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Michael Jetter Adhipradana P. Swasito

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A Comment on "How the Party Commands the Gun: The Foreign-Domestic Threat Dilemma in China"

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A comment on "How the Party Commands the Gun: The Foreign–Domestic Threat Dilemma in China"

Michael Jetter, Adhipradana P. Swasito *

July 8, 2024

Abstract

Mattingly (2024) investigates how authoritarian leaders select military generals, focusing on the People's Liberation Army of China. Three main findings emerge. First, in general, Chinese leaders consider both personal ties (as a proxy for loyalty to the leader) and combat experience (as a proxy for competence) when promoting military officers. Second, personal ties are particularly relevant during periods of *domestic* threat. Third, combat experience only matters during periods of *foreign* threat. We successfully replicate all main results with Mattingly's (2024) database, only identifying minimal differences in calculated standard errors when employing *Stata* instead of *R*. However, results differ substantially in sign, magnitude, and statistical precision once we employ alternative, data-driven approaches to defining periods of *domestic* threat. Alternative specification results pertaining to *foreign* threat periods are more robust in sign but also vary in terms of magnitude and levels of statistical relevance.

KEYWORDS: Guardianship Dilemma, Chinese Military, Promotion as General, Foreign and Domestic Threats, Career Ties, Combat Experience.

JEL CODES: C81, C87, D74, F52, H56, N45

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1 Introduction

Mattingly (2024) investigates how the leader of an authoritarian state promotes military officers, focusing on the case of China. His first set of analyses explores whether and, if so, how (i) career ties to the leader (as a measure for loyalty) and/or (ii) combat experience (as a measure for competence) predict promotion to General and promotion to China's Central Military Commission. To do so, he assembles a sizeable and comprehensive database of 720 Chinese military officers from 1978 to 2019. The associated findings suggest both characteristics emerge as positive and statistically relevant predictors of promotion.

Second, Mattingly (2024) studies whether career ties to the leader matter particularly during periods of domestic threat – a result that would be consistent with basic propositions of the *Guardianship Dilemma*. Theoretically, by taking personal closeness as a proxy for loyalty into account, authoritarian leaders may be able to reduce the likelihood of a coup. Indeed, Mattingly (2024) finds empirical patterns consistent with that hypothesis.

Third, Mattingly (2024) turns to the interaction between combat experience (as a measure for military competence) and periods of foreign threat. Theoretically, promoting capable officers should strengthen the military, therefore reducing the possibility of foreign threats materializing to dethrone the autocratic leader. Indeed, Mattingly's (2024) findings suggest combat experience matters for promotion particularly during periods of foreign threat.

We first successfully replicate the results of all three Tables in Mattingly's (2024) main text, using his original R code. Next, we employ *Stata* to explore whether results are consistent in an alternative program that is prominently used in empirical research. Indeed, we observe identical estimates for the coefficients of interest and only identify minor differences in the calculated standard errors of the variables of interest. Specifically, standard errors differ by a maximum of 0.003 units or 8.6% of the original standard errors, while levels of statistical significance remain largely unchanged.¹ Although these minor differences do not change the interpretation of the main findings, they highlight the importance of conducting replications to

¹In column (1) of Mattingly's (2024) Table 3, the level of statistical significance for the variable of interest drops from 5% to 10%.

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evaluate the statistical accuracy of a study, in particular when employing alternative statistical platforms.

Next, we focus on the definition of the *domestic threat* and *foreign threat* variables. We do so because these variables constitute essential elements of the second and third results, and because it is difficult to objectively and consistently define such periods, both for the Chinese case and in general. We begin with defining domestic threats. Rather than defining a period of domestic threat in an ad-hoc fashion, we build on existing work, turning to a dataset provided by the Cross-National Time-Series (CNTS) Data Archive (Banks and Wilson 2023). In particular, we focus on a comprehensive set of measures to identify domestic threats with demonstrations, riots, government crises, and an overall domestic conflict index that involves all of these elements.

After calculating binary measures for each of these characteristics (to be consistent with Mattingly 2024), we re-estimate his Table 2. The corresponding results from all six alternative regressions produce a change in sign on three occasions, and none of these regressions produce a coefficient that is positive and statistically significant at conventional levels. Thus, *how* a period of domestic threat is defined constitutes an important element in Mattingly's (2024) results. We remain agnostic about which definition strictly dominates others.

Finally, we re-define foreign threats as periods in which strategic rivals of China are particularly powerful in military terms, combining Thompson et al.'s (2021) definition of strategic rivals with their contemporaneous levels of military strength from Singer et al. (1972) and, alternatively, Souva (2022). The observed estimates are, in the majority of cases, consistent in terms of sign with Mattingly's (2024). Nonetheless, levels of statistical precision vary, depending on how a period of foreign threat is defined and whether such a variable is coded as binary or continuous.

2 Computational Reproducibility

The replication package provided by Mattingly (2024) contains a complete set of code and data necessary to reproduce the analyses. It provides code to construct the analysis data from raw data, to analyze the data, and to generate all results

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in the form of tables and figures. Detailed instructions are provided for running the code in the R platform. We find no coding errors and all the main findings are successfully reproduced.

We then extend the replication effort to the *Stata* environment. We first export the main databases ("bio" and "panel year") from R to *Stata*. Mattingly (2024) employs the R command "lm" for his Table 1, while we implement *Stata*'s "regress" command. Similarly, for Tables 2 and 3, Mattingly (2024) uses the "plm" command, and we draw on *Stata*'s "reghtfe" package. The pure replication generates fully consistent results in terms of coefficients, and the results are reported in Tables A1, A2, and A3. We conclude the reliability of the findings across platforms.

Nevertheless, we observe minor differences during the validation process. Noticeably, small differences in standard errors emerge, which are possibly due to variations in the respective packages and/or platforms of R and *Stata*. Additionally, we find fully explainable discrepancies in the number of observations between Tables 2 and 3 of the original study and our Tables A2 and A3. This is because the "reghdfe" package automatically excludes singleton observations.

Finally, we identify one (inconsequential) particularity related to the inclusion of the binary year variables for the threat period in Tables 2 and 3: Once binary year indicators are included in these regressions, the individual variables pertaining to "Period of domestic threat" (in Table 2) and "Period of foreign threat" (in Table 3) are redundant because they are fully nested in the year-fixed effects. Indeed, excluding these binary variables of domestic and foreign threats leaves all results unchanged.

3 Replication with New Data

Mattingly (2024, p.237) uses the 1989 protest and the Bo Xilai scandal as reference points to identify periods of domestic threat. Following this, the years 1990-1993 and 2012-2015 are determined periods of domestic threat. As for periods of foreign threat, Mattingly (2024, p.239) defines the years 2000-2002 as times when tensions between China and the United States escalated.

In general, selecting particular events as indicative of a threat period is challeng-

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ing because concepts of domestic and foreign threats are difficult to measure and objectively define. This is even more complicated when defining binary, rather than continuous, variables. It is well possible the events chosen by Mattingly (2024) had significant political and social impacts; however, they may not capture *all* aspects that constitute periods of domestic or foreign threat.

Therefore, it is important to carefully consider the definition of threat periods, as these coding decisions may carry important consequences for the derived estimates since the respective coefficients of interest come from the interaction of the domestic (foreign) threat period dummy with the measure of "Career tie to current CMC Chairman" ("Combat experience"). We propose an alternative way to define these threat periods, based on well-established databases that aim to measure domestic (foreign) threat periods.

3.1 Defining Periods of Domestic Threat

We alternatively define periods of domestic threat by taking into account domestic conflict events, as collected by the CNTS dataset (Banks and Wilson 2023). We use the CNTS as a source of domestic conflict events for three main reasons. First, the CNTS includes specific variables related to domestic conflict with (*i*) demonstrations, (*ii*) riots, and (*iii*) government crises. Second, the CNTS spans several decades, allowing us to analyze the full observation period in the original paper. Third, the CNTS has been used and cited widely in scientific work (e.g., see Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2023 and Su 2021).

First, we explore demonstration events in China as a proxy for domestic threats. Specifically, we assign a value of one to a binary variable if demonstrations occur in China within a given year, and a value of zero otherwise. We do the same for cases of riots and government crises. We use these three types of events as they are direct indicators of domestic instability, with their occurrence reflecting concrete political challenges to the regime's authority.²

As an alternative, we use the *Weighted Conflict Index* variable, which combines and weights all domestic conflict events from the CNTS dataset. To transform this continuous variable into a binary indicator (in order to remain as close as

²For example, Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2023, p.1044) use riots and demonstration to describe the mass effort to overthrow the leader.

possible to Mattingly's, 2024 approach), we study its statistical distribution for the case of China during our period of interest. We then define three alternative binary indicator variables if a given year ranks above (i) the median, (ii) the 75^{th} percentile, or (iii) the 90^{th} percentile in the Index to identify periods of domestic threat.

As another alternative, we also explored the possibility of using the UCDP/Prio Armed Conflict dataset Version 23.1 (Gleditsch et al. 2002, Davies et al. 2023). However, we only identify one year of domestic conflict in China in that database (2008) under that definition, which means we would not be able to derive any meaningful statistical variation in that variable for the purposes of our analysis.

3.2 Defining Periods of Foreign Threat

Next, we define periods of foreign threat based on the strength of China's interstate rivals. Interstate rivalry refers to a situation where two states view each other as a threat and a competitive enemy engaged in long-duration conflict (Kim 2019). We use information from Thompson et al. (2021) to identify China's rivals for each year. Based on these data, China always had interstate rivals during the observation period, including India (41 years), Japan (25 years), Russia (11 years), Taiwan (41 years), the US (25 years), and Vietnam (13 years).

To measure the contemporaneous military strength of China's rivals, we first access the Composite Index of National Capability (CINC; Singer et al. 1972). This variable has been used widely to measure a nation's military power (e.g., see Oksamytna et al. 2021 or Kushi and Toft 2023). As an alternative measure, we then employ the Material Military Power (MMP) index, derived by Souva (2022). While the CINC considers broader aspects of a country (not just the military) when calculating national power, the MMP only considers military capability.

For any given year, we then calculate the sum of the respective CINC (or MMP) values of the contemporary rivals to proxy the total level of foreign threat China is facing. For example, in the year 2010, China's rivals included India (CINC score of 0.0793162), Japan (0.0369272), Taiwan (0.0069388), and the US (0.1475797). Overall, this produces a value of 0.2707619 (0.0793162+0.0369272+0.0069388+0.1475797=0.2707619).

Finally, we transform each index (separately) into a binary indicator variable by considering its statistical distribution for China over the sample period from 1978 to 2019. As with the *Weighted Conflict Index*, we then define a year as featuring foreign threat when that variable is above (*i*) the median, (*ii*) the 75^{th} percentile, or (*iii*) the 90^{th} percentile. Again, we opt for defining binary indicators to stay consistent with Mattingly's (2024) operationalization of the foreign threat variable. Nevertheless, in additional analyses, we employ continuous foreign threat variables derived from the CINC and the MMP indices, as well as a basic count measure of the number of China's rivals in a given year (see Table A4).

3.3 Empirical Results: Promotions during Periods of Domestic Threat

Table 1 reports the results from using the CNTS variables to define domestic threats. For comparison purposes, column (1) documents Mattingly's (2024) original result with the most complete specification of his column (4) of Table 2. Note that the number of observations shows 4,372 (instead of 4,743 in Mattingly 2024), but this is only because the "reghtfe" command in *Stata* automatically omits the 371 singleton observations, while the R command employed by Mattingly (2024) does not. For ease of exposition, we only show the coefficient of interest, i.e., the interaction term between the variables "Career tie to current CMC Chairman" and "domestic threat".

In columns (2), (3), and (4) of Table 1, domestic threat periods are defined as years marked by government crises, demonstrations, or riots. We observe a switch in sign from positive to negative coefficients of -0.132, -0.080, -0.001, respectively. Noticeably, the coefficient in column (3) is statistically significant at the 5% level (p = 0.022).

Subsequently, columns (5)-(7) document results from using the Weighted Conflict Index as an alternative to define periods of domestic threat. The corresponding results recover the positive correlation of the initial result. However, the estimates remain far from statistically significant at conventional levels (p = 0.605, p = 0.535, and p = 0.204). Additionally, magnitudes are relatively small, ranging from 0.029 to 0.073, which remains substantially lower than the initial magnitude of 0.170.

3.4 Empirical Results: Promotions during Periods of Foreign Threat

3.4.1 Employing the CINC Table 2 presents results from using the CINC to measure the strength of China's rivals in a given year. The first column reports Mattingly's (2024) original estimate. Since the CINC database is only available up to 2016, we re-estimate Mattingly's (2024) original specification when only using data up to 2016. The resulting estimate of interest is reported in column (2), and we observe a virtually identical coefficient and standard errors. Thus, any differences from using the CINC data are not owed to omitting the post-2016 period.

In column (3), we define periods of foreign threat as those years when China's rivals' CINC exceeds the median of that variable between the years 1978 and 2021. In columns (4) and (5), we follow the same logic for that variable ranging above the 75th or 90th percentile, respectively, applying a stricter threshold for defining foreign threats. In all three specifications, an officer's combat experience remains positively correlated with their promotion chances during periods of foreign threat, recovering Mattingly's (2024) result in terms of sign. The coefficients in columns (3) and (4) are statistically significant at the 10% and 5% levels (p = 0.069 and p = 0.035), while the coefficient in column (5) does not cross conventional levels of statistical relevance (p = 0.312). These empirical patterns receive support when considering continuous values of the foreign threat variable. The corresponding result is displayed in column (2) of Table A4 (p = 0.070).

In columns (6)-(8) of Table 2, we present an alternative approach that still uses the same threshold levels for defining foreign threats – but we only consider the strongest of China's rival of the respective year (i.e., the rival with the highest CINC score among all contemporary rivals), rather than the sum of all contemporaneous rivals' scores. In these specifications, we observe negative coefficients that, however, remain statistically irrelevant and relatively negligible in magnitude. When using a continuous foreign threat variable, we recover a positive association (see column 3 of Table A4) that remains statistically weak, however (p = 0.248).

3.4.2 Employing the MMP Table 3 presents results from following the same sequence of specifications as Table 2 but using the MMP (as opposed to the CINC) to calculate the military threat of China's rivals. In terms of sign, we recover the

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same pattern: We observe positive coefficients when considering the total sum of the military strength of China's rivals (columns 3-5), but statistical precision diminishes (p = 0.021, p = 0.722, and p = 0.500). When focusing on the strongest rival in columns (6)-(8), we document negative and statistically irrelevant coefficients, similar to the CINC results from Table 2.

As before, we also explore alternative approaches by using continuous variables to measure foreign threats. Using a simple count measure of the number of strategic rivals yields a positive and weakly statistically significant association with promotion chances (p = 0.044; see column 1 of Table A4). Similarly, using the MMP index to measure foreign threat produces a positive correlation, with the corresponding results being referred to columns (4) and (5) of Table A4 (p = 0.063 and p = 0.110).

4 Conclusion

The findings of our replication, conducted using R and *Stata*, first validate the conclusions of Mattingly's (2024) study on promotion correlates of military officers in China. The switch to *Stata*, however, leads to a minor disparity in the magnitude of standard errors. To extend Mattingly's (2024) work, we present alternative, data-driven approaches to defining periods of domestic and foreign threat. The corresponding analyses reveal statistical precision, sign, and magnitude of the variables of interest can differ, depending on the definition of threat. This is particularly the case for studying domestic threats and to a lesser extent for studying foreign threats. Importantly, we remain agnostic about which is the *correct* specification of domestic or foreign threat.

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Combat experience \times sum of rivals' CINC (above 75^{th} percentile)				0.109^{*} (0.052)				
Combat experience \times sum of rivals' CINC (above 90 th percentile)					0.046 (0.045)			
Combat experience \times the largest rival's CINC (above median)						-0.002 (0.037)		
Combat experience \times the largest rival's CINC (above 75^{th} percentile)							-0.044 (0.046)	
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Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. ⁺ p < 0.10, ^{*} p < 0.05, ^{**} p < 0.01

	(1)	(2)	Depende (3)	ent Variable: I (4)	Promotion to (5)	General (6)	(2)	(8)
Combat experience \times foreign threat	0.113^{*} (0.047)	0.113^{*} (0.047)						
Combat experience \times sum of rivals' MMP (above median)			0.129^{*} (0.056)					
Combat experience \times sum of rivals' MMP (above 75^{th} percentile)				0.041 (0.116)				
Combat experience \times sum of rivals' MMP (above 90 th percentile)					0.052 (0.077)			
Combat experience \times the largest rival's MMP (above median)						-0.004 (0.038)		
Combat experience \times the largest rival's MMP (above 75^{th} percentile)							-0.024 (0.045)	
Combat experience \times the largest rival's MMP (above 90 th percentile)								-0.003 (0.031)
Individual fixed effects	>	>	>	>	>	>	>	>
Year fixed effects	>	>	>	>	>	>	>	>
Foreign threat \times controls	>	>	>	>	>	>	>	>
Year \times birth year FE	>	>	>	>	>	>	>	>

A1 Appendix Tables

		Promoted to General)	Central	Promoted to Military Co	o mmision
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Career tie to paramount leader	0.200^{**} (0.048)		0.133^{**} (0.046)	$\begin{array}{c} 0.176^{**} \\ (0.039) \end{array}$		0.128^{**} (0.035)
Combat experience, post-1949		0.348^{**} (0.052)	0.248^{**} (0.056)		0.153^{**} (0.041)	0.077^{*} (0.038)
College-level education			0.129^{**} (0.029)			0.049^{**} (0.016)
Long-march participant			$0.095 \\ (0.091)$			0.248^{**} (0.071)
Political commisar experience			0.106^{**} (0.032)			-0.018 (0.017)
Ethnic minority			$0.145 \\ (0.116)$			$0.070 \\ (0.065)$
Princelling			$0.010 \\ (0.077)$			-0.005 (0.040)
Rural Birth			$0.071^+ \\ (0.041)$			0.076^{**} (0.026)
Constant	0.218^{**} (0.016)	0.217^{**} (0.016)	0.325^{*} (0.157)	$\begin{array}{c} 0.045^{**} \\ (0.008) \end{array}$	0.055^{**} (0.009)	0.250^+ (0.142)
Birth cohort fixed effects N	764	779	✓ 755	764	779	✓ 755

Table A1: Pure Replication of Mattingly's (2024) Table 1, using Stata.

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. + p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01

		Promoted	to General	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Career tie to current CMC Chairman	0.049 (0.036)	0.053 (0.037)	0.008 (0.037)	-0.006 (0.047)
Period of domestic threat	0.995^{**} (0.063)	1.016^{**} (0.120)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)
Career tie to Chairman \times domestic threat	0.129^{**} (0.040)	0.128^{**} (0.040)	0.160^{**} (0.040)	0.170^{**} (0.050)
Individual fixed effects	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark
Year fixed effects	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark
Foreign threat \times controls		\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark
Year \times birth decade FE			\checkmark	
Year \times birth year FE				\checkmark
	4,778	4,735	4,712	4,372

Table A2: Pure Replication of Mattingly's (2024) Table 2, using Stata.

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. + $p < 0.10, \ ^* \ p < 0.05, \ ^{**} \ p < 0.01$

		Promoted	to General	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Period of foreign threat	0.621^{**} (0.056)	0.142 (0.119)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)
Combat experience \times for eign threat	0.074^+ (0.039)	0.103^{**} (0.038)	0.128^{**} (0.043)	0.113^{*} (0.047)
Individual fixed effects	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark
Year fixed effects	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark
For eign threat \times controls		\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark
Year \times birth decade FE			\checkmark	
Year \times birth year FE				\checkmark
N	4,778	4,735	4,712	4,372

Table A3: Pure Replication of Mattingly's (2024) Table 3, using Stata.

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. + p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01

	Dep	endent Var	iable: Prom	oted to Gen	eral
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Combat experience \times number of rivals	0.052^{*} (0.026)				
Combat experience × sum of rivals' CINC		0.472^+ (0.261)			
Combat experience \times the largest rival's CINC			0.553 (0.478)		
Combat experience × sum of rivals' MMP				0.356^+ (0.192)	
Combat experience \times the largest rival's MMP					0.351 (0.219)
Individual fixed effects	>	>	>	>	>
Year fixed effects	>	>	>	>	>
Foreign threat \times controls	>	>	>	>	>
Year×birth year FE	>	>	>	>	>
	046 1	7997 1	100V	096 1	096 1

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