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Networks of coercion: Military ties and civilian leadership challenges in China

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Abstract

Civilian-led coups are one of the most common routes to losing power in autocracies. How do authoritarian leaders secure themselves from civilian leadership challenges? We argue that autocrats differentiate civilian rivals in part by their social ties to the military. To reduce the threat of coups, leaders buy off civilians with strong military ties by promoting them to lower-tier institutions—but isolate these same civilians by denying them promotion to higher-tier institutions that afford opportunities to challenge the leader. We introduce an original data set of over 117,000 postings of 34,140 Chinese military officers and map ties between the entire civilian and military elite between 1927 and 2014. We find that civilian leaders with strong ties to the military improve prospects for promotion to the Central Committee, but degrade the likelihood of promotion to the apex Politburo Standing Committee, particularly for civilians outside the leader's social network.

The leaders of any authoritarian regime should fear a military-backed leadership challenge. Coups, after all, are the most common way that authoritarian leaders are forced from office (Geddes et al., 2018; Svobik, 2012)—and nearly all successful elite-led overthrows have the backing of the armed forces (De Bruin, 2019, 2020; Powell & Thyne, 2011).

A growing literature has examined how civilian leaders guard against military coups and prevent the officers charged with protecting the regime from turning their guns against it (e.g., Brooks, 2019; Greitens, 2016; Grewal, 2019, 2023a, 2023b; Hassan, 2020, 2017; McMahon & Slantchev, 2015; Meng & Paine, 2022; Paine, 2021, 2022; Talmadge, 2015). Yet, this literature generally focuses on coups led by *military* leaders and has paid less attention to *civilian* leadership challenges—attempts by civilians to remove the sitting leader from office. This gap is striking because

leadership challenges by civilian elites are a frequent path to losing power—more common, in fact, than exit by mass revolt, assassination, foreign intervention, or civil war (Svobik, 2012). Since 1946, successful civilian-led coups have occurred in 37 countries across Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, and South America, and attempted civilian coups have occurred in an additional 48 countries (Bjørnskov & Rode, 2020; Svobik, 2012). In many regimes, particularly autocracies with strong institutional control over the military (Lachapelle et al., 2020; Meng & Paine, 2022), civilian challenges are the primary threat to a leader's continued rule. While recent work has called attention to the importance and frequency of civilian leadership challenges in numerous contexts such as Sudan, Egypt, Tunisia, and Iraq (Ben Hammou, 2024; Kinney, 2019, 2021), it remains unclear how the leaders of authoritarian regimes guard against them.

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The Cornell Center for Social Sciences verified that the data and replication code submitted to the AJPS Dataverse replicates the numerical results reported in the main text of this article.

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How do authoritarian leaders secure themselves from civilian leadership challenges? In this paper, we develop a logic of elite political control emphasizing the importance of social ties between civilian and military actors. In order to challenge a leader, civilian rivals must solve a civil–military coordination problem: to ensure that the military will back their challenge rather than the sitting leader. We argue that social ties spanning the civil–military divide ease the costs of solving this coordination problem by allowing potential challengers to know where military leaders stand and speak with authority when mobilizing their support. As a result, the civilian rivals who are most threatening to leaders tend to be the ones most connected to those who hold the guns.

We argue that authoritarian leaders strategically manipulate political appointments in ways that limit the ability of civilian rivals to solve the civil–military coordination problem. On the one hand, leaders can appoint rival civilians with strong military ties to low-level power-sharing institutions that share spoils. Such appointments reduce the threat that strong elites pose by curtailing their motivation to challenge the leader. On the other hand, leaders can deny these same rival civilians appointment to high-level power-sharing institutions that confer leverage to displace the leader.

To develop and test our hypotheses about the importance of civil–military network ties, we examine the world's largest and most powerful autocracy: the People's Republic of China. We introduce an original data set that catalogues over 117,000 appointments of 34,140 Chinese military officers between 1927 and 2014. The data set we build is the most comprehensive of its kind and allows us to map in fine-grained detail the connections between the entire Chinese Communist Party (CCP) civilian and military elite. We build our data set through an extensive effort to compile material produced by the CCP and the US government. Using these data, we identify over 73,000 career ties between military officers and members of the CCP elite.

Drawing on this novel data set, we show how elites with strong ties to the military are more likely to be promoted to the CCP Central Committee, a comparatively low-level elite power-sharing institution through which spoils are shared. Our main research design leverages overtime changes in a civilian leader's ties to active-duty military personnel, using two-way fixed effects to account for individual characteristics and period shocks. A one standard deviation increase in the number of ties to active military officers increases the likelihood of promotion to full member of the Central Committee by 11 to 21 percentage points. These findings hold even when accounting for the strength of the party member's ties to other civilian officials commonly emphasized in existing scholarship (Shih, 2004,

2008, 2022; Shih et al., 2012). Our results also show, however, that civilian rivals with strong ties to military leaders are *less* likely to be rewarded with elevation to the CCP Political Bureau (Politburo) Standing Committee, a small leadership group at the regime's apex whose members possess more leverage and authority to challenge the leader. Collectively, these findings suggest that authoritarian leaders strategically use appointments to curb the threat of civilian leadership challenges by keeping potential rivals close—but not necessarily too close.

Our theory and findings contribute to a growing body of work that examines the role of the military in authoritarian politics. Much recent work has focused on the “guardianship dilemma”—or how leaders of authoritarian regimes manage the trade-off between empowering the military, which can increase coup risk, and weakening the military, which can increase vulnerability to mass and foreign threats (e.g., Blaydes, 2018; De Bruin, 2020; Dragu & Przeworski, 2019; Greitens, 2016; Grewal, 2019, 2023a, 2023b; Mattingly, 2024; McMahon & Slantchev, 2015; Meng, 2020; Paine, 2021, 2022; Weeks, 2014). We build most directly on work by Meng and Paine (2022), who highlight a power-sharing logic for how authoritarian leaders tame military elites. By contrast, we argue that leaders will regulate the rise of *civilians* with coercive power by drawing them into the elite coalition but, crucially, not necessarily drawing them into the inner circle.

Our argument also contributes to a rich literature on elite politics and political selection in China. China under the CCP provides a quintessential example of a regime that has established strong norms of civilian control over the military. Yet, factional divides *within* the civilian elite can force the military to choose sides between contesting civilians. Thus, whereas prior work on promotion in Chinese politics emphasizes performance and intra-civilian networks that foster patronage (Landry et al., 2018; Manion, 2023; Shih et al., 2012), we emphasize a third factor: civil–military networks that generate coercive threats. By drawing attention to such threats, this paper sheds light on the hidden role of coercive organizations in Chinese politics—and suggests how promotion strategies to reduce these threats may have contributed to the CCP regime's remarkable durability.

A THEORY OF CIVILIAN LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES AND PROMOTION IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

In an authoritarian regime, a successful leadership challenge requires the assent of the military, otherwise the regime's guns can simply be turned against the coup plotters. When a coup is led by military offi-

cers, the critical coordination challenge is within the military: Officers “want to convince military actors that the success of the coup has the support of almost everybody in the institution” (Singh, 2014, p. 8).

When a leadership challenge is led by civilian politicians, on the other hand, plotters are faced with a separate *civil–military coordination problem*. The crux of this problem is that civilian leaders need to ensure that military actors will back the challenge, but they must coordinate with military officers with great care and secrecy, since if their plot fails, they face the possibility of being jailed and executed.

We develop a theory of civilian leadership challenges based on the logic of the civil–military coordination problem. First, we argue that social network ties between civilians and military officers can ease the costs of solving the civil–military coordination problem. Second, we argue that leaders use appointments to power-sharing institutions to address the varying threats that civilian rivals pose. These incentives have important implications for promotion patterns in autocracies, particularly institutionalized ones: Elites with strong ties to the military should be more likely to promote into the broader ruling coalition, but less likely to promote to the inner sanctum at the apex of the regime.

Our approach builds on a rich tradition of work showing how factional ties, especially in China, are important for advancement (e.g., Nathan, 1973; Shih, 2004, 2008, 2022; Shih et al., 2012; Jia et al., 2015; Chen & Hong, 2021; Manion, 2023). Generally, this literature argues that autocrats consider a mix of loyalty and competence when promoting subordinates. Some emphasize that leaders may promote subordinates with competence in crucial arenas, such as spurring economic growth or collecting taxes (Landry, 2008; Jia et al., 2015; Landry et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020), while others suggest that authoritarian leaders have incentives to recruit and promote loyal but less competent subordinates (Acemoglu et al., 2010; Zakharov, 2016; Scharpf & Gläsel, 2020). In contrast, we propose a complementary, yet distinct logic governing elite advancement: the importance of civil–military ties.

The civil–military coordination problem

The most common extra-constitutional method through which autocratic leaders are removed from office is the coup d'état in which regime elites forcefully impose a change in political leadership (Powell & Thyne, 2011). Although some coups are planned by military organizations, many are instead organized by civilian elites who aspire to unseat ruling leaders. We use the term *civilian leadership challenges* to refer to attempts by civilians within the regime's ruling coalition to remove the sitting leader from office.

Civilian leadership challenges are conceptually similar to military coups—but the key difference is that they are organized and executed by civilians without direct control over the state's coercive organizations. The outcome of civilian leadership challenges is often an extra-constitutional change in civilian leadership, rather than a transition to military rule. Nikita Khrushchev's removal from office, for example, was organized by other civilian members of the Soviet Union's Politburo, who selected Leonid Brezhnev as the new ruler. In other cases, civilians work jointly with military officers to remove sitting leaders. In Sudan in 1989, for example, “a civilian political party, jointly seized power with sympathetic officers to establish a military-Islamist regime” (Ben Hammou, 2024, pp. 13–14). Such challenges by civilian hands have occurred in some 37 countries (Bjørnskov & Rode, 2020).

In order to launch a leadership challenge, civilians need to coordinate with military actors, which we refer to as the *civil–military coordination problem*. Without the backing of the military, the sitting leader can simply use the armed forces to arrest or kill the coup plotters. This coordination problem is particularly vexing to civilians because they often have few opportunities to interface with military leaders and gain information about who may support or oppose a leadership challenge.

We argue that a civilian's social ties to the military decrease the costs of solving this coordination problem. First, social ties provide information about the personalities and preferences of potential backers of the leadership challenge within the military. This allows challengers to screen which military officers would be sympathetic to a challenge, even before planning begins.¹ Second, social ties can facilitate interpersonal communication. Such coordination is easier when political leaders can “draw on a reservoir of common cultural material—language, experience, understandings about modes of interaction” (Habyarimana et al., 2007). Shared experiences, particularly in wartime, make it easier for potential civilian challenges to speak to the military with clarity and authority (Torigian, 2022; Thaler, 2022).

Several historical examples illustrate this logic. In the Soviet Union, ties between Nikita Khrushchev and Georgy Zhukov, one of the top Soviet generals, forged through shared service in World War II were critical in challenging Lavrentiy Beria, the head of Soviet intelligence (Roberts, 2012, p. 260). In Tunisia, Prime Minister Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's social ties to the military, and the information about private preferences that those ties provide, were crucial in ousting President Habib Bourguiba from office. To remove Bourguiba, Ben Ali turned to a leading military officer, Habib Ammar, whom he had known since

¹ See also Cebul and Grewal (2022).

childhood—both men came from the same village and were classmates at the Saint-Cyr Military Academy in France (Wolf, 2023, p. 42; Droz-Vincent, 2020, p. 102). After the two men privately discussed their willingness to challenge Bourguiba, Ammar ordered his troops to surround the presidential palace and Ben Ali had the president declared medically unfit for office (Grewal, 2023b, pp. 198–199).

The power-sharing dilemma

How do leaders respond to the threats that elites with social ties to the military (hereafter “strong” elites) pose to their rule?² Institutional appointments—such as membership on party committees, executive councils, and cabinets—offer one approach to share power and defuse conflict among civilian elites (e.g., Gandhi, 2008; Blaydes, 2010; Svobik, 2012; Weeks, 2014; Hassan, 2020).³ Appointment to these bodies can reduce the appointee’s incentives to defect and can also potentially make it harder for leaders to renege in the future.

Yet, leaders face a trade-off in choosing whether to share power with strong elites. On the one hand, sharing power with strong elites may help to neutralize the constituency most threatening to the leader’s survival—what Finer (1962, p. 23) describes as an elite’s “motive” for initiating a leadership challenge. Appointing strong elites to a government cabinet or party committee affords them power over how the ruling party allocates budgets, sets policy, and hires. By sharing the pie of state resources with strong elites, leaders can reduce their payoff for launching a challenge for the purpose of gaining more control over spoils, compared to being excluded from the elite coalition altogether.

On the other hand, sharing power with strong elites could also increase the probability a leadership challenge will succeed—what Finer (1962, p. 72) termed “opportunity” for challenging a leader. Leadership challenges require support (or at least acquiescence) from other key players in the broader regime coalition. Membership in key party and government bodies may give elites the opportunity to use their institutional powers to launch a leadership challenge. For instance, as Ben Hammou (2024, p. 5) argues, “privileged civilians” who occupied “sensitive positions” at the apex of the regime in Sudan were uniquely positioned “to initiate coup plots or jointly plot with officers to seize power.” Drawing on evidence from

Africa, Roessler (2016, p. 20) similarly notes that “[s]haring power can... increas[e] rivals’ coup-making capabilities.”

Leadership challenges, military ties, and selective promotion

We argue that leaders resolve this dilemma by appointing strong elites to some types of power-sharing institutions, while denying them appointment to others. Power-sharing institutions in autocracies tend to be hierarchical. Institutions at different ends of the hierarchy differ in two key aspects that allow leaders to selectively choose how to share power with strong elites. The first is the extent to which membership allows elites access to the spoils of governance (Meng et al., 2022). Appointment to these power-sharing institutions is helpful in defusing motivation for coup because it allows members to extract rents and set the political agenda. The second is the degree to which membership provides leverage—or authority to challenge the leader’s continued rule. Members of such bodies have formal power to remove or replace the leader, creating a potential threat to the leader’s rule.⁴

Appointment to power-sharing institutions with significant spoils but low leverage—such as a low-level party congress that approves the political agenda but does not play a meaningful role in leadership selection—presents a logical strategy to address the challenge of strong elites. By appointing strong elites to these bodies, leaders curb motivation for revolt among those elites most threatening to their political survival. Appointment to broader power-sharing institutions secures the leader’s position by giving strong elites access to spoils, while at the same time limiting their legal and institutional power over leadership selection.

One important screening mechanism for promotion is whether strong elites are inside or outside of the leader’s own network, however. All else equal, elites outside the leader’s personal network are more likely to have limited access to spoils from office, and thus have stronger incentives to challenge the leader. As such, elites should be especially likely to target civilians who have strong ties but are outside of their own personal network—that is, the most dangerous potential rivals. All together then, this leads to our first hypothesis.

² We use the term “leaders” to refer to the individual or set of individuals who manage elite promotions. Appointment decisions are sometimes determined by a single ruler, as in personalist dictatorships. While they are also sometimes the result of collective decision, we assume that authority over elite appointments remains concentrated at the regime’s apex, such that appointments are made in part to curb the risk of leadership challenge.

³ See Meng and Paine (2022) on the importance of cabinets in rebel regimes.

⁴ Note that in some political contexts, leverage may stem from other formal authorities, such as a president’s or civilian court’s ability to declare a prime minister unfit to govern.

H1. *Civilian elites who have strong ties to the military are more likely to promote to low-level agenda-setting bodies, such as a central committee. Strong civilian elites without ties to the sitting leader will be especially likely to promote.*

The picture looks different when considering appointment to bodies at the apex of the government, such as a party standing committee, which provide leverage over leadership selection. These bodies often help to set policy, including issues of cadre selection and removal. They also confer status and authority for members to replace the leader, making them precisely the sort of body from which leaders want to exclude strong elites.

Leaders thus carefully guard appointment to high-level power-sharing institutions that confer leverage. Leaders should aim to keep strong elites from joining such bodies—and only allow them to do so when strong elites are already a part of the leader's personal network. This promotion strategy thereby ensures that elites whose institutional positions confer leverage are not the same elites who are also capable of solving the civil–military coordination problem as well. This leads to our second hypothesis.

H2. *Civilian elites who have strong ties to the military and lack strong ties to the sitting leader are less likely to promote to high-level bodies that provide political leverage, such as a politburo standing committee.*

Finally, institutions at intermediate levels of the regime hierarchy, such as a full politburo, are likely to feature mixed results. On the one hand, members of these bodies have more control over the spoils of government, which may reduce incentives for revolt. At the same time, members of these bodies are more likely to play a direct role in selecting and appointing top leaders, which magnifies the danger that these strong elites pose. These competing considerations make intermediate bodies an indeterminate case for our theory. This leads to our third and final hypothesis.

H3. *Civilian elites who have strong ties to the military are neither more nor less likely to promote to intermediate bodies, such as a full politburo.*

Scope conditions

Important recent work has highlighted the widespread nature of civilian–military collaboration during leadership challenges across a range of regime types (Kinney, 2019, 2021; Ben Hammou, 2024). Nevertheless, our theory makes several assumptions that may be most likely to hold in institutionalized autocracies, which

possess hierarchical party organizations and well-enforced rules regarding political behavior (e.g., Meng & Paine, 2022; Lachapelle et al., 2020).⁵

First, our theory assumes that the leader and ruling coalition are civilians—and that there are strong norms of civilian control—such that leaders are more concerned about the military adjudicating between divisions between elites than about a traditional military coup. This suggests that our theory may not apply in regimes directly or indirectly ruled by the military.

Second, our theory assumes that leadership challenges are more likely to come from individuals at the apex of the regime hierarchy, rather than from lower levels of the state hierarchy. While this condition holds in many institutionalized autocracies, it may not apply in weakly institutionalized regimes vulnerable to coups by low-level soldiers or backbench politicians.

Third, we assume that civilians gain significant access to spoils when they join the broader ruling coalition, not just when they join the regime's inner sanctum. In other words, membership in the broader leadership group should bring enough of a payoff in terms of influence over policy, budgets, and so forth that it reduces the incentives for launching a leadership challenge. While this is plausible in institutionalized autocracies, such as China, where spoils are spread widely (Truex, 2014, 2016), it may not hold in other autocracies.

Finally, our theory assumes that the benefits of decreasing opportunities for a leadership challenge tend to outweigh the benefits of decreasing motives for one. Some apex decision-making bodies could confer both more leverage *and* more access to spoils. Our theory assumes, however, that leaders prioritize limiting a strong elite's opportunity to challenge, because even appeased elites could potentially challenge if given the opportunity.

MILITARY TIES AND POLITICAL SURVIVAL IN CHINA

In China, splits between party civilians create opportunities—perceived and actual—for elites to challenge one another. Chinese leaders want to ensure that they can survive such power struggles. They do so in part by differentiating other civilians by the threat that they pose in the event of a future leadership challenge.

The Chinese military, or People's Liberation Army (PLA), has played an important, if sometimes underappreciated, role in these calculations surrounding

⁵ On institutional strength, see Levitsky and Murillo (2009).

potential power struggles between civilians (Whitson, 1973; Fravel, 2019; Torigian, 2022; Shih, 2022; Fewsmith, 2021). While Chinese military leaders have not unilaterally seized power—as counterparts in Pakistan, Thailand, or Burma have—the PLA nevertheless shapes elite politics in China in two key ways.

First, civilians in China often depend on the military to remain in office and to consolidate their power. Toward the end of his life, Mao Zedong leveraged loyalists within the PLA as a political base to launch the Cultural Revolution and purge his presumed successor, Liu Shaoqi (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals, 2009). Civilians also depend on the military to survive challenges to their rule. After Mao's death, the PLA intervened directly in politics by siding with the more moderate Hua Guofeng and arresting the radical "Gang of Four" (Teiwes & Sun, 2014). As a result, civil-military network ties have historically been a key asset during leadership struggles in China. After the sacking of the Gang of Four, personal connections to the PLA leadership helped Deng Xiaoping mobilize support unseat Hua Guofeng (Torigian, 2022). After the crackdown on the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, personal ties to the PLA proved pivotal in securing support for Deng's crackdown on the protesters and removal of CCP General Secretary Zhao Ziyang from office (Gewirtz, 2022).

Second, the latent power of the military to adjudicate in the event of a civilian power struggle has also *indirectly* shaped political behavior in China. Even when military power is not directly used, the military's ability to arbitrate a potential civilian leadership challenge shapes the strategic choices of Chinese rulers—just as the balance of power between states shapes their foreign policy behavior even when military force is not employed (Schelling, 1966). For example, Jiang Zemin undermined Hu Jintao's authority by retaining his position on the Central Military Commission—and by appointing loyalists to key military posts—after Hu became the CCP general secretary (Fewsmith, 2021). Similarly, one reported reason that Xi Jinping removed Chongqing Party Secretary Bo Xilai in 2012 was that his ties to the military posed a threat to Xi's political leadership (Shih, 2022).

As a result of the military's direct and indirect influence on Chinese politics, one way that party elites are commonly differentiated from one another in China is by their social connections to the military (Torigian, 2022; Mattingly, 2024; Jost, 2024). As Deng Xiaoping was contemplating his retirement in the late 1980s, for instance, he emphasized that two successors who lacked these ties—Zhao Ziyang and Jiang Zemin—would need to "get to know" the senior ranks of the PLA in order to compensate for this deficiency (Liu Huaqing, 2007, pp. 530, 576). Jiang himself acknowledged his lack of military experience in one of his first speeches to the senior military leadership in November 1989 (Jost 2024, p. 143).

How military ties form in China

Social ties between civilian and military actors typically form in one of two ways in China. In the first four decades of the People's Republic of China (PRC), many top leaders had previously served as military officers in the revolution that brought the CCP to power. These officials formed ties with military leaders by serving alongside them in the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Civil War. For instance, Zhou Enlai—who later became China's first premier—served alongside four of China's later defense ministers, Zhu De, Peng Dehuai, Lin Biao, and Ye Jianying.

Civilian officials can also form ties with military officers through shared service on party committees. The CCP is organized into organizational silos (系统) that run from the party's apex down to local party organs. Two important silos for our purposes are *civilian silos*, where cadres can serve as party secretaries in districts and provinces, and *military silos*, in which PLA officers serve in district and province leadership roles. Critically, civilian cadres and military officers who serve in the same geographic region at the same time tend to serve on overlapping district and provincial committees that allow them to form personal ties. For example, Xi Jinping built connections with air force officer Xu Qiliang during their shared service in Fujian province.

Power-sharing institutions in China

The CCP is a sprawling and hierarchical political organization with over 90 million members. In this study, we focus our attention on three high-level bodies, visualized in Figure 1, that plausibly provide civilian elites with spoils and leverage.

The first is the Central Committee, a national-level body composed of approximately 200 of the most important party cadres. Membership on the Central Committee affords party cadres substantially higher ability to extract rents and at least a modicum of influence over policy.⁶ Crucially, however, the party charter states that rank-and-file members of the Central Committee cannot be appointed as the party general secretary. These features limit the ability of members to participate in a leadership challenge, making it a low-leverage institution. Thus, consistent with H1, we expect that civilians with strong ties to the military are more likely to be appointed to the Central Committee, especially when strong civilian elites are outside the leader's personal network.

Two noteworthy institutions rest above the Central Committee in the regime hierarchy: the Politburo and the Politburo Standing Committee. The Politburo is

⁶ On the role of and selection procedure for the Central Committee, see Wu (2015).

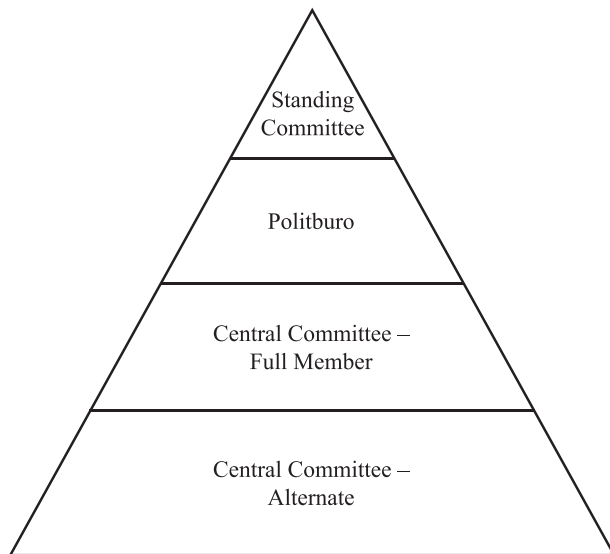


FIGURE 1 Hierarchy of power-sharing institutions in China.
Note: Size does not correspond precisely to the number of members in each institution, as there are generally fewer alternates than full members in the Central Committee.

a smaller leadership of approximately 25 members. While Politburo members are more likely to be consulted on policy, regular Politburo members cannot be named general secretary or party chairman per the party charter and longstanding custom. In contrast, membership on the Politburo Standing Committee—an exclusive body of five to eleven members at the regime's apex—substantially magnifies leverage. Crucially, per the party constitution and party norms, the supreme leader should be a member of the Standing Committee. Appointment to the Standing Committee also symbolically establishes members as the most politically influential cadres in the Party, which may afford admission into traditionally important but informal decision-making rooms.

Thus, consistent with H2, we expect that civilians with strong ties to the military will be less likely to be appointed to the Politburo Standing Committee if they are outside of the leader's own network. Consistent with H3, however, we expect that civilians with strong military ties will be neither more nor less likely to be appointed to the full Politburo.

DATA

To explore elite promotion patterns within the CCP, we collected data on the careers of over 34,000 Chinese military officers between 1927 and 2014. We leveraged two types of source material. The first were organizational histories published by the PLA General Political Department, titled *Materials on the Organizational History of the People's Liberation Army of the Chinese Communist Party* [中国共产党中国人民解放军组织史

资料].⁷ These materials cover military appointments between the formation of the PLA in August 1927 to the time of their publication in the mid-1990s. The second category were annual yearbooks maintained by the US government titled *The Directory of PRC Military Personalities*.⁸ These volumes cover the period between 1988 and 2014.⁹ Table 1 uses the career trajectory of Liu Huaqing as an illustrative example. Figure 2 shows the number of new military appointments over time contained in these data. The online appendix (see pp. A2 to A6) provides additional details regarding the data set and coding rules.

A crucial advantage of these materials is their temporal scope and level of detail. Whereas existing data sets of Chinese military officers only include the most senior levels in recent decades (e.g., Mattingly, 2024), our data capture organizational affiliations dating back to the PLA's founding and include a wider span of appointments, including the general staff departments, field armies and military regions, provincial headquarters, as well as other subsidiary military divisions. To our knowledge, this provides the most comprehensive data yet available on the career history and corresponding social networks of the PLA.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In this section, we discuss our strategies to measure political promotion in China, the centrality of cadres within military and civilian networks, as well as our model specifications. Our study period is from 1949 to 2012—inclusive of 11 party congresses (from the eighth to the eighteenth).

Measuring promotion

Our analyses examine four promotion outcomes. First, to analyze power-sharing through inclusion in the wider ruling coalition, we focus on promotion from non-member of the Central Committee to full or alternate member of the Central Committee. We leveraged data on prefecture-level party secretaries and mayors from 1949 to 2016 published by the China Stock Market & Accounting Research Database (CSMAR). Unlike province-level leaders, who generally belong to the Central Committee already, there is significant variation in whether prefecture-level leaders promote to the Central Committee. The outcome variable takes a value of one if an individual is a full or alternate member and a value of zero otherwise.

⁷ See People's Liberation Army General Political Department Editorial Group (1994).

⁸ See United States Department of Defense, Defense Liaison Office (1988–2014).

⁹ Both the PLA organizational histories and the US government directories are publicly available in libraries at Harvard University, Princeton University, and George Washington University.

TABLE 1 Example career data for Liu Huaqing.

Position	Unit	Years	Source
Organization Chief	Political Department, 25th Red Army	1934–1935	PLA Organizational History, Vol. I
Confidential Section Chief	8th Route Army Command Group	1938–1939	PLA Organizational History, Vol. II
Political Committee Member	Second Field Army Second, Sixth Brigade	1945–1946	PLA Organizational History, Vol. III
...	...	...	...
Vice President	PLA Naval Academy	1953–1954	PLA Organizational History, Vol. IV
...	...	...	...
Commander	PLA Navy	1982–1989	PLA Organizational History, Vol. VI
Deputy Secretary General	Central Military Commission	1987–1989	Directory of PRC Military Personalities
Vice Chairman	Central Military Commission	1990–1997	Directory of PRC Military Personalities

Note: Example career data for Liu Huaqing including the position, unit, years served, and source. For brevity, some of Liu Huaqing's career positions are skipped, indicated by the ellipses.

Abbreviations: PLA, People's Liberation Army; PRC, People's Republic of China.

Second, we examine promotion from alternate to full member of the Central Committee. Here, we leveraged the CCP Leadership Database (Shih et al., 2021), which lists all members of the Central Committee. These data also provide biographical covariates for the Central Committee cadres in whose promotion we are interested. Again, we focus on a simple dichotomous outcome that takes a value of zero if an individual is an alternate member in a given Party CPongress and a value of one if they are a full member.

Third, we examine promotion from the broader Central Committee to the Politburo, the elite group of about 25 top party officials. In parallel, we examine promotion to the Politburo Standing Committee, the apex body of the party. We collected original data on CCP Politburo membership from 1927 to present released by the CCP, titled *Materials on CCP Organizational History* [中国共产党组织史资料].¹⁰ For each member, we recorded their date of entry and exit to the Politburo or Standing Committee. We again use a simple dichotomous measure that takes a value of zero if a person is not a member and a value of one if they join.¹¹ In the online appendix (pp. A11 and A15), we show that the results are robust to an alternative measure of promotion, which uses an ordinal measure combining promotion levels by rank.

Measuring military network centrality

Our main explanatory variable is an individual's centrality in military social networks. For each cadre in our analyses, we coded a social tie to any of the military officers in our data if one of two conditions are met. The first condition is when the two individuals served in the same active military unit at the same

time. For most civilian members of the Central Committee, these connections were formed during the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Chinese Civil War, when most of the party's senior leadership were soldiers. For military members, connections were formed by overlapping service in the same unit.¹² A second condition is when the two individuals served in the same body at the provincial, district, or prefecture level. For example, when individuals serve as a provincial governor, they often serve in provincial defense mobilization committees; when they serve as provincial party secretary, they are also concurrently the first party secretary of the province military district.¹³ We thus coded provincial governors and secretaries as connected to the specific military officers who served in provincial or district leadership positions during the civilian cadre's tenure. In a similar fashion, we coded prefecture-level leaders as having ties to the specific military officers serving in leadership positions of the same prefecture-level military subdistricts, as well as PLA Group Army leaders stationed in the same prefecture, during the civilian cadre's time at that locality.¹⁴ In the online appendix (see pp. A16 to A17), we disaggregate the results by connections built through wartime military service and those forged through common service in peacetime civil-military bodies.

The main analysis employs a degree centrality measure of connectedness within military networks (mean = 20.7; median = 0, sd = 37.8). This measure is the

¹⁰ Wang (2000). For a similar approach, see Chen et al. (2024).

¹¹ For individuals promoted, purged, or demoted during a Party Congress, we recorded the highest level they achieved.

¹² Note that while the size of each military unit varied, the organizational data on which we rely focus on the command staffs composed of no more than a few dozen officers. The structure of these data thus increases the likelihood that our measure of social ties captures real-world social familiarity.

¹³ Note that our analysis focuses on civil-military ties that form prior to promotion to the Central Committee. While it is possible that party civilians may also build connections to military officers through the Central Committee, this seems less plausible given the infrequency of Central Committee meetings.

¹⁴ For this analysis, we limit our measure to ties to PLA officers who in that period have become members of the Central Committee. Most prefecture-level military leaders are unlikely to be promoted, and ties to these lower level officers are likely less important.

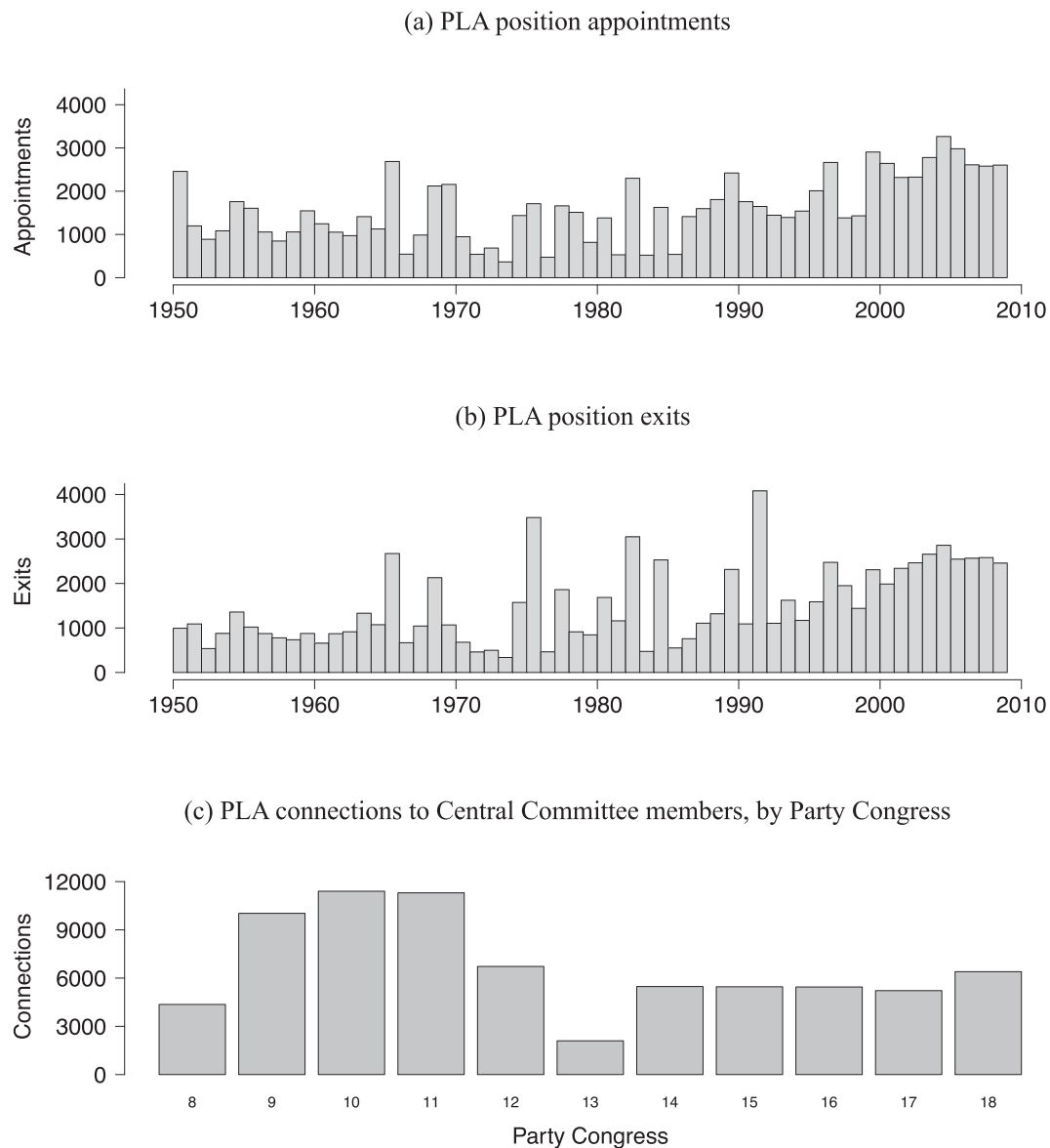


FIGURE 2 Trends in military appointments, exits, and ties to civilian leadership. *Note:* Figure 2a reports the number of new military appointments by year between 1927 and 2014. Figure 2b reports when a People's Liberation Army (PLA) officer exits a position. Figure 2c presents the number of ties to PLA leaders for each Central Committee member in each Party Congress.

number of connections that an individual has to officers still in active military service (i.e., not retired). We take the log value of the degree centrality measure and normalize it so that it has a mean value of zero and a standard deviation of one. Figure 3 provides examples of degree centrality scores, as well as network graphs, for three noteworthy party officials: Mao Zedong, Lin Biao, and Zhou Enlai. In the online appendix (see pp. A12 to A19), we replicate our results using other measures of network centrality.

Measuring civilian network ties

In most model specifications, we coded ties among civilians to account for the alternative explanation that

it is centrality in nonmilitary networks that explains promotion. We constructed this variable in a method analogous to the military network centrality score. Specifically, individuals who served in a senior-level position within the same central organ (e.g., the Ministry of Commerce), province, or district organ at the same time were coded as possessing a tie.¹⁵ An important feature of our measure is that it captures ties

¹⁵ "Senior-level" included roles at the head of each administrative unit, such as minister, vice minister, bureau/department head, provincial (vice) party secretary/governor, provincial people's congress chairman, provincial standing committee member, provincial party secretariat, provincial department head, and district party secretary/head. Since the data in Shih et al. (2012) only include individuals within the Central Committee, we are only able to measure ties formed with individuals already promoted to the Central Committee. This feature of the data may overestimate the association between civilian network centrality and promotion.

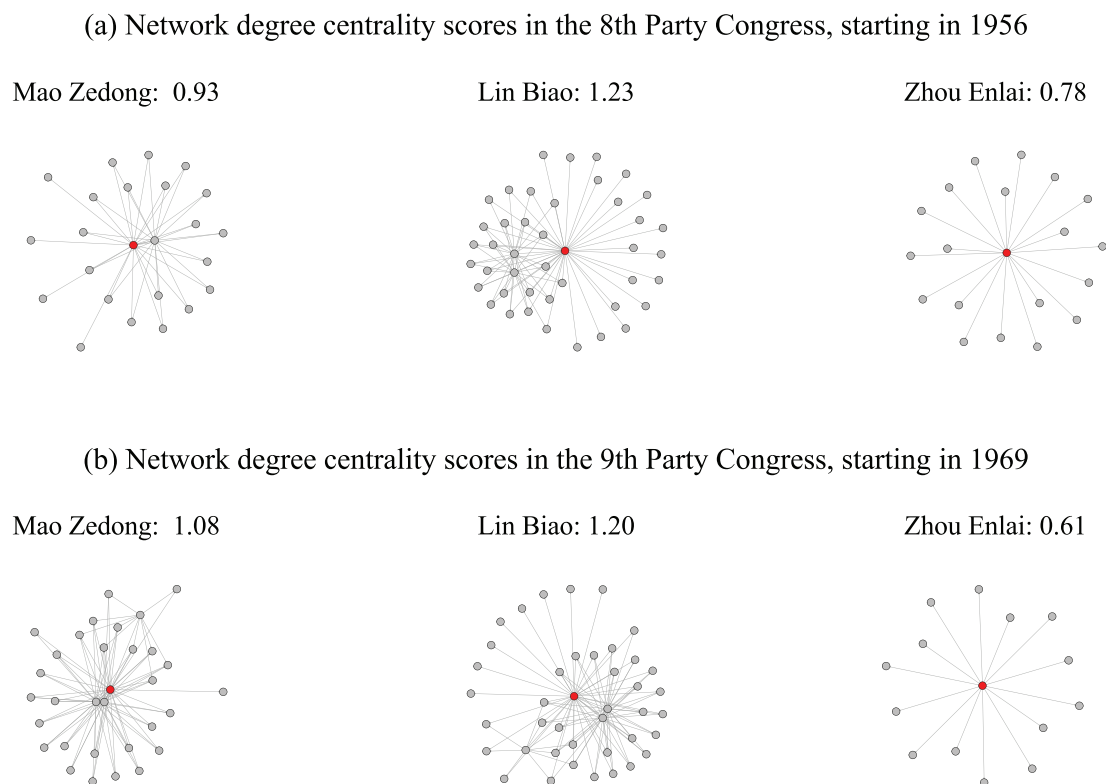


FIGURE 3 Example network graphs for key Chinese leaders of the Mao Era. *Note:* Examples of civil–military network graphs with normalized degree centrality values for Party Chairman Mao Zedong, Party Vice Chairman Lin Biao, and Premier Zhou Enlai in the 8th Party Congress (top) and 9th Party Congresses (bottom). Mao and especially Lin have denser ties to the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) elite than Zhou.

between individuals who served together in the same bodies, which increases the likelihood that a real-world tie was formed.¹⁶ Finally, we construct a simple dichotomous measure of the cadre’s position within the leader’s social network (inside or outside) based on our measure of civilian network ties.¹⁷

Model specification

Our research design uses two-way fixed effects to estimate the effect of military connections on promotion. Our main specification is:

$$y_{it} = \beta_1 D_{it} + \mu_i + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{it}.$$

Here, y_{it} is the binary measure of promotion (i.e., inclusion in the Central Committee, Politburo, or Politburo Standing Committee) for individual i in Party congress t . Our unit of analysis is structured by

Party Congress because most promotion occurs at the beginning of a new Party Congress.

The variable D_{it} is a *military network centrality score* for each individual in each Party Congress, which has a mean value of zero and a standard deviation of one. We include individual fixed effects μ_i that absorb time-invariant differences between individuals. We also include Party Congress fixed effects δ_t that absorb common time period shocks. The key assumption of this research design is that time-varying changes do not drive both network centrality and promotion.

We also estimate a set of regressions with control variables. The first and most substantively important control variable is an individual’s *civilian network centrality score*, which measures the density of a cadre’s ties to other party civilians. Like the military network centrality score, we normalize the measure such that it has a mean value of zero and a standard deviation of one. Second, while demographic characteristics are time-invariant covariates that are absorbed by the individual fixed effects terms, we include interaction terms between demographic characteristics and Party Congress to capture the possibility that the effect of demographic characteristics on promotion may have changed over time. Specifically, we interact the period dummies with prior provincial party secretary service

¹⁶ Alternative measurement strategies, such as those coding ties based on service in the same ministry or geographic region, risk counting weak ties between individuals who have few opportunities for social interaction.

¹⁷ We code the leader as Mao Zedong, Hua Guofeng, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping.

(taking a value of one if the individual has served in this role), prior provincial governor service (taking a value of one if the individual has served in this role), minority status (taking a value of one if the individual is a minority), princeling status (taking a value of one if the individual has parents who were CCP leaders), and college education (taking a value of one if the individual went to university). These controls thus capture outsider status, insider status, and human capital, all of which could potentially drive inclusion in the ruling coalition. In the analysis of prefecture-level leaders, for which we have a different set of covariates, we include controls for education, sex, age, and service as a prefecture party secretary. In total, we incorporate these two sets of control variables by estimating fixed effects regressions of the following form:

$$y_{it} = \beta_1 D_{it} + \beta_2 C_{it} + \mu_i + \delta_t * \lambda_i + \varepsilon_{it}.$$

This specification is the same as the first but includes a vector of civilian network centrality scores C_{it} for each individual in each Party Congress, as well as a matrix of time-invariant characteristics λ that we interact with period (Party Congress) dummy variables.

RESULTS

Our theory suggests that in order to reduce the risk of a civilian leadership challenge, leaders will promote civilians with strong ties to the military to positions inside the broader ruling coalition—in China's case the Central Committee. At the same time, leaders should be reluctant to promote civilians with strong leadership ties to apex bodies, such as the Politburo Standing Committee, where they could gain the resources, connections, and prestige to launch a leadership challenge. In this section, we examine these claims using our panel data.

Party leaders with strong military ties are more likely to join the Central Committee

We begin our analysis by probing patterns of promotion to the Central Committee from the prefectures. In Table 2, we analyze promotion to full or alternate membership in the Central Committee among the pool of civilian prefecture-level leaders. Promotion at this career stage is rare: About 5% of leaders promote to the Central Committee as an alternate or full member.

The results show that for prefecture-level leaders, centrality in military networks is strongly correlated with promotion. Column (1) presents results without controls and only individual and period (Party Congress) fixed effects. Column (2) then adds controls

to account for possible time-varying trends. Both analyses show that a one standard deviation increase in network centrality in the military is associated with a 1% increase in likelihood of promotion to the Central Committee from a baseline of 5%.

We further probe this analysis in two ways. First, we consider whether this pattern holds among only civilian officials, in which our theory is most interested. In columns (3) and (4), we thus subset the analysis to individuals with civilian backgrounds, coded as lacking any prior experience as a military officer. Second, columns (5) and (6) subset the analysis to promotions that occurred after 1989, by which time most of the founding leaders of the CCP had retired—as one might wonder whether these promotion patterns only hold for the early generations of Chinese leaders who had participated in the Communist revolution. The results remain significant and substantively unchanged across these alternative models.

The results are consistent with our hypothesis that civilian elites with military ties are more likely to be promoted to large agenda-setting bodies, such as the Central Committee (H1). Nevertheless, we must be cautious in interpreting this first set of results for two reasons. First, the CSMAR data do not include complete professional backgrounds, meaning that we cannot account for the individual's civilian network centrality or their position within the leader's network. Second, officials who are promoted from prefecture-level leadership to positions as party, central government, or prefecture government are censored in the CSMAR data, which limits our ability to probe promotion patterns among officials in other sectors of the party and government, such as the provinces or central bureaucracy. This feature of the data means that the results, while consistent with our hypotheses, can only speak to promotion conditional on being a prefecture mayor or secretary.¹⁸ With this limitation in mind, we turn to another test of the same hypothesis using the CCP Leadership Database (Shih et al., 2012).

In Table 3, we analyze patterns of promotion in the Central Committee, accounting for the individual's civilian connections, as well as their position within the leader's network, alongside their military network centrality. Our second analysis finds a strong association between military ties and promotion to full member of the Central Committee among civilian elites.¹⁹ In column (1), we present results without controls but with individual and period fixed effects. Consistent with H1, a one standard deviation increase in network centrality leads to a 15 percentage point

¹⁸ Many Central Committee members promote directly from these positions. However, testing the theory across the broader pool of officials eligible for promotion, and across other types of promotion, remains an important area for future research.

¹⁹ If we include military leaders, the results are substantively unchanged and statistically significant.

TABLE 2 Promotion to the Central Committee among prefecture leaders and network ties to military officers.

	Promoted to Central Committee: All		Promoted to Central Committee: Civilians		Promoted to Central Committee: Civilians post-1989	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Military network degree centrality	.009** (.003)	.009** (.003)	.008* (.003)	.008* (.004)	.010** (.004)	.009* (.004)
Individual fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Time period fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Controls		✓		✓		✓
Clusters	3,795	3,018	3,364	2,672	2,564	2,262
Observations	7,347	5,969	6,505	5,280	4,770	4,309
R ²	.069	.108	.063	.107	.065	.108

Note: Each observation in the panel is an individual and Party Congress. The outcome variable is a binary indicator for membership in the Central Committee. The main explanatory variable is network degree centrality, normalized. The results show that prefecture leaders are more likely to be promoted to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee if they have stronger ties to the military. Robust standard errors are clustered by individual.

† $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

increase in the likelihood of promotion to the full Central Committee. This is a significant increase from the baseline probability of promotion of 56%. In column (2), we add control variables interacted with the time dummies to account for possible time-varying differences in how career and personal background

influence promotion prospects. The results remain substantively unchanged.

Columns (3) and (4) show that the results remain the same in the postrevolutionary generation. If anything, the magnitude of the relationship is slightly larger, although the confidence intervals are wide enough

TABLE 3 Promotion to full member of the Central Committee and network ties to military officers.

	Promoted to Central Committee: Civilians		Promoted to Central Committee: Civilians post-1989		Promoted to Central Committee: Civilians	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Military network degree centrality	.147** (.021)	.148** (.024)	.207** (.029)	.210** (.030)	.107** (.024)	.108** (.026)
Civilian network degree centrality		.024 (.016)		-.013 (.026)		-.006 (.017)
Outside leader network					-.080** (.027)	-.079** (.029)
Military degree × Outside leader network					.098** (.028)	.091** (.029)
Individual fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Time period fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Controls		✓		✓		✓
Clusters	1,857	1,857	859	859	1,857	1,857
Observations	2,806	2,806	1,470	1,470	2,798	2,798
R ²	.356	.388	.452	.475	.373	.401

Note: Elites are more likely to be promoted to the Full Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee if they have stronger ties to the military. The reference category are Central Committee alternates. Each observation in the panel is an individual and Party Congress. The outcome variable is a binary indicator for membership in the full Central Committee. The main explanatory variable is network degree centrality, normalized. Robust standard errors are clustered by individual.

† $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

TABLE 4 Promotion to member of the Politburo Standing Committee and network ties to military officers.

	Promoted to Standing Committee: Civilians		Promoted to Standing Committee: Civilians post-1989	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Military network degree centrality	.011 (.012)	.011 (.012)	-.015 (.016)	-.012 (.016)
Outside leader's network	-.032 ⁺ (.017)	-.008 (.016)	.015 (.026)	.031 (.024)
Civilian network degree centrality		.047** (.011)		.050*** (.017)
Military degree × Outside leader network	.063** (.019)	-.071** (.019)	-.051* (.023)	-.058* (.024)
Individual fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Time period fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Controls		✓		✓
Clusters	1,502	1,502	859	859
Observations	2,798	2,798	1,467	1,467
R ²	.092	.168	.120	.236

Note: Elites are less likely to be promoted to the Politburo Standing Committee if they have stronger ties to the military and are outside of the paramount leader's network. Each observation in the panel is an individual and Party Congress. The outcome variable is a binary indicator for membership in the full Central Committee. The main explanatory variable is network degree centrality, normalized. Robust standard errors are clustered by individual.

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

that we cannot say conclusively if the two periods are different. This suggests that our hypothesis that centrality in military networks is associated with inclusion in the Central Committee is not limited to the revolutionary generation.

Finally, we examine whether connections to the top leader influence promotion into the Central Committee. Our theory predicts that leaders will especially wish to promote strong civilian elites outside of their personal network (H1). In columns (5) and (6), we interact leader connections and military service, finding that strong elites outside of the leader's own network are especially likely to be promoted.

Civilian leaders with military ties are less likely to join the Standing Committee

How do strong ties to the military shape prospects for promotion to apex bodies, such as the CCP Politburo Standing Committee? The Politburo Standing Committee constitutes a small share of the total ruling coalition—around five to eleven people in recent years. Our theory suggests that civilian elites who possess strong military ties *and* who lack personal connections to the leader should be less likely to promote to the Standing Committee (H2). We test our contention in Table 4. As above, columns (1) and (2) report models testing the relationship between

military ties and promotion among civilian Central Committee members. Our main point of interest is the interaction between military network ties and position within the leader's network (inside or outside).

Our analysis reported in Table 4 finds that the interaction term is statistically significant across both models. This finding suggests that, consistent with H2, the relationship between strong ties to the military and promotion depends on an elite's connections to the leader. To ease substantive interpretation, Figure 4a plots the interaction between our two variables of interest from the model in column (1). The left-hand band shows that for individuals inside the leader's network, military ties are associated with a positive, but statistically insignificant relationship with promotion to the party's apex. The right-hand band instead shows that for cadre's outside the leader's network, there is a strong *negative* relationship between stronger military ties and promotion to the Standing Committee. The nature of the interaction remains unchanged once we control for civilian network centrality, as well as other career and demographic characteristics that may shape the prospects of promotion: A civilian cadre's ties to the military are a liability for promotion when the cadre is less familiar, and thus potentially more threatening, to the leader.

In columns (3) and (4), we subset our analysis to the postrevolutionary period. We find that the magnitude of the negative association between military central-

ity and Standing Committee promotion is roughly equal to the magnitude of the positive association between civilian centrality and Standing Committee promotion. One interpretation of this finding is that conditional on being outside the leader's network, dense military ties are as much of a hindrance to advancement within the CCP as dense civilian ties are an asset to it.

Finally, our theory suggested that we should find mixed results for intermediate power-sharing institutions, such as the full Politburo (H3). We present our results in Table 5. Again, our primary interest is in the interaction between military ties and position within the leader network. Figure 4b plots the interaction model to ease interpretation. Congruent with H3, the results are mixed. The interaction term is significant without controls, but once we add controls in columns (2) and (4), the results are not significant at standard levels, leaving the results ambiguous.

DISCUSSION

Overall, our analyses suggest that civil–military network ties are an important factor shaping promotion patterns in China. While cadres possessing these ties are more likely to rise up the CCP's ranks, they appear to also be less likely to reach the party's apex unless they also have personal ties to the leader. These findings are consistent with our theoretical framework emphasizing the ways that military network ties shape the risk of civilian leadership challenges.

The results remain robust to different modeling and measurement strategies. In the online appendix, we present a number of robustness checks, including models employing random effects (see pp. A20 to A22), alternative measurement approaches where military ties are weighted by the duration of common service (see pp. A30 to A31), and alternative measures of network centrality (A12 to A19). In each case, the results are consistent with, and in many cases larger in magnitude, than the results we present in the main text.

Two questions are worth additional discussion. One potential concern would be if the assignment of ties correlates with other demographic or professional assignments—such as age or experience as a provincial governor. In the online appendix (see pp. A32 to A33), we perform a sensitivity analysis (Cinelli & Hazlett, 2020) that considers the degree to which two confounders—experience as a provincial governor or secretary—would need to be correlated with the explanatory variable (degree centrality) and outcome (promotion to the Central Committee) to change the results. The analyses provide strong support for the robustness of our findings. Another alternative explanation of our findings is that more professionally ambitious cadres may be more likely to seek out assignments that connect them to the military leadership. Even if this were the case, it would suggest that cadres can capitalize on a leader's survival concerns in order to secure promotions—a conclusion consistent with our theory. Nevertheless, we caution that interpreting these results as an estimate of the

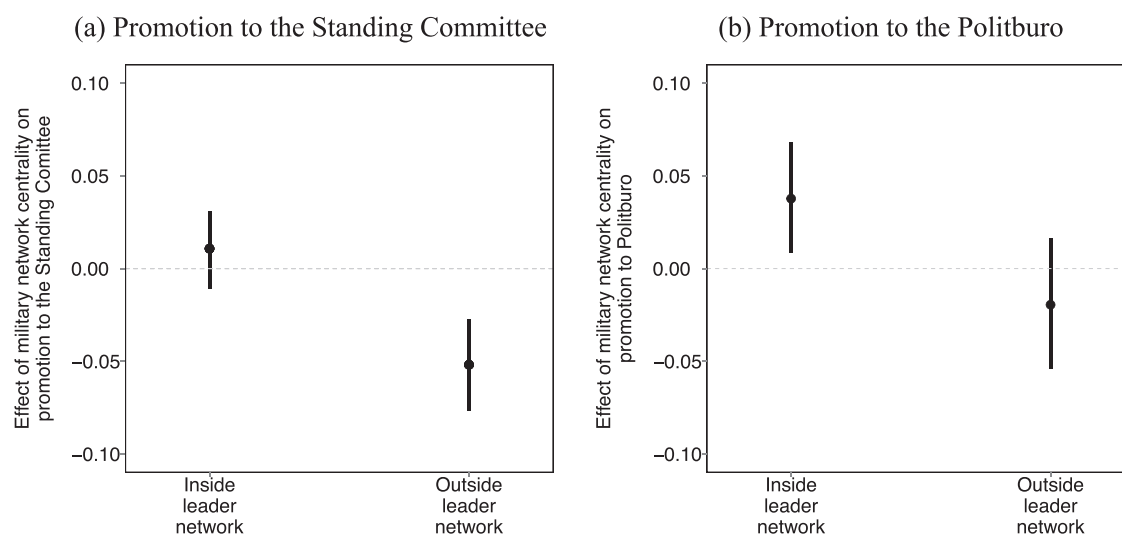


FIGURE 4 How military networks and leader ties shape promotion to the Politburo and Standing Committee. *Note:* Interaction between military degree centrality and leader network position (model 1 of Table 4 and Table 5). Bands are 95% confidence intervals, with standard errors clustered by individual. The left-hand estimate illustrates the negative effect of strong military ties on promotion to the Standing Committee for individuals outside the leader's network. However, the right-hand estimate illustrates that for individuals outside the leader's network, the effect of strong military ties is statistically indistinguishable for zero for promotion to the Politburo, while those inside the leader network are more likely to be promoted.

TABLE 5 Promotion to member of the Politburo and network ties to military officers.

	Promoted to Politburo: Civilians		Promoted to Politburo: Civilians post-1989	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Military network degree centrality	.038 ⁺ (.022)	−.011 (.020)	.053* (.026)	.010 (.025)
Outside leader's network	−.041* (.021)	−.004 (.019)	−.024 (.036)	.003 (.032)
Civilian network degree centrality		.047** (.014)		.037+ (.021)
Military degree × Outside leader network	−.057* (.023)	−.038+ (.021)	−.078* (.039)	−.034 (.036)
Individual fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Time period fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Controls		✓		✓
Clusters	1,502	1,502	859	859
Observations	2,798	2,798	1,467	1,467
R ²	.138	.272	.179	.340

Note: The relationship between military ties, leader ties, and promotion to the Politburo is ambiguous, with the results sensitive to the addition of control variables and time period. Each observation in the panel is an individual and Party Congress. The outcome variable is a binary indicator for membership in the full Central Committee. The main explanatory variable is network degree centrality, normalized. Robust standard errors are clustered by individual. ⁺ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

causal effect of connections on promotion requires the strong assumption of no time-varying differences among individuals gaining and losing connections. We cannot rule out time-varying differences that we do not account for in our model.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we developed a theory of civilian leadership challenges. We argued that when civilian elites attempt to displace a leader, they must secure the support of the military—or else risk that the coercive arm of the state will put down their challenge. Civilian elites can more easily solve this civil–military coordination problem when they possess strong ties to the military leadership. We theorized that leaders use appointment to power-sharing institutions to strategically address these threats, allowing strong elites into the regime's ruling coalition, but denying them entry into its inner sanctum.

To test our theory, we introduced original data on over 34,000 military officers in the People's Republic of China. We built fine-grained measures of elite military connections from 1949 to 2014, offering one of the first systematic analyses of how military ties shape promotion patterns and, implicitly, the prospects for civilian leadership challenges, in an authoritarian regime. Analysis of these data showed, first, that civilians with strong military ties are more likely to be appointed

to the Central Committee, a large agenda-setting body. This evidence was consistent with the notion that leaders aim to ensure that militarily connected elites have a seat at the table. Second, our results showed that promotion to the Politburo Standing Committee—a small decision-making body at CCP's apex—was not helped by network connections. On the contrary, we found that military connections can hinder promotion to the Standing Committee, particularly when the elite is not personally connected to the leader. This supports the notion that leaders do not want civilians with strong ties to coercive institutions too close to the seat of power, especially when those elites are outside of their trusted personal networks.

The theory and findings help push forward three areas of the discipline. First, the results pose intriguing questions about the relationship between civilian leadership challenges and traditional military coups more broadly. One important scope condition of the theory is that the regime possesses strong institutions establishing civilian control. In other regimes, however, the threat of military defection may overwhelm the risk of civilian leadership challenge to which we draw attention. Leaders may thus face trade-offs in addressing the two types of challenges in tandem, as keeping elites with strong ties to the military (and thus potential advocates for the military's corporate interests) might also increase motive for military coup. How leaders resolve these competing incentives in

other types of regimes remains an important area for research.

Second, our findings help to fill a gap in the literature on authoritarian politics by illuminating how regimes avoid civilian leadership challenges, building on a nascent literature on this topic (e.g., Kinney, 2019, 2021; Ben Hammou, 2024; Powell et al., 2022). Other authors have analyzed civilian coups using cross-national data and in conjunction with other types of coups (e.g., Svoblik, 2012; Bjørnskov & Rode, 2020). This paper wielded a theory and fine-grained data on military network ties to explain how promotion choices can help stave off civilian challenges: by sharing power with strong elites but not bringing them to the inner sanctum. Our results also imply a condition of authoritarian breakdown. When civilian elites must share power with elites with strong military ties, it can be destabilizing to the system as a whole.

Finally, the theory and findings show how coercive threats are an important, if understudied, facet of political promotion in China. Coercive organizations, such as the PLA, continue to play a latent but important role in authoritarian politics even when civilians have established institutions to subordinate the military. Political power in China has and will likely continue to grow from the barrel of a gun.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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