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Governmental Responses to Terrorism in Autocracies: Evidence from China

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Abstract

Autocracies are widely assumed to have a counterterrorism advantage because they can censor media and are insulated from public opinion, thereby depriving terrorists of both their audience and political leverage. However, institutionalized autocracies such as China draw legitimacy from public approval and feature partially free media environments, meaning that their information strategies must be much more sophisticated than simple censorship. To better understand the strategic considerations that govern decisions about transparency in this context, this article explores the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) treatment of domestic terrorist incidents in the official party mouthpiece – the *People's Daily*. Drawing on original, comprehensive datasets of all known Uyghur terrorist violence in China and the official coverage of that violence, the findings demonstrate that the CCP promptly acknowledges terrorist violence only when both domestic and international conditions are favorable. The authors attribute this pattern to the entrenched prioritization of short-term social stability over longer-term legitimacy.

Keywords: terrorism; autocracy; media; China; transparency

While debate persists on the broader relationship between regime type and terrorism, there is a relative consensus that powerful authoritarian governments possess an important counterterrorism tool – the ability to control information.¹ A defining feature of terrorism is that it is ‘designed to have far-reaching psychological repercussions beyond the immediate victim or target’ (Hoffman 2006, 43). In mass societies, terrorism accomplishes this goal by leveraging the media to convey knowledge of attacks to the broader public (Atkinson, Sandler and Tschirhart 1987; Crenshaw 1981; Sandler, Tschirhart and Cauley 1983; Wilkinson 2001). Recognizing this, Margaret Thatcher famously asked the British media to stop providing terrorists with the ‘oxygen of publicity’ (Apple 1985, A3). Her pleas were, however, largely futile: comprehensive information control is almost definitionally impossible in democracies and media self-restraint is unlikely because terrorism so reliably excites audiences (Crelinsten 1989; Farnen 1990; Martin 1985; Rohner and Frey 2007; Wilkinson 1997). Autocracies are widely assumed to be much more capable of accomplishing this goal through control of the media.²

These stylized facts, however, can be misleading when it comes to the dilemmas that many modern autocratic regimes face, particularly given the evolving technological and media environments. In institutionalized autocracies public opinion matters, information control is not

¹The literature on regime type and terrorism is enormous, but for useful reviews see Wilson and Piazza (2013) and Gaibullov, Piazza and Sandler (2017).

²Others have pointed out that this empirical pattern could be driven by under-reporting rather than prevention. See, for example, Drakos and Gofas (2006) and Sandler (1995). We return to this point in the discussion of gathering data on terrorist attacks in China.

absolute, media can be partially independent and market driven, and state strategies toward terrorism are therefore nuanced.³

China is one such autocracy.⁴ Government control over the reporting of terrorist attacks is explicitly written into the 2015 Counterterrorism Law that states, ‘information on the occurrence, development, and response and handling of a terrorist incident is uniformly released by the provincial leading institution on counter-terrorism work of the place where the terrorist incident occurs...no other units or individuals are allowed to disseminate details of the incidents that may lead to copycat actions, nor may they spread cruel or inhuman images of the incidents’.⁵ However, despite impressive controls, China is nonetheless an increasingly developed and connected society in which information can spread organically and unpredictably through social media and other channels and the Party is deeply sensitive to public opinion and domestic pressure.⁶

How, then, does the Party manage official coverage of terrorism, and what can this tell us about its sensitivities, preferences and strategies?⁷ We argue that Beijing’s handling of terrorism in the official media reveals a tension between long- and short-term priorities.⁸ On the one hand, prompt acknowledgment in the official press can legitimize the party by demonstrating transparency and responsiveness, internationalize China’s terrorism challenges and strengthen its regional relationships in Central Asia. As we will detail, transparency is increasingly important for maintaining legitimacy in institutionalized autocracies like China where citizens have some access to independent information. Similarly, under the right conditions, transparency can allow China to place its domestic terrorism challenges in the broader context of the ‘global war on terror’ and thereby shield its repressive response from international criticism. On the other hand, the high priority placed on social stability incentivizes Chinese authorities to avoid highlighting militant violence for fear that the Chinese public will either blame the government for it or demand that the government responds in ways that it deems suboptimal. The question is: under what conditions do each of these impulses prevail?

To better understand the strategic considerations that govern this decision, we develop event history models of ‘time to official acknowledgment’ after terrorist incidents. Drawing on original, comprehensive datasets of all known Uyghur terrorist violence and the timing of official coverage in the *People’s Daily*, we demonstrate that the official press promptly acknowledges terrorist incidents when the domestic economy is thriving and China enjoys diplomatic support abroad.⁹ We establish the robustness of this finding with a variety of alternative operationalizations of

³For a more general discussion of media control in autocracies, see Gehlbach, Sonin and Svulik (2016).

⁴Institutionalized autocracies are typically conceived of as those in which leaders manage the political process through parties or legislatures – i.e., those other than military, personalist and monarchical autocracies (Brownlee 2007; Gandhi 2008; Geddes, Wright and Frantz 2014; Smith 2005). These democratic trappings are not representative or competitive, but by relying on them, some autocratic leaders can build support by regularizing the delivery of political rents (Boix and Svulik 2013; Lust-Okar 2005; Reuter and Robertson 2015). The result, however, is that ordinary citizens in these contexts are better positioned to extract policy concessions – in other words, public opinion matters more.

⁵For the full text of the Counterterrorism Law of the People’s Republic of China, see the official website of the National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China (2018).

⁶[T]he government cares about public opinion because it is concerned with political stability, suggesting that the role of public opinion is mostly a negative one. Nevertheless, the effort the government puts into understanding public opinion suggests that the role of public opinion is somewhat broader’ (Lampton 2001, 155)

⁷Major incidents do go uncovered in the official media. For example, neither a stabbing attack that killed six people and injured twenty-eight in Kashgar on 30 July 2011, nor an attack in Dayecheng on 28 February 2012 that resulted in fifteen deaths and fourteen injured, were mentioned in the *People’s Daily*.

⁸Scholars have identified these tradeoffs as core elements of China’s foreign policy. See Shirk (1993); Shirk (2007), Swaine and Henry (1995), and Swaine and Tellis (2000).

⁹While the terminology overlaps, this should be distinguished from the larger literature on whether *militant groups* acknowledge attacks that they perpetrate, such as perpetrating party claiming credit (e.g., Abrahms and Conrad 2017; Hoffman 1997; Kearns, Conlon and Young 2014). Here we are investigating the related but distinct question of whether the state acknowledges attacks that have been perpetrated by militants.

domestic and international conditions, including natural disasters and composite measures of domestic and international conditions generated from machine-coded events data.

Regardless of the particular operationalization, we see prompt acknowledgment of terrorist incidents in the *People's Daily* only when *both* international and domestic conditions are favorable. When domestic conditions are broadly favorable, Chinese citizens are less likely to challenge the government's handling of terrorism; if some do, the government is better positioned to tolerate the dissent. When international diplomatic conditions are favorable, China is less likely to face external criticism of its minority policy, which in turn could further inflame public opinion. Only when both conditions hold are authorities sufficiently confident that the investment in longer-term legitimacy that accompanies transparency will not threaten the Party's immediate grip on power and individual officials' paths toward promotion. In contrast, when these conditions are not in place, delays give the authorities time to gauge the political sensitivities of the moment and the impact of the incident.

These findings contradict the rival possibility that Chinese authorities might systematically use their control of the media to stoke fear of terrorism (or the nationalist sentiments it tends to provoke) as a diversionary tactic. They also contribute to a growing body of work on China's policies toward media censorship, propaganda and collective action (Huang, Boranbay-Akan and Huang 2019; King, Pan and Roberts 2013; Stockmann and Gallagher 2011; Weiss 2014). The patterns that we uncover reveal a complementary but underappreciated element of Chinese authorities' information strategy: they seek to control *uncertainty*. When an unfavorable political environment makes it unclear how the public will react to a potentially inflammatory piece of information, the Chinese authorities are less willing to risk transparency, even when the long-term rewards might be high.

The remainder of the article proceeds in five sections. We begin by discussing the nature of terrorism in China and introducing comprehensive data on Uyghur-related terrorist incidents. We then clarify the rewards and risks (for the CCP) of prompt transparency in the official media. Leveraging the aforementioned data on terrorist incidents and time to coverage, we find that prompt acknowledgment of terrorist incidents in the official media is most likely when both international and domestic conditions are favorable. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of these findings for China, the globe and our understanding of the relationship between terrorism and regime type.

Terrorism in China

China's experiences with (and policies related to) domestic ethnic unrest have evolved substantially since the end of WWII. Maoist policy was often heavy handed, with substantial crackdowns on minority populations from Inner Mongolia to Tibet (Bovingdon 2010; Goldstein 1991; Lai 2009).¹⁰ Xinjiang, however, was largely an afterthought during this period; Uyghurs fared somewhat better than many other minorities due to the region's remoteness and relative quiescence (Zhao 2010).¹¹ Whereas Tibet figured prominently in the ongoing rivalry with India, the USSR, for the most part, shared an interest in suppressing nationalist sentiments among the ethnic Turkic populations in Central Asia (Luong 2004; Martin 2001).

Xinjiang remained a distant concern during the early phases of China's economic and political revitalization under Deng Xiaoping. However, the fall of the Soviet Union and the resulting independence of its Central Asian republics changed this dynamic by raising expectations among the Uyghur population (Gladney 2004a).¹² The Chinese authorities, however, drew lessons from both the Soviet breakup and their own experiences in the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 and adopted a hard line against any increase in autonomy (Gladney 2004b; Rudelson and

¹⁰We exclude Tibet from the analysis because the nature of violence, state response and strategic situation are so distinct.

¹¹For more on the politics of the region, see Starr (2015).

¹²Ethnonationalist violence was on the rise in Xinjiang even before the full collapse of the USSR (Bequelin 2000).

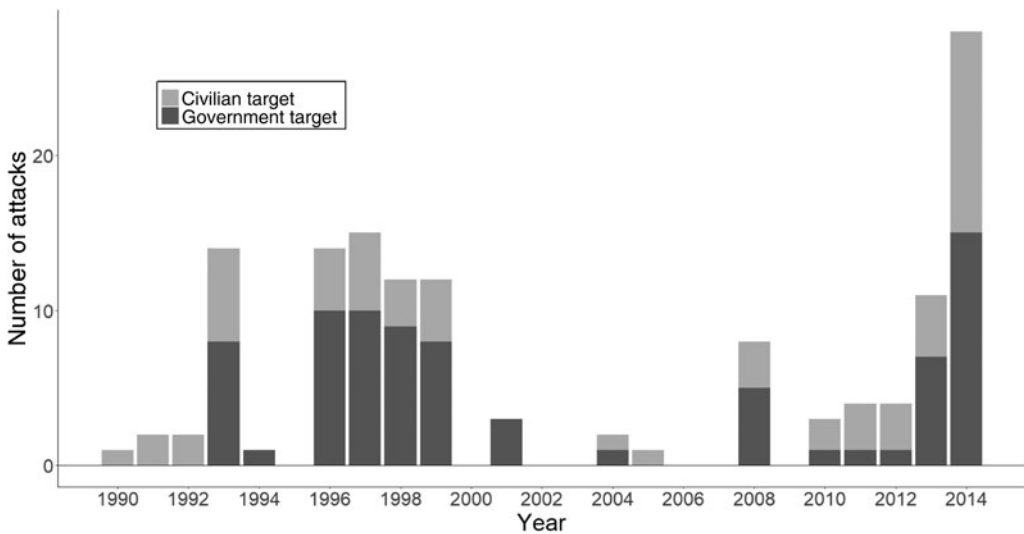


Figure 1. Uyghur-initiated terrorist incidents, 1990–2014

Jankowiak 2004). This stance has not softened: an overwhelming police presence, harsh crackdowns, cultural assimilation programs and Han in-migration are now the norm in the region. The result is the present status quo of simmering tension punctuated by sporadic violence (Cao et al. 2018a; Cao et al. 2018b; Clarke 2018).

To establish the scope of this violence, we developed a dataset of all known incidents of Uyghur-initiated terrorism in China from 1990 to 2014.¹³ Figure 1, which graphs these data, indicates two distinct campaigns. The first, which arose around the initial push for autonomy after the fall of the USSR, reached its peak in 1997 when fifteen terrorist attacks resulted in fifty deaths and ninety-eight injured. The lead-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics marked the beginning of the second wave, culminating in 2014 when 164 people were killed and 426 others were injured in twenty-eight incidents. Figure 1 also indicates that the attacks have shifted over time toward increased civilian targeting, bringing it more in line with global trends.¹⁴

¹³We collect the data from four main sources: (1) existing datasets including the Global Terrorism Database, RAND Terrorism Database and Minorities at Risk, (2) English-language news media, particularly Radio Free Asia, (3) Chinese websites such as Sina, Tencent, ifeng and Sohu, and (4) secondary data from sources such as Bovingdon (2010) and Reed and Raschke (2010). See the Appendix for details on the construction of these data. See also Cao et al. (2018b), who engage in a related effort, though their data end in 2005 rather than 2014. Our dataset differs from their Ethnic Violence in China (EVC) database in three additional respects. First, we focus on militant attacks, while the EVC includes spontaneous riots and protests that turn violent. Secondly, our dataset captures Uyghur-initiated militant attacks throughout China, while the EVC database focuses exclusively on incidents in Xinjiang autonomous region. Thirdly, while the EVC database includes both violent incidents and non-violent precursors, such as arms manufacturing, we focus on attacks that were carried out. After being filtered to match our definitions (see the Appendix), the EVC dataset contains twenty-four incidents that we do not identify during the period of 1990–2005 (the overlapping period between our data and EVC data). These twenty-four incidents were collected from (1) Xinjiang Public Security Gazette, (2) the Unpublished Draft of Xinjiang Public Security Gazette, and (3) Ma (2002) (an internally circulated source on ethnic conflicts in Xinjiang), to which we do not have access. Our data collection effort yielded fourteen incidents between 1990 and 2005 that are omitted from the EVC. These come from a combination of the Global Terrorism Database, RAND, Chinese-language media and the abstract of a Chinese-language article titled, ‘The Investigation of Series Bombings in South Xinjiang’, which was accessed from CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) but we cannot read in full because it requires a security clearance. To assess the implications of this distinction we conducted robustness checks using EVC data and found similar results to those we report here (see Appendix).

¹⁴Civilian targets make up the majority of global attacks (LaFree, Dugan and Miller 2014). However, government targets remain the norm in East Asia and Central Asia.

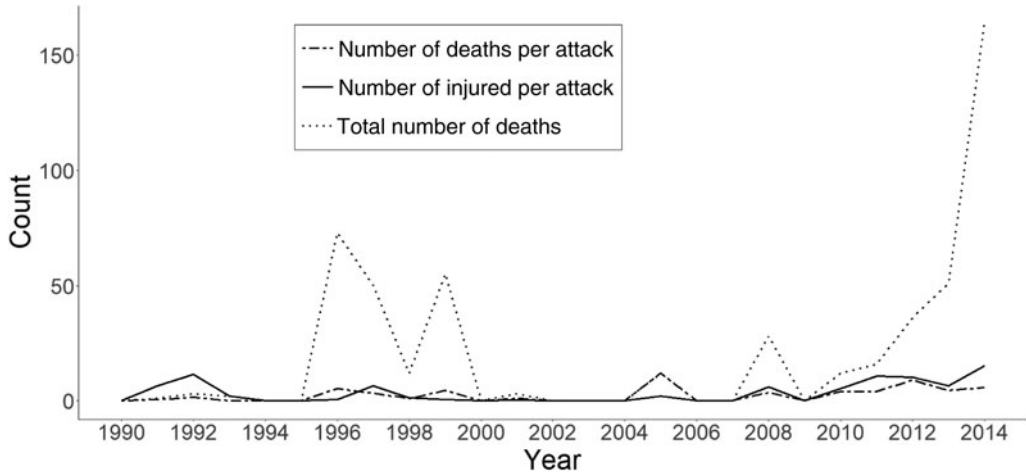


Figure 2. Killed and injured per attack, 1990–2014

Figure 2 graphs the average number of casualties from these attacks. In keeping with both global trends and the greater sophistication of Uyghur militant organizations in that period, the second wave was more lethal than the first (Potter 2013). The difference amounts to three more deaths and eight more injuries per attack. However, while increasing, the number of casualties per attack remains relatively low compared to global averages. This is because weapons and tactics have been notably crude – predominantly knives and simple bombs – accounting for approximately 39 and 42 per cent of all attacks, respectively. There are, however, indications that the militants’ tactics are becoming more sophisticated, particularly with regard to the adoption of al Qaeda-style coordinated attacks and suicide bombing.¹⁵

In sum, Uyghur militant violence has been a significant issue for the Chinese government. Although the authorities have successfully limited, if not absolutely blocked, access to highly lethal weapons, the number of attacks and casualties have increased. Violence in Xinjiang is in a lull at the time of writing, well down from the 2014 highs at the end of our period of analysis, likely owing to an overwhelming security crackdown over the last 5 years. Members of a United Nations human rights committee announced in August 2018 that the Chinese government is holding as many as one million ethnic Uyghurs in ‘massive internment camps’, ‘shrouded in secrecy’ (Cumming-Bruce 2018, A9).

The Long-Term Benefits of Transparency

The CCP has several good reasons to promptly acknowledge terrorist violence in its official media when it occurs, the most significant of which is legitimacy. The link between transparency and Party legitimacy is well documented in the Chinese context. Stockmann and Gallagher (2011), for example, note that exposure to news regarding labor disputes promotes the perception of pro-worker bias in the law among Chinese citizens, which helps increase the Party’s popular legitimacy.¹⁶ Similarly, Huang, Boranbay-Akan and Huang (2019) link media acknowledgment of social protests to enhanced claims of Party legitimacy.

Transparency regarding protests can increase CCP legitimacy in part because it can be spun as the government is stepping in to protect the rights of the aggrieved. The mechanism driving

¹⁵Additional detail can be found in the Appendix.

¹⁶Stockmann and Gallagher (2011, 445) label this type of media representation as ‘bad apples but happy endings’ as the reported disputes are usually resolved positively in favor of workers’ rights.

legitimacy gains from transparency with regard to terrorism is similar but works through two distinct channels. First, prompt acknowledgement can improve legitimacy even when the fault lies unambiguously with the government for failing to protect citizens. As the adage goes, the coverup can be worse than the crime, and if a government error will eventually come to light, owning it at the outset is often the best way to mitigate the downside by at least maintaining legitimacy as an honest provider of information. However, in the context of counterterrorism, blame is rarely that clear. It can also be the case that the government has an opportunity to reap positive rewards (not just mitigate negative repercussions) by quickly acknowledging a terrorist attack. As is the case with labor disputes and social protests, here too the government can portray itself as stepping in to protect the vulnerable and the aggrieved by increasing security and policing as well as arresting and punishing the perpetrators. Such framing tends to be effective because the Han majority in China generally blames Uyghurs rather than the government for the violence. Indeed, terrorist attacks can lead to upsurges in nationalist sentiment that can rally support for the government. However, the government cannot always tell which of these scenarios is more likely to play out (or whether the situation will turn entirely negative), hence the imperative for caution even in the face of potential rewards for transparency.

This is more than an academic insight. The CCP has grown increasingly explicit in the linkage that it draws between transparency and legitimacy and is clearly cognizant of the positive returns that can accompany quick official acknowledgment of negative events. Such transparency is described as essential to avoiding the ‘Tacitus Trap’ – a term used in Chinese policy circles as shorthand for a permanent loss of credibility, as its every subsequent action is viewed as a lie once an unknown reputation threshold has been crossed.¹⁷ The most recent wave of intensive discussion of this trap arose in the context of a kindergarten abuse scandal at the end of 2017, in which the government was widely blamed by Chinese ‘netizens’ for failing to release enough information about the investigation process in a timely manner (Quackenbush 2017). In an enlarged meeting of the Lankao County Party Committee on 14 March 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping highlighted this concern, saying, ‘we are certainly not there [falling into the Tacitus Trap] yet, but the current problem facing us is not trivial either; if that day really comes, then the Party’s *legitimacy* foundations and *power* status will be threatened’.¹⁸

The failure to officially acknowledge high-profile incidents has proven costly in some key cases. The school collapses in the Sichuan earthquake, the 2011 high-speed rail accident, and recent events surrounding the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan are prominent illustrations of the downside risks of reticence to engage on issues of high salience to the public.¹⁹ These costs increase as it becomes easier for Chinese citizens to determine when the government is not talking about particular issues. Media fragmentation and semi-privatization, as well as the emergence of social media, contribute to a ‘leaky’ information environment in which the government might forgo discussion of an incident in the official media, but it may still reach segments of the public. Gaps between what official voices choose to engage with and what the people are concerned about can contribute to the erosion of legitimacy (Lorentzen 2014). It is therefore important not just that information is *released*, but that the government is seen to be the source and conveyor of that information – hence the significance of acknowledgment in the official press. While it is broadly understood that the party heavily influences what is and is not discussed in the semi-private press, official acknowledgment sends a distinct and important signal.

¹⁷According to an article published in *People’s Daily* in 2017, the term ‘Tacitus Trap’ refers to a quote from the Roman senator and historian: ‘indeed, when a ruler once becomes unpopular, all his acts, be they good or bad, tell against him’ (Li 2017, 5).

¹⁸CPC News 2016, emphasis added.

¹⁹This insight is echoed in recent work on China’s social media, which has revealed that the scale of censoring of sensitive materials on the Chinese microblogging platform Sina Weibo is more limited than commonly appreciated – a pattern attributed to the government’s desire to gauge (and provide an outlet for) bottom-up public opinion (Qin, Strömberg and Wu 2017).

International priorities can also favor rapid transparency with regard to terrorism because such incidents are more likely to receive prominent global attention. In the post-9/11 context, there are potential long-term benefits that arise from internationalizing domestic terrorism emanating from Xinjiang by linking it to global counterterrorism efforts and thereby insulating China's policies from criticism (Potter 2013). The global fixation on militant Islamist movements provides a useful and easy rhetorical frame for Uyghur violence – this is, after all, a Muslim minority bordering Afghanistan in the heart of central Asia.²⁰ Credible condemnation of China's repressive policies (particularly by the United States) is difficult if the situation in Xinjiang can be successfully framed in terms of terrorism and international jihadist movements. International attentiveness to terrorism in China is, however, generally short-lived; thus authorities risk wasting an opportunity if they obscure an incident by delaying official acknowledgment.

Highlighting terrorism in the official media also legitimizes China's expansive military, political and economic ambitions in Central Asia. Beijing's presence in the region has always had the potential to be viewed as aggressive and expansionist. To combat this possibility, China draws on the threat of terrorism and the promise of counterterrorism co-operation to justify its policies in the region and frame them in a more positive light. For example, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was formed with the explicit mandate to fight against the 'three evils' of separatism, fundamentalism and terrorism (Chung 2004). Thus it is rhetorically useful for the Chinese government to promptly and officially acknowledge terrorist attacks in order to highlight the severity of these three evils and bolster the SCO as a nascent collective security institution: shared experience of terrorism, and transparent treatment of that experience, can help make the case that the threat is real. This is particularly important because, while the three evils are the stated justification for the organization's existence, there is suspicion that China's regional policy is actually driven by a desire for regional hegemony (Cohen 2006; Swanström 2005).

The Short-Term Risks of Transparency

However, there remain strong countervailing incentives for leaders to delay the acknowledgment of terrorist incidents in the official media until the risks can be mitigated and passions can cool. Since Deng Xiaoping's 'reform and opening' strategy, 'stability above everything else' (*wending yadao yiqie*) has been a cornerstone of domestic policy. Prompt acknowledgment of domestic terrorism in the official media has the potential to undermine that stability. Green lighting popular discussion and further media coverage in the non-official press may, for example, intensify the ethnic tensions between Han and Uyghurs by triggering (and even seeming to sanction) violent reprisals. For instance, the extensive coverage of the July 2009 Urumqi riot is thought to have contributed to the deadly protest by Han Chinese that immediately followed (Wong 2009).

When domestic conditions are unfavorable and the party is less popular, the public reaction to a terrorist event is more uncertain, and that uncertainty is less acceptable. In other words, if support for the government is already soft, a terrorist attack is more likely to bring with it a condemnation of the authorities rather than a rally in support. While public opinion on terrorist violence is generally pro-government and anti-Uyghur, this could shift, or the authorities could come under fire for not cracking down hard enough. Moreover, when domestic conditions are less than ideal, the authorities are much less willing to risk this social instability because they are less well positioned to weather difficulties. Any weakness in domestic conditions makes the Chinese authorities even more risk averse than usual – and therefore less likely to prioritize long-term interests in legitimacy over short-term interests in stability.

The few public opinion surveys that have been conducted on such sensitive matters suggest reasons for caution. For example, Hou and Quek (2019) report that 96 per cent of Chinese citizens think the government should increase efforts to prevent terrorist violence, raising the possibility that

²⁰Uyghur militants have been apprehended as foreign fighters for al Qaeda, the Taliban, and Islamic State in Afghanistan and Syria.

popular demands could outstrip what the government is able or willing to deliver. Further, while surveys suggest that citizens do not primarily blame the government for terrorist incidents, 69 per cent of Chinese citizens do think the current ethnic policies need to be modified (Chen and Ding 2014). And opinion is polarized on the nature of that modification: 28 per cent strongly agree with reliance on forceful suppression and 40 per cent strongly disagree. In this context, official discussion of terrorist violence can invite critiques of standing government policy, push policy in directions that the authorities would prefer it not go, or expose rifts in public consensus.

There are also disincentives for open discussion of terrorism that stem from international considerations, particularly since highlighting Uyghur ethnic violence can invite foreign criticism of China's highly repressive ethnic policies (Jacobs 2016). Although global concerns over militant Islamist movements can provide China with a useful rhetorical frame for Uyghur violence, Western suspicion that China hides human rights violations against its ethnic minorities behind the 'war on terror' has never faded.²¹ Indeed, even when China's support at the UN was urgently needed shortly after the 9/11 attacks, US President George W. Bush cautioned then-Chinese President Jiang at a press conference following their first meeting in Shanghai in October 2001 that 'the war on terrorism must never be an excuse to persecute minorities' (Lam 2001). Diplomatic circumstances were such, however, that Bush was willing to prioritize co-operation in the 'war on terror' over these concerns – going so far as to designate the leading Uyghur militant organization (ETIM) a terrorist organization at China's request.

Poor diplomatic relations diminish the incentive to officially acknowledge terrorist incidents, since such acknowledgement is more likely to engender international critique than promote co-operation. The CCP has long perceived critiques of its human rights record and minority policies as a threat to the regime and a barrier to international prestige, which Beijing uses to nurture its legitimacy at home. Chinese policy makers have explicitly argued that these critiques represent a 'double standard' given US actions at Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib and broadly in the war on terror. An emerging tenet of China's diplomatic posture has been that such 'double standards' should not be tolerated for fear that international adversaries will use them strategically to undercut the Party (Duchâtel 2016).

Balancing Short- and Long-Term Priorities

Given these incentives and constraints, Chinese authorities face a basic problem of time-inconsistent preferences. Legitimacy at home and abroad are long-term priorities for the CCP, and the erosion of that legitimacy is perceived as a fundamental threat to power (Holbig and Gilley 2010; Shambaugh 2008). Domestic instability and international pressure, however, are usually of more immediate concern. The Chinese government therefore confronts a dilemma: prompt official coverage of terrorist violence is an investment in long-term legitimacy, but fear of instability biases toward delay or silence.

We argue that unless both domestic and international conditions are favorable, Chinese authorities will prioritize short-term stability by delaying or forgoing official coverage of terrorist violence. This bias arises from the very foundations of the Party's claim to authority. Caution arises from a longstanding priority placed on social stability that dates back to the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Tiananmen democracy movement (Wang and Minzner 2015).

Just before the Tiananmen protests, Deng Xiaoping reportedly told George H. W. Bush: '[b]efore everything else, China's problems require stability' (Bandurski 2012). Shortly after the crackdown, Deng reemphasized that 'stability is of overriding importance' and a *People's Daily* front-page article titled 'Stability Above Everything Else', published on the first anniversary of

²¹The 9/11 attacks on the United States marked a turning point in this evolution by providing China with an opening to place the Uyghur question firmly within the framework of the 'war on terror'. This shift can be clearly seen in foreign policy position papers issued during this period. See, for example, *China's Position Paper on Enhanced Cooperation in the Field of Non-Traditional Security Issues* (2002).

the Tiananmen crackdown, cemented this stance as the bedrock of China's domestic policy (*People's Daily* 1990). The third generation of China's leadership, led by Jiang Zemin, continued this prioritization, emphasizing that 'stability is the premise, reform is the driving force, and development is the goal' (Wang 2018). Hu Jintao, in turn, repackaged this idea with the slogan 'building a harmonious socialist society', the core principles of which were to 'promote harmony through reform, consolidate harmony with development, and guarantee harmony through stability' (State Council Gazette 2006, 33). Finally, and most relevant to the issue at hand, in the second Central Work Forum on Xinjiang held in 2014, Xi Jinping emphasized that 'safeguarding social stability and achieving an enduring peace' is the general goal of Xinjiang work (Leibold 2014, 4).

Why does the CCP delay coverage in the face of international opposition rather than expedite it? One might plausibly (but mistakenly) suppose, for example, that China would be more likely to report on terrorist incidents when diplomatic conditions are otherwise adverse in order to convince other countries that it is a victim of terrorism and needs their support. The answer lies in China's history, rapid rise and current nationalism. China's emergence from a 'century of humiliation' has left it with an arguably outdated, but still very real, intolerance of outside criticism, particularly at times of perceived weakness (Kaufman 2009). Chinese authorities have been particularly sensitive to criticisms of human rights violations, which are generally viewed as a pretext for such interference and a means of delegitimizing the Party. International critiques on these matters also tend to play very poorly with Chinese domestic audiences and therefore risk further inflaming popular passions in the wake of a terrorist incident. Most significantly, because China has thus far been unable to garner consistent international endorsement of its domestic policies in Xinjiang, there is little reason for Chinese authorities to believe the international response will be favorable when the diplomatic situation is otherwise negative. In this sense, Western attitudes and the corresponding responses to violence in Xinjiang are contingent on the bigger picture: when there are broader disagreements with China, the Uyghur issue becomes a means by which to pressure and delegitimize Beijing, but when the mood tends more toward diplomatic co-operation in other domains then the narratives shift more readily toward terrorism. The result is that Chinese leaders tend to carefully evaluate their international diplomatic position when deciding whether to acknowledge domestic terrorism and are much more likely to report quickly when international conditions are otherwise favorable.

This bias toward caution is fundamental to the Chinese system's structure and incentives from the lowest to the highest levels. For individual bureaucrats and lower-level officials, poor performance on social stability targets has an immediate impact on promotion, can result in punishment, and typically cannot be overridden by good performance on other targets (Minzner 2009). At the same time, the top-level leadership is perennially fearful of popular unrest and accustomed to exercising strong controls over information. The combination of these forces leads the system to default toward caution and opacity (Stern and Hassid 2012).

We therefore anticipate that *only when both domestic and international conditions are favorable will there be prompt coverage of militant violence in the official media*. To be clear, it is not the case that the negative consequences of transparency disappear entirely when domestic and international conditions are favorable – rather, the Party's tolerance of this possibility and the uncertainty that accompanies it is higher, and thus it becomes more willing to reap the longer-term rewards of transparency.

Assessing the Timing of Official Coverage

We rely on the *People's Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*) to assess official media coverage of terrorist attacks.²² This newspaper is widely understood to be the authoritative voice of the CCP; its

²²We relied on both the digital database (*Renmin Ribao Shujuku*) and archived print versions of the newspaper. We used the University of Michigan's *Renmin Ribao* Full-text database (with PDF images of the original print version) for 1990–2008 data. For 2009–2014 data, we rely on the *People's Daily* Figure and Text database.

editorials and commentaries are carefully curated to represent official views and enjoy ‘hegemony’ in shaping Chinese public opinion (Shambaugh 2007, 53).²³ Coverage in the *People’s Daily* is an unambiguous green light that a topic is acceptable for popular discussion and further media coverage (within certain bounds). As a result, acknowledgment of a terrorist incident in the *People’s Daily* can amplify broader coverage because it is a strong signal to both traditional media and social media users. While the terrorism coverage of more independent, audience-driven papers is not our dependent variable of interest, we searched these resources in the course of gathering our original data on all terrorist incidents. That survey indicated that these outlets generally wait for an official go-ahead before reporting.

We rely on event history models to assess the time to coverage in the *People’s Daily* after a terrorist incident.²⁴ In keeping with broader patterns in Chinese media policy (King, Pan and Roberts 2013, 5),²⁵ we observe in our data that terrorism is rarely reported immediately following an attack but is more likely to be covered over time. This is partly because the penetration of social media and Internet-accessible outlets put increasing pressure on authorities to address high-salience events that have become common knowledge. Event history models can capture this delayed coverage dynamic. We measure duration as the number of days (up to one year) between an attack and the date it is first reported by the *People’s Daily*.²⁶

There is no perfect single indicator for such an abstract and multifaceted concept as domestic conditions in China. Our approach is to first operationalize this concept with multiple formulations of what we deem to be the literature’s consensus on the best indicator – economic performance – before establishing robustness across a wide array of alternative measures including natural disasters and machine-coded events data from the Integrated Crisis Early Warning System (ICEWS) project.

We prioritize economic performance as a measure of domestic conditions for two major reasons. First, Chinese officials themselves treat economic performance as foundational. Despite tremendous economic growth over the past few decades, Chinese citizens’ income as a percentage of gross national income remains low; increasing it remains a top official priority, and doing so without substantial turmoil requires growing the overall economic pie (Zhu 2011). Given the size of China’s population and the extent of urban–rural inequality, high growth rates are seen as important to broader social stability and cohesion. It is therefore unsurprising that since Deng Xiaoping’s opening and reform strategy, much of the CCP’s legitimacy stems from its ability to deliver economic growth (Laliberté and Lanteigne 2007; Schubert 2008; Womack 2005).²⁷ While there have been preliminary indications of a shift from purely growth-based legitimation to one that takes social equality and welfare more seriously, even such refinements are based on the prerequisite of overall growth (Gilley and Holbig 2009; Holbig and Gilley 2010). Second, economic performance is broadly felt across society and is therefore hard to hide completely. Citizens have first-hand experience of (and are highly responsive to) the job market, cost of living and wages. The government is therefore highly sensitive to any negative signals from the economy.

To address concerns regarding the accuracy of official Chinese statistics, we rely on three indicators: annual GDP growth rate (*Growth*), the annual Consumer Confidence Index (*CCI*)²⁸ and

²³Shambaugh (2007) further points out that the *People’s Daily* is one of the institutions over which the CCP Propaganda Department has absolute authority.

²⁴A simple logistic model in which the dependent variable is whether each incident was covered produces consistent results (see the Appendix).

²⁵After the 2011 Wenzhou train wreck, some categories of events were cleared for immediate reporting, but not terrorism.

²⁶The complete data and summary statistics are available in the Appendix.

²⁷In a meta-analysis of 168 articles on the subject, Gilley and Holbig (2009) find that most treat economic growth as foundational to Party legitimacy.

²⁸According to the OECD (2019), ‘This consumer confidence indicator provides an indication of future developments of households’ consumption and saving, based upon answers regarding their expected financial situation, their sentiment about the general economic situation, unemployment and capability of savings.’

the Li Keqiang Index (*Li-Index*).²⁹ The current Chinese premier, Li Keqiang (then a provincial governor), reportedly told an American diplomat in 2007 that he focused on three indicators to evaluate the true economy: electricity consumption, railroad freight and bank loans (Rabinovitch 2010). Following Clark, Pinkovskiy and Sala-I-Martin (2017), we construct the *Li-Index* as the annual average of the growth rate of these indicators.

Despite wide skepticism regarding the accuracy of official Chinese GDP statistics, the debate primarily centers on whether the official figure systematically overstates the true figure (Holz 2014). The trend in GDP is still seen as informative. For example, Owyang and Shell (2017, 12) note that ‘while the level of Chinese GDP may remain overstated...the recent growth rate numbers for Chinese official data are more reliable’. However, the CCI and Li Keqiang measures sidestep this concern because they are broadly viewed among experts as not being subject to the same extent of official manipulation in the first place. While they proxy for economic conditions, they lack the political salience of the direct measure (and corresponding incentives to manipulate them). With regard to the Li index, this lack of salience and manipulation is precisely the reason that Li Keqiang articulated his reliance on that set of indicators for insight into the true economy (Rabinovitch 2010).

Perfect measures of how Chinese government officials evaluate the international environment are similarly elusive, but as Ikenberry (2008, 30) argues, ‘the most farsighted Chinese leaders understand that globalization has changed the game and that China accordingly needs strong, prosperous partners around the world’. To capture officials’ assessments, we investigate the extent to which China is diplomatically integrated or isolated, using United Nations (UN) General Assembly voting data (Bailey, Strezhnev and Voeten 2017). The variable, *Majority Frequency*, measures the proportion of each year’s important UN votes in which China is a member of the majority.³⁰ This results in a continuous variable, ranging from 26.7–77.8 per cent, with larger values indicating a more favorable international diplomatic environment. To further address the concern that Beijing may value relations with some countries more than others, we also assess two variants of the *Majority Frequency* measure: China’s majority votes among G20 countries and China’s majority votes within the Security Council.

Because our theory implies an interaction between China’s domestic and international environments, we include the interaction term between them in all models.³¹ Because both indicators, regardless of their specific operationalization, are continuous and lack a substantively meaningful zero, we center these variables by subtracting the mean value from the observed value.

Our models also include several confounders that are related to both the dependent variable and the independent variables of interest. Among incident-level attributes, we include dummy variables for attacks that *Target Civilians*, involved a *Bombing* or happened in densely populated *Urban* areas; we also account for *Casualties* per attack. These attributes would contribute directly to public awareness and/or newsworthiness, and therefore affect the duration of wait-to-report periods. They may also indirectly affect Chinese authorities’ sensitivity to the external environment, because low-intensity attacks initiated by poorly equipped perpetrators against government targets are usually difficult for Beijing to sell as terrorist attacks; they instead tend to be interpreted as spontaneous responses to state repression.

²⁹We also considered the unemployment rate and find similar results, but do not report these models because these statistics are generally considered to be less reliable.

³⁰Votes are identified as important according to the designation in the US State Department’s report on *Voting Practices in the United Nations*.

³¹In the Appendix, we report similar results when applying the flexible estimation strategies suggested by Hainmueller, Mummolo and Xu (2019) to account for potential nonlinear interaction effects and possible excessive extrapolation (due to the small number of observations).

Our models also address politically delicate periods for the CCP (*Sensitive Period*) when the authorities are likely to be systematically biased toward maintaining stability (*wei wen*). We identify these periods as: (1) a month in which annual sessions of the National People's Congress (NPC) and National Committee of the People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) are held (*liang hui*); (2) a month in which the National Congress of the CCP is held; (3) leadership transition years or (4) the year of the 2008 Olympics.³² Such moments may be related to both perceptions of domestic conditions and greater cautiousness with regard to official coverage.

Finally, we include *Internet Penetration* (the ratio of the number of Internet users to the total population in each year) to capture the possibility that the costs of delayed transparency grow with technological change, particularly social media, while also changing domestic conditions.³³

We rely primarily on Cox proportional hazards models for which a positive (negative) coefficient indicates that a one-unit increase in that variable is associated with an increase (decrease) in the hazard rate, defined as 'the rate at which units fail (or durations end) by t (a predetermined period of time) given that the unit has survived until t ' (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004, 13).³⁴ The hazard is therefore interpreted as the rate at which domestic attacks are reported (or durations of wait-to-report periods) at time t given that the attack has not been reported by t .

Table 1 presents the results of seven such models. Model 1 is a streamlined test of the interaction between the domestic and international environments, measured in terms of GDP growth and UN voting majority frequency. Model 2 adds country-level control variables. Model 3 is the first full model, which contains both country-level and incident-level controls. Models 4 and 5 replicate Model 3 but with the Li Index and Consumer Confidence Index as alternate indicators of economic performance. In Models 6 and 7, we use two variants of UN voting majority frequency that focus exclusively on G20 countries and Security Council members, respectively.

All the models are in line with the expectation that Chinese authorities promptly cover violence in the official media only when both domestic and international conditions are favorable.³⁵ This relationship is clearest when shown graphically – which we do for Models 3–5 in Figures 3–5.³⁶ A similar graphic can be generated from the results of any of the models in Table 1.

First, in Figure 3, we generate estimated survival curves for non-reporting under four hypothetical cases based on Model 3: (1) high growth and high frequency, (2) high growth and low frequency, (3) low growth and high frequency, and (4) low growth and low frequency.³⁷ The estimated probability of non-reporting in the official media drops quickly when both the domestic and international political environments are favorable – to about 0.80 one day after a terrorist incident and continues to decline over time, to about 0.59 after 4 days. In contrast, the survival curves

³²For a more comprehensive discussion of sensitive political moments and how the Chinese government pre-emptively represses to preserve stability, see Truex (2016).

³³The number of Internet users in China grew from about 620,000 in 1997 to approximately 632 million in 2014 (China Internet Network Information Center 1997; China Internet Network Information Center 2014).

³⁴Tests of the scaled Schoenfeld residuals indicate that the proportional hazard assumption is satisfied. Details are available in the Appendix.

³⁵Since we use centered independent variables in all models, the coefficient of each independent variable should be interpreted as the main effect of that variable conditional on the mean value of the other independent variable. However, the main effect ought not to be overemphasized in models with interaction terms, for the sign and significance of the effect of each variable is conditional on values of another variable.

³⁶Figures corresponding to Models 6 and 7 are available in the Appendix.

³⁷In response to the distribution of the data, we characterize low growth and high growth as one standard error below and above the mean value of the centered value of *Growth* (which are -2.14 and 2.14 , respectively), which are equivalent to a growth rate of 6.95 per cent and 11.22 per cent in their original form. Similarly, we characterize low frequency and high frequency as one standard error below and above the mean value of the centered value of *Majority Frequency* (which are -12.61 and 12.61), which are equivalent to 36.96 per cent and 62.18 per cent, respectively, in their original form. All other control variables are held at their mean values.

Table 1. Models of time to reporting in *People's Daily* after terrorist incidents

	Cox PH models						
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	Majority frequency G20 countries (6)	Majority frequency Security Council members (7)
Growth	-0.454 (0.291)	0.302 (0.268)	0.150 (0.362)			0.854*** (0.219)	0.349* (0.180)
Majority frequency	0.074*** (0.018)	0.062** (0.025)	0.108*** (0.034)	0.073*** (0.028)	0.169*** (0.058)	0.070* (0.039)	0.001 (0.047)
Growth × majority frequency	0.030** (0.014)	0.040*** (0.015)	0.048** (0.021)			0.063*** (0.023)	0.045** (0.018)
Li-index				0.027 (0.120)			
Li-Index × majority frequency				0.033** (0.015)			
CCI					1.135 (1.583)		
CCI × majority frequency					0.031** (0.015)		
Internet penetration		0.095*** (0.014)	0.071*** (0.012)	0.052*** (0.012)	0.160 (0.130)	0.077*** (0.014)	0.059*** (0.014)
Sensitive period		1.188** (0.533)	0.731 (0.521)	1.079** (0.500)	0.710 (0.450)	1.404** (0.620)	1.346** (0.550)
Casualty			0.023*** (0.007)	0.021*** (0.006)	0.021*** (0.005)	0.018*** (0.006)	0.017*** (0.005)
Urban			0.357 (0.485)	0.327 (0.518)	0.340 (0.582)	0.281 (0.520)	0.295 (0.540)
Target civilian			-0.897 (0.547)	-0.750 (0.541)	-0.532 (0.560)	-0.877 (0.571)	-0.664 (0.580)
Bombing			0.317 (0.470)	0.624 (0.486)	0.673 (0.441)	0.522 (0.541)	0.353 (0.505)
Observations	137	137	122	122	122	122	122
Max. possible R ²	0.702	0.702	0.734	0.734	0.734	0.734	0.734
Log likelihood	-75.530	-67.193	-58.289	-60.235	-58.069	-61.571	-63.213
LR test	14.675***	31.349***	45.015***	41.123***	45.454***	38.451***	35.166***

Note: table entries are coefficients obtained from Cox proportional hazards models. Robust standard errors clustered on the incident are in parentheses. *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01

for non-reporting under all other combinations of conditions remain statistically indistinguishable from both one another and from 1.

Figure 4 demonstrates how the relative risk of coverage varies with different combinations of *Li-Index* and *Majority Frequency* based on Model 4.³⁸ The left-hand panel shows that when *Li-Index* is high (one standard error above the mean), the probability that an incident will be reported by the *People's Daily* will become significantly higher than the sample mean probability only when *Majority Frequency* is also high. Specifically, when *Li-Index* is high and *Majority Frequency* is lower than its mean (49.57 per cent), the probability of being reported is not significantly different from the sample mean probability. However, this risk becomes 3.92 times and then 11.59 times higher than the sample mean as the *Majority Frequency* increases to 55 per cent and 60 per cent, respectively. In contrast, the right-hand panel of Figure 4 demonstrates that when internal conditions are not favorable, the probability of coverage is indistinguishable

³⁸ Figures 5 and 6 use the original values of the interaction variables as labels of the x-axis to ease interpretation. In these figures, centered values lead to negative ranges, which can cause confusion. The substantive interpretation is, however, unchanged.

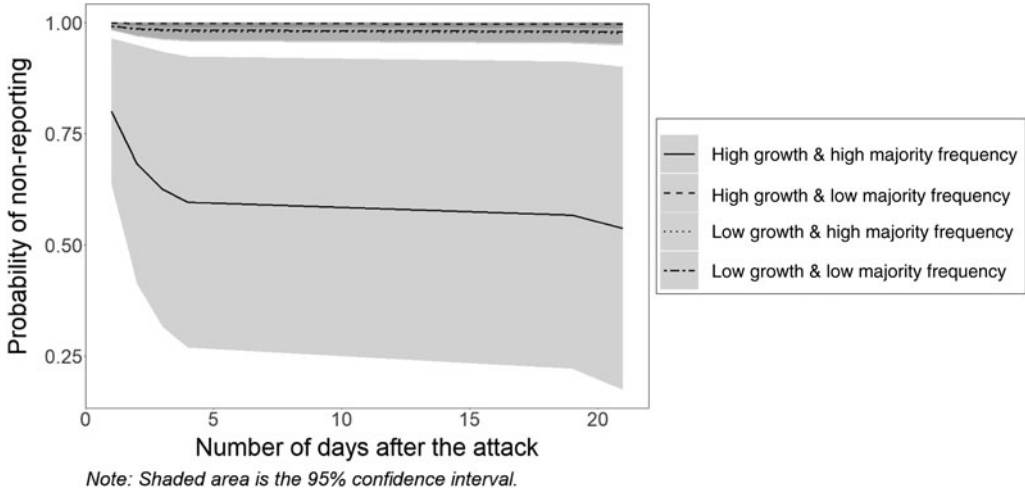


Figure 3. Probability of non-reporting for combinations of growth and majority (Model 3)

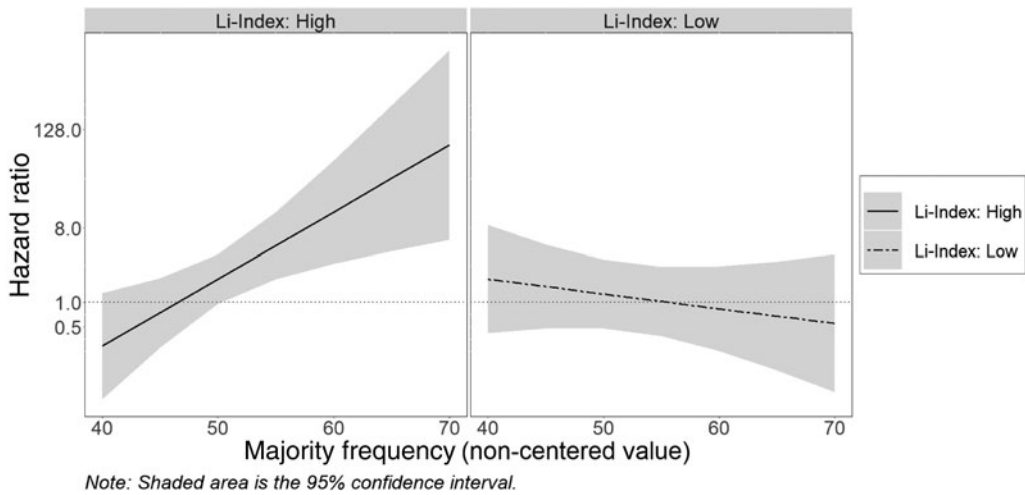


Figure 4. Relative risk of coverage (Model 4)

from the sample mean probability regardless of the proportion of UN votes in which China is a majority.

In Figure 5, we plot the variation in the probability of non-reporting by the twenty-first day (three weeks) after a terrorist attack across different values of the Consumer Confidence Index when *Majority Frequency* is high and low (one standard error above and below the mean). Again, the graph indicates that prompt reporting is only likely when both domestic and international conditions are favorable to the government. When *Majority Frequency* is high, the probability of non-reporting by the twenty-first day after an attack is nearly 1 when the *CCI* is below its mean value (about 99.7). This decreases to 0.86 (meaning that coverage is more likely) at the mean value for *CCI*. The probability of non-reporting plunges to 0.02 at one standard deviation above the mean (about 101.8). However, if the Chinese government is internationally isolated

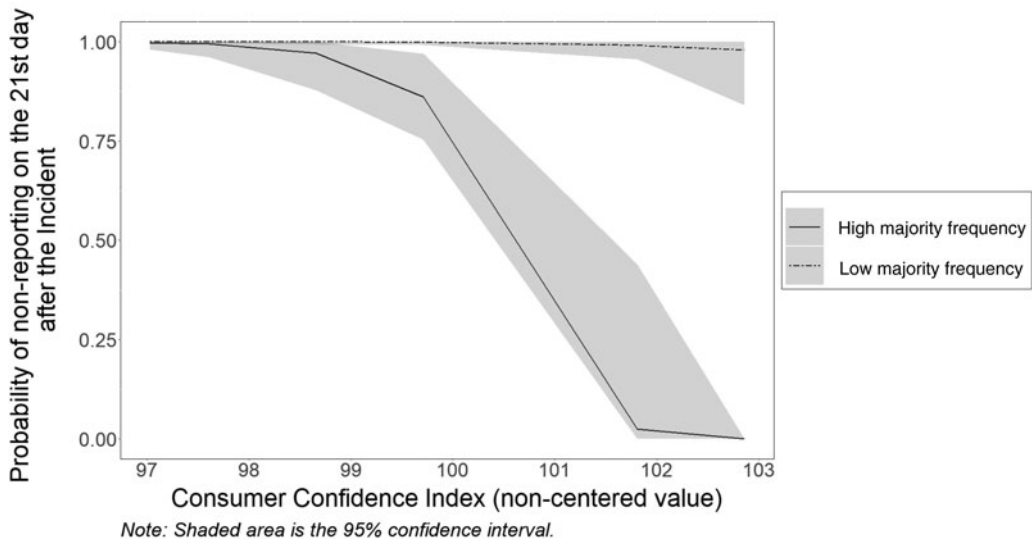


Figure 5. Probability of non-reporting by the twenty-first day after terrorist attack (Model 5)

(that is, the majority frequency is low), there is essentially no change in the probability of non-reporting regardless of the state of the economy.

Among the control variables, *Urban*, *Target Civilian* and *Bombing* are not significant predictors. The coefficient for *Sensitive Period* is positive and significant in Models 2, 4, 6 and 7, which contradicts our expectation. This result is potentially caused by the increased global attention paid to China during these periods, especially during the 2008 Olympics, which could make censoring more difficult and costlier. As anticipated, the coefficients for *Internet Penetration* and *Casualties* are positive and significant.

Alternative Specifications

To establish the robustness of these findings we reassess our models with alternate operationalizations, control variables and periods of analysis (Table 2). In Model 8, we account for the possibility that both *Majority Frequency* and time to coverage may be confounded with underlying elements of Chinese foreign policy. Put differently, a change in China's foreign policy may simultaneously lead to voting in the majority at the UN and a willingness to acknowledge attacks in the official media. Given that the time horizon of our data covers three different Chinese leaders – Jiang, Hu and Xi – there might be systematic differences in their foreign policies that must be accounted for. To address this possibility, we include an estimate of China's ideal point from the General Assembly voting data (Bailey, Strezhnev and Voeten 2017), which is widely used as a measure of the country's foreign policy position.³⁹ We also include *Global Terrorist Incidents*, which is measured as the logged value of the total number of successful terrorist attacks in a given year around the world, to account for the possibility that the global trend of terrorism may induce Uyghur attacks and make the international climate more favorable for transparency.

To further address concerns about specific operationalizations of key variables, we use alternative measures of domestic and international conditions – natural disasters and diplomatic relations with the United States. The Chinese government has long been sensitive to natural disasters because they disrupt regional economic development, threaten social stability and present

³⁹See, for example, Mattes, Leeds and Carroll (2015).

Table 2. Alternative model specifications

	Cox PH Models					Post-2000 sample (13)
	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	
Growth	0.486 (0.353)	0.177 (0.154)				
Majority frequency	0.060 (0.049)		0.425*** (0.129)			
US-China distance		-3.328*** (1.080)		-5.053*** (1.431)		
Natural disaster			-0.005 (0.030)	-0.011 (0.012)		
Growth × majority frequency	0.045** (0.020)					
Growth × US-China distance		-1.543*** (0.503)				
Natural disaster × majority frequency			-0.010*** (0.003)			
Natural disaster × US-China distance				0.085*** (0.021)		
Internal condition					0.391* (0.210)	0.356 (0.220)
External condition					0.377* (0.197)	0.328* (0.199)
Internal condition × external condition					0.193*** (0.065)	0.167** (0.068)
Growth (non-centered)			1.219*** (0.326)	0.503*** (0.184)	0.472* (0.244)	0.239 (0.272)
Internet penetration	0.063 (0.055)	0.036** (0.015)	0.258*** (0.068)	0.061*** (0.019)	0.136*** (0.028)	0.086** (0.041)
Sensitive period	1.045* (0.560)	1.425*** (0.545)	-2.380** (0.990)	1.213** (0.541)	0.787 (0.547)	0.525 (0.525)
Casualty	0.022*** (0.007)	0.020*** (0.006)	0.038*** (0.010)	0.022*** (0.006)	0.024*** (0.007)	0.025*** (0.007)
Urban	0.166 (0.493)	0.067 (0.538)	0.289 (0.488)	0.178 (0.536)	0.118 (0.483)	0.175 (0.489)
Target civilian	-0.791 (0.555)	-0.792 (0.579)	-1.006* (0.577)	-0.972* (0.571)	-0.359 (0.517)	-0.395 (0.517)
Bombing	0.573 (0.446)	0.461 (0.496)	-0.113 (0.521)	0.510 (0.481)	0.207 (0.417)	0.209 (0.403)
China ideal point	4.303 (3.944)					
Global terrorist incidents	0.615 (1.151)					
Observations	122	122	122	122	103	57
Max. possible R ²	0.734	0.734	0.734	0.734	0.779	0.904
Log likelihood	-57.584	-61.099	-54.863	-60.287	-54.122	-53.495
LR test	46.425***	39.394***	51.867***	41.018***	47.249***	26.485***

Note: table entries are coefficients obtained from Cox proportional hazards models. Robust standard errors clustered on the incident are in parentheses. *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01

openings for critiques of government performance. The 2008 Sichuan earthquake exemplifies this threat and sensitivity. Days after the earthquake, local residents, especially parents who lost children, turned from grief to anger and started protesting the poor workmanship and government corruption that led to the collapse of several schools (Blanchard 2008; Branigan 2008). We posit that a year more plagued by natural disasters indicates a more challenging domestic environment,

during which the Chinese government would be more reluctant to report other negative events including domestic terrorist attacks. To measure the severity of natural disasters, we calculate the total number of days in a given year during which China experienced natural disasters that caused ten or more deaths.⁴⁰ A further advantage of these data is that natural disasters are outside the government's control and are therefore plausibly exogenous to the mechanisms we are exploring.

As an alternative measure of the international environment, we focus on the Sino-US relationship. Given the United States' primacy in the international system, the salience of the United States in Chinese foreign policy calculations, Beijing's particular sensitivity to American critiques of China's human rights record, and the centrality of the United States in global counterterrorism policy, it is reasonable to anticipate that bilateral considerations (rather than the Chinese position vis-à-vis a global average) might factor more prominently in official calculations. The variable, *US-China Distance*, is the absolute distance between the ideal points of China and the United States based on their UN voting (Bailey, Strezhnev and Voeten 2017). In Models 9, 10 and 11, we substitute the original measures of domestic and international conditions with these two alternative measures one by one and together, respectively (while controlling for GDP growth).⁴¹

In Model 12, we utilize machine-coded measures of domestic and international conditions from the ICEWS event data (Boschee et al. 2018).⁴² All of our previous operationalizations of domestic and international conditions vary only by year, which may be insufficiently granular to fully capture the decision-making environments facing the Chinese government when attacks happen. The ICEWS data allow us to address this concern with more granular 'intensity scores' of both domestic and international conditions.⁴³ The intensity scores range from -10 to 10, with lower values indicating hostile interactions and higher values indicating co-operation. For *Internal Condition*, we calculate the mean value of the intensity scores for all China's domestic events that happened within 90 days before each violent attack. *External Condition* is calculated in the same way for all international events in which China is the target.⁴⁴ We normalize both variables to a 1-10 scale.

Finally, as noted above, the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks increased the opening for China to reframe the Uyghur militancy in the context of the war on terror. Internet penetration and social media use also exploded in China at about that time. To explore this dynamic we limit the analysis to the post-2000 period in Model 13 using the ICEWS data. Unfortunately, the temporal coverage of the ICEWS data prevents us from using it for an equivalent pre-9/11 analysis, which would further clarify this point if it were possible. Table 2 indicates that the coefficients for the interaction term remain significant and in the anticipated direction in all models.

⁴⁰We rely on the International Disaster Database (EM-DAT) (Guha-Sapir, Below and Hoyois 2015) to construct this variable (*Natural Disaster*). For a disaster to be entered into the database, at least one of the following criteria must be fulfilled: ten or more people reported killed; 100 or more people reported affected; declaration by the country of a state of emergency and/or an appeal for international assistance. It is worth noting, however, that there is no substantively or statistically significant relationship when natural disasters are measured as a simple count of events. This is likely because there are many insignificant incidents in these data that lasted very short periods of time, had limited impact, and killed one or even no people. Such events do not seriously degrade domestic conditions or threaten official power in the way that we were attempting measure – that is, they were simply adding noise.

⁴¹In the Appendix, we provide an additional model in which GDP growth is not included as a control. The results are substantively equivalent to those in the main body of the article. Because economic growth remains the Party's ultimate objective, any model that excludes it entirely runs the risk of being seriously underspecified. Since the theoretical action in our model is coming through the interaction term, it is the movement of alternative measures in and out of that interaction term that is relevant rather than the movement of independent variables like GDP in and out of the model entirely.

⁴²Since the ICEWS data only go back to 1995, Model 12 is based on a truncated 1995–2014 sample.

⁴³The intensity score, which is similar to the Goldstein Conflict-Cooperation Scale (Goldstein 1992), measures the related intensity of the event type, as defined by the CAMEO (Conflict and Mediation Event Observations) coding scheme. For more detail, see Gerner et al. (2002).

⁴⁴Mattes and Rodriguez (2014) adopt a similar strategy to measure the degree of cooperation between two states using the 10 Million International Dyadic Events data.

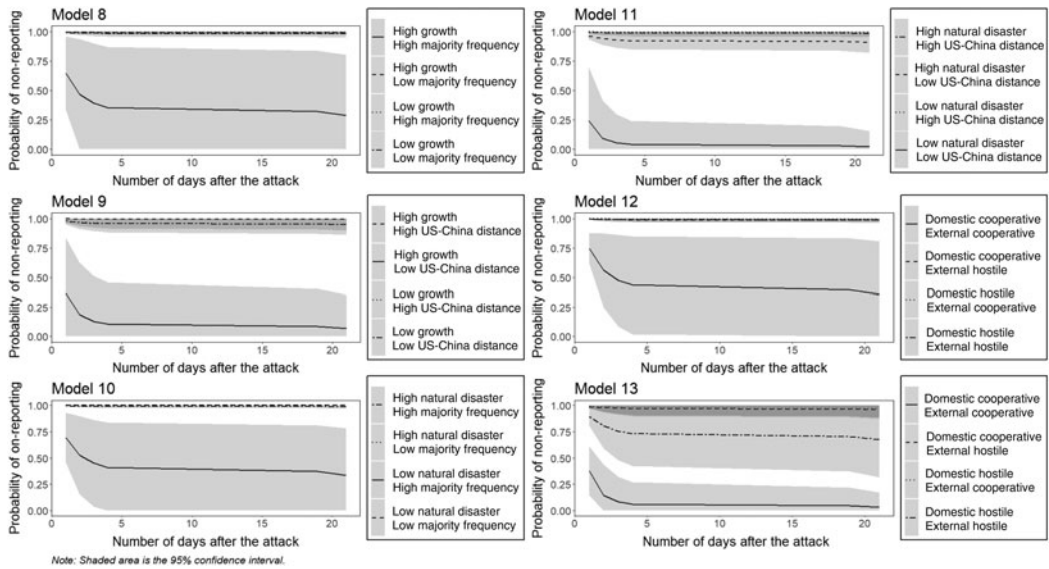


Figure 6. Alternative specifications

In Figure 6 we repeat the four-case survival curve comparison presented in Figure 3 for the models in Table 2. All these plots reveal almost identical patterns; the probability of non-reporting drops sharply only when both domestic and international political conditions are favorable. The plot based on the post-2000 subsample (Model 13) produces predicted probabilities that are relatively lower than those using full samples, which suggests that 9/11 was indeed a turning point after which China became more willing overall to internationalize its domestic terrorist incidents. However, even in this period, official acknowledgments were still more likely when both domestic and international conditions were favorable.

Conclusion

Chinese policy makers' decisions regarding official coverage of terrorist incidents are highly politicized. The available evidence indicates that this calculus is governed by caution: timely acknowledgment of terrorism occurs only when both domestic and international conditions are highly favorable. While transparency can boost the government's legitimacy, publicizing domestic terrorism immediately risks social and political stability by intensifying ethnic tensions, encouraging copycat attacks, engaging public opinion and prompting international criticism. These time-inconsistent preferences lead Chinese decision makers to attend to the short-term risk at the expense of longer-term goals unless they believe those risks are minimal.

These findings also contribute to the emerging literature on the strategic logic of China's censorship policies. While not in opposition to arguments that China's information control policies center on undermining collective action, we argue that there is evidence in favor of an underappreciated, parallel mechanism: authorities censor uncertainty (King, Pan and Roberts 2013).

With over 420 million Internet users, China has more people surfing the web than any other country, and new web-based technologies are increasingly directing media attention. Over the past decade, numerous incidents that were first reported online generated such outrage that traditional news media were compelled to report on them, often leading to changes in the

government's positions.⁴⁵ The spread of these new technologies may undermine the current model of media control in China, which relies on a combination of self-censorship and official oversight (Weber and Jia 2007). It is plausible that the growth of social media will accelerate the timeline for reporting by increasing the costs of opacity. That said, if social media growth turns out to favor government surveillance and information control, then the pressures for transparency are likely to decline, all else equal. These are trends worth keeping a close eye on as China seeks to export its model of information control around the region and even the globe.

In addition to China's media policy towards domestic terrorism, our work also draws attention to an underappreciated issue – the violence itself. Despite the increasingly intense social control and continuing 'strike hard' campaigns in Xinjiang, the forces that have given rise to Uyghur terrorism remain unresolved. Complicating the picture, China's domestic security crackdown contributes to grievances and pushes militants into weakly governed border states where they can congregate, train and plan attacks. Uyghur fighters have shown up in Iraq and Syria, and propaganda photos released in 2016 show Uyghur children participating in weapons training, which suggests a troubling future for terrorism in China (Weiss 2016). Given the strategic importance of Xinjiang and the broader Central Asia region to China's 'Belt and Road' strategy, it is reasonable to anticipate that these issues will become more salient in the coming decades.

Extending beyond China, future work would do well to consider the extent to which the findings that we present here generalize to other institutionalized autocracies like Russia. Our findings indicate that the ways in which China manages sensitive information are more complex than the choice to censor or not censor. The institutional mechanisms that we identify as driving this impact are, however, present in many of the most important autocracies with systems in which parties and legislatures are broadly used to manage public opinion and leaders do, in fact, have popular mandates. At the same time, changes in the media and information landscape mean that the populations in these autocracies have independent means of obtaining information, which makes notions of absolute censorship obsolete. Thus while autocrats maintain important levers of information control, they are less about censorship than they are about the decision to strategically highlight some pieces of information and obscure others.

Finally, for scholars of terrorism and political violence, the work we present here has important implications for our understanding of the event data we work with. To the extent that data collection efforts rely on local media, attack data from autocracies may be biased toward those that occur in favorable circumstances for the regime. This, in turn, could drive prior findings that autocracies are better able to limit and handle terrorist attacks. A further implication of this point is that militants may strategically time their attacks to advance their agendas. In the case of China, the official acknowledgment pattern we uncover suggests that militants who operate in similar environments (for example, the broader political pursuit has international support, but the violence is subject to condemnation) may face a tradeoff. Attacking when the government enjoys good external relations could garner publicity as the government is more likely to report it, but this could also serve the government's strategy to delegitimize the militants' political agenda. In contrast, attacking when the target government is internationally isolated would likely be followed by government attempts to suppress news of the violence, but would potentially find greater international sympathies were word to get out. Thus the degree of under-reporting or systemic missing data is likely to be affected by the dynamics of the interactions between militants and governments.

Supplementary material. Online appendices are available at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123420000514>.

⁴⁵Famous incidents include one involving Sun Zhigang, a migrant graphic designer, beaten to death by police, see Yu (2006). Another incident, known as the 'Wanzhou uprising', was in response to an encounter between a 'lowly porter' and a 'self-proclaimed' government official, see Zhao (2009).

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