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No. 179  
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# Response to Jetter and Swasito (2024)

Daniel Mattingly

This paper responds to:

Jetter, Michael, and Adhipradana P. Swasito. 2024. A Comment on "How the Party Commands the Gun: The Foreign-Domestic Threat Dilemma in China". *I4R Discussion Paper Series* No. 178. Institute for Replication.

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### **Response to Jetter and Swasito (2024)**

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## Response to Jetter and Swasito (2024)

Daniel Mattingly\*

### Abstract

Rigorous replication efforts is crucial for good social science, and I am grateful to [Jetter and Swasito \(2024\)](#), who replicate and extend the results of a recent published paper ([Mattingly, 2024](#)). My original paper examined, among other things, the ways in which periods of foreign and domestic threat shaped how the Chinese Communist Party selected officers for the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Jetter and Swasito confirm the core results are computationally replicable. To extend the results, they use alternative data sources to measure foreign and domestic threat. They conclude that the domestic threat results in particular are not robust to the alternative data source they use. I raise questions about the quality of this alternative data source. I also ask whether, even if the data were of higher quality, it would map onto the core concept. Finally, I argue for the importance of substantive knowledge of the case and qualitative scoring of the foreign and domestic threat variable. However, the points raised by Jetter and Swasito in their replication effort are important and well-taken. Measuring concepts such as foreign and domestic threat is challenging, and doing so is a potential avenue for future quantitative research.

Replication is crucial for good social science, and I am grateful to the I4R team and in particular [Jetter and Swasito \(2024\)](#), who replicate and extend the results of a paper I recently published ([Mattingly, 2024](#)). The original paper examined, among other things, the ways in which periods of foreign and domestic threat shaped how the Chinese Communist Party selected officers for the People's Liberation Army (PLA). I argued that in periods of domestic threat, leaders were more likely to promote generals with ties to the top leader, while in periods of foreign threat, they were more likely to promote leaders with combat experience.

[Jetter and Swasito \(2024\)](#) confirm the computational replicability of the results. They reproduce the results in R, which was the statistical program used in the original analysis. They then replicate

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the results to Stata. They find only minor differences which they attribute (correctly I believe) to differences in how standard errors are calculated in the two packages.

[Jetter and Swasito \(2024\)](#) then extend the results by using different data to measure the key explanatory variables of foreign and domestic threat, with more mixed results. They note, and I agree, that “it is difficult to objectively and consistently define [periods of foreign and domestic threat], both for the Chinese case and in general” ([Jetter and Swasito, 2024](#), p. 3). In the paper, I based my definition of these periods on qualitative knowledge and accounts of leadership debates. [Jetter and Swasito \(2024\)](#) instead use what they call “data-driven approaches” to measuring these outcomes. Rather than basing it on qualitative knowledge of elite assessment of threats, they use proxy indicators including measures of domestic unrest to capture domestic threat and quantitative measures of the capabilities of major rivals to capture foreign threat. They find results that are largely consistent with the original paper for the foreign threat result. However, the results for domestic threat variable fail to replicate using this alternative conceptualization and data source.

In this brief response I will make three points. First, I agree with the broader point that measuring domestic and foreign threat is very difficult, a common problem in quantitative social science focusing on large concepts in international relations. Second, I do not think that the quantitative measures chosen by the replication team to measure domestic threat are reliable — a few simple plots of the data raise serious questions about data quality. Third, even if they were perfectly reliable at measuring what they claim to, they do not map cleanly onto the core concept of domestic threat in any case. I argue that qualitative, substantive knowledge of the case can be not only useful but preferable to quantitative data when the data are of poor quality or do not capture the theoretically relevant concept.

At the same time, I wish to highlight again my gratitude to the authors and I4R for this replication effort, which I found even-handed, thoughtful, and careful in its critique — in short, a model of good social science. Even if I did not agree with some of the conclusions, I share the core belief that social science should be replicated and criticized in a tough-minded but fair manner.

## 1 Measuring Concepts Like Foreign and Domestic Threat Is Challenging

In the replication, [Jetter and Swasito \(2024\)](#) note that “domestic and foreign threats are difficult to measure and objectively define... it is important to carefully consider the definition of threat periods, as these coding decisions may carry important consequences for the derived estimates” ([Jetter and Swasito, 2024](#), p. 4). I agree.

The notion of foreign and domestic threat is admittedly a difficult concept to clearly define and measure. In conceptualizing it, I drew on other works that argue that foreign and domestic threats shape how political leaders of authoritarian regimes design and staff their military ([Talmadge, 2015](#); [McMahon and Slantchev, 2015](#); [Greitens, 2016](#); [Paine, 2021](#); [Meng and Paine, 2022](#), e.g.). A common thread in this literature is that dictators are preoccupied with maintaining political power — and so they spend significant resources and time assessing the relative risk of domestic or foreign threats to their regimes.

I agree with [Jetter and Swasito \(2024\)](#) that it would be ideal to have an objective quantitative indicator of elite assessment of foreign and domestic threat. If it were possible, we would want a direct measure of elite perceptions — for instance, it would be helpful to have access to an ongoing panel survey of the 200-plus members of the CCP Central Committee in which they assess the degree of domestic and foreign threat. Of course, this is not feasible in a closed system like China’s. What we do have some access to, particularly in the pre-Xi Jinping Era of China, is some qualitative access to and knowledge of elite debates over the nature of domestic and foreign threats.

Importantly, it may *or may not* be the case that perceptions of threat are correlated with the degree of observed domestic unrest. For example, it may be the case that they will observe growing numbers of protest and assess a growing domestic threat. It may also be the case that they assess some local protests as not threatening to the regime. I discuss this more below.

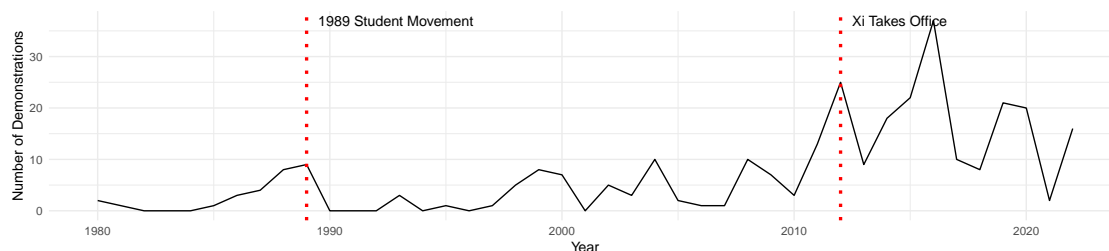
## 2 The Data The Replication Team Uses to Measure Domestic Unrest is of Questionable Quality

[Jetter and Swasito \(2024\)](#) propose using quantitative measures as an alternative to my own qualitative coding. For measuring domestic threat, they turn to data collected by [Banks and Wilson \(2023\)](#), who have constructed measures of the number of demonstrations, riots, and government crises around the world, including for China. These data have, as the authors note, been used by others ([Bueno de Mesquita and Smith, 2023](#)), if infrequently in political science. I will focus here on the domestic threat measure in part because these results did not replicate. However, I think a similar critique could also extend to the foreign threats measure, which do replicate with the new measure, at least partially.

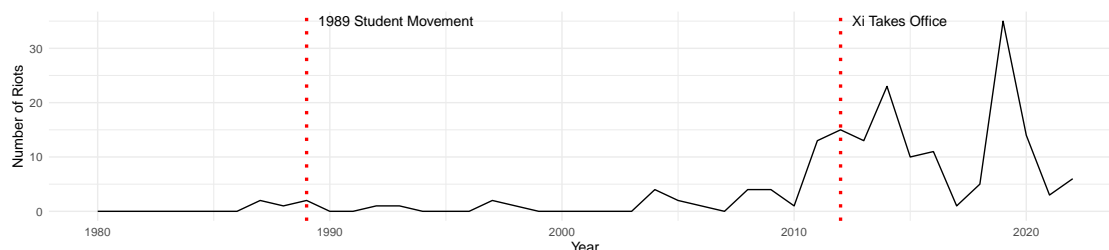
For most recent years in the [Banks and Wilson \(2023\)](#) for China, in my understanding the data were collected by counting stories in secondary news sources, especially the New York Times and other major English-language newspapers. Does counting stories in secondary sources in English capture the underlying distribution of demonstrations, riots, and other domestic political conflict in China?

In Figure 1 I plot the key variables that [Jetter and Swasito \(2024\)](#) use from the [Banks and Wilson \(2023\)](#) to capture domestic threat. These plots reveal puzzling patterns and raise serious questions about data quality and the approach used to gather these data.

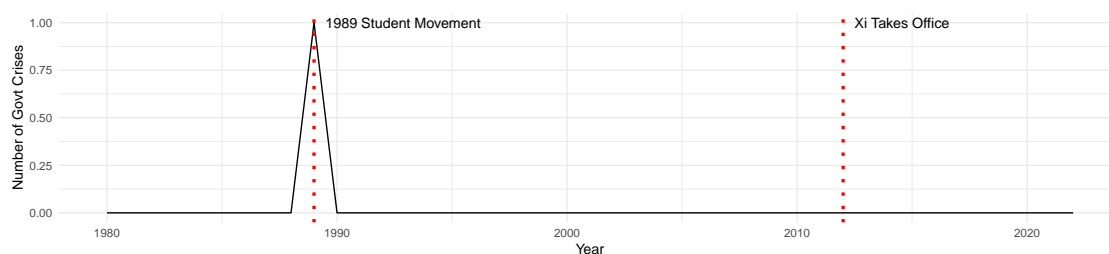
First, the over-time change in the number of anti-government demonstrations presented in Figure 1a does not credibly reflect over-time trends in China. In the [Banks and Wilson \(2023\)](#), these are defined as “[a]ny peaceful public gathering of at least 100 people for the primary purpose of displaying or voicing their opposition to government policies or authority, excluding demonstrations of a distinctly anti-foreign nature.” It is somewhat reassuring that there is an increase in the 1980s leading up to the 1989 student movement, consistent with historical accounts. It is, however, striking and puzzling to see that the number of such demonstrations peaks not in 1989 but *after* Xi Jinping takes office, a period widely known to be a period of intense control over civil society in which the number of local disturbances decreased relative to prior leaders. Nor do the results



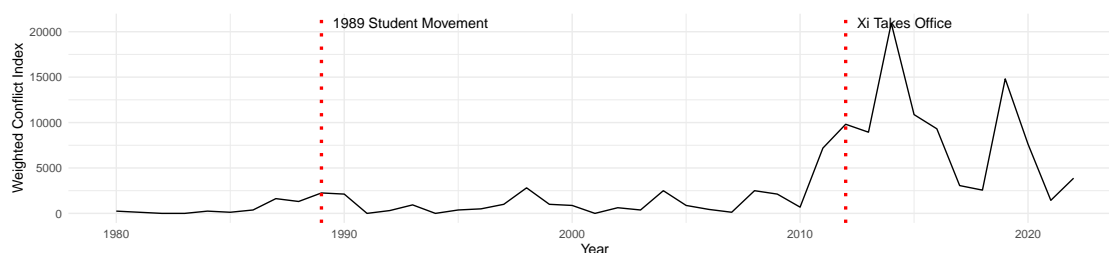
(a) Anti-Government Demonstrations



(b) Riots



(c) Government Crises



(d) Weighted Conflict Index

Figure 1: Plots of key variables in [Banks and Wilson \(2023\)](#) used for the extension analysis. For reference, the 1989 student movement and Xi Jinping's assumption of the CCP General Secretary role are marked with vertical lines.

show a steady growth of protest through the 1990s and 2000s, as the Chinese police have reported. Instead of reflecting empirical reality, the changes in this data series appear to be driven by shifts in western news reporting on China and mentions of such incidents. The data series for riots, in



Figure 1b, are similarly puzzling. These data in my view are simply not credible.

The government crisis variable, by contrast, is more credible, although it captures only one moment: the 1989 protests. These crises are defined as a “rapidly developing situation that threatens to bring the downfall of the present regime - excluding situations of revolt aimed at such overthrow.” Surely the 1989 movement qualifies. Here the maintainers of the [Banks and Wilson \(2023\)](#) have clearly made some judgments based on substantive (qualitative) knowledge. An difficult question is whether one might reasonably include (or exclude) the 2012 Bo Xilai incident based on a similar coding criteria.

The [Banks and Wilson \(2023\)](#) data include some other series not used by [Jetter and Swasito \(2024\)](#) that show how flawed the data collection method is for China. For example, they include a “purge” variable in which there are few purges in the Xi Jinping Era, despite the ongoing corruption crackdown that has led to large numbers of removals from office. It also includes a “general strike” variable that codes there being more strikes in the late Xi Era than in the Hu Era, which is not consistent with either a basic understanding of China or other data sources such as the China Labor Bulletin’s strike data.

Finally, if we turn to the Weighted Conflict Index, we should not be reassured. This index would lead us to think that the 1989 student movement was comparable as a moment of political conflict to the end of the Jiang Zemin Era and the mid-2000s — and that there has been more political conflict in the entirety of the Xi Jinping Era, driven not by elite conflict (recall this data source codes few purges under Xi) but by, incredibly, growing domestic unrest. It is not clear what this index is meant to capture in any case.

### **3 Available Quantitative Data Do Not Map Onto the Core Concepts**

If the quantitative data on domestic unrest and instability were more reliable, would they still be useful for measuring domestic threat? Not necessarily.

Protests, riots, and demonstrations do not always indicate a threat to the central government. As [Lorentzen \(2013\)](#) argues, the Chinese government long strategically tolerated protests partly as

a way to elicit information about local corruption and malfeasance by officials. Moreover, protests when they did occur were often aimed not at undermining the central government but instead were calling on the government to enforce its own laws on its local agents (O'Brien and Li, 2006). Thus, domestic disturbances in China were to some degree tolerated, prior to the Xi Jinping Era, and were arguably one source of government resilience. So using protests measure as a proxy for domestic threat is problematic.

In a system as institutionalized and resilient as China under the CCP, genuine threats to central authority are rare. Only the 1989 student protest movements and the Bo Xilai incident have unambiguously threatened the central government's power. The more recent A4/White Paper movement had the possibility to do so, but they were not sustained and large enough, even though they cut across regions.

#### **4 Conclusion: When Is Qualitative Case Knowledge Superior to Quantitative Data?**

My final brief point is that while “data driven approaches” have clear value, they should be accompanied by deep substantive knowledge of the cases being studied. Here, familiarity with Chinese history and politics suggest that the data collected by Banks and Wilson (2023) have serious problems when it comes to measuring domestic political trends in China, and are misleading. Somewhat more provocatively, I think that qualitative case knowledge in this case is likely superior to available quantitative measures when it comes to understanding elite assessments of internal and external threats, at least with the data presently available.

Having raised these concerns with the data used in the replication extension, I nevertheless found the core critique raised by Jetter and Swasito (2024) to be important and valid. Conceptualizing and, especially, measuring concepts like foreign and domestic threat is quite challenging, and the alternatives they propose are a good way to start a larger conversation. Future data collection efforts could attempt to measure foreign and domestic threats quantitatively using other approaches, such as using text-as-data techniques to analyze elite documents. I am grateful to Jetter and Swasito (2024) for a careful, thorough, and high-quality replication effort.

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