

# Provocation, Public Opinion, and International Crises: Evidence from China

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## **Abstract**

Leaders often claim that foreign insults, challenges, and threats galvanize domestic demands for tough action, exposing them to public disapproval if they do not take strong countermeasures. Using multiple methods, we examine whether publics are provoked by certain kinds of actions and incidents. Across two survey experiments—one hypothetical scenario and one selective presentation of historical events—and a natural experiment involving US naval patrols, we demonstrate that provocative events followed by Chinese government inaction increase domestic disapproval of the Chinese government’s foreign policy performance. We discuss possible explanations, whether government elites can manage the publicity of potentially provocative events, and how such events can change the logic of coercion and deterrence.

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All studies in this paper were preregistered, with preanalysis plans. To preserve anonymity these are not included, but are available upon request. Complete replication files will be posted at the time of publication.

# 1 Introduction

Domestic publics often appear to be *provoked* by foreign actions, demanding restitution or strong action to defend the national honor. After China sent a deep-water oil rig to explore off the coast of Vietnam, tens of thousands of Vietnamese protesters marched to denounce Chinese actions and demand a firm response, carrying signs that read: “sovereignty is sacred and inviolable.”<sup>1</sup> Government leaders often claim that such sentiments force them to respond with tough words and actions or risk a domestic backlash, thus tying their hands in international crises. As former deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg and Michael O’Hanlon note, “China’s policymakers regularly refer to the constraint of public opinion, referring in all apparent seriousness, for example, to occasional actions by the United States that ‘hurt the feelings of 1.3 billion Chinese’ and to the impact of ‘netizens’ [Chinese internet users] on constraining the options available to China’s leaders” (Steinberg and O’Hanlon, 2015).

Government leaders have deemed a variety of actions “provocative,” with US examples ranging from the placement of Soviet missiles in Cuba to the surprise Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. More recently, Chinese officials have called US freedom of navigation patrols “provocative attempts to infringe on China’s South China Sea sovereignty,”<sup>2</sup> patrols that one US official defended by saying that “I don’t see how these could be interpreted as provocative in any way.”<sup>3</sup> Chinese officials have warned foreign governments to speak and act carefully regarding the South China Sea or risk provoking the Chinese public. As Cui

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<sup>1</sup>“Protests staged in Vietnam against China planting oil rig in Vietnamese waters,” *Tuoi Tre* (2015, May 11). Available at <http://tuoitrenews.vn/politics/19579/vietnamese-people-in-big-cities-demonstrate-to-protest-against-china>.

<sup>2</sup>“China Voice: U.S. provocations threaten to militarize South China Sea,” *Xinhua* (2015, October 17). Available at [bit.ly/1oCYILN](http://bit.ly/1oCYILN).

<sup>3</sup>“CNO: South China Sea patrols are not provocative,” *Navy Times* (2015, October 15). Available at <http://www.navytimes.com/story/military/2015/10/15/cno-richardson-south-china-sea-provocative/73989210/>.

Tiankai, PRC Ambassador to the United States, stated: “the Chinese public is following very closely whether the United States will adopt a just and objective position.”<sup>4</sup>

Given that government leaders may choose to exaggerate or downplay alleged “provocations,” there are limits on what we can infer about public reactions from historical and observational data alone. In this paper we employ several complementary experimental and quasi-experimental designs to evaluate whether and what kinds of foreign actions provoke domestic disapproval and pressure on the Chinese government to stand tough in international disputes. The first involves an abstract hypothetical scenario-based survey experiment: a widely used survey design in the study of international relations where crucial features of a scenario are experimentally manipulated. The second employs a more novel “selective-history” survey experimental design, where we remind respondents of recent events in an ongoing dispute. The third design examines a plausible natural experiment: by fielding our survey over a period time, we are able to examine the effects of US military patrols in the South China Sea. Our results are consistent: in each of these three designs we find that foreign challenges and slights increased disapproval of the government’s inaction among our Chinese respondents. In additional tests, we find evidence that this disapproval reflects an increase in public resolve to use force.

In the next section, we provide historical and theoretical context for the phenomenon of provocation before turning to our survey designs and results. We then discuss government incentives to control the information environment as well as limits on authoritarian propaganda and censorship in managing public reactions to international disputes. We conclude by discussing the implications for deterrence failure and crisis escalation.

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<sup>4</sup>“Beijing warns U.S. about South China Sea disputes,” *New York Times* (2011, June 22). Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/23/world/asia/23china.html>.

## 2 Provocation

An important body of research has examined the conditions under which publics disapprove of leaders who issue public threats and then back down, generating “audience costs” that incentivize leaders to stand firm, lest they be seen as tarnishing the nation’s honor and reputation.<sup>5</sup> However, most crises (83%) and militarized disputes (90%) contain no explicit coercive threats (Downes and Sechser, 2012, 459), underscoring the importance of understanding what other mechanisms may fuel escalation and make it difficult for leaders to compromise. In particular, we argue that leaders can face domestic costs for failing to take tough measures after *foreign* actions and events engage public concern for defending the national honor. Like a government’s own explicit threats and commitments, foreign actions can galvanize domestic demands for tough action, potentially even locking a government into escalation.<sup>6</sup>

Many historians have noted the importance of foreign actions and challenges in motivating the onset of war, with canonical US examples including the Lusitania, Pearl Harbor, and 9/11. Formal theorists have also suggested that threats and troop mobilization can generate audience costs in the target state (Slantchev, 2012; Fearon, 1994; Kurizaki, 2007). For example, Fearon noted that French Foreign Minister Rouillé complained that offensive British pamphlets made it harder for the French public to accept a compromise with Britain (Fearon, 1994, 581). Slantchev similarly notes that foreign leaders might be “loath to make overt threats” because “frightening the opponent might backfire if it raises his audience costs [or] *provokes* him into attacking” (Slantchev, 2012, 380, emphasis added). A rival’s public demands can heighten the domestic reputational consequences for leaders seeking to prove their competence and make escalation more likely. In survey experiments on inter-

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<sup>5</sup>This literature is extensive. Among others, see Fearon (1994); Smith (1998); Snyder and Borghard (2011); Slantchev (2012); Trachtenberg (2012); Chaudoin (2014); Tomz (2007); Weeks (2008); Trager and Vavreck (2011); Levendusky and Horowitz (2012); Davies and Johns (2013).

<sup>6</sup>Some recent work on the phenomenon of provocation includes Dafoe et al. (2017); Hall (2016); Cho (2016).

state conflict, Gottfried and Trager found that aggressive foreign rhetoric increases popular support for leaders who wage war, demonstrating that foreign statements can alter domestic evaluations of a leader’s performance (Gottfried and Trager, 2016).

Aware that public challenges may tempt or pressure their target to retaliate to preserve their domestic and international reputation, leaders often take pains to make their actions covert. As Hopf notes, Stalin’s “fear of provoking the United States” led him to conceal Soviet military aid to China and Korea (Hopf, 2012, 119). Carson shows how the Truman administration “tacitly colluded” with the Soviets to hide the extent of Soviet involvement in the Korean War, as otherwise “the [American] public would expect us to do something about it,” according to State Department Policy Planning Staff director Paul Nitze (Carson, 2016, 124).

In this study, we systematically and experimentally examine whether and what types of foreign actions and challenges can provoke domestic pressure for tough action. We define the phenomenon of *provocation* as when an action or event stimulates a greater willingness to use tough action to resist or retaliate against an adversary. The precipitating event is commonly referred to as a “provocation” or provocative event. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a provocation is defined as “action or speech held to be likely to incite (esp. physical) retaliation” or “the action of challenging someone to fight; a challenge, a defiance.” Actions or incidents that are often deemed provocative include verbal slights, legal or physical challenges to core national interests, the killing of soldiers or civilians, and the public defiance of stated claims or demands. Actions and events are more likely to be perceived as provocative when they threaten important interests, cause harm and especially fatalities, are done in a public manner, without contrition, and with disrespect (O’Neill, 1999).

The game tree in Figure 1 identifies the observable implications of provocation. Nature or the Adversary generates an event ( $E$ ) of the class we consider—such as a challenge, insult, inadvertent or coercive harm—or not ( $\neg E$ ). Government **B** then can either take some specific

Tough Action ( $TA$ ), or not ( $\neg TA$ ). If a provocative event ( $E$ ) occurs and the government does not take tough action, we expect the government to pay an approval cost ( $-p_1$ ). The final payoff is the public’s approval of its government  $B$ .<sup>7</sup>

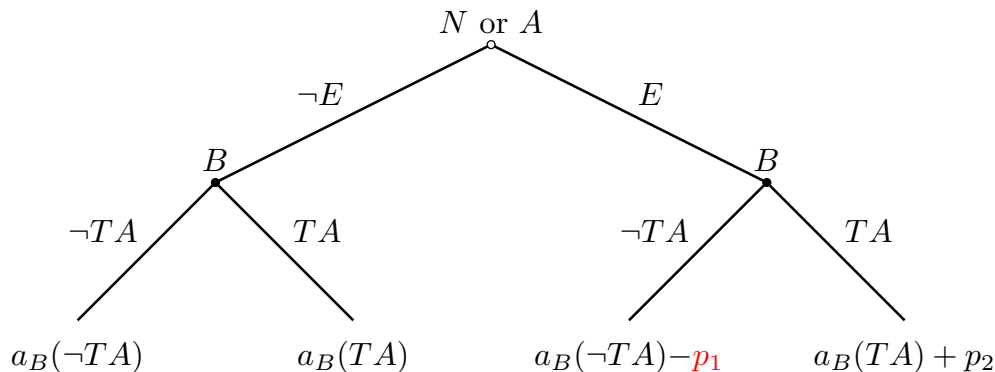


Figure 1

We seek to manipulate the presence or absence of a potentially provocative event, holding fixed all other actions, information, and context. If we succeed, we can then evaluate whether and to what extent a particular event is provocative by comparing the level of approval after the event ( $E$ ) and no tough action ( $\neg TA$ ), versus approval after no such event ( $\neg E$ ) and no tough action ( $\neg TA$ ). In section 6 we consider whether  $E$  might have direct effects on approval.

Although there is ample *prima facie* historical evidence that publics are provoked by foreign actions and events to demand tough action, this evidence is not free from selection effects and other biases. First, governments can try to make provocative events more likely, in order to generate a rally-round-the-flag effect or strengthen public resolve; as Kimberly Marten notes, “Putin is trying to provoke the United States and NATO into military action and create the appearance that they are posing a threat to Russia, in order to bolster his own popularity.”<sup>8</sup> Governments can also adopt policies that make certain actions more

<sup>7</sup>It is worth noting that the government may benefit from a ‘rally-round-the-flag’ boost in approval ( $+p_2$ ) if the government responds to the provocative event with tough action, an effect that we do not investigate for design reasons explained in section 6.

<sup>8</sup> “Russia rearms for a new era,” *New York Times* (2015, December 24). Available at <https://www.>

provocative as a commitment device. For example, US troops were deployed in Berlin and South Korea, exposing them to casualties in the event of an invasion, thereby increasing the U.S. commitment to defend its allies.

Second, public perceptions of foreign actions and events are mediated by elite-influenced channels. Government officials and other opinion leaders typically interpret, frame, and showcase or downplay international events. Leaders of strong authoritarian states are well-equipped to restrict the domestic flow of information, but even democratic elites can frame how events are perceived and invoke new information to shape public opinion (Berinsky, 2007; Levendusky and Horowitz, 2012; Trager and Vavreck, 2011; Saunders, 2015; Guisinger and Saunders, 2017).

Finally, governments have even resorted to false-flag attacks on themselves to generate a public reaction and support for the use of force. Given these strategic incentives to influence the probability and perception of foreign actions that provoke the domestic public, it can be difficult to draw clean causal inferences from observational data.<sup>9</sup> For this reason, we turn to experimental and natural experimental designs.

Foreign provocations may galvanize public demand for tough action through multiple channels, including concern for the national honor, reputation, prestige, face, credibility, status, and vengeance.<sup>10</sup> We do not try to disentangle these here, regarding the empirical demonstration of the public’s reaction to alleged provocations as a necessary first step. As we discuss more fully in section 6, we conjecture that provocation arises from (possibly subconscious) concern about national honor, in keeping with other work in this vein.<sup>11</sup> National honor can be understood as a nation’s “right to respect” (Stewart, 1994, 21), which

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[nytimes.com/interactive/2015/12/24/world/asia/russia-arming.html](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/12/24/world/asia/russia-arming.html).

<sup>9</sup>For an analogous argument about the difficulty of observing the audience costs of empty threats, see Schultz (1999).

<sup>10</sup>These literatures are too extensive to cite fully; some notable works include Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo (2015); Sartori (2005); Huth (1997); Sechser (2010); Stein (2015).

<sup>11</sup>See for example Dafoe et al. (2017); Hall (2016); Kagan (1995); O’Neill (1999); Snyder and Borghard (2011).

is both an instrumentally valuable resource (in anarchic environments where wealth can be coerced) and something that many value intrinsically. Following an insult or injury, the defense or restitution of honor often requires tough action, with full restitution often involving vengeance or an apology and compensation from the transgressor.

In this way, provocation may be driven by the same impulse underlying the domestic disapproval of empty threats: the public “deplore[s] the *international* loss of credibility, face, or honor” (Fearon, 1994, 581). However, explicit threats are arguably an uncommon source of honor-engagement (Snyder and Borghard, 2011), with honor being more often engaged by indirect and symbolic expressions of commitment, nationalist narratives and identity claims, perceptions of core interests, and expectations of respect.

Since the logic of honor and respect is culturally and contextually specific, it is important to root research on provocation in a specific cultural and historical milieu. Below, we draw from recent Chinese history to identify the types of events that are often characterized as provocative or said to engage public concern for defending the national honor (see sections 3-4). Using our experiments and natural experiment, we then test whether these events in fact generate the public reaction often described or assumed by analysts and state leaders.

### 3 Provocation in an Authoritarian Context: China

The phenomenon of provocation does not appear to be unique to any particular regime type, with both democratic and authoritarian leaders publicly condemning or warning against foreign “provocations.” For instance, American officials have told China that “We would consider an ADIZ [in the South China Sea]...a provocative and destabilizing act which would automatically raise tensions.”<sup>12</sup> And South Korean president Lee Myung-bak ordered plans

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<sup>12</sup>“Kerry warns Beijing over air defense zone for South China Sea,” *Reuters* (2016, June 4). Available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-usa-china-idUSKCN0YR01D>.



to attack a North Korean missile base upon “any indication of further provocation.”<sup>13</sup>

Since most militarized conflicts involve at least one non-democracy, it is important to understand whether and what kinds of foreign actions are likely to provoke public pressure for tough action in an authoritarian context. A large body of research has studied how government behavior in international crises affects public opinion in democracies; particularly relevant to the study of provocation is the literature on rallying the public around the flag.<sup>14</sup> However, we are not aware of a study that has systematically investigated public reactions to foreign actions in an authoritarian regime.

Why should we study public opinion where leaders are not held accountable through free and fair elections? Monitoring and responding to public sentiment has become increasingly critical to authoritarian leaders, even as intra-elite dynamics remain important. Many authoritarian leaders fear popular ouster and the threat of revolution. Since the end of the Cold War, elite coups have been eclipsed by popular protests as the modal means of ousting nondemocratic leaders.<sup>15</sup> Anti-foreign protests are particularly risky for authoritarian leaders to allow and costly to suppress, given their patriotic appeal and ability to unite popular grievances against the regime (Weiss, 2014).

Even in the absence of widespread protests, the threat of a popular backlash can impose a “revolution constraint” on the policies that authoritarian leaders are willing to adopt (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2005). As President Xi explained to visiting dignitaries from Taiwan: “The Communist Party would be overthrown by the people if the pro-independence

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<sup>13</sup>Lee Chi-dong, “S. Korea vows ‘stern retaliation’ against N. Korea’s attacks,” *Yonhap* (2010, November 23). Available at <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2010/11/23/81/0301000000AEN20101123013700315F.HTML>.

<sup>14</sup>The literature is extensive. Among other works, see Mueller (1973); Baker and Oneal (2001); Lai and Reiter (2005).

<sup>15</sup>Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Erica Frantz, “Autocrats now more vulnerable to being ousted by revolt,” *Washington Post* (2014, April 9). Available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/04/09/autocrats-now-more-vulnerable-to-being-ousted-by-revolt>.

issue was not dealt with.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, public disenchantment can embolden regime insiders within the electorate to oppose or challenge the leadership in an attempt to reclaim popular legitimacy (Wallace, 2013; Shirk, 2008; Svolik, 2012, 12). The apparent importance of public support in China was evident in President Xi Jinping’s statement to the Central Committee that “Winning or losing public support is an issue that concerns the CPC’s survival or extinction.”<sup>17</sup>

Given its fears of losing popular support and emboldening elite dissent, the Chinese government has invested in a form of “responsive” authoritarianism that takes seriously popular grievances and public opinion. A large and growing body of research has documented the Chinese government’s efforts to respond to public sentiment and demands (Truex, 2016; Meng et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2016; Manion, 2016). Even without electoral accountability, “local service institutions in China are comparably responsive to similar institutions in democracies” (Distelhorst and Hou, 2017). Chinese officials do not risk punishment at the polls for ignoring public opinion, but they may still adjust policies to respond to or anticipate citizen demands, reducing risks of collective action and elite challenges.<sup>18</sup>

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. If a new great power war occurs, there is a good chance that it would be between China and the United States or Japan over sovereignty and maritime issues in the Asia-Pacific.<sup>19</sup> Second, despite many differences

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<sup>16</sup>“Xi Jinping warns Communist Party would be ‘overthrown’ if Taiwan’s independence push left unchecked,” *South China Morning Post* (2016, November 4). Available at <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2042784/xi-jinping-warns-communist-party-would-be-overthrown-if>.

<sup>17</sup>“Study History, be Close to the People,” *China Daily* (2013, July 25). Available at <http://english.cri.cn/6909/2013/07/25/53s777949.htm>.

<sup>18</sup>As Johnston (2017, 41) notes, Chinese “leaders have an interest in taking positions close to those of more nationalistic or hard-line publics” in order to deprive elite competitors of a political weapon in internal power struggles; .

<sup>19</sup>Graham Allison, “The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?” *The Atlantic* (2015, September 24). Available at <http://theatlantic.com/perspective/archive/2015/09/thucydides-trap/414621/>.

in domestic regime, 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.

In China, foreign “provocations” are central to the national narrative of a “Century of National Humiliation” by foreign powers, a trope that continues to shape how international crises are understood in China today (Wang, 2014). Chinese leaders have historically invoked foreign provocations to bolster domestic support for meeting international challenges. During the 1950s, Chinese Communist Party propaganda emphasized “American imperialism” to foster a siege mentality and mobilize public support for Mao’s broader strategic vision. As one *People’s Daily* headline read: “All the Nation’s People Mobilize, Struggle to Resolutely Oppose the American Military Provocation!” (Christensen, 1996, 218). Chinese leaders have often tried to manage tensions short of war, as Christensen notes, but “conflict manipulation is dangerous and can lead to escalation and warfare despite the more limited intentions of leaders in the mobilizing state” (Christensen, 1996, 14).

Since cracking down on pro-democracy demonstrations in 1989, the Chinese Communist Party has invested heavily in nationalist propaganda and patriotic education to legitimate its continued one-party rule (Zhao, 2004). Chinese textbooks exhort students to “Never Forget National Humiliation!” (Wang, 2014) and events such as the 2001 EP-3 collision are remembered and replayed on state television, retelling the story and lauding Chinese pilot Wang Wei as a martyr.<sup>20</sup> Visits by Japanese prime ministers to Yasukuni shrine, which houses the spirits of 14 A-class World War II war criminals along with ordinary war dead, have provoked angry condemnations from Beijing and sparked anti-Japanese protest marches in many Chinese cities (Reilly, 2013). The U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia in 1999 was portrayed by Chinese officials as an intentional probe of China’s

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<sup>20</sup>“Yang Shi ji nian Zhong Mei Nanhai zhuangji shijian zhong yunan feixingyuan,” *CCTV* (2013, April 1). Available at <http://news.sohu.com/20130402/n371413641.shtml>.

resolve and a public demonstration of China's weakness on the international stage. As President Jiang Zemin declared in an internal meeting of the Politburo Standing Committee, the bombing "was definitely not an accident, definitely not innocent....We must speak with the force of justice and make known to U.S.-led NATO: the Chinese people will not be humiliated! The Chinese nation will not be bullied!" Even reform-minded Premier Zhu Rongji stated: "If we submit to this humiliation without a protest, the United States will become even more unbridled in the future" (Weiss, 2014, 52-53).

Do foreign actions actually "hurt the feelings" of the Chinese public, increasing popular resolve to fight and criticism of the government if it fails to take tough action? Chinese diplomats claim to receive unsolicited mail from citizens containing calcium pills, an implied demand to "show more backbone in standing up against the United States" (Shirk, 2008, 101). At least some foreign officials have pointed to the pressure that public opinion exerts on Chinese foreign policy. As former deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg notes with Michael O'Hanlon, "In China, rising national pride and memories of past humiliations put increased pressure on leaders not to compromise with foreigners, including Americans. This nationalism is fueled by the emergence of a vibrant and often virulent community of microbloggers who challenge leaders at any sign of weakness. The Communist Party is especially susceptible to these pressures, given its dependence on nationalist credentials" (Steinberg and O'Hanlon, 2015).

But other foreign officials have asked how "real or induced" this pressure is (Keefe, 2002), given China's control over state-run media and ability to repress popular protests. The Chinese government has invested heavily in "public opinion management," deploying commentators and censors in an effort to win the "guerrilla battle" in the "mass microphone era," according to the head of the People's Daily Public Opinion Monitoring Unit.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Quek and Johnston (2018) find in survey experiments that the Chinese government is

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<sup>21</sup>Michelle Fong and Jennifer Cheung, "If you like killing time on social networks, China has a job for you," *Public Radio International* (2014, July 31). Available at <http://bit.ly/1K0BYwW>.

able to employ a variety of rhetorical strategies to reduce the public opinion costs of restraint or backing down in foreign policy crises.

On the other hand, a growing body of research suggests that the government’s efforts to mold public opinion have not been fully effective, with state media outlets facing a trade-off between guiding public opinion and preserving their credibility.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Roberts finds that knowledge of censorship “does not deter the spread of information and instead often undermines government legitimacy and induces information seeking” (Roberts, 2014). Indeed, Chinese leaders have not been able to veil all potentially provocative events from public view, such as the EP-3 incident and *USNS Impeccable* incident, both of which were first reported by the U.S. side. We return to the dilemma that internationally publicized events create for the Chinese government in section 6.1.

## 4 *Hypothetical and Selective-History* Survey Experiments

Despite the abundance of historical and contemporary examples, we lack systematic evidence of whether and what kinds of international actions and events deemed “provocative” actually generate public pressure on the government to respond with tough action. To evaluate the domestic effects of a range of potentially provocative events, we developed a set of designs grounded in recent and ongoing foreign policy disputes that China has been involved in. In these disputes, foreign “provocations” have allegedly justified Chinese countermeasures. For example, Japan’s “nationalization” of three of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea in September 2012 prompted China to retaliate with unprecedented patrols in the territorial waters surrounding the islands. In November 2013, the United States defied China by flying a pair of B-52 bombers through China’s newly declared air defense identification

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<sup>22</sup>See for example King et al. (2013); Lorentzen (2014); Huang (2015b); Brady (2009); Lynch (1999); Huang (2015c); Stockmann (2010); Stockmann and Gallagher (2011).

zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, without complying with Chinese instructions to notify Beijing. Although the Chinese military did not initially employ any “defensive emergency measures”, as it had threatened to do against noncompliant aircraft, in 2014 Beijing justified several close flybys between Chinese fighter jets and Japanese reconnaissance planes as legitimately enforcing the ADIZ.<sup>23</sup>

We use the context of these recent disputes to evaluate which types of foreign actions may put domestic pressure on the Chinese government to respond with tough action. We evaluate three types of potentially provocative events, all involving a public defiance or challenge to Chinese claims and interests. The first involves a foreign military patrol near Chinese-claimed features. The second adds a fatality, with a foreign military patrol resulting in a collision and the death of a Chinese military pilot. The third adds a verbal insult to the act of defiance, involving foreign construction on a disputed territorial feature and the dismissal of China as a “paper tiger.”

To assess the effects of these events as portrayed to the Chinese public, we employ three survey-based research designs, all fielded to mainland Chinese respondents online and via mobile devices between October 2015 and March 2016. We chose an online sample for a number of reasons, most importantly because Chinese internet users represent a segment of the public whose reactions are of particular concern to the Chinese government.<sup>24</sup> According to the chief editor of the *People’s Daily*, the Internet is the “biggest variable” (*zui da bianliang*) that the Chinese Communist Party faces in managing public opinion.<sup>25</sup> Roughly 80 percent of respondents who took our survey said they were likely or very likely to share or repost information about the dispute online, suggesting a connection between their attitudes

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<sup>23</sup>“China’s Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ),” *Congressional Research Service* (2015, January 30), p. 13. Available at <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R43894.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup>As Johnston (2017, 42) notes, “[Online opinion] may be less representative, but nonetheless more immediately salient for political leaders.”

<sup>25</sup>“Bawo hao zheng zhi jia ban bao de shidai yaoqiu,” *Renmin Ribao* (2016, March 21). Available at <http://news.qq.com/a/20160321/020121.htm>.

and online behavior. As recent scholarship has noted, moreover, the Chinese government regards online opinion as a leading indicator of potential unrest (King et al., 2013).

Recruited participants came from provinces all across China and from different income, educational, and urban/rural backgrounds.<sup>26</sup> The gender and age distributions were 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 (see, for example, Huang, 2015a).

Two of our designs involved scenario-based survey experiments, where respondents were asked to read a short description of a hypothetical or recent dispute before giving their opinion. Widely used in international relations, hypothetical scenarios provide greater freedom to tailor vignettes and may yield more generalizable inferences by avoiding specifics of any particular scenario. Our hypothetical design described a potential territorial dispute between China and one of its neighbors. We manipulated five contextual variables: three about the foreign government (regime type, alliance with the US, and military power), and two about the value of the territory (its symbolic importance to the nation as well as its economic and strategic value). Respondents were then assigned in a factorial (and thus independent) way to several substantive treatments, one of which was our *provocation* treatment (discussed below).<sup>27</sup> For all conditions the scenario ended with the Chinese government failing to take action to defend its claims: “In the end, China does not take military action, and the neighboring country consolidates control over the territory.” By using the same ending for all respondents, we were able to measure the effect of provocation while holding constant the outcome of the scenario. The full text is available in Appendix 5.

To complement the hypothetical design, we simultaneously fielded a second scenario-based experiment. In this design, which we call a *selective-history* survey experiment, we provided concrete details of a recent crisis between China and the United States in the East

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<sup>26</sup>For further recruitment details and discussion of self-censorship, see the Appendix.

<sup>27</sup>The other treatments, which are examined in another paper, involved a Chinese statement of commitment, troop mobilization, protests, and elite cues.

China Sea.<sup>28</sup> Specifically, all respondents read the same opening context: “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.” Respondents were then assigned our substantive treatments, including two actual events that were plausibly provocative (discussed below), in a factorial and thus independent way.<sup>29</sup> The scenario ended for all respondents with the Chinese government failing to take further action to enforce its claims. All respondents read: “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.” We held the ending constant to isolate the impact of perceived provocations from material and other considerations.

## 4.1 Provocations

Our key manipulation in these designs was the presence or absence of a potentially provocative event, each involving a public defiance or challenge to Chinese claims and interests. The first involved a foreign military patrol near Chinese-claimed features. The second added a fatality, with a foreign military patrol resulting in a collision and the death of a Chinese military pilot. The third added a verbal insult to the act of defiance, involving foreign construction on a disputed territorial feature and the dismissal of China as a “paper tiger”.

The first provocation treatment reminded respondents of the US decision in November 2013 to fly B-52s through China’s Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, defying China’s threat to use “defensive emergency measures” if foreign aircraft failed to comply. Respondents receiving this treatment first read: [ADIZ] “On November 23, 2013 China announced an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea. China

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<sup>28</sup>Another example of a selective-history design is [Tingley \(2017\)](#), which reminds some American respondents about China’s declaration of the ADIZ.

<sup>29</sup>Other treatments, examined in another paper, involved a statement of commitment (the declaration of the ADIZ), and three elite cues. For the full text see [Appendix 6](#).



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.” They then read our first provocation condition, *ADIZ Provocative Defiance (ADIZp)*.<sup>30</sup>

[ADIZp] 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.”

The second provocation treatment reminded respondents of the April 2001 EP-3 spy plane collision near Hainan Island, which resulted from Chinese opposition to US military reconnaissance flights near China’s coast and submarine base. Respondents read:

[EP-3] 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.<sup>31</sup>

The third provocation treatment involved the foreign country defying as well as publicly insulting China:

[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.

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<sup>30</sup>In assessing the effect of *ADIZp* we control for the effect of *ADIZ*.

<sup>31</sup>This is how the Chinese government and media have depicted the collision, even though US officials explained that it was technically impossible for the slow-moving EP-3 to have maneuvered in this manner. See Keefe (2002).

## 4.2 Results

Our primary outcome of interest was approval or disapproval of the government’s performance, on a scale ranging from Strongly Disapprove to Strongly Approve. We also asked respondents an open-ended question to elicit their reasoning.

In both scenario-based designs, the provocation conditions led respondents to disapprove more of their government’s foreign policy performance (Figure 2). The joint significance of these three predictions for our primary (no covariate) specifications ( $p_{J,1}$ ) and for our secondary covariate specifications ( $p_{J,2}$ ) are<sup>32</sup>:

$$p_{J,1} = 0.012 \qquad p_{J,2} = 0.002$$

Thus, overall the weight of the evidence is consistent with our prediction that these kinds of provocative events reduce approval of government inaction.

The hypothetical act of defiance and public insult had a strong individual effect. Reminding respondents of the EP-3 incident also reduced approval of the government’s foreign policy performance in the selective-history design. Finally, reminding respondents of the United States’ defiance of the ADIZ also reduced approval, although these results are more suggestive.<sup>33</sup>

We obtained illustrative evidence of why respondents disapproved of their government’s inaction by asking them to explain their answer to our approval question in detail. “If happiness means bowing and scraping, I’d rather stand painfully,” said one respondent. Another wrote: “The US bullies the weak and fears the strong. The fewer actions you take, the more brazenly the US will step by step touch our bottom line.” Two other respondents implied that a more competent government would take tougher action against foreign threats: “An incapable country, fooling people, bullying people, but weak externally,” wrote one respondent. Another said: “The government is too incompetent. Protests cannot be used

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<sup>32</sup>We used the Fisher combining function to combine our one-sided (pre-registered) predictions.

<sup>33</sup>Shown  $p$ -values are two-sided.

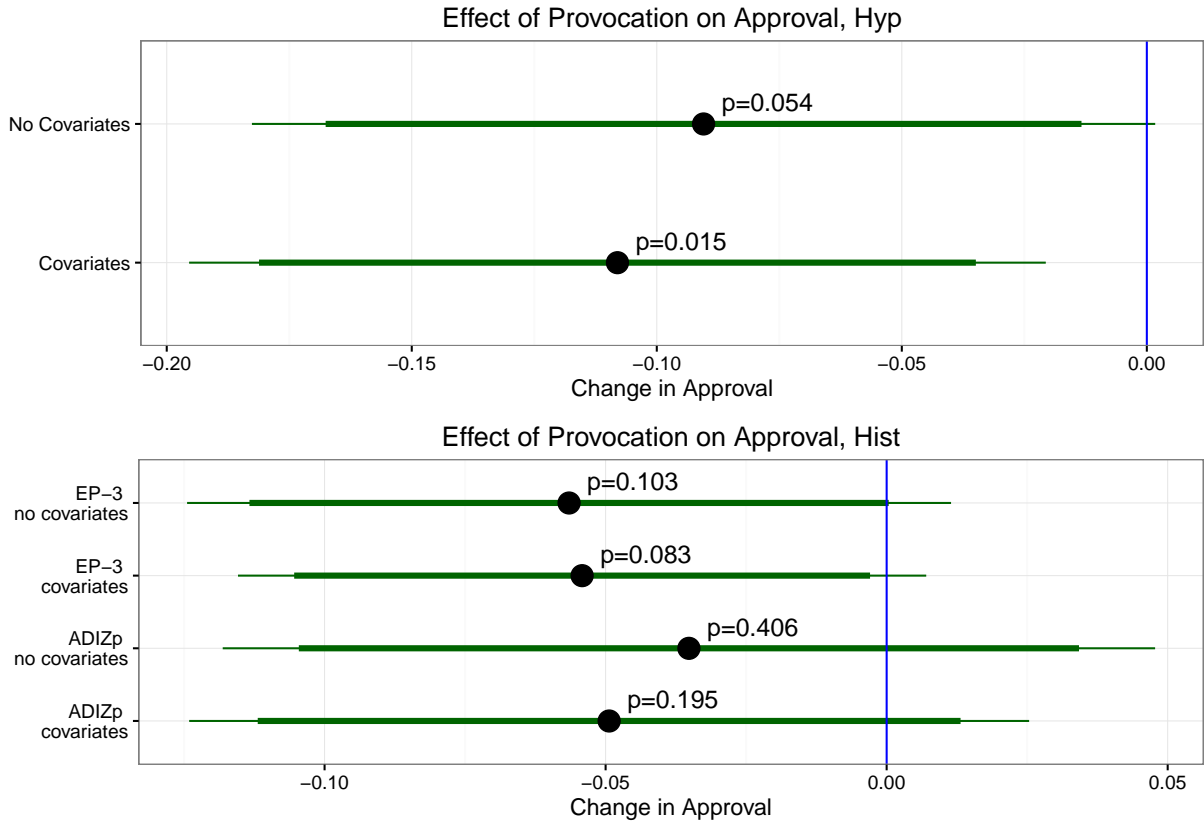


Figure 2

as food. Must show fists!” Another wrote: “I think what China currently does is to take strong measures only after courteous ones fail. If the US continues to run wild, it will bear all the consequences.”

## 5 Natural Experiment: US Military Patrols in the South China Sea

To complement our scenario-based designs, our third design exploited the occurrence of three US military patrols in the South China Sea that were reported in China as provocative. First was the October 27 Freedom of Navigation Patrol (FONOP) by the *USS Lassen* near Subi Reef, an enlarged Chinese-held feature in the South China Sea. The patrol was prominently

reported in Chinese media, including one of the most widely watched and authoritative state-run news programs in the country, the CCTV seven o'clock evening news broadcast. CCTV reported that the government had denounced the US patrol as “provocative behavior” (*tiaoxin xingwei*), a threat to Chinese sovereignty, and a danger to Chinese security interests.<sup>34</sup>

On December 18, 2015, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that a US B-52 plane had unintentionally flown within two nautical miles of an artificial Chinese island on a routine mission the previous week. After the *WSJ*'s report, the overflight was reported by the Chinese media and called “a severe military provocation” (*yanzhong de junshi tiaoxin xingwei*) by the Chinese Ministry of Defense.<sup>35</sup> Reports in the Chinese media acknowledged US claims that the B-52 flight was accidental, but often skeptically or not as prominently as the Ministry of Defense's characterization of the event as a severe military provocation.<sup>36</sup>

On January 30, 2016, another US freedom of navigation patrol took place in the South China Sea. The *USS Curtis Wilbur* sailed within 12 nautical miles of Triton Island in the Paracels, which China has administered since 1974. Chinese officials and state media condemned the act, with China's foreign ministry spokesperson demanding the US halt such “risky and provocative behavior (*maoxian yu tiaoxin xingwei*).”<sup>37</sup>

Did these three reported “provocations” have any real-world effect on Chinese public approval? We measured respondents' baseline opinion by asking the following question at the beginning of the survey, before respondents read the selective-history context and

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<sup>34</sup>CCTV, October 27, 2015, <http://news.cntv.cn/2015/10/27/VIDE1445945038538140.shtml>

<sup>35</sup>“Zhongfang nu chi Mei jun ji chuang Nanhai, Mei jun biaotai ling ren yi wai,” *Sohu.com* (2015, December 20). Available at <http://m.sohu.com/n/556491041/>.

<sup>36</sup>“Mei jun B52 dai zhe ye xin quan qiu ben xi, chuang Nan hai xi yan zhong jun shi tiao xin,” *Renminwang* (2015, December 21). Available at <http://military.people.com.cn/n1/2015/1221/c1011-27954552.html>. See also “Jiefangjun Nanhai shou jiao bu dui jing gao qu li Mei B52 hong zha ji,” *Global Times* (2015, December 19). Available at <http://world.huanqiu.com/exclusive/2015-12/8214170.html?t=t>.

<sup>37</sup>CCTV, January 30, 2016, <http://news.cntv.cn/2016/01/30/VIDEw8Zmuzamp2d01zyQGukP160130.shtml>; Huanqiu wang, January 30, 2016, <http://world.huanqiu.com/exclusive/2016-01/8477927.html>.

scenario: “Regarding the security situation in China’s surrounding waters, what is your overall evaluation of the government’s performance?”<sup>38</sup> We then compared these baseline approval levels in the days following each incident with the baseline responses received on other days.<sup>39</sup> To do so, we produced an indicator variable for the  $s$  days after the first announcement of the event in China, where  $s = 10$  for both FONOPs and  $s = 5$  for the overflight. These numbers represent our best guess for how long the events were salient in the minds of respondents, as the FONOPs were more prominent than the overflight. We drop observations for the first 24 hours after an event was first reported, because we expect the treatment effect of a reported “provocation” to be ambiguous during the first day, when citizens are still becoming aware of the event and how the government chose to respond. Modifying this rule does not substantially change the results.

## 5.1 Results

Figure 3 shows the time trend in baseline approval, with a rug plot along the bottom axis indicating the frequency of observations during our two survey waves. The vertical red lines mark the first reporting of the events that fell within our sampling period.

We analyzed the effect of these three reported provocations (the 1st FONOP on Oct. 27, the mistaken overflight reported on Dec. 18, and the 2nd FONOP on Dec. 30) using regression, controlling for temporal trends in two ways (see 1.3). Figures 4 and 5 report the confidence intervals from these regressions, showing that all three events decreased approval of the government’s performance, especially in the days after the more salient Freedom of Navigation patrols. The joint test is highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ), as are the individual FONOPs.

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<sup>38</sup>We initially asked only half the respondents this pre-scenario question. After the first few days, given our interest in measuring reactions to real-world events, we modified the design so that all respondents received these questions.

<sup>39</sup>See Appendix 2 for details on the allocation of subjects per day.

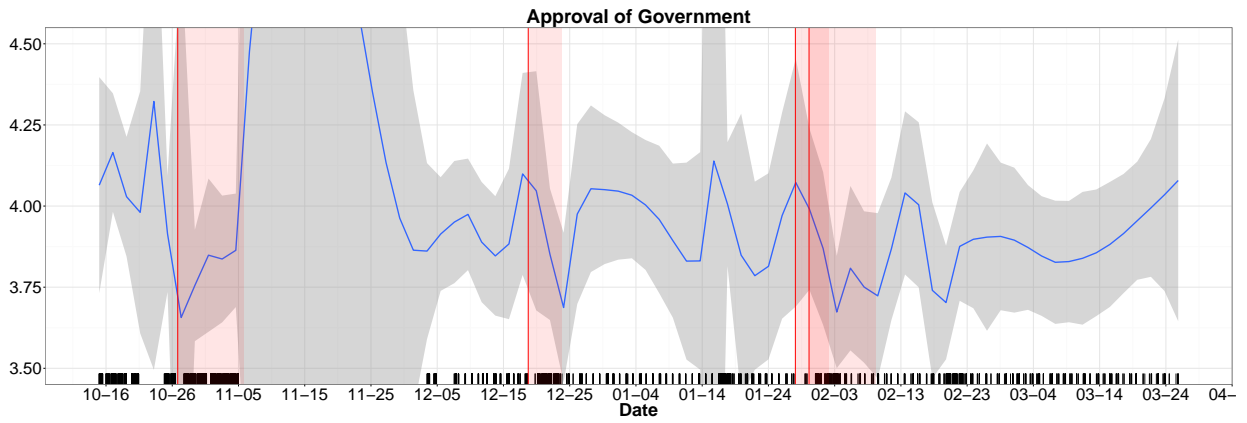


Figure 3

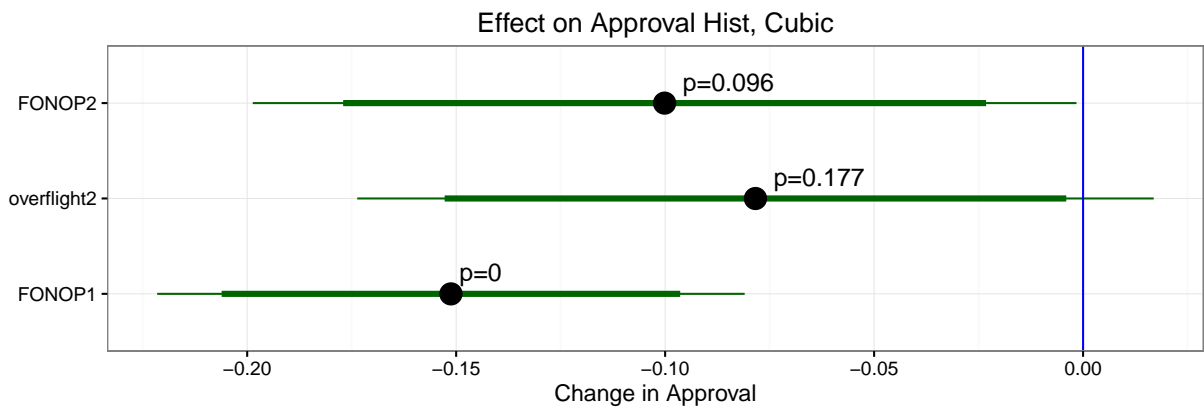


Figure 4

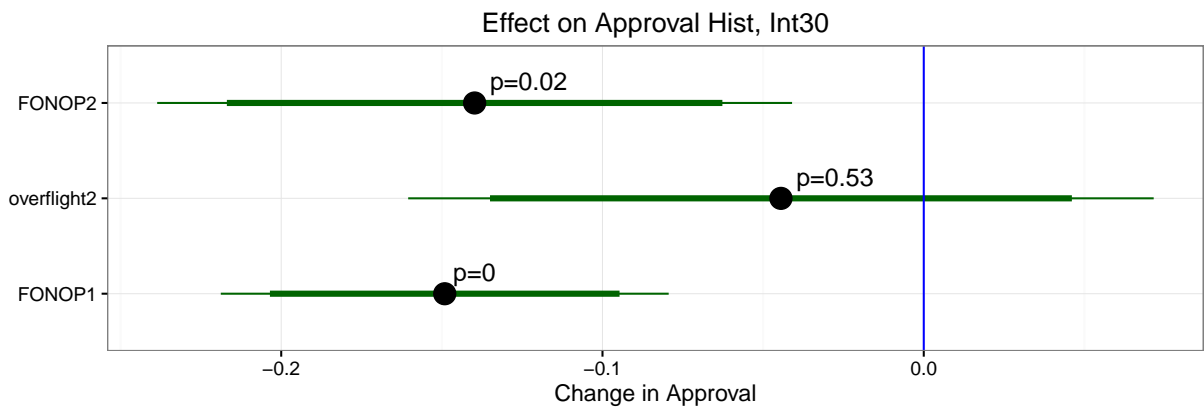


Figure 5

## 6 Discussion

Together, the results of two scenario-based survey experiments and a natural experiment indicate that the class of events we investigate—including challenges, insults, escalation, and coercive harm—increase disapproval of government inaction. What explains this increase in public disapproval? We have argued that such events shift the public’s preferences towards more resolute and punitive actions, and that the government’s failure to take tough action is seen as betrayal of the national honor. In this way, we posit that public disapproval is conditional on the government’s inaction in the face of a provocative event.

However, our results might also be consistent with theories that posit that the event (*E*) has unconditional effects: increasing public disapproval whether or not the government responds with tough action. Foreign challenges or insults might reveal some undesirable trait about the government, such as the government’s overreach in its coercive diplomacy, failure to deter an adversary, and inability to win the respect of other countries. In short, the event may reveal that the government is not competent (Gelpi and Grieco, 2015), causing the public to feel ashamed of their government or humiliated. Alternatively, if the event is regarded as a consequence of the government’s prior aggression, then the event may lead some to disapprove of their government for being excessively belligerent (Kertzer and Brutger, 2016).

These alternative explanations are important to disentangle because they yield different strategic implications. Our theory implies that these events will make it harder for a leader to back down by increasing public and leader resolve and hence the risks of crisis escalation. By contrast, these alternative explanations may imply no effect on resolve or even a reduction in resolve. To differentiate these possibilities, we included a set of questions to evaluate respondents’ preferences for using force in the scenario.<sup>40</sup>

In both the hypothetical and selective-history designs, the effect on resolve was always

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<sup>40</sup> Phrasing and results are in 1.4; appendix 3 discusses an alternative design for evaluating these strategic implications and why we chose not to adopt it here.

in the predicted direction, and significantly so for a subset of the tests. Selective reminders of recent real-world challenges (the EP-3 collision and the US defiance of China’s ADIZ) had the strongest effect on resolve, while the hypothetical challenge had the weakest effect. The  $p$ -values from our joint tests, using the Fisher combining function, for our primary and secondary specifications, are:

$$p_{J,1} = 0.017 \qquad p_{J,2} = 0.071$$

The results for the natural experiment are ambiguous. The first Freedom of Navigation Patrol appeared to increase resolve, the overflight had no apparent effect, and the second FONOP may have actually reduced resolve (figure 1.4). A possible explanation for this last result is that a sequence of unrequited provocations could be more likely to fatigue, humiliate, or intimidate the target, rather than provoke. This view is expressed in an old Chinese saying: “the fighting spirit is aroused by the first roll of drums, is depleted by the second, and is exhausted by the third (*yi gu zuo qi, zai er shuai, san er jie*).”

Overall, the evidence suggests that reading about these foreign challenges made our respondents more willing to use force, consistent with the logic of provocation and inconsistent with several other explanations. Future research should seek to parse these effects, as well as examine the conjecture that repeated, unrequited provocative events humiliate and intimidate more than they provoke. Many open questions remain, including: To what extent is provocation due to instrumental concern for maintaining valuable social traits like reputation, or does it reflect more intrinsic concerns? To what extent is provocation mediated by emotional reactions such as anger, outrage, or damaged pride? To what extent is provocation characterized by desire for vengeance as opposed to less punitive means of defending and recovering honor? In what ways is concern for honor related to personal and national identity? We raise these open questions to acknowledge the many dimensions on which honor-based theories of provocation might differ. For example, Hall articulates a theory of provocation



that focuses on emotion (Hall, 2016); Stein emphasizes the importance of vengeance (Stein, 2015); O’Neill emphasizes the ritualistic aspects of maintaining honor (O’Neill, 1999); and Schelling offers a more instrumental account based on reputation (Schelling, 1960). While each of these works implies different answers to these questions, at this stage we do not try to separate these mechanisms, regarding them instead as offering complementary understandings of provocation rooted in national honor, noting that there are many open questions for future scholarship to theorize and evaluate.

## 6.1 Going public: The dilemma of disclosing foreign provocations

A puzzle emerges from China’s restrained response to U.S. military patrols in the South China Sea. Given the evidence we found of public disapproval, why did Chinese officials talk about these events and frame them as provocative, if the government did not plan to respond with tough action? Historically, some governments have been able to suppress public knowledge about foreign military actions (Carson, 2016). At other times, governments seem unable to shield their public from potentially provocative events. Some incidents may be too large or directly experienced by a segment of the public to be concealed, such as the attacks of 9/11 and Pearl Harbor. Particularly with widespread Internet and social media usage, it may be nearly impossible for all but the most totalitarian regimes to seal off international news. As Susan Shirk notes, “despite censorship, the Chinese people today have exponentially more information about events outside the country than in the past. Keeping people ignorant of a speech by a Japanese or US cabinet minister is no longer possible. In the short time before the censors delete a news story, it can be spread widely and spark online outrage, forcing Chinese officials to react” (Shirk, 2014).

Once a foreign event is reported in the international news, the home government faces a dilemma. If the government publicizes foreign “provocations” and does not take tough countermeasures, it suffers a loss in public approval, as our results illustrate. But if the government does not publicly acknowledge foreign actions and citizens learn of them through

other channels, including online and overseas news media, the government looks weak in allowing foreign transgressions without protest (Quek and Johnston, 2018).

In 2015, the Chinese government tried to keep US military patrols in the South China Sea quiet but broke this silence after foreign media and U.S. officials publicized the patrols. As further leaks confirmed that the Obama administration had authorized an impending patrol and had begun briefing US allies in Asia, Chinese officials and media began to react more stridently. The official Xinhua News Agency rejected the White House spokesman’s comment that such patrols would not “provoke” a Chinese reaction, asking rhetorically: how could any military patrol “at one’s doorstep” be deemed “not provocative?”<sup>41</sup> President Xi Jinping stated that “the Chinese people will not accept violations of Chinese sovereignty” and that the South China Sea was “left to us by our ancestors.”<sup>42</sup> When the *USS Lassen* entered waters within 12 nautical miles of Subi Reef on October 27, 2015, the Chinese government responded publicly. Asked by reporters about the event, Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that “we are still verifying the matter but if true, the US should think twice and not act recklessly or provoke trouble (*bu yao wu shi sheng fei*).”<sup>43</sup> On the prominent state-controlled Xinwen Lianbo evening news, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang “urged the American side to immediately rectify its mistakes” and stated that “China will firmly respond to any country’s deliberate provocation. We will continue to closely monitor the situation in the air and on the water, and adopt all necessary measures as needed.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Daily Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest (2015, October 8). Available at [1.usa.gov/1LQ2zum](http://1.usa.gov/1LQ2zum); “Meiguo junjian wu tiaoxin xun hang tui bo Nanhai junshihua,” *Xinhua* (2015, October 16). Available at [bit.ly/1Qo0CXW](http://bit.ly/1Qo0CXW).

<sup>42</sup>“Xi Jinping: Yao qinfan Zhongguo zhu quan, Zhongguo renmin dou bu hui da ying,” *Huanqiu Shibao* (2015, October 18). Available at <http://world.huanqiu.com/article/2015-10/7785864.html>; “Chinese President Xi: China’s Actions in the South China Sea Are Not Expansionism,” *People’s Daily Online* (2015, October 20). Available at <http://en.people.cn/n/2015/1020/c90000-8963997.html>.

<sup>43</sup>“Meiguo junjian jinru Zhongguo Nansha daojiao linjin haiyu, Zhongfang jianshi genzong bing fachu jinggao,” *Xinhua* (2015, October 27). Available at [bit.ly/1QnPX2P](http://bit.ly/1QnPX2P).

<sup>44</sup>“Zhong fang jianjue fan dui Mei jun jian jin ru Zhongguo haiyu,” *CCTV* (2015, October 27). Available at <http://news.cntv.cn/2015/10/27/VIDE1445945038538140.shtml>, translated by Andrew Chubb

Why did Chinese officials prominently denounce the “provocative” U.S. patrol if China’s physical response was so restrained—merely warning the *Lassen* to leave the area and shadowing the patrol at a safe distance? As a senior scholar and commentator on US-China relations at Fudan University noted, “It was impossible for China not to report on this because of the internet. The US media reported this for weeks in advance, almost a countdown. It was US publicity that forced China to cover it.”<sup>45</sup>

The Chinese government’s efforts to downplay potentially provocative activities until foreign reporting forced their hand was again displayed in December 2015, when a US B-52 bomber flew within 2 nautical miles of another Chinese-held feature in the South China Sea. This time, Chinese officials and media did not acknowledge the intrusion until after it was reported by the *Wall Street Journal* more than a week later.<sup>46</sup> On December 18, the *WSJ* reported the B52 flight and that the Pentagon was investigating the incident in response to the Chinese government’s formal diplomatic complaint to the US Embassy. Despite filing the diplomatic complaint, the Chinese government and media did not publicly acknowledge the overflight until it was reported by the *WSJ*. Only then did the Chinese Defense Ministry release a statement saying that the “actions by the U.S. side were a serious military provocation, creating complex conditions in the South China Sea and even militarization in the region.”<sup>47</sup>

In summary, our study suggests that the Chinese leadership pays an approval cost from inaction when provocative events become known to domestic audiences. However, the government can reduce these approval costs by expressing outrage or otherwise “getting out in front” of the crisis. As Quek and Johnston show, the government may use a variety of strate-

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at [bit.ly/1oK02MW](http://bit.ly/1oK02MW).

<sup>45</sup> Author interview, Shanghai, January 13, 2016.

<sup>46</sup> Lubold, Gordon and Jeremy Page (2015, December 18), “U.S. Bomber Flies Over Waters Claimed by China,” *The Wall Street Journal*. Available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-jet-flies-over-waters-claimed-by-china-1450466358>.

<sup>47</sup> “U.S. flight near islands ‘serious military provocation’: Chinese defense ministry,” *Xinhua* (2015, December 19). Available at [bit.ly/1RBc3hn](http://bit.ly/1RBc3hn).

gies to reduce the public opinion costs of inaction, including emphasizing peace, the costs of war, or threatening non-military measures.([Quek and Johnston, 2018](#)). Thus, faced with moderate provocations when tough action is dangerous, bluster may be the better response than either tough action or ignoring the provocation. Due to selection effects we are unlikely to observe the disapproval costs of inaction from major provocations, as in such cases the government is likely to take tough action.

## 7 Conclusion

Few studies have systematically investigated the mass pressures that authoritarian leaders face during international crises. Combined with our natural experiment, our two survey experiments in China provide evidence that perceived provocations lead to disapproval if the government fails to take tough action. Our results about provocation have important implications for crisis dynamics, while raising many questions for future research.

Scholars have examined whether threats and uses of force increase domestic disapproval for backing down and can be used to tie a leader's hands. Such actions can be strategically deployed by the leader, but provocations often arise inadvertently or from an adversary's actions. Accordingly, provocations can alter the strategic dynamics of coercion and crisis escalation. If the only hand-tying actions are those that a leader chooses to enact, then a leader's stakes in a crisis only escalate as high as the leader allows. However, if other events and foreign actions can increase a leader's costs for inaction, then crises cannot necessarily be controlled. A leader may initiate a crisis with limited aims, but unexpected provocative events may then lock the leader into the dispute. Crisis bargaining is then much riskier than most models of international bargaining portray. Many moves by one party in a dispute to achieve its aims, such as public commitments, threats, or symbolic deployments of military force, risk being perceived as provocative by the target, which may then harden the target's resolve. Instead of creating asymmetric commitments, these actions are also likely to put

pressure on the other side to escalate. Our findings thus suggest that public threats, commitments, symbolic deployments of force, as well as actual use of force, may be mutually escalatory, reducing their efficacy as tools of coercion.

Although the phenomenon of provocation is found throughout history, it is not well understood. What kinds of actions or events are provocative? Is there a close mapping between the actions that increase domestic audience costs and the actions that are most likely to provoke their target? If so, then hand-tying tactics are likely to be much less effective than previously thought, if not counter-productive. But to the extent that this correlation is not perfect, there will be some actions that tie one government's hands more than they provoke a foreign reaction, and others that provoke a foreign reaction more than they tie the government's own hands. The skilled statesman seeking bargaining advantages through commitment will then be a master of employing the former and avoiding the latter. Do provocations follow a rational logic of defending reputation, or are they more psychological and emotional? How much cultural variation is there in the understanding of provocations, and is this variation substantive, or is there a universal grammar of provocations that simply has different cultural vocabularies? Once the phenomenon of provocation is better understood it can be integrated into our theories of crisis dynamics.

Further research is needed to evaluate how typical or singular are our findings. Some publics may be more or less sensitive to foreign provocations, and the specifics of what is understood as a provocation may vary. Asymmetries in power and specific histories of suffering under imperial or colonial exploitation likely affect how provocative particular actions are seen to be. In addition, the sensitivity of leaders to popular sentiment and their ability to manage how foreign events are portrayed or downplayed is likely to vary across leaders, regimes, electoral institutions, and the media environment (Potter and Baum, 2014; Slantchev, 2006). Further research is needed to address the range and efficacy of elite justifications for inaction. Given that many officials and media outlets form "hawkish" or "dovish" reputations even in the absence of party competition, the persuasiveness of elite cues may

vary with different domestic constituencies. Our findings represent an initial step toward illuminating these important questions.

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