

Leadership Turnover, Domestic Constraints, and International Conflict: Evidence from Ancient China*

Xin Nong[†]

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Abstract

How does leadership turnover affect international conflict? We propose a new theory emphasizing the domestic constraints of new leaders. Leadership turnover results in successors who, regardless of their absolute strength, initially face a period of relative political vulnerability. We argue that new leaders prioritize consolidating power—through repression, co-optation, and reforms—before engaging in external conflict. Using a novel dataset of wars and rulers in 17 states during the Spring-Autumn and Warring States eras (771–221 BCE) of ancient China, we leverage exogenous variation in leadership turnover induced by rulers’ natural deaths. We find that leadership turnover decreases the likelihood of initiating interstate wars. To further substantiate our theory, we present both empirical and anecdotal evidence of power consolidation strategies during leaders’ early tenure. Our findings contribute to debates on the diversionary use of force and the broader role of domestic politics in shaping international conflict.

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[†]Assistant Professor, Hitotsubashi University, Japan.

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, then leader of China's Nationalist government, who had risen to power three years earlier, 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 before addressing external threats. We begin with the premise that, on average, new lead-

ers face greater political vulnerability in their early tenure (Svolik, 2009; Little, 2017). Since sending troops abroad leaves the capital exposed to domestic rivals (Henderson, 2009), new leaders should prioritize addressing domestic threats before engaging in external conflicts.

To test our hypotheses, we focus on the Spring-Autumn and Warring States eras (771-221 BCE) of ancient China for 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 arguably exhibit a greater degree of homogeneity. All were absolute monarchies with a relatively high degree of cultural similarity. This homogeneity 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 shows that warfare between states was 40 to 100 percent more frequent than in a modern sample (Gibler & Sarkees, 2004; Nils Petter Gleditsch, Wallensteen, Eriksson, Sollenberg, & Strand, 2002).

Referencing various primary and secondary sources, we build up an original dataset of wars and leaders over 500 years. The data covers 418 instances of interstate conflict and 358 monarchs across 17 states between 771 to 221 BCE. Our identification assumption is that, conditional on dying naturally, the timing of leadership turnover is essentially random, determined by the leader's death rather than political or economic factors. We find strong evidence that leadership turnover reduces the propensity to instigate an interstate war, and the results are consistent across different model specifications and estimation methods.

We provide additional evidence of leaders consolidating power. Using a novel dataset covering 1261 political elites from 9 states during the Spring-Autumn period (Chen, 2024), we discern a higher risk of political assassinations targeting elites during leaders' early

tenure. We further provide anecdotal evidence that new leaders often consolidate power first using a combination of strategies including repression, co-optation, and reforms before addressing external threats.

This study speaks broadly to the literature on leaders and war (e.g., Wolford, 2007; Chiozza & Goemans, 2011; Saunders, 2011, 2017b; Weeks, 2012; Horowitz, Stam, & Ellis, 2015; Schub, 2020). Studies focused on turnover typically link leadership transition to **increased** risk of interstate war.¹ This paper offers a new perspective: leadership turnover **decreases** the likelihood of interstate war due to the domestic constraints faced by new leaders. Empirically, our study provides one of the most rigorous causal tests to date on the relationship between leadership turnover and interstate war, leveraging a unique dataset and research design.

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). Numerous studies have explored the conditions under which domestic vulnerability translates into international aggression (Ross A Miller, 1995; Gelpi, 1997; Leeds & Davis, 1997; Chiozza & Goemans, 2003, 2004; Tarar, 2006; Sobek, 2007; Nicholls, Huth, & Appel, 2010), but empirical findings remain contentious. A key limitation of these studies is that they often overlook the full range of strategies available to leaders in times of political insecurity. Building on Oakes (2006), who argues that leaders can also pursue repression and reform as alternatives to war, we show that new leaders typically prioritize power consolidation before engaging in external conflict. Our findings refine the diversionary war framework by demonstrating that leaders often perceive internal threats as more pressing than external ones, and that power consolidation is not merely an alternative to war, but a necessary step before it.

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

¹Notable exceptions include Schub (2020), who argues that high anticipated future leadership turnover can reduce the risk of war by lowering the costs of maintaining peace, and Chiozza and Goemans (2011), who distinguish between leaders removed through regular versus forcible means, finding that only the latter are more likely to initiate conflict.

al., 2010), revolutions (Colgan, 2013), and civil wars (Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, Salehyan, & Schultz, 2008) can create conditions conducive to international conflict. Our findings suggest that leadership turnover constrains conflict, and disruptive domestic events may unexpectedly promote 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 (Haggard & Kang, 2020; Huang & Kang, 2022; Yuhua Wang, 2022; Chen, Wang, & Zhang, 2024), they mostly focus on medieval and imperial China. 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).

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. We first review and summarize existing theories that link leadership turnover to interstate war before proposing a new theory that emphasizes the domestic constraints faced by new leaders. We then provide historical background on ancient China during the period of study, followed by a detailed discussion of our data collection and identification strategy. After presenting our results, we examine heterogeneous effects and conduct extensive robustness checks. We also provide empirical and anecdotal evidence of how leaders consolidate power through repression, co-optation, and reforms in their early tenure. Finally, we examine the scope conditions and external validity of our theory before concluding.

New Leaders, Power Consolidation, and International Conflict

Leadership Turnover and War: The Existing Debate

Many theories link leadership turnover to greater risk of interstate war. New leaders often differ from their predecessors in terms of military experience, education, or ideology (Horowitz et al., 2015; Saunders, 2017a), which can alter their perceived resolve to fight (Renshon, Dafoe, & Huth, 2018). Because resolve is only revealed over time, leadership transitions increase uncertainty and the risk of miscalculation in foreign crises (Wolford, 2007). Others suggest that leadership transitions create windows of vulnerability that embolden foreign rivals (Blainey, 1988; Van Evera, 1998).

Yet, this positive relationship between leadership turnover and international conflict has been challenged by recent studies. Schub (2020) argues that high expectation of future leadership turnover decreases the likelihood of interstate war because it lowers the expected cost for maintaining peace. Chen Wang (2023) shows that new leaders might deter rather than invite attacks by demonstrating resolve early in their tenure. Building on this newer line of inquiry, we shift attention to an often-overlooked mechanism: domestic constraints facing new leaders may reduce rather than increase the likelihood of initiating war.

Revisiting the Diversionary War Hypothesis

Another popular theory that informs the relationship between leadership turnover and interstate conflict is the theories of diversionary war, which propose that vulnerable leaders initiate conflict to distract from domestic instability and generate a rally-around-the-flag effect (Levy, 1989). Since leaders tend to be more vulnerable in their early tenure (Svolik, 2012; Knutsen & Nygård, 2015; Little, 2017), theories of diversionary war would predict that new leaders are more likely to initiate war.

Two mechanisms underlie diversionary war arguments. The first is diversion through

external conflict: leaders engage in war to shift public attention away from internal instability (Mueller, 1973; Levy, 1989). The second is gambling for resurrection: leaders facing a high risk of removal may prefer risky military action, as even a small chance of victory could help them stay in power (Richards, Morgan, Wilson, Schwebach, & Young, 1993; Downs & Rocke, 1994; De Mesquita, Morrow, Siverson, & Smith, 1999).

Despite the theoretical appeal of diversionary war, empirical findings remain mixed (Gelpi, 1997; Leeds & Davis, 1997; Chiozza & Goemans, 2003, 2004; Tarar, 2006; Sobek, 2007; Kristian Skrede Gleditsch et al., 2008; Nicholls et al., 2010; Powell, 2014; Blaydes et al., 2021). It remains unclear why vulnerable leaders on average would prefer war as a power consolidation strategy. Even limited wars carry substantial risks of escalation, with outcomes that are far from predictable (Ladwig III, 2007). As Von Clausewitz (1950) notes, “war is the realm of chance”—uncontrollable factors such as weather (Winters, 2001), disease (Smallman-Raynor & Cliff, 2004), and third-party intervention (Smith & Stam, 2003) can shape war outcomes in unpredictable ways. Also, defeat can have severe consequences, including exile, imprisonment, or execution (Debs & Goemans, 2010; Croco, 2011). Moreover, sending troops to the borders leaves the capital vulnerable to domestic rivals (Henderson, 2009). Therefore, it is puzzling why fighting a diversionary war would be the best policy option for vulnerable leaders.

Leadership Turnover and Domestic Constraints

We argue that new leaders prioritize power consolidation before engaging in external conflict. This occurs for three key reasons. First, internal threats pose a greater risk to leaders than external enemies. Historical patterns suggest that domestic rivals, not foreign adversaries, are the primary threats to rulers’ survival. Of 303 autocrats who lost office between 1946 and 2008, more than two-thirds were removed by domestic elites rather than external forces (Svolik, 2009). Similarly, dynastic changes in Asia over half a millennium were overwhelmingly driven by internal uprisings (David Kang & Ma, 2024). Historically, this pattern holds across Chinese dynasties: Han emperors first consolidated power by weakening the vassal kings before initiating military campaigns against the

Xiongnu nomads (Psarras, 2003); Ming emperors focused more on peasant rebellions than the rising Manchu threat (David Kang & Ma, 2024); and Qing rulers viewed the Taiping Rebellion as a greater threat than Western imperialist incursions (Platt, 2012). As discussed in the introduction, even in the face of Japanese aggression, Chiang Kai-shek famously likened the Japanese to a “disease of the skin” but the Communists to a “disease of the heart,” suggesting that his primary concern was domestic rivals (Dreyer, 2014).

Second, war is strategically risky for politically vulnerable leaders. Leadership turnover creates temporary instability, weakening new rulers’ ability to control their states (Jones & Olken, 2005; Kokkonen, Møller, & Sundell, 2022). Deploying troops abroad leaves the capital exposed to political rivals, increasing the risk of coups or elite opposition. Even if internal rivals do not launch a coup, they can sabotage war efforts by obstructing military logistics or refusing to cooperate politically. This aligns with Henderson (2009), who finds that African states with lower legitimacy levels are constrained in deploying troops abroad, as doing so makes their urban centers vulnerable to insurgency.

Third, consolidating domestic power increases the chances of future military success. As Abraham Lincoln famously stated, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.”² New leaders must first stabilize their internal position before launching external campaigns. They achieve this through three primary strategies:

1. **Repression**—Removing political opponents, whether subtly (bureaucratic reshuffling) (Doherty, Lewis, & Limbocker, 2019) or overtly (forced retirement, purges) (Sudduth, 2017; Goldring & Matthews, 2023).

2. **Co-optation**—Securing elite loyalty through monetary rewards and strategic appointments (De Mesquita, Smith, Morrow, & Siverson, 2005; Bove & Rivera, 2015).

3. **Reforms**—Strengthening state capacity and political control (Besley, Persson, & Reynal-Querol, 2016). Leaders often implement institutional reforms when they feel vulnerable, using economic and political restructuring to solidify their grip on power.

²Abraham Lincoln Online, <https://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/house.htm>, accessed April 7, 2024.

Through a combination of repression, co-optation, and reforms, new leaders can signal strength to political elites (Little, 2017) and ensure long-term loyalty through credible rewards (Magaloni, 2008). Only after securing their rule do they consider engaging in external conflict.

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

To clarify, we do not claim that all new leaders are inherently vulnerable, nor do we assume that vulnerability is uniform across all leaders. Our theory is based on the premise that leaders are relatively more vulnerable in their early tenure. This premise holds for two key reasons. First, power accumulation takes time; even strong leaders must consolidate their rule before exercising full authority (Svolik, 2009; Abramson & Rivera, 2016). Second, once leaders survive their early tenure, elites recognize their strength and may refrain from staging a coup, as mutual expectations of stability reinforce their rule (Little, 2017). Consistent with the expectation, we examine the tenure distribution of leaders who were forcibly removed by domestic elites and find that most removals occur early in a leader's tenure (Figure A3 in the Appendix).

That said, some leaders may enter office with a stronger domestic base than others, potentially allowing them to engage in war sooner. Usurpers, for instance, may have already built elite coalitions to seize power, but they may also face legitimacy challenges that make their rule precarious. Given these competing possibilities, we do not theorize how entry mode conditions the effect of tenure on war initiation but instead explore potential heterogeneous effects in the empirical section.³

Thus far, our discussion has focused on how domestic political constraints make new leaders less likely to initiate interstate conflict. However, leadership turnover may also alter the incentives of foreign adversaries. Theories of opportunistic war suggest that leadership transitions create a temporary window of vulnerability that may invite aggression from rivals (Blainey, 1988; Walt, 1992). Yet recent studies caution that such opportunism is neither automatic nor inevitable. Chen Wang (2023) finds that new lead-

³See the heterogeneous effects section and Table A2 in the Appendix.

ers may deter attacks by credibly signaling a willingness to fight harder to establish a reputation. Likewise, Tarar (2023) shows that third-party opportunism may not materialize when uncertainty across dyads expands the bargaining range or when potential gains are too limited to justify intervention. Given that theory points in both directions regarding whether new leaders are more likely to be attacked, we leave this question for empirical exploration.

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.

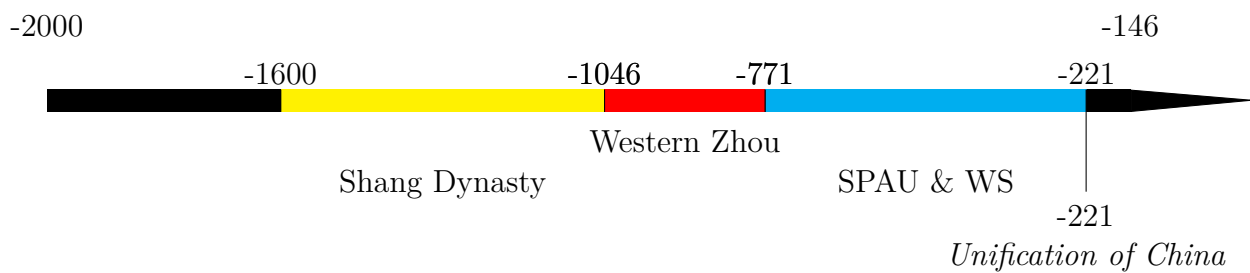


Figure 1: Timeline of Ancient China

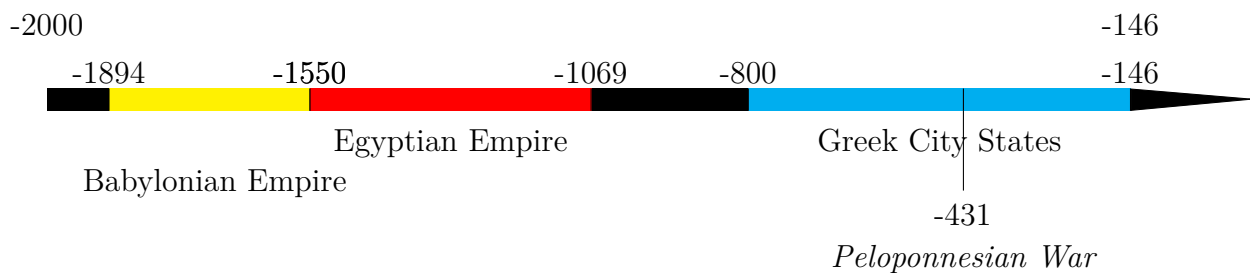


Figure 2: Timeline of the World

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.⁴ When Zhou overthrew the Shang Dynasty, its rulers were

⁴The concept of feudalism was created to depict European phenomena, and it imposes inaccuracies when applied to the Chinese context. Following Zhao (2015), we use the term “feudalism” here in order to facilitate comparison.

confronted with the challenge of governing an expansive territory. Their solution, known as “fenfeng 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 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 “fenfeng 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.⁵

⁵Since the Han Dynasty, brothers were excluded from potential rightful successors, and the succession norm converged to the eldest son of the monarch’s legal wife. However, during the period of our study,

Data

Data Sources and Coding

Monarchs

To compile a dataset on monarchs during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, we rely on two primary sources: the *Zuo Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Zuozhuan*) and 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). Because of its extremely compact and cryptic text, we rely on its commentary, the *Zuozhuan* as our first primary source of coding, which provides crucial background information behind political events. Bamboo and silk manuscripts excavated from ancient tombs suggest that the *Zuozhuan* was compiled in the 4th century BCE.⁶

Our second primary source of coding, the *Records of the Grand Historian*, is compiled around 94 BCE by Sima Qian. It 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

succession norms did not exclude brothers, making brother succession not uncommon (Entian Wang, 1980).

⁶The *Zuozhuan* is rumored to be compiled by one of Confucius’ disciples (Zuo Qiuming). For more details regarding its historiography, see (Feldherr & Hardy, 2011, p. 420-435).

not viable, we typically prioritize the *Zuozhuan* 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 358 unique monarchs from 17 states. Among these, 241 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.

Wars

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 (David C Kang, Shaw, & Fu, 2016). It provides brief descriptions of each conflict, detailing the involved actors, time frames (years), locations, processes, and occasionally the number of chariots and soldiers. Figure A1 and A2 in the Appendix provide two coding examples.

One limitation of this source is its yearly structure, which does not provide information on the specific months of war events. To ensure that our key independent variable (leaders' natural death) precedes our dependent variable (war onset), we carefully examine the 55 instances where war and a leader's death occurred in the same year. To do so, we reference the *Zuozhuan* and the *Records of the Grand Historian*, as these sources provide more detailed information on the season or month of significant events. If we find that a monarch's natural death occurred after an interstate war within the same year, we adjust the monarch's recorded death year to the subsequent year.⁷ Figure A1 and A2 in the Appendix provide detailed coding examples for this issue.

Another concern pertains to the reliability of our coding for war direction. The specificity of Chinese characters affords us comprehensive coverage of war direction in our dataset. Characters such as gong (攻), fa (伐), mie (灭), and xi (袭) unambiguously indicate which state is the aggressor.⁸ Nonetheless, potential concerns may arise regarding

⁷In 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 request. The findings remain robust even without this adjustment.

⁸In the two coding examples (Figure A1 and A2 in the Appendix), the Chinese character 'fa (伐)'

reporting bias in historical documentation. We conceptualize reporting bias as analogous to omitted variable bias. Should this bias be random, it will bias our estimates toward zero, suggesting that our findings represent the lower bound of the impact of leadership turnover on international conflict. Conversely, it is plausible that the authors of the *Zuozhuan* and the *Records of the Grand Historian* displayed a bias towards certain states, perhaps depicting their preferred states (such as the State of Lu, Confucius’s hometown) predominantly as war victims.

To mitigate these concerns, our approach is twofold. First, we exclude each state from our dataset one by one and re-estimate the models, finding consistent results throughout (see Figure A5 in the Appendix). Second, we incorporate directed-dyad fixed effects and decade fixed effects. Thus, if reporting bias is time-invariant at the country, dyad, or directed-dyad level, or it is constant within a decade, it will be washed out by these fixed effects.⁹

We should note that the conflict in our sample aligns 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). 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 conflict in our sample. However, for those with available casualty information, the death toll significantly exceeds the 1000-death benchmark. For instance, according to the *Records of the Grand Historian*, 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 conflict 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 conflict enduring for three years.

indicates that Cai, Wey, Chen, and Zhou were the attackers, with Zheng being the target. In contrast, approximately 30 percent of war outcomes are missing from our data.

⁹Directed-dyad fixed effects operate at a more granular level than country or dyad fixed effects, meaning that any country- or dyad- fixed effects are implicitly accounted for and would be collinear in the regression.

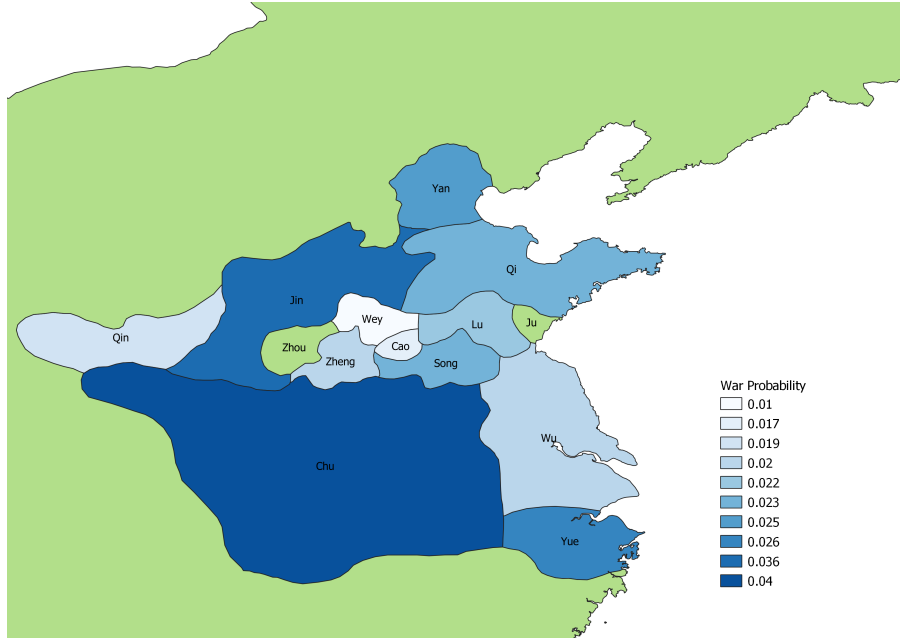


Figure 3: Spring and Autumn Period

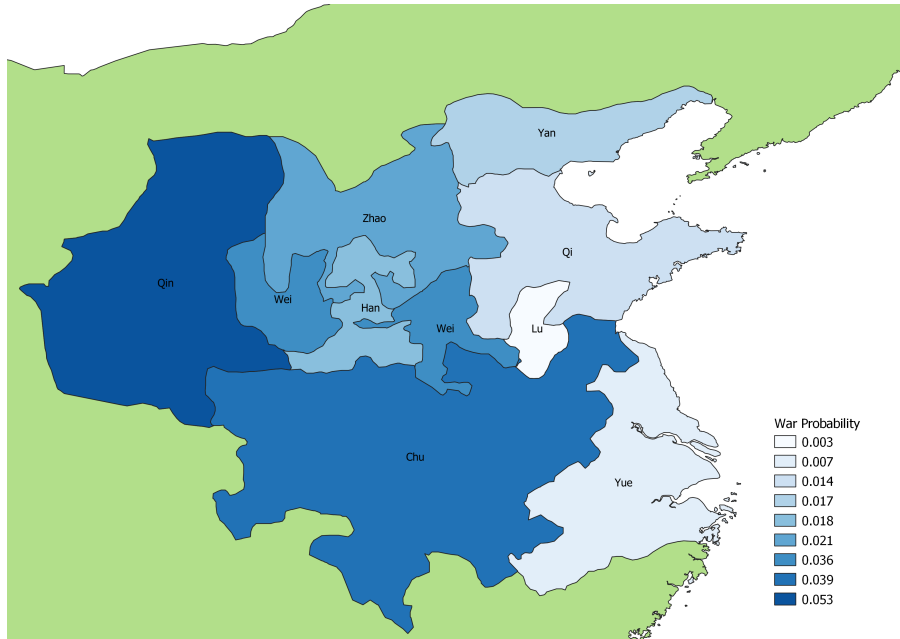


Figure 4: Warring States Period

In total, we have identified 418 interstate wars among 17 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.¹⁰

¹⁰The war probability here is calculated as the total number of wars a state engaged in during a

State Capacity and Network Dependencies

To measure state capacity, we introduce a novel indicator: the number of newly established counties (xian). Counties, first emerging in the Spring and Autumn period, became an administrative innovation used by states to consolidate control. Monarchs directly appointed county magistrates, and tax revenues bypassed local elites, strengthening central authority (Yang, 1981; Chen, 2023). Using data from Zhou and Li (2009), we count new counties per period and use the logged value in regression models.

To account for interdependencies in the war network, we calculate two node centrality measures by century: betweenness centrality, which captures a state’s ability to connect with others, and eigenvector centrality, which measures influence through indirect connections. These measures serve as robustness checks, as they may be post-treatment variables.

Data Construction for Directed-Dyad-Year Structure

We construct a dataset at the directed-dyad-year level following COW project methodologies. First, we create a state survival table listing the start and end years for each state. Using the “peacesciencer” package in R (Steven V. Miller, 2022), we expand this into directed-dyad-year format, then merge war data, leader data, and covariates for both initiators and targets. Table 1 provides summary statistics of key variables.

Identification Strategy

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

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.

Table 1: 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

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).

A potential concern is 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 3, the distribution of natural deaths over age groups does not exhibit a pronounced skew, alleviating concerns that natural deaths heavily concentrate among old monarchs.

Additionally, we employ a probit regression analysis on the full cohort of 358 monarchs. Given the scarcity of data regarding monarchs' ages, we use the tenure length of previous monarchs as a proxy for the current monarchs' ages. The 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.

Another potential issue is that politically stable states might be more likely to expe-

rience natural deaths of leaders compared to their politically unstable counterparts. To mitigate this concern, we follow Kokkonen and Sundell (2020) by creating a binary variable indicating 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, finding that political stability does not predict natural deaths. Furthermore, we conduct a balance test Jones and Olken (2005) using a wider array of independent variables, including state capacity (measured by newly created counties), the previous monarch’s tenure length, political stability, and century fixed effects. As shown in Table 2, none of these variables significantly predict natural deaths.

Table 2: Balance Tests for Natural Death: Probit Models

	(1) Model 1	(2) Model 2	(3) Model 3
State capacity	0.047 (0.049)	0.049 (0.048)	0.036 (0.068)
Monarch’s length in office ($t - 1$)		0.006 (0.005)	0.007 (0.005)
Stable state dummy			0.130 (0.204)
Century FE	NO	YES	YES
Observations	358	341	341
Clusters	17	17	17

Standard errors in parentheses, clustered by state.

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

Models and Results

Model Specifications

In the baseline analysis, we have opted to use linear models because their results are easy to interpret and more robust to the inclusion of fixed effects. Results are consistent using conditional logit models (see Table A5 in the Appendix). The model can be represented mathematically as:

$$Y_{ijt} = \beta_1 death_{it} + \beta_2 death_{jt} + \gamma_1 controls_{it} + \gamma_2 controls_{jt} + \alpha_{ij} + u_t + \varepsilon_{ijt}. \quad (1)$$

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. $death_{it}$ and $death_{jt}$ are binary indicators equal to 1 if the leader of state i or j , respectively, dies of natural causes in year t , and 0 otherwise. $controls_{it}$ and $controls_{jt}$ denote control variables such as state capacity and node centrality measures. And the $\alpha_{i,j}$ term represents directed-dyad fixed effects and u_t represents time fixed effects.

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 (David B Carter & Signorino, 2010). We also include a lagged dependent variable to account for potential autocorrelation in model 4.

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 “Jia Dao Fa Guo.” 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

¹¹ «Zuozhuan, the Second Year of Duke Xi of Lu»

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 over-representation 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.

Baseline Results

Table 3: Linear Models: Leadership Turnover and International Conflict

	(1) Model 1	(2) Model 2	(3) Model 3	(4) Model 4
Death of initiator	−0.009*** (0.001)	−0.009*** (0.001)	−0.009*** (0.001)	−0.010*** (0.001)
Death of target	−0.002 (0.002)	−0.002 (0.002)	−0.002 (0.002)	−0.002 (0.002)
State capacity of initiator			−0.001 (0.001)	−0.001 (0.001)
State capacity of target			0.000 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)
Y(t-1)				0.075*** (0.015)
t	−0.001*** (0.000)	−0.001*** (0.000)	−0.001*** (0.000)	−0.001*** (0.000)
t ²	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)
t ³	−0.000*** (0.000)	−0.000*** (0.000)	−0.000*** (0.000)	−0.000*** (0.000)
Directed-dyad FE	YES	YES	YES	YES
Decade FE	NO	YES	YES	YES
Observations	69798	69798	69798	69550
Clusters	248	248	248	248

Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered by directed-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 deaths 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 1 percentage points, while holding other variables constant. Given the baseline mean of war initiation (1.1%), this means that leadership turnover is associated with a 91% reduction in the probability of initiating international conflict. Notably, the magnitude of the coefficients associated with the natural deaths of initiating state leaders remains stable across different models. This strengthens our confidence in the key assumption that the timing of leaders' natural deaths is plausibly exogenous.

Interestingly, the coefficients associated with the natural deaths of leaders in targeted states are also negative, but not statistically significant. Since we do not theorize about how leadership turnover affects the risk of being targeted, we shall interpret the results with caution. Regressions estimate only the average treatment effect, and these results should not be taken to mean that countries never exploit the temporary weakness of other states. During our coding process, we observed a few cases where historians clearly attributed conflict to opportunistic wars. For example, historians recorded that the state of Wu took advantage of the mourning period for King Gong of Chu and attacked Chu in 560 BCE.¹² However, the lack of a consistent average effect suggests that multiple mechanisms may be at play. Chen Wang (2023) points out that while new leaders can invite challengers to exploit their temporal weakness, they also can deter challengers by their strong incentives to fight harder to establish a reputation, and these effects can cancel out each other. This finding is consistent with Kristian Skrede Gleditsch et al. (2008, p. 481), who find no support for the concept of “opportunistic war” in their 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

¹²Zuozhuan, 13th Year of Duke Xiang of Lu.

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 replicate the analysis presented in Table 3 using leaders’ time in office. And we find a positive and significant relationship between leaders’ time in office and war initiation (see Table A1 in the Appendix).

Heterogeneous Effects

Not all leaders face the same risk of losing office when they assume power. In particular, a leader’s mode of entry may shape the initial strength of their domestic base. On one hand, those who have successfully launched a coup must have already solved the coordination problem among the elite—otherwise, the coup would have failed in the first place. This suggests that usurpers may enter office with a stronger domestic foundation. On the other hand, usurpers often lack legitimacy, and factions loyal to the previous regime may seek to retaliate. Consequently, it remains unclear whether usurpers face greater or lesser political vulnerability in their early tenure.

To examine potential heterogeneous effects, we interact leaders’ tenure with a binary indicator for usurpers and replicate the models in Table A1. Here, we define usurpers as leaders who seized the throne through a coup or a civil war.¹³ Among the 358 monarchs in our dataset, 33 came to power via coups and 4 via civil wars, resulting in a total of 37 usurpers.

Table A2 in the Appendix presents the results. The interaction term between leaders’ tenure and the usurper indicator is negative but reaches statistical significance in only one of the four models. This suggests that the effect of leader tenure on war initiation does not systematically vary by entry mode. Our interpretation is that usurpers face risks of removal similar to those of non-usurpers. To further investigate this, We estimate survival models and find that being a usurper does not significantly affect how long a monarch remains in power before being forcibly removed by domestic elites (see Appendix Table

¹³If a minister launched a coup and installed an underage leader from the royal family’s lineage, the underage ruler would not be classified as a usurper for the purpose of this study.

A3).

We also visualize the tenure distributions of leaders who were removed from office by domestic elites. Figure A4 in the Appendix presents histograms comparing the tenure length of usurpers and non-usurpers who were deposed through coups or civil wars. The distributions are strikingly similar, with both groups exhibiting a high risk of removal in their early tenure.

Robustness Checks

We conduct a series of robustness checks to ensure the reliability of our findings. They include: 1) clustering standard errors at different levels; 2) estimating conditional logit models; 3) employing rare events logit models; 4) using country-year as the unit of analysis; 5) incorporating network centrality measures to account for potential interdependence; 6) excluding observations spanning approximately 20 years that corresponded with Qin's unification war; 7) systematically removing each state one by one from the models; and 8) estimating survival models.

Across all these checks, our results remain consistent, as evidenced by Tables A4-A12 and Figure A5 in the Appendix. Additionally, we conduct placebo tests using the lagged and forward values of leaders' natural deaths and found no discernible impact on the likelihood of interstate war (see Table A13 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?

As discussed above, new leaders can consolidate power through repression, reforms, and co-optation. Extreme ways of power consolidation, such as purges and assassinations, are more likely to be documented in history. Therefore, we provide large-N analysis for the repression channel through which leaders consolidate power. And because of data availability, we rely on case studies and anecdotal evidence for the reforms and co-optation

mechanisms.

Empirical Evidence

To test the consolidation through repression mechanism, we utilize a unique dataset from Chen (2024) 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 monarchs) or a high official. In total, the dataset comprises 1261 political elites from 9 states during the Spring and Autumn period, with 130 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 expand into a panel structure (elite-year) and merged with our own dataset. We estimate both linear and 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 leader has been in power.

Table 4: Leaders’ Tenure and Power Consolidation

	(1) Linear	(2) Linear	(3) Conditional Logit	(4) Conditional Logit
Monarch tenure	−0.001** (0.000)	−0.001** (0.000)	−0.042*** (0.011)	−0.040*** (0.010)
Constant	0.035*** (0.002)	0.031*** (0.004)		
Country FE	YES	YES	YES	YES
Century FE	NO	YES	NO	YES
Observations	9984	9984	9975	9975
Clusters	9	9	7	7

Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered by country

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

As indicated in Table 4, the longer a leader holds office, the lower the risk of an elite dying from political assassination.¹⁴ Given the limitations of the historical record, we cannot pinpoint the perpetrators of elite assassinations. Nevertheless, this is the best

¹⁴We may underestimate standard errors when the number of clusters is small. Thus, we replicate the models without clustering standard errors, and the results are consistent (see Table A14 in the Appendix).

available approach given the data, and the results lend suggestive evidence that repression is more likely during leaders' early tenure.¹⁵ The following anecdotal cases further enrich the narrative and bolster our interpretation.

Anecdotal Evidence

Repression is only one of the methods for power consolidation. As we illustrate below with anecdotal evidence, new leaders can consolidate power through a combination of repression, reforms, and co-optation.

History provides numerous instances where leaders solidified their authority before engaging in interstate wars. A notable case is Duke Huan of Qi (齐桓公), who ruled from 685 to 643 BCE. During his first year in office, Duke Huan undertook significant military and economic reforms, successfully forging an alliance with other noble families. This consolidation of power was crucial for his subsequent military campaigns.

*(They) united the military forces of the five noble families, established a system for the fair distribution of wealth, and provided support for the impoverished. They rewarded the talented and capable, and the people of Qi were all pleased.*¹⁶

Following these strategic moves, Duke Huan launched an attack against the smaller state of Tan in his second year and embarked on a campaign against the more formidable state of Lu in his fifth year.

Another exemplary figure is King Zhuang of Chu (楚庄王), who reigned from 613 to 591 BCE. By the third year of his reign, King Zhuang had effectively consolidated his power using a combination of repression and strategic alliances:

*He (King Zhuang of Chu) executed several hundred individuals, promoted several hundred others, and entrusted the government to Wu Ju and Su Cong. The people of the country greatly rejoiced.*¹⁷

With his authority firmly established, King Zhuang initiated an offensive against the state of Chen in his sixth year. This marked the beginning of a series of military

¹⁵Even if monarchs were not the direct perpetrators, they may have orchestrated or sanctioned political assassinations behind the scenes.

¹⁶Records of the Grand Historian. House of Duke Tai of Qi. Chapter 28

¹⁷Records of the Grand Historian. House of Chu. Chapter 26

campaigns under his leadership, where he repeatedly confronted Chen and Jin, ultimately establishing Chu as a dominant force during his reign.

In summary, the histories of Duke Huan of Qi and King Zhuang of Chu demonstrate a common strategic pattern among leaders: the consolidation of power precedes the initiation of interstate conflict. These leaders achieved consolidation through a combination of methods, including repression, reforms, and co-optation. This pattern suggests a deliberate approach to strengthening internal stability and capacity before engaging in external military endeavors.

External Validity

How well does our theory generalize across different regions and historical periods? While the analysis of ancient China offers a valuable setting to examine the relationship between leadership turnover and interstate conflict, it also suggests important scope conditions: (1) states must already have issues in dispute, and (2) leaders must face few institutional veto points—conditions most likely met in absolute monarchies and personalist regimes. We briefly examine two additional cases below.

Medieval and Early Modern Europe

The case of medieval and early modern Europe presents a more complex picture. While its international system shares similarities with that of ancient China, key differences exist. First, European monarchs often ruled over multiple polities simultaneously, which complicated their ability to consolidate power and made them more dependent on local elites for military campaigns (Kokkonen et al., 2022). Second, monarchs faced institutional constraints as parliaments expanded and gained greater authority over fiscal and military matters (Van Zanden, Buringh, & Bosker, 2012). Third, the Catholic Church played a significant role in war-making, particularly before the Reformation, as it could define “just causes” for war and mobilize rulers for religious conflicts (Blaydes & Paik, 2016). Given these factors, we do not have a strong theoretical expectation for European

states and leave the question to empirical exploration.

Kokkonen et al. (2022) find that the natural death of a leader increases the risk of interstate war, primarily by making the state more vulnerable to foreign attacks. Similarly, Dube and Harish (2020) show that polities led by queens engaged in war more frequently than those led by kings, but the pattern differs by marital status: single queens were more likely to be attacked than single kings, whereas married queens were more likely to initiate war than married kings. Using replication data from Kokkonen et al. (2022) (KMS sample) and Dube and Harish (2020) (DH sample), we assess whether leader tenure influences war initiation in European states and find mixed results.¹⁸ The KMS dataset covers 27 European polities from 1000 to 1799, while the DH dataset includes 35 European kingdoms from 1480 to 1913. While the coefficients on leader tenure are positive in both models, they are statistically significant only in the DH sample.¹⁹

Several factors may explain this difference. One explanation is that after the Reformation, the Church's influence over war-making declined, allowing monarchs to exercise greater control over military decisions. Another possibility is that before 1500, many European conflicts were localized feudal disputes among noble families, while after 1500, the emergence of centralized states and standing armies increased issues in dispute between states (Tilly, 2017), strengthening the tenure-war relationship.

Adolf Hitler and the Invasion of Poland

The case of Adolf Hitler provides an opportunity to examine our theory in the modern era. After being appointed Chancellor of Germany on January, 1933, Hitler spent years consolidating power before launching his first major interstate war with the invasion of Poland in 1939.²⁰

Upon assuming office, Hitler quickly moved to suppress political opposition, using

¹⁸We focus on commonly shared variables between the two datasets. For details on data and model specifications, see the Appendix.

¹⁹When limiting the KMS sample to post-1500, the t-stat of the tenure coefficient increases, but remains statistically insignificant.

²⁰The annexation of Austria in 1938 faced no effective resistance, and the combatant casualties did not cross the threshold of an interstate war as defined in the Correlates of War Project (Sarkees & Schafer, 2000).

the Reichstag Fire of February 27, 1933, as a pretext to curtail civil liberties and outlaw the Communist Party. The subsequent Reichstag Fire Decree and the Enabling Act of 1933 allowed Hitler to bypass the Reichstag, effectively dismantling the Weimar Republic's democratic institutions. He then turned against rivals within his own movement, orchestrating the Night of the Long Knives in 1934 to eliminate the leadership of the SA (Sturmabteilung) and other internal threats. In August 1934, following the death of President Paul von Hindenburg, Hitler merged the offices of Chancellor and President, declaring himself Führer (leader). Meanwhile, he placed the media, judiciary, and economy under state control, while militarizing society through extensive propaganda and youth indoctrination programs. By the time he invaded Poland in 1939, Hitler had neutralized domestic opposition, secured the military's loyalty, and transformed Germany into a war economy capable of sustaining his expansionist ambitions (Abel, 1986; Reiter, 2020).

Indeed, what Hitler did after coming to power closely mirrored his vision for Germany's future. In his 1932 letter to Colonel Walther von Reichenau, he acknowledged Germany's weakness, stating²¹

"I consider the threat of this (France) attack to be acute and believe that it would be advisable to reckon with its onset at any moment! However, at present, there is no possibility of Germany intervening in such a conflict."

At the end of the letter, he outlined a five-step plan for Germany's resurgence:²²

1. *"Overcoming Marxism and its consequences until they have been completely exterminated. The creation of a new unity of mind and will for our people."*
2. *"A general intellectual and moral rearmament of the nation on the basis of this new ideological unity."*
3. *"Technical rearmament."*

²¹Hitler (2001), English translation at https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1537.

²²Hitler (2001).

4. *“The organizational mobilization of the national resources for the purpose of national defense.”*
5. *“Once this has been achieved, the securing of the legal recognition of the new situation by the rest of the world.”*

This sequence underscores our theoretical argument: Hitler prioritized internal consolidation—eliminating political opposition, restructuring the state, and militarizing the economy—before addressing external threats. The conditional phrasing of the final step (“Once this has been achieved”) suggests that Hitler viewed domestic consolidation as a necessary prerequisite before engaging in expansionist foreign policy.

Conclusions

The Spring-Autumn and Warring States eras of ancient China provide one of the earliest cases of an anarchic international system (Waltz, 1986). Using primary and secondary sources, we construct a novel dataset of leaders and wars during this period to examine the relationship between leadership turnover and interstate conflict. Leveraging the random timing of leaders’ natural deaths, we find that leadership turnover decreases the likelihood of initiating interstate war. Additionally, we present evidence that new leaders prioritize power consolidation through repression, reforms, and co-optation before engaging in external conflicts.

This study contributes to the growing literature on leaders and war. Existing research often links leadership turnover to an increased likelihood of interstate conflict. In contrast, our findings suggest that new leaders prioritize power consolidation, and the domestic constraints they face may unexpectedly delay or even deter their engagement in external wars.

A more expansive interpretation of our theory suggests that leaders in vulnerable positions are less likely to instigate interstate conflicts. Chiozza and Goemans (2003) use leaders’ characteristics and domestic political and economic conditions to measure vulnerability, and find that leaders at greater risk of losing office are less inclined to

initiate international crises.²³ Jeff Carter (2024) shows that while hawkish leaders are generally more prone to initiate conflict, they do so only when politically secure. This paper fits into this broader literature by emphasizing that domestic vulnerability may reduce, rather than increase, the likelihood of international aggression.

Finally, our paper bears important policy implications. The findings suggest that as authoritarian leaders consolidate power, they may be more likely to pursue an expansionist foreign policy. This pattern is evident in the case of Putin, whose tightening grip on power preceded Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and it raises concerns that as President Xi further consolidates authority, China may adopt a more assertive foreign policy. Future research could explore how leadership turnover influences not only the onset of war but also war termination and the durability of peace following ceasefires.

²³Chiozza and Goemans (2003) view these findings as a rebuttal to the “diversionary war” theory but do not offer an alternative theoretical framework.

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