly prominent, non-Western power. This is particularly valuable given that much of the extant research on diplomacy in international relations focuses on Western democracies.

We collected data on Chinese diplomacy from two official government sources.⁷ Data on civilian diplomacy were collected from the appendices of the *Yearbook of China’s Diplomacy* (中国外交年鉴), entitled “Record of Important Activities in Chinese Foreign Relations” (中国外交重要活动记事) and published annually by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Senior civilian diplomatic exchanges have been included in each yearbook since 2002. Civilian participants include foreign minister and vice ministers, state councilors, members of the Political Bureau, Political Bureau Standing Committee, National People’s Congress,

⁶Figures depicting the geographic distribution of PRC civilian diplomatic exchanges are found in the online appendix.

⁷The full set of coding definitions, rules and procedures used to construct the dataset is provided in the appendix.

Figure 1: Geographic Distribution of PRC Military Diplomacy, 2002-2010^a



^aSource: PRC Defense White Papers. The x-axis scale represents the number of total military exchanges with a country over the study period.

and the Supreme People’s Court. Data on military diplomacy were gathered from the *China National Defense White Paper* (中国的国防白皮书), a biannual document released by the Ministry of National Defense. Military participants include defense ministers, Central Military Commission vice chairmen, chiefs, deputy chiefs of general staff, and other senior commanders and political commissars. Routine interactions between embassy personnel, as well as between sub-national (e.g., provincial, city or military region) officials are not included in the sample. Unfortunately, as the Ministry of National Defense ceased publication of its diplomatic exchanges after 2010, we restrict our study period in order to create a comparable sample. The online appendix reports top recipients of each type of diplomacy.

Table 1 reports basic descriptive statistics for China’s diplomatic exchanges by type within the study period. Immediately striking is the frequency of military participation. While civilian diplomacy outpaces military diplomacy, the latter constitutes nearly half (45%) of total observed exchanges—a high percentage considering the the small fraction of the national government elite that the military constitutes. For example, as of 2018, the National People’s Congress had 2,980 members, including all members of the elite Political

Bureau and Central Committee (Mengjie 2018). By comparison, there are approximately 30-40 national-level military positions who commonly participate in diplomatic exchanges.

Table 1: PRC Civilian and Military Diplomacy, 2002-2010

Category	Visits	Hosts	Total	(%)
Civilian				
Head of State	86	351	437	(17.6%)
Foreign Minister	159	229	388	(15.6%)
Other Civilian	437	109	546	(21.9%)
<i>Sub-Total</i>	682	689	1,371	(55.1%)
Military				
Defense Minister	67	202	269	(10.8%)
Other Military	491	355	846	(34.0%)
<i>Sub-Total</i>	558	557	1,115	(44.9%)
Total	1,240	1,246	2,486	

Note: “Head of State,” “Foreign Minister,” and “Defense Minister” refer exclusively to the top leaders in each category. As such, vice heads of state, foreign affairs and defense ministers are included in “Other Civilian.”

Because we draw data recording civilian and military exchanges from different materials, it is possible that this finding reflects incomplete reporting by the Chinese government. However, the political motives for under-reporting civilian diplomacy are unclear. If anything, the China’s official line that “the party controls the gun” (a traditional slogan describing military subordination to civilian authority) should create incentives to over-report civilian and under-report military diplomacy (Shambaugh 2002). While data generation for civilian diplomacy may reflect a modicum of bureaucratic ignorance (i.e. the Ministry of Foreign Affairs might simply be unaware of some exchanges), a comparison between the diplomatic activities of the foreign minister (388 exchanges) and defense minister (269 exchanges) still suggests extremely high levels of military participation. In addition, while we are unable to account for the unknown share of diplomacy China conducts in secret (Carson and Yarhi-Milo 2017), we have limited reason to believe that civilian diplomacy is more prone to secrecy than its military variant. If anything, the opposite argument can easily be made, given the reputation for secrecy in military organizations. Finally, even if civilian

exchanges are under-reported, the frequency of China’s military diplomacy alone—almost one exchange every two days—is sufficiently high to merit investigation.

DEPENDENT VARIABLE

Our dependent variable is a count of diplomatic exchanges (visit or host) between the People’s Republic of China and country i in year t . We create three variables each separately measuring the frequency of China’s diplomatic exchanges that featured one of three types of incumbent, national-level officials in the Chinese government: (1) the head of state, (2) Minister of Foreign Affairs, and (3) senior members of the People’s Liberation Army. Specifically, HOS counts the number of Chinese diplomatic exchanges conducted by the head of state, whether an outward visit by China’s head of state or an incoming visit by a foreign head of state. MFA and MIL are analogously coded for foreign ministry and military actors.⁸

EXPLANATORY VARIABLES

Defense Information Collection. Our theory predicts that the Chinese head of state should be more likely to delegate diplomacy to military actors when the target country possesses technologies and doctrines that China can emulate in order to increase its own military capability. We measure the sophistication of defense technology by total MILITARY SPENDING, the annual estimate of defense expenditures in 2010 US dollars in the National Material Capabilities (v.5) dataset, using its logarithm in order to correct for potential outliers. We expect that military spending will be positively correlated with military diplomatic exchanges (**H2a**), but not with those led by the head of state or Ministry of Foreign Affairs (**H1**).

PRC Arms Trade. Our theory predicts that military diplomacy should be more likely when China itself engages in arms trade with the target country. We test this by

⁸Previous studies exploring diplomatic travel focus on outward visits only ([Kastner and Saunders 2012](#); [Lebovic and Saunders 2016](#)). In the appendix, we run analogous tests using only outward visits.

including terms for PRC ARMS EXPORTS and PRC ARMS IMPORTS, separate annual measures of the total value in 2010 USD of military technologies exported to and imported from the target state. As with our measures of defense information collection, we expect to observe a positive correlation only between PRC arms trade and military diplomacy (**H2b**). Because arms trade markets are competitive, however, we also expect to observe competition between China and other leading arms exporters. To capture market competition, we include a separate measure for the arms exports from the United States. US ARMS TRANSFERS measures the annual total value in 2010 USD of military technologies that the United States exported to the target country. We expect China’s military diplomacy to be positively correlated with competition for arms exports.

Crisis Management. Our theory predicts that military diplomacy will be more likely when there is a high propensity for interstate crisis with the target state. Past research documents that since the early-2000s, China has been involved in a number of non-violent military incidents. For example, a US spy plane collided with a Chinese fighter jet near Hainan Island in 2001 and the USNS *Impeccable* had a near collision with Chinese ships in 2009 (Mastro 2011). We measure crisis propensity using the Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) dataset (v.4.1). MILITARIZED DISPUTE is a binary measure recording if there was a MID between China and the target country in the previous year. We expect to observe a positive relationship between disputes and military diplomacy (**H2c**).⁹

Institutional Routine & Bureaucratic Routine. An alternative hypothesis is that military leaders autonomously select into exchanges in order to pursue individual or parochial interests. Following Lebovic and Saunders (2016), we test this by including a one-year lagged term for each of the three types of diplomatic exchange as a plausible proxy for institutional oversight. Specifically, if the head of state has strong institutional oversight over the mili-

⁹To address past critiques of the MIDs dataset, particularly incidents involving China (Johnston 2012), we take a number of precautionary steps. First, we examine each dispute narrative to confirm the other country participants. Second, we independently confirm each incident through a search of global newspapers. Authors’ data from *Factiva* available upon request.

Table 2: List of Variables and Data Sources

Variable	Measure	Source
Diplomatic Exchange	1 = diplomatic exchange;	Authors' data
- President	0 = no diplomatic exchange	
- Foreign Minister		
- Military		
Arms Transfers	arms imports & exports in logged USD (2010)	SIPRI Arms Transfers Dataset
- China		
- United States		
Military Spending	defense expenditure in logged USD (2010)	National Material Capabilities (v.5)
Militarized Dispute	MID with China	Correlates of War MID Dataset (v.4.1)
UNGA Ideal Point Distance	ideal point distance from PRC	Bailey, Strezhnev and Voeten (2015)
Bilateral Trade	imports/exports w/PRC in logged USD (2010)	International Trade Dataset (v.4)
GDP per capita	GDP per capita in logged USD (2010)	World Development Indicators
Taiwan Recognition	1 = diplomatic recognition of Taiwan	Rich (2009); extended by authors
	0 = no diplomatic recognition of Taiwan	
Regime Type	polity score	Polity IV Dataset (v.2016)
Major Power	1= great power;	State Membership Dataset (v.2011)
	0 = all other states	
US Defense Pact	1 = defense pact w/US	COW Alliance Data (v.4.1)
	0 = no defense pact w/US	
Region	North America, South America, etc.	State Membership Dataset (v.2011)
Geographic Distance	weighted distances (by major city), logged	CEPII
Lagged Exchange	1 = exchange in previous year	Authors' data
	0 = no exchange in previous year	

tary, we would expect Chinese military diplomacy to more closely follow that of the head of state. A positive relationship between lagged head of state and military exchanges is consistent with a civil-military relationship in which military agents follow orders. On the other hand, a negative correlation may suggest the opposite. These lagged variables also allow us to further test whether civilian diplomacy is more routine than military diplomacy (**H1**). We expect military diplomacy to concentrate on a smaller, more focused set of counterpart countries and to occur repeatedly in this countries. In contrast, head of state and MFA diplomacy should be more temporally and geographically dispersed. All explanatory variables, as well as the set of control variables below, are lagged by one year.

CONTROL VARIABLES

We include a number of standard controls. United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) IDEAL POINT DISTANCE, a measure of dyadic similarity in UNGA voting behavior, proxies for the similarity of economic and political preferences, which may nudge states toward

closer diplomatic relationships. In addition, we include a separate measure for whether the target country diplomatically recognizes Taiwan, given the traditional importance China assigns to the “One China Policy.” `BILATERAL TRADE` with China reports the annual sum of bilateral exports and imports with China in 2010 US dollars from the Correlates of War International Trade dataset (v.4). States with strong trade ties may have incentives to engage diplomatically to maintain or improve economic relations. `REGIME TYPE`, based on Polity IV scores, is a continuous variable scaled between autocracy and democracy based on various regime characteristics. States with dissimilar political institutions may be less inclined to diplomatically engage due to domestic political or ideological constraints. Finally, we control for the target state’s `GDP PER CAPITA`, `MAJOR POWER` status, whether it is part of a `US DEFENSE PACT`, its geographic `REGION`, and `GEOGRAPHIC DISTANCE` to China. Table 2 summarizes our dependent and explanatory variable measures and the source used to construct each.

4 Results and Discussion

In this section we first discuss the results of our quantitative tests on the determinants of Chinese diplomatic delegation. We then unpack the results through complementary qualitative analysis of declassified archival data and media reports. Finally, we illuminate the importance of our findings for debates about China’s rise in the international system.

STATISTICAL RESULTS

Because our dependent variable is an event count, we perform our analysis using a Poisson regression model.¹⁰ Explanatory and control variables are lagged to partially address concerns about simultaneous or reverse causation. To address temporal and geographic dependence,

¹⁰Our data do not appear to suffer from overdispersion (dispersion parameter = 0.97).

we cluster standard errors on the country-dyad and include lagged terms of each type of diplomatic exchange to correct for potential path dependence (Lebovic and Saunders 2016). Finally, in the appendix, we show that our findings generally hold using alternate model specifications, including the inclusion of fixed effects and multiple imputation methods for missing data.

The results generally follow our theoretical expectations. We begin by investigating patterns of China’s military diplomacy. We first estimate three parsimonious models for each of our explanatory variables (Achen 2005), reported in Columns 1-3 of Table 3. We then include the full set of control variables, reported in Column 4. Consistent with our hypotheses, the coefficients for military spending, as well as military arms trade, are positive and significant in all models (H2a and H2b). China is more likely to conduct public military diplomacy with countries that spend more on defense or purchase military equipment from China and other major exporters of modern military technology, such as the United States.

However, we find only mixed evidence that China’s military exchanges are driven by past military disputes (H2c). While militarized disputes have a positive relationship with exchanges in the parsimonious model, the relationship changes direction and loses statistical significance when we include controls. This suggests that, while crisis management may inform its military relations with some countries, such as the United States, a broader set of goals motivate China’s military diplomacy program.

Columns 5 and 6 report models for diplomatic exchanges featuring the head of state and the foreign minister, respectively. Consistent with our theoretical expectations, we find no statistically significant relationship between civilian diplomacy and any of our main explanatory variables. That is, lacking expertise that military actors possess, heads of state and other civilian diplomats do not exhibit the same relationship between exchanges and military budgets, arms trade, or propensity for militarized disputes. We do note that head of state exchanges are *negatively* correlated with militarized disputes and discuss some potential reasons for this in the following section, which may suggest that heads of state choose to

Table 3: Regression Analysis of PRC Diplomatic Exchanges, by Type

	<i>Dependent Variable: Diplomatic Exchange (count)</i>					
	Parsimonious Model (Poisson)		Full Model (Poisson)			
	Military (1)	Military (2)	Military (3)	Military (4)	President (5)	Foreign Minister (6)
<i>Explanatory Variables</i>						
Military Spending (log)	0.264*** (0.013)			0.144** (0.044)	0.037 (0.039)	0.021 (0.048)
PRC Arms Exports (log)		0.161*** (0.024)		0.091* (0.036)	0.019 (0.060)	0.065 (0.047)
US Arms Exports (log)		0.203*** (0.014)		0.050* (0.025)	0.020 (0.034)	-0.034 (0.032)
PRC Arms Imports (log)		0.172*** (0.030)		-0.015 (0.028)	0.056 (0.033)	-0.028 (0.031)
US Arms Imports (log)		-0.004 (0.029)		0.052 (0.030)	-0.011 (0.043)	0.073 (0.040)
MID			0.963*** (0.172)	-0.124 (0.124)	-0.444* (0.218)	-0.337 (0.353)
<i>Control Variables</i>						
UNGA Ideal Point Distance				-0.118 (0.106)	-0.222 (0.144)	0.175 (0.123)
Bilateral Trade (log)				0.106** (0.041)	0.066 (0.046)	0.138* (0.059)
GDP per Capita (log)				-0.183*** (0.052)	-0.126* (0.057)	0.001 (0.058)
Taiwan Recognition				-2.774*** (0.599)	-1.759*** (0.523)	-1.005 (0.695)
Major Power				0.039 (0.161)	0.717* (0.279)	0.335* (0.163)
Regime Type				0.004 (0.011)	0.009 (0.014)	0.006 (0.011)
US Defense Pact				-0.184 (0.126)	0.171 (0.168)	-0.260 (0.157)
<i>Lagged Exchanges</i>						
President				0.094* (0.048)	-0.129 (0.089)	0.256** (0.093)
Foreign Ministry				0.075 (0.056)	0.059 (0.080)	-0.135 (0.085)
Military				0.158*** (0.027)	0.082* (0.037)	0.024 (0.046)
Constant	-5.753*** (0.274)	-0.785*** (0.039)	-0.451*** (0.030)	-0.475 (1.502)	0.178 (1.756)	-0.629 (1.586)
Observations	1,603	1,718	1,715	1,266	1,266	1,266

Note: region and geographic distance controls not reported. Full table included in the online appendix. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

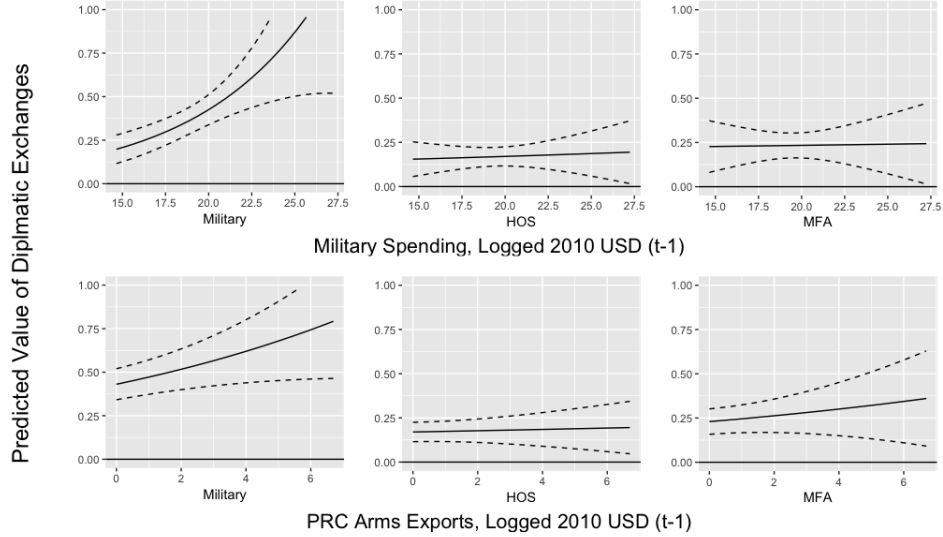
temporarily “break ties” through canceling or opting out of diplomatic exchanges in the wake of a militarized confrontation.

We visualize our main findings in Figure 2, which plots the predicted values of Chinese military and civilian diplomacy conditional on a state’s military spending and imports of Chinese arms. The figure makes it clear that there is an increasingly positive relationship between Chinese military diplomacy and a country’s military expenditures and imports of Chinese arms. For example, we find that a country with military spending equal to the mean of the sample that increased its military spending to the top 75% of the sample—roughly a \$2.29 billion dollar increase after transforming the logarithm form of the military spending variable—would experience roughly a 0.25 increase in the number of predicted Chinese military exchanges in a given year. As Figure 2 illustrates, similar increases in military spending or arms purchases from China do not significantly correlate with either type of Chinese civilian diplomacy.

In addition, we find that the control variables in each of the models generally perform as expected. Standard determinates of diplomatic exchange noted in existing literature—such as major power status, economic trade partners, and diplomatic recognition of Taiwan, as well as neighboring countries and those that vote similarly in the United Nations—all show positive and statistically significant relationships. More broadly, our findings suggests that PRC heads of state employ civilian diplomats to maintain a wider set of relationships (**H1**). While not statistically significant ($p=0.09$), we note that the lagged exchange term for the head of state and foreign ministry are both negative, meaning that an exchange in one year is associated with *fewer* exchanges in the following year. In contrast, military diplomats appear to conduct repeat visits to a comparatively narrow set of states.

The results in Table 3 do not appear to provide support for the alternative hypotheses considered above. First, we find strong evidence that China’s civilian and military diplomacy follow dissimilar patterns, and there is little evidence to support the alternative hypothesis that China’s diplomacy is uniform across actor types. Second, we find evidence inconsistent

Figure 2: Conditional Predicted Values of Chinese Diplomatic Exchanges by Type



Note: Solid lines represent conditional predicted values; dotted lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

with the hypothesis that military actors unilaterally select into diplomatic exchanges in pursuit of individual or organizational interests. There is correlation between lagged terms for head of state and military exchange, suggesting that these trips may complement each other. This supports the consensus among China scholars that, while elite Chinese military officials may exert influence on certain aspects of national security decision-making, they generally obey the directives of civilian elites (Saunders, Scobell and Saunders 2015). In contrast to the MFA, military exchanges in a given year are positively associated with an exchange to the same country the following year. This suggests that military leaders focus diplomatic resources on a narrow set of strategic relationships. That is, whereas heads of state delegate routine diplomacy with a wide range of states to MFA diplomats, they employ the military for a select subset of states in which their expertise is more relevant.

As reported in the appendix, we perform a number of robustness checks that attest to the stability of our results. First, we estimate models using a fixed effects model (Green, Kim and Yoon 2001), as well as without the diplomatic exchange lag terms.¹¹ To address potential

¹¹In the fixed effects model, PRC and US arms exports remain positive and significant for military, but not civilian, exchanges. While the coefficient sign for military spending remains positive for military exchanges,

bias introduced by missingness in our data, we use the **Amelia** software package to impute 50 datasets, regression analysis of which actually results in stronger findings (Honaker et al. 2011). We also show that our findings hold after restricting exchanges that China hosted from the sample, following existing research focused solely on diplomatic visits.

Finally, one potential objection to our interpretation of the results is that military exchanges are simply more likely in states with large defense budgets because such states represent potential military threats—or because international hierarchy is correlated with military power. We offer two answers to these objections. First, if such alternate interpretations were true, we would also expect that China would also focus head of state and MFA diplomatic exchanges on such countries, which we do not observe. Second, our findings hold even after including several controls that proxy for international prestige and influence, including major power status and economic size. In fact, we find a *negative* correlation between military exchanges and GDP per capita.

ARCHIVAL EVIDENCE ON CHINA’S MILITARY DIPLOMACY

We complement our quantitative results through analysis of declassified documents, as well as aggregated articles from Chinese official newspapers. While a complete investigation of the history of China’s military diplomacy is beyond the scope of this paper, these materials demonstrate the external validity of our findings beyond the 2002-2010 period and illustrate our hypothesized mechanisms concerning defense information collection, arms exports, and crisis management.

THE ORIGINS OF CONTEMPORARY PRC MILITARY DIPLOMACY

Archival evidence makes clear that China began its contemporary foray into military diplomacy, at least in part, to improve its military capabilities. In January 1980, US Secretary of

it is not statistically significant for any type of exchange.

Defense Harold Brown traveled to Beijing for the first senior-level meeting with PRC defense officials, including Vice Premier Geng Biao, Minister of National Defense Xu Xiangqian, and Director of the Chinese National Defense Science and Technology Commission Zhang Aiping. The expressed purpose of the exchange was to “develop an institutional framework for wider contacts and exchanges between the US and Chinese defense establishments” and to explore the possibility of dual-use technology transfers.¹² Of particular note, Brown offered US support for China’s military modernization, initiating discussions to share US expertise and experience on communications, transportation, and logistics.¹³

Declassified US transcripts from the meetings illustrate how China sought to use military diplomacy for purposes of its defense modernization. As Zhang Aiping described:

We are glad of your decision to help us develop our military technology.

Like the other aspects of our economy, our technology lags well behind you. The reason we want access to your technology is that we want to develop at a faster pace. Without the assistance of foreign countries, we can do nothing.¹⁴

The implications of these diplomatic exchanges were not lost on other states. So troubling was US-PRC defense cooperation to the Soviet Union that it issued a memorandum to diplomats condemning US-PRC cooperation in the “military-technical sphere.”¹⁵ Of course,

¹²“Document #286: Memorandum From Secretary of Defense Brown to President Carter (December 29, 1979),” in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980* (2013).

¹³Document #291: Memorandum for the Record: Second Meeting Between Secretary of Defense Harold Brown and Vice Premier Geng Biao, People’s Republic of China (January 7, 1980),” in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980* (2013).

¹⁴“Document #293: Memorandum of Conversation between Harold Brown and Zhang Aiping, January 8, 1980” in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980* (2013). Similarly, Brown’s trip summary specified that next steps would entail developing “guidelines concerning types of military equipment” to be sold to China and “consultations with the Chinese on their list of desired technology transfers.”“Document #295: Telegram From Secretary of Defense Harold Brown to President Carter, Secretary of State Vance, the Deputy Secretary of Defense (Claytor), and the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski), January 12, 1980” in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980* (2013).

¹⁵“CPSU CC Politburo Directive to Soviet Ambassadors and Representatives, ‘Carrying Out Additional Measures to Counter American-Chinese Military Cooperation’,” October 2, 1980, *History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive*, TsKhSD, F. 89, Per. 34, Dok. 10. Translated by Elizabeth Wishnick.

military diplomacy was not exclusive to the US-China relationship. For example, United Kingdom Secretary of State for Defence Francis Pym¹⁶ met with senior members of the Chinese military, including Xu Xiangqian, Yang Dezhi, and Zhang Aiping on March 24, 1980. During the exchange, PRC Defense Minister Xu conveyed China's intention "to introduce [foreign] advanced technology" from the United Kingdom, United States, and France in order to "improve our backward weapons" (Li and Xu 2016, p. 403).

These high-level diplomatic exchanges opened doors for a number of senior Chinese military officers to travel abroad. For example, between 1984 and 1985, Admiral Liu Huaqing—commander of the PLA Navy and considered by many to be the architect of China's naval modernization—visited military facilities in United Kingdom and France. In his memoirs, Liu describes these exchanges as an opportunity to "deepen understanding and learning" from countries with "rich military experience and more advanced [military] equipment" (Liu 2007, p. 509). In addition to learning from advanced Western militaries, China actively sought out other countries which great powers had trained and equipped. For example, in November 1983, Liu visited Pakistan to observe naval fleet exercises and tour Pakistani military academies, naval bases, factories and shipyards. Liu describes that his "interest was piqued" on the visit by the French submarines, British and American destroyers, and British and French aircraft (Liu 2007, p. 507-8).¹⁷

By the mid-1980s, the rationale behind these exchanges was translated into formal policy. In May 1986, a PLA conference brought together senior officers to discuss how China's military diplomacy would proceed. The group's conclusions were published in a report that was sent to the Central Military Commission, recommending that China should "gradually expand the scope of foreign exchanges and increase the proportion of professional

¹⁶While Pym was replaced as Secretary before the exchange occurred, Chinese records retain his former title.

¹⁷The memoirs of Zhang Zhen, who served as the president of the PRC National Defense University in the late-1980s, similarly describe how China used face-to-face exchanges with the United States, United Kingdom, Italy, and Germany to "obtain new information on foreign militaries" (Zhang 2003, p. 345)

and technical exchanges” (Liu and Li 2008). Specifically, future exchanges should focus on “visiting and investigating the combat training, institutional preparation, logistical support, and other aspects” of foreign militaries in order to improve military modernization (Liu and Li 2008, quoted on p. 332). Despite these initial overtures, however, the frequency of Chinese military diplomacy remained modest. As late as 1997, senior military leaders noted that “funding for the military’s foreign affairs is limited” and that “expenditures for visits and receiving visits is very tight.”¹⁸

THE GROWTH OF PRC MILITARY DIPLOMACY

Since the late 1990s, China’s military diplomacy has grown substantially. Figure 3a shows that China nearly quadrupled the annual frequency of high-level military exchanges in the period between 1998 and 2010 compared to the previous 20 years (Ministry of National Defense 1998-2010).¹⁹ Articles referencing military diplomacy appearing in the *People’s Daily* and *PLA Daily*, two prominent government Chinese newspapers, further mirror this growth. Between 1979 and 1995, these newspapers featured between 4-5 articles per year referencing military diplomacy. In the subsequent decade between 1996 and 2006, these same government materials increased coverage to 44-45 articles per year. Figure 3b charts the rise in official media coverage, which peaked 2009 with an annual total of 124 articles—about once every 3 days. Authoritative public statements from senior officials also help confirm the timing of this shift.²⁰

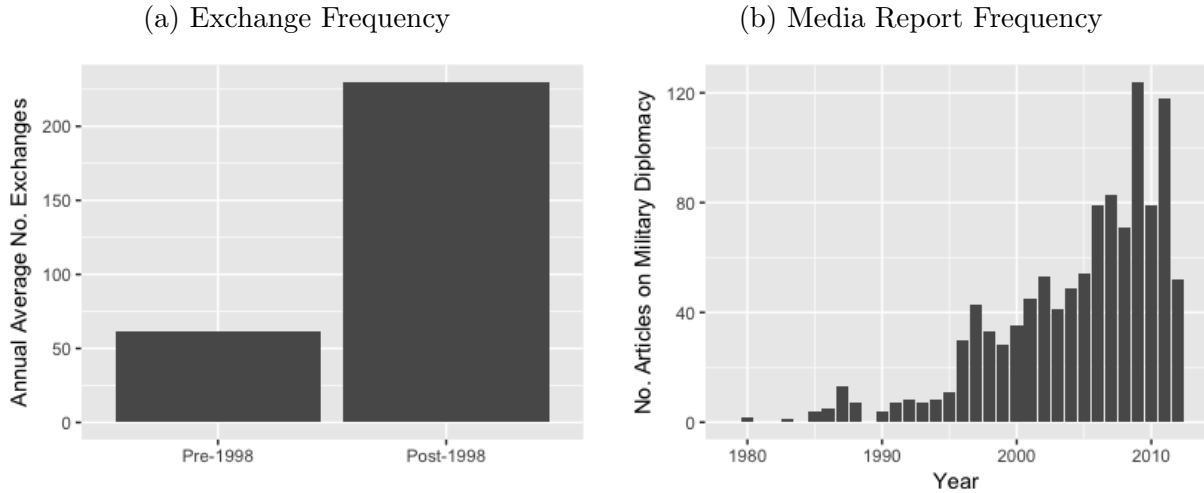
Two conferences held by China’s military during the 1990s illuminate the origins of China’s full embrace of military diplomacy. In July 1991, a conference provided detailed

¹⁸Remarks of Chi Haotian at the All-Military Foreign Affairs Work Conference, December 30, 1997. Full text in Chi (2009).

¹⁹We choose this date because of availability of Chinese official reports, rather than research design.

²⁰For example, Major General Qian Lihua, the director of the Foreign Affairs Office of the Ministry of National Defense, the government office that manages China’s military exchange program (Hagt 2015), describes that “Entering the 1990s, a major change in the the international strategic situation occurred. Military diplomacy implemented new military strategic objectives, continuously expanding pragmatic exchange and cooperation.” (Gao and Wang 2011).

Figure 3: The Rise of PRC Military Diplomacy, 1979-2010



description of the “guiding principles” (指导思想) for “two services” (两个服务) of military diplomacy: to supplement China’s diplomatic objectives generally and to improve military modernization specifically. This included instructions to “actively carry out arms trade,” and “further expand foreign professional and technical exchanges and cooperation” (Liu and Li 2008). At a subsequent conference, held in August 1998, Fu Quanyou provided a detailed defense for “launching” (开展) a new phase of military diplomacy:

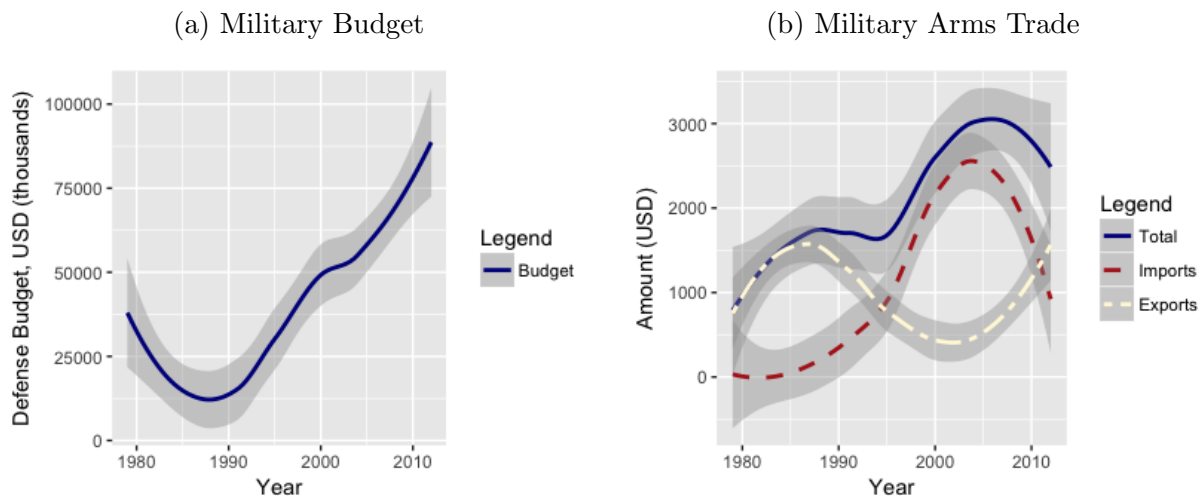
Over the past few years, through strengthening military diplomacy, we have [...] introduced advanced equipment and technology, investigated the military theories and management experiences of other countries [...] This has played an active role in advancing the modernization of our military. In the future, we must continue to intensify our efforts in this area, [...] quickly comprehend the trends in military developments in other countries, keep abreast of world trends in high-tech development, and selectively learn and borrow useful things from foreign militaries.²¹

²¹Remarks of Fu Quanyou at the All-Military Foreign Affairs Work Conference, August 28, 1998. Full text in Fu (2015). The meeting was also attended by senior party elites, including Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji (Wang 2015, p. 433).

Why did China increase the frequency of its military diplomacy beginning in the late 1990s? If our theoretical framework is correct, we would expect to see aggregate shifts in military involvement in diplomatic exchanges occur in step with demand for defense information related to military modernization or arms imports or exports. The record suggests that each of these motivations was present during China’s uptick in military diplomacy.

First, Figure 4 highlights that China’s increase in military diplomacy moved in lock-step with increases to its defense budget and arms trade. Figure 4a depicts China’s military spending, illustrating that the military remained in a resource-scarce environment throughout the 1980s. This offers one potential explanation for why military exchanges did not expand until after military budgets grew in the 1990s. Specifically, in January 1993, China published new “strategic guidelines” (战略方针) for its national defense. In contrast to previous iterations, which emphasized countering land invasions, the 1993 strategy emphasized that the Chinese military needed to “win local wars under modern, especially high-technology, conditions” (Jiang 2006, p. 285). As China assessed that future warfare would hinge upon maintaining technological parity or superiority, the PLA implemented new operational doctrine, campaign outlines, and, in 1998, established the General Armaments Department to improve weapons development (Fravel 2018, p. 73-4).

Figure 4: Explaining the Increase in PRC Military Diplomacy



Note: Lines represent loess curves, with 95% confidence intervals indicated by shaded area.

As China increased investments in military modernization to meet changing defense requirements, its demand for defense information concomitantly expanding, prompting an increase in military exchanges. In a notable example, Zhang Wannian traveled to the United States in September 1998, observing some of the “newest equipment” in the US arsenal, including anti-tank missiles, as well as F15s and F16s fighter aircraft, the U.S. Air Force Air Warfare Center, Red Flag exercise units, and the USS Stennis, a Nimitz-class nuclear-powered aircraft carrier. Zhang’s official biography describes that the visit prompted reflection and ideas on China’s academic education, military training, and weapons manufacturing that were reported back to and approved by Jiang Zemin, the Central Military Commission, and the CCP Central Committee (Guo 2011, p. 385-94)

Imports of advanced technology also help explain the proliferation of Chinese military diplomacy in the late 1990s. Figure 4b illustrates similar trends in China’s military arms trade. Overall, the solid blue line shows how China’s arms trade increased in the both the early-1980s and the mid-1990s. The second shift was driven by a massive increase in arms imports from the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Israel, and—most importantly—Russia. Between 1992 and 2010, Russian technology constituted 80% of China’s total arms imports.²² Given its increased demand for advanced military technology, why did China look to these countries specifically? Following the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989, China’s direct purchase of advanced military technologies was blunted by a US-led embargo. However, many European countries remained lax in their enforcement (Shambaugh, Sand-schneider and Hong 2007). The United Kingdom, France, Italy and Spain all modified their interpretations of the arms embargo to permit export of dual-use technologies—products with both civilian and military applications—to China. As such, China relied heavily on European technology imports, such as German submarine engines, British radar surveillance, and French helicopter designs and equipment, well into the 2000s.

²²Authors’ analysis of data from the SIPRI Arms Transfers Dataset.

Documentary sources from the Chinese military clearly bear out this logic. For example, after leading a military delegation to Belgium, France, Italy and the United Kingdom in the spring of 1997, Fu Quanyou, head of the PLA General Staff Department, reported to the Central Military Commission that “maintaining the momentum of high-level exchanges” would serve to improve China’s defense modernization by “introducing their military technology and weaponry” (Wang 2015, p. 449). Specific instances of diplomatic exchanges captured in our dataset also speak to this mechanism. For example, in May 2011, Wang Ke, PLA Central Military Commission (CMC) member and PLA General Armaments Department (GAD) director, visited Germany and the United Kingdom.²³

Third, in addition to its own military modernization needs, China’s emergence as an arms exporter—and increased demand for specialized expertise necessary to sell arms—helps explain the uptick in Chinese military diplomacy in the context of our argument (De Soysa and Midford 2012). The red dashed line in Figure 4b depicts China’s declining demand for arms imports in the mid-2000s, reflecting China’s improved capacity to produce advanced military equipment domestically. Interestingly, however, the yellow dashed line shows how China’s arms exports began to increase just as its arms imports began to fall. The majority of China’s arms exports over this period were aircraft, armored vehicles, and ships to countries such as Pakistan, Iran, Egypt, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar.²⁴ Increases in these exports corresponded with China’s ability to acquire, reverse engineer, and domestically manufacture more advanced replacements (Page 2010; Wezeman 2017).²⁵

Finally, as with our statistical analysis, we find only limited support for our final hypothesis in available documentary sources. Crisis management is conspicuously absent

²³The General Armaments Department was responsible for PLA weapons research and development. More examples include June 2002, when GAD director Cao Guangchuan visited Italy and France. Chen Bingde, GAD director and head of China’s burgeoning space program between 2004-2007 (and subsequently the Chief of Staff of the PLA General Staff Department), visited Italy, Belarus and the UK in 2005. Similarly, the GAD director visited Germany and Sweden in late 2010.

²⁴Listed in descending order. Authors’ analysis of data from the SIPRI Arms Transfers Dataset.

²⁵For example, China’s Jian-11B (J-11B) combat aircraft was a near copy of the Russian Sukhoi-27 (Su-27).

from official objectives of China’s diplomacy throughout the 1990s and early-2000s. Only in 2010 did China’s Defense White Papers begin to specify that military diplomacy can “strengthen communication and coordination,” develop “rules of behavior for safety of air and maritime encounters,” and provide “notification of major military activities.”

However, the crisis management mechanism is evident in its military exchanges with certain maritime neighbors, particularly the United States. For example, the *Military Maritime Safety Agreement* (MMCA), signed between the United States and China in January 1998 after extensive diplomatic exchanges, was designed to “promote common understanding regarding activities undertaken by their respective maritime and air forces” and “to establish a stable channel for consultations.”²⁶ Subsequent exchanges negotiated a *Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea*, signed in April 2014, which established maritime safety, communications, and signals standards for naval relations (US Department of Defense 2015).²⁷

5 Conclusion

In this paper we have explored the incentives for states to delegate diplomatic responsibilities to non-diplomats, such as the military, in order to send and receive specialized information that may improve material capabilities. In doing so, we make two primary contributions. First, our original, individual-level data on China’s diplomatic exchanges demonstrates the remarkable scope of military diplomacy in a major (and rising) world power. Our data show that nearly half of China’s recent diplomatic exchanges have been led by military officers. Second, consistent with our theoretical predictions, statistical analyses of these

²⁶“United States Department of Defense. 2000. William Cohen’s Visit to China,” *Digital National Security Archive*. US defense department records from military exchanges with China in the early-2000s similarly echo that the MMCA would serve as a “confidence-building measure to avoid incidents and miscalculations at sea.”

²⁷Military contacts also facilitated a “joint strategic dialogue mechanism,” signed by US chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joe Dunford and PRC Chief of Joint Staff General Fang Fenghui to facilitate communication between senior military commanders at the Pentagon and PLA headquarters ([Joint Chiefs of Staff 2017](#)).

data show that between 2002-2010, China was more likely to conduct military exchanges with countries with large defense budgets, with which it is an arms trade partner, and—to some extent—with which it is prone to military crises. Importantly, these patterns do not hold for diplomatic exchanges featuring the head of state or foreign minister. Accompanying archival documents help illustrate the logic of our argument.

More broadly, this paper contributes to the literature on why and how states engage in face-to-face diplomacy. International exchanges are not the sole purview of statesmen or civilian diplomats. Yet, the types of actors that participate in diplomacy are not created equal. Expertise differentials create incentives to integrate non-diplomats in order to improve the quality of information transmission during the exchange. Our findings further suggest that the diffusion of defense information and technology is connected to interstate diplomacy in ways the existing literature does not acknowledge. Face-to-face diplomacy is not simply a forum for teasing out intentions. It also affords states opportunity to assess, adopt, and export military capabilities.

Our study merits certain caveats that suggest avenues for future research. First, our theory is only one potential explanation for why states delegate diplomacy to non-diplomats. Future work could explore both the social motivations (e.g., international status) and domestic characteristics (e.g., institutions, bureaucratic politics, leader dispositions) that might also lead to delegated diplomacy. Second, we do not examine the second-order effects of delegating diplomacy—specifically the possibility that states may perceive diplomacy differently based on who executes it. This has implications not only for the study of interstate signaling, but potentially for interstate conflict and cooperation more broadly. Third, while our study focuses on China and its military diplomacy, future research could examine both military diplomacy in other countries and other types of non-diplomatic bureaucrats. Finally, we concede that our analysis leaves at least one important theoretical puzzle unaddressed: why would status quo powers opt into military exchanges that cede material advantages to rising powers? Our cursory examination of archival evidence tentatively suggests two preliminary

explanations: (1) bureaucratic inefficiencies in the status quo power; and (2) incentives for the status quo power to yield some military advantages in exchange for an opportunity to diplomatically persuade the rising power. Future research might explore this in depth.

Finally, our findings also merit a brief discussion of the broader implications of military diplomacy for the rise of China. China's impressive economic and military growth primes canonical debates regarding power transitions and the prospects for future rivalry and conflict (Gilpin 1983; Powell 2006). Yet, states and scholars alike remain divided in their conclusions regarding China's preferences. Some describe China as a status quo power, stressing China's diplomatic engagement (Medeiros and Fravel 2003), propensity to settle territorial disputes peacefully (Fravel 2008), and confirmity to international norms (Johnston 2014). Others conclude China seeks to revise the international order, emphasizing China's limited transparency (Cunningham and Fravel 2015; Mastro 2016), expanding economic influence (Flores-Macías and Kreps 2013; Kastner 2016), initiatives to establish new international institutions (Dai and Renn 2016; Yu 2017), and "assertive" behavior (Christensen 2011), particularly in resolving its territorial disputes (Delisle 2012; Yahuda 2013).²⁸

Our analysis provides some additional purchase on questions of Beijing's preferences on international order, following scholarly accounts that use patterns of diplomatic exchange to assess China's systemic preferences. For example, using data on PRC president and premier diplomatic travel from 1998 to 2008, Kastner and Saunders (2012) argue that the pattern of China's diplomatic engagement evince preferences to maintain, rather than revise the status quo order. Practitioners look to diplomatic patterns as well. The 2007 US Department of Defense report on China notes that "increased military-to-military exchanges consequent to arms sales resulting from lifting the embargo could also give the PLA access to critical military management practices, operational doctrine and training" (Department of Defense 2007, p. 29). Our results generally complement existing accounts of China's

²⁸For a critique, however, see Johnston (2013).

civilian diplomacy. Consider two indicators of revisionist diplomacy offered by [Kastner and Saunders \(2012\)](#): exchanges with authoritarian states and exchanges with US defense partners. Our analysis shows that Chinese civilian diplomacy does not correlate with either of these indicators.

Yet our results regarding China's military diplomacy present a more complicated picture. On the one hand, China's military diplomacy does not appear to systematically target authoritarian states, rising powers, or US defense partners any more than its civilian variants. That is, even in the military domain, there is limited evidence that the pattern of Chinese diplomacy is consistent with revisionist intentions. On the other hand, and in contrast to civilian variants of diplomacy, China's military diplomacy instead appears designed to systematically target states possessing national defense information in order to improve China's military capabilities. Indeed, as [Johnston \(2003, p. 11\)](#) and others ([Yan, Bell and Zhe 2011](#)) note, international rules and institutions constitute only one side of revisionism. The other half entails satisfaction with the distribution of material power. Our results strongly suggest that China's military diplomacy nests within a broader objective to change this distribution and provides improved understanding of China's strategy for achieving it. This finding sheds new light on why the United States remains apprehensive about China's international engagement, particularly the military component of its global outreach.

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