

The Calm After the Storm: How Leadership Turnover Shapes Interstate Conflict*

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Abstract

How does leadership turnover affect international conflict? We propose a new theory emphasizing the domestic constraints of new leaders. We argue that leadership turnover induces temporary turbulence, weakening successors who prioritize internal power consolidation before confronting external threats. Compiling a novel dataset of wars and leaders in 17 states during the Spring-Autumn and Warring States eras of ancient China, we exploit the plausible random timing of leaders' natural deaths to identify exogenous variation in leadership turnover. We find that leadership turnovers decrease the likelihood of initiating interstate wars, while not affecting the probability of foreign attacks. We further provide supporting evidence of power consolidation: data from 1,337 political elites across 10 states during the Spring and Autumn period reveal a negative correlation between the risk of political assassination and a leader's tenure. Our paper highlights the importance of leaders in international relations and suggests that domestic disruptions can unexpectedly foster international peace.

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Hence, if we do not first eliminate the Red Bandits and restore the vitality of our nation, we cannot resist humiliation; if we do not first subdue the Guangdong rebels and achieve national unity, we cannot ward off foreign aggression...

— Chiang Kai-shek, *An Open Letter to Compatriots Nationwide*, 1931

Introduction

On July 23, 1931, Chiang Kai-shek, the then leader of China's Nationalist government who just rose to power three years ago, published an open letter announcing his policy of "First internal pacification, then external resistance." This strategy sought to eradicate the Red Army of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) before addressing the foreign threat posed by Japan. Despite the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in September 1931, Chiang adhered to this policy. Indeed, his campaigns against the CCP nearly annihilated the Red Army, forcing them to abandon their bases in southern China and embark on the "Long March" to the North. However, Chiang's strategy was halted by the Xi'an Incident in 1936, in which he was kidnapped by two of his subordinate generals and compelled to recognize the legitimacy of the CCP, ending the civil war and uniting to combat the Japanese (Dreyer, 2014).

The idea that new leaders prioritize addressing domestic threats before resolving external ones is not limited to China. A prominent example from European history is Peter the Great of Russia. When he came into power, he prioritized modernizing Russia and suppressing domestic opponents before engaging in significant military campaigns such as the Great Northern War (Anisimov, 1993). Another example is Hitler. After being appointed as Chancellor of Germany in 1933, Hitler, leveraging events like the Reichstag Fire, consolidated absolute power by suppressing domestic opponents such as the Social Democrats and the Communists before invading Poland in 1939 (Bullock, 1962).

Motivated by these examples, we propose that new leaders tend to consolidate power first before resolving external threats. We begin with the premise that leadership turnover

creates a temporary power vacuum, weakening new leaders. Since sending troops abroad leaves the capital vulnerable to domestic rivals and adds uncertainty to war outcomes (Henderson, 2009), new leaders should prioritize addressing domestic threats before resolving external ones.

To test our hypotheses, we leverage the plausible random timing of leaders' natural death in historical China. We identify 357 monarchs from 17 states during the Spring-Autumn and Warring States eras (771-221 BCE) and focus on those 240 monarchs who died naturally or by accident. Biographical information of these monarchs is drawn from two classical texts: *Zuozhuan* and *Records of the Grand Historian*.¹ Conflict data is primarily gathered from the *Chronology of Wars in China Through Successive Dynasties* (Chinese Military History Writing Group, 2003) and we reference *Zuozhuan* if a war and a leadership turnover occurred in the same year.² Together we have 418 instances of interstate conflict involving the 17 states during our study period.³

Estimating conditional logit models with directed-dyad-year as the unit of analysis, we find strong evidence that leadership turnover reduces the propensity to instigate an interstate war, but does not systematically influence the likelihood of being targeted. We perform a set of robustness checks, including the estimation of rare events logit models and the sequential removal of each state from the sample. The results remain consistent.

We further provide supporting evidence for leaders' consolidation of power. Using a novel dataset covering 1199 political elites from 10 states during the Spring and Autumn period (Chen, 2023), we discern a higher risk of political assassinations targeting political elites during the initial years of a leader's tenure. This pattern aligns with our anticipation that leaders are more likely to concentrate on power consolidation before addressing external threats.

Our causal identification assumption is that conditional on dying naturally, the timing of leadership turnover can be deemed essentially random, determined by the leader's

¹The data section provides more details on the validity of the sources.

²The Appendix provides a coding example.

³While there were over 100 states during this era, many were merely small city-states and/or existed briefly. Due to a lack of reliable sources for these smaller states, they were not included in the analysis. The 17 states in our sample accounted for over 95 percent of ancient China's population and territories.

death rather than underlying political or economic factors. The identification strategy is pioneered by Jones and Olken (2005) and used by other scholars in similar settings (e.g., Abramson & Rivera, 2016; Kokkonen & Sundell, 2020). We conduct a set of balance tests following these studies, and find that neither age nor a country's instability could predict natural death.

Our case selection of the Spring-Autumn and Warring States eras of historical China is motivated by several reasons. First, states were in a constant struggle for survival during this period, and its international system arguably best represents anarchy (Waltz, 1986), offering an ideal environment for theory testing. The hierarchical structure of the modern international system impedes efforts to causally identify determinants of interstate war (McDonald, 2015).

Second, the states in our sample exhibit a greater degree of homogeneity. All were absolute monarchies with a high degree of cultural similarity. This uniformity enables us to minimize potential confounding factors such as regime type (Fearon, 1994) and cultural or religious differences (Huntington, 2000). Last, the high prevalence of war in ancient China bolsters statistical power. Our sample indicates a 40 to 100 percent higher frequency of warfare between states compared to a modern sample (Gibler & Sarkees, 2004; Nils Petter Gleditsch, Wallensteen, Eriksson, Sollenberg, & Strand, 2002).

This study speaks directly to the literature on leadership turnover and international conflicts (e.g., Blainey, 1988; Wolford, 2007; Wu & Wolford, 2018; Kokkonen, Møller, & Sundell, 2022). Prevailing theories usually propose that leadership turnover **increases** the likelihood of interstate war.⁴ This paper puts forth a novel theory, suggesting that leadership turnover **decreases** the likelihood of interstate war due to domestic constraints faced by new leaders. Empirically, this study establishes a causal link between leadership turnover and interstate war utilizing a unique dataset.

This study contributes to the ongoing debate on the diversionary use of force. The diversionary war literature posits that as the likelihood of leaders losing office increases, so does their propensity to incite international conflict (Levy, 1989). And if new leaders face

⁴An exception is Schub (2020), who posits that a high anticipated future leadership turnover diminishes the likelihood of interstate war by reducing the projected costs of maintaining peace.

greater risks of deposition as Svobik (2009) argues, then theories of diversionary war would predict that new leaders tend to initiate more interstate war. However, empirical results on diversionary wars are inconclusive (Leeds & Davis, 1997; Chiozza & Goemans, 2003, 2004; Tarar, 2006; Sobek, 2007; Nicholls, Huth, & Appel, 2010; Jonathan M Powell, 2014). Our paper shows that contrary to theories of diversionary war, new and vulnerable leaders are less likely to initiate interstate war, which is consistent with Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, Salehyan, and Schultz (2008) who find little evidence that the domestic-international conflict nexus can be attributed to opportunistic attacks or diversionary wars.

This paper also speaks to the broader literature on domestic politics and foreign policy. Studies find that disruptive domestic events such as riots and protest (Nicholls et al., 2010), revolutions (Colgan, 2013), and civil wars (Kristian Skrede Gleditsch et al., 2008) can create conditions conducive to international conflict. Our findings suggest that leadership turnover can act as a constraint, and disruptive domestic events can unexpectedly contribute to international peace.

Last, this paper contributes to our understandings of a crucial episode in Chinese history. While a growing body of research examines state formations in historical China or more broadly in East Asia (Yuhua Wang, 2022; Haggard & Kang, 2020), they often begin with the Tang Dynasty (618–907) or the Song Dynasty (960–1279). While the decisions are well-warranted given the availability of more sources, a comprehensive understanding of state formations is incomplete without examining the Spring-Autumn and Warring States eras. These eras set the stage for the development of a centralized bureaucratic government and fostered a persistent, collective identity (Lewis, 2011; Zhao, 2015).

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. We first review and summarize current theories that link leadership turnover to interstate war before proposing a new theory that focuses on domestic constraints facing new leaders. Then we provide the historical background of ancient China during the period of study. This is followed by a detailed discussion of our data collection and identification strategy, as well as our findings and robustness checks. After that, we discuss the scope condition of our theory and external validity. The final section concludes.

New Leaders, Power Consolidation, and International Conflicts

A growing literature has adopted leader-centric approaches to study international conflicts (Wolford, 2007; Horowitz, Stam, & Ellis, 2015; Saunders, 2017). Under the bargaining theory framework (Fearon, 1995; Robert Powell, 2006), leadership turnover contributes to international conflicts through two mechanisms: private information and the commitment problem. New leaders have different military and educational backgrounds (Horowitz et al., 2015; Saunders, 2017), and their resolve to fight often differs from their predecessor (Renshon, Dafoe, & Huth, 2018). The longer a leader stays in office, the more information she reveals. Using formal models, Wolford (2007) shows that leadership turnover changes the geopolitical information structure, and uncertainty over a new leader's resolve increases the risk of international conflict because of informational asymmetries.

Leadership turnover also creates the commitment problem (Gartzke & Gleditsch, 2004; McGillivray & Smith, 2004). War is more likely when conquest is easy (Van Evera, 1998), and leadership turnover creates a window of opportunity for foreign states to target a weak adversary (Blainey, 1988). The mechanism behind opportunistic wars is the commitment problem because even if new leaders are willing to make concessions to strike an agreement with foreign states, they cannot credibly commit to uphold the agreement in the future once they recover from the turbulence of leadership turnover and consolidate power. Also, the prospect of leadership turnover can fuel concerns that the successor of an incumbent leader might overturn inherited settlements. The looming possibility of more hawkish leaders replacing dovish ones can increase the risk of bargaining breakdown between international rivalries (Colaresi, 2004; Wolford, 2018).

The aforementioned studies primarily focus on bargaining at the international level and, while they are strong in their analysis of foreign policy, they do not fully elucidate the dynamics of domestic politics. To attain a more comprehensive understanding, it is imperative to consider the domestic constraints new leaders face.

Leaders tend to be more vulnerable during the early stages of their tenure (Svolik, 2012; Knutsen & Nygård, 2015). According to Svolik (2009, p. 492), for dictators who stay in office for 10 years or more, the odds of dying naturally rather than being deposed by a coup improve from less than one in five to more than one in one. Therefore, new leaders have strong incentives to consolidate power. In the context of democratic societies, there is a noted increase in the marginalization of career executives following the election of a new administration (Doherty, Lewis, & Limbocker, 2019). By contrast, power consolidation in authoritarian regimes often involves more draconian measures, including forced retirement, purges, and assassinations (Zeren Li & Manion, 2022; Goldring & Matthews, 2023).

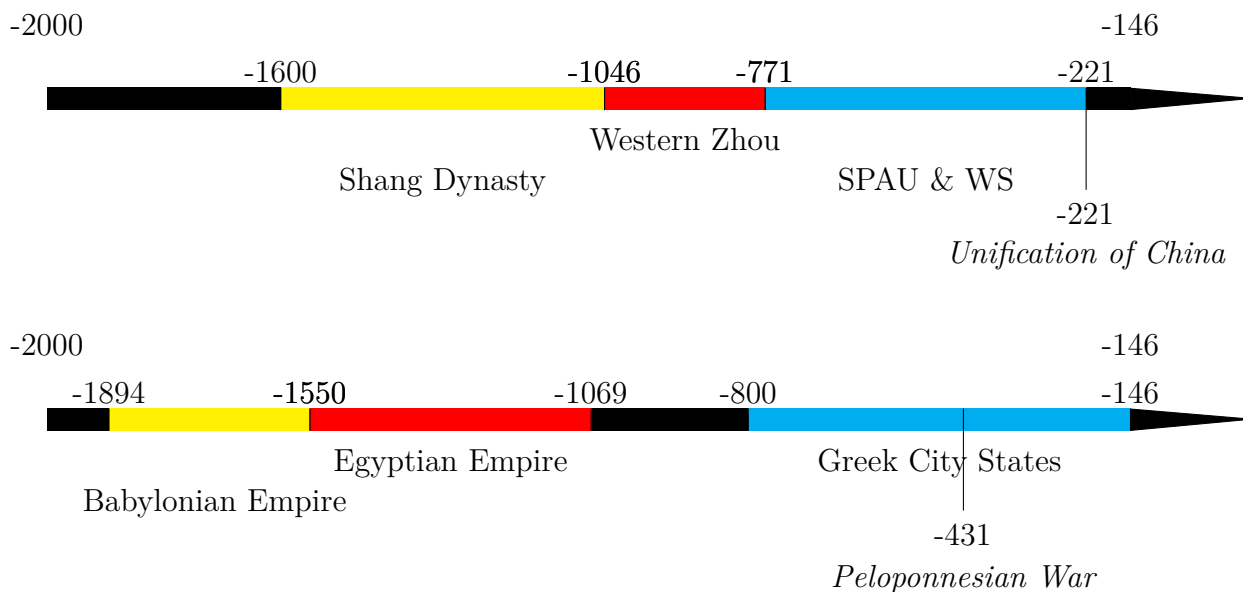
Theories of diversionary war argue that leaders are more likely to initiate conflict when they perceive themselves as vulnerable (Levy, 1989). And given the stylized fact that leaders are more vulnerable in their early tenure, theories of diversionary war would predict that new leaders are more likely to instigate international conflicts. Scholars have explored different mechanisms of diversionary war. One mechanism is that vulnerable leaders are more likely to initiate war in order to divert attention away from domestic issues and create the “rally around the flag” effect to increase social cohesion (Mueller, 1973; Levy, 1989). Another mechanism, known as gambling for resurrection, posits that leaders at risk of losing office may opt for war over peace, as even a slight chance of victory could enhance their prospects for retaining power (Richards, Morgan, Wilson, Schwebach, & Young, 1993; Downs & Rocke, 1994; De Mesquita, Morrow, Siverson, & Smith, 1999).

However, despite numerous studies examining the phenomenon of diversionary conflict, empirical results are mixed at best (Gelpi, 1997; Leeds & Davis, 1997; Chiozza & Goemans, 2003, 2004; Tarar, 2006; Sobek, 2007; Kristian Skrede Gleditsch et al., 2008; Nicholls et al., 2010; Jonathan M Powell, 2014; Blaydes et al., 2021). It remains puzzling why, on average, engaging in a diversionary war would be considered the most effective policy option for power consolidation for vulnerable leaders. Even if a leader intends to fight a limited war, the risk of provoking or escalating a larger conflict exists

(Ladwig III, 2007), with outcomes that are far from predictable. As Von Clausewitz (1950) posits, "war is the realm of chance." Factors such as weather (Winters, 2001), diseases (Smallman-Raynor & Cliff, 2004), and third-party intervention (Smith & Stam, 2003) can all serve to alter the course of war. Furthermore, leaders face severe repercussions, such as removal from office or exile, in the event of a military defeat (Debs & Goemans, 2010; Croco, 2011). Thus, the reasons why vulnerable leaders would opt for such a risky foreign policy in their efforts to consolidate power remain unclear.

We argue that new leaders tend to prioritize power consolidation before addressing external threats. As the primary interest of leaders is to maintain their grip on power (De Mesquita, Smith, Morrow, & Siverson, 2005), it is natural for them to rank internal threats above external ones. According to Svoboda (2009), of the 303 autocrats who lost office in a non-constitutional manner between 1946 and 2008, more than two-thirds were ousted by domestic elites. Kang and Ma (2018) find that an overwhelming majority of dynastic changes in Asia over half a millennium were caused by domestic uprisings. Leaders in historical China consistently prioritize domestic threats over external ones: the emperors of the Han Dynasty viewed the regional semi-autonomous kings as a greater threat than the nomadic Xiongnu (Psarras, 2003), Ming Dynasty emperors were more concerned about peasant rebels than the emerging Manchu force (Kang & Ma, 2018), and 19th century Qing Dynasty leaders considered the Taiping rebellion a more substantial threat to their rule than imperial powers such as Great Britain or Russia. Even in the face of a Japanese invasion, Chiang Kai-shek declared that the Japanese were merely a "disease of the skin," while the Communists were a "disease of the heart" (Dreyer, 2014).

There is also strategic reasons for new leaders to avoid engaging in international conflicts. Leadership turnover usually generates turbulence that temporarily weakens new leaders (Jones & Olken, 2005; Kokkonen et al., 2022). Deploying troops abroad will leave the capital susceptible to political rivals. Even if political opponents do not plot a coup, they can use their political connection to impede the logistical support to the army, adding additional uncertainty to war outcomes. Our theory echoes with Henderson (2009) who argues that African states with lower legitimacy levels are more constrained



in deploying their troops abroad as it would leave their urban centers vulnerable to insurgency.

Hypothesis: new leaders are less likely to initiate interstate conflicts because they prioritize power consolidation over external threats.

Historical Background

The period of our study is the Spring-Autumn and Warring States eras (771-221 BCE) of ancient China, which roughly corresponds to the period of Greek City States in European history.

To understand the international system during the period of study, it is crucial to look at the political and economic system of the Western Zhou, which is similar to that of the medieval Europe’s feudalism.⁵ When Zhou overthrew the Shang Dynasty, its rulers were confronted with the challenge of governing an expansive territory. Their solution, known as “fengfeng zhi,” entailed the king of Zhou maintaining direct control over the capital, while donating territory throughout the country to his relatives who served as vassals (Loewe & Shaughnessy, 1999). These vassals, who inherited their positions, collected

⁵We acknowledge that there is a debate on using the term “feudalism” to describe the political system of the Western Zhou. Some scholar also challenge the use of “states” or “country” to describe the territory of the feudal kings. We are aware of the criticism and we still choose to use these terms in order to facilitate comparison following (Zhao, 2015). Please see the Appendix for more discussions.

taxes within their respective states and maintained their own armies. However, they were obligated to pay tributes to the king of Zhou and contribute manpower during military operations (Loewe & Shaughnessy, 1999).

The decentralized system gradually began to crumble as the familial ties between the king of Zhou and the vassals faded over time. Invasions from nomadic groups further diminished the power of Zhou. During the Spring and Autumn period (771-476 BCE), the “fengfeng zhi” system gradually collapsed. The vassals became increasingly powerful and effectively functioned as independent kings within their territories. According to Fukuyama (2011, p. 125), the taxation and mobilization capacity of Qin at the end of the Warring States period was already stronger than states like France and Spain in the late seventeenth century. These states frequently clashed with each other in their pursuit of expansion. The frequency and scale of warfare escalated during the Warring States period (475-221 BCE) (Zhao, 2004). Complicated and advanced military strategy and tactic were deployed in warfare. The book *The Art of War* was written during the period of study, which heavily influenced East Asian and Western military theory and thinking.

This tumultuous period came to an end with the first unification of China by the State of Qin in 221 BCE. Hui (2004, p. 176) provides good a summary of the international system during the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period:

“Similar to the early modern European system, the ancient Chinese system experienced prevalence of war, disintegration of feudalism, formation of international anarchy, emergence of territorial sovereignty, and configuration of the balance of power.”

States in our sample also share some similarities. All of them were absolute monarchy, did not have formal succession rules, and practiced polygamy (Lv, 2020). In practice, monarchs passed the throne to their sons or brothers. While some scholars argue that the norm of primogeniture — the rule that stipulates the eldest son should inherit the throne, emerged in late Spring-Autumn period (Entian Wang, 1980; Hengmei Li, 1987), the norm was not legally binding and new leaders still faced the challenge of power consolidation (Zhao, 2015).

Identification Strategy and Data

Leadership turnover could be endogenous. Various scenarios such as a leader’s death in battle, deposition post losing a war, or assassination due to underlying political and economic changes can trigger this process (Chiozza & Goemans, 2003; Croco, 2011; Jones & Olken, 2009). To address this concern, we exploit an identification assumption: when a leader dies naturally while in office, the timing of their death is considered independent of political outcomes, such as the onset of interstate war. The identification strategy was pioneered by Jones and Olken (2005) to investigate the correlation between the quality of leadership and economic growth, and scholars have utilized similar assumptions to measure the causal impacts of leadership turnover on various political and economic outcomes (Faccio & Parsley, 2009; Abramson & Rivera, 2016; Kokkonen & Sundell, 2020; Kokkonen et al., 2022).

To compile a dataset on the fates of monarchs during the Spring and Autumn period and Warring States period in ancient China, we engaged in extensive research by cross-referencing two primary sources: 1) the *Zuo Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals* (also known as the *Zuozhuan*); and 2) the *Records of the Grand Historian*.

The *Spring and Autumn Annals*, compiled in the 5th century BCE, represents the earliest surviving Chinese historical text organized in annals form. This text provides a record of a broad range of events from 722 to 481 BCE. Its astronomical observations have been substantiated as accurate through independent studies (Stephenson & Yau, 1992), and archaeological evidence provides additional support to the reliability of its accounts of numerous events (Von Falkenhausen, 2006). Similarly, the *Records of the Grand Historian*, compiled around 94 BCE by Sima Qian, covers an extensive timeline—from the era of the legendary Yellow Emperor to the author’s contemporary period. While there are questions surrounding the author’s ability to provide an accurate account of events predating the Shang Dynasty, his records pertaining to the periods post the Shang Dynasty are generally deemed as accurate and reliable (Lewis, 2011).

The two referenced sources exhibit a significant degree of consistency. In instances where discrepancies arise, we adhere to two guiding principles. First, we resort to cross-

referencing with other sources such as the *Shiben*. In situations where cross-referencing is not viable, we typically prioritize the *Spring and Autumn Annals* over the *Records of the Grand Historian*, given that the former was penned concurrently or shortly after the actual events unfolded.

Our finalized dataset encompasses 357 unique monarchs from 17 states. Among these, 240 monarchs passed away due to natural causes or accidents while serving in office, 71 were overthrown by coups, 41 were ousted by foreign states or perished in battles, and the remaining 5 either renounced their throne or were assassinated by bandits or thugs. To maintain the assumption that the timing of a monarch's death is unrelated to underlying political circumstances, we only included those 240 monarchs who succumbed to natural causes or accidents.

A concern may arise that natural deaths are more likely to occur among the elderly. While the exact timing of death might be unpredictable, foreign states could anticipate the passing of an older monarch. However, before the advent of modern medicine, premature deaths due to diseases and illnesses were common. To substantiate this, we construct a histogram of the ages at death of monarchs who died naturally and compare it to the full sample. Notably, the full sample only includes 59 monarchs for whom reliable age data is available. As depicted in Figure 2, the distribution of natural deaths over age groups does not exhibit a pronounced skew, which alleviates the concern that natural deaths could be easily predicted by foreign states.

In addition, we employ a probit regression analysis on the full cohort of 357 monarchs. In this model, the dependent variable is a binary factor distinguishing the 240 monarchs who died naturally. Given the scarcity of data regarding the monarchs' ages, we use the tenure length of previous monarchs as a proxy for the current monarchs' ages. The underlying rationale is that the longer a monarch's predecessor remained in power, the older the current monarch is likely to be. Our analysis reveals that this proxy fails to predict natural deaths in the regression models.

Another potential issue is that politically stable states might be more likely to experience natural deaths of leaders compared to their politically unstable counterparts. To

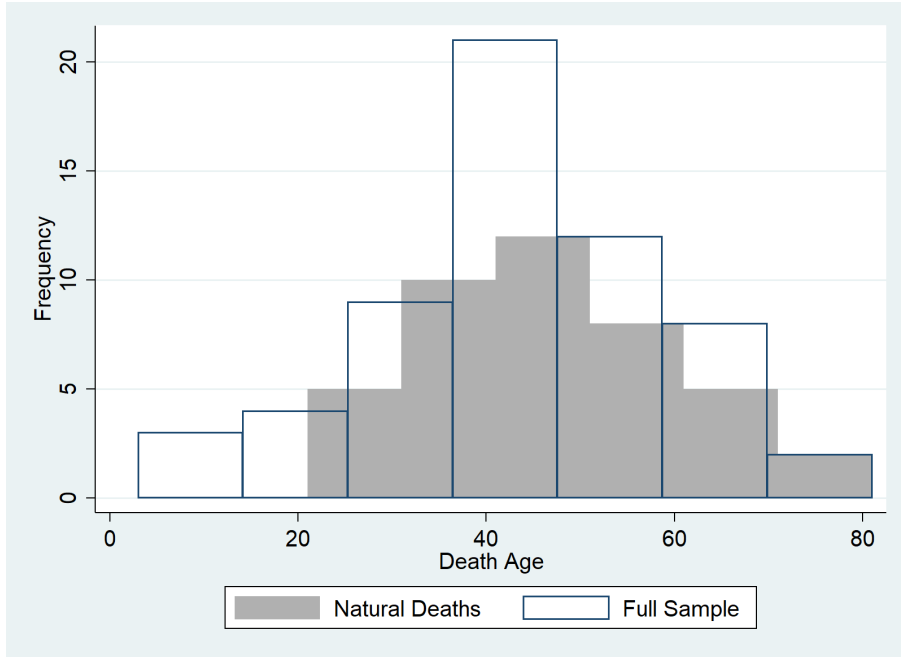


Figure 1: Monarchs' Death Age in the Spring-Autumn and Warring States Eras

mitigate this concern, we follow the approach outlined by Kokkonen and Sundell (2020) and create a binary variable to denote whether states have a number of depositions (caused either by domestic or foreign actors) above or below the mean value. We then perform a probit regression analysis as previously described, and our results indicate that this measure of political stability does not predict natural deaths.

In addition, we carry out a balance test, as suggested by Jones and Olken (2005), by implementing the aforementioned probit regression model, but this time we incorporate a wider array of independent variables. These include state capacity (measured by the number of newly created counties), the duration of rule of the previous monarch, a binary variable denoting whether states have a deposition count above or below the mean value, and dummy variables for each century. Detailed discussions of these variables will be provided in the subsequent paragraphs. As demonstrated in Table 2, none of these independent variables prove significant in predicting natural deaths.

Our conflict data primarily stems from the *Chronology of Wars in China Through Successive Dynasties*, a source widely utilized by researchers investigating historical conflict in East Asia (Kang, Shaw, & Fu, 2016). One limitation of this source is its yearly structure, which does not provide information on the specific months of war events. To ensure

Table 1: Balance Tests for Natural Death: Probit Models

	(1) Model 1	(2) Model 2	(3) Model 3
State capacity	0.044 (0.049)	0.045 (0.048)	0.034 (0.068)
Monarch's length in office($t - 1$)		0.006 (0.005)	0.007 (0.005)
Stable state dummy			0.128 (0.203)
Century FE	NO	YES	YES
Observations	357	340	340
Clusters	17	17	17

Standard errors in parentheses, clustered by state.

⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

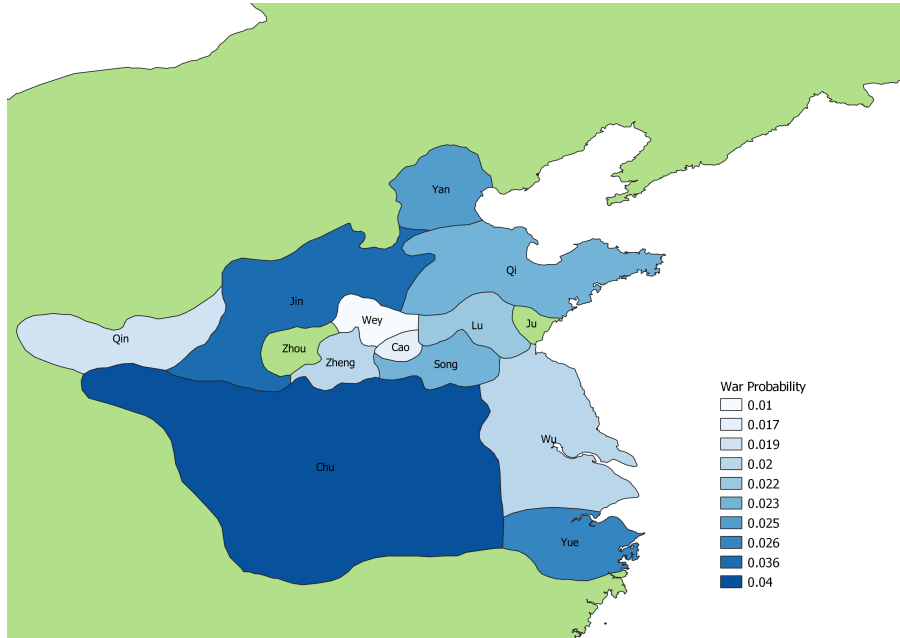


Figure 2: Spring and Autumn Period

that our key independent variable (leaders' natural death) precedes our dependent variable (war onset), we carefully examined the 55 instances where war and a leader's natural death occurred in the same year. To do so, we cross-referenced the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and the *Records of the Grand Historian*, as these sources provide more detailed information on the season or month of significant events. If we found that a monarch's natural death occurred after an interstate war within the same year, we adjusted the monarch's recorded death year to the subsequent year.⁶

⁶In 24 of the 55 cases, the leaders' natural deaths were found to have occurred post-war. The codebook provides a comprehensive explanation of the coding methodology for these instances and is available upon

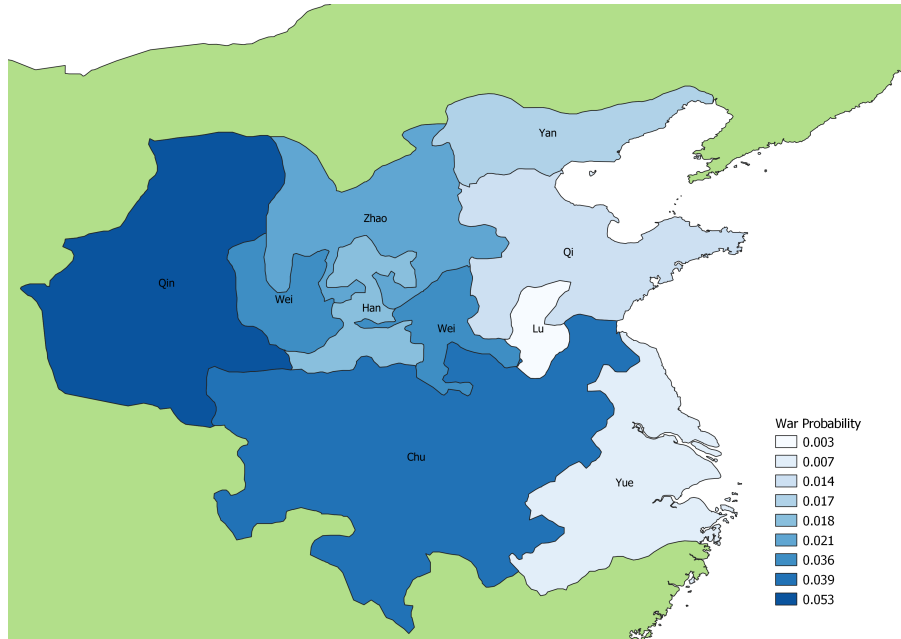


Figure 3: Warring States Period

We should note that the conflicts in our sample align more closely with the concept of interstate wars than the Militarized Interstate Disputes (MIDs) as defined by the Correlates of War (COW) project (Gibler & Sarkees, 2004; Palmer et al., 2022). Our primary conflict data source, the *Chronology of Wars in China Through Successive Dynasties*, provides brief descriptions of each conflict, detailing the involved actors, time frames (years), locations, processes, outcomes, and occasionally the number of chariots and soldiers. These descriptions imply that the conflicts encompassed sustained combat between states. The COW project requires a threshold of 1000 battle-related deaths per year among all participants to classify a conflict as a war. Unfortunately, we lack casualty data for over 95 percent of the conflicts in our sample. However, for those with available casualty information, the death toll significantly exceeds the 1000-death benchmark. For instance, the Records of the Grand Historian state that the Battle of Changping between Zhao and Qin resulted in an estimated 450,000 casualties on the Zhao side and 250,000 on the Qin side. While these figures may be overstated, they illustrate that these conflicts involved sustained combat and were not merely threats or displays of force. Regarding war duration, over 95 percent of the wars in our sample commenced and concluded within the same year, with the longest-lasting conflicts enduring for three years.

request. It should be noted that our findings remain robust even without this adjustment.

In total, we have identified 418 interstate wars amongst the 17 principal states during the period from 771 to 221 BCE in ancient China. The frequency of warfare throughout this period greatly surpasses those in the modern era, thus improving the statistical power to identify a relationship between leadership succession and interstate war. Figure 3 and Figure 4 visually depict the probability of each state’s involvement in war.⁷

Assuming the identification assumption is valid, which posits that the timing of a leader’s natural death is independent of political outcomes, even a basic regression model would yield an unbiased estimate of the causal effect. Although state capacity could potentially act as a confounder, we have demonstrated earlier that it cannot predict a leader’s natural death. However, if state capacity has a correlation with the onset of war, incorporating it into the model can enhance the precision of our estimates. To this end, we introduce an innovative measure for state capacity, utilizing the total number of newly established counties.

The county (*xian*), as an administrative unit, first emerged in a few states during the Spring and Autumn period and gradually got adopted by all states during the Warring States period. Counties were established through two main mechanisms: by conquering small neighboring states and by amalgamating nearby villages (Zhou & Li, 2009). County magistrates were directly appointed by monarchs, and their roles were not hereditary. In addition, county tax revenues were channeled directly to the monarchs for military utilization (Yang, 1981). As such, the total number of newly established counties serves as a useful indicator of bureaucratic centralization (Chen, 2021).

Zhou and Li (2009) offer an extensive discussion on the names, locations, and establishment dates of all counties during the study period. Nonetheless, some counties do not have precise establishment dates. Therefore, we compute the total number of newly established counties for each state separately during the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period. Given the skewed distribution of the number of newly created

⁷The war probability here is calculated as the total number of wars a state engaged in during a given period, divided by the number of dyad-years within that period. The shape-files are digitized from historical maps obtained from the website <http://www.txlzp.com> using GIS technology. We exclude Zhou from the sample, as it was the royal family and distinct from the other states. Additionally, Ju is omitted due to a lack of sufficient reliable sources.

counties, we use its logged value in the regression analyses.

Additionally, we consider incorporating centrality measures in war networks to account for potential interdependencies.⁸ We segregate war onset by century and calculate node (state) centrality measures for each century.⁹

The first measure is betweenness centrality, which signifies a state’s capacity to establish connections with other states in the network.¹⁰ The second measure is eigenvector centrality, which recognizes the transitive influence of nodes. A high eigenvector centrality indicates that a state is connected to many other influential states. Given that these are arguably post-treatment variables, we include them only in the robustness checks.

Table 3 provides the summary statistics of the variables.

Table 2: Summary statistics

	mean	sd	min	max	count
War	0.011	0.10	0	1	69798
Death of initiator	0.038	0.19	0	1	69798
Death of target	0.038	0.19	0	1	69798
State capacity of initiator	1.14	1.51	0	4.33	69798
State capacity of target	1.14	1.51	0	4.33	69798
Initiator betweenness centrality	9.71	17.4	0	92.5	69798
Target betweenness centrality	9.71	17.4	0	92.5	69798
Initiator eigenvector centrality	0.25	0.14	0	0.56	69798
Target eigenvector centrality	0.25	0.14	0	0.56	69798

Models and Results

Baseline Models

For our analysis, we have opted to use conditional fixed-effects logit models as the baseline model. These models allow us to control for unobserved time-invariant con-

⁸We also execute inferential network analysis including exponential family random graph models (ERGMs) and additive and multiplicative effects network models (AMEN). However, due to the sparsity of the war network, our models encounter the degeneracy problem. Network analysis for international conflict typically aggregates war networks by decades or every five years, but this approach might dilute the identification of the effect of leadership turnover since our theory anticipates a temporary treatment effect.

⁹For this measure, we employ non-directed networks. The use of directed networks yields similar results.

¹⁰This is calculated as the sum of the number of shortest paths that pass through the node.

founding variables, which can bias results if left unaccounted for.

The model can be represented mathematically as:

$$P(y_{i,j,t} = 1 | \alpha_{i,j}\beta) = \frac{\exp(\alpha_{i,j} + \mathbf{x}_{i,j,t}\beta)}{1 + \exp(\alpha_{i,j} + \mathbf{x}_{i,j,t}\beta)} \quad (1)$$

In this equation, $y_{i,j,t}$ is a binary variable that represents the onset of war. It equals 1 if state i initiates a war against state j in year t , and 0 otherwise. The $\alpha_{i,j}$ term represents dyad-specific intercepts or fixed effects, while $\mathbf{x}_{i,j,t}$ is a vector of independent variables, and β represents their corresponding coefficients.

The fixed effects are implemented at the directed-dyad level, which is the unit of analysis in our baseline model. This helps us control for any unobserved unit-specific confounders that are time-invariant.

To account for potential within-group correlation of the error term, we use clustered robust standard errors. To control for temporal dependence, we follow the approach suggested by Beck, Katz, and Tucker (1998) and include cubic polynomials (t , t^2 , and t^3) in the regressions, where t is the number of years from the last war onset between two states. Compared to cubic splines, cubic polynomial is easy to implement and does not suffer from the quasi-complete separation problem (Carter & Signorino, 2010). We also include a lagged dependent variable to account for potential autocorrelation.

A potential concern in our analysis may be the geographic distances between states. Inclusion of dyads representing states far apart from each other might lead to an abundance of zero outcomes, as these states might not have had the opportunity to engage in conflict due to technological and military capabilities of their era. This concern is pertinent, as Zhao (2015, p. 140) notes that the average war distances during the period of study were approximately 400 kilometers, peaking at 800 kilometers.

However, there were instances where states did possess the capability to attack non-neighbouring states. An illustrative example of this is the historical event known as “*Jiadao Faguo*.” In this anecdote, the state of Jin offered precious horses and jades to the state of Yu, not for warfare, but to gain their permission to cross Yu’s border and attack

the state of Guo.¹¹ This underscores the fact that states, even during these times, were not always limited by geographical distance in their capacity to wage war.

To account for this concern in our analysis, we employ a methodology that ensures dyads representing states that never engaged in conflict are automatically excluded from model estimations, thanks to the inclusion of fixed effects. This effectively alleviates the concern of overrepresentation of zero outcomes. For additional robustness checks, we utilize fixed effects at various levels and also employ rare events logit models, further addressing any potential concerns over the abundance of zeros in our outcome variable.

Table 3: Conditional Logit Models: Directed-Dyad-Year as Unit of Analysis

	(1) Model 1	(2) Model 2	(3) Model 3	(4) Model 4
Death of initiator	-1.628*** (0.366)	-1.719*** (0.364)	-1.719*** (0.364)	-1.752*** (0.365)
Death of target	-0.154 (0.208)	-0.208 (0.214)	-0.204 (0.214)	-0.221 (0.213)
State capacity of initiator			0.035 (0.098)	0.028 (0.095)
State capacity of target			0.207* (0.101)	0.196* (0.099)
Y(t-1)				0.484** (0.156)
t		-0.111*** (0.016)	-0.111*** (0.016)	-0.109*** (0.017)
t ²		0.001*** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)
t ³		-0.000* (0.000)	-0.000* (0.000)	-0.000* (0.000)
Directed-dyad FE	YES	YES	YES	YES
Observations	46332	46332	46185	46185
Clusters	147	147	147	147

Standard errors in parentheses, clustered by direct-dyad
⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 3 presents the results. As expected, the coefficients corresponding to the natural death of initiating state leaders are negative and statistically significant across all models, even at the 0.001 level. The impact of this factor is also substantial. As indicated by model 4, a leadership turnover decreases the likelihood of initiating interstate wars by

¹¹ «Zuozhuan.The Second Year of Duke Xi of Lu»

about three-fold, while holding other variables at their average values. Furthermore, the magnitude of the coefficients associated with the natural death of initiating state leaders remains stable even with the inclusion of control variables. This strengthens our confidence in the key assumption that the timing of leaders' natural death is unrelated to the other variables in the model. Interestingly, the coefficients associated with the natural death of leaders in targeted states are also negative, but not statistically significant. This suggests that there is no systematic evidence that foreign states exploit the temporary weakness associated with leadership turnovers in other states to launch opportunistic attacks. This finding is consistent with Kristian Skrede Gleditsch et al. (2008, p. 481), who also found no support for the concept of an "opportunistic war" in their comprehensive analysis of modern conflict.

Alternative Models

The baseline model of our study specifically focuses on the year of leadership turnover. This focus facilitates a clearer identification strategy due to the greater randomness inherent in the specific year of a leadership turnover as compared to the overall tenure of a leader. However, our theory also implies a broader trend — that leaders typically seek to consolidate power prior to addressing external threats. This raises the question of whether there is a generalized relationship between a leader's tenure and the onset of interstate wars. To investigate this, we replicated the analysis presented in Table 3 using the duration a leader has been in office. As demonstrated in Table A1 in the Appendix, a positive correlation exists between the length of a leader's tenure and the likelihood of war initiation.

Robustness Checks

We conducted a series of robustness checks to ensure the reliability of our findings. They include: 1) clustering standard errors at different levels (such as at the dyad levels instead of the directed-dyad levels); 2) employing rare events logit models for estimation;

3) utilizing linear fixed effects models; 4) incorporating network centrality measures to account for potential interdependence; 5) excluding observations spanning approximately 20 years that corresponded with Qin’s unification war; and finally, 6) systematically removing each state one by one from the models.

Across all these checks, our results remained consistent, as evidenced by Tables A2-A6 and Figure A1 in the Appendix. Notably, both the magnitude and significance of the coefficients associated with leaders’ natural deaths remained virtually unchanged. Additionally, we conducted placebo tests using the lagged and forward values of leaders’ natural death and found no discernible impact on the likelihood of interstate war (see Table A7 in the Appendix).

Evidence of Power Consolidation

One key premise of our theory is that new leaders need to consolidate power. But to what extent does this premise hold up?

Power consolidation is challenging to quantify. It can manifest in extreme ways such as purges and assassinations, but it can also transpire in more subtle forms like the marginalization of old officials and rotating appointments (Doherty et al., 2019). Given the constraints of data availability, we concentrate on the more extreme forms of power consolidation. If our theory is valid, we would expect a heightened risk of political assassinations of elite figures during the early tenure of leaders.

To test this, we utilize a unique dataset from Chen (2023) who has compiled biographical information of political elites mentioned in the *Zuozhuan*. Here, “political elites” are broadly defined as family members of a state leader (excluding the leader herself) or a high official. In total, the dataset comprises 1199 political elites from 10 states during the Spring and Autumn period, with 125 of these individuals dying from politically motivated assassinations. This term includes purges, civil unrest, murder, execution, and forced suicide.

The original data is structured individually, which we have expanded into a panel

structure (elite-year) and merged with our own dataset. We estimate logit models where the outcome is a binary variable — ‘1’ if an elite died from political assassination in a given year and ‘0’ otherwise. The key independent variable is the number of years a new leader has been in power.

As indicated in Table 6, the longer a leader holds office, the lower the risk of an elite dying from political assassination. This outcome lends supporting evidence to the premise of power consolidation in our theory.

Table 4: Power Consolidation and Fates of the Elite: All Monarchs’ Death

	(1) Logit	(2) Logit	(3) Conditional Logit	(4) Conditional Logit
Years since turnover (all)	−0.195*** (0.031)	−0.170*** (0.037)	−0.191*** (0.031)	−0.167*** (0.038)
Elite age		−0.026 (0.018)		−0.025 (0.019)
Constant	−2.778*** (0.152)	−2.683*** (0.147)		
Observations	8039	8039	8023	8023
Clusters	10	10	7	7

Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered by country

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Discussions

Ancient China Versus Medieval Europe

Compared to medieval and early modern European states, the findings here are different. Using a dataset of 28 European states from 1000 to 1800, (Kokkonen et al., 2022) find that leadership turnover increases the risk of interstate war, and the effect is primarily driven by an increased risk of being targeted by foreign states.¹² Their major explanation is that leadership turnover in Europe provides a unique chance for neighboring states to

¹²Kokkonen et al. (2022) only provide the sub-group analysis for the relationship between leadership turnover and interstate war, and they use country-year as the unit of analysis instead of dyad-year or directed-dyad-year even though they differentiate the direction of war. Therefore, it is difficult to directly compare their results to ours.

intervene because the emergence of elective monarchy allowed more candidates to claim the throne and monarchs in medieval Europe often ruled several polities at the same time.

Given the unique political structure of medieval and early modern European states, it is difficult to know if lessons drawn from European states are applicable to a broader setting where a monarch only rules a single polity and a foreign leader rarely has any legal ground to claim the throne in a neighboring country. The international system during our period of study arguably best represents anarchy (Waltz, 1986) and a monarch only rules a polity. Therefore, the case of the international system in ancient China arguably better serves as a baseline for our understanding of the relationship between leadership turnover and interstate war.

External Validity

How well does our theory travel across diverse regions and time periods? A narrower interpretation of our theory anticipates that leadership turnover should lead to a decrease in the propensity to initiate international conflicts. Ancient China provides a prime setting to scrutinize this relationship, and it potentially suggests certain scope conditions for our theory: 1) the presence of weak institutional arrangements governing power transitions, and 2) existing points of dispute between states. Therefore, we predict our theory would translate well to other historical international systems, such as the Greek city-states' system (800-200 BCE), the system in western Europe following the Roman Empire's collapse until the emergence of parliaments (476-1188 CE), and the early modern East Asia's international system (1368 to 1841 CE). To support this, we examine war data from early modern East Asia (Kang et al., 2016) and find that of the 17 interstate wars China initiated between 1368 to 1841, none were instigated in the first year following a power transition.

In order to rigorously assess the external validity of our theory, we replicate the analysis in Table 3 using the dyadic Militarized Interstate Disputes (MIDs) data (version 4.02) from the period 1945 to 2014. MIDs are defined as a "series of incidents that involve

the deliberate, overt, and government-approved threat, display, or use of force between two or more states” (Maoz, Johnson, Kaplan, Ogunkoya, & Shreve, 2019, p. 2), and the dataset distinguishes between initiators and targets.

Leadership transitions due to natural death are extracted from the Archigos Dataset (Goemans, Gleditsch, & Chiozza, 2009), narrowing our focus to the 108 leaders between 1945 to 2014 whose departure from office was attributed to natural causes. For instances where a leader’s natural death coincided with the occurrence of MIDs within the same year, we meticulously reviewed the temporal information (i.e., month and day) to ensure the precedence of our treatment variable over the outcome. To account for potential regime type influence, we incorporated a control variable indicating whether a state is a democracy, employing regime type data as detailed by Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014).

Interestingly, our findings show that natural death of leaders in the contemporary sample reduces the probability of initiating a MID, consistent across all model specifications (refer to Table A8 in the Appendix). These results contribute to an expanding body of literature that underscores the critical role of leaders in international relations (Chiozza & Goemans, 2003; Wu & Wolford, 2018). It also suggests that even with the presence of modern institutions, power transitions may not always proceed smoothly.

A more expansive interpretation of our theory suggests that leaders in vulnerable positions are less likely to instigate interstate conflicts. This paper primarily centers on leadership turnover, as it offers a robust identification strategy, but it is worth noting that other proxies for leadership vulnerability could be used. By analyzing various factors such as leaders’ characteristics and the political and economic conditions of states to gauge leadership vulnerability, Chiozza and Goemans (2003) discovered that leaders facing an increased risk of losing office tend to avoid initiating crises. Chiozza and Goemans (2003) viewed these findings as a rebuttal to the “diversionary war” theory, but did not provide an alternative explanation. This paper contributes further by proposing that vulnerable leaders tend to shy away from initiating interstate conflicts due to their need to first consolidate power. To the best of our knowledge, we are one of the first to furnish

empirical evidence in support of the power consolidation process.

Conclusions

The Spring-Autumn and Warring States eras of ancient China offer one of the earliest glimpses of international relations (Waltz, 1986). By developing a dataset that integrates various primary and secondary sources, we exploit the random timing of leaders' natural deaths to causally identify the relationship between leadership turnover and interstate conflicts. Our research presents compelling evidence that leadership turnover decreases the likelihood of initiating interstate war.

Our findings bolster the core proposition that new leaders are typically unwilling to risk international conflicts until they have adequately consolidated their power. While current studies predominantly examine the link between leaders' vulnerability and interstate conflict at the international level, our paper advances this literature by offering direct evidence of the power consolidation process. Therefore, our study not only highlights the importance of leaders' vulnerability but also provides insight into the internal power dynamics within state leadership.

Furthermore, our analysis suggests a broader interpretation: leaders in precarious positions are generally hesitant to instigate interstate conflicts. We emphasize that while leadership turnover offers a robust measure of vulnerability, it is not the sole indicator. Future research could consider other proxies for leadership vulnerability, further refining our understanding of this critical dynamic.

Finally, our paper bears important policy implications. By demonstrating the consistency of our theory's implications with modern samples, we underscore the significance of individual leaders in shaping international relations, even amidst contemporary institutions. Moreover, our research suggests that disruptive domestic events might unintentionally contribute to international peace. Future studies could explore the impact of leadership turnover on war termination and the duration of peace following ceasefires.

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