

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

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Abstract

How does government rhetoric and propaganda affect mass reactions in international crises? Using two scenario-based survey experiments in China, one hypothetical and one that selectively reminds respondents of recent events, we assess how government statements and propaganda 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, suggesting that leaders can face public opinion costs akin to audience costs in an authoritarian setting. However, we also find evidence that citizens approve of bluster—vague and ultimately empty threats—suggesting that talking tough can provide benefits, even in the absence of tough action. In addition, narratives that invoke future success to justify present restraint increase approval, along with frames that emphasize a shared history of injustice at the hands of foreign powers.

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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

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. 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 (Bunce and Wolchik, 2010). At the same time, autocrats have been removed more frequently by public protests in recent years than by elite coups.⁶ Mass and elite forces may also jointly jeopardize the tenure of authoritarian leaders,⁷ with public disapproval providing an opportunity for elites to turn against the incumbent and reclaim the mantle of popular legitimacy. Appearing weak or failing to defend the nation’s honor may justify and focus opposition to the regime, creating opportunities for popular protests and elite challenges from other party or military officials (Shirk, 2008).

¹Lynch (2003), 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.

⁴A recent exception is Quek and Johnston (2018)

⁵On the diplomatic calculus of managing foreign policy street protests in authoritarian regimes, see Weiss (2014, 2013); Reilly (2013). On elite preferences, constraints, and incentives to use force, see Weeks (2012, 2008); Lai and Slater (2006); Chiozza and Goemans (2011); Pickering and Kisangani (2010).

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

⁷Wallace (2013); (Svolik, 2012, 12).

We evaluate three propositions about how public opinion responds to crisis developments in the authoritarian setting of China. First, we investigate whether mass audiences disapprove of leaders who fail to carry out explicit threats, inspired by extensive research on “audience costs” in democratic settings (Fearon, 1994a; Tomz, 2007). Second, we evaluate whether mass audiences also approve of tough but vague statements (“bluster”) that are unaccompanied by military action (Oakes, 2006). Third, we investigate whether authoritarian rhetoric and propaganda can effectively shape public perceptions and reactions. While media freedom and access also varies widely across democracies (Potter and Baum, 2014), autocratic regimes typically exert far greater control over the information and narratives that shape the public debate (Quek and Johnston, 2018).⁸ We explore three such framing tactics: two that explicitly justify inaction, and one that invokes a history of shared trauma and injustice at the hands of foreign powers.

We focus on the attitudes and reactions of citizens in China for two reasons. First, Chinese foreign policy is substantively important. Among possible great power wars, China’s tensions with the United States and Japan over maritime issues in the Asia-Pacific loom large.⁹ Second, China represents a useful point of departure for investigating the efficacy of government rhetoric and propaganda in shaping public perceptions and the popular incentives authoritarian leaders face in international crises. The Chinese leadership closely monitors online sentiment, receiving a daily brief of what Chinese “netizens” (*wangmin*) are saying online.¹⁰ 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 (King et al., 2013). 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.¹¹ As a state that has invested heavily in monitoring and guiding public opinion, China represents a “most likely” case for its leaders to be sensitive to public opinion 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.”¹²

⁸In democracies, see Guisinger and Saunders (2017), Saunders (2015), Trager and Vavreck (2011), and Levendusky and Horowitz (2012).

⁹Graham Allison, “The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?” *The Atlantic*, September 24, 2015, <http://theatlantic.com/1PxGVNV>.

¹⁰Simon Denyer, “In China, Communist Party Takes Unprecedented Step: It Is Listening,” *Washington Post*, August 2, 2013, <http://wapo.st/1GcWfKL>.

¹¹“Bawo hao zheng zhi jia ban bao de shidai yaoqiu,” *Renmin Ribao*, March 21, 2016.

¹²“Study History, be Close to the People,” *China Daily*, July 25, 2013.

We fielded two complementary online survey experiments to Chinese netizens. The first survey described an abstract hypothetical crisis scenario in which 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 explicit, empty threat, as audience cost theory would expect.

The second is a *selective-history* survey experiment, which reminded respondents of recent events. The issue of US military patrols near China has contributed to recent tensions between the United States and China, including high-profile “Freedom of Navigation” patrols. 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 Chinese demands. 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 tough but vague threat of “defensive emergency measures” against foreign aircraft that do not comply.

In both designs, we assess how respondents reacted to three different strategies to frame the public presentation of crisis events: biding time for future success, a nationalist frame of past humiliation, and the costs 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 authoritarian rhetoric and propaganda can be effective in bolstering popular support and attenuating disapproval of inaction. In both scenarios, biding time narratives were effective, while messages that emphasized the cost of war were less effective. We also find evidence that invoking a nationalist frame of remembered injustice at the hands of foreign powers had a positive effect on public approval. In addition, we find that empty threats can have positive or negative effects on public approval, in our case negative when the threat was explicit but positive when the threat was vague.

These results suggest that the public opinion costs of inaction exist but are relatively muted and malleable in China, undermining the government’s claims that its 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 but vague threats, 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 and

rhetorical justifications for inaction alongside audience costs and belligerence costs (Kertzer and Brutger, 2016).

In both designs, we prioritized realism, using actual statements and phrases by the Chinese government. This decision emphasized external validity but limited our choice of quotes, meaning that some treatments may bundle multiple concepts and be articulated by different speakers. We privileged selecting real quotes from speakers who were as senior in the Chinese government as possible, avoiding sources or outlets that might have been perceived as partisan or biased. Following (Huang, 2018), our primary purpose is not to compare across treatments, but instead to demonstrate the existence of effects and point the way for future studies to parse more finely the underlying mechanisms.

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.”¹³ Authoritarian leaders often rely heavily on nationalist mythmaking, making their behavior during international confrontations particularly important for sustaining claims of popular legitimacy.¹⁴ 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 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.¹⁵ Fearing a popular backlash, authoritarian leaders may feel compelled to take a tough international stance to appease these domestic pressures. 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.¹⁶ Considering the harsh consequences that authoritarian elites face if pushed out of office, even a small increase in the probability of ouster could alter authoritarian incentives in international crises.¹⁷

A history of nationalist uprisings make Chinese citizens and leaders especially aware of the

¹³De Sola Pool (1973a), p. 463.

¹⁴Snyder (1991)

¹⁵On the importance of shared or widespread beliefs in sparking protests against authoritarian regimes, see Kuran (1991), Lohmann (1994), Hollyer et al. (2015)

¹⁶Svolik calls this the problem of authoritarian control. Svolic (2012).

¹⁷Debs and Goemans (2010), Goemans (2000)

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.¹⁸ 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."¹⁹ 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."²⁰

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 (Reilly, 2013). 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.²¹

While propaganda, surveillance, and censorship are important tools that the Chinese government uses to monitor and manage popular sentiment,²² the efficacy of authoritarian information control and government propaganda in shaping public opinion remains unclear. On the one hand, citizens may discount government statements as biased propaganda (Slantchev, 2006). 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."²³ 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 (Little, 2017). 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 and elite machinations.

¹⁸Mitter (2004), p. 36-7.

¹⁹"Ba wo hao zheng zhi jia ban bao de shi dai yao qiu," *Renmin Ribao*, March 21, 2016.

²⁰As quoted in Reilly (2013), p. 35.

²¹"Wangluo yuqing fexishi cheng guanfang renke zhiye congyezhe da 200 wan," *Xinjing Bao*, October 10, 2013, cited in "If you like killing time on social networks, China has a job for you," PRI, July 31, 2014.

²²See, e.g., King et al. (2013), Pan and Chen (2018), Huang (2015b), Brady (2009).

²³De Sola Pool (1973b), p. 463.

2.1 Managing Public Reactions

Our study looks at the ways that governments use rhetoric and propaganda in international crises to shape public reactions, particularly in contexts when the government does not take, or intend to take, tough military action. The dominant theoretical perspective on leader statements in international relations is that of domestic “audience costs.” This perspective argues that leaders pay disapproval costs for failing to fulfill threats. These threats may be explicit (such as an ultimatum) or implicit (such as troop mobilization). Domestic publics are theorized to disapprove of failure to fulfill threats for several reasons, including betraying the nation’s honor, harming the nation’s reputation for consistently upholding commitments, or revealing the leader’s incompetence.²⁴ Survey experiments reveal empirical evidence of audience costs,²⁵ though scholars debate how important such considerations are in actual crises.²⁶ 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” (Snyder and Borghard, 2011, 437). In investigating the frequency and efficacy of democratic threats, Downes & Sechser (2012, 461) acknowledge that the accompanying threat of force is more often implied than explicit. Finally, scholars have remarked on the ambiguity and interpretive flexibility of commitments; Schelling (1966) writes how “most commitments are ultimately ambiguous in detail. Sometimes they are purposely so.” (67) This permits a “lenient interpretation” of often “ill defined and ambiguous” commitments (48).

Many rhetorical statements in international crises appear to serve other functions and operate according to other logics not captured by the audience cost model. For example, one countervailing possibility is that statements may offer a plausible justification for restraint, such as that the costs of war are likely to be especially great, and thereby attenuate audience costs (Levendusky and Horowitz, 2012). We are interested in exploring broader ways that government rhetoric can affect audience evaluations and justify military inaction.

Many authoritarian governments devote significant effort to “guiding” public opinion.

²⁴Fearon (1994b); Smith (1998); Schultz (2012); Sartori (2002); Levy et al. (2015); Guisinger and Smith (2002); Debs and Weiss (2016).

²⁵(Tomz, 2007, 823); Trager and Vavreck (2011); (Levendusky and Horowitz, 2012, 2); Chaudoin (2014); (Davies and Johns, 2013, 725); Kertzer and Brutger (2015); 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 (2008); Weiss (2013).

²⁶Snyder and Borghard (2011); Trachtenberg (2012); Slantchev (2012).

As Mao Zedong told his comrades: “When you make revolution, you must first manage public opinion.”²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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 public propaganda and media guidance. 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 and propaganda strategies.

We investigate three particular frames appropriate to the China context. First, we evaluate rhetoric that justifies inaction as part of a resolute, but subtle, long-term *biding time* strategy of building one’s strength in the present so as to achieve ultimate victory or vengeance. This narrative frames escalation as foolhardy, and inaction as a shrewd path to national honor rather than a humiliating capitulation.²⁹ 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.”³⁰

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” (Chen and Wang, 2011). 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 (Swaine, 2010, 7). Indeed, biding time messages often invoke the benefits of restraint by making implicit or vague references to the future, without a specific

²⁷Quoted in Michel Oksenberg, “The Political Leader,” in Wilson (1977), p. 179.

²⁸Slantchev (2006); Trager and Vavreck (2011); Levendusky and Horowitz (2012); Potter and Baum (2014).

²⁹For 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.

³⁰As quoted in (Legro, 2007, 519).

commitment to take action.

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.³¹ 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 costs-of-war justifications, 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 frame, 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 bolster popular support for inaction.

H_B (Biding Time): Statements that justify inaction by invoking future success will increase public approval.

Second, we evaluate nationalist propaganda about history, highlighting past humiliations by foreign adversaries and the governments role in overcoming past challenges. Governments seeking to bolster their domestic legitimacy often invoke nationalist references to a shared history of national struggle against foreign mistreatment and trauma.³² This frame, which in China is often invoked as the “Century of National Humiliation,”³³ puts current military inferiority in the context of the nations longer-term trajectory of rising to surpass foreign enemies and seeks to rally or mobilize the public toward that end.

However, the effects of such nationalist narratives on popular support in international crises have not been systematically evaluated and could have diverse effects.³⁴ Reminding respondents of a shared national trauma or injustice at the hands of foreign powers 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

³¹See, e.g., Johnston (2013); Chen et al. (2014); Xuetong (2014).

³²Snyder (1991); Mansfield and Snyder (2007); Bunce and Wolchik (2010).

³³Gries (2004); He (2009); Zhao (2004); Wang (2014).

³⁴Elite manipulation of nationalism and nationalist persuasion campaigns have been linked to an increased likelihood of interstate conflict. See Schrock-Jacobson (2012).

a rally-round-the-flag effect after the use of force or other dramatic events.³⁵ But because authoritarian leaders routinely employ nationalist appeals and propaganda without using force in international disputes, it is important to investigate the independent effect of nationalist propaganda 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, Nationalist History gives an honorable frame to present inaction, tying the current dispute into a long-term struggle for status. On the other hand, reminding the public of past losses could also generate an endowment effect, making citizens more willing to risk war. A humiliation prime could also heighten the salience of concerns for national honor, magnifying the costs of inaction. The net effect of these diverse mechanisms on public approval is unclear.

H_N (Nationalist History): *Statements that invoke a shared history of national injustice at the hands of foreign powers will increase (decrease) public approval.*

Third, we evaluate government rhetoric that emphasizes the economic, material, and human *costs of war* that the public might bear.³⁶ Chinese officials have sometimes invoked the costs of war to dampen the public’s appetite for confrontation.³⁷ As tensions between Japan and China escalated after the 2012 sale of the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, Political Commissar of the PLA General Logistics Department General Liu Yuan publicly warned that war would be “very cruel and costly.”³⁸ To maximize external validity, we used General Liu’s words in our experimental design. In a similar hypothetical scenario between China and Japan, [Quek and Johnston \(2018\)](#) found an increase in approval of backing down among respondents who read that the leader said that war with Japan would derail China’s economic development.

³⁵The literature is too extensive to cite fully here, but see, e.g., [Mueller \(1973\)](#); [Lai and Reiter \(2005\)](#); [Baker and Oneal \(2001\)](#); [Hetherington and Nelson \(2003\)](#).

³⁶On the cost- and casualty- sensitivity of democratic citizens’ support for war, see, e.g., [Berinsky \(2007\)](#); [Gelpi et al. \(2009\)](#); [Gartner \(2008\)](#).

³⁷At 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.

³⁸“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>.

H_C (Cost of War): *Statements that justify inaction by invoking the costs of war will increase public approval.*

Another species of rhetoric that is common in international affairs but under-examined in international relations theory is *bluster*, which we define as aggressive, vague rhetoric that is not followed by tough action, per the Oxford English Dictionary—“boisterous inflated talk, violent or angry self-assertion, noisy and empty menace, swaggering.” Bluster is a puzzle from the perspective of contemporary theories of audience costs, since if this rhetoric does anything, it is to communicate a threat to take tough action if some condition is not met, but is then unfulfilled. We concretely see the puzzle of bluster in China, where the government made strong public statements proscribing US behavior within its Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) and then failed to take tough measures to enforce that proscription. The phenomenon of bluster is also apparent in other countries, including statements by the 45th president of the United States that “North Korea best not make any more threats to the United States. They will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen.”³⁹ In the days after the president issued this threat, North Korea announced a plan “to interdict the enemy forces on major military bases on Guam and to signal a crucial warning to the U.S.,”⁴⁰ fired a missile over Japan, and conducted its most powerful nuclear test to date; none of these precipitated US military action as Trump had promised.

The possibility of bluster was noted by Fearon in his discussion of audience costs: “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’ (Fearon, 1994b, 580). What is the logic of bluster? Why would domestic audiences approve of their leader making empty threats?

We offer three possible explanations, which future research could explore and disentangle. First, tough talk itself may be interpreted as strength, and certain audiences may value the appearance of strength more than consistency or action. This can be thought of as a belligerence benefit, the inverse of Kertzer and Brutger’s belligerence costs. Indeed, some audiences may naively conflate tough talk with tough action. A leader who makes loud, confident demands may appear to be successfully advancing the national interest, at least

³⁹“Remarks by President Trump Before a Briefing on the Opioid Crisis,” August 8, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/08/08/remarks-president-trump-briefing-opioid-crisis>.

⁴⁰“N.K. threatens to fire four missiles toward Guam,” Yonhap News Agency, August 10, 2017, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/news/2017/08/10/0200000000AEN20170810000651315.html>.

absent persuasive claims to the contrary. In low-information environments, individuals may reflexively trust their leader’s behavior and judgment, discounting critics who point to the lack of follow-through as biased by partisan or other motivations.

Second, citizens may recognize that resisting a foreign adversary is not feasible, while nevertheless believing it prudent to lodge a symbolic protest. Publicly registering a state’s opposition to a foreign action could have material consequences under customary international law, where silence may be legally interpreted as consent;⁴¹ it could help communicate to potential allies one’s displeasure with the transgression and transgressor; and it could help prevent loss in the contest of expectations⁴² with the adversary, communicating that some arrangement will be challenged when one has the power to do so.

Third, vague tough talk may be understood as a threat about which there is subjective uncertainty about what kinds of behavior constitute noncompliance as well as the appropriate timeline and nature of restitution. A vague threat may communicate that some behavior or arrangement is unacceptable on a latent, not objectively measurable, dimension. The latent dimension may represent disrespect, hostility, or challenge to core national interests. Domestic audiences understand vague tough talk as communicating the threat that persistence in a disrespectful arrangement will lead to an appropriately forceful response, but individuals may disagree about the details. Further, given that the public has less access to all information relevant to assessing disrespect and whether one’s leader appropriately followed through, under this model the public may give their leadership the benefit of the doubt. This mechanism is consistent with Trager and Vavreck’s (2011: 536) finding that the vague statement “the U.S. will not tolerate the invasion” generated less audience costs than the precise threat “the U.S. military will prevent the invasion.” We could even see an increase in approval in the midst of a vague threat that will eventually be unfulfilled, if the increase in approval from the leader issuing the threat outweighs the reduction in approval for those who deem the vague threat to be unfulfilled.⁴³

H_B (Bluster): Tough but vague threats to use force may increase public approval, even when the threats are unfulfilled or unaccompanied by military action.

It is important to note that while the benefits of bluster often run counter to audience costs, there are conditions when one logic is more likely to dominate over the other. In

⁴¹Byers, Michael. Custom, power and the power of rules: international relations and customary international law. Cambridge University Press, 1999. Ch 7.

⁴²Dafoe et al. (2014).

⁴³Schultz also notes that bluffing may be an optimal strategy, making it unclear why audiences would rationally punish a leader for backing down. (Schultz, 1999, 237).

particular, specific threats are more likely to incur public opinion costs if unfulfilled, whereas vague threats are more likely to generate public approval when unfulfilled.

H_A (Audience Costs): *Explicit threats to use force should increase domestic disapproval when unfulfilled or unaccompanied by military action.*

To evaluate whether vague threats can generate public approval while specific threats generate audience costs, we designed two treatments that varied the specificity of the threatened consequences. In the Explicit Threat, respondents were told that “China will use force to take the territory” if the foreign country does not recognize Chinese sovereignty over the disputed territory, whereas in the Vague Threat treatment, respondents were told that “Chinese armed forces will take defensive emergency measures” if foreign aircraft do not comply with China’s newly declared Air Defense Identification Zone over the disputed territory.

We also look at the effect of mobilization, an act that is often regarded as an implicit threat and that has been found to increase audience costs (Tomz, 2007). In our framework, mobilization may also constitute a vague expression of resolve, if the conditions under which the mobilized military capabilities will be used are not publicly explicated. We find indeterminate (null) effects for mobilization, which may reflect these countervailing effects.

There is an important difference between how we measure the costs of unfulfilled, explicit threats and how canonical studies have measured audience costs (Tomz 2007). Because the crisis we consider is more likely to impact core Chinese interests (including sovereignty over claimed land and water) than a hypothetical scenario in which the United States or United Kingdom intervenes in a dispute between third parties, our baseline “stay out” comparison is more likely to engage national honor. Thus, respondents may disapprove of inaction even in the no-threat, no-action (control) condition, making it more difficult to observe differences with the explicit threat, no-action (audience cost) condition. The choice to adopt a more likely, realistic crisis for a Chinese context makes this a relatively hard test of whether unfulfilled threats generate public opinion costs.

3 Research Design

To evaluate these hypotheses, 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 (see Supplementary Files C.1). Participants were then directed to our anonymous, US-based Qualtrics survey. As Supplementary File C.2 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.⁴⁴

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.⁴⁵ 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 (Schultz, 2001).

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.⁴⁶ 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 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 (Dafoe et al., 2015). 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 use a *selective-history* survey experiment. In this design, we provided respondents with information about real events, here a recent crisis in the East China Sea, before asking respondents for their opinions. Other examples

⁴⁴See, for example, Huang (2015a).

⁴⁵In both experiments our manipulations were assigned according to a set of conditional probability rules. See Supplementary File D and Supplementary File E for details.

⁴⁶Though the scope and merit of this claim remain to be empirically evaluated.

of selective-history designs are Tingley (2017), which reminds some American respondents about China’s declaration of the ADIZ (see Supplementary Files), and Huang (2018), which looks at the effect of real-world Chinese propaganda messages. Other hypothetical designs also use contexts where real-world disputes are specified, but where the treatments involve actions or events that have not (yet) occurred, such as Quek and Johnston (2018) and Mattes and Weeks (mimeo). The selective history design can be understood as estimating two causal effects.

First, selective-history designs evaluate the selective presentation of information about previous crises. This is an especially relevant causal estimand in authoritarian states, where the government has substantial influence over the media. In China, state-run media often remind the public about aspects of previous crises, such as the death of pilot Wang Wei during the 2001 EP-3 collision.⁴⁷ Since selective-history designs closely mimic real world statements and behavior, they pose relatively externally valid means of studying these phenomena. To the extent that such survey designs deviate from the real world, effects are likely to be attenuated because surveys are a less realistic, potent, and saturated source of information about past events, compared to what real-world governments can broadcast through sustained television and radio coverage. If our manipulations affect opinion, then so should stronger manipulations in the real world.

Second, selective-history designs can be understood as estimating the impact of events in a crisis. This is the estimand more typically investigated in survey experiments. Selective-history designs are plausibly more externally valid than hypothetical designs because they involve actual (and hence more realistic) events, implicitly involving all the contextual information that was relevant to the respondent during the actual crisis.

However, selective-history designs also have disadvantages. First, they are limited to events and statements that have transpired, making it difficult to evaluate the effect of behavior that has yet to occur, such as explicit, unfulfilled threats to use force or mobilization of troops for a China-US conflict. Second, the magnitude of effects may be attenuated if respondents’ knowledge of events crowds out the survey’s representation of them.

While this makes it harder to detect effects (reducing statistical power), the effects we find are likely to be underestimates of real world effects. The magnitude of effects could also be greater than 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 ADIZ; and second, respondents may feel more strongly about events when reminded of them

⁴⁷See, for example, China Central Television, April 3, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1h3k5Sa>

than when they first occurred, if effects increase with exposure.⁴⁸

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 in a full-factorial way, 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.⁴⁹ These covariates are regime type, alliance with the US, military power, and the material value of the territory. Respondents who received the *Nationalist 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.

⁴⁸A 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.

⁴⁹In addition, if other theories predict heterogeneous effects across some of these covariates, our survey design will allow researchers to investigate these.

[*The disputed territory was part of the land China lost during the Century of National Humiliation OR no mention.*]

Respondents then read none, some, or all of the following (assigned in an independent factorial manner, except only one of the two rhetorical cues, *Biding Time* or *Cost of War*, was given).⁵⁰

- *Explicit Threat*: 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.
- *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.”
- *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.”

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.

⁵⁰Two 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).

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.⁵¹ 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*.

In the selective-history design, 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.

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.⁵²

- *Vague Threat*: 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.
- *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.”
- *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

⁵¹US 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>.

⁵²In a separate paper we also analyze two other treatments related to provocation. These can be seen in Supplementary File E.

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.”

- *Nationalist 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.⁵³ Immediately after the scenario, we asked respondents to answer the following question, worded more generally in the hypothetical design.

(Hypothetical) How do you feel about the government’s performance in handling the situation?

(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

⁵³For full details on the surveys, see Appendices D and E.

the particular treatment. Per our preanalysis plan, the primary specification is a linear regression model that controls only for conditions that we experimentally manipulated.⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵

4.1 Government Rhetoric, Propaganda, and Mass Reactions

The data suggest an important role for government rhetoric and propaganda in shaping public perceptions and persuading citizens to see government (in)action in a positive light. Figure 1 suggests that the Biding Time and Nationalist History narratives had positive effects, while the Costs of War frame did not seem to have an effect.⁵⁶

Many respondents who received the Biding Time treatment 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 Nationalist History treatment, which invoked 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

⁵⁴These 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.

⁵⁵In 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.

⁵⁶The full table of results for the models on which these estimates are based is in Supplementary File A.

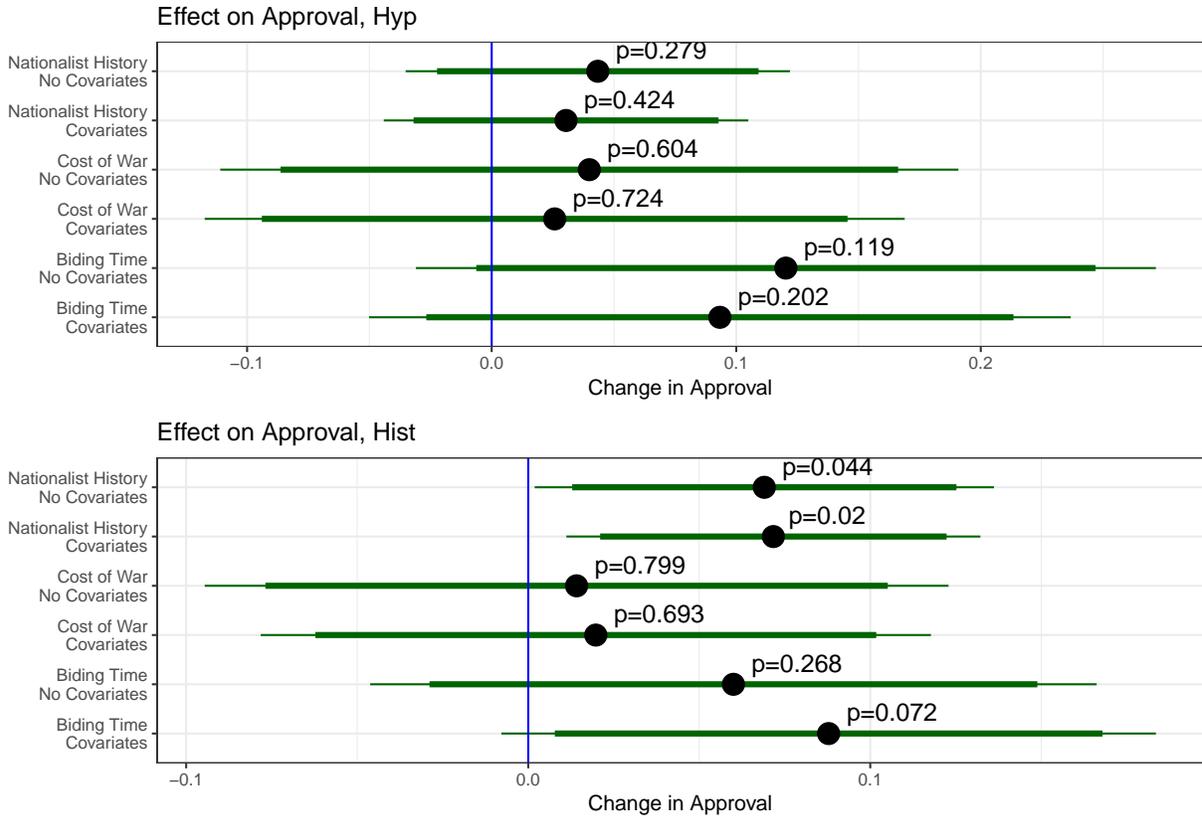


Figure 1: Effects of Government Rhetoric and Propaganda. Estimated effect of rhetorical frames on public approval of the government’s actions relative to the control group. The *Biding Time*, *Nationalist History*, and *Cost of War* treatments all increased approval, but the effects were only statistically significant at conventional levels in the case of the *Biding Time* and *Nationalist History* treatments in the Selective History experiment. In no case was the estimated effect negative.

homeland. Whatever it does is right (*Wo ai wo de zuguo, zuguo zuo shenme dou shi dui de*). 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 its logic. 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.)”

4.2 Audience Costs and Bluster

Next we consider the effect of explicit versus vague threats. Interestingly, we see contrasting effects. In the hypothetical design, the Explicit Threat treatment reduced approval of the government’s performance, consistent with audience costs. By contrast, reminding respondents of the vague but ultimately unfulfilled *ADIZ* threat increased approval in the selective history design, consistent with the view that audiences may reward leaders for bluster: making tough but vague statements without taking military action. *Mobilization* had a positive effect on approval, though not at conventional levels of significance.

The results are similar and a bit stronger when we control for other covariates, as depicted in Figure 2. 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 treatment and control groups suggest that domestic audience costs exist in China for explicit threats, but not for tough but vague threats.

It is also possible that respondents punished inconsistency in the explicit threat condition but rewarded vague bluster due to differences in the perceived finality of the scenarios outcome. The selective history design ended with “to this day, the United States continues to fly military planes through Chinas surrounding waters and that “China has not used force to stop this’, whereas the hypothetical design concluded with “in the end, China does not take military action, and the neighboring country consolidates control over the territory. If more respondents in the selective history design believed that the government might take future action to rectify the situation, then this design choice may have minimized the inconsistency costs of saying one thing and doing another. At the same time, audiences evaluating their leaders performance in many real-world crises may anticipate the possibility of future action, particularly for protracted disputes with periodic flare-ups. Often a leaders decision to “stay out” of a conflict is later reversed, as Levy et al. (2015, 990) and Quek (2017) note.

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, 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

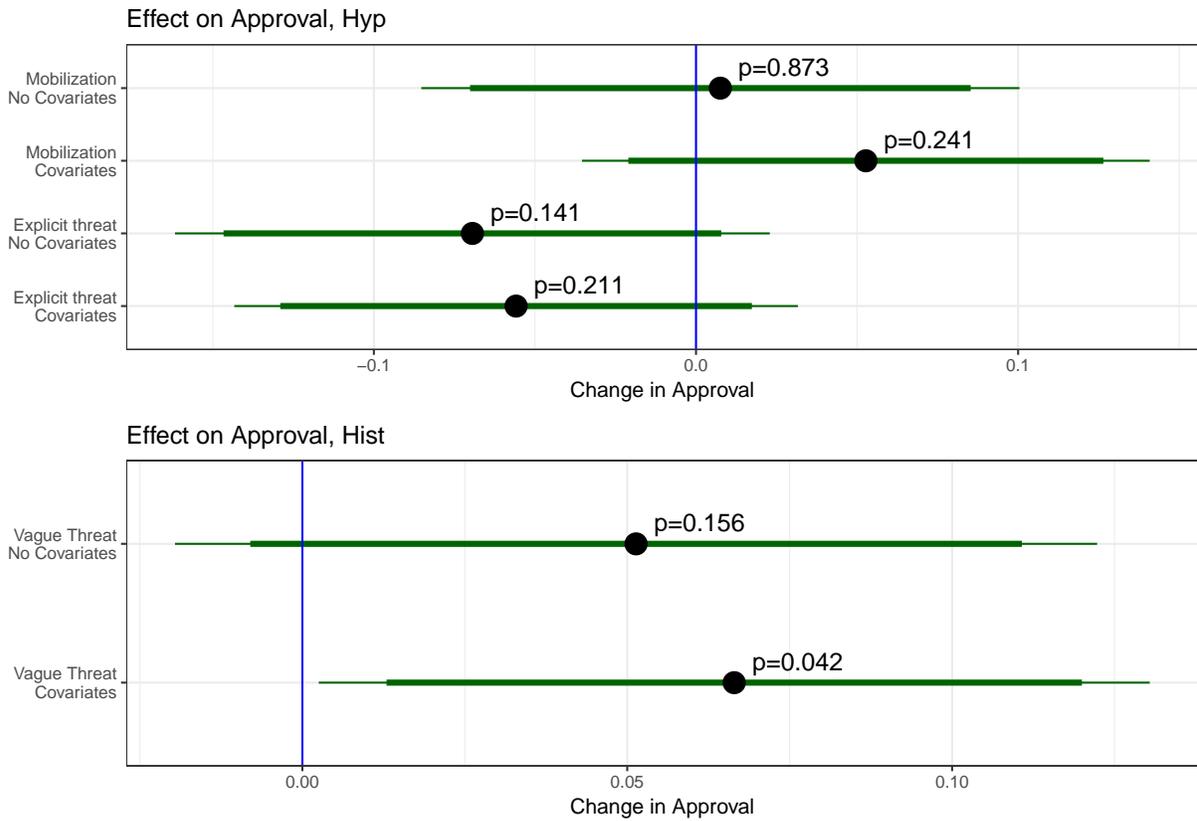


Figure 2: Audience Costs and Bluster. Estimated effect of the use of threats by the government on public approval of the government's actions relative to the control group. Explicit Threats decreased public approval, while Vague Threats increased public approval, though not always at conventional standards of significance. These differences in approval across treatment and control groups suggest that public opinion costs exist in China for explicit threats, but not for vague threats.

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 (Smith, 1998), one respondent wrote: “The incompetent Chinese Communist Party (*wu neng de Gongchandang*).” On harming the nation’s credibility (Guisinger and Smith, 2002), a number of respondents expressed concern about the reputational consequences of empty threats: “After declaring 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 bluster, many respondents were satisfied with the government’s effort, understanding 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 wei hu guojia zhuquan, you yao daju wei zhong, wei hu 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 were reminded of the tough but vague ADIZ threat forgave the government’s inaction by referencing the future, even without receiving the Biding Time justification. 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.*)”

Interestingly, the bluster condition increased approval, whereas vague threats in other (US) contexts have not. This difference may also point to an important scope condition: a population must be relatively hawkish for leaders to gain approval through bluster, consistent with Kertzer and Brutger (2015), who find that hawks and conservatives that punish inconsistency while liberals and doves punish leaders for making threats in the first place.

The hawkishness of mass attitudes in the PRC may help explain the benefits of bluster. 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 re-

spondents were about defending the national honor.⁵⁷ 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 Supplementary Files. This distribution of hawkish beliefs does not appear to be distinctive to our online sample. In a separate survey one of us conducted in both China and the US, 10% of American respondents endorsed risking war to maintain their country’s claims, as compared with 40% of Chinese respondents. As the Supplementary Files further illustrate, 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.⁵⁸ 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.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

Our study provides evidence that at least one authoritarian regime confronts domestic costs for inaction in a hypothetical crisis when public threats are explicit. In the real world, and in our experiment, however, the Chinese government is able to rally popular support by framing inaction as part of a long-run, “biding time” strategy of overcoming past national humiliation. In addition, the government appears to gain domestic approval by engaging in *bluster*—making tough but vague threats that increase popular support.

We also note some limitations and shortcomings of our evidence. Overall, the estimated effects were relatively small and were not robustly significant. A potential explanation is self-censorship and inattentiveness, as detailed in Supplementary File A.5. Subsequent studies are warranted to evaluate the robustness of our conclusions, as well as to probe the many implications, theoretical extensions, and potential underlying mechanisms.

First, we conclude that scholars should invest more in understanding how authoritarian

⁵⁷The 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.

⁵⁸This 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>

rhetoric and propaganda can shape mass reactions in international crises. 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,⁵⁹ while others have highlighted the importance of social peers (Kertzer and Zeitzoff, 2017). Further research may wish to explicitly compare the extent to which democratic and authoritarian governments can shape domestic reactions to crisis developments—as well as how these mass incentives are communicated and understood by foreign decision-makers.

If bluster is accurately diagnosed as non-committing “empty menace” by foreign leaders, then it should have little effect on crisis escalation. As a US official remarked, “There’s a certain amount of bluster that’s taken for granted when you’re dealing with North Korea.”⁶⁰ On the other hand, if the foreign government thinks the home government has tied its hands or that the statement does signal resolve, then the foreign government may choose to back down, in which case we will not observe whether the government’s statement was bluster or not. However, the foreign government may also try to test the home government’s resolve, as Narang and Panda note of recent U.S.-North Korea tensions: “in order to test whether Trump’s threat is real or bluster, North Korea may try to push the line to see how far it can go.”⁶¹ Finally, bluster may have the effect of provoking foreign audiences and incentivizing the foreign leadership to mount a tough response, a possibility we investigate in a separate paper.

Second, more work should study the effect of realistic threats, which often fall short of explicit threats. We found evidence that Chinese audiences disapproved of an empty, explicit threat in a hypothetical territorial dispute, but we also found evidence that Chinese audiences rewarded a real-world threat that was vaguer and (as yet) unfulfilled. Further comparisons within and between hypothetical and selective-history designs are needed to strengthen this inference. 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

⁵⁹Trager and Vavreck (2011); Levendusky and Horowitz (2012)

⁶⁰Reuters, September 21, 2017, <http://reut.rs/2xZx9Fu>.

⁶¹Vipin Narang and Ankit Panda, “War of the Words: North Korea, Trump, and Strategic Stability,” August 10, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/08/war-of-the-words-north-korea-trump-and-strategic-stability/>.

articulating a nation’s claims. Disentangling these components more systematically is an important next step. We also recommend that survey experimentalists more often employ realistic scenarios, at least as a complement to hypothetical and abstract scenarios.

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 may be less hawkish and nationalistic. As reported above, Chinese appear to be much more hawkish than Americans. Further, 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 may be critical to sustaining popular support.

Which audience or constituency “matters” most to government leaders 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 (Potter and Baum, 2014). 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 *Nationalist History* frames were effective, we suspect, is that they framed 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 government rhetoric and other 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 rhetorical 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.

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Supplementary Files

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

August 6, 2018

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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, vague threat, vague threat with defiance, bidding time, and cost of war. These were all assigned independently of each other, except that vague threat with defiance only occurs if vague threat occurs, and only one of eli.f and eli.c could occur.

his, pro, prot, com, mob, eli.f, eli.c: Hypothetical treatment indicators for history, provocation, protests, commitments, troop mobilization, bidding time, cost of war. These were all assigned independently of each other, except that only one of eli.f and eli.c could occur.

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. These were assigned independently of each other, and of all other manipulations.

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: respondent answer to question na1, which asks about national honor

na2: respondent answer to question na2, which asks about reliance on China's military strength

na3: respondent answer to question na3, which asks about political views (conservative vs liberal)

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 female¹

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

start.time.n,.n2.n3: denotes the variables time, time squared, and time cubed which record when the respondent began the survey. These variables are meant to account for potential changes in the international political context that might have occurred over the period of time in which the survey was in the field.

start.time.swd: denotes the second wave of the survey. This variable is meant to account for potential changes in the international political context that might have occurred between the first and second waves of the survey.

¹For replication purposes, all demographic information has been replaced with a random sample of demographics similar in distribution with those from the original data.

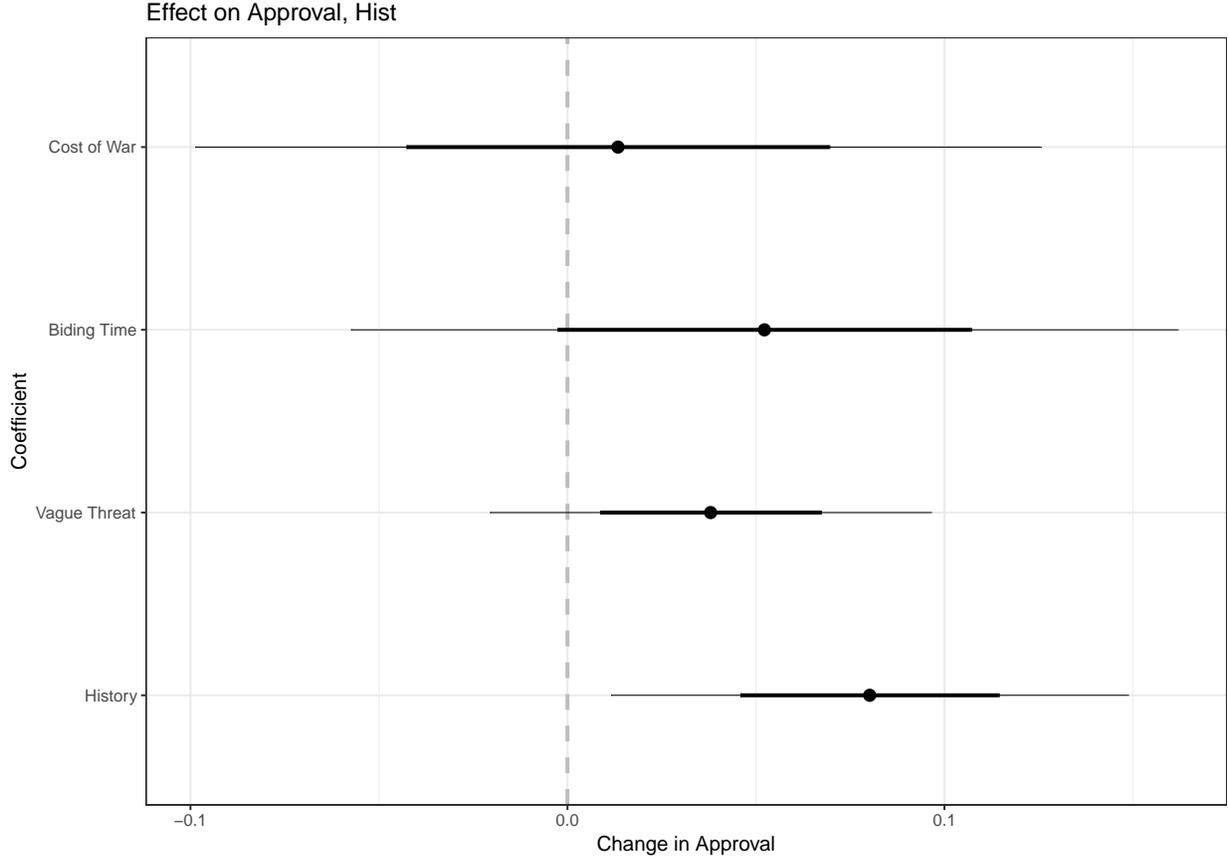
Table A.1: Summary Statistics

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 A.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

Figure A.1: Raw Results Selective History



Note: Estimated effect of government rhetoric treatments on public approval of the government's actions relative to the control group, similar to Figures 1 and 2 in the main text. This estimation includes only the treatment and no other covariates.

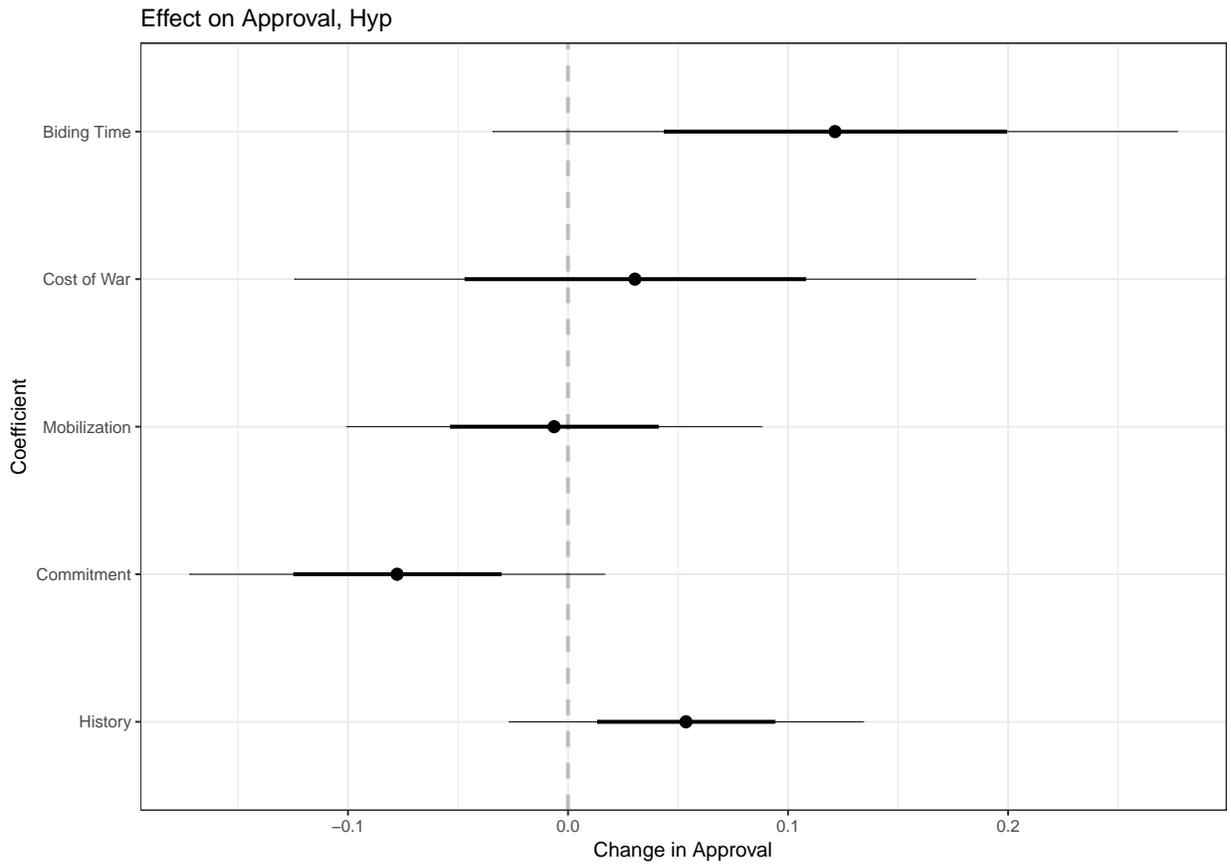
A.2 Raw Results

Figures A.1 and A.2 report the bivariate estimates of the treatment effects on government approval. Similar to the results discussed in Figure 1 and 2 in the main text, in the selective history design, Biding Time, Nationalist History, Cost of War and Vague Threat treatments increased approval. Similarly, in the hypothetical design, the Biding Treatment, Nationalist History and Cost of War treatment increased approval, while the Explicit Threat treatment decreased approval. Overall, the raw estimates are similar in size and direction with the estimated coefficients in the main text.

Figures A.5 and A.6 report the mean approval level of the treatment group relative to the control for each treatment type.

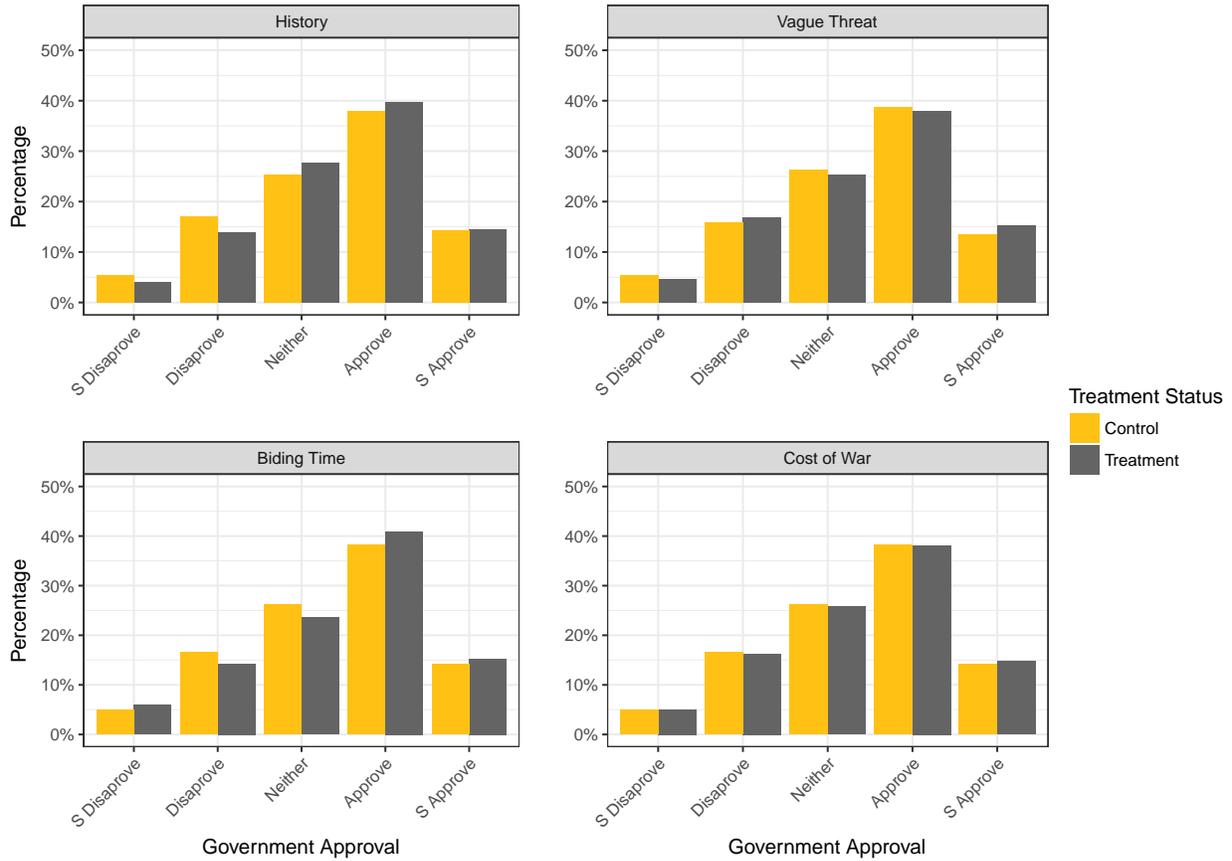
Tables A.3 and A.4 report the effect of being asked questions about national honour, alongside questions related to the reliance on China's military strength or the respondent's political views. One worry may be that these questions act as a pre-treatment prime that inflates hawkishness across the sample. Respondents were randomly asked these questions within the first few weeks of the survey, with all respondents being asked these questions after this period. Tables A.3 and A.4 report the effect of these pretreatment questions among those

Figure A.2: Raw Results Hypothetical Design



Note: Estimated effect of government rhetoric treatments on public approval of the government's actions relative to the control group, similar to Figures 1 and 2 in the main text. This estimation includes only the treatment and no other covariates.

Figure A.3: Government Approval by Treatment (Selective History)



Note: Percentage distribution of government rhetoric treatments on government approval relative to the control group in the selective history design.

who were randomly asked these questions. In the case of the real history design, a decrease in approval is noticeable. However, given that the pretreatment questions included a battery of questions, it remains unclear whether the effect is necessarily dragged by any particular question, such as the national honour one. In the hypothetical design case, pretreatment questions had no effect on approval.

Table A.3: Prequestions Effect on Approval (Real History)

<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Approval
pre.questions	-0.193*** (0.052)
Constant	3.576*** (0.041)
Observations	1,843

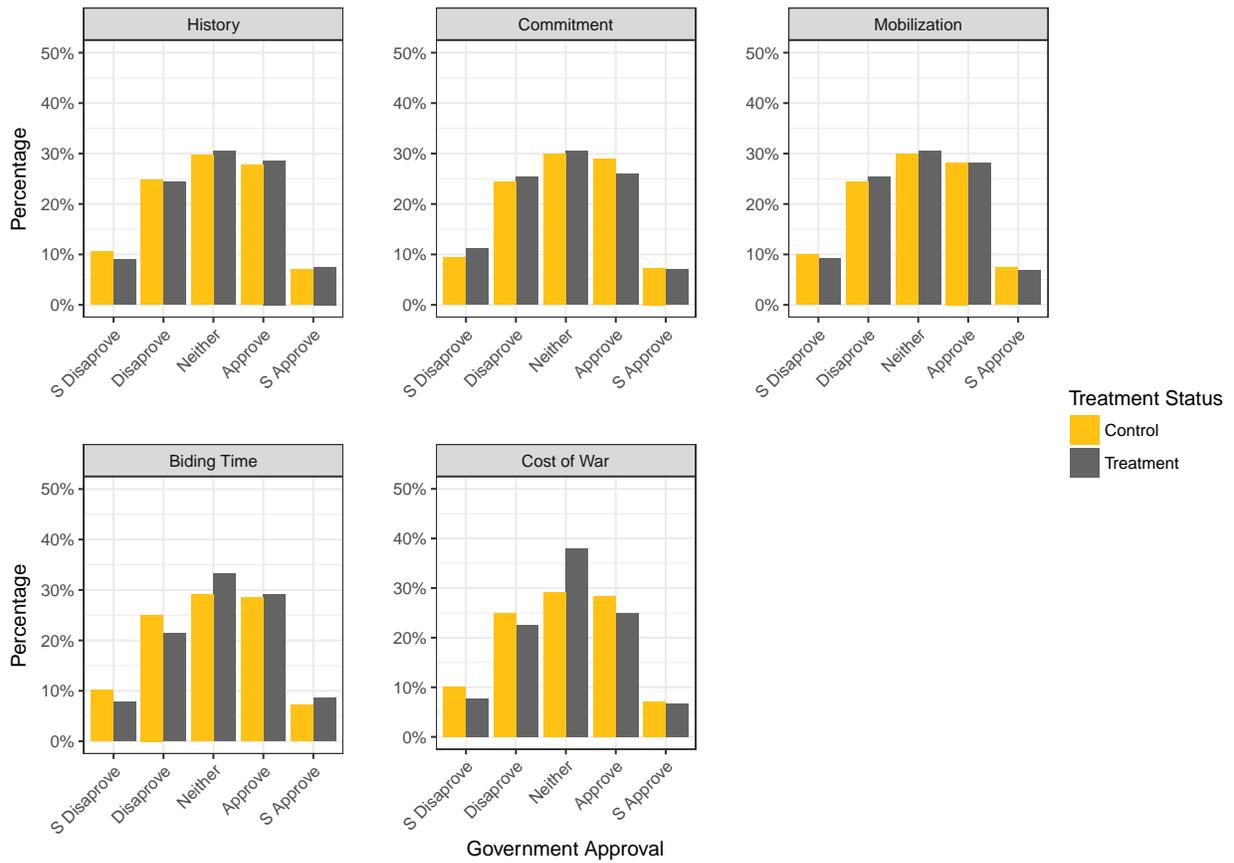
Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A.4: Prequestions Effect on Approval (Hypothetical Design)

<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Approval
Prequestions	-0.062 (0.058)
Constant	3.034*** (0.041)
Observations	1,494
R ²	0.001

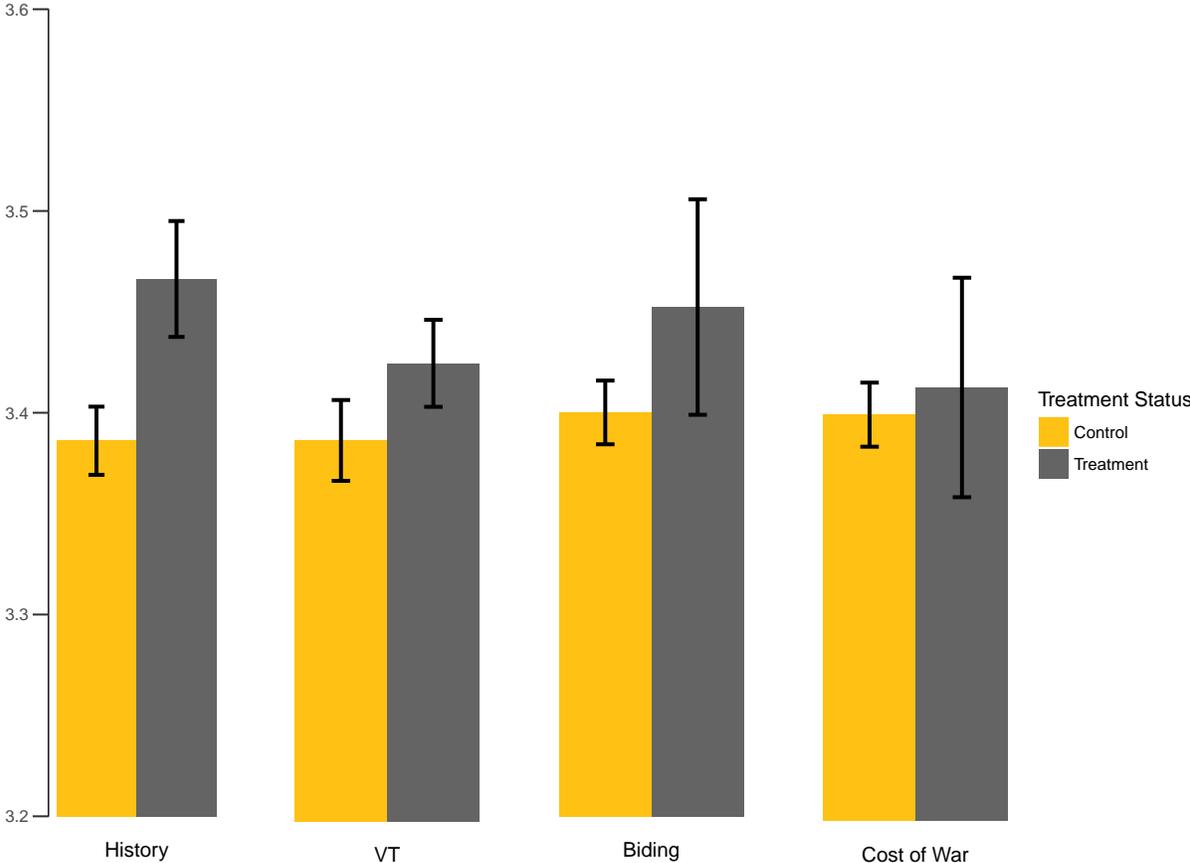
Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Figure A.4: Government Approval by Treatment (Hypothetical Design)



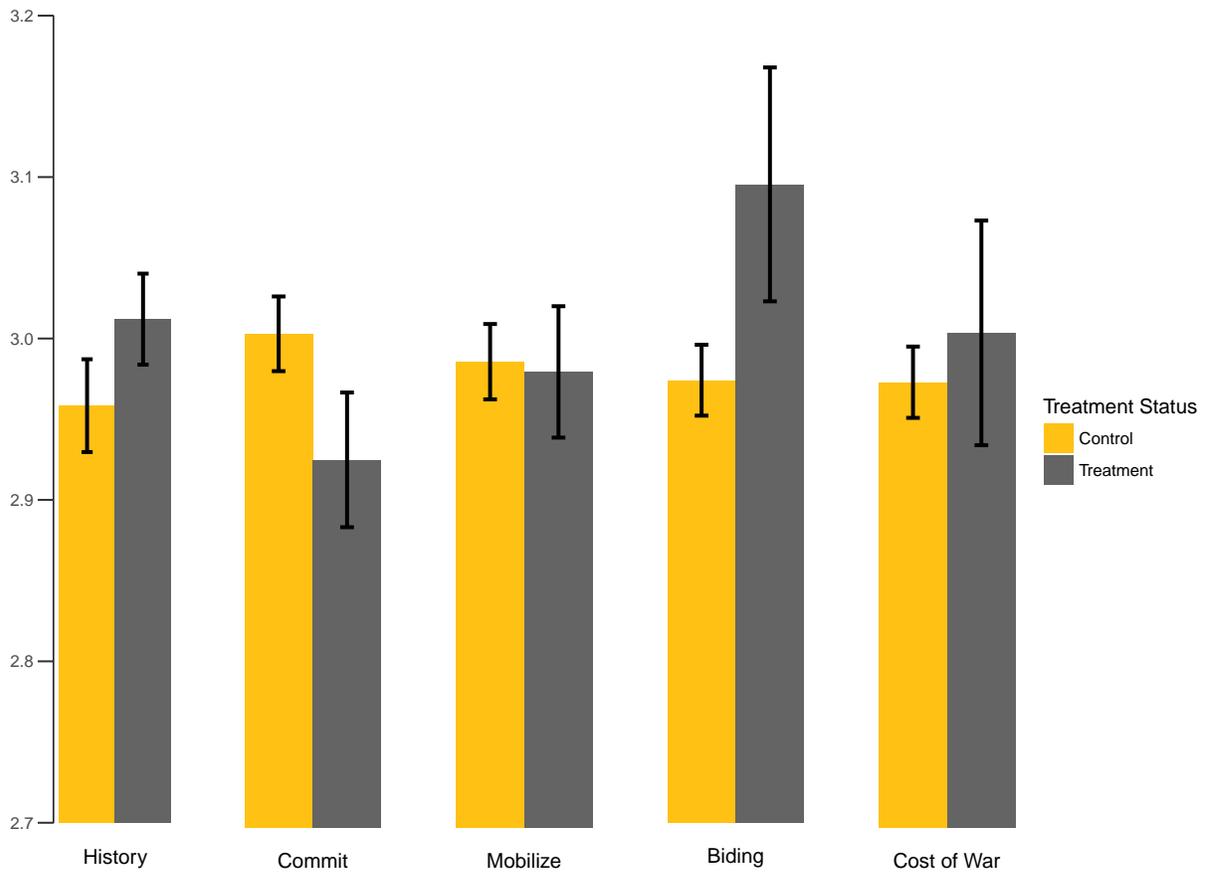
Note: Percentage distribution of government rhetoric treatments on government approval relative to the control group in the hypothetical design.

Figure A.5: Government Approval by Treatment (Selective History)



Note: Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. The Figure plots the mean approval level of the treatment and control status for each treatment type. History refers to the National History treatment, VT denotes the Vague Threat treatment, Biding denotes the Biding Time treatment and Cost of War denotes the Cost of War treatment.

Figure A.6: Government Approval by Treatment (Hypothetical Design)



Note: Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. The Figure plots the mean approval level of the treatment and control status for each treatment type. History refers to the National History treatment, Commit denotes the Explicit Threat treatment, Mobilize denotes the Mobilization treatment, Biding denotes the Biding Time treatment and Cost of War denotes the Cost of War treatment.

A.3 Primary Regression Tables

Table A.5: 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 A.6: 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:[†] $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

A.4 Attentiveness

As mentioned, 35% of our subjects failed at least one of our attention filters.² This level of attentiveness appears comparable to what is achieved in other survey samples and in other countries (though, in our experience, not MTurk where respondents are often especially attentive). For example, Berinsky et al (2014) found that 20% to 40% of their SSI sample failed their various attention filters (or "screeners") (Berinsky et al., 2014). We reflect here on what this might mean for our inference, though see Berinsky et al (2014) for a more extended discussion.

Respondents who are not attentive will generally be less responsive to experimental manipulation. As such, the first order effect of inattentiveness is to make it harder to generate effects in an experiment. Whether this leads to bias or not depends on one's population of interest and causal estimand. For example, if one's target real-world context and counterfactual involves people who are similarly inattentive to real-world events, then this inattentiveness is actually a desired feature of the population. Alternatively, we might think that in the target real-world context (1) people would be paying more attention or (2) only those people who are paying attention would be politically relevant, in which case our estimand is not what our survey experiment will estimate, and we may want to theorize about or adjust for the difference between these. If our desired population consists of the kinds of people who would pay attention in the survey, then our estimates should be less biased after subsetting on those who pass an attention filter.

Suppose that actual attentiveness in the survey is not correlated with the unit level causal effects for an attentive subject.³ Then the primary issue becomes whether including, excluding, or otherwise adjusting for attentive subjects will increase statistical power. Excluding inattentive subjects could increase power, such as if the inattentive subjects are providing more noise than signal. At the limit, if some subjects are answering randomly (and we can identify them pre-treatment) then it must be better to drop those uninformative observations. Alternatively, removing inattentive subjects could reduce power, if their responses are still providing sufficient signal.

While the above considerations are important to keep in mind, we don't believe they pose a substantial concern to our inference, relative to what should be expected from this kind of research. (1) Our inference does not rely on closely recovering a target population, as we are primarily looking for the existence of effects for a sample approximately corresponding to a politically relevant population. (2) Survey experiments, in general, face the challenge of

²The 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."

³That is, take a group of subjects who pass the attention filter, and a group who do not. If they were forced to be attentive, perhaps by exposing them to the real world treatment, then this assumption would imply that the average causal effects for these two groups will be the same.

trying to recover a real-world counterfactual using vignettes that are likely to lack realism in many dimensions. Our vignettes strived for realism in many respects, especially the selective-history design, and thus relative to the standards for this method, are less likely to suffer from problems of external validity. In other research we have also complemented the hypothetical and selective-history design with a natural experiment, which recovered similar results.

An additional complication with subsetting on inattentiveness arises with our design because we (intentionally) asked our attention filters late in the survey. In this case, our measure of attentiveness could be a consequence of treatment received. For example, if one of our experimental manipulations was especially interesting then more subjects receiving that manipulation should pass our attention filter. In such a case, it is problematic to subset or adjust on our attention measure, since it could be a consequence of treatment. If considering doing so, one must be cautious in interpreting the result.

In our case, as per our preanalysis plan and for the above reasons, our primary analysis leaves the inattentive subjects in the sample. However, for transparency we report below (1) the results after removing inattentive subjects and (2) results from a model predicting attentiveness using our experimental manipulations.

(1) Removing inattentive subjects does not meaningfully change our results. Compare Tables 3 and 4 with Tables 5 and 6. With respect to the hypothetical design, once the inattentive respondents are omitted the estimated effect of Biding Time increases in magnitude and, when controlling for pre-treatment covariates, becomes statistically significant at the .1 level. For the selective history design the estimated effects of interest (biding time and nationalist history treatments) remain statistically significant and increase in magnitude slightly.

(2) Tables 7 and 8 reveal that overall our experimental manipulations do not cause inattentiveness. The F-test of the null that any of the experimental manipulations had an effect on attentiveness yielded a $p = 0.6$ for the selective history design (Table 8), showing that there is little reason to think in this case that the experimental manipulations had an effect. The F-test for the hypothetical design would have been similar, but for one result: Mobilization significantly $p < 0.01$ increased attentiveness.⁴ This suggests that scenarios involving troop mobilization were more engaging. One way this could affect our inference is if we get slightly more signal from the Mobilization treatment; in our case given that Mobilization did not have a clearly positive or negative effect, plausibly because of countervailing effects, an amplification of attention did not alter our results. Future work could continue to consider, as we have done here, how attentiveness may be influenced by treatment assignment, as it may provide insight into the mechanism of the effect.

⁴More weakly, in the hypothetical design Nationalist History and whether a subject got a set of questions before the vignette had a weaker and barely significant ($p < 0.1$) reduction in attentiveness, and in the selective history design the Explicit Threat had a similarly weak positive effect on attentiveness. Given multiple comparisons bias we should not overinterpret these weak results.

Table A.7: Effect on Approval, Hypothetical (Inattentive respondents omitted)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	asc	
	(1)	(2)
pro	-0.080 (0.060)	-0.119* (0.058)
prot	0.015 (0.077)	-0.021 (0.074)
com	-0.053 (0.060)	-0.060 (0.057)
mob	-0.009 (0.059)	0.021 (0.057)
eli.f	0.169 (0.103)	0.186 [†] (0.099)
eli.c	0.068 (0.101)	0.063 (0.097)
authoritarian	-0.022 (0.051)	-0.022 (0.049)
ally	-0.054 (0.051)	-0.054 (0.049)
capabilities	-0.055 (0.051)	-0.063 (0.049)
saliency	0.019 (0.051)	0.028 (0.049)
his	0.053 (0.051)	0.040 (0.049)
pre.questions	-0.062 (0.059)	-0.120 (0.073)
asc.or	0.164** (0.051)	0.146** (0.049)
partnerB		-0.124 [†] (0.074)
asc0.v2		0.334*** (0.035)
na1.v2		-0.061*** (0.016)
na2.v2		-0.267*** (0.048)
na3.v2		0.042 (0.032)
na2.v.dn		-0.028 (0.144)
na3.v.dn		-0.127 (0.230)
gender		0.081 (0.053)
educ		-0.079 [†] (0.043)
age		-0.006* (0.003)
age.m		-0.157 (0.193)
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	2.850*** (0.086)	3.194*** (0.344)
Observations	1,896	1,896
R ²	0.011	0.096
Adjusted R ²	0.004	0.083
Residual Std. Error	1.111 (df = 1882)	1.067 (df = 1868)
F Statistic	1.623 [†] (df = 13; 1882)	7.347*** (df = 27; 1868)

Note:

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

Table A.8: Effect on Approval, History (Inattentive respondents omitted)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	asc	
	(1)	(2)
pre.questions	-0.210*** (0.055)	-0.180** (0.061)
asc.or	0.263*** (0.037)	0.255*** (0.033)
asc0.v2		0.592*** (0.019)
na1.v2		-0.022** (0.008)
na2.v2		-0.089** (0.028)
na3.v2		0.003 (0.019)
na2.v.dn		0.030 (0.080)
na3.v.dn		-0.036 (0.120)
gender		-0.053 (0.035)
educ		0.039 (0.028)
age		0.003† (0.002)
age.m		0.088 (0.484)
gender.m		
educ.m		0.093 (0.482)
start.time.n		0.00000 (0.00000)
start.time.n2		-0.000 (0.000)
start.time.n3		0.000 (0.000)
start.time.swd		0.084 (0.153)
his	0.101* (0.044)	0.095* (0.039)
pro	-0.052 (0.044)	-0.057 (0.039)
ADIZ	0.032 (0.046)	0.037 (0.041)
ADIZp	-0.049 (0.054)	-0.075 (0.047)
eli.f	0.041 (0.070)	0.107† (0.062)
eli.c	-0.021 (0.072)	-0.002 (0.063)
partnerB		-0.092 (0.063)
Constant	3.404*** (0.059)	1.171*** (0.215)
Observations	3,429	3,429
R ²	0.021	0.245
Adjusted R ²	0.019	0.240
Residual Std. Error	1.083 (df = 3420)	0.953 (df = 3404)
F Statistic	9.360*** (df = 8; 3420)	46.095*** (df = 24; 3404)

Note:

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

Table A.9: Effect on Attentiveness, Hypothetical

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	att
pro	0.005 (0.020)
prot	0.008 (0.026)
com	0.032 (0.020)
mob	0.059** (0.020)
eli.f	-0.049 (0.033)
eli.c	-0.042 (0.033)
authoritarian	-0.007 (0.017)
ally	0.010 (0.017)
capabilities	-0.002 (0.017)
saliency	-0.0001 (0.017)
his	-0.029 [†] (0.017)
pre.questions	-0.033 [†] (0.020)
asc.or	0.0002 (0.017)
Constant	0.709*** (0.029)
Observations	2,992
R ²	0.008
Adjusted R ²	0.003
Residual Std. Error	0.463 (df = 2978)
F Statistic	1.790* (df = 13; 2978)

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

Table A.10: Effect on Attentiveness, History

<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	att
pre.questions	-0.007 (0.019)
asc.or	-0.012 (0.013)
his	-0.008 (0.015)
pro	0.006 (0.015)
ADIZ	0.027 [†] (0.016)
ADIZp	-0.001 (0.019)
eli.f	-0.017 (0.024)
eli.c	-0.013 (0.024)
Constant	0.685*** (0.020)
Observations	5,445
R ²	0.001
Adjusted R ²	-0.0003
Residual Std. Error	0.466 (df = 5436)
F Statistic	0.811 (df = 8; 5436)

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

A.5 Attenuated Effects: 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. A potential explanation is self-censorship.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷ As King, Pan, and Roberts have demonstrated, it is not criticism of the government per se but commentary that could facilitate collective action that Chinese authorities typically censor (King et al., 2013). 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 (Kuran, 1997). 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" (King et al., 2017).

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

⁵Another potential explanation is low attentiveness in our sample. Approximately 35% failed our two easy attention filters. However, this rate is comparable to that reported in other surveys, such as (Berinsky et al., 2014) two SSI samples. We discuss and evaluate attentiveness in more detail in Appendix A.4

⁶Their *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.

⁷For 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, as well as whether respondents have "personally experienced or witnessed a situation of cadre corruption". <http://thechinasurvey.tamu.edu/html/home.html>.

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 Explicit Threat 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 B.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 deference to the government will make it more difficult for our prompts to move respondent opinions, it may lead to 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 research interest if, for example, one wanted to evaluate how (expressed) public opinion could shift if there was a focal event that made people more willing to express different opinions. 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 acute benefits and costs to the Chinese government of foreign policy actions. Put differently, in order for domestic public opinion to “matter,” it needs to be expressed in some manner, and usually this is in a public manner. Thus, for evaluating these effects we believe a focus on public beliefs is productive: we want to know what respondents are willing to say in a venue like an online survey. It is worth keeping in mind that all surveys are better able to estimate public beliefs than private beliefs.

A.6 Threats to Identification

One potential threat to identification may be that approval is increasing in the length of treatment text the respondents received, including treatments related to information or rhetoric, threats. The advantage of this hypothesis is that it is partially testable with our data. We can look to see whether approval is generally increasing in text length.

Broadly, our data suggests this effect either doesn’t exist or is relatively small, as evident from Table A.5. We had a range of potential treatments, including background treatments which seem to fit this hypothesis of involving additional information, and they did not systematically increase approval. For example, receiving either of the independently assigned conditions of authoritarian regime, ally with the US, capabilities or salience had no effect on approval among respondents. These treatments each increased the length of treatment text that respondents received. Thus, the small or absence of effects here is evidence that length

of text did not have large effects on approval. Of course, it remains possible that particular forms of this confound could impact results.

B 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?

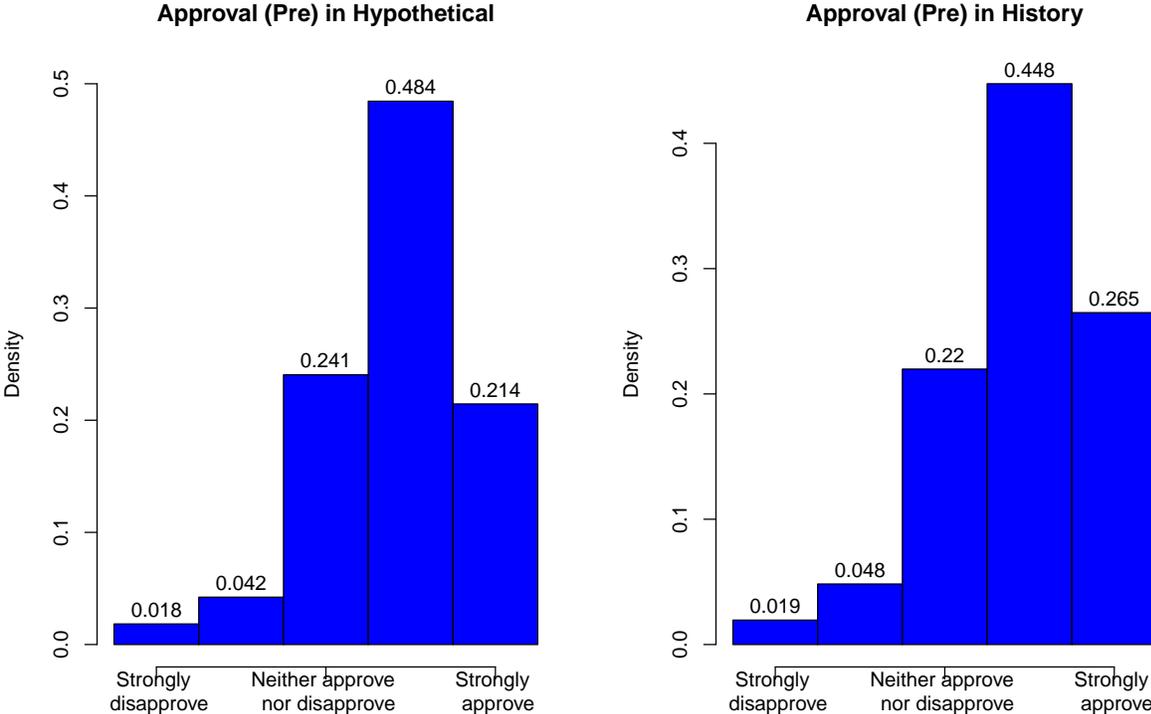


Figure B.1: Distribution of government approval by experiment (pre-scenario).

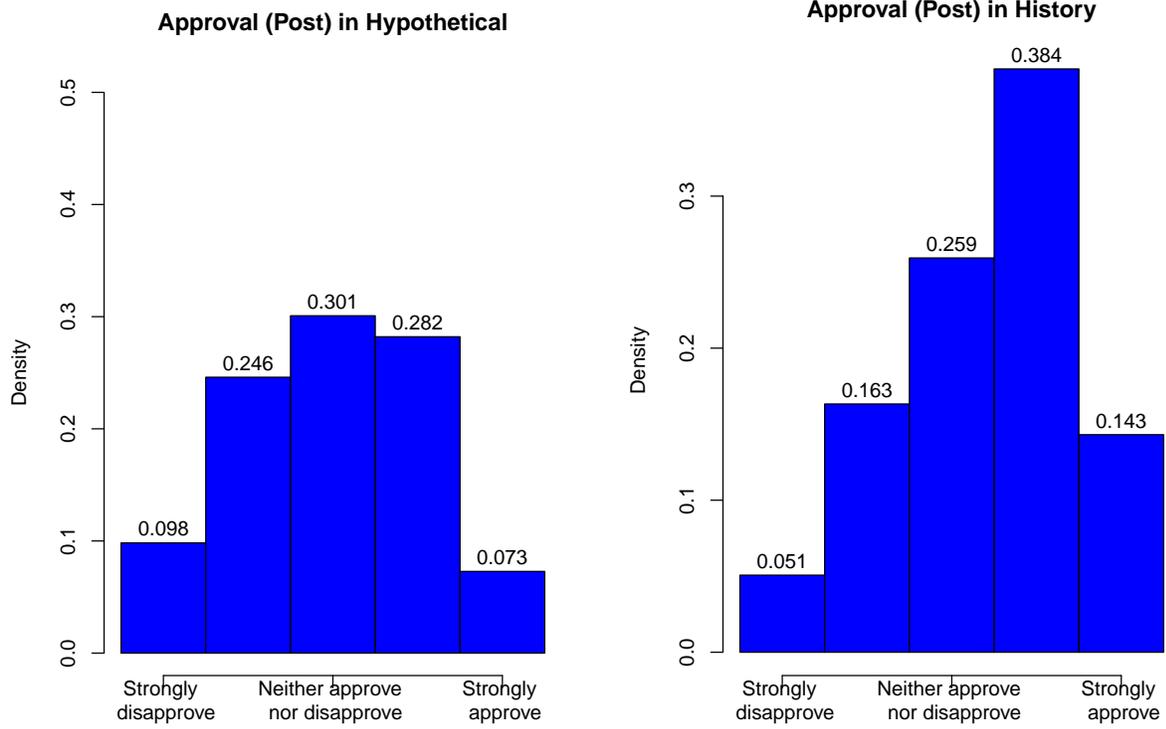


Figure B.2: Distribution of government approval by experiment (post-scenario).

Criticism of the Government is Unhelpful

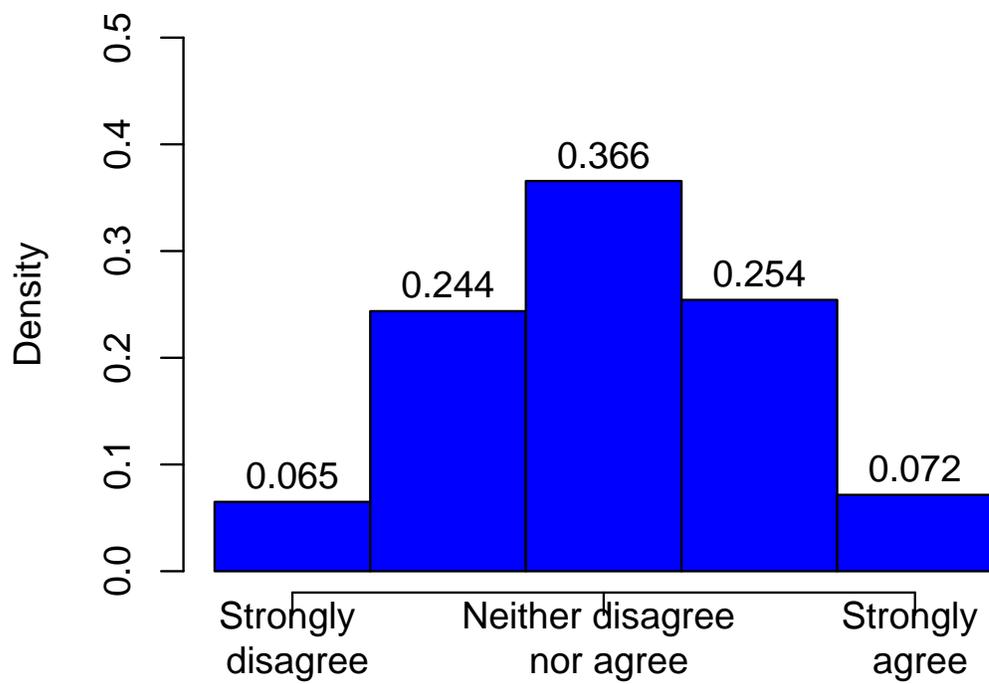


Figure B.3: Distribution of respondent perceptions of criticism of the government being unhelpful.

C Demographics and Recruitment

C.1 Recruitment Details

Subjects were recruited through Chinese partners of Qualtrics. The names of the partners were not publicly disclosed for proprietary reasons, though we were able to get information about how subjects were recruited. Broadly, Qualtrics’ partners recruited respondents through a variety of means, including “referrals, online intercept, and email invitations;” this document⁸ provides more information about their recruitment practices. According to our Qualtrics’ team lead, our sample was “sourced from an existing research panel”, “all our sample sources [were] paid” about \$1USD, and it is “unlikely that [our respondents] would have participated in a similar survey. Most other surveys are market research focused.”⁹ In response to the question, “Do panelists know anything about the contents of our survey (like even the topic) before they click on the link?” our team lead wrote “Respondents are not given insights into the content of a survey beforehand.”

C.2 Demographics

65% of our sample was male. 55% of Chinese Internet users are male, as reported by the China Internet Network Information Center.¹⁰

⁸<https://www.dropbox.com/s/epwhgs3yd2yr8fm/QualtricsESOMAR28.pdf?dl=0>

⁹“Panel Respondents are only invited to 2-3 surveys a month. They are not allowed to participate in more than 2 surveys a month. The average panelist only remains on the panel for approximately 6-8 weeks. So, it would be fair to say that a majority of the panel members would have completed 4 or fewer surveys prior to participating in your experiment.”

¹⁰36th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China (2015) available at <https://cnnic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201601/P020160106496544403584.pdf>.

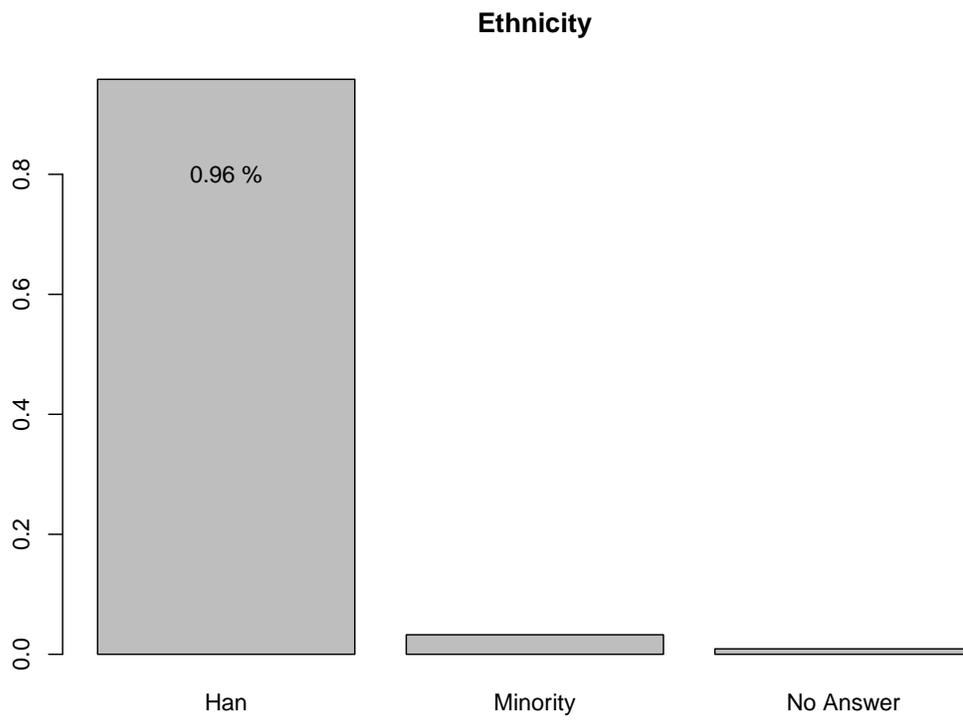
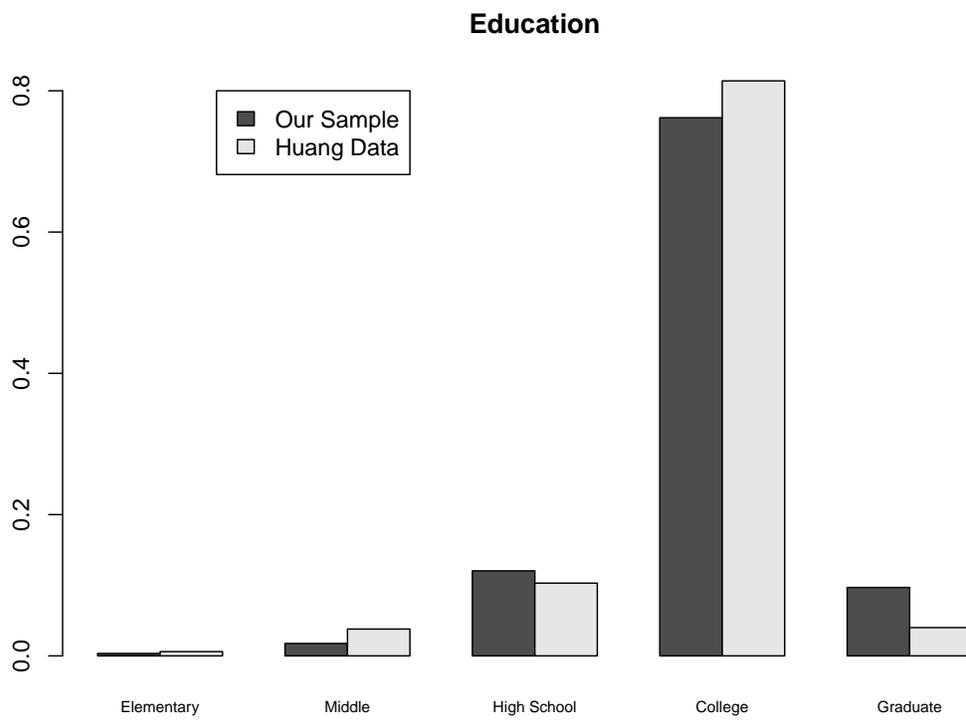


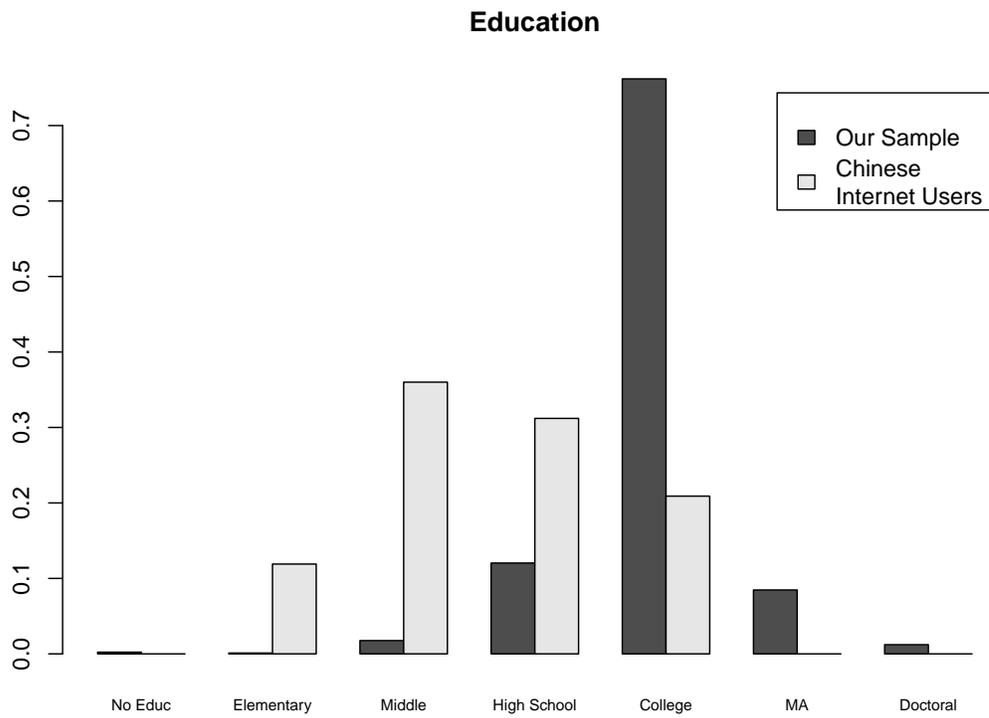
Figure C.1: Distribution of respondent ethnicity.

Figure C.2: Education Distribution Our vs Huang Data



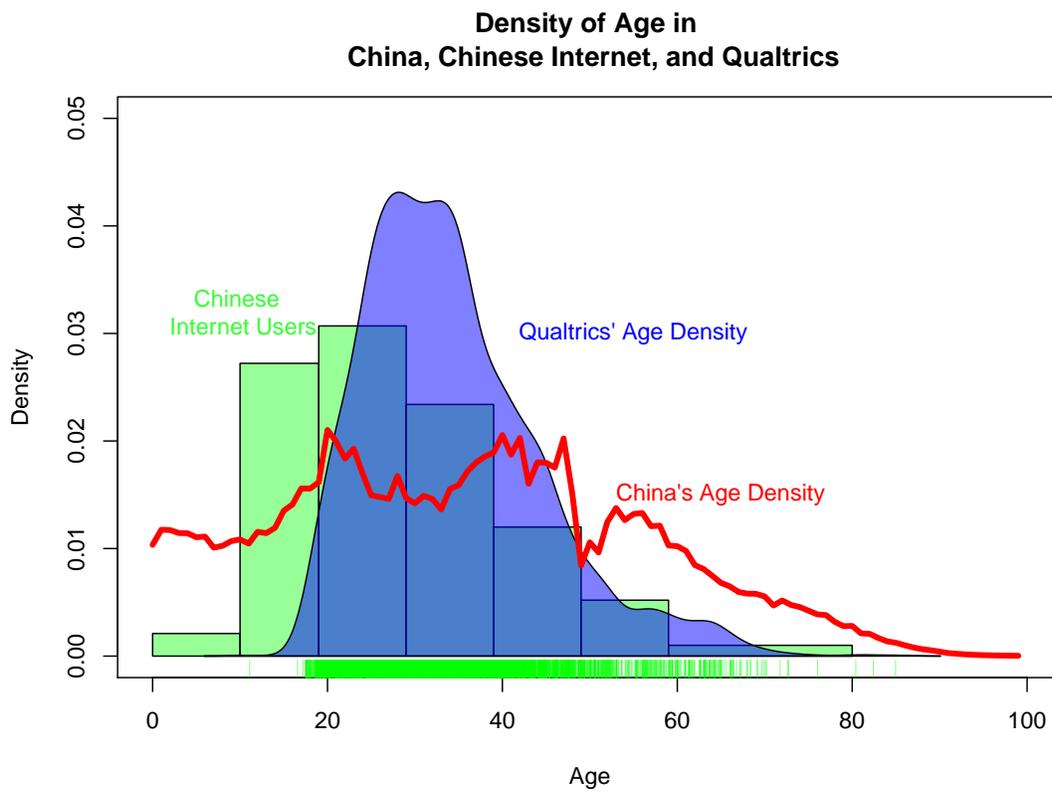
Huang data come from Haifeng Huang (2015). International Knowledge and Domestic Evaluations in a Changing Society: The Case of China. *American Political Science Review*, 109, pp 613-634. doi:10.1017/S000305541500026X.

Figure C.3: Education Distribution of Chinese Internet Users



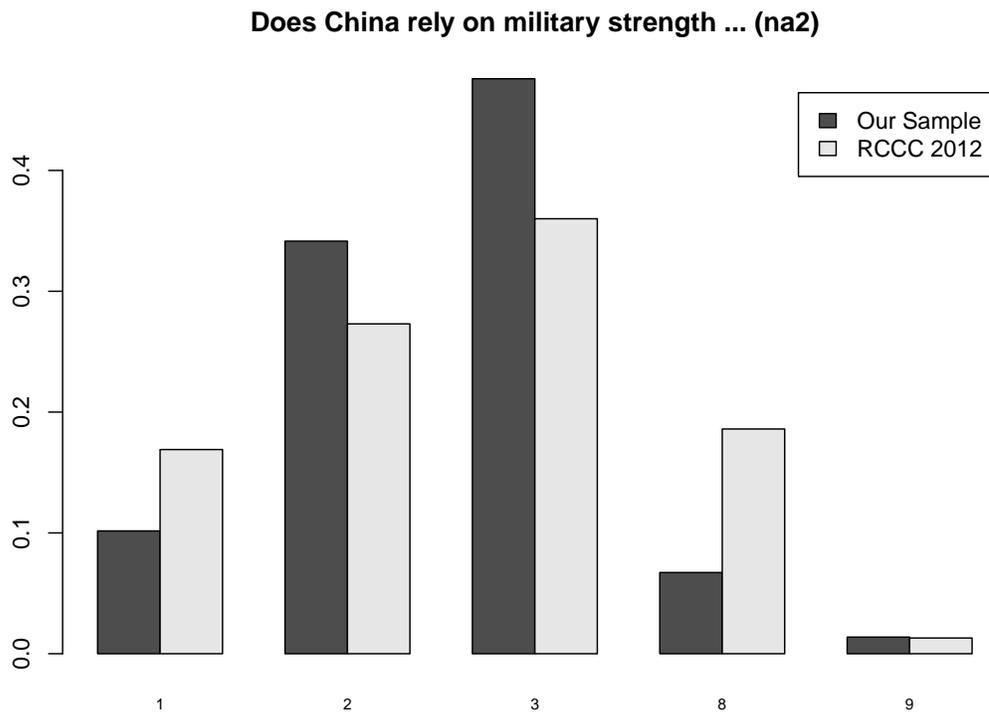
Educational attainment of Chinese internet users provided by the CNNIC 2015, which does not separate college and post-graduate education. See <https://cnnic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201601/P020160106496544403584.pdf>

Figure C.4: Age Distribution for Chinese Internet Users



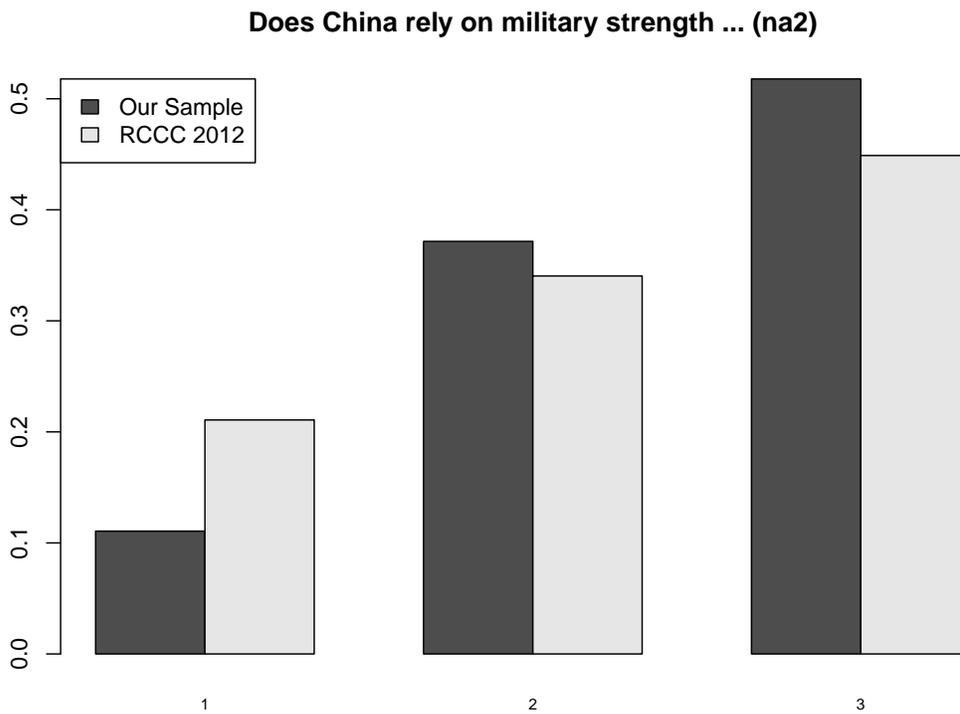
Age data for Chinese Internet Users is from CNNIC 2014. Age data for China is from the [UNSD Demographic Statistics](#).

Figure C.5: Chinese Reliance on Military Strength Our vs RCCC 2012 Sample



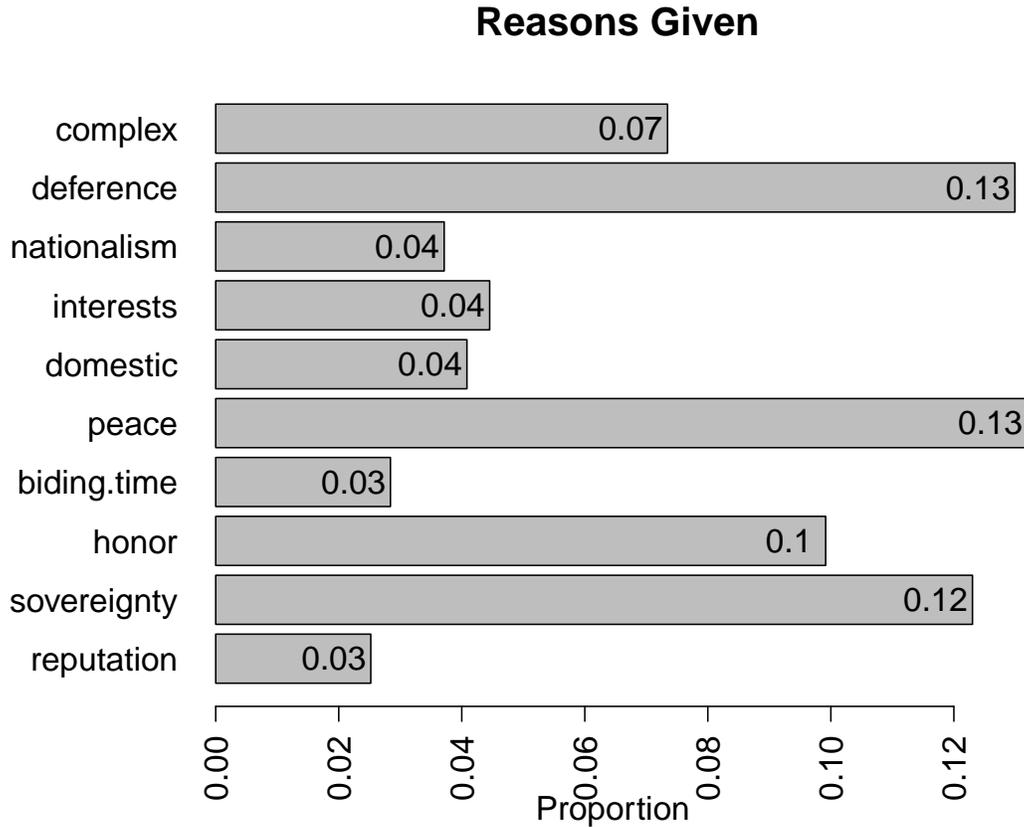
“RCCC 2012” shows the responses to question B3 of the [Public Opinion Survey of the China-U.S. Security Perceptions Project \(2012\)](#), a face-to-face and GPS-assisted multistage probability survey of urban Chinese, conducted by the Research Center for Contemporary China at Peking University.

Figure C.6: Chinese Reliance on Military Strength Our vs RCCC 2012 Sample Substantive Answer



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.

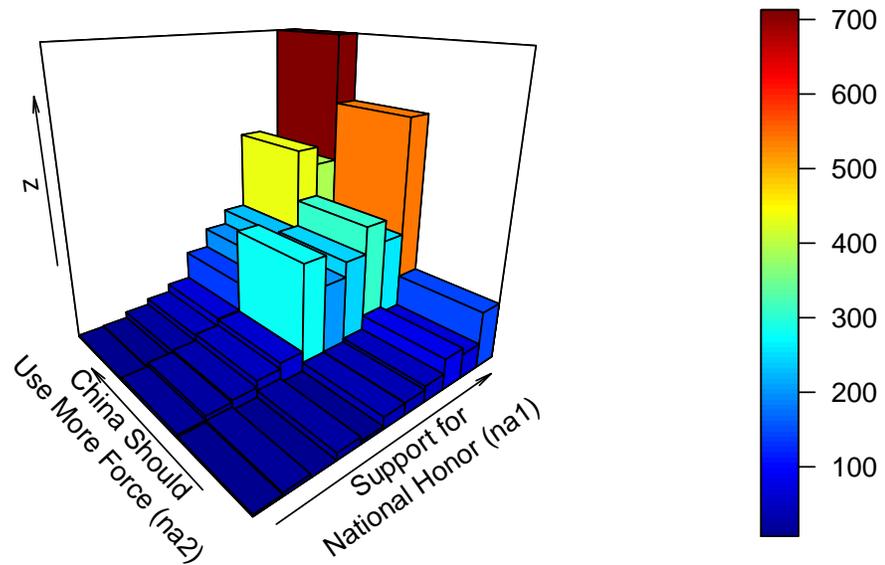
Figure C.7: Reasons Given



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 country’s national interests or security, without necessarily referencing territorial integrity or sovereignty); Deference (references to the government’s judgment, reasoning, or plans); Complexity (references to the respondents lack of understanding or the complexity of the situation).

Figure C.8: Distribution of Pre-Scenario Responses

Distribution of Pre-Scenario Responses



[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

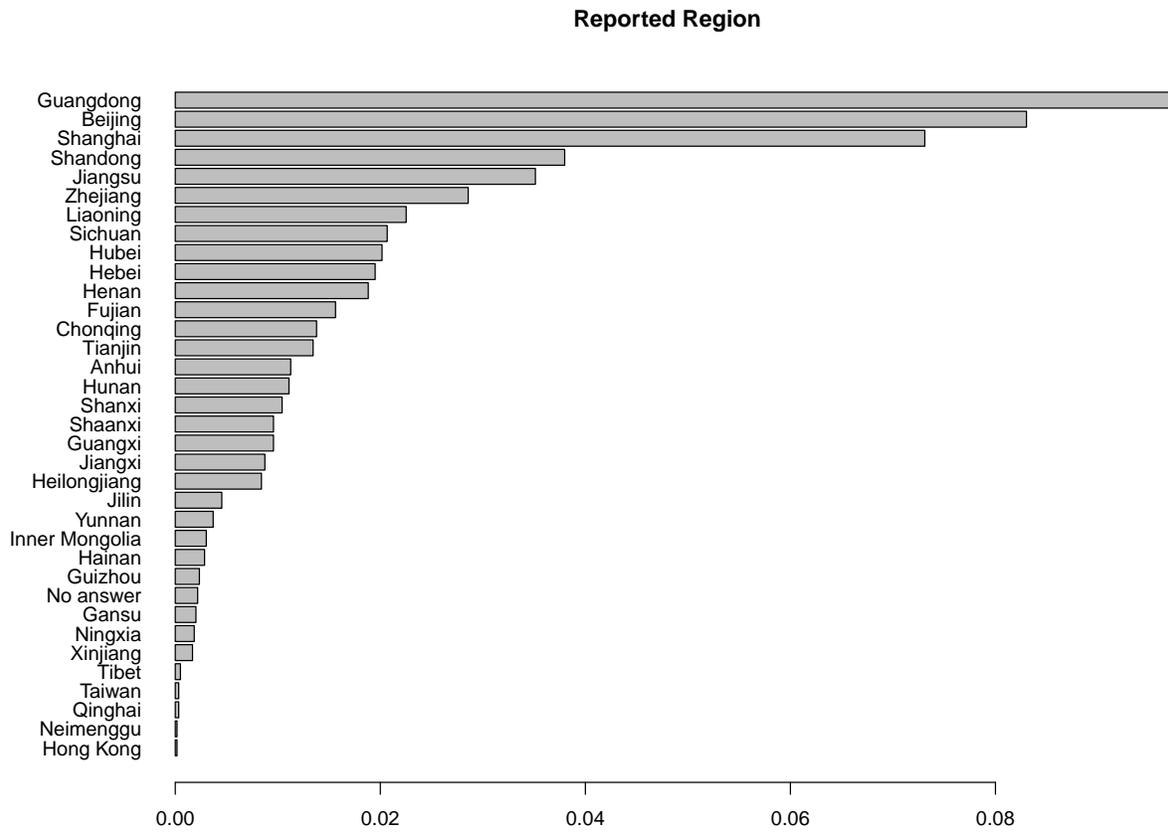


Figure C.9: Distribution of respondent region.

D Hypothetical Design

Treatments in the hypothetical experiment were assigned in the following manner:

- At the start of the survey, our software randomly generated 8 independent values between 0 and 99 (inclusive) for each respondent [rand1-rand8].
- Respondents receiving $\text{rand1} < 20$ did not receive any of our primary treatments (Explicit Threat, Mobilization, Provocation, Protests).
- To be assigned the Explicit Threat treatment, respondents must have drawn a value of rand1 greater than or equal to 20 and rand4 less than 30. (That is, of those who received any primary treatment, 30% were independently assigned to receive the Explicit Threat treatment.)
- To be assigned the Mobilization treatment, respondents must have drawn rand1 greater than or equal to 20 and rand5 less than 30. (That is, of those who received any primary treatment, 30% were independently assigned to receive this treatment.)
- To be assigned the Biding Time treatment, respondents must have drawn rand6 less than 15 and rand8 less than 50. To be assigned the Cost of War treatment, respondents must have drawn rand6 less than 15 and rand8 greater than or equal to 50. (That is, 15% of all respondents were independently assigned to one of either the Costs of War treatment or Biding Time treatment.)
- To be assigned the Provocation treatment, respondents must have drawn rand1 greater than 20 and rand2 less than 30. (That is, of those who received any primary treatment, 30% were independently assigned to receive the Provocation treatment.)
- To be assign the Protests treatment, respondents must have drawn rand1 greater than or equal to 20 and rand3 less than 15. (That is, of those who received any primary treatment, 15% were independently assigned to receive the Protests treatment.)
- The Nationalist History treatment as well as the features of the hypothetical neighboring country including regime type, alliance status with US, material value of the territory in question, and the neighbor’s military power were assigned in a fully factorial way such that each respondent had an equal probability of being assigned to any combination of hypothetical features and the Nationalist History treatment.
- Those that drew random numbers that do not meet any of the criteria above and who did not receive the nationalist treatment comprise the non-parametric control group.

We present the realized frequencies of respondents for the main treatment combinations in Table D.1.

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.]

		Explicit threat	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1
		Mobilization	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1
		Biding time	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1
Cost of war	Nationalist history									
0	0	724	58	238	12	228	21	84	8	
0	1	761	62	207	27	217	22	92	10	
1	0	83	0	14	0	16	0	4	0	
1	1	68	0	19	0	14	0	3	0	

Table D.1: Observed frequencies of treatment assignment for Hypothetical experiment.

Hypothetical scenarios have several advantages, such as greater conceptual closeness to theory. However, hypothetical designs may have weaker external validity if the scenario is overly abstract or far from the lived experience of the respondent. For example, we find that about 51 percent of respondents were thinking of particular countries as the hypothetical nation China had a territorial dispute with, and among those who were thinking of a country, they were mainly thinking of Japan (30%), the Philippines (7%) or Vietnam (5%).

Table D.2: Distribution of Respondents' Country Choices

	Percent
None	0.485
Afghanistan	0.000
Cambodia	0.000
Germany	0.000
India	0.036
Indonesia	0.001
Japan	0.301
Laos	0.001
Malaysia	0.001
Mongolia	0.001
Myanmar	0.003
Nepal	0.001
North Korea	0.013
Pakistan	0.001
Philippines	0.072
Russia	0.016
South Korea	0.007
Taiwan	0.004
Thailand	0.001
UK	0.001
US	0.006
Vietnam	0.051

E Selective-History Design

Treatments in the selective history experiment were assigned in the following manner:

- At the start of the survey, our software randomly generated 8 independent values between 0 and 99 (inclusive) for each respondent [rand1-rand8].
- Respondents receiving $\text{rand1} < 20$ did not receive any of our primary treatments (Nationalist History, Provocation, Vague Threat, Vague Threat with Defiance).
- To be assigned the Nationalist History treatment, respondents must have drawn rand1 greater than or equal to 20 and rand2 less than 20. (That is, of those who received any primary treatment, 20% were independently assigned to this treatment.)
- To be assigned the Provocation treatment, respondents must have drawn rand1 greater than or equal to 20 and rand3 less than 30. (That is, of those who received any primary treatment, 30% were independently assigned to this treatment.)
- To be assigned the Vague Threat treatment, respondents must have drawn rand1 greater than or equal to 20, rand4 less than 60, and rand5 less than 50. To be assigned the Vague Threat with Defiance treatment, respondents must have drawn rand1 greater than or equal to 20, rand4 less than 60, and rand5 greater than or equal to 50. (That is, of those who received any primary treatment, 60% were independently assigned to receive a Vague Threat treatment, 50% of whom also received the Defiance treatment and 50% of whom did not receive the Defiance treatment.)
- To be assigned the Biding Time treatment respondents must have drawn rand6 less than 15 and rand8 less than 50. To be assigned the Cost of War treatment, respondents must have drawn rand6 less than 15 and rand8 greater than or equal to 50. (That is, 15% of all respondents were independently assigned to one of either the Costs of War treatment or Biding Time treatment.)
- Those that drew random numbers that do not meet any of the criteria comprise the nonparametric control group.

We present the realized frequencies of respondents for the main treatment combinations in Table [E.1](#).

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] 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
- 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]

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.]

			Nationalist history	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1
			Provocation	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1
			Vague threat	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1
Vague threat w/defiance	Biding time	Cost of war									
0	0	0	1716	541	300	221	316	228	133	87	
0	0	1	137	41	30	19	35	23	12	7	
0	1	0	167	49	31	16	30	21	14	5	
0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
1	0	0	0	547	0	213	0	224	0	100	
1	0	1	0	40	0	24	0	22	0	9	
1	1	0	0	44	0	18	0	20	0	5	
1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	

Table E.1: Observed frequencies of treatment assignment for Selective history experiment.

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