

## RESEARCH SUMMARY

## Is It Possible to Predict the Timing of a Chinese Military Crackdown on Hong Kong?

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In the latter part of 2019, Hong Kong was the site of a series of protests against a proposed extradition bill and, more generally, the tightening of control by the Chinese government. As the unrest became more dangerous, some observers speculated about the likelihood of an authoritarian crackdown by the Chinese government. In “[Predicting Authoritarian Crackdowns: A Machine Learning Approach](#),” Julian TszKin Chan and Weifeng Zhong offer an index of proximity, in days, of a crackdown. To produce this index, they use an innovative approach to read and anticipate the Chinese government’s behavior: they pick up the signals from the government’s own propaganda.

### COVERAGE IN CHINESE NEWSPAPERS ESCALATED BEFORE THE TIANANMEN CRACKDOWN

On June 4, 1989, the Chinese government used its military to put down democratic protests in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square. The *People’s Daily*, which is the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, revealed the day-to-day change in the government’s stance on the protests.

As tensions mounted, “demonstrators” and “protesters” became “rioters.” Students initially described as having “a good heart” were later accused of wanting “to destroy the country’s future.” The government’s denunciations ramped up significantly in the weeks before June 4, 1989—unintentionally hinting at the brutal crackdown to come.

### AN ALGORITHM THAT PREDICTS BY “READING” THE NEWSPAPER

In previous work, Chan and Zhong trained a machine learning algorithm, the Policy Change Index for China, to read the signals of the *People’s Daily* that precede China’s major policy moves. Using a similar approach, they have now created a policy change index where the “policy” change of interest is a crackdown. Their algorithm creates a timeline for the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown based on the *People’s Daily* articles of that era and then maps current reporting of the Hong Kong protests onto that timeline.

To provide a daily estimate of how close the Chinese government is to a military crackdown, the authors pay particular attention to factors such as (1) dates articles were published and (2) headlines and full text of the articles.

### WILL CHINA LAUNCH A MILITARY CRACKDOWN ON THE HONG KONG PROTESTS?

In the months leading up to the Tiananmen crackdown, the level of rhetoric in the *People’s Daily* built at a steady pace. By contrast, coverage of the Hong Kong protests has fluctuated in its intensity level. On August 5, 2019, for example, it reached a level signifying less than 10 days from a crackdown. It spiked to that level again on November 13 and 14, 2019. Throughout the protest it has stayed within a three-week window of an impending crackdown.

It is possible that the protests will fizzle out as others did in 2014. However, since the political unrest in Hong Kong still persists, the possibility of another Tiananmen cannot be ruled out.