

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

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What public pressures do leaders face in international disputes? Leaders often denounce foreign actions as provocations, triggering public anger and demands for restitution. Rather than generating a reflexive rally around the flag, we argue that leaders who invoke foreign provocations—whether hypothetical, remembered, exaggerated, or real—face heightened public disapproval if they fail to take tough action in the present. Across two survey experiments and a quasi-experiment involving US naval patrols in the South China Sea, we find that incidents construed as provocative increase public pressure on the Chinese government to respond or incur public disapproval. We discuss possible explanations, how government elites seek to mitigate public disapproval, and how such events can change the logic of coercion and deterrence.

¿A qué presiones públicas se enfrentan los líderes en las disputas internacionales? Los líderes suelen denunciar las acciones extranjeras como provocaciones, lo que desencadena la ira de la población y las exigencias de restitución. En vez de generar una movilización reflexiva en torno a la bandera, argumentamos que los líderes que invocan provocaciones extranjeras, ya sean hipotéticas, temidas, exageradas o reales, se enfrentan a una mayor desaprobación de la opinión pública si no adoptan medidas firmes en el presente. En dos experimentos con encuestas y un cuasiexperimento con patrullas navales estadounidenses en el mar de la China Meridional, observamos que los incidentes interpretados como provocación aumentan la presión pública sobre el Gobierno chino para que responda, caso contrario, generará la desaprobación pública. Discutimos las posibles explicaciones, cómo las élites gubernamentales tratan de mitigar la desaprobación pública, y cómo tales acontecimientos pueden cambiar la lógica de la coerción y la disuasión.

À quelles pressions publiques les dirigeants sont-ils confrontés lors de conflits internationaux? Les dirigeants dénoncent souvent des actions étrangères en tant que provocations, déclenchant ainsi une colère et des demandes publiques de réparation. Nous soutenons que plutôt que de générer un ralliement réflexif autour du drapeau, les dirigeants qui invoquent des provocations étrangères—qu'elles soient hypothétiques, mémorées, exagérées ou réelles—sont confrontés à une désapprobation publique accrue s'ils ne parviennent pas à prendre une mesure sévère dans le présent. Nous nous sommes basés sur deux expériences d'enquête et sur une quasi-expérience impliquant des patrouilles navales américaines en mer de Chine méridionale et nous avons constaté que les incidents interprétés comme des provocations augmentaient la pression publique sur le gouvernement chinois pour qu'il endure ou réponde à la désapprobation publique. Nous abordons des explications possibles de la manière dont les élites gouvernementales cherchent à atténuer la désapprobation publique et de la façon dont de tels événements peuvent faire évoluer la logique de coercition et de dissuasion.

## Introduction

What public pressures do leaders face in international disputes? Most scholarship on this question has looked at whether leaders who make public threats face audience costs for failing to follow through, particularly in democracies.<sup>1</sup> However, most crises (83 percent) and militarized disputes (90 percent) contain no explicit coercive threats (Downes and Sechser 2012, 459), underscoring the importance of understanding what other mechanisms may create public pressure for escalation. Some crises arise from foreign actions outside the government's control (Clary, Lalwani, and Siddiqui 2021). At other times, governments invoke or construe foreign actions as provocative to mobilize domestic audiences, with a potentially unintended consequence being greater pressure for international escalation.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, we investigate how foreign provocations—past, present, real, exaggerated, and invented—affect

<sup>1</sup>This literature is extensive. Among others, see Fearon (1994), Smith (1998), Tomz (2007), Snyder and Borghard (2011), Trager and Vavreck (2011), Levendusky and Horowitz (2012), Slantchev (2012), Trachtenberg (2012), Davies and Johns (2013), and Chaudoin (2014); in autocracies, see Weeks (2008) and Weiss (2013).

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domestic incentives to escalate, with implications for deterrence and escalation in the shadow of public opinion. Provocation is an important phenomenon with the potential to undermine deterrence. If a foreign government's threats and public demonstrations of resolve have the effect of galvanizing domestic outrage and demands for restitution in the targeted state, deterrent threats may make more likely the very outcomes they seek to prevent. Indeed, US officials have at times avoided actions that might goad the target into retaliation. In a 1996 crisis with China, the US Secretary of Defense William Perry sent aircraft carriers near but not through the Taiwan Strait, worrying that their presence in the strait itself would result in an "unnecessary provocation" of Chinese leaders. Perry consciously limited the scope of military intervention for fear of goading China into escalation (Miller Center 2014).

But how exactly does provocation take place? In an important article, Todd Hall (2017) distinguishes between elite and popular reactions to foreign provocations. Given elite incentives to influence the probability and perception of foreign actions that provoke the domestic public, it can be difficult to draw inferences from observational data alone. In studying the Franco-Prussian War, for example, Hall writes, "What exact percentage of the French population actually shared these feelings in the absence of modern polling is difficult to tell ... [but] what really mattered was that the French government saw these passions as dominating public opinion and thus as constraints on state behavior" (Hall 2017, 27). Yet, the frequency of elite references to popular outrage during international crises suggests the importance of studying the logic of public provocation more directly.

A conventional expectation is that leaders invoke foreign slights and humiliations to bolster domestic support. As Kimberly Marten argues, "Putin is trying to provoke the United States and NATO into military action and create the appearance that they are posing a threat to Russia, in order to bolster his own popularity" (Einhorn, Fairfield, and Wallace 2015). Many contemporary disputes also play out against imagined as well as remembered provocations that elites reference in their domestic and international rhetoric. If leaders can generate a reflexive rally around the flag by denouncing foreign "provocations," past as well as present, then leaders indeed face incentives to fabricate or exaggerate international slights for domestic consumption.

We instead argue that foreign provocations—whether hypothetical, remembered, exaggerated, or real—put leaders at risk of public disapproval if they fail to take tough action in the present. Leaders who choose to denounce or recount a foreign action as "provocative" increase their domestic costs of inaction; any subsequent public opinion rally is *conditional* on tough action. Importantly, such domestic pressures—including the opportunity costs of a lost rally (Clary, Lalwani, and Siddiqui 2021)—may not make escalation inevitable; government leaders may use other rhetorical tactics to assuage public anger, including bluster (Weiss and Dafoe 2019) and invoking the costs of conflict (Quek and Johnston 2018). Yet, even if public opinion does not force the government's hand, it is still important to understand the domestic pressures a government incurs—or creates—when faced with foreign provocations.

Studying these dynamics in China has a number of advantages. First, it allows us to examine public pressures for escalation in the world's most populous authoritarian state. Second, it enables us to evaluate whether authoritarian leaders

can invoke foreign "provocations" to rally popular support without increasing domestic pressure for international escalation. Third, it allows us to evaluate policymakers' claims about provocation in one of the most consequential settings for international peace and conflict: rising tensions between the United States and China. As the former Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg and Michael O'Hanlon note, "China's policymakers regularly refer to the constraint of public opinion, referring in all apparent seriousness, for example, to occasional actions by the United States that 'hurt the feelings of 1.3 billion Chinese'" (Steinberg and O'Hanlon 2014, 41). In one standoff, for example, Chinese officials warned that US freedom of navigation patrols were "provocative attempts to infringe on China's South China Sea sovereignty" (Xinhua 2015a) and could trigger public demands for retaliation (Wong 2011).

Leveraging three different experimental and quasi-experimental survey designs, fielded to eight thousand respondents in mainland China from 2015 to 2016, we find that foreign provocations create public pressures for escalation and disapproval of inaction. Additional tests suggest that this disapproval reflects an increase in public resolve to use force and increased concern for defending the national honor. If public opinion rallies in the face of foreign provocations exist, our results suggest that they are conditional on government action rather than reflexive reactions to out-group threats. Remembered transgressions do not rally popular support for a government that is unable or unwilling to take tough action in the present, thereby restricting the utility of invoking past grievances to bolster popular support in ongoing disputes.

Below, we describe our theoretical expectations about provocation and the relevance of studying public pressures for escalation, with special attention to China. We then introduce our research designs and describe our results before concluding with broader implications and future directions.

### Theoretical Expectations and Implications

A large body of scholarship has focused on audience costs, or the domestic costs a government faces for backing down after making public threats. Related work has investigated the public costs of making threats (Kertzer and Brutger 2016) and domestic support for de-escalation or restraint (Snyder and Borghard 2011), particularly when leaders emphasize the costs of conflict (Quek and Johnston 2018; Clary, Lalwani, and Siddiqui 2021) or substitute bluster for military action (Weiss and Dafoe 2019). Compared with this rich vein of research, the target state's domestic calculus has been relatively understudied, even though formal theorists note that public threats could heighten the targeted leader's audience costs and backfire by "provok[ing] him into attacking" (Slantchev 2012, 380; see also Kurizaki 2007).<sup>3</sup> Aware that public challenges may pressure the target to retaliate, leaders have sometimes pursued covert action. As Hopf notes, Stalin's "fear of provoking the United States" led him to conceal Soviet military aid to China and Korea (Hopf 2012, 119). The Truman administration "tacitly colluded" to hide the extent of Soviet involvement in the Korean War, as otherwise "the public would expect us to do something about it," according to State Department Policy Planning Staff director Paul Nitze (Carson 2016, 124). However, covert threats and actions are unlikely to characterize most crises and disputes,

<sup>2</sup>As Christensen notes, "conflict manipulation is dangerous and can lead to escalation and warfare despite the more limited intentions of leaders in the mobilizing state" (Christensen 1996, 14).

<sup>3</sup>For instance, French officials complained that offensive British pamphlets made it harder for the French public to accept a compromise (Fearon 1994, 581).

making it crucial to understand how public threats and challenges affect the target state's domestic calculus (Clary, Lalwani, and Siddiqui 2021).

To what extent do foreign actions provoke pressures for retaliation? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a provocation is an “action or speech held to be likely to incite (esp. physical) retaliation” or “the action of challenging someone to fight; a challenge, a defiance.” Actions and events are more likely to be perceived as provocative when they threaten important interests, cause harm and especially fatalities, and are done in a public manner, without contrition, and with disrespect (O'Neill 1999). The latter features are more characteristic of actions perceived as intentional than accidental or unintentional. Foreign provocations may galvanize public demand for tough action through multiple channels, including concern for the national honor, reputation, prestige, face, credibility, status, and vengeance.<sup>4</sup>

Provocations can trigger both elite and public outrage, with government elites often engaging in performative or sincere displays of emotion (Hall 2017). Provocations can also elicit a direct response from the public, whose angry demands for restitution may erupt independent of elite representations. Even if public narratives are shaped by elite discourse, Kertzer and Zeitzoff (2017) show that bottom-up understandings can be as important as elite cues in shaping popular responses to foreign policy issues.

A key implication of public provocation is that leaders should suffer domestic disapproval unless they mount a swift response to foreign transgressions, while governments that respond successfully may improve their public standing.<sup>5</sup> According to this logic, public opinion rallies should be *conditional* on the government's subsequent action. As Hall notes, “Policymakers that waiver may find themselves fearing public wrath; policymakers that accede can hope for enthusiastic endorsement” (Hall 2017, 12).

In contrast, a conventional expectation is that foreign threats increase in-group cohesion and support for the government.<sup>6</sup> One might call this alternative expectation a *reflexive* rally, where public support for the leader does not depend on military escalation, although it may “permit retaliation and retribution” (Clary, Lalwani, and Siddiqui 2021, 3). Foundational works on rally 'round the flag notably do not explicitly require government action; salient external threats are said to increase public support for the leader without requiring that the leader respond with force. For example, Mueller (1970)'s pioneering study defines “rally points” as specific, dramatic, and sharply focused international events. Kobayashi and Katagiri (2018) find that segments of the Japanese public rallied around the conservative prime minister when they perceived territorial threats from China, regardless of the Japanese government's military response. The existing studies of the rally phenomenon

also typically do not distinguish international crises initiated by the domestic state leader from those initiated by a foreign adversary. As such, this literature has not paid much attention to circumstances in which the target state may be constrained in its military response, nor has it attempted to parse whether rallies are conditional on the use of force.<sup>7</sup>

Differentiating between these expectations is important for understanding the domestic dynamics in the targeted state. If foreign challenges bolster the government's popular standing without increasing demands for restitution, then they do not meaningfully alter the dynamics of coercion and crisis escalation. However, if foreign challenges jeopardize the popularity of a government that does not mount a tough response, then they may undermine deterrence by raising the public opinion costs of restraint.

A further complication arises from governments' ability to manipulate foreign provocations. Events in international affairs do not “speak for themselves” but come embedded in narratives (Krebs 2006; Krebs and Lobasz 2007; Krebs 2015). Leaders contribute heavily to these narratives and may have a penchant for exaggerating or even fabricating foreign transgressions. For example, after a Chinese fighter jet collided with a US EP-3 reconnaissance plane off the coast of China in April 2001, Beijing blamed the US military for making a “sudden turn,” even though the lumbering EP-3 could not have physically executed the alleged maneuver. The NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia in 1999 was portrayed by Chinese officials as an intentional probe of China's resolve and a public demonstration of China's weakness. As President Jiang Zemin declared in an internal meeting of the Politburo Standing Committee, the bombing “was definitely not an accident, definitely not innocent ... We must speak with the force of justice and make known to US-led NATO: the Chinese people will not be humiliated!” (Weiss 2014, 52–53). More dramatically, governments have resorted to “false-flag” attacks, such as the 1931 Mukden incident and 1939 Gleiwitz incident, to mobilize domestic support for war (Dafoe, Hatz, and Zhang 2021). Many leaders have blamed foreign conspirators for instigating domestic unrest or deliberately spreading diseases like the coronavirus.

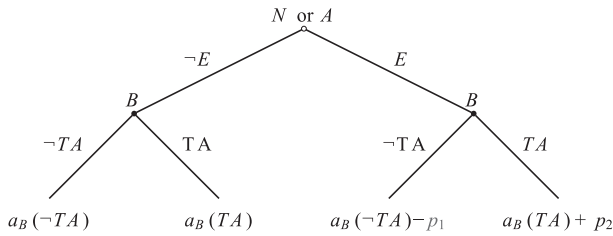
Government leaders may also invoke or showcase past provocations to bolster domestic support and resolve to meet international challenges. “Remember the Lusitania!” became a central slogan in efforts to mobilize US public support for entering World War I. In the 1950s, Chinese propaganda emphasized “American military provocation” to mobilize public support for Mao's strategic vision (Christensen 1996, 218). After Mao's death and the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown, the Chinese Communist Party invested heavily in patriotic education to justify one-party rule (Zhao 2004), with textbooks exhorting students to “Never Forget National Humiliation!” (Wang 2012) and state television annually commemorating China's “martyred” pilot in the 2001 EP-3 collision (China Central Television 2013). China's embassy in Serbia also holds an annual commemoration of the Belgrade embassy bombing, with wide coverage in state media outlets (Sina 2021). Although such propaganda may be intended to rally the public, the logic of provocation suggests that such remembered or imagined transgressions may

<sup>4</sup>These literatures are too extensive to cite fully; some notable works include Schelling (1960), Huth (1997), O'Neill (1999), Sartori (2005), Sechser (2010), Stein (2015), Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo (2015), and Cho (2017).

<sup>5</sup>Leaders may win public approval by demonstrating their competence in managing an international crisis. See Richards et al. (1993), Smith (1996), and Haynes (2017). Gottfried and Trager (2016) similarly find that aggressive foreign rhetoric increases popular support for leaders who wage war.

<sup>6</sup>There is a large literature in political psychology on the relationship between foreign threats and domestic rallies. Works based on social identity theory suggest that attacks on the home country by a foreign power “prime” national in-group identity and emotions among citizens, generating greater support for the leader (Dumont et al. 2003; Kam and Ramos 2008; see also Parker 1995). Specifically, salient territorial threats lead citizens in targeted countries to identify with the nation (Gibler, Hutchison, and Miller 2012). Other approaches suggest that emotions themselves, especially anger, are primarily responsible for shifts in political attitudes and support for the home country leader (Lerner et al. 2003; Lambert et al. 2010; Huddy and Feldman 2011).

<sup>7</sup>The literature is extensive. Among other works, see Mueller (1973), Baker and Oneal (2001), and Lai and Reiter (2005). Previous works have identified a variety of conditions associated with a positive rally effect, such as media reporting, elite framing, opposition criticism, and the level of military involvement (e.g., Oneal and Bryan 1995; Edwards and Swenson 1997; James and Rioux 1998; Baker and Oneal 2001; Groeling and Baum 2008). This body of work focuses less on the origin of these crises, such as whether the United States was provoked into military involvement.



**Figure 1.** Observable implications of provocation: conditional rally and the costs of inaction.

heighten pressure for vindication in the present, with failure to defend the national honor incurring public disapproval. If we observe such costs, they suggest scope conditions on governments' ability to use remembered, exaggerated, or invented provocations as a unifying trope without creating pressures for international escalation.

What impact do these remembered, exaggerated, or invented provocations have on public opinion and a government's incentives to escalate contemporary disputes? Studying the public channel through which provocation might occur is important for two reasons. First, even if most provocations are framed by government narratives, it is important to understand the effects that governments engender by invoking foreign provocations, much as scholars have sought to observe the audience costs that leaders create by making public threats. Leaders of strong authoritarian states are well equipped to employ propaganda to control the public reception of international events, but even democratic elites can frame how events are perceived (Berinsky 2007; Trager and Vavreck 2011; Levendusky and Horowitz 2012; Guisinger and Saunders 2017; Saunders 2018). The effects of framing foreign actions as provocative are important to study in any context but may be of particular interest in authoritarian settings where leaders are often said to rely on reminders of foreign transgressions and nationalist mythmaking to bolster domestic support (Snyder 1991; Shirk 2007).

Second, foreign actions may also directly provoke public outrage and demands for restitution, as governments may not be able to fully control the narrative around international events. Although some governments have suppressed public knowledge about foreign military actions (Carson 2016), many incidents are too dramatic to conceal, such as the attacks of 9/11 and Pearl Harbor. In addition, particularly with widespread internet and social media usage, even governments such as China's face the possibility of a "Streisand effect," where censorship backfires by increasing popular interest in the blocked information and tools necessary to evade censorship (Hobbs and Roberts 2018). As Susan Shirk notes, "the Chinese people today have exponentially more information about events outside the country than in the past. Keeping people ignorant of a speech by a Japanese or US cabinet minister is no longer possible. In the short time before the censors delete a news story, it can be spread widely and spark online outrage, forcing Chinese officials to react" (Shirk 2014, 403). During the pandemic, for instance, Chinese internet users jumped the Great Firewall to acquire censored information about the coronavirus (Chang et al. 2021), leading to harsh online criticism and calls for Xi Jinping's removal.

The game tree in figure 1 identifies the observable implications of provocation. Nature ( $N$ ) or the Adversary ( $A$ ) generates a real, imagined, exaggerated, or remembered event ( $E$ ) of the class we consider—such as a challenge, insult, inadvertent, or coercive harm—or not ( $\neg E$ ). Government  $B$  then can either take some specific tough action ( $TA$ ), or not

( $\neg TA$ ). If the government does not take tough action after a provocative event ( $E$ ), we expect the government to pay an approval cost ( $-p_1$ ). The final payoff is the public's approval of its government  $B$ .<sup>8</sup>

Our article fields multiple designs, seeking to leverage the relative advantages and disadvantages of each for generalizability and external validity. In two scenario-based survey experiments, we manipulated the presence or absence of a provocative event, holding fixed all other actions, information, and context. To evaluate whether a particular event increased a government's domestic incentives to escalate, we compared the level of approval after the event ( $E$ ) and no tough action ( $\neg TA$ ) versus approval after no such event ( $\neg E$ ) and no tough action ( $\neg TA$ ), with additional tests to evaluate the effect on resolve and honor. Recognizing the limitations of scenario-based experiments, we also employed a quasi-experiment: by fielding our survey over a period of time, we examined the effect of US military patrols in the South China Sea on Chinese citizens' evaluations of their government's foreign policy performance. This observational analysis allowed us to evaluate whether these effects persist in the real world, where the outcome is less clearly specified and government elites have the opportunity to shape the public narrative. We describe our scenario-based and quasi-experiments in greater detail below.

### Provocation in an Authoritarian Context: China

The phenomenon of provocation does not appear to be unique to any particular regime type, with both democratic and authoritarian leaders publicly condemning or warning against foreign "provocations." For instance, US officials told Chinese leaders that "We would consider an ADIZ [in the South China Sea] ... a provocative and destabilizing act which would automatically raise tensions" (Reuters Staff 2016). The South Korean President Lee Myung-bak ordered plans to attack a North Korean missile base upon "any indication of further provocation" (Lee 2010).

Since most militarized conflicts involve at least one non-democracy, it is important to understand whether and what kinds of foreign actions are likely to provoke public pressure for tough action in an authoritarian context. Monitoring and responding to public sentiment have become increasingly critical to authoritarian leaders, who fear that popular unrest may trigger elite splits or even ouster from office. Since the end of the Cold War, elite coups have been eclipsed by popular protests as the modal means of ousting nondemocratic leaders (Kendall-Taylor and Frantz 2014). Formally, the risk of incurring popular wrath may impose a "revolution constraint" on the policies that authoritarian leaders are willing to adopt (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006, 120). As President Xi explained to visiting dignitaries from Taiwan: "The Communist Party would be overthrown by the people if the pro-independence issue was not dealt with" (Zhuang 2016). Even if authoritarian elites do not fear popular revolt, public dissatisfaction may embolden regime insiders to oppose or challenge the leadership in an attempt to reclaim popular legitimacy (Shirk 2007; Svobik 2012, 12; Wallace 2013). The apparent importance of public support in China was evident in Xi's statement to the Central Committee that "Winning or losing public support is an issue that concerns the CPC's survival or extinction" (Xinhua 2013).

<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that the government may benefit from a conditional rally-round-the-flag boost in approval ( $+p_2$ ) if the government responds to the provocation with tough action—an effect that we do not investigate for design reasons explained in online supplement appendix 3.

Given its fears of losing popular support and emboldening elite dissent, the Chinese government has invested in monitoring and responding to public sentiment and demands (Manion 2015; Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016; Truex 2016; Meng, Pan, and Yang 2017). Even without electoral accountability, “local service institutions in China are comparably responsive to similar institutions in democracies” (Distelhorst and Hou 2017, 1024). Chinese officials do not risk punishment at the polls, but they may still adjust policies to respond to or anticipate citizen demands, reducing risks of collective action and elite challenges.<sup>9</sup>

We focus on the attitudes and reactions of citizens in China for two reasons. First, Chinese foreign policy has substantive importance. If a new great power war occurs, there is a good chance that it would be over sovereignty and maritime issues in the Asia–Pacific (Allison 2015). Second, despite many differences in size, power, and history, Chinese reactions to international crises can help us understand the incentives and pressures that other authoritarian states face, just as scholars studying US foreign policy can shed light on democratic behavior in international relations.

Do foreign actions actually “hurt the feelings” of the Chinese public, increasing popular indignation, resolve, and disapproval of the government if it fails to stand tough? Chinese diplomats claim to receive unsolicited mail from citizens containing calcium pills, an implied demand to “show more backbone in standing up against the United States” (Shirk 2007, 101). At least some foreign officials have pointed to the pressure that public opinion exerts on Chinese foreign policy. As the former Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg notes with Michael O’Hanlon, “In China, rising national pride and memories of past humiliations put increased pressure on leaders not to compromise with foreigners, including Americans ... The Communist Party is especially susceptible to these pressures, given its dependence on nationalist credentials” (Steinberg and O’Hanlon 2014, 25).

Still, other foreign officials have asked how “real or induced” this pressure is given China’s control over state-run media and ability to repress popular protests (Keefe 2001). The Chinese government has invested heavily in “public opinion management,” deploying commentators and censors in an effort to win the “guerrilla battle” in the “mass microphone era,” according to the head of the *People’s Daily* Public Opinion Monitoring Unit (Fong and Cheung 2014). Moreover, Quek and Johnston (2018) find in survey experiments that the Chinese government is able to employ a variety of rhetorical strategies to reduce the public opinion costs of restraint or backing down in foreign policy crises. These debates underscore the importance of studying the effects of foreign provocations—real, remembered, exaggerated, and invented—on public opinion in the Chinese context.

### Research Design

We conducted a survey of mainland Chinese respondents online and via mobile devices between October 2015 and March 2016. Chinese internet users represent a segment of the public whose reactions are of particular concern to the Chinese government, which regards online opinion as a leading indicator of potential unrest (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013).<sup>10</sup> According to the chief editor of the *People’s Daily*, the Internet is the “biggest variable” (*zui da bian-*

*liang*) that the Chinese Communist Party faces in managing public opinion (Yang 2016). Roughly 80 percent of respondents who took our survey said they were likely or very likely to share or repost information about the dispute online, suggesting a connection between their attitudes and online behavior. Recruited participants came from provinces all across China and from different income, educational, and urban/rural backgrounds.<sup>11</sup> The gender and age distributions were comparable to the general population of internet users in China. The educational attainment was somewhat higher in our sample than the general netizen population, making ours similar to samples analyzed in other recent online surveys (see, e.g., Huang 2015).

We employ several complementary experimental and quasi-experimental designs to evaluate the effect of foreign provocations in the context of China’s maritime and territorial disputes in Asia, where foreign “provocations” have allegedly justified military countermeasures.<sup>12</sup> For example, Japan’s “nationalization” of three islands in the East China Sea in September 2012 prompted unprecedented Chinese patrols around the islands. In November 2013, US B-52 bombers flew through China’s newly declared Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea. Although the Chinese military did not initially employ any “defensive emergency measures,” as it had threatened against noncompliant aircraft, in 2014 Beijing justified several close flybys between Chinese fighter jets and Japanese reconnaissance planes as enforcing the ADIZ (Rinehart and Elias 2015, 13).

The advantage of scenario-based survey experiments is that we are able to measure the projected public opinion costs of inaction, which would be otherwise difficult to observe if our theory is correct. If real or exaggerated provocations lead the government to escalate or assuage domestic demands for retribution through bluster or other tactics (Quek and Johnston 2018; Weiss and Dafoe 2019; Clary, Lalwani, and Siddiqui 2021), then we will have difficulty observing the full extent of public disapproval that the government risks by not taking action.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, following the spirit of Tomz (2007), vignette-based experiments require respondents to read the same stylized ending in order to reduce divergent expectations about the scenario’s outcome.

We developed two complementary survey experiments: an abstract *hypothetical* design and a *selective-history* design that reminded respondents of past transgressions, realistic and exaggerated. Abstract hypothetical scenarios have the advantage of providing greater generalizability, but respondents may react differently to real provocations. At the same time, hypothetical scenarios may come closer to representing the real-world effects of government propaganda that invokes unnamed external enemies and fictional provocations. Selective-history designs may have more external validity than abstract hypothetical designs because they more closely approximate real-world events and their domestic presentation. However, selective-history designs are limited to events and provocations that have actually transpired, so treatment effects may be attenuated by respondents’ existing knowledge of those events. Recognizing these tradeoffs, we fielded multiple designs to increase our confidence that any findings are not the product of a specific design choice.

In the hypothetical design, we manipulated five contextual variables: three about the foreign government (regime

<sup>11</sup> For further recruitment details and discussion of self-censorship, see online supplement appendix 8.

<sup>12</sup> As such, our designs seek to probe more generally Quek and Johnston (2018)’s suggestive finding that US military threats increase the costs of backing down among Chinese respondents.

<sup>13</sup> For a similar argument about audience costs, see Schultz (1999).

<sup>9</sup> As Johnston (2017, 41) notes, Chinese “leaders have an interest in taking positions close to those of more nationalistic or hard-line publics” in order to deprive elite competitors of a political weapon in internal power struggles.

<sup>10</sup> As Johnston (2017, 42) notes, “[Online opinion] may be less representative, but nonetheless more immediately salient for political leaders.”

type, alliance with the United States, and military power) and two about the value of the territory (its symbolic importance to the nation as well as its economic and strategic value).<sup>14</sup> Respondents were then assigned in a factorial (and thus independent) way to several substantive treatments, one of which was provocation.<sup>15</sup>

[Hypothetical 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.

For all conditions the scenario ended with the Chinese government's inaction, in order to measure the effect of provocation while holding constant the outcome of the scenario: "In the end, China does not take military action, and the neighboring country consolidates control over the territory."

The selective-history experiment reminded respondents of two events construed by the Chinese government as provocative, one exaggerated and one realistic. All respondents read the same opening context: "China and the United States 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 United States has not agreed with this position." Respondents were then assigned to our substantive treatments, including two foreign challenges, in a factorial and thus independent way.<sup>16</sup>

One treatment reminded respondents of the April 2001 EP-3 spy plane incident, which resulted from China's opposition to and increased harassment of close-in US military reconnaissance flights, even though official Chinese accounts have exaggerated US responsibility for the pilot's death. The EP-3 incident is regularly commemorated by Chinese state media, making it a good candidate for evaluating whether governments can generate reflexive popular support by invoking remembered provocations or whether such commemorations increase public pressure on the government to take tough action in the present. In keeping with the Chinese government's depiction of the episode, respondents read:

[EP-3] The United States frequently sends military reconnaissance patrols dangerously close to China's territorial airspace and waters. In 2001, a US military reconnaissance plane made a sudden turn and collided with a Chinese fighter jet, killing Chinese pilot Wang Wei.

The second treatment was more objective, reminding respondents of the US decision in November 2013 to fly B-52s through China's ADIZ in the East China Sea. Respondents receiving this treatment first read:

[ADIZ] On November 23, 2013 China announced an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea. China announced that if any foreign aircraft fails to identify itself to Chinese authorities or re-

fuses to follow instructions, Chinese armed forces will take defensive emergency measures.

This sentence was followed by:

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

All respondents then read: "To this day, the US continues to fly military planes through the area without identifying themselves or following instructions. China has not used force to stop this," an accurate characterization of the status quo at the time the survey was fielded. We held the ending constant to isolate the impact of perceived provocations from material and other considerations. To isolate the effect of *ADIZp*, we controlled for the effect of *ADIZ*.

### Results

Our primary outcome of interest was approval or disapproval of the Chinese government's performance, on a scale ranging from strongly disapprove to strongly approve. We also asked respondents an open-ended question to elicit their reasoning. In the hypothetical and selective-history scenarios, the three provocation conditions led respondents to disapprove more of their government's foreign policy performance (figure 2). The joint significance of these three predictions for our primary (no covariate) specifications ( $p_{j,1}$ ) and for our secondary covariate specifications ( $p_{j,2}$ ) is:<sup>17</sup>

$$p_{j,1} = 0.058 \quad p_{j,2} = 0.011$$

Overall, the weight of the evidence is consistent with our prediction that provocations reduce approval of the government for failing to seek restitution.

The hypothetical provocation had a strong individual effect. The first selective-history treatment, reminding respondents of the EP-3 incident, also reduced approval of the government's foreign policy performance. Finally, reminding respondents of the United States' defiance of the ADIZ likewise reduced approval, although these results were more suggestive.<sup>18</sup>

Open-ended responses illuminated why respondents disapproved of their government's performance. "If happiness means bowing and scraping, I'd rather stand painfully," said one respondent. Another added: "The US bullies the weak and fears the strong. The fewer actions you take, the more brazenly the US will step by step touch our bottom line." Two other respondents implied that a more competent government would take tougher action against foreign threats: "An incapable country, fooling people, bullying people, but weak externally," wrote one respondent. Another said: "The government is too incompetent. Protests cannot be used as food. Must show fists!" And another wrote: "I think what China currently does is to take strong measures only after courteous ones fail. If the US continues to run wild, it will bear all the consequences."

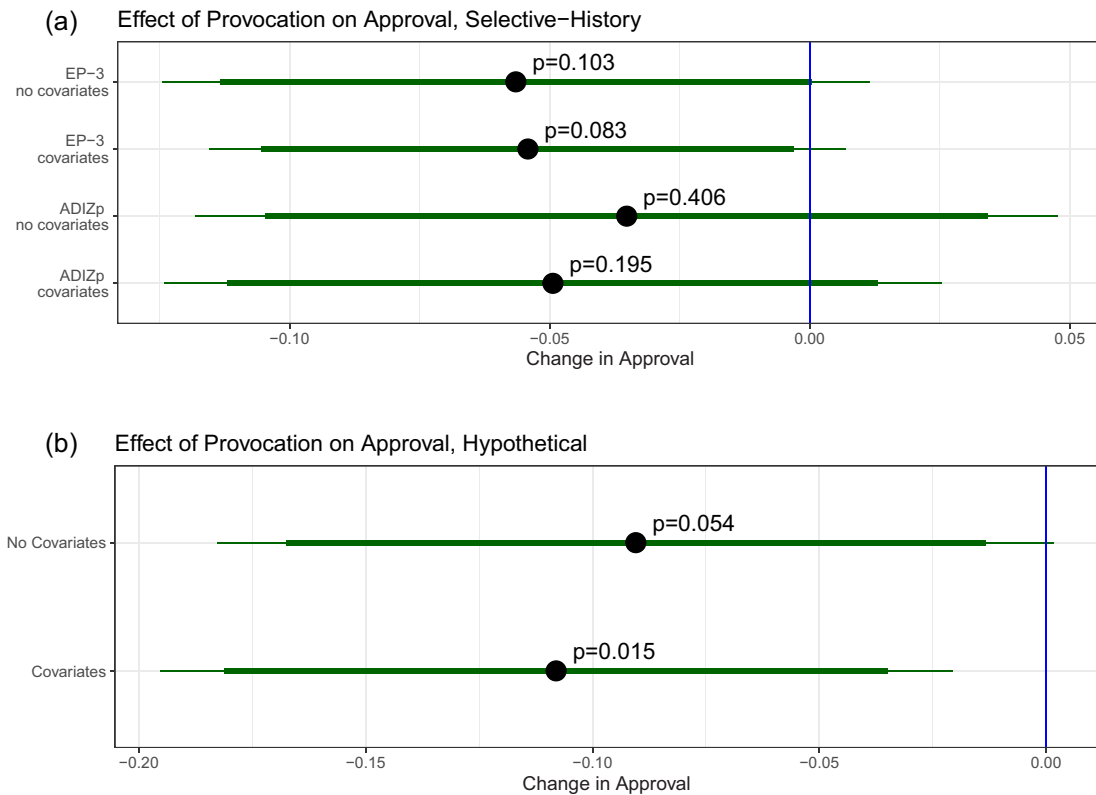
<sup>14</sup>These manipulations reduce the chance of unintended cues about the foreign adversary and territory in dispute (see Dafoe, Zhang, and Caughey 2018). All regression specifications control for the effects of these contextual variables.

<sup>15</sup>The other treatments, which are examined in another paper (Weiss and Dafoe 2019), involved a Chinese statement of commitment, troop mobilization, protests, and elite cues.

<sup>16</sup>Other treatments, examined in another paper (Weiss and Dafoe 2019), involved a statement of commitment (the declaration of the ADIZ) and three elite cues. For the full text, see online supplement appendixes 5 and 6.

<sup>17</sup>We used the Fisher combining function to combine our one-sided (preregistered) predictions.

<sup>18</sup>Shown  $p$ -values are two-sided.



**Figure 2.** Effects of remembered (a) and hypothetical (b) provocations on government approval, controlling for inaction.

### Quasi-Experiment: South China Sea Patrols

Our third design exploited the occurrence of three US military patrols in the South China Sea reported in China as provocative. By evaluating public approval of the government's performance in managing the security situation in China's surrounding waters in the survey prior to any experimental conditions, we investigated whether real-world military challenges have a measurable effect on public opinion in the target state. A key advantage of this observational design is that it allows us to investigate whether such patrols triggered popular disapproval of the Chinese government despite its symbolic displays of resolve, including tough-but-vague blustery threats to take unspecified action (Weiss and Dafoe 2019). If we still observe public disapproval in the face of government efforts to spin the public narrative and talk tough, then we should be more confident that public provocation is a phenomenon that cannot be ignored or fully subordinated to elite cues. An increase in popular anger may reflect elite messaging, but an uptick in popular disapproval suggests that such anger can still create pressure on the government to respond.

First was the October 27, 2015, freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) by the USS *Lassen* near Subi Reef, an enlarged Chinese-held feature in the Spratly Islands. The *Lassen* operation marked the first South China Sea FONOP since 2012 in which a US military vessel sailed within twelve nautical miles of a feature artificially enlarged by China. The patrol was prominently reported in Chinese media, including the China Central Television (CCTV) seven o'clock evening news broadcast. CCTV reported that the government had denounced the US patrol as "provocative behavior" (*tiaoxin xingwei*), a threat to Chinese sovereignty and a danger to Chinese security interests (China Central Television 2015).

A second event was revealed on December 18, 2015, when the *Wall Street Journal* reported that a US B-52 plane had unintentionally flown within two nautical miles of an artificial Chinese island on a routine mission the previous week (Lubold and Page 2015). As our theory expects, provocations deemed intentional should generate greater public outrage and greater demand for government response than those deemed unintentional. After the *Wall Street Journal's* report, the Chinese Ministry of National Defense called the overflight "a severe military provocation" (*yanzhong de junshi tiaoxin xingwei*) (Jinghua Shibao 2015). While Chinese media reports acknowledged US claims that the B-52 flight was accidental (Guo 2015; Renmin Wang and Huanqiu Shibao 2015), China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs affirmed the characterization of the actions as "provocative" and "urge[d] the US side to reflect upon and correct its mistake" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015).

On January 30, 2016, another US FONOP took place in the South China Sea. This patrol came shortly after Adm. Harry Harris, commander of US Pacific Command (PACOM), told an audience at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) on January 27 that he personally believed islands in the South China Sea do not belong to China and that "you will see more of them [FONOPs]" (Parameswaran 2016). The remark was immediately reported by Chinese media on January 28 (Fenghuang Weishi 2016). On January 30, the USS *Curtis Wilbur* sailed within twelve nautical miles of Triton Island in the Paracels, which China has administered since 1974. The operation constituted the first US assertion of "innocent passage" in the Paracels since 2011. Again, the patrol was first reported in the *Wall Street Journal* (Lubold and Page 2016), although US defense officials quickly issued a formal statement describing the events (Panda 2016). Following the initial report, Chinese officials and state media immediately con-

demned the act, with China's foreign ministry spokesperson demanding the US halt such "risky and provocative behavior" (Zhang 2016; China Central Television 2016b) and reasserting China's position that foreign military ships "shall be subject to approval by the Government of the People's Republic of China for entering the territorial sea of the People's Republic of China" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016). The Ministry of National Defense spokesperson Senior Colonel Yang Yujun called the operation "a deliberate provocation" and said Chinese planes and vessels had "warned and expelled [the ship] swiftly" (Johnson 2016).

Did these three reported "provocations" have any real-world effect on Chinese public approval? We measured respondents' baseline opinion by asking the following question at the beginning of the survey, before respondents read the selective-history context and scenario: "Regarding the security situation in China's surrounding waters, what is your overall evaluation of the government's performance?"<sup>19</sup> We then compared these baseline approval levels in the days following each incident with the baseline responses received on other days.<sup>20</sup> To do so, we produced an indicator variable for the  $s$  days after the first announcement of the event in China, where  $s = 10$  for both FONOPs and  $s = 5$  for the overflight. These numbers represent our best guess as to how long the events were salient in the minds of respondents, as the FONOPs were more prominent than the overflight. We drop observations for the first twenty-four hours after an event was first reported, since we expect the treatment effect of a reported "provocation" to be ambiguous during the first day, when citizens are still becoming aware of the event and how the government chose to respond. Modifying this rule does not substantially change the results.

We use two regression specifications for our analysis. For one specification, we include a cubic polynomial of calendar time. That is, we estimate:

$$Y_i = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 t + \alpha_2 t^2 + \alpha_3 t^3 + \beta_1 P1 + \beta_2 P2 + \beta_3 P3 + \epsilon_i$$

where  $\alpha_k$  and  $\beta_k$  are coefficients,  $t$  is calendar time,  $P\#$  is an indicator set to 1 if provocation  $\#$  happened within the last  $s$  days, 0 otherwise, where  $s$  is 10 days for both FONOPs, and 5 days for the overflight.<sup>21</sup>

For the second specification, we produce a separate indicator variable ( $PW\#$ ) for the  $m$  days preceding each provocation, and  $s$  days following it, and then drop all other observations; this leads to a before-after analysis of the impact of each provocation, with the before window being  $m$  days long and the after window being  $s$  days long. For  $m$ , we used 10, 20, and 30 days; we show the results in the paper using  $m = 30$  and present the others in online supplement appendix 1.3. We thus estimate:

$$Y_i = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 PW1 + \alpha_2 PW2 + \alpha_3 PW3 + \beta_1 P1 + \beta_2 P2 + \beta_3 P3 + \epsilon_i$$

### Results

Figure 3 shows the time trend in baseline approval, with a rug plot along the bottom axis indicating the frequency of

<sup>19</sup>We initially asked only half the respondents this pre-scenario question. After the first few days, given our interest in measuring reactions to real-world events, we modified the design so that all respondents received this question.

<sup>20</sup>See online supplement appendix 2 for details on the allocation of subjects per day. The number of respondents we were able to recruit per day was not consistent over the survey period, resulting in a fair amount of noise (figure 3).

<sup>21</sup>As robustness checks, we ran additional specifications with different parameters of  $s$ . The results do not change substantively.

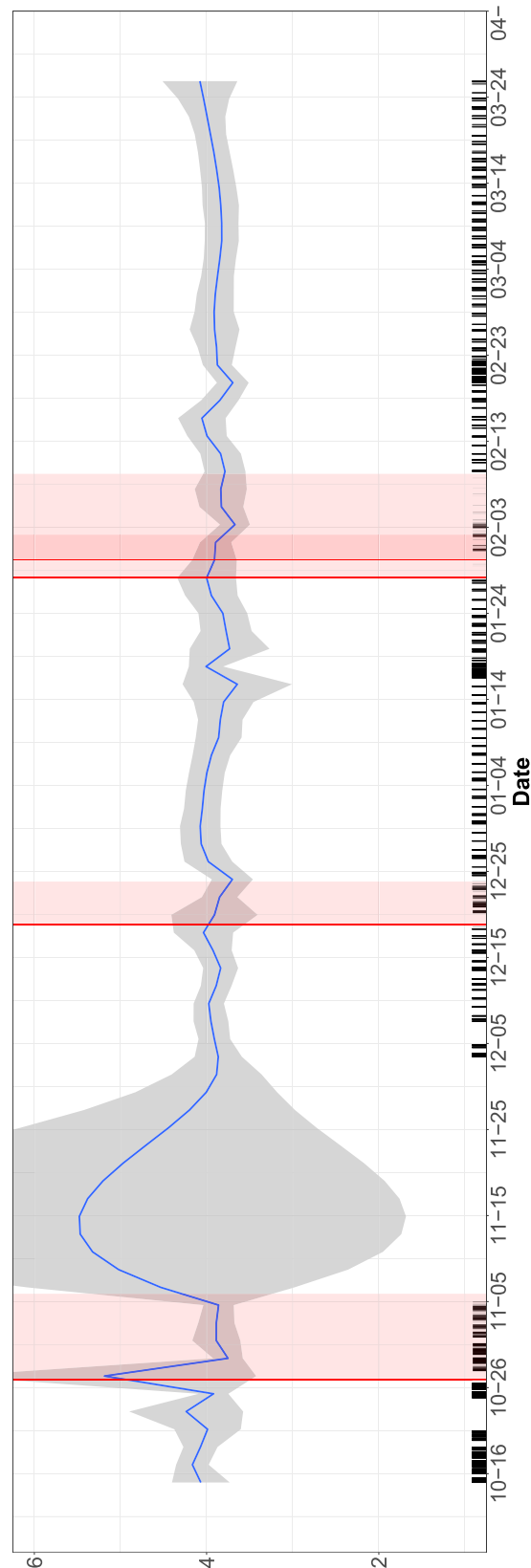
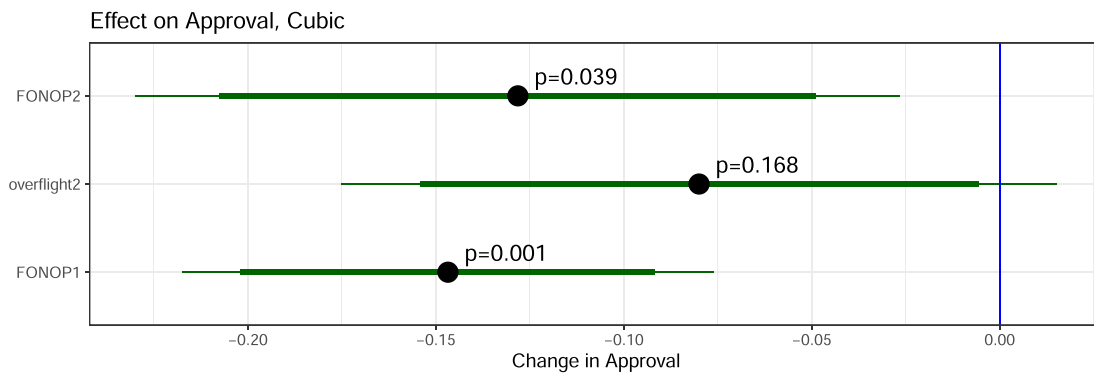
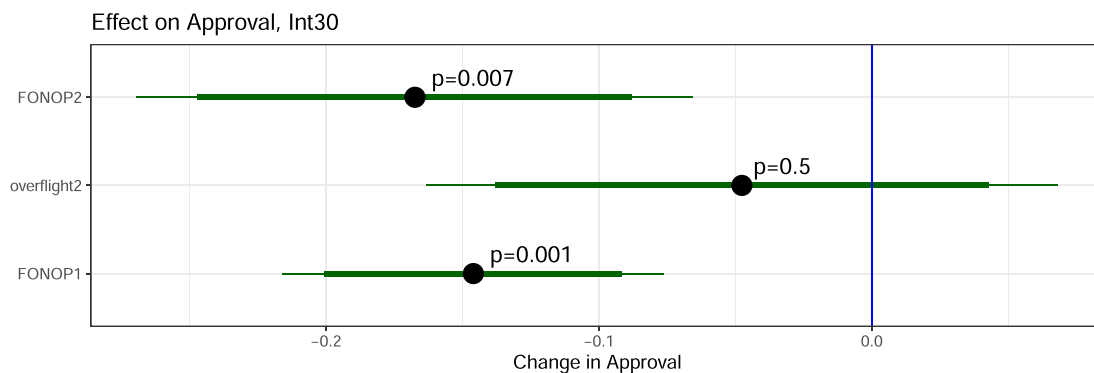


Figure 3. Time trend: U.S. military patrols and Chinese government approval.





**Figure 4.** Effects of U.S. military patrols on Chinese government approval (cubic polynomial).



**Figure 5.** Effects of U.S. military patrols on Chinese government approval (before-after).

observations during our two survey waves. The vertical red lines mark the first reporting of the events that fell within our sampling period. We analyzed the effect of these three reported provocations (the first FONOP on October 27, the mistaken overflight reported on December 18, and the second FONOP on January 30). We also control for the effect of PACOM commander Adm. Harry Harris’s “provocative” remark, first reported on January 28 (third vertical line in figure 3), to isolate the effect of the second FONOP.<sup>22</sup> Figures 4 and 5 report the confidence intervals from these regressions, showing that all three events decreased approval of the Chinese government’s performance, especially in the days after the more salient freedom of navigation patrols, although the magnitude is small. The joint test is highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ), as are the individual FONOPs. The effect of the accidental overflight is not statistically significant, which could be explained by the US claim that the overflight was unintentional and the absence of strong Chinese pushback to that claim.

### Resolve

What explains this increase in public disapproval following government inaction in the face of foreign provocation? We have argued that provocation may be driven by the same impulse underlying the domestic disapproval of empty threats: the public “deplore[s] the *international* loss of credibility, face, or honor” (Fearon 1994, 581). However,

explicit threats are arguably an uncommon source of honor-engagement (Snyder and Borghard 2011), with honor being more often engaged by indirect and symbolic expressions of commitment, nationalist narratives and identity claims, perceptions of core interests, and expectations of respect. Following an insult or injury, the defense or restitution of honor often requires tough action, with full restitution often involving vengeance or an apology and compensation from the transgressor. As such, we expect foreign transgressions to increase public desire for more resolute and punitive actions to restore the national honor or a nation’s “right to respect” (Stewart 1994, 21).

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

These alternative explanations are important to disentangle because they yield different strategic implications. Our theory implies that provocations will make it harder for a leader to back down because they increase public resolve, whereas other explanations imply no effect or even a

<sup>22</sup>The PACOM commander’s remark, stated as a personal opinion during a CSIS talk, was not widely reported in Chinese state media (after appearing in online media on January 28, it was reported on CCTV on January 29, one day before the FONOP; see China Central Television 2016a). Although we expect its effect (if any) to be small relative to the FONOPs, controlling for it allows the second FONOP’s provocative effect to be compared to the period before the statement, giving us a more accurate estimate.

reduction in resolve.<sup>23</sup> To differentiate these possibilities, we asked respondents to assess “the maximum probability of war” China should risk to defend the territory (in the hypothetical scenario) or to defend its maritime interests (in the selective-history scenario).

In both the hypothetical and selective-history designs, the effect on resolve was always in the predicted direction and significantly so for a subset of the tests. The EP-3 collision had the strongest effect on resolve, while the hypothetical challenge had the weakest effect, as described in online supplement appendix 1.4.

The results for resolve in the observational study were mixed and suggestive rather than dispositive. Similar to our government approval question, we asked about a respondent’s willingness to risk war with the United States to defend maritime interests at the beginning of the survey, before the embedded experiments. We found that the first freedom of navigation patrol may have increased resolve, the accidental overflight had no apparent effect (as anticipated), and the second FONOP may have corresponded with a small and brief reduction in resolve (see online supplement appendix 1.6), although not at conventional levels of significance. To further probe how provocations may have impacted resolve, we also collected data on respondents’ perceived importance that China defend national honor. The experimental results were not statistically significant (see online supplement appendix 1.5), but the effects on national honor were more suggestive in the observational quasi-experiment (see online supplement appendix 1.7). The first FONOP and accidental overflight appeared to increase public willingness to defend national honor, whereas the effects of the second FONOP were more inconclusive.

A few concurrent events may have contributed to these mixed results on resolve. For one, the second FONOP took place in the week prior to the Chinese New Year holiday, a weeklong holiday celebration that began on February 7. Respondents may have been less willing to risk war during the latter half of our post-treatment window, which began on February 1 and ran through February 11. In addition, between the first and the second FONOPs, the Chinese government also took measures to shore up China’s position in the South China Sea. China landed civilian planes on Fiery Cross Reef, an artificially constructed island in the South China Sea, on January 2 and January 6, stunts that were widely publicized in the Chinese media (Xinhua 2016). Such measures may have led respondents to feel less concerned about responding to subsequent US patrols.<sup>24</sup> Finally, if there was a decrease in resolve, another possible explanation is fatigue: a sequence of unrequited provocations may have eventually intimidated the target, as expressed in an old Chinese saying: “the fighting spirit is aroused by the first roll of drums, is depleted by the second, and is exhausted by the third (*yi gu zuo qi, zai er shuai, san er jie*).” In other words, foreign shows of force may have differential effects over time, with subsequent challenges reducing public support for war—a phenomenon reminiscent of the Tet Offensive during the Vietnam War.

<sup>23</sup> Online supplement appendix 3 discusses an alternative design for evaluating these strategic implications and why we chose not to adopt that design here.

<sup>24</sup> If anything, continued US patrols may have revealed a heightened probability of conflict, and respondents may have felt that China could now afford to reduce the likelihood of war, having strengthened its position in the South China Sea. If so, this possibility suggests that the effect of foreign provocations may depend on how vulnerable the public perceives China’s claim strength to be (Fravel 2008). When China’s perceived claim strength is strong, a foreign transgression may be less likely to induce pressure on the government to take actions that could risk war than when China’s perceived claim strength is weak.

### Mitigating Public Disapproval

Collectively, our results suggest that the resumption of US FONOPs may have increased public disapproval of the Chinese government’s performance, creating pressure on the government to respond. If so, it may seem puzzling that Chinese officials denounced these events as provocative and then responded with such restraint—only warning the US patrols to leave and shadowing at a safe distance. However, China’s response to the resumption of US FONOPs illustrates the kinds of tactics a government may employ to mitigate public disapproval when it is unable to conceal foreign actions or retaliate with force at an acceptable cost.

As international news reports confirmed that the Obama administration had authorized an impending patrol and had begun briefing US allies in Asia, Chinese officials and state media responded with tough but vague rhetoric—the kind of bluster that can boost popular approval even when the government does not take tough action (Weiss and Dafoe 2019). Xi Jinping proclaimed that “the Chinese people will not accept violations of Chinese sovereignty” and that the South China Sea was “left to us by our ancestors” (Renmin Ribao 2015a, 2015b; People’s Daily Online 2015). After the first FONOP, the Chinese government broadcast that it had sent a missile destroyer and patrol boat to warn away the US ship and threatened “to speed up its construction activities” (Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Waijiaobu 2015). Following *Wall Street Journal* reports of the mistaken B-52 overflight in December (Lubold and Page 2015), the Chinese defense ministry released a statement saying that the “actions by the US side were a serious military provocation” and that China would “take whatever measures necessary to safeguard China’s national sovereignty and security” (Xinhua 2015b).

That we still observed an uptick in public disapproval in the days following these statements suggests that such declarations and symbolic shows of force were insufficient to alleviate the pressure created by the publicly reported foreign military patrols. Ultimately, these episodes and surveys reveal that the Chinese leadership pays an approval cost from inaction when provocative events become known to domestic audiences. Although the government can mitigate these domestic costs by expressing outrage or reserving the right to take later countermeasures, our observational data suggest that such strategies do not fully insulate the government from this domestic pressure. When a forceful military response would be too dangerous, engaging in bluster and other non-kinetic countermeasures may be the least-bad option for a government facing a moderate foreign provocation.<sup>25</sup> As such, foreign public patrols may not provoke the target into a rash military reaction, but they may nevertheless increase domestic demands for other measures to advance the nation’s territorial and maritime claims. A general takeaway from our analysis, then, is that while high-profile FONOPs may appear initially successful in that they do not lead to conflict, in the long run they may prove counterproductive by increasing the tempo of “salami slicing,” gray-zone measures short of open conflict.

### Conclusion

This study joins a growing interest in the mass pressures authoritarian leaders face during international disputes. Across several survey experiments and a quasi-experiment in

<sup>25</sup> It should be reiterated that due to selection effects, we are unlikely to observe the disapproval costs of inaction from major provocations, as in such cases the government is likely to take military action in response.

China, we find evidence that foreign provocations increase popular disapproval if the government fails to take tough action and can increase popular willingness to use force. Our results concerning provocation have important implications for crisis dynamics, while raising many questions for future research.

Scholars have examined whether threats and uses of force increase domestic disapproval for backing down and can be used to tie a leader's hands. Such actions can be strategically deployed, but provocations often arise inadvertently or from an adversary's actions. Accordingly, provocations can alter the strategic dynamics of coercion and crisis escalation. If the only hands-tying actions are those that a leader chooses to enact, then a leader's stakes in a crisis only escalate as high as the leader allows. However, if other events and foreign actions can increase a leader's costs for inaction, then crises cannot necessarily be controlled. A leader may begin with limited aims, but unexpected events may increase the leader's incentives to escalate further.

The logic of popular provocation, therefore, makes crisis bargaining potentially much riskier than most models of international bargaining portray. Moves by one party in a dispute to achieve its aims—such as public commitments, threats, or symbolic deployments of military force—risk being perceived or construed as provocative by the target, which may then harden the target's resolve. Instead of creating asymmetric commitments, these actions may put public pressure on the other side to escalate. Our findings thus suggest that public threats, commitments, symbolic deployments of force, and actual uses of force may be mutually escalatory, limiting their efficacy as tools of coercion and deterrence.

In addition, governments often seem to exaggerate or recall foreign provocations to mobilize domestic support. Our findings imply that governments play with fire by invoking as well as magnifying foreign provocations. In survey experiments as well as an observational study of Chinese reactions to US military patrols, foreign provocations increased popular disapproval of the Chinese government's performance in ongoing disputes, with suggestive evidence of increased public appetite for a forceful response.

Although the phenomenon of provocation is found throughout history, it is not well understood. What kinds of actions or events are provocative? Is there a close mapping between actions that increase domestic audience costs and actions that are most likely to provoke their target? If so, then hands-tying tactics are likely to be much less effective than previously thought—if not counterproductive. To the extent that this correlation is imperfect, there will be some actions that tie one government's hands more than they provoke a foreign reaction, and others that provoke a foreign reaction more than they tie the government's own hands. The skilled leader seeking bargaining advantages through commitment will then be a master of employing the former and avoiding the latter. Do provocations follow a rational logic of defending reputation (Schelling 1960), restoring status (Barnhart 2017, 2020), or are they more psychological and emotional (Hall 2017)? To what extent is provocation characterized by desire for vengeance (Stein 2015) as opposed to less punitive means of defending and recovering honor? How much cultural variation is there in the meaning of provocation, or is there a universal grammar of provocations that simply has different cultural vocabularies? Once the phenomenon of provocation is better understood, it can be integrated into our theories of crisis dynamics.

Further research is needed to evaluate how typical or singular are our findings. Some domestic audiences may

be more or less sensitive to foreign provocations, and the specifics of what is understood as a provocation may vary. Asymmetries in power and specific histories of suffering under imperial or colonial exploitation likely affect how provocative particular actions appear. In addition, the ability to manage how foreign events are portrayed or downplayed is likely to vary across leaders, regimes, electoral institutions, and media environments (Slantchev 2006; Potter and Baum 2014). Further research is needed to address the range and efficacy of elite narratives. Given that many officials and media outlets form “hawkish” or “dovish” reputations even in the absence of party competition, the persuasiveness of elite framing tactics may vary across domestic constituencies.

Our results also suggest that invoking past provocations may have limited utility for rallying popular support. Commemorating past transgressions or humiliations may backfire on the home government by increasing public disapproval when domestic audiences are aware of the government's feebleness in confronting a foreign adversary. An open question is how specific this is to the territorial and maritime disputes examined here, where the Chinese government had relatively little ability to compel US military patrols to desist without risking potential catastrophic escalation, making inaction both practical and visible to domestic audiences. On other issues, such as human rights and international sanctions linked to territorial disputes, governments from Beijing to Moscow appear to have had greater success at turning international pressure into a nationalist rallying cry, making respondents less receptive to international criticism and in some cases more supportive of the government (Grossman, Manekin, and Margalit 2018; Frye 2019; Gruffydd-Jones 2019; Gueorguiev, McDowell, and Steinberg 2020). Examining the conditions under which foreign pressure is likely to backfire by provoking hostility from the target audience, and when the target government benefits from that public indignation, is an important task for future research.

### Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available in the *ISAISSQ* data archive. Our preregistration and preanalysis plan can be found at [allandafoe.com/china](http://allandafoe.com/china).

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