

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, we explore 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, we demonstrate that the CCP promptly acknowledges terrorist violence only when both domestic and international conditions are favorable. We attribute this pattern to the entrenched prioritization of short-term social stability over longer-term legitimacy.

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 by leveraging the media to convey knowledge of attacks to the broader public (Atkinson, Sandler, and Tschirchat 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). In contrast, 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 evolving technological and media environments. In institutionalized autocracies public opinion matters, information control is

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

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

not 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 which 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 where 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

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

⁴ Institutionalized 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 Svobik 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.

⁵ For 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

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 the Chinese 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, 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 to respond 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

understanding public opinion suggests that the role of public opinion is somewhat broader" (Lampton 2001, 155)

⁷ Major incidents do go uncovered in the official media. For example, neither a stabbing attack that killed 6 people and injured 28 people in Kashgar on July 30, 2011, nor an attack in Dayecheng on February 28, 2012, which resulted in 15 deaths and 14 injured were mentioned in the *People's Daily*.

⁸ These are tradeoffs that scholars have identified as core elements of the China's foreign policy. See Shirk (1993; 2007), Swaine and Henry (1995), and Swaine and Tellis (2000).

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 the finding with a variety of alternative operationalizations of 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; and, 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 risk the Party's immediate grip on power and individual officials' paths toward promotion. In contrast, when these conditions are not in place, delay allows time for authorities 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 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

⁹ While 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.

of work on China's policies toward media censorship, propaganda, and collective action (Huang, Boranbay-Akan, and Huang 2016; 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, 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 both for China, the globe, and our understanding of the relationship between terrorism and regime type.

Terrorism in China

China's experiences with and policies toward domestic ethnic unrest have evolved substantially over the course of the country's post-WWII history. 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

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

through this period and Uyghurs fared somewhat better than many other minorities, owing 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 through 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 Chinese authorities, however, having drawn lessons from both the Soviet breakup and their own experiences in the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, adopted a hard line against any increase in autonomy (Gladney 2004b; Rudelson and Jankowiak 2004). This stance has not softened in the ensuing decades, and 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; Clark 2018).

To establish the scope of this violence, we develop a dataset of all known incidents of Uyghur-initiated terrorism in China from 1990 to 2014.¹³ Figure 1, which graphs these data,

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

¹² Even before the full collapse of the USSR ethnonationalist violence was on the rise in Xinjiang (Becquelin 2000).

¹³ We 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

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 15 terrorist attacks resulted in 50 deaths and 98 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 28 incidents. Figure 1 also indicates that attacks have shifted over time toward increased civilian targeting, bringing it more in line with global trends.¹⁴

Bovingdon (2010) and Reed and Raschke (2010). See the Online 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 EVC includes spontaneous riots and protests that turn violent. Second, our dataset captures Uyghur initiated militant attacks throughout China, while the EVC database focuses exclusively on incidents in Xinjiang autonomous region. Third, 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 Appendix), the EVC dataset contains 24 incidents that we do not identify during the period of 1990-2005 (the overlapping period between our data and EVC data). These 24 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 regarding ethnic conflicts in Xinjiang), to which we do not have access. Our data collection effort yielded 14 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).

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

Figure 1. Uyghur-Initiated Terrorist Incidents, 1990 -2014

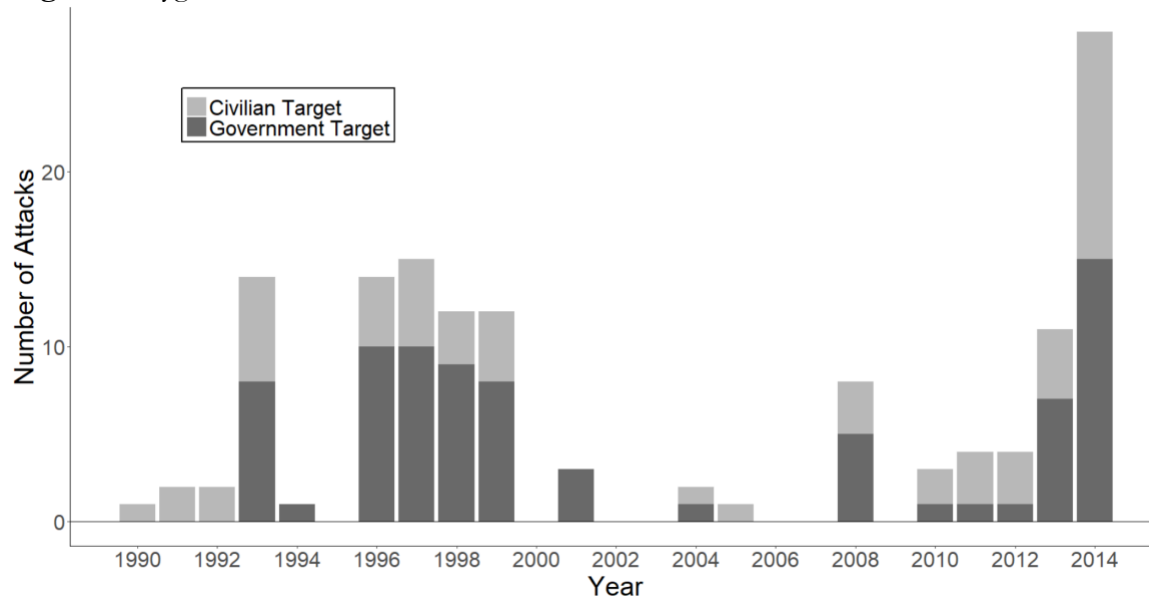
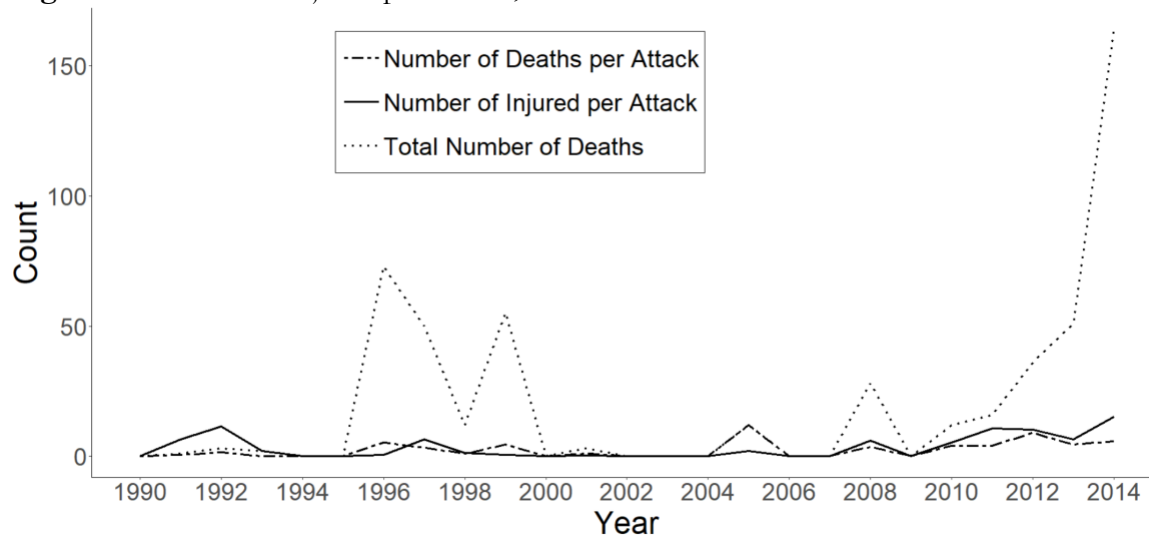


Figure 2 graphs the average casualties from these attacks. In keeping with both global trends and the greater sophistication of Uyghur militant organizations in that period, the second wave was more lethal than the first (Potter 2013). The difference amounts to 3 more deaths and 8 more injuries per attack. However, while increasing, casualties per attack remain relatively low when 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 percent of all attacks respectively. There are, however, indications that tactics are becoming more sophisticated, particularly with regard to the adoption of al Qaeda-style coordinated attacks and suicide bombing.¹⁵

¹⁵ Additional detail can be found in the Online Appendix.

Figure 2. Killed and Injured per Attack, 1990-2014



In sum, Uyghur militant violence has been a significant issue for the Chinese government. Although authorities have successfully limited, if not absolutely blocked, access to highly lethal weapons, the number of attacks and casualties have increased. At the present time violence in Xinjiang is in a lull, 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 of 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 (2016) link media acknowledgment of social protests to enhanced claims of Party legitimacy.

Transparency around 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 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 is going to come to light one way or the other it is often the case that owning it at the outset is the best way to mitigate the downside by at least maintaining legitimacy as an honest provider of information. However, when it comes to 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 paint 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 caution even in the face of potential rewards for transparency.

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

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 a 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 “Tacitus 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 March 14, 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

Failure to officially acknowledge high profile incidents has proven costly in some key cases—the school collapses in the Sichuan earthquake, 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

¹⁷ According 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).

¹⁸ CPC News 2016, emphasis added.

¹⁹ This insight is echoed by 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

increase as it becomes easier for Chinese citizens to know 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 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 as 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.

International priorities can also favor rapid transparency with regard to terrorism because it makes it more likely that it will 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 critique (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

appreciated—a pattern attributed to the government’s desire to gauge bottom-up public opinion and provide an outlet for it (Qin, Strömberg, and Wu 2017).

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

jihadist movements. International attentiveness to terrorism in China is, however, generally short-lived so 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. Chinese presence in the region has always had the potential to be viewed as aggressive and expansionist. To combat this, China draws on the threat of terrorism and the promise of counterterrorism cooperation 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 charge to fight against the “three evils” of separatism, fundamentalism, and terrorism (Chung 2004). As a consequence, 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 with terrorism, and transparent treatment of that experience, can help make that 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

There remain, however, strong countervailing incentives for leaders to delay the acknowledgment of terrorist incidents in the official media until risks can be mitigated and passions 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 July 2009 Urumqi riot was reported on extensively and that coverage 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 authorities rather than a rally in support. While public opinion is generally pro-government and anti-Uyghur when it comes to terrorist violence, there remains the possibility that this could shift or that authorities could come under fire for not cracking down hard enough. Moreover, when domestic conditions are less than ideal, authorities are much less willing to risk this social instability because they are more poorly positioned to weather difficulties. Any weakness in domestic conditions makes Chinese authorities even more risk-averse than they usually are and therefore less likely to prioritize long term interests in legitimacy over short term interests in stability.

Public opinion surveys on these sensitive matters are few and far between, but those that exist indicate reasons for caution. For example, Hou and Quek (2019) report that 96 percent of Chinese citizens think that the government should increase efforts to prevent terrorist violence, raising the possibility that 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 percent of Chinese citizens do think that the current ethnic policies need to be modified (Chen and Ding 2014). And opinion is polarized on the nature of that modification, with 28 percent strongly agreeing with reliance

on forceful suppression and 40 percent strongly disagreeing. In this context, official discussion of terrorist violence can invite critiques of standing government policy, push policy in directions that 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 lead to openings for 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 cloaks human rights violations against its ethnic minorities behind the "war on terror" has never faded.²¹ Indeed, even when China's support at UN was urgently needed shortly after the 9/11 attacks, Bush cautioned the 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 cooperation in the "war on terror" over these concerns—going so far as to list the leading Uyghur militant organization (ETIM) as a designated terrorist organization at China's request.

Poor diplomatic relations diminish the incentive to officially acknowledge terrorist incidents, as such acknowledgement is more likely to engender international critique than promote cooperation. The CCP has long perceived critiques of its human rights record and minority policies to be a threat to the regime and a barrier to international prestige, which

²¹ The 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).

Beijing uses to nurture its legitimacy at home. Chinese policymakers 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 standard” should not be tolerated for fear that they will be used strategically by international adversaries 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 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 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, No.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 critique, particularly in moments 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 then for Chinese authorities to think that 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 cooperation in other domains then narratives shift more readily toward terrorism. The result is that Chinese leaders to carefully evaluate their international diplomatic position when they make decisions about acknowledging domestic terrorism and are much more likely to report quickly when these international conditions are otherwise favorable.

This bias toward caution is baked into 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, 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 negative consequences from transparency disappear entirely when domestic and international conditions are favorable—rather, the Party's tolerance for 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 The *People's Daily* is widely understood to be the authoritative voice of the CCP and its 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, the 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 tends to be rarely reported immediately following an attack but is more likely to be covered over time. This is, in part,

²² We 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.

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

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

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

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 are able to capture this delayed coverage dynamic. We measure duration as the number of days (up to one year) between the occurrence of an attack and the date it is first reported by the *People's Daily*.²⁶

There is no perfect single indicator for as abstract and multifaceted a 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 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 a few reasons. First, Chinese officials themselves treat economic performance as foundational. Despite tremendous economic growth over the past few decades, the income of Chinese citizens as a percentage of gross national income remains low, increasing it remains a top official priority, and doing 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 unsurprising then that since Deng Xiaoping's open and reform strategy, much of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) legitimacy stems from its ability to deliver economic growth

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

(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). Finally, economic performance is broadly felt across the whole of society and therefore hard to hide completely. Citizens have first-hand experience with 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 the Li Keqiang Index (*Li-Index*).²⁹ The current Chinese premier, Li Keqiang (then a provincial governor), reportedly told an American diplomat that he focused on three indicators to evaluate the true economy: electricity consumption, railroad freight, and bank loans (Rabinovitch 2010). Following Clark, Pinkovsky, and Sala-i-Martin (2017) we construct the *Li-Index* as the annual average of the growth rate of these indicators.

Despite the wide skepticism of the accuracy of Chinese official GDP statistics, the debate primarily centers on whether the official figure systematically overstates the reality

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

²⁸ According 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.”

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

(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 for manipulation). With regard to the Li index, this lack of salience and manipulation is precisely the reason that Li Keqiang articulated for his reliance on that set of indicators for insight into the true economy (Rabinovitch 2010).

Perfect measures of the way in which 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 this, we assess 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 about 26.7 percent to about 77.8 percent, 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.

³⁰ Vote identified as important by U.S. State Department report on Voting Practices in the United Nations.

Because our theory implies an interaction between China's domestic and international environment, 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.

We also include in our models 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 towards the external environment, for low-intensity attacks initiated by poorly equipped perpetrators against government targets are usually difficult for Beijing to sell as terrorist attacks, but instead tend to be interpreted as spontaneous responses to state repressions.

Our models also address politically delicate periods for the CCP (*Sensitive Period*) when authorities are likely to be systematically biased toward stability maintenance (*wei wen*). We identify these periods as: 1) a month in which annual sessions of National People's Congress (NPC) and National Committee of the People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) is held (*liang hui*); 2) a month in which the National Congress of the CCP is held; 3) leadership

³¹ In the Appendix, we find 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).

transition years; or 4) the 2008 Olympics year.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. Model 4 and 5 replicate Model 3 but with the Li Index and Consumer Confidence Index as

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

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

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

alternate indicators of economic performance. In Model 6 and 7, we use two variants of UN voting majority frequency that focus exclusively on G20 countries and security council members respectively.

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	Majority Frequency Security Council Members
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

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-

³⁵ Since 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.

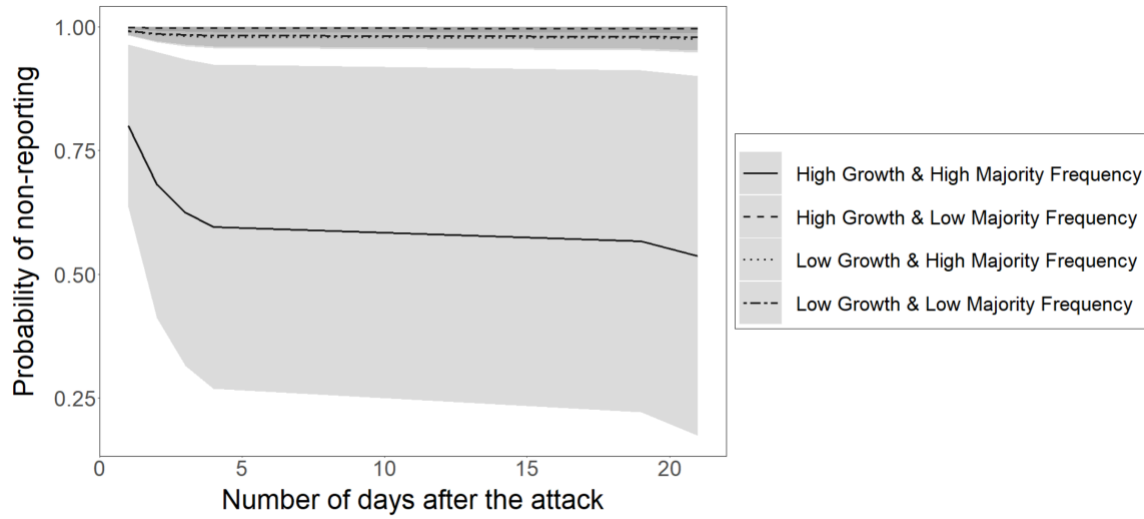
5 in Figures 3-5.³⁶ A similar graphic can be generated from the results of any of the models in Table 1.

First, in Figure 3, we generate estimated survival curves for non-reporting under four hypothetical cases based on Model 3: (1) High Growth & High Frequency, (2) High Growth & Low Frequency, (3) Low Growth & High Frequency, and (4) Low Growth & 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. Specifically, the probability of non-reporting drops to about .80 one day after a terrorist incident and continues to decline over time, reaching to about 0.59 after 4 days. In contrast, the survival curves for non-reporting under all other combinations of conditions remain statistically indistinguishable from both one another and from 1.

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

³⁷ In 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% and 11.22% 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% and 62.18% respectively in their original form. All other control variables are held at their mean values.

Figure 3. Probability of Non-reporting for Combinations of Growth and Majority (Model 3)

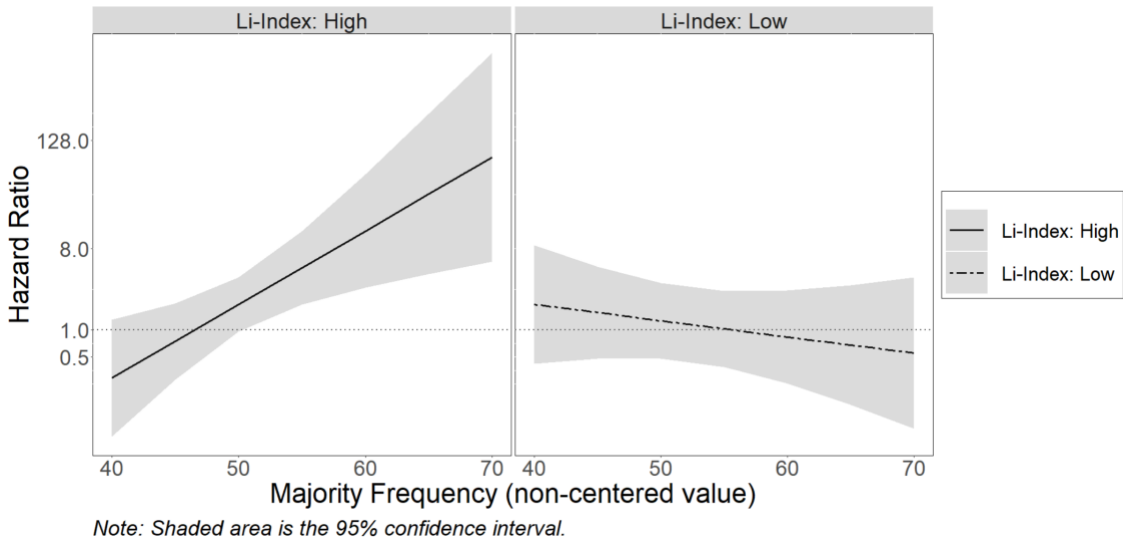


Note: Shaded area is the 95% confidence interval.

Figure 4 demonstrates how the relative risk of coverage varies at 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 be reported by *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%), 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% and 60% respectively. In contrast, the right-hand panel in Figure 4 demonstrates that when internal conditions are not favorable, the probability of coverage is indistinguishable from the sample mean probability regardless of the proportion of UN votes in which China is a majority.

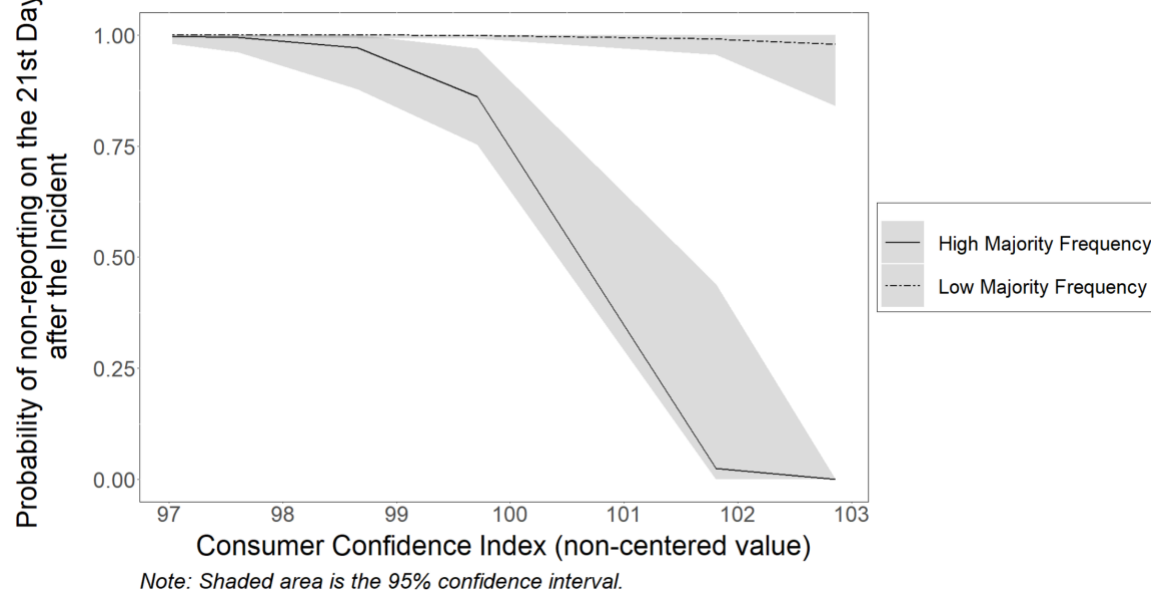
³⁸ Figures 5 and 6 use the original values of the interaction variables as labels of the x-axis to ease interpretation. In the cases of Figure 5 and 6, centered values lead to negative ranges that can lead to confusion. The substantive interpretation is, however, unchanged.

Figure 4. Relative Risk of Coverage (Model 4)



In Figure 5, we plot the variation in the probability of non-reporting by the 21st 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 21st day after an attack is nearly 1 when the *CCI* is below its mean value (about 99.7). This decreases to 0.86 (meaning 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 (i.e. majority frequency is low), there is essentially no change in the probability of non-reporting regardless of the state of the economy.

Figure 5. Probability of Non-reporting by the 21st Day After Terrorist Attack (Model 5)



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 the Olympic game period, 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 change may simultaneously lead to voting in the majority at the UN and 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, 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 both 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 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 10 or more deaths.⁴⁰ A

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

⁴⁰ We 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 (10) or more people reported killed; Hundred (100) or more people reported affected;

further advantage of these data is that natural disasters are outside the government's control and 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 primacy of the U.S. in the international system, the salience of the U.S. in Chinese foreign policy calculations, the particular sensitivity to American critiques of China's human rights record, and the centrality of the U.S. in the 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, *U.S.-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 Model 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

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 likely owes to the 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.

⁴¹ In 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 ultimate objective for the Party, any model that excludes it entirely runs the risk of being seriously underspecified. Notably, the theoretical action in our model is coming through the interaction term and it is, therefore, 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.

In Model 12, we utilize machine-coded measures of domestic and international conditions from the ICEWS (Integrated Crisis Early Warning System) event data (Boschee et al. 2018).⁴² All 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 with more granular “intensity scores” of both domestic and international conditions.⁴³ The intensity score ranges from -10 to 10 with lower values indicating hostile interactions and higher values indicating cooperation. For *Internal Condition*, we calculate the mean value of the intensity scores of 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 on the target side.⁴⁴ We normalize both variables to a 1-10 scale.

Finally, as we have noted, 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.” In addition, 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.

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

⁴³ The 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. Space constraints preclude a full description of the complexities of the CAMEO project and the nuances of intensity scores here, but for more detail see Gerner et al. (2002).

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

Table 2 indicates that the coefficients for the interaction term remains significant and in the anticipated direction in all models.

Table 2 – Alternative Model Specifications

	Cox PH Models					Post-2000 Sample
	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)
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***

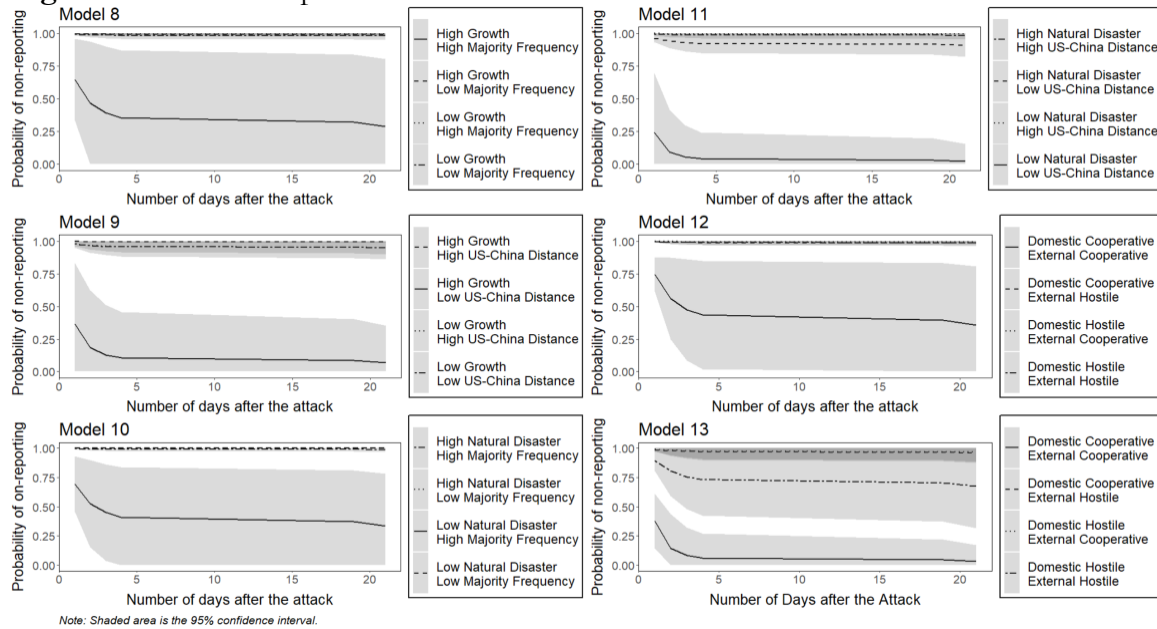
Note: Table entries are coefficients obtained from Cox proportional hazards models. Robust standard errors clustered on the incident are in parentheses.

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

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 with the probability of non-reporting sharply dropping only when both domestic and international political conditions are favorable. The plot based on post-2000 subsample (Model 13) produces predicted probabilities that are relatively lower than those using full samples, which suggests that the 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 are favorable.

Figure 6. Alternative Specifications



Conclusion

Chinese policymakers' decisions regarding official coverage of terrorist incidents are highly politicized. 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 that 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, one 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 we will likely see the pressures for transparency 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 continued “strike hard” campaigns in Xinjiang, the forces that have given

⁴⁵ Famous 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).

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, pointing to 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 be of growing salience 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 is 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 in the system where 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, making 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 that we work with. To the extent to which 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 existing findings that autocracies are better able to limit and handle terrorist attacks. A further implication of this point is that militants may strategically select the timing of attacks to advance their agendas. In the case of China, the official acknowledgment pattern we uncover suggests that militants who operate in similar environments (e.g. 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, 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 underreporting or systemic missing data is likely to be affected by the dynamics of the interactions between the militants and the governments.

Supplementary material. Data replication sets are available in Harvard Dataverse at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/XCN5HY>. The online appendix can be found at:

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