

Authoritarian Audiences and Government Rhetoric in International Crises: Evidence from China

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June 22, 2016

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Abstract

How do mass political pressures affect the incentives of authoritarian leaders in international crises? We investigate how citizens in an authoritarian setting respond to hollow threats, expressions of resolve, and elite justifications for restraint. We utilize two scenario-based survey experiments—one hypothetical and one that selectively reminds respondents of recent events—to evaluate how elite statements affect Chinese citizens’ approval of their government’s performance in its territorial and maritime disputes. We find evidence that citizens disapprove more of inaction after explicit threats to use force, providing evidence of mass “audience costs” in an authoritarian setting. By contrast, we also find that citizens approve of symbolic expressions of resolve, suggesting that talking tough can provide benefits, even in the absence of tough action. In addition, statements that invoke future success to justify present restraint increase approval, along with narrative frames that emphasize a shared history of national trauma. Together, these results suggest that governmental expressions of resolve and rhetoric can have varied effects: approval of the government can be harmed by their explicit empty threats, though it can also be bolstered by symbolic expressions of resolve, as well as narratives that frame restraint as part of a longer-term national struggle.

The authors contributed equally. Author order reflects a regular rotation. The authors can be reached at jessica.weiss@cornell.edu and allan.dafoe@yale.edu. Our preregistration, preanalysis plan, and the most recent version of this paper can be found at allandafoe.com/china. We thank Qiuqing Tai and Ran Chen for excellent research assistance. For helpful input we thank Matthew Baum, Tom Christensen, Charles Crabtree, Jeff Frieden, Ed Friedman, Josh Kertzer, David Lake, Anne Sartori, Elizabeth Saunders, Jack Snyder, Dustin Tingley, Mike Tomz, Jessica Weeks, and Nick Weller. For financial support, we are grateful to Stein Tønnesson and the East Asian Peace Program, and Ian Shapiro and the MacMillan Center at Yale University.

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1 Introduction

Many authoritarian leaders act as if the need to maintain public support constrains their foreign policy choices. Leaders in the Middle East often claim that their hands are tied in international negotiations by the threat of a popular backlash.¹ Chinese leaders are fond of invoking the “feelings of more than 1.3 billion Chinese people” in protesting foreign actions and demands.² As a Chinese commentary noted after the October 2015 US Freedom of Navigation patrol in the South China Sea, “If the US government hopes to persuade the Chinese government to make concessions, it will first have to persuade the Chinese people.”³

Given the power that authoritarian leaders typically wield over the domestic media and information environment, are these claims about popular reactions to international disputes mere bluffs? Despite the apparent importance of popular sentiment to many authoritarian leaders, we have little systematic evidence of how citizens in autocracies evaluate their government’s performance in international disputes and how effectively authoritarian governments can guide public perceptions.⁴ The study of public reactions to international crises in authoritarian regimes has lagged behind the rich body of research on how elite institutions such as the military or politburo shape authoritarian foreign policy.⁵

Scholars have found that the survival of authoritarian regimes increasingly depends on the public. Autocrats have been removed more frequently by public protests in recent years than by elite coups, which have been on the decline since the end of the Cold War.⁶ Mass and elite forces may also combine to jeopardize the tenure of authoritarian leaders,⁷ with public disapproval providing an important window of opportunity for elites inside the regime to

¹Marc Lynch. “Beyond the Arab street: Iraq and the Arab public sphere”. In: *Politics & Society* 31.1 (2003), pp. 55–91, p. 70.

²“China’s Xi, Japan’s Abe hold landmark meeting,” Reuters, November 10, 2014; “China urges Japan to properly handle sensitive issues in bilateral ties,” Xinhua, November 2, 2015.

³Shan Renping (pen name of *Global Times* editor Hu Xijin), “Pinglun: you ren xian Zhongfang ruanruo, kangyi baici bu ru zou Lasen Hao yi ci,” *Huanqiu Shibao*, October 29, 2015.

⁴The large literature on diversionary war suggests a positive public response to the use of force, but to our knowledge this research tradition has not utilized public opinion data from authoritarian regimes.

⁵On the diplomatic calculus of managing foreign policy street protests in authoritarian regimes, see Jessica Chen Weiss. *Powerful patriots: nationalist protest in China’s foreign relations*. Oxford University Press, 2014; Jessica Chen Weiss. “Authoritarian Signaling, Mass Audiences, and Nationalist Protest in China”. In: *International Organization* 67.1 (2013), pp. 1–35; James Reilly. *Strong society, smart state: The rise of public opinion in China’s Japan policy*. Columbia University Press, 2013. On elite preferences, constraints, and incentives to use force, see Jessica L Weeks. “Strongmen and Straw Men: Authoritarian Regimes and the Initiation of International Conflict”. In: *American Political Science Review* 106.02 (2012), pp. 326–347; Jessica Lea Weeks. “Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve”. In: *International Organization* 62.1 (2008), pp. 35–64; Brian Lai and Dan Slater. “Institutions of the offensive: Domestic sources of dispute initiation in authoritarian regimes, 1950–1992”. In: *American Journal of Political Science* 50.1 (2006), pp. 113–126; Giacomo Chiozza and Hein E Goemans. *Leaders and International Conflict*. Cambridge University Press, 2011; Jeffrey Pickering and Emizet F Kisangani. “Diversionary Despots? Comparing Autocracies’ Propensities to Use and to Benefit from Military Force”. In: *American Journal of Political Science* 54.2 (2010), pp. 477–493.

⁶Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Erica Frantz, “Autocrats now more vulnerable to being ousted by revolt,” Washington Post (Monkey Cage), April 9, 2014.

⁷Jeremy Wallace. “Cities, redistribution, and authoritarian regime survival”. In: *The Journal of Politics* 75.03 (2013), pp. 632–645; Milan W Svobik. *The politics of authoritarian rule*. Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 12.

turn against the incumbent and reclaim the mantle of popular legitimacy. Appearing weak or failing to defend the nation's honor may provide a justification and focal point for regime opposition, creating opportunities for popular protests and elite challenges from other party or military officials.⁸ At the same time, international disputes can provide authoritarian leaders with opportunities to inflame nationalism, rally the country behind their leadership, and crowd out other concerns that might mobilize opposition to the regime.⁹

We evaluate three propositions about how public opinion responds to crisis events in an authoritarian setting. Following extensive research on democratic crisis behavior, we investigate whether domestic audiences disapprove of leaders who make empty threats (“audience costs”).¹⁰ Second, and in contrast, we evaluate whether tough but vague statements (“bluster” or verbal saber-rattling) may in fact be rewarded by domestic audiences, even when followed by inaction.¹¹ Third, we investigate whether authoritarian governments can effectively shape public perceptions and reactions by using government rhetoric and elite cues¹² to shape the domestic interpretation of crisis events. While media freedom and access also varies widely across democracies,¹³ autocratic regimes typically exert far greater control over the information and narratives that shape the public debate.¹⁴ We explore three rhetorical tactics: two cues that explicitly justify inaction, and one narrative that invokes a history of shared national trauma.

We focus on the attitudes and reactions of citizens in China for two reasons. First, Chinese foreign policy has great substantive importance to world affairs. Among possible sites for a great power war, looming large are China's conflicts with the United States and Japan over sovereignty and maritime issues in the Asia-Pacific.¹⁵ Second, despite many differences in size, power, and national history, Chinese reactions to international crises can help us understand the incentives and pressures that other authoritarian states face, just as scholars studying American foreign policy can shed light on democratic behavior in international relations. Third, as a single-party state that has invested heavily in monitoring and guiding

⁸Susan L Shirk. *China: fragile superpower*. Oxford University Press, 2008.

⁹Valerie J Bunce and Sharon L Wolchik. “Defeating dictators: Electoral change and stability in competitive authoritarian regimes”. In: *World Politics* 62.01 (2010), pp. 43–86.

¹⁰James Fearon. “Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes”. In: *American Political Science Review* 88.3 (1994), pp. 577–92; Michael Tomz. “Domestic Audience Costs in International Relations: An Experimental Approach”. In: *International Organization* 61.4 (2007), pp. 821–40.

¹¹Amy Oakes. “Diversionary war and Argentina's invasion of the Falkland Islands”. In: *Security Studies* 15.3 (2006), pp. 431–463.

¹²Elizabeth N Saunders. “War and the Inner Circle: Democratic Elites and the Politics of Using Force”. In: *Security Studies* 24.3 (2015), pp. 466–501; R.F. Trager and L. Vavreck. “The Political Costs of Crisis Bargaining: Presidential Rhetoric and the Role of Party”. In: *American Journal of Political Science* 55.3 (2011), pp. 526–545; Matthew S Levendusky and Michael C Horowitz. “When Backing Down is the Right Decision: Partisanship, New Information, and Audience Costs”. In: *The Journal of Politics* 74.02 (2012), pp. 323–338.

¹³Philip BK Potter and Matthew A Baum. “Looking for Audience Costs in all the Wrong Places: Electoral Institutions, Media Access, and Democratic Constraint”. In: *The Journal of Politics* 76.01 (2014), pp. 167–181.

¹⁴On the role of political elites in shaping public opinion in democracies, reducing democratic audience costs, see Saunders, “War and the Inner Circle: Democratic Elites and the Politics of Using Force”.

¹⁵Graham Allison, “The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?” The Atlantic, September 24, 2015, <http://theatlantic.com/perspective/archive/2015/09/thucydides-trap/414621/>.

public opinion, China represents a “most likely” case for its leaders to be sensitive to audience costs, if they exist, and to be able to control them. As President Xi Jinping told the Central Committee: “Winning or losing public support is an issue that concerns the CPC’s survival or extinction.”¹⁶

As a first step toward understanding the popular pressures authoritarian leaders face in international crises and the efficacy of government rhetoric in shaping public perceptions, China represents a useful point of departure. The Chinese leadership closely monitors online sentiment, receiving a daily brief of what Chinese “netizens” (*wangmin*) are saying online.¹⁷ Although the Chinese leadership utilizes many tools for gauging public opinion and mass unrest, including party cells at every level and branch of government, online sentiment is used as a leading indicator of potential unrest and collective action.¹⁸ The chief editor of the *People’s Daily* described the internet as the “biggest variable” (*zui da bianliang*) that the Chinese Communist Party faces in managing public opinion.¹⁹

We fielded two complementary online survey experiments to Chinese netizens. The first survey described an abstract hypothetical crisis scenario in which we experimentally manipulated crucial features of the scenario. In this design, all respondents were told that the Chinese government did not use force to prevent a rival state from consolidating control over disputed territory, but a random subset learned that the government had first made an explicit threat to use force. We use this design to evaluate whether respondents disapproved more of inaction after an empty threat, as audience cost theory would expect.

The second is a *selective-history* survey experiment, where we remind respondents about recent events. The issue of US military patrols near China has been core to the recent escalation of tensions between the United States and China, including a high-profile series of “Freedom of Navigation” patrols in 2015 and 2016. In this survey design, all respondents were told that the US military continues to fly military vessels through the airspace above China’s surrounding waters, without identifying themselves or following instructions, contra China’s expressed preferences. A random subset of respondents was also reminded of the government’s declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone over the East China Sea and invocation of “defensive emergency measures” against foreign aircraft that do not comply. We use this design to assess whether respondents approved more of the government for making tough but vague statements, even though the outcome was the same, or disapproved more as audience cost theory might expect. Unlike most hypothetical threats investigated by survey experiments, the declaration of ADIZ is more like most real-world threats: in part ambiguous, not completely tying the government’s hands, but also probably signaling resolve and bolstering public support.²⁰ What are the effects of such a real-world unfulfilled threat?

In both designs, we also assess how respondents reacted to two different justifications

¹⁶ “Study History, be Close to the People,” *China Daily*, July 25, 2013.

¹⁷ Simon Denyer, “In China, Communist Party Takes Unprecedented Step: It Is Listening,” Washington Post, August 2, 2013, <http://wapo.st/1GcWfK1>.

¹⁸ Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts. “How censorship in China allows government criticism but silences collective expression”. In: *American Political Science Review* 107.2 (2013), pp. 326–343.

¹⁹ “Bawo hao zheng zhi jia ban bao de shidai yaoqiu,” *Renmin Ribao*, March 21, 2016.

²⁰ Jack Snyder and Erica D. Borghard. “The Cost of Empty Threats: A Penny, Not a Pound”. In: *American Political Science Review* 105.03 (2011), pp. 437–456, p. 437.

for inaction: biding time for future success, and the high cost of war. We then analyze respondents' open-ended comments to provide insight into the reasons for the respondents' answers. To preview our results, we find that explicit but empty threats generated audience costs in the hypothetical design, while reminders of the Chinese government's actual bluster increased approval in the selective-history design. We find that some types of government rhetoric can be effective in bolstering popular support and attenuating disapproval of inaction. In both scenarios, biding time cues were effective, while messages that emphasized the cost of war were less effective. We also find evidence that invoking a nationalist narrative of collective suffering had a positive effect on public approval.

These results suggest that audience costs exist but are relatively muted and malleable in China, which poses a challenge to claims that the government's hands are tied by the threat of public disapproval. Such claims are not entirely bluffs, as the threat of disapproval is small but significant. But such statements typically fail to acknowledge the government's ability to influence popular perceptions, redirecting public resolve toward future international confrontations (biding time) and discouraging it from targeting the government. Moreover, our findings suggest that tough talk, even if the government does not take action, can also generate popular support. A fuller appreciation of authoritarian incentives in international disputes must consider the positive effect of bluster alongside audience costs and belligerence costs.²¹

2 Mass Audiences and Authoritarian Regimes

Public support—or the appearance of it—matters greatly to many authoritarian regimes. In a seminal study, Ithiel de Sola Pool writes that modern dictatorships are “highly conscious of public opinion and make major efforts to affect it.”²² Although authoritarian leaders are rarely held accountable to public opinion through free and fair elections, fears of popular unrest and irregular ouster often weigh heavily on autocrats seeking to maximize their tenure in office.²³ Considering the harsh consequences that authoritarian elites face if pushed out of office, even a small increase in the probability of ouster can alter authoritarian incentives in international crises.²⁴

Authoritarian leaders often rely heavily on nationalist mythmaking, making their behavior during international confrontations particularly important for sustaining claims of popular legitimacy.²⁵ Success or failure in defending the national honor could burnish the leadership's patriotic credentials or provide a focal point for opposition. Shared outrage at

²¹Joshua D Kertzer and Ryan Brutger. “Decomposing Audience Costs: Bringing the Audience Back into Audience Cost Theory”. In: *American Journal of Political Science* 60.1 (2016), pp. 234–249.

²²Ithiel De Sola Pool. “Communication in totalitarian societies”. In: *I. de Sola Pool, Wilbur Schram, et. al., Handbook of Political Communication, Chicago, Ill, Rand McNally College Publishing Co* (1973), p. 463.

²³Svolik calls this the problem of authoritarian control. Svolic, *The politics of authoritarian rule*.

²⁴Alexandre Debs and Hein E Goemans. “Regime type, the fate of leaders, and war”. In: *American Political Science Review* 104.03 (2010), pp. 430–445, Hein Erich Goemans. *War and punishment: The causes of war termination and the First World War*. Princeton University Press, 2000

²⁵Jack Snyder. *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991

the regime's foreign policy failures could spark street protests or provide the impetus for existing elite fissures to become open splits, creating intraparty upheaval or inviting military officers to step in to restore order.²⁶ Fearing a popular backlash, authoritarian leaders may feel compelled to take a tough international stance to appease these domestic pressures.

A history of nationalist uprisings make Chinese citizens and leaders especially aware of the linkage between international disputes and domestic unrest. Before the Chinese Communist Party came to power, the prior regime's perceived weakness in defending Chinese sovereignty at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 galvanized widespread protests and a general strike. The protests forced the government to sack three officials and reject the Treaty of Versailles, which awarded to Japan formerly German territories in China.²⁷ These historical precedents have made Chinese officials particularly sensitive to the appearance of hewing to public opinion. As the *People's Daily* chief editor wrote in March 2016: "History and reality have shown us that public opinion and regime safety are inseparable."²⁸ One Chinese scholar even claimed that "the Chinese government probably knows the public's opinion better and reacts to it more directly than even the U.S. government."²⁹

To anticipate the sources of public unrest today, multiple Chinese government agencies are tasked with monitoring public sentiment on foreign affairs and providing the top leadership with daily "excerpts of online information" from the most popular internet sites.³⁰ With almost 650 million internet users in China, the government employs more than 2 million online opinion analysts to monitor internet sentiment and win the "guerrilla battle" in the "mass microphone era," according to the head of the People's Daily Public Opinion Monitoring Unit.³¹

While propaganda, surveillance, and censorship are important tools that the Chinese government uses to monitor and manage popular sentiment,³² the efficacy of authoritarian

²⁶On the importance of shared or widespread beliefs in sparking protests against authoritarian regimes, see Timur Kuran. "Now out of never: The element of surprise in the East European revolution of 1989". In: *World politics* 44.01 (1991), pp. 7–48, Susanne Lohmann. "The dynamics of informational cascades: the Monday demonstrations in Leipzig, East Germany, 1989–91". In: *World politics* 47.01 (1994), pp. 42–101, James R. Hollyer, B. Peter Rosendorff, and James Raymond Vreeland. "Transparency, Protest, and Autocratic Instability". In: *American Political Science Review* 109 (04 Nov. 2015), pp. 764–784. ISSN: 1537-5943. DOI: [10.1017/S0003055415000428](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055415000428). URL: http://journals.cambridge.org/article_S0003055415000428

²⁷Rana Mitter. *A bitter revolution: China's struggle with the modern world*. Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 36-7.

²⁸"Ba wo hao zheng zhi jia ban bao de shi dai yao qiu," *Renmin Ribao*, March 21, 2016.

²⁹As quoted in Reilly, *Strong society, smart state: The rise of public opinion in China's Japan policy*, p. 35.

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹Michelle Fong and Jennifer Cheung, "If you like killing time on social networks, China has a job for you," Public Radio International, July 31, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1K0BYwW>. On the rise of online opinion and contention in China, see Guobin Yang. *The power of the Internet in China: Citizen activism online*. Columbia University Press, 2013.

³²On Chinese censorship and media policy, see King, Pan, and Roberts, "How censorship in China allows government criticism but silences collective expression", Peter Lorentzen. "China's Strategic Censorship". In: *American Journal of Political Science* 58.2 (2014), pp. 402–414. On propaganda, see Haifeng Huang. "Propaganda as Signaling". In: *Forthcoming in Comparative Politics* (2014), Anne-Marie Brady. *Marketing dictatorship: Propaganda and thought work in contemporary China*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2009, Daniel C Lynch. *After the Propaganda State: Media, politics, and "thought work" in reformed China*. Stanford

information control and government propaganda in shaping public opinion remains unclear. On the one hand, citizens may discount government statements as biased propaganda.³³ As Pool notes, “the public learns to read between the lines. It becomes accustomed to interpreting clues to the truth that are buried in the unreliable information available to them.”³⁴ On the other hand, propaganda may encourage citizens to echo the “party line” and act as if they support the government even when they have access to unbiased information about international events.³⁵ The balance between mass incredulity and deference will affect whether authoritarian regimes are able to use propaganda to shape public reactions to crisis events. Even if citizens shield their private preferences, the extent of stated popular support for the government represents an important bulwark against collective action.

2.1 Public Reactions to Expressions of Resolve

How do authoritarian publics evaluate their government’s performance in international crises, thereby shaping the expected calculus of authoritarian leaders? Public expressions of resolve by the government—including explicit threats to use force, the mobilization of military forces, and vague but escalatory rhetoric—can have a variety of effects on domestic audiences in international crises.

First, by the logic of audience costs, public threats to use force articulate a commitment, putting the country’s honor and reputation at stake; if the commitment is not fulfilled, the nation’s reputation is harmed, of which the public disapproves. Fearon’s influential argument holds that domestic audiences disapprove of leaders who back down after escalating a crisis because they “deplore the *international* loss of credibility, face, or honor.”³⁶ A large empirical and theoretical literature has examined and debated the scope conditions, microfoundations, and historical relevance of these “domestic audience costs”, often understood as arising from the failure to carry-out public threats or commitments.³⁷

University Press, 1999.

³³Branislav L Slantchev. “Politicians, the media, and domestic audience costs”. In: *International Studies Quarterly* 50.2 (2006), pp. 445–477.

³⁴Ithiel De Sola Pool. “Communication in totalitarian societies”. In: *I. de Sola Pool, Wilbur Schram, et. al., Handbook of Political Communication, Chicago, Ill, Rand McNally College Publishing Co* (1973), p. 463.

³⁵Andrew T. Little. “Propaganda and Credulity”. 2015.

³⁶James D. Fearon. “Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes”. In: *The American Political Science Review* 88.3 (1994), pp. 577–592, p. 581.

³⁷Kenneth A. Schultz. “Looking for Audience Costs”. In: *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45.1 (2001), pp. 32–60, p. 33; Alastair Smith. “International Crises and Domestic Politics”. In: *American Political Science Review* 92.3 (1998), pp. 623–638; Weeks, “Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve”, p. 35; Alexander B Downes and Todd S Sechser. “The Illusion of Democratic Credibility”. In: *International Organization* 66.03 (2012), pp. 457–489; Snyder and Borghard, “The Cost of Empty Threats: A Penny, Not a Pound”, p. 438; B.L. Slantchev. “Audience Cost Theory and Its Audiences”. In: *Security Studies* 21.3 (2012), pp. 376–382; M. Trachtenberg. “Audience Costs: An Historical Analysis”. In: *Security Studies* 21.1 (2012), pp. 3–42; Stephen Chaudoin. “Promises or Policies? An Experimental Analysis of International Agreements and Audience Reactions”. In: *International Organization* 68.01 (2014), pp. 235–256. URL: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0020818313000386, p. 235; Alexandre Debs and Jessica Chen Weiss. “Circumstances, Domestic Audiences, and Reputational Incentives in International Crisis Bargaining”. In: *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (2014).

Survey experimental studies of audience costs have been largely conducted in democratic settings,³⁸ and an important set of recent survey experiments investigating public aversion to using force against democracies have been conducted only in democracies.³⁹ Democracies are a natural place to begin investigating these phenomena, since audience costs have been proposed as part of the democratic advantage over autocracies in international relations.⁴⁰ In order to evaluate the comparative claim that these processes—domestic audience costs and aversion to using force against democracies—are part of the democratic advantage, we also need to investigate whether and how they work in autocracies. Understanding authoritarian incentives in international crises is especially important given that many military conflicts involve at least one authoritarian regime.⁴¹ However, to fully explain the high level of conflict between autocracies and democracies, we also need to explain why and under what conditions authoritarian leaders stand firm rather than back down when faced with such resolved democratic opponents.

Scholars have also noted that explicit statements of commitment (“threats”) appear to be relatively rare, as Snyder and Borghard point out: “leaders see unambiguously committing threats...as imprudent. They almost always seek to retain significant flexibility, rather than lock in.”⁴² In this vein, the precision of a public commitment should affect the size of audience costs.⁴³ The more explicit and precise the threat to use force, the more likely reputation is to be harmed by the failure to do so, and the more likely domestic audiences are to identify the government’s failure to follow through and disapprove of inaction. By calling the use of chemical weapons in Syria a “red line,” for example, President Obama made it relatively easy for critics to call his inaction a blow to US credibility and reputation.⁴⁴ Expressions of resolve need not be verbal. In fact, in coercive bargaining diplomatic expressions “often take the form of actions rather than words”.⁴⁵ In particular, the mobilization of forces may

³⁸Tomz, “Domestic Audience Costs in International Relations: An Experimental Approach”, p. 823; Trager and Vavreck, “The Political Costs of Crisis Bargaining: Presidential Rhetoric and the Role of Party”; Levendusky and Horowitz, “When Backing Down is the Right Decision: Partisanship, New Information, and Audience Costs”, p. 2; Graeme AM Davies and Robert Johns. “Audience Costs among the British Public: The Impact of Escalation, Crisis Type, and Prime Ministerial Rhetoric”. In: *International Studies Quarterly* (2013), p. 725; Joshua D Kertzer and Ryan Brutger. “Decomposing Audience Costs: Bringing the Audience Back Into Audience Cost Theory”. In: *American Journal of Political Science* (2015), pp. 1–49, p. 1; for non-experimental studies of audience costs in authoritarian regimes, Weeks examines the role of elite but not mass audiences, while Weiss analyzes the role of street protests but not the mass public. Weeks, “Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve”; Weiss, “Authoritarian Signaling, Mass Audiences, and Nationalist Protest in China”.

³⁹Michael Tomz and Jessica L. Weeks. “Public Opinion and the Democratic Peace”. In: *American Political Science Review* 107.4 (2013), pp. 849–865.

⁴⁰Fearon called this democratic advantage in audience costs a “plausible working hypothesis”.(Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes”, p. 582)

⁴¹On the high frequency of conflict between mixed and authoritarian dyads, see, e.g., Bruce Russett and John Oneal. *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2001.

⁴²Snyder and Borghard, “The Cost of Empty Threats: A Penny, Not a Pound”, p. 437.

⁴³Trager and Vavreck, “The Political Costs of Crisis Bargaining: Presidential Rhetoric and the Role of Party”.

⁴⁴“Panetta: Obama’s ‘red line’ on Syria damaged US credibility,” *The Hill*, 7 October 2014.

⁴⁵Thomas C. Schelling. *Arms and Influence*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966, p. 142.

be an especially clear expression of resolve;⁴⁶ in democratic survey experiments, citizens disapproved more of leaders who mobilized but ultimately did not send in the troops.⁴⁷

H_A (Audience Costs): *Explicit threats to use force should increase domestic disapproval of inaction.*

Second, domestic audiences may not care as much about the fulfilling of coercive commitments, as other attributes of the government's behavior.⁴⁸ Citizens may even see honor in valor, regarding a leader who expresses resolve to defend the nation as brave rather than meek or spineless, even if the leader ultimately eschews the use force. As Fearon notes: "Political audiences need not and do not always [disapprove of empty threats]. For example, leaders of small states may be *rewarded* for escalating crises with big states and then backing down.... Standing up to a 'bully' may be praised even if one ultimately retreats."⁴⁹

Put another way, some citizens may actually reward *bluster*—"to speak in a loud, angry, or offended way, usually with little effect"⁵⁰—rather than disapproving of belligerence.⁵¹ Domestic audiences may also approve of their government for speaking up in defense of the country's rights and claims, especially when failure to do so could weaken the legal basis of the country's claims. In countries where leaders have limited options and capabilities, tough talk may be better than no talk, even if the outcome is the same.⁵²

Whether the reaction is emotional or rational, audiences evaluate the act of talking tough in addition to whatever (in)action follows. Since the reputational costs of inaction should be weaker when the public has difficulty evaluating whether the government's actions are inconsistent with its commitments, vague expressions of resolve are more likely to rally popular support when audiences approve of bluster.

H_{B1} (Benefits of Bluster): *Tough but vague expressions of resolve increase public approval, even if the government does not take action or backs down.*

On the other hand, vague expressions of resolve may also incur public disapproval if the public disapproves of belligerent talk:

⁴⁶Branislav L Slantchev. "Military coercion in interstate crises". In: *American Political Science Review* 99.04 (2005), pp. 533–547.

⁴⁷Michael Tomz. "Domestic Audience Costs in International Relations: An Experimental Approach". 5. In: *International Organization* 61.4 (2007). URL: <http://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en-us&q=Domestic+Audience+Costs+in+International+Relations:+An+Experimental+Approach&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>.

⁴⁸Snyder and Borghard, "The Cost of Empty Threats: A Penny, Not a Pound"; Kertzer and Brutger, "Decomposing Audience Costs: Bringing the Audience Back into Audience Cost Theory"; Debs and Weiss, "Circumstances, Domestic Audiences, and Reputational Incentives in International Crisis Bargaining". Schultz also notes that bluffing may be an optimal strategy, making it unclear why audiences would rationally punish a leader for backing down. Kenneth A. Schultz. "Do Democratic Institutions Constrain or Inform? Contrasting Two Institutional Perspectives on Democracy and War". In: *International Organization* 53.2 (1999), pp. 233–266, p. 237.

⁴⁹Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes", p. 580.

⁵⁰<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/bluster>.

⁵¹Kertzer and Brutger, "Decomposing Audience Costs: Bringing the Audience Back into Audience Cost Theory".

⁵²Domestic audiences in powerful countries may be more likely to criticize tough talk and little action, when their government has the material capabilities to speak softly and carry a big stick.

H_{B2} (Belligerence Costs): *Tough but vague expressions of resolve decrease public approval, especially if the government does not take action or backs down.*

When leaders express resolve but do not follow through, the net effect on public approval thus depends on the balance between the costs of inconsistency (“audience costs”) and approval or disapproval of talking tough in the first place. In addition, audience reactions may not be homogenous, as Kertzer and Brutger note. Hawks and conservatives might be more likely to approve of bluster, while doves and liberals might be more likely to regard such behavior as belligerence. The composition and distribution of preferences across the public will likely affect the balance of approval and disapproval of bluster. This holds whether expressions of resolve are verbal or physical. For example, mobilizing the troops might generate domestic benefits, if audiences believe that some symbolic resistance and saber rattling is better than saying nothing,⁵³ or it may generate domestic costs, if viewed by respondents as too belligerent or harming the nation’s reputation when ultimately force is not used.

2.2 Government Rhetoric and Elite Cues

Many authoritarian governments devote significant effort to “guiding” public opinion. As Mao Zedong told his comrades: “When you make revolution, you must first manage public opinion.”⁵⁴ Studies of audience costs in democratic settings have shown that elite cues, framing narratives, and the media environment are important moderators of public approval in international crises.⁵⁵ In authoritarian regimes, the public is even more likely to learn about crisis developments and foreign provocations through media outlets that are government-influenced or controlled.

To shape domestic opinion on foreign affairs, the Chinese government relies heavily on media guidance and public propaganda. Since Deng Xiaoping ushered in the era of “Reform and Opening”, the Chinese government has sought to preserve a stable external environment for domestic development, including the “shelving” of territorial disputes for later generations to solve. To bolster popular support when international tensions rise, Chinese officials have employed a variety of rhetorical strategies. We examine whether three commonly used frames or “elite cues” are effective at shaping domestic support and mitigating disapproval of inaction.

The first two cues provide justifications for international restraint, enabling us to evaluate whether authoritarian publics are receptive to explanations for inaction, like their democratic counterparts.⁵⁶ First, the *Cost* cue emphasizes the domestic costs of conflict, reflect-

⁵³Oakes, “Diversionary war and Argentina’s invasion of the Falkland Islands”.

⁵⁴Quoted in Michel Oksenberg, “The Political Leader,” in Dick Wilson. *Mao Tse-Tung in the scales of history: a preliminary assessment organized by the China quarterly*. CUP Archive, 1977, p. 179.

⁵⁵Slantchev, “Politicians, the media, and domestic audience costs”; Trager and Vavreck, “The Political Costs of Crisis Bargaining: Presidential Rhetoric and the Role of Party”; Levendusky and Horowitz, “When Backing Down is the Right Decision: Partisanship, New Information, and Audience Costs”; Potter and Baum, “Looking for Audience Costs in all the Wrong Places: Electoral Institutions, Media Access, and Democratic Constraint”.

⁵⁶Levendusky and Horowitz, “When Backing Down is the Right Decision: Partisanship, New Information, and Audience Costs”.

ing broader insights about economic interdependence and casualty-sensitivity as a bulwark against war.⁵⁷ To dampen the public’s appetite for confrontation, Chinese officials have often invoked the cost to China’s own citizens.⁵⁸ For example, to discourage popular demands for conflict in the East China Sea, Political Commissar of the PLA General Logistics Department General Liu Yuan spoke of the high cost of war.⁵⁹ In designing the elite cue, we followed General Liu’s words closely. While leaders may have the costs of conflict in mind, it remains to be seen whether authoritarian citizens are persuaded by these justifications for restraint and approve of leaders who do not take action.

H_{EC} (Elite Cue, Costs): *Statements that justify inaction by invoking the costs of war will increase public approval.*

Second, the *Biding Time* cue frames war as a potential setback and invokes the prospect of future success, characterizing inaction as honorable rather than a humiliating retreat or backing down. Biding time narratives emphasize building one’s strength in the present and waiting for a more advantageous opportunity in the future.⁶⁰ As the head of the (disarmed) German army reportedly said during the interwar years, “First we’ll get strong, then we’ll take back what we lost.”⁶¹

Chinese officials have frequently emphasized strategic forbearance and the “overall picture” (*da ju*) to dampen demands for immediate action and counsel patience. The “lie low and bide time” principle (*tao guang yang hui*) has often been used to characterize China’s grand strategy in the PRC reform era, a phrase that emerged from a series of Deng Xiaoping’s speeches in the late 1980s and 1990s and is sometimes translated as “keep a low profile” or “hide brightness and cherish obscurity.”⁶² While the *tao guang yang hui* maxim is often interpreted as implying the future assertion of Chinese power, other scholars have noted that it does not necessarily mean that China plans to challenge US primacy in the future.⁶³ Indeed, biding time messages often invoke the benefits of restraint by making implicit or vague references to the future, without a specific commitment to take action.

⁵⁷On the cost- and casualty- sensitivity of democratic citizens’ support for war, see, e.g., Adam J Berinsky. “Assuming the costs of war: Events, elites, and American public support for military conflict”. In: *Journal of Politics* 69.4 (2007), pp. 975–997; Christopher Gelpi, Peter D Feaver, and Jason Reifler. *Paying the human costs of war: American public opinion and casualties in military conflicts*. Princeton University Press, 2009; Scott Sigmund Gartner. “The multiple effects of casualties on public support for war: An experimental approach”. In: *American Political Science Review* 102.01 (2008), pp. 95–106.

⁵⁸At a lower level of escalation, Chinese officials have also warned citizens against boycotting foreign-branded goods by noting that such goods are often manufactured in China.

⁵⁹“Under Xi, China seeks to cool row with Japan over islands,” Reuters, March 16, 2013; “She ping: he ping jin 30 nian hou, wo men yinggai ru he kan da zhang,” *Huanqiu Shibao*, January 15, 2013, in English at <http://opinion.huanqiu.com/editorial/2013-01/3494346.html>.

⁶⁰For a powerful democratic state like the United States, a parallel justification for inaction might be the specter of “quagmire,” a costly conflict that would draw US resources away from the primary task of defeating the Soviet Union.

⁶¹As quoted in Jeffrey W. Legro. “What China Will Want: The Future Intentions of a Rising Power”. In: *Perspectives on Politics* null (03 Sept. 2007), pp. 515–534, p. 519.

⁶²Dingding Chen and Jianwei Wang. “Lying low no more? China’s new thinking on the Tao Guang Yang Hui strategy”. In: *China: An International Journal* 9.02 (2011), pp. 195–216.

⁶³Michael D Swaine. “Perceptions of an assertive China”. In: *China Leadership Monitor* 32.2 (2010), pp. 1–19, p. 7.

In recent years, scholars have debated whether China’s foreign policy strategy began to shift in late 2009 or early 2010, putting aside a biding time or low-profile stance in favor of an increasingly “assertive” approach, especially in Chinese maritime and territorial disputes.⁶⁴ Yet some senior Chinese officials have continued to emphasize the importance of restraint for China’s continued development, including General Liu Yuan in 2013. As with the costs of war, however, the impact of biding time justifications on public opinion has not been systematically examined. If biding time narratives remain effective at bolstering public support for international restraint, then recent Chinese “assertiveness” in its territorial and maritime disputes is less likely a reflection of unavoidable domestic pressure than a deliberate strategic choice by Beijing.

In designing the biding time cue, we closely followed General Liu’s words, quoting his statement that China should not be baited into war in the East China Sea, a “trap” set by other powers to derail China’s rise. By recasting inaction as consistent with honorable behavior, such biding time narratives may lessen public demands for tough measures.

H_{EB} (Elite Cue, Biding Time): *Statements that justify inaction by invoking future success will increase public approval.*

A third *History* narrative invokes a shared trope or collective myth about the nation’s past. Governments seeking to bolster their domestic legitimacy often invoke nationalist references to a shared history of national trauma and rejuvenation.⁶⁵ However, the effects of such nationalist narratives on popular support in international crises have not been systematically evaluated.⁶⁶ Reminding respondents of a shared national trauma may encourage solidarity with the government in the face of adversity, generating a rally effect. International relations scholars have typically examined whether democratic publics display a rally-round-the-flag effect after the use of force or other dramatic events.⁶⁷ But because authoritarian leaders

⁶⁴See, e.g., Alastair Iain Johnston. “How new and assertive is China’s new assertiveness?” In: *International Security* 37.4 (2013), pp. 7–48; Dingding Chen, Xiaoyu Pu, and Alastair Iain Johnston. “Debating China’s Assertiveness”. In: (2014); Yan Xuetong. “From keeping a low profile to striving for achievement”. In: *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* (2014), pou027.

⁶⁵Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition*; Edward D Mansfield and Jack Snyder. *Electing to fight: Why emerging democracies go to war*. MIT Press, 2007; Bunce and Wolchik, “Defeating dictators: Electoral change and stability in competitive authoritarian regimes”; Peter Hays Gries. *Chinas new nationalism: Pride, politics, and diplomacy*. Univ of California Press, 2004; Yinan He. *The Search for Reconciliation: Sino-Japanese and German-Polish Relations since World War II*. Cambridge University Press, 2009; Suisheng Zhao. *A nation-state by construction: Dynamics of modern Chinese nationalism*. Stanford University Press, 2004; Zheng Wang. *Never forget national humiliation: Historical memory in Chinese politics and foreign relations*. Columbia University Press, 2014.

⁶⁶Elite manipulation of nationalism and nationalist persuasion campaigns have been linked to an increased likelihood of interstate conflict. See Gretchen Schrock-Jacobson. “The violent consequences of the nation nationalism and the initiation of interstate war”. In: *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56.5 (2012), pp. 825–852.

⁶⁷The literature is too extensive to cite fully here, but see, e.g., J E Mueller. *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*. University Press of America, 1973; Brian Lai and Dan Reiter. “Rally ‘round the union jack? Public opinion and the use of force in the United Kingdom, 1948–2001”. In: *International Studies Quarterly* 49.2 (2005), pp. 255–272; William D Baker and John R Oneal. “Patriotism or opinion leadership? The nature and origins of the “rally’round the flag” effect”. In: *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45.5 (2001), pp. 661–687; Marc J Hetherington and Michael Nelson. “Anatomy of a Rally Effect: George W. Bush and the War on Terrorism”. In: *Political Science & Politics* (Jan. 2003).

routinely employ nationalist appeals and propaganda without using force in international disputes, it is important to investigate the independent effect of nationalist messages on public approval, particularly when the government does not take action. In addition to promoting solidarity with the government, invoking past losses may alter how respondents evaluate the status quo, reminding them of how far the nation has come in defending its interests. Like biding time, the history frame may give an honorable frame to present inaction, tying the current dispute into a long-term struggle for status. Where the biding time cue emphasizes the future, the historical frame highlights the past.⁶⁸

H_{EH} (History): *Statements that invoke a shared national trauma will increase public approval.*

3 Research Design

To evaluate these arguments, we fielded two complementary survey experiments in China between October 2015 and March 2016, $n_1=2992$ and $n_2=5445$. We recruited respondents through Qualtrics’ Chinese partners, two national market research firms that regularly invite respondents to take surveys on a voluntary basis in exchange for small cash payments. Participants were then directed to our anonymous, US-based Qualtrics survey. As the Appendix shows, respondents came from provinces all across China and from different income, educational, and urban/rural backgrounds. The gender and age distribution were particularly comparable to the general population of internet users in China. The educational attainment was somewhat higher in our sample than the general netizen population, similar to samples analyzed in other recent online surveys.⁶⁹

In both experiments, we manipulated key aspects of what respondents were told about the dispute before asking their opinion of the government’s foreign policy performance. This method enables us to evaluate the consequences of “off equilibrium” behavior rarely found in observational data, such as publicly backing down when national honor is at stake or other actions that might elicit popular disapproval.⁷⁰

The first experiment employed a prevalent design, which we refer to as the *hypothetical design*. Hypothetical scenarios offer several advantages. They provide freedom to design vignettes to match precisely the theoretical framework being evaluated. By avoiding the idiosyncrasies of any particular scenario, abstract (hypothetical) scenarios may yield more generalizable inferences.⁷¹ However, abstract hypothetical designs also have potential disadvantages. Respondents may react differently to a hypothetical situation in a survey than to an actual crisis. As hypothetical scenarios become more abstract and devoid of contextual information, the connection between survey responses and real-world reactions to particular crises becomes more tenuous, weakening external validity. Conversely, respondents may draw upon their knowledge of real world examples in answering questions about abstract

⁶⁸This mechanism was unanticipated, as we primarily expected the nationalist, historical narrative to magnify audience costs by heightening the importance of honor.

⁶⁹See, for example, Haifeng Huang. “International Knowledge and Domestic Evaluations in a Changing Society: The Case of China”. In: *American Political Science Review* 109.03 (2015), pp. 613–634.

⁷⁰Schultz, “Looking for Audience Costs”.

⁷¹Though the scope and merit of this claim remain to be empirically evaluated.

scenarios. Manipulating certain aspects of a scenario can change respondents' beliefs about other, unmentioned features of the scenario, introducing a form of bias akin to confounding biases in observational studies.⁷² For example, informing Chinese respondents that an unnamed "neighboring country" is a powerful democracy and a US ally is likely to make respondents think of Japan, plausibly influencing their responses in unintended ways. Indeed, by asking respondents whether they had any country in mind while taking the survey, we found that our respondents were more likely to report that they were thinking of Japan if the scenario mentioned that the adversary had strong military capabilities, was a US ally, or was a democracy.

To complement the hypothetical design, we also introduce a *selective-history* survey experiment. In this design, we provided respondents with selective information about real events, here a recent crisis in the East China Sea, before asking respondents for their opinions.⁷³ The selective history design can be understood as estimating two distinct causal effects.

First, a selective-history design estimates the effects of controlling information. Does the selective presentation of information about previous crises influence public approval? This is an especially policy-relevant causal estimand in authoritarian states, where the government has substantial influence over the media and dissemination of information about crisis events. In China, state-run media often reminds the public about selective aspects of previous crises, such as the death of pilot Wang Wei during the 2001 EP-3 collision.⁷⁴ Since a selective-history design more closely mimics real world statements and behavior, it poses a relatively externally valid means of studying these phenomena. To the extent that our survey design deviates from the real world, it is likely to lead to attenuated effects since our survey is a less realistic, potent, and saturated source of information about past events, compared to what the government can broadcast through sustained television and radio coverage. If our manipulations affect opinion, then so should stronger manipulations in the real world.

Second, a selective-history design can be understood as estimating the impact of events in a crisis. This is the estimand more typically investigated in survey experiments. The selective-history design is plausibly more externally valid than a hypothetical design because it involves an actual (and hence more realistic) crisis, implicitly involving all the contextual information that was relevant to the respondent during the actual crisis and confining ourselves to situations that have actually occurred. Given the infrequency of unambiguous and explicit public threats to use force, for example, the selective-history design allows us to evaluate the effect of actual statements and threats.

However, selective-history designs also have disadvantages. First, we are limited to events and statements that actually transpired, making it more difficult to evaluate the effect of behavior that has yet to occur, such as unambiguous threats to use force or mobilization of troops for a China-US conflict. Second, the magnitude of the effects we are able to measure may be attenuated if respondents' knowledge of events that have occurred crowds out our representation of them. While this makes it harder to detect effects (reducing statistical

⁷²Allan Dafoe, Baobao Zhang, and Devin Caughey. "Confounding in Survey Experiments". Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Political Methodology. 2015.

⁷³Another example of a selective-history design is in (Dustin Tingley. *Rising Power on the Mind*. 2015), which reminds some American respondents about China's declaration of the ADIZ.

⁷⁴See, for example, China Central Television, April 3, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1h3k5Sa>

power), the effects we find are likely to be underestimates of real world effects. It is also possible that the magnitude of effects that we will estimate are greater than what would arise in a real crisis, for two reasons: first, in a real crisis the government may prevent certain information from being presented, such as news that the Chinese government did not take action to stop the US from continuing to fly through China’s newly declared Air Defense Identification Zone; and second, respondents may feel more strongly about events when reminded of them than when they first occurred, if effects increase with exposure.⁷⁵

Ultimately, both hypothetical and selective-history designs have strengths and limitations. By combining the two and looking for the observable implications of theories from multiple angles, we hope to make progress on these important questions. Below, we describe the two designs.

3.1 Hypothetical Design

For comparability, our hypothetical design follows the spirit of Tomz’s (2007) canonical audience cost study, but we modify the vignette so that it describes an abstract territorial dispute that China has faced and will continue to face. We do so for two reasons. First, it is in this context that Chinese leaders invoke the pressure of public opinion, so this provides reason to believe that if Chinese audience costs exist, they should be present in this empirical domain. Second, China’s limited global reach and reluctance to intervene in third party disputes make the conventional audience cost scenario (an optional foreign policy crisis in which the government decides whether to intervene in a conflict between two other states) much less plausible than in an American or British context.

Respondents read the following vignette, worded to describe either a maritime or land dispute. Five contextual variables, assigned independently, gave details that prevent the scenario from being too abstract and were manipulated to ensure that any causal effects we estimate are averages across this covariate space.⁷⁶ These covariates are regime type, alliance with the US, military power, and the material value of the territory. Respondents who received the *History* treatment were told that the disputed territory was part of the land lost during the “Century of National Humiliation” from the Opium Wars to the founding of the PRC in 1949.

There exists a territorial dispute between China and a neighboring country. The neighboring country is led by [*a non-democratic government* OR *a democratic government*], which [*is* OR *is not*] an ally of the United States. The neighboring country has [*a strong military, so in the event of war it would* OR *a weak military, so in the event of war it would not*] take a major effort for China to secure control of the territory. Experts believe that allowing the neighboring country to control the territory [*would hurt* OR *would not affect*] the safety and economy of China. [*The disputed territory was part of the land China lost during the Century of National Humiliation* OR *no mention.*]

⁷⁵A key assumption is that reminding or informing a subject about past events generates effects in the same direction (positive or negative) as the actual crisis events.

⁷⁶In addition, if other theories predict heterogeneous effects across some of these covariates, our survey design will allow researchers to investigate these.

Respondents then read none, some, or all of the following (assigned in an independent factorial manner, except only one of the two elite cues was given):⁷⁷

- *Statement of Commitment*: The Chinese government states that the neighboring country must recognize Chinese sovereignty or China will use force to take the territory.
- *Mobilization*: China mobilizes military forces to prepare to take the territory by force.
- *Elite Cue, Biding Time*: Chinese officials explain that fighting a war over the territory would be a grave mistake. According to a senior Chinese military official, “China’s neighbors will use all means to check China’s development, but we absolutely must not take their bait.”
- *Elite Cue, Costs*: Chinese officials explain that fighting a war over the territory would be too costly. According to a senior Chinese military official, “Since we have enjoyed peace for quite a long time, many young people do not know what a war is like, it is actually very cruel and costly. If there is any alternative way to solve the problem, there is no need to resort to the means of extreme violence for a solution.”

The scenario ended for all respondents with:

In the end, China does not take military action, and the neighboring country consolidates control over the territory.

3.2 Selective-History Design

The second survey presented respondents with a selective portrayal of recent events in China’s surrounding waters, focusing on China’s threat to use “defensive emergency measures” by Chinese armed forces if foreign aircraft fail to comply with China’s Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ). We chose this statement because it is one of the most prominent threats to use force that the Chinese government has made in recent territorial and maritime disputes. Indeed, US officials have made a point of warning China against declaring a similar ADIZ in the South China Sea, implying that such statements matter.⁷⁸ Still, the imprecise nature of the threatened consequences make it unlikely that we would observe audience costs arising due to inconsistency, and more likely that we would observe approval of *bluster* or disapproval of *belligerence*.

In the selective-history design, all respondents read the same opening context:

⁷⁷Two other independently assigned conditions that are analyzed in other work, but are not relevant to this paper, are: 1. Protests (A dozen Chinese protesters gather outside the neighboring country’s embassy, calling for the defense of Chinese sovereignty over the territory); and 2. Provocation (The neighboring country sends engineers to build infrastructure on the territory. When asked by a reporter if they were worried about China, the neighboring country’s spokesman dismissed the possibility, saying that China is a paper tiger).

⁷⁸US Department of State, Remarks with Philippine Foreign Secretary Alberto del Rosario, 17 December 2013, accessed at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/12/218835.htm>.

China and the U.S. do not agree about the appropriate rules for air transit in China’s surrounding waters. China’s position is that foreign aircraft should identify themselves and follow instructions. The U.S. has not agreed with this position.

The following treatments were randomly and independently assigned, with a control group receiving none of the treatments and reading only the common opening and closing context.⁷⁹

- *ADIZ*: On November 23, 2013 China announced an Air Defense Identification Zone over the East China Sea. China announced that if any foreign aircraft fails to identify itself to Chinese authorities or refuses to follow instructions, Chinese armed forces will take defensive emergency measures.
- *Elite Cue, Biding Time*: Chinese officials have explained that fighting a war in China’s surrounding waters would be a grave mistake. According to General Liu Yuan, Political Commissar of the PLA’s General Logistics Department, the United States is “afraid of us catching up and will use all means to check China’s development, but we absolutely must not take their bait.”
- *Elite Cue, Cost*: Chinese officials have explained that fighting a war in China’s surrounding waters would be too costly. According to General Liu Yuan, Political Commissar of the PLA’s General Logistics Department: “Since we have enjoyed peace for quite a long time, many young people do not know what a war is like, it is actually very cruel and costly. If there is any alternative way to solve the problem, there is no need to resort to the means of extreme violence for a solution.”
- *History*: The present dispute between the United States and China reflects a long history of China’s confrontations with foreign powers. As General Secretary Jiang Zemin wrote, “In more than 100 years after the Opium War, Chinese people were subjected to bullying and humiliation under foreign powers.” In 1949, Chairman Mao Zedong proclaimed the establishment of the new China, saying: “The Chinese people have stood up!”

The scenario then ended for all respondents with:

To this day, the U.S. continues to fly military planes through the area without identifying themselves or following instructions. China has not used force to stop this.

3.3 Outcome Questions

Our key outcome of interest was whether respondents approved of the government’s foreign policy performance.⁸⁰ Immediately after the scenario, we asked respondents to answer the following question, worded more generally in the hypothetical design.

⁷⁹In a separate paper we also analyze two other treatments related to provocation. These can be seen in Appendix D.

⁸⁰For full details on the surveys, see Appendices C and D.

(*Hypothetical*) How do you feel about the government’s performance in handling China’s international affairs?

(*Selective history*) Regarding the security situation in China’s surrounding waters, what is your overall evaluation of the government’s performance?

We then asked all respondents an open-ended question to elicit their reasoning:

Please explain in detail your answer to the question above.

4 Results

We analyze the data in two ways to assess whether these treatments affected respondents’ approval of the government’s performance, compared with respondents that did not receive the particular treatment. Per our preanalysis plan, the primary specification is a regression that controls only for conditions that we experimentally manipulated.⁸¹ Second, we control for a select set of covariates, as doing so may increase power. The covariate specifications provided similar but often more significant results.⁸²

4.1 Expressions of Resolve

First we consider the effect of *Statements of Commitment* in the hypothetical design and *ADIZ* in the selective history design. Interestingly, we see contrasting effects. In the hypothetical design, the explicit threat reduced approval of the government’s performance, consistent with domestic audience costs. By contrast, the *ADIZ* treatment increased approval in the selective history design, consistent with the view that tough but vague statements can be publicly rewarded even if followed by inaction. Furthermore, *Mobilization* had a positive effect on approval, though not at conventional levels of significance. The positive effect of saber rattling and tough talk without action is more consistent with the benefits of bluster than the costs of belligerence.

The results are similar and a bit stronger when we control for other covariates, as depicted in Figure 1. The confidence intervals depicted are 1.64 and 1.96 standard errors wide, denoted by the thick and thin lines; exclusion of 0 indicates a two-sided rejection of the null hypothesis of no average effect at $p < 0.1$ or $p < 0.05$ respectively. These differences in approval across

⁸¹These include the treatment conditions described here, the order of the answer options (which we randomized to diagnose inattention), and whether a set of pre-scenario questions were asked about respondents’ political views, the importance of defending the national honor even if it jeopardizes the stability of China’s international environment, and whether the Chinese government relies on military strength too much or too little to achieve its foreign policy goals.

⁸²In addition to the above mentioned covariates, these covariates consist of: which of two Qualtrics’ partners provided the respondent; the answer to the pre-scenario questions (about the outcome, national honor, support for using military strength, political views); an indicator for whether the answer to the two preceding questions was “don’t know” or “refuse to answer”; reported gender, education, and age; an indicator for whether the preceding were missing; and covariates to control for changes in response associated with the date and time when the survey was taken, specifically a cubic polynomial of survey date-time and an indicator for whether the survey was part of the “second wave” after December 5th 2015.

treatment and control groups suggest that domestic audience costs exist in China for explicit threats, but not for tough but vague statements or actions.

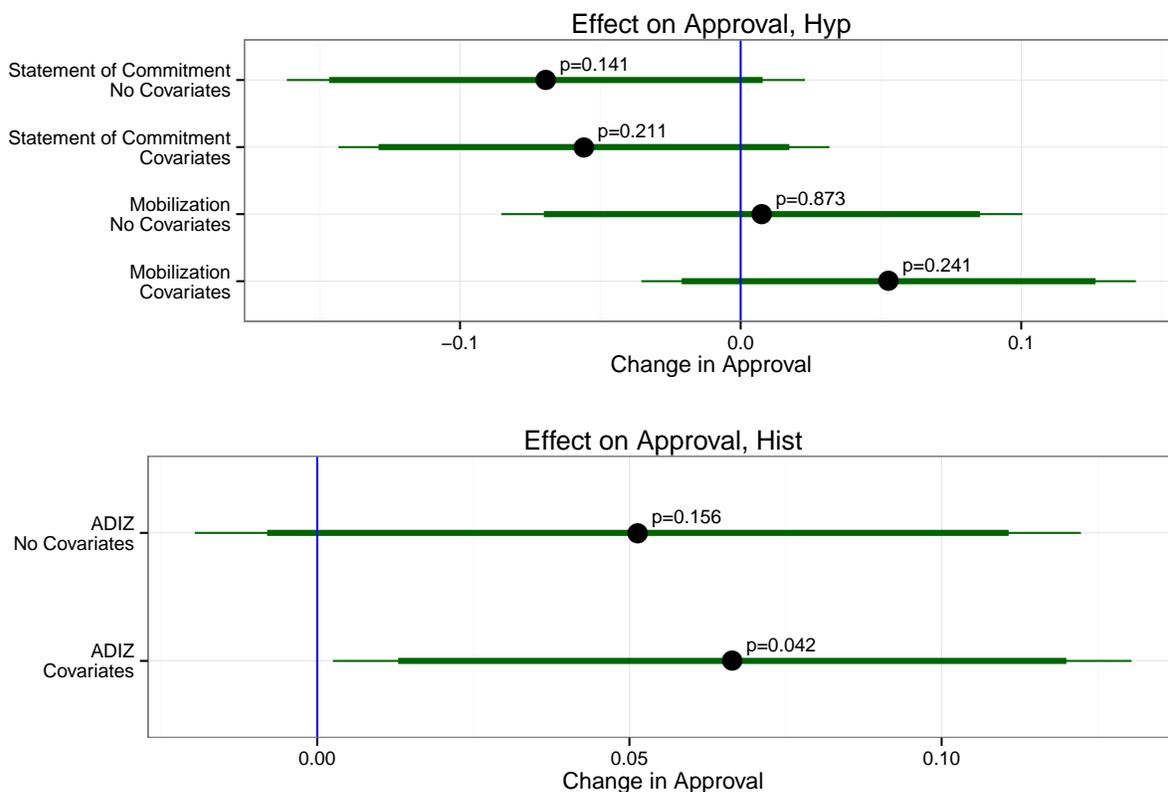


Figure 1: Effect of Expressions of Resolve

What were respondents thinking as they read the scenario and responded to our questions? By asking respondents to explain in detail their answer to our question about approval, we obtained a rich source of qualitative data on the underlying mechanisms driving our results. For audience costs, we found evidence consistent with several theories of why respondents would disapprove of the government’s failure to fulfill explicit threats. On betrayal of the national honor,⁸³ for example, one respondent wrote: “Strong start, weak finish, lost national honor (*hu tou she wei, sang shi guo jia rong yu*).” On the inconsistency of words and deeds, another respondent wrote, “All words, no action (*guang shuo bu zuo*),” after learning of the government’s inaction following a hypothetical threat to use force. Consistent with arguments that audiences disapprove of empty threats for revealing the leadership’s incompetence,⁸⁴ one respondent wrote: “The incompetent Chinese Communist Party (*wu neng de Gongchandang*).” On harming the nation’s credibility,⁸⁵ a number of respondents expressed concern about the reputational consequences of empty threats: “After declaring

⁸³Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes”.

⁸⁴Smith, “International Crises and Domestic Politics”.

⁸⁵Alexandra Guisinger and Alastair Smith. “Honest Threats The Interaction of Reputation and Political Institutions in International Crises”. In: *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46.2 (2002), pp. 175–200.

the use of force, in the end backed down with no result. If other neighbors learned, it will bring China more troubles (*jiran yijing shengming yong wuli jiejie, dao zui hou wu gong er fan, ruguo qita linguo dou jiejian, na jiang gei Zhongguo dailai gengduo mafan.*)!" Another wrote: "This will fuel the neighboring country's ambitions (*Zheyang hui zhuzhang gaiguo de yexin.*)"

As for the benefits of expressing resolve without ultimately taking action, many respondents were satisfied with the government's effort given that conflict at present would be unwise. As one respondent explained: "While defending the nation's sovereignty, we must also take the overall situation into account, safeguard the international environment for peaceful development, and handle issues 'on just grounds, to our advantage, and with restraint (*ji yao weihu guojia zhuquan, you yao daju wei zhong, weihu heping fazhan de kongjian huanjing, suoyi guojia you li you li you jie de chuli wenti.*)"

Recognizing that China would have difficulty successfully challenging the US at present, many who received the ADIZ treatment forgave the government's inaction by referencing the future, even without receiving the biding time cue. One respondent wrote: "Keep a low profile, bide time, no confidence of victory right now (*tao guang yang hui, zanshi meiyou bisheng de bawo.*)" Another respondent stated: "Stability and development is a prerequisite for China. It is best to avoid wars. When China is developed, we will no longer fear anyone (*Zhongguo yi wending fazhan wei qianti, neng bu da jiu bu da, deng fazhan hao le, jiu shei dou bu pa.*)" Another cautioned that "The US has hidden, ulterior motives by doing this. We should not take the trap (*Meiguo zheyang zuo shi juxin poce, bieyou yongxin, wo men bu yao shang ta de dang.*)"

The hawkishness of mass attitudes in the PRC may help explain why the benefits of bluster outweighed the costs. At the start of the survey, we assessed respondents' general views before the scenario context or treatment conditions. Two prescenario questions evaluated how hawkish or concerned respondents were about defending the national honor.⁸⁶ Far more respondents were hawkish or neutral than dovish, and most respondents felt that it was important or very important to defend the national honor, even if it meant international conflict or instability, as shown in the Appendix. This distribution of hawkish beliefs does not appear to be distinctive to our online sample. As the Appendix illustrates, our respondents' beliefs about the desirability of using military means to achieve China's foreign policy goals was roughly comparable to the face-to-face, GPS-assisted multistage probability survey of urban residents conducted by the Research Center on Contemporary China.⁸⁷ Domestic audiences are more likely to reward bluster when attitudes are predominantly hawkish and nationalistic than when doves are better represented and the distribution of preferences is more symmetrical or even bimodal.

⁸⁶The two questions were: "How important is it to defend the national honor even if it jeopardizes the stability of China's international environment?" and "In general, does China rely on military strength too much, too little or about the right amount to achieve its foreign policy goals?" We used the latter for comparison with the 2012 China-US Security Perceptions Project, discussed below.

⁸⁷This pre-scenario question was identical to Question B3 of the general public survey in China of the 2012 China-US Security Perceptions Project, Research Center for Contemporary China at Peking University. See <http://www.for-peace.org.cn/upload/20140410/1397141067591.pdf>

4.2 Elite Cues and Nationalist Propaganda

The data also suggest a powerful role for government rhetoric in shaping public perceptions and persuading citizens to see government (in)action in a more positive light. Figure 2 suggests that the history and biding time cues had positive effects, while the costs cue did not seem to have an effect.

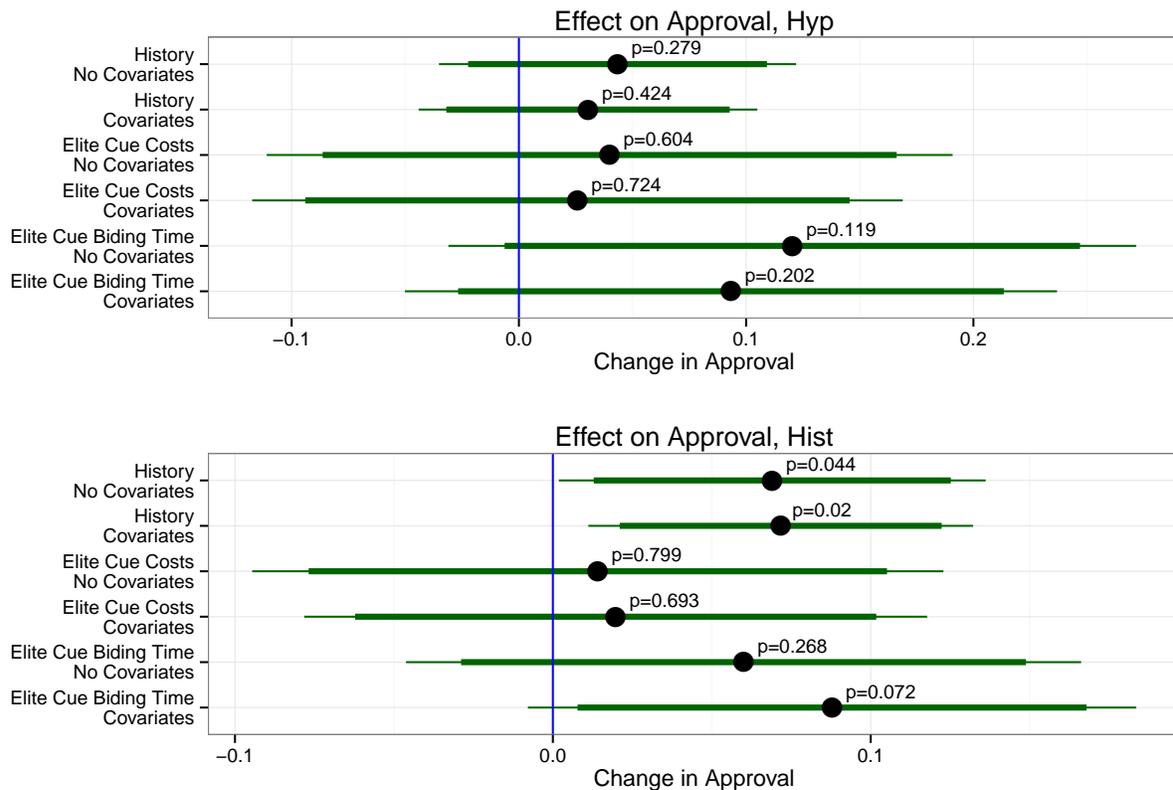


Figure 2: Effect of Elite Rhetoric

Many respondents who received the biding time cue explained in their own words a willingness to defer satisfaction to the future. As one respondent wrote: “We are still a developing country. Can’t be penny wise and pound foolish and take the trap of some countries. Wait for the right time to teach this guy who has no clue how high the sky is or how thick the earth is (*wo men haishi yi ge fazhanzhong guojia, bu neng yin xiao shi da, zhongle mouxie guojia de quantao, dengdao shidang shiji zai jia yi jiaoxun zhege bu zhi tian gao di hou wei hu zuo zhang de xiaozi*).” Another respondent explained: “Currently, the most important thing for China is development. Make future plans after development (*Zhongguo muqian zui zhuyao shi fazhan, fazhanhou da jin yi bu dasuan*).”

The history cue, which invoked a nationalist narrative of China’s victimization by foreign powers, elicited a variety of expressions of solidarity and support for the government, such as “I am Chinese. I love my homeland (*Wo shi Zhongguoren, wo re ai zuguo*)” and “I love my homeland. Whatever it does is right (*Wo ai wo de zuguo, zuguo zuo shenme dou shi dui*)”

de). The history cue in the selective-history design included a more extensive and explicit description of past humiliations as well as a more uplifting message about the successful establishment of the Chinese nation, probably accounting for its stronger effect than in the hypothetical design.

Although emphasizing the cost of war had a positive but not statistically significant effect on approval, a number of respondents gave qualitative responses consistent with the logic of the cue. In explaining her approval, one respondent wrote: “war brings too much loss to the masses (*zhanzheng dui laobaixing dailai de sunshi taida*),” while another respondent wrote that “Territorial sovereignty must be defended, but best not to use force, because war never brings benefit to the ordinary people of any country (*lingtu zhuquang shi xuyao hanwei de, zuihao jinliang buyao dong wu, yinwei dong wu dui na ge guojia youqi shi laobaixing meiyou haochu*).”

4.3 Attenuated Effects: Inattention or Self-Censorship?

Overall, our experimental manipulations did not generate effects as large as those found in studies of audience costs fielded to US and British samples. One explanation might be the low attentiveness of our sample, with approximately 35% failing our two easy attention filters.⁸⁸ Following our preanalysis plan, we ran our analysis on all respondents. Restricting our analysis to respondents who passed the attention filters strengthens the results somewhat. Based on our experience here and in two other survey experiments in China with different survey partners, we suspect that this low attentiveness is common to online surveys in China.

Another potential explanation is self-censorship. A concern with all surveys is whether respondents’ answers correspond with their sincere beliefs, especially in an authoritarian context where the government can punish the expression of certain political views. In designing our surveys, we sought to minimize the risks to our respondents while preserving the core scientific value of the research in three ways. First, we did not ask questions that could uniquely identify respondents, such as their name, email address, or other personally identifying questions. Second, our survey was hosted by Qualtrics, a reputable non-Chinese firm with strict security policies.⁸⁹ Third, our questions tried to solicit the types of opinions that Chinese citizens regularly voice on social media and do not fall very far outside the bounds of questions asked in other Chinese surveys.⁹⁰ As King, Pan, and Roberts have demonstrated,

⁸⁸The first read: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: The current population of China is more than five billion? (This is an attention filter. Please select disagree. The true population of China is in fact 1.4 billion).” The second read: “Now we would like to ask about your views on China’s geography and population. First, we will ask you a question to see if you are paying attention. Please choose the number twenty-two below.”

⁸⁹Their *Security White Paper Lite* can be found [here](#); their full *Security White Paper* is available from Qualtrics after signing a confidentiality agreement. For our purposes, it is worth noting that Qualtrics appears to employ best practices in protecting data and that their Asia/Pacific Servers are located in Sydney, Australia.

⁹⁰For example, the Chinese General Social Survey asks whether respondents have “ever attended self-motivated patriotic protest (including activities such as boycotting Japanese goods)”, and the TAMU China Survey asks whether respondents have ever “signed a petition”, “taken part in a demonstration”, or “joined an organization or group in support of a political cause”. The TAMU survey also asks whether respondents agree with the statement “the state is too strong” and “there is not enough freedom”, how satisfied respondents are with the central government, how respondents communicate with others about political issues,

it is not criticism of the government per se but commentary that could facilitate collective action that Chinese authorities typically censor.⁹¹ Nevertheless, given the Chinese government’s advanced cyber capabilities and potential sanctions against disaffected citizens, some respondents may have shielded or falsified their true beliefs.⁹² Some respondents may also be part of the “fifty-cent party (*wumao dang*)” in China, individuals who volunteer or are paid or obliged to post positive comments and engage in online “cheerleading.”⁹³

To assess the degree to which self-censorship or fifty-cent cheerleading might be affecting our results, we look at several variables. First, we look at whether our respondents offered answers that might be aimed at pleasing their government. If this were the case, we would expect to see nearly universal high approval of the government. Our data do not show this. The majority of respondents do not choose *Strongly Approve*, the median response is *Approve*, and about 33% of respondents did not *Approve* or *Strongly Approve* (see Appendix B.1). Second, we might think that respondents who are guarding their beliefs would not disapprove more of their government after specific scenarios, such as our statement of commitment condition, as they might suppress negative judgments on the government as a function of adverse events. This is also contrary to what we find. Third, we would expect to see high levels of agreement with the question *cc*: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “Criticism of government policy is unhelpful.” We did not see high levels of agreement with this statement. As figure 3 shows, as many respondents disagreed as agreed with it.

Although self-censorship or fifty-cent cheerleading does not appear to dominate our data, it may still be heavily influencing our results, attenuating our effects if respondents are more likely to agree with the government or avoid judging the government’s performance. After individually examining and hand-coding the open-ended responses, we found that approximately 13% of respondents expressed a wish to defer to the government’s judgment. While this makes it more difficult to detect effects, it may produce more externally valid estimates, depending on how we think about our causal estimand. One class of estimands relates to the respondents’ *private beliefs*: what the respondent would say if they were completely honest. Estimates of private beliefs are more likely to be biased by respondent concerns of government punishment. Another class of estimands relates to *public beliefs*: what respondents would be willing to say in public, in conversations with friends, and online. Private beliefs could be of primary interest, for example, if one wanted to evaluate how (expressed) public opinion could shift if there was a focal event that made people more willing to express their private beliefs. However, public beliefs are in many ways of greater importance, since public beliefs—what people are willing to express in the current political environment—are what determine the benefits and costs to the Chinese government of foreign

as well as whether respondents have “personally experienced or witnessed a situation of cadre corruption”. <http://thechinasurvey.tamu.edu/html/home.html>.

⁹¹King, Pan, and Roberts, “How censorship in China allows government criticism but silences collective expression”.

⁹²Timur Kuran. *Private truths, public lies: The social consequences of preference falsification*. Harvard University Press, 1997.

⁹³Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E Roberts. “How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, not Engaged Argument”. In: *Copy at http://j. mp/1Txxiz1 Download Citation BibTex Tagged XML Download Paper 2* (2016).

policy actions. Put differently, in order for domestic public opinion to “matter,” it needs to be expressed in a public manner. Thus, for evaluating these effects it is more appropriate to focus on public beliefs: what respondents are willing to say in a venue like an online survey. In any case, it is worth keeping in mind that all surveys are better able to estimate public beliefs than private beliefs.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

We have shown that at least one authoritarian regime may confront domestic costs for inaction in a hypothetical crisis when public threats are explicit. In the real world, however, the Chinese government has been able to rally popular support by making threats that were more bluster than unambiguous commitments and framing inaction as part of a long-run, “biding time” policy. These findings have several important implications for our understanding of threats, expressions of resolve, and elite rhetoric in international crises.

First, we conclude that scholars should be wary of inferring a democratic advantage in utilizing domestic audience costs for international bargaining leverage. Most international crises involve at least one authoritarian regime, but few studies have systematically investigated the mass pressures that authoritarian leaders face, and whether such leaders can effectively use propaganda to shape popular sentiment. Our two survey experiments in China provide suggestive evidence of authoritarian audience costs and indicate that some government explanations can be effective in justifying inaction. However, researchers have also shown that democratic governments are able to control the domestic costs of inaction or backing down through elite cues.⁹⁴ If these domestic costs exist and can be shaped by elites in both types of regimes, they cannot provide a categorical advantage to either regime type. There may still be a democratic advantage, but it is likely a matter of degree rather than of kind. Indeed, the magnitude of this difference is likely to vary with audience preferences, such as hawkish preferences and concern for the national honor.

Second, more work should study in a variety of settings the effect of realistic threats, which often fall short of explicit and unambiguous commitments. We found evidence that Chinese audience costs exist in a hypothetical territorial dispute when a threat was explicit and unambiguous, but we also found evidence of audience *benefits* of making a vague threat that went unfulfilled. In the real world, threats tend to be subtle and ambiguous, with complex effects: in part engaging audience costs, but also in part expressing resolve and articulating a nation’s claims.

Third, investigating how public preferences vary across countries and how government leaders vary in their sensitivity to public support are crucial tasks for future research. Why do some audiences reward bluster while others disapprove of it? The benefits of bluster or belligerence may have been overlooked because existing research has focused on developed, democratic societies in which audience preferences are likely less hawkish and nationalistic. In countries like China, where debates about the use of force are enmeshed in nationalist narratives of resistance and past trauma, even the symbolic defense of the nation’s honor

⁹⁴Trager and Vavreck, “The Political Costs of Crisis Bargaining: Presidential Rhetoric and the Role of Party”; Levendusky and Horowitz, “When Backing Down is the Right Decision: Partisanship, New Information, and Audience Costs”.

may be critical to sustaining popular support. Which audience or constituency “matters” most to government elites is also likely to vary across time and place, depending on whose approval the government needs to maintain most. The sensitivity of authoritarian leaders and their ability to manage popular sentiment is likely to vary across autocracies, just as democratic audience costs tend to vary by electoral system, media environment, and citizen access to information.⁹⁵ If public threats and expressions of resolve are to be accurately interpreted, scholars (not to mention government decision-makers) must better understand the context in which such statements are made and evaluated.

Fourth, more attention should focus on the effectiveness of different rhetorical strategies and media frames in shaping foreign policy perceptions. One reason the biding time and history frames were effective, we suspect, is that they portrayed inaction as consistent with broader narratives of defending the national honor. The impact of other face-saving statements or symbolic gestures is an important question for future research. Beyond China, some audiences may be less amenable to justifications based on future success. The credibility of “biding time” explanations is likely to be more effective in a rising power like China than in relatively stationary or declining powers, such as Russia or Japan. The persuasiveness of elite cues may also differ by source and domestic constituency, given that many officials and media outlets form “hawkish” or “dovish” reputations even in the absence of party competition. Further research should investigate whether citizens in autocracies, like in democracies, respond more favorably to cues from sources they identify with politically.

Finally, our study sheds light on the prospects for conflict and peace in East Asia. Our surveys suggest that the Chinese government’s appeals to nationalism and strategic patience have indeed been effective at bolstering popular support. While this tactic may succeed in giving Chinese leaders flexibility in short-term crises, they also risk tying their hands in the long run, as repeatedly invoking historical grievances may harden the public’s desire for future vindication. If these nationalist commitments were one-sided, they might provide sufficient leverage to force an advantageous bargain. But similar convictions and nationalist narratives exist in varying degrees and permutations on all sides of the East and South China Sea disputes. As such, the domestic benefits of nationalist appeals may tempt leaders to posture in the short run, while making the long-term resolution to these conflicts that much more challenging.

In addition, these disputes often appear to flare up over perceived “provocations,” inadvertent developments or foreign actions that arouse domestic concern for defending the national honor. Is bluster still effective when domestic audiences feel slighted by a foreign insult? In the face of a perceived provocation, can a rhetorical emphasis on past humiliation or future success be as effective in bolstering support for inaction? We reserve for future research these important questions.

⁹⁵Potter and Baum, “Looking for Audience Costs in all the Wrong Places: Electoral Institutions, Media Access, and Democratic Constraint”.

A Supplementary Analyses

A.1 Variables and Summary Statistics

asc: Approval Measure, Post

asc0: Approval Measure, Pre

his, pro, ADIZ, ADIZp, eli.f, eli.c: Selective-History treatment indicators for: conditions history, provocation, ADIZ, ADIZp, elite cue framing, and elite cue costs.

his, pro, prot, com, mob, eli.f, eli.c: Hypothetical treatment indicators for history, provocation, protests, commitments, troop mobilization, elite cue framing, elite cue costs

authoritarian, ally, capabilities, salience: Hypothetical treatment indicators for background conditions authoritarian regime, ally with US, adversary has strong military, whether loss would hurt safety and economy of China.

pre.questions: indicator for whether pre-scenario questions were asked

asc.or: indicator for order of answer options for question asc

partner: indicator for which Qualtrics partner provided the respondent

na1: variable for question na1

na2: variable for question na2

na3: variable for question na3

na2.v.dn: indicator for whether respondent answered “don’t know” or “refused to answer”

na3.v.dn: indicator for whether respondent answered “don’t know” or “refused to answer”

gender: indicator for reported gender, 1 for female

educ: variable for education. Levels are: 01 No formal education; 02 Elementary school; 03 Middle school 04 High school; 05 College; 06 Masters; 07 Doctoral

age: variable for age

.o or .v: denotes the variable in its original form, before missing values were imputed

.v2: denotes the version of the variable in which missing values were imputed as a single central value, usually median or mode, for analysis

.m: denotes an indicator variable for whether this variable was missing because the respondent skipped the question

Table 1: Summary Statistics

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
asc	2,992	2.985	1.101	1	5
asc0	2,345	3.835	0.873	1	5
his	3,241	0.467	0.499	0	1
pro	3,241	0.226	0.419	0	1
prot	3,241	0.118	0.323	0	1
com	3,241	0.223	0.416	0	1
mob	3,241	0.222	0.416	0	1
eli.f	3,241	0.069	0.253	0	1
eli.c	3,241	0.068	0.253	0	1
authoritarian	3,241	0.466	0.499	0	1
ally	3,241	0.465	0.499	0	1
capabilities	3,241	0.464	0.499	0	1
salience	3,241	0.466	0.499	0	1
pre.questions	3,241	0.712	0.453	0	1
asc.or	2,992	0.500	0.500	0	1
na1.v	2,308	8.012	1.974	0	10
na2.v	2,308	2.438	0.639	1	3
na3.v	2,308	3.229	0.916	1	5
na2.v.dn	3,241	0.044	0.206	0	1
na3.v.dn	3,241	0.021	0.143	0	1
gender.o	2,019	0.353	0.478	0	1
educ.o	2,019	4.960	0.576	1	7
age.o	2,019	35.872	10.157	6	85
age.m	3,241	0.377	0.485	0	1
gender.m	3,241	0.377	0.485	0	1
educ.m	3,241	0.377	0.485	0	1

Table 2: Summary Statistics

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
asc	5,445	3.405	1.076	1	5
asc0	4,927	3.890	0.917	1	5
his	5,950	0.219	0.413	0	1
pro	5,950	0.211	0.408	0	1
ADIZ	5,950	0.427	0.495	0	1
ADIZp	5,950	0.215	0.411	0	1
eli.f	5,950	0.071	0.257	0	1
eli.c	5,950	0.067	0.251	0	1
asc.or	5,445	0.500	0.500	0	1
na1.v	4,791	7.698	2.275	0	10
na2.v	4,791	2.374	0.661	1	3
na3.v	4,791	3.143	0.958	1	5
na2.v.dn	5,950	0.065	0.247	0	1
na3.v.dn	5,950	0.032	0.176	0	1
gender.o	3,535	0.374	0.484	0	1
educ.o	3,531	4.941	0.606	1	7
age.o	3,535	34.331	10.166	11	85
age.m	5,950	0.406	0.491	0	1
gender.m	5,950	0.406	0.491	0	1
educ.m	5,950	0.407	0.491	0	1

A.2 Primary Regression Tables

Table 3: Effect on Approval, Hypothetical

<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	asc	
	(1)	(2)
pro	-0.090 [†] (0.047)	-0.108* (0.045)
prot	-0.029 (0.060)	-0.045 (0.057)
com	-0.069 (0.047)	-0.056 (0.045)
mob	0.008 (0.047)	0.053 (0.045)
eli.f	0.120 (0.077)	0.093 (0.073)
eli.c	0.040 (0.077)	0.026 (0.073)
authoritarian	-0.018 (0.040)	-0.026 (0.038)
ally	-0.006 (0.040)	-0.012 (0.038)
capabilities	-0.020 (0.040)	-0.021 (0.038)
saliency	0.002 (0.040)	0.009 (0.038)
his	0.043 (0.040)	0.030 (0.038)
pre.questions	-0.042 (0.047)	-0.107 [†] (0.057)
asc.or	0.235*** (0.040)	0.226*** (0.038)
partnerB		-0.126* (0.057)
asc0.v2		0.339*** (0.027)
na1.v2		-0.042*** (0.012)
na2.v2		-0.202*** (0.035)
na3.v2		0.023 (0.024)
na2.v.dn		-0.040 (0.101)
na3.v.dn		-0.179 (0.144)
gender		0.072 (0.049)
educ		-0.100* (0.040)
age		-0.006** (0.002)
age.m		0.131 (0.097)
gender.m		
educ.m		
start.time.n		0.00000 (0.00000)
start.time.n2		0.000 (0.000)
start.time.n3		-0.000 [†] (0.000)
start.time.swd		
Constant	2.928*** (0.068)	2.982*** (0.292)
Observations	2,992	2,992
R ²	0.015	0.123
Adjusted R ²	0.011	0.115
Residual Std. Error	1.095 (df = 2978)	1.036 (df = 2964)
F Statistic	3.584*** (df = 13; 2978)	15.459*** (df = 27; 2964)

Note:

[†] $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table 4: Effect on Approval, History

<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
asc		
	(1)	(2)
pre.questions	-0.188*** (0.043)	-0.168*** (0.050)
asc.or	0.308*** (0.029)	0.305*** (0.026)
asc0.v2		0.536*** (0.016)
na1.v2		-0.017** (0.006)
na2.v2		-0.082*** (0.022)
na3.v2		0.013 (0.015)
na2.v.dn		0.042 (0.057)
na3.v.dn		-0.039 (0.079)
gender		-0.037 (0.034)
educ		0.041 (0.027)
age		0.003 (0.002)
age.m		0.137 (0.480)
gender.m		
educ.m		0.074 (0.483)
start.time.n		0.000 (0.00000)
start.time.n2		-0.000 (0.000)
start.time.n3		0.000 (0.000)
start.time.swd		0.085 (0.122)
his	0.069* (0.034)	0.072* (0.031)
pro	-0.056 (0.035)	-0.054 [†] (0.031)
ADIZ	0.051 (0.036)	0.066* (0.033)
ADIZp	-0.035 (0.042)	-0.049 (0.038)
eli.f	0.060 (0.054)	0.088 [†] (0.049)
eli.c	0.014 (0.055)	0.020 (0.050)
partnerB		-0.054 (0.050)
Constant	3.390*** (0.046)	1.258*** (0.192)
Observations	5,445	5,445
R ²	0.026	0.213
Adjusted R ²	0.025	0.210
Residual Std. Error	1.063 (df = 5436)	0.957 (df = 5420)
F Statistic	18.129*** (df = 8; 5436)	61.140*** (df = 24; 5420)

Note:

[†] $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

B Demographics and Descriptive Results

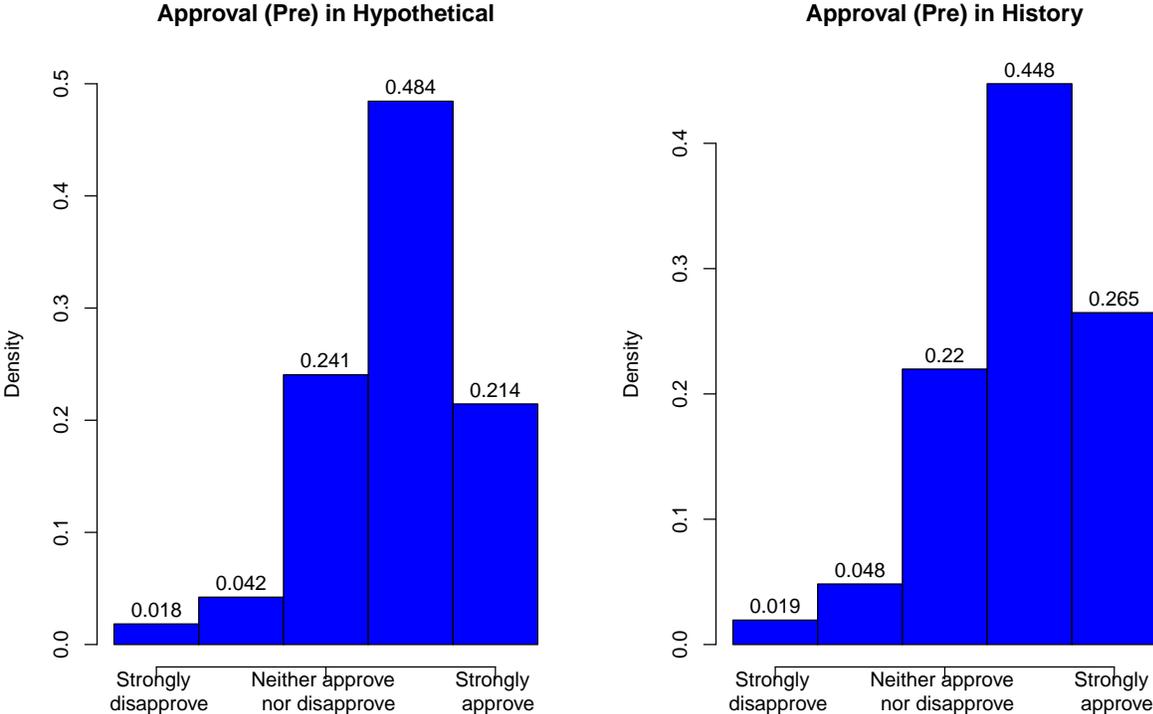
This section contains more complete results from the above reported analyses.

B.1 Approval

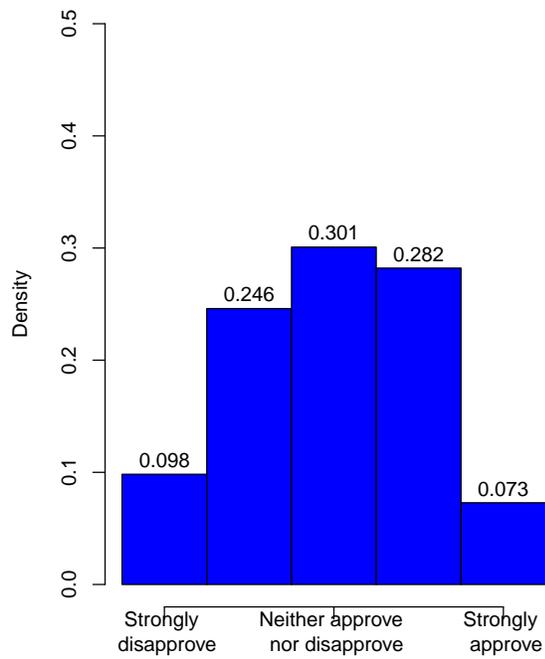
The first question asked of respondents was the following:

Hypothetical: How do you feel about the government’s performance in handling China’s international affairs?

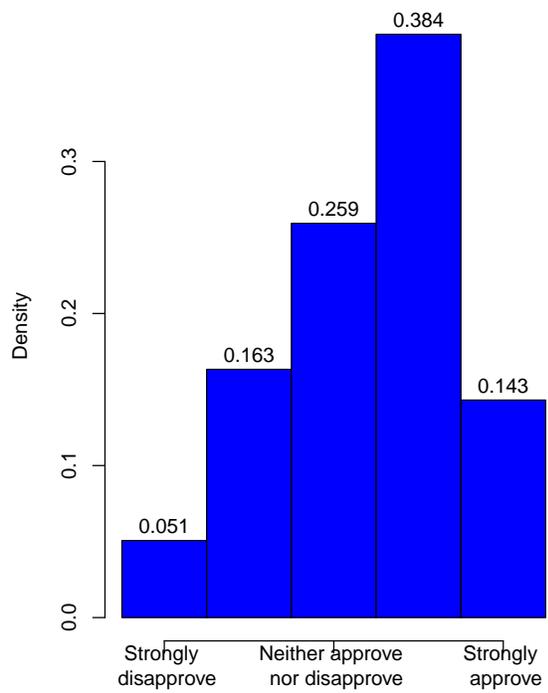
Selective-History: Regarding the security situation in China’s surrounding waters, what is your overall evaluation of the government’s performance?



Approval (Post) in Hypothetical



Approval (Post) in History



Criticism of the Government is Unhelpful

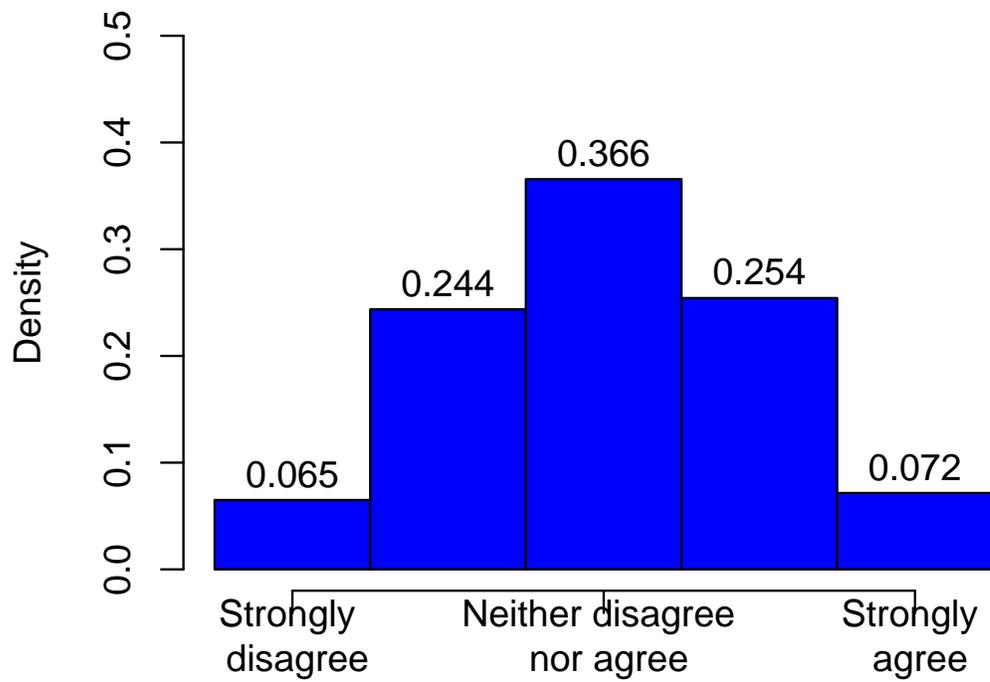
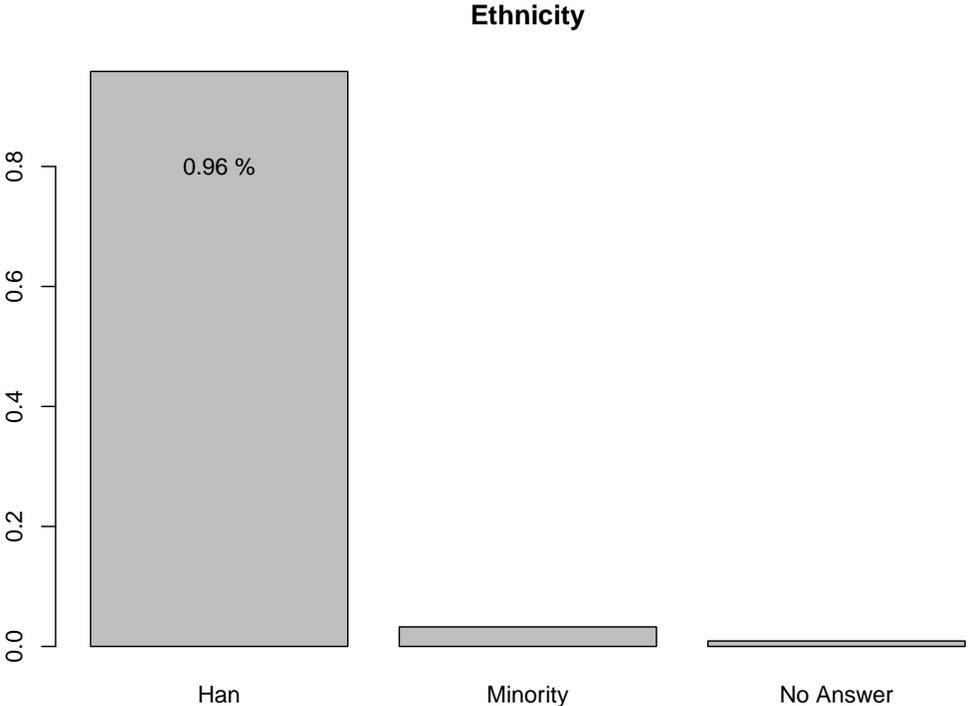


Figure 3

B.2 Demographics

65% of our sample was male. 55% of Chinese Internet users are male, as reported by the China Internet Network Information Center.⁹⁶



⁹⁶36th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China (2015) available at <http://www1.cnnic.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201601/P020160106496544403584.pdf>.

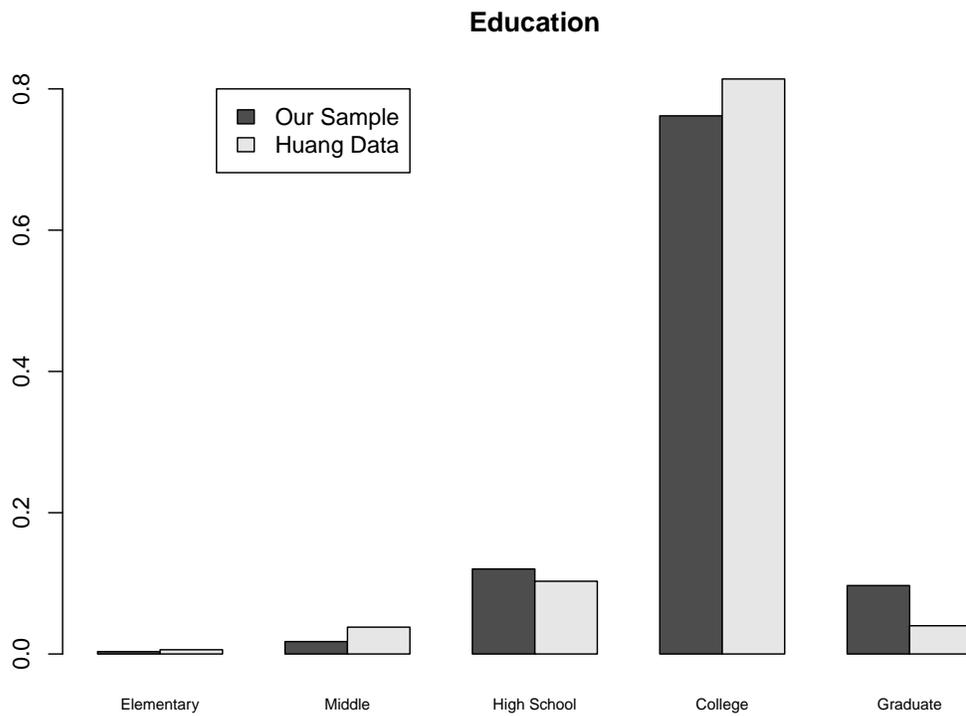


Figure 4: Huang (2015) refers to HAIFENG HUANG (2015). *International Knowledge and Domestic Evaluations in a Changing Society: The Case of China*. *American Political Science Review*, 109, pp 613-634. doi:10.1017/S000305541500026X.

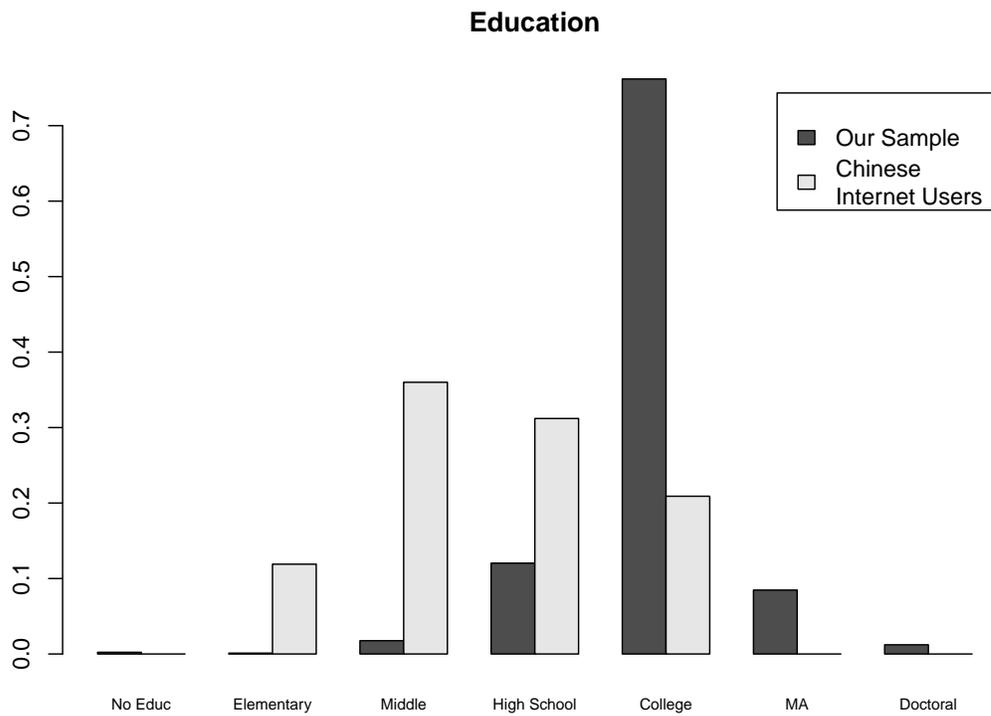


Figure 5: Educational attainment of Chinese internet users provided by the CNNIC 2015, which does not separate college and post-graduate education. See <http://www1.cnnic.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201601/P020160106496544403584.pdf>

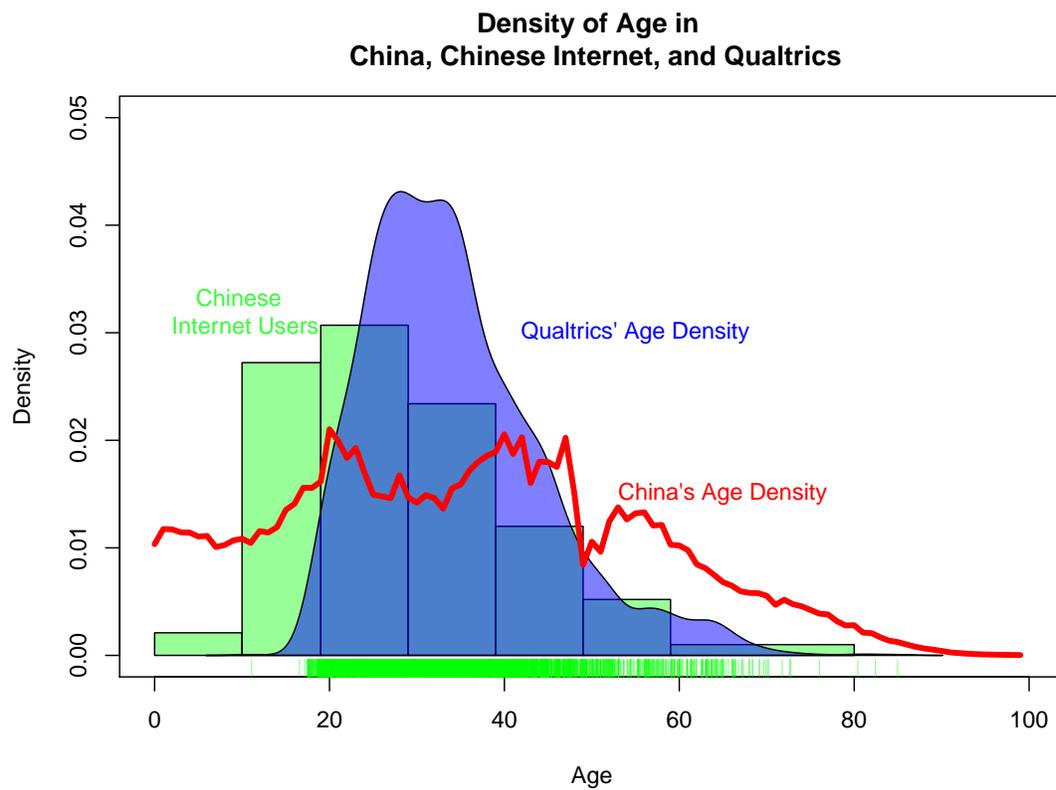


Figure 6: Age data for Chinese Internet Users is from CNNIC 2014. Age data for China is from the [UNSD Demographic Statistics](#).

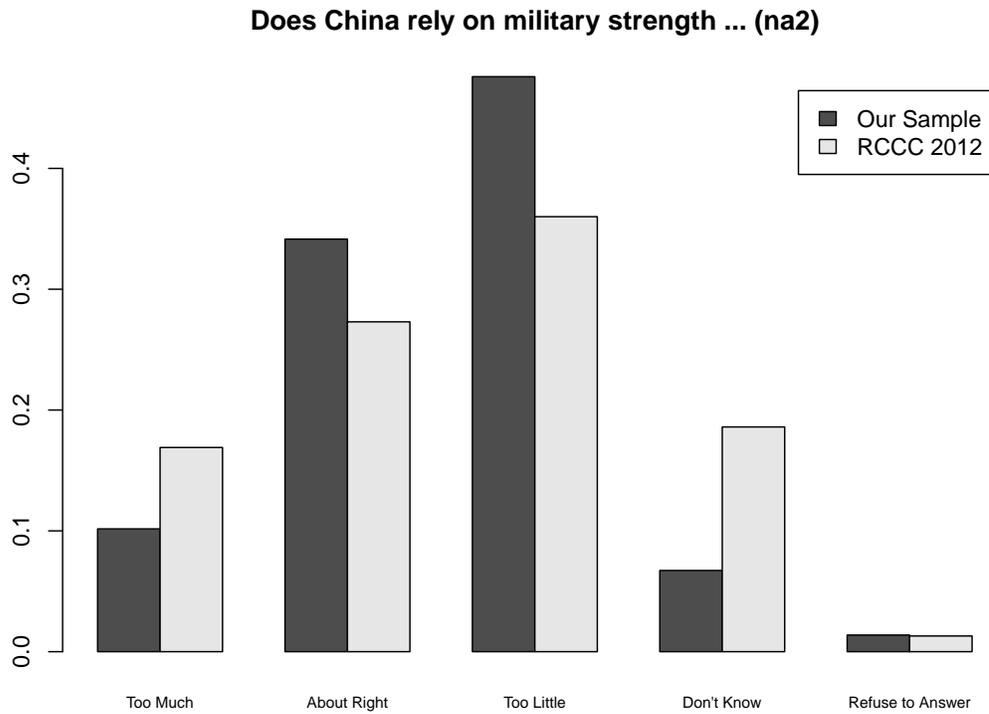


Figure 7: “RCCC 2012” shows the responses to question B3 of the [Public Opinion Survey of the China-U.S. Security Perceptions Project \(2012\)](#), a face-to-face and GPS-assisted multistage probability survey of urban Chinese, conducted by the Research Center for Contemporary China at Peking University.

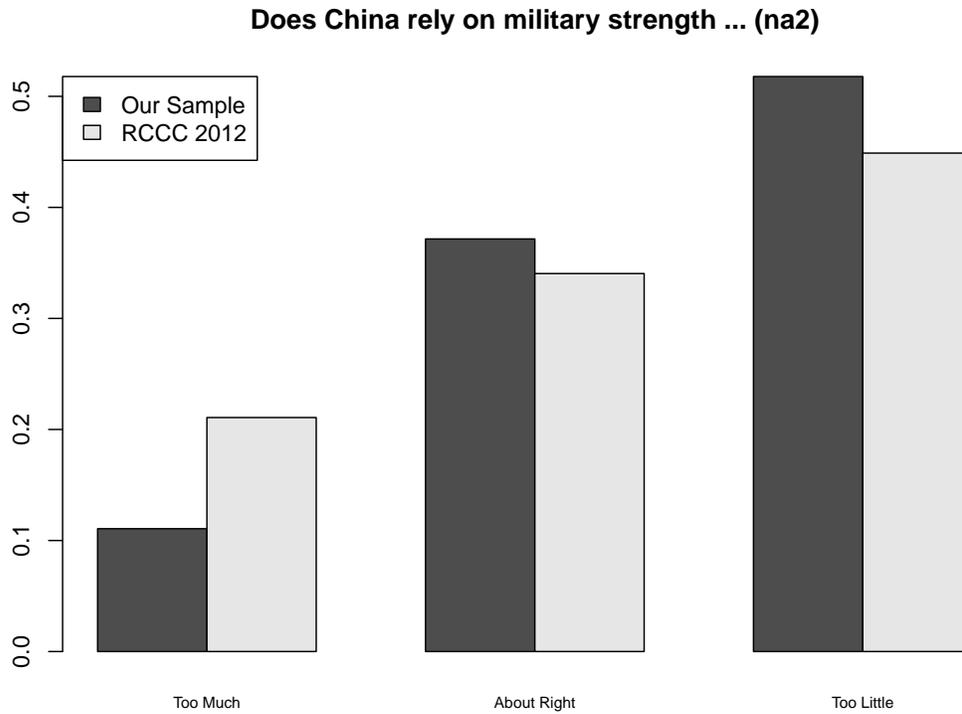


Figure 8: These proportions are for the total number of responses that gave a substantive answer, excluding “Don’t Know” and “Refuse to Answer”. “RCCC 2012” shows the responses to question B3 of the Public Opinion Survey of the China-U.S. Security Perceptions Project (2012), a face-to-face and GPS-assisted multistage probability survey of urban Chinese, conducted by the Research Center for Contemporary China at Peking University.

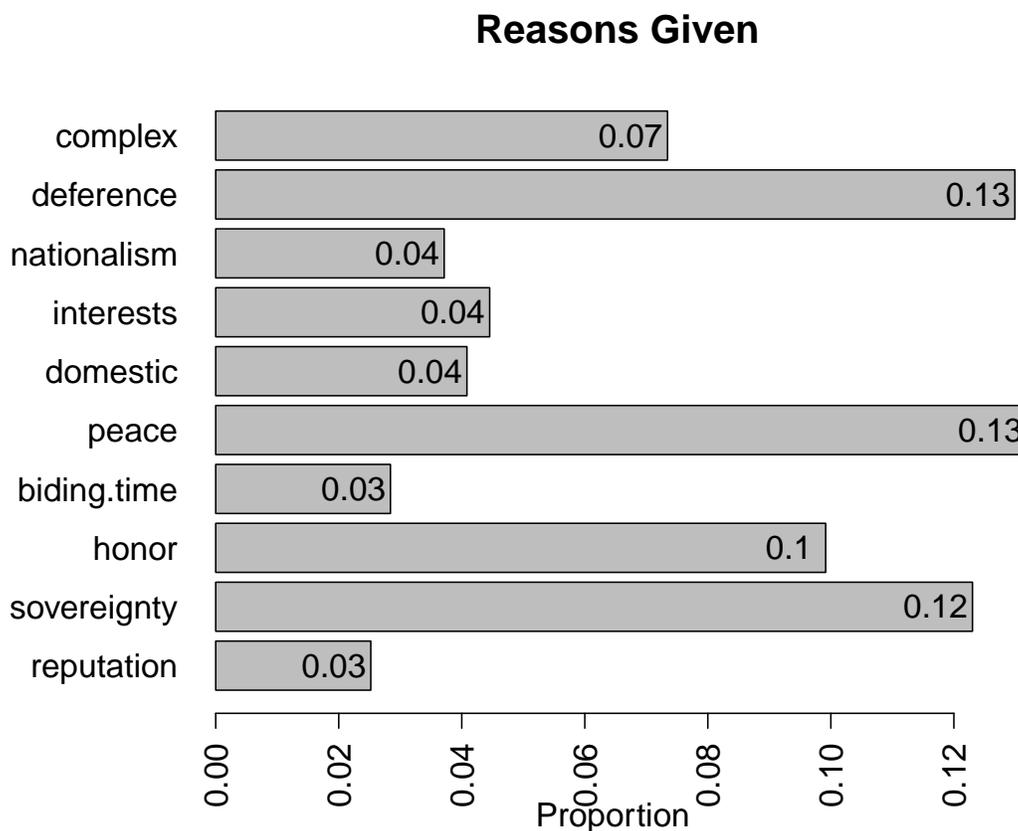


Figure 9: Reputation (references to adverse future consequences, such as leading others to take advantage or be more aggressive or demanding); Honor (references to honor, prestige, greatness, respect, or international standing); Nationalism (references such as “I am Chinese” or “I love China/my homeland”); Resolve (calls for the government to show greater strength or countermeasures and/or criticism of weakness or inaction); Sovereignty (references to sovereignty, territorial integrity, or disputed control of physical territory or maritime space); Biding time (references to future action to recover territory, defeat the adversary, or obtain concessions); Peace/Force (references to the value of peace or warnings against the use of force); Domestic development (references to the importance of domestic development, economic growth, stability, or social welfare); National interests (references to the countrys national interests or security, without necessarily referencing territorial integrity or sovereignty); Deference (references to the governments judgment, reasoning, or plans); Complexity (references to the respondents lack of understanding or the complexity of the situation).

Distribution of Pre-Scenario Responses

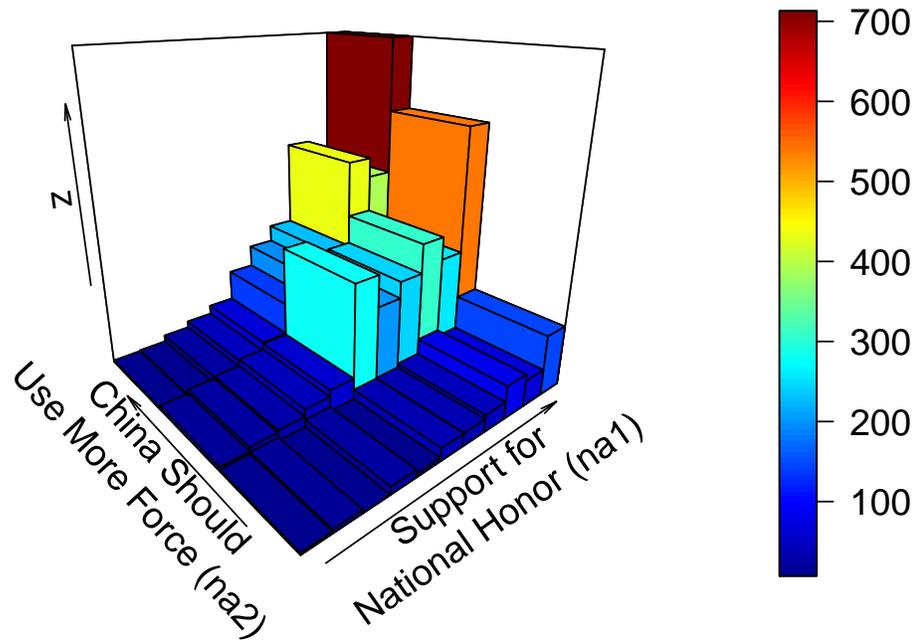


Figure 10: [na1] How important is it to defend the national honor even if it jeopardizes the stability of China's international environment?

[scale from 0 to 10, with 0 being not important at all, and 10 being very important]

[na2] In general, does China rely on military strength too much, too little or about the right amount to achieve its foreign policy goals?

01 Too much. 02 About right. 03 Too little

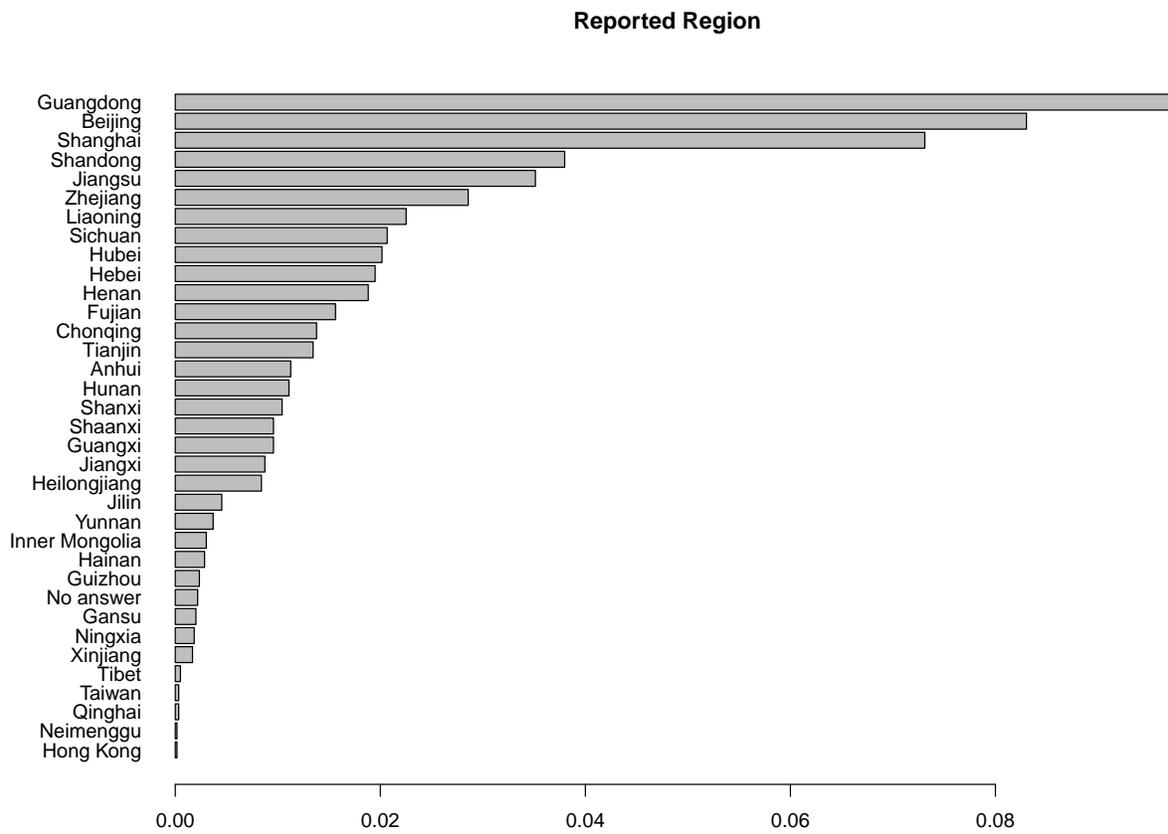


Figure 11

C Hypothetical Design

Consent

This survey is about your views of foreign affairs and domestic issues. We will ask you some questions about these topics. This survey is part of an academic research project.

此次问卷调查旨在了解您对国际和国内事务的看法。我们会问您一些关于这方面的问题。本调查是一项学术研究课题的一部分。调查结果将只用于学术目的。

The survey should take approximately 15 minutes. As specified in your invitation to this survey, you will receive an incentive if you qualify for and fully complete this survey. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to decline to participate or to end participation at any time for any reason.

完成本次调查大约需要 15 分钟。如果您具有参加本次调查的资格并且完成了本此调查的全部问题，您会收到给您的邀请中所指定的数额的奖励。参加此次调查完全基于自愿。您可以拒绝参加本调查，或者在任何时候以任何方式停止回答问卷。

Your responses will be kept confidential. We will not ask for your name, email address, or other personal identification, and we will not share any of your personal information with others. If you have any questions about this study, please contact the investigators at: adk423@gmail.com

您个人的回答将会被保密。我们不会询问您的姓名、邮箱，或其他个人身份信息，我们也不会将您的个人信息分享给他人。如果您对本研究有任何问题，请联系：
adk423@gmail.com。

- I have read the above information and agree to participate in this study.
- I do not agree to participate.

我已经阅读了以上信息并同意参与此项调查
我不同意参加此项调查

[Pre-scenario questions]

We would first like your opinion on China's international affairs.

我们希望首先了解您对于中国国际事务的看法。

[as0] How do you feel about the government's performance in handling China's international affairs?

[randomize order]

- 01 Strongly disapprove
- 02 Disapprove
- 03 Neither approve nor disapprove
- 04 Approve
- 05 Strongly approve

[as0] 您对政府处理国际事务的表现做何整体评价？

- 01 强烈反对
- 02 反对
- 03 既不支持也不反对
- 04 支持
- 05 强烈支持

[na1] How important is it to defend the national honor even if it jeopardizes the stability of China's international environment?

[scale from 0 to 10, with 0 being not important at all, and 10 being very important]

[na1] 您认为捍卫国家荣誉的重要性有多大，即使这可能不利于中国获得稳定的国际环境？（0表示完全不重要，10表示极为重要）

[na2] In general, does China rely on military strength too much, too little or about the right amount to achieve its foreign policy goals?¹

- 01 Too much
- 02 Too little
- 03 About right
- 08 Don't know
- 09 Refuse to answer

[na2] 一般来看，您认为中国在实现外交目标方面过多地依赖军事力量、较少地依赖军事力量，还是不多不少地依赖军事力量？

¹ From Public Opinion Survey of the Sino-U.S. Security Perceptions (2012), Research Center for Contemporary China at Peking University, question B3.

- 01 过多依赖
- 02 较少依赖
- 03 不多不少
- 08 不知道
- 09 拒绝回答

[na3] How would you describe your political views?²

- 01 very conservative
- 02 somewhat conservative
- 03 moderate
- 04 somewhat liberal
- 05 liberal
- 08 don't know
- 09 refuse to answer

[na3] 总的来说，您认为您的政治观点是非常保守的、比较保守的、温和的、比较开放的，还是非常开放的？

- 01 非常保守的
- 02 比较保守的
- 03 温和的
- 04 比较开放的
- 05 非常开放的
- 08 不知道
- 09 拒绝回答

[Scenario]

You will read about a situation that our country could face. We will describe one approach Chinese leaders might take and ask whether you approve or disapprove.

您将阅读一个中国可能面对的情形。我们将描述中国领导人可能采取的某项政策，并询问您是否支持该政策。

Imagine the following situation:

请想象以下情形：

There exists a territorial dispute between China and a neighboring country. The neighboring country is led by *[a non-democratic government OR a democratic government]*, *[is OR is not]* an

² This is from the Public Opinion Survey of the Sino-U.S. Security Perceptions (2012), Research Center for Contemporary China at Peking University, question C6.

ally of the United States. The neighboring country has [*a strong military, so in the event of war it would* OR *a weak military, so in the event of war it would not*] take a major effort for China to secure control of the territory. Experts believe that allowing the neighboring country to control the territory [*would hurt* OR *would not affect*] the safety and economy of China. [The disputed territory was part of the land China lost during the Century of National Humiliation. OR no mention]

中国和某邻国之间对某一地区存在着主权争端。该邻国是一个【非民主国家/民主国家】，【是/不是】美国的盟国。该邻国拥有【较强的军事实力，因此如果发生战争，中国确保控制该地区需要付出较大的努力/较弱的军事实力，因此如果发生战争，中国控制该地区不需要付出较大的努力】。专家认为该国控制该地区【会/不会】影响中国的安全和经济。【争议地区是中国百年国耻期间沦丧的国土中的一部分。/不提及】

[Control]

[Provocation]

The neighboring country sends engineers to build infrastructure on the territory. When asked by a reporter if they were worried about China, the neighboring country's spokesman dismissed the possibility, saying that China is a paper tiger.

该邻国向该地区派出工程师以建造基础设施。当被记者问及是否担心中国介入时，该国政府发言人否认了这种可能，并表示中国是纸老虎。

[Protests]

A dozen Chinese protesters gather outside the neighboring country's embassy, calling for the defense of Chinese sovereignty over the territory.

十几名中国抗议者聚集在该邻国大使馆外，呼吁中国政府捍卫该地区的主权。

[Statement of Commitment]

The Chinese government states that the neighboring country must recognize Chinese sovereignty or China will use force to take the territory.

中国政府声明对该地区拥有主权，并表示该国必须承认中国的主权，否则中国将使用武力夺取该地区。

[Troop Mobilization]

China mobilizes military forces to prepare to take the territory by force.

中国进行军事动员，准备使用武力夺取该地区。

[Elite Cue - Framing]

Chinese officials explain that fighting a war over the territory would be a grave mistake. According to a senior Chinese military official, “China’s neighbors will use all means to check China’s development, but we absolutely must not take their bait.”

中国官员解释称开战将铸成大错。一位中国的高级军官表示：“中国的邻国千方百计要遏制中国发展，而我们千万不能上当。”

[Elite Cue – Cost of War]

Chinese officials explain that fighting a war over the territory would be too costly. According to a senior Chinese military official, “Since we have enjoyed peace for quite a long time, many young people do not know what a war is like, it is actually very cruel and costly. If there is any alternative way to solve the problem, there is no need to resort to the means of extreme violence for a solution.”

中国官员解释称开战的代价太大。一位中国的高级军官表示：“因为和平时间很长了，这么小的孩子不知道打仗是什么样，其实是很残酷的，代价很大的。可以用别的方式解决的情况下，没有必要用极端的暴力手段来解决。”

[Ending]

In the end, China does not take military action, and the neighboring country consolidates control over the territory.

最终，中国没有采取军事行动。该邻国加强了对争议地区的控制。

[Post-scenario questions]

Reflecting on this situation, we would like to ask you some questions.

在这样的情形下，我们希望向您询问一些问题。

[as1] How do you feel about the government’s performance in handling the situation?

[randomize order]

01 Strongly disapprove

02 Disapprove

03 Neither approve nor disapprove

04 Approve

05 Strongly approve

[as1] 您对政府处理此事件的表现做何整体评价？

01 强烈反对

02 反对

03 既不支持也不反对

04 支持

05 强烈支持

[aso] Please explain in detail your answer to the question above.

[aso] 请解释您做出上述回答的原因。

[Remainder of survey included in replication files.]

D Selective-History Design

Consent

This survey is about your views of foreign affairs and domestic issues. We will ask you some questions about these topics. This survey is part of an academic research project.

此次问卷调查旨在了解您对国际和国内事务的看法。我们会问您一些关于这方面的问题。本调查是一项学术研究课题的一部分。调查结果将只用于学术目的。

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Your responses will be kept confidential. We will not ask for your name, email address, or other personal identification, and we will not share any of your personal information with others. If you have any questions about this study, please contact the investigators at: adk423@gmail.com

您个人的回答将会被保密。我们不会询问您的姓名、邮箱，或其他个人身份信息，我们也不会将您的个人信息分享给他人。如果您对本研究有任何问题，请联系：
adk423@gmail.com。

- I have read the above information and agree to participate in this study.
- I do not agree to participate.

我已经阅读了以上信息并同意参与此项调查
我不同意参加此项调查

[Pre-scenario questions]

We would first like your opinion on China's international affairs.

我们希望首先了解您对于中国国际事务的看法。

[as0] Regarding the security situation in China's surrounding waters, what is your overall evaluation of the government's performance?

[randomize order so that it either goes from 1 to 5, or from 5 to 1. The display of all ordinal answers should be randomized.]

- 01 Strongly disapprove
- 02 Disapprove
- 03 Neither approve nor disapprove
- 04 Approve
- 05 Strongly approve

[as0] 关于中国周边海域安全形势，您对政府的表现做何整体评价？

- 01 强烈反对
- 02 反对
- 03 既不支持也不反对
- 04 支持
- 05 强烈支持

[ra0] Regarding the security situation in China's surrounding waters, what is the maximum probability of war with the US that you think China should risk in order to defend its maritime interests (in percentage)?

[Options range from 0% to 100%.]

[ra0] 关于中国周边海域安全形势，为了保护中国的海上利益，您认为中国应该承担的与美国发生战争的风险是多大（百分数）？

[na1] How important is it to defend the national honor even if it jeopardizes the stability of China's international environment?

[scale from 0 to 10, with 0 being not important at all, and 10 being very important]

[na1] 您认为捍卫国家荣誉的重要性有多大，即使这可能不利于中国获得稳定的国际环境？（0表示完全不重要，10表示极为重要）

[na2] In general, does China rely on military strength too much, too little or about the right amount to achieve its foreign policy goals?¹

- 01 Too much
- 02 Too little
- 03 About right
- 08 Don't know

¹ From Public Opinion Survey of the Sino-U.S. Security Perceptions (2012), Research Center for Contemporary China at Peking University, question B3.

09 Refuse to answer

[na2] 一般来看，您认为中国在实现外交目标方面过多地依赖军事力量、较少地依赖军事力量，还是不多不少地依赖军事力量？

- 01 过多依赖
- 02 较少依赖
- 03 不多不少
- 08 不知道
- 09 拒绝回答

[na3] How would you describe your political views?²

- 01 very conservative
- 02 somewhat conservative
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[na3] 总的来说，您认为您的政治观点是非常保守的、比较保守的、温和的、比较开放的，还是非常开放的？

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- 02 比较保守的
- 03 温和的
- 04 比较开放的
- 05 非常开放的
- 08 不知道
- 09 拒绝回答

[Scenario]

We will now remind you about some recent events. We will then ask you about your views of foreign affairs and domestic issues. We are grateful for you sharing your opinion. **Please read the following carefully.**

现在我们将回顾一些近期发生的事件，之后我们将询问您对于国际和国内事务的一些看法。我们感谢您分享您的观点。请您仔细阅读以下材料：

China and the U.S. do not agree about the appropriate rules for air transit in China's surrounding waters. China's position is that foreign military aircraft should identify themselves and follow

² This is from the Public Opinion Survey of the Sino-U.S. Security Perceptions (2012), Research Center for Contemporary China at Peking University, question C6.

instructions. The U.S. has not agreed with this position.

中美两国对于中国周边海域空中交通的合适规定持不同观点。中国的立场是外国军用飞机应该向中方通报并遵照中方指示。美国不同意这种立场。

[History]

The present dispute between the United States and China reflects a long history of China's confrontations with foreign powers. As General Secretary Jiang Zemin wrote, "In more than 100 years after the Opium War, Chinese people were subjected to bullying and humiliation under foreign powers."³ In 1949, Chairman Mao Zedong proclaimed the establishment of the new China, saying: "The Chinese people have stood up!"

中美两国现有的争端反映了中国与外国势力之间的长期对抗。正如江泽民总书记写道：“鸦片战争以后的一百多年中，中国人民曾备受列强欺凌。” 1949年，毛泽东主席宣布新中国成立并宣告“中国人民从此站起来了！”

[Provocation]

The United States frequently sends military reconnaissance patrols dangerously close to China's territorial airspace and waters. In 2001, a US military reconnaissance plane made a sudden turn and collided with a Chinese fighter jet, killing Chinese pilot Wang Wei.

美国频繁派出侦察机在中国领空和领海附近进行危险的巡逻。2001年，一架美军侦察机突然转向，与中国战斗机相撞，造成中方飞行员王伟死亡。

[ADIZ]

On November 23, 2013 China announced an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea. China announced that if any foreign aircraft fails to identify itself to Chinese authorities or refuses to follow instructions, Chinese armed forces will take defensive emergency measures.

中国于2013年11月23日宣布在东海设立防空识别区。中方宣布任何在区域内航行的不配合识别或拒不服从指令的外国航空器，中国武装力量将采取防御性紧急处置措施。

[ADIZ and Provocative Defiance]

On November 23, 2013 China announced an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea. China announced that if any foreign aircraft fails to identify itself to Chinese authorities or refuses to follow instructions, Chinese armed forces will take defensive emergency measures.

³ Wang 2012, p. 98.

The US has refused to comply with China's ADIZ. Two American B-52 long-range bombers entered China's newly established ADIZ on November 25, flying in the area of the disputed East China Sea islands without informing Beijing beforehand. A Pentagon spokesman said: "We have continued to follow our normal procedures, which include not filing flight plans, not radioing ahead and not registering our frequencies."

中国于 2013 年 11 月 23 日宣布在东海设立防空识别区。中方宣布任何在区域内航行的不配合识别或拒不服从指令的外国航空器，中国武装力量将采取防御性紧急处置措施。

美国拒绝遵从中国东海防空识别区的规定。2013 年 11 月 25 日，两架美军 B-52 轰炸机进入中国刚刚划设的东海防空识别区，在未事先通告中方的情况下在中国东海争议岛屿领空飞行。美国国防部发言人表示：“我们继续遵循我方正常程序，包括不提交飞行计划，不事先借助无线电通信，不登记我方的频率。”

[Elite Cue – Framing]

Chinese officials have explained that fighting a war in China's surrounding waters would be a grave mistake. According to General Liu Yuan, Political Commissar of the PLA's General Logistics Department, the United States is "afraid of us catching up and will use all means to check China's development, but we absolutely must not take their bait."⁴

中国官员解释称在中国周边海域开战将铸成大错。中国人民解放军总后勤部政委刘源上将表示：美国“就怕我们赶上来，千方百计要遏制中国发展，而我们千万不能上当。”

[Elite Cue – Cost of War]

Chinese officials have explained that fighting a war in China's surrounding waters would be too costly. According to General Liu Yuan, Political Commissar of the PLA's General Logistics Department: "Since we have enjoyed peace for quite a long time, many young people do not know what a war is like, it is actually very cruel and costly. If there is any alternative way to solve the problem, there is no need to resort to the means of extreme violence for a solution."⁵

中国官员解释称在中国周边海域开战的代价太大。中国人民解放军总后勤部政委刘源上将表示：“因为和平时间很长了，这么小的小孩不知道打仗是什么样，其实是很残酷的，代价很大的。可以用别的方式解决的情况下，没有必要用极端的暴力手段来解决。”

⁴ *Global Times*, February 4, 2013 (Chinese), http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion_world/2013-02/3614115.html

⁵ "Under Xi, China seeks to cool row with Japan over islands," March 16, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/16/us-china-japan-military-idUSBRE92F0EH20130316>; *Global Times*, January 16, 2013, <http://opinion.huanqiu.com/editorial/2013-01/3494346.html>; English version: <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/756065.shtml>; <https://southseaconversations.wordpress.com/2013/02/18/radar-incident-obscares-beijings-conciliatory-turn-toward-japan/>

[Ending]

To this day, the U.S. continues to fly military planes through China's surrounding waters without identifying themselves or following instructions. China has not used force to stop this.

至今，美国继续在没有进行身份识别的情况下派出飞机飞越中国周边海域。中国并未使用武力进行阻止。

[Post-scenario questions]

Reflecting on these recent developments, we would like to ask your opinion about China's international affairs.

在以上的背景下，我们希望了解您对于中国国际事务的看法。

[as1] Regarding the security situation in China's surrounding waters, what is your overall evaluation of the government's performance?

[randomize order so that it either goes from 1 to 5, or from 5 to 1. The display of all ordinal answers should be randomized.]

- 01 Strongly disapprove
- 02 Disapprove
- 03 Neither approve nor disapprove
- 04 Approve
- 05 Strongly approve

[as1] 关于中国周边海域安全形势，您对政府的表现做何整体评价？

- 01 强烈反对
- 02 反对
- 03 既不支持也不反对
- 04 支持
- 05 强烈支持

[aso] Please explain in detail your answer to the question above.

[aso] 请解释您做出上述回答的原因。

[Remainder of survey included in replication files.]