Authoritarian Audiences, Rhetoric, and Propaganda 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.

Contents

1 Introduction

Many authoritarian governments 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 officials are fond of invoking the "feelings of more than 1.3 billion Chinese people" in protesting foreign actions and demands.[2] After a U.S. Freedom of Navigation patrol in the South China Sea, Chinese media warned: "If the US government hopes to persuade the Chinese government to make concessions, it will first have to persuade the Chinese people."[3] Yet we have relatively little systematic evidence of how citizens in autocracies evaluate their government's performance in international disputes.[4] Moreover, authoritarian governments devote significant resources to managing domestic opinion through propaganda and rhetoric. When these efforts succeed, governments can conduct foreign policy with greater latitude, unhindered by public backlash. They may even benefit by stoking popular nationalism, rallying the public around the government.

To illuminate the domestic costs and opportunities that authoritarian governments face in international disputes, this article investigates three questions. First, do leaders who fail to carry out explicit threats suffer greater public disapproval, akin to "audience costs" in democratic settings (Fearon, 1994a; Tomz, 2007)? Second, do mass audiences approve of tough but vague statements ("bluster") that are unaccompanied by military action (Oakes, 2006)? Third, can authoritarian rhetoric and propaganda mitigate disapproval of military inaction in international crises?

We focus on China for two reasons. Among possible great power wars, tensions between China, its neighbors, and the United States in the Asia-Pacific loom large. China also represents a "most likely" case for an authoritarian leadership 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."[5]

We fielded two complementary online survey experiments in China, one involving an abstract hypothetical territorial dispute, and another involving real-world Chinese threats against U.S. military operations in East Asia. In both designs, we assess how respondents

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[1]Lynch (2003), p. 70.

[2]"China urges Japan to properly handle sensitive issues in bilateral ties," Xinhua, November 2, 2015.

[3]Shan Renping, "Pinglun: you ren xian Zhongfang ruanruo, kangyi baici bu ru zou Lasen Hao yi ci," *Huanqiu Shibao*, October 29, 2015.

[4]A recent exception is Quek and Johnston (2018).

[5]"Study History, be Close to the People," *China Daily*, July 25, 2013.

reacted to threats that were ultimately unfulfilled, as well as 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.

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 was not to compare across treatments, but to demonstrate the existence of effects and point the way for future studies to parse more finely the underlying mechanisms.

We find that authoritarian rhetoric and propaganda can be effective in bolstering popular support and attenuating disapproval of inaction. In both scenarios, we find suggestive evidence that biding time narratives had a positive effect on public approval, as did a nationalist frame of remembered injustice at the hands of foreign powers. We also find that empty threats can have positive or negative effects on public approval—positive with the vague, real-world threat, but negative with the explicit, hypothetical threat.

Overall, these results suggest that the public opinion costs of inaction exist but are relatively muted and malleable in China, undermining claims that the government's hands are tied by the threat of public disapproval. Such claims are not entirely bluffs, as the possibility of disapproval is real, but such statements elide the government's ability to influence popular perceptions. Tough but vague threats can also generate popular support, even if the government does not take action. A fuller appreciation of authoritarian incentives in international disputes should consider the positive effect of bluster and rhetorical justifications for inaction alongside audience costs and belligerence costs (Kertzer and Brutger, 2016).

2   Mass Audiences and Authoritarian Regimes

Public support—or the appearance of it—matters to many autocracies. As Ithiel de Sola Pool writes, modern dictatorships are "highly conscious of public opinion and make major efforts to affect it."[6] Mao Zedong told his comrades: "When you make revolution, you must first manage public opinion."[7] Because autocracies often rely on nationalist mythmaking,[8] success or failure in defending the national honor in international crises could burnish the

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[6]De Sola Pool (1973a, 463).

[7]Quoted in Michel Oksenberg, "The Political Leader," in Wilson (1977), p. 179.

[8]Snyder (1991).

leadership's patriotic credentials or spark opposition. Shared outrage at the regime's foreign policy failures could galvanize street protests or elite fissures, creating intraparty upheaval or inviting military officers to step in to restore order. Fearing a domestic backlash, authoritarian leaders may feel compelled to take a tough international stance. 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. 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.[9]

A history of nationalist uprisings make Chinese citizens and leaders especially aware of the linkage between international disputes and domestic unrest. The weakness of the PRC's predecessor in defending Chinese sovereignty at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 galvanized protests and a general strike, forcing the government to sack three officials and reject the Treaty of Versailles, which awarded territories in China to Japan. These precedents have made Chinese officials particularly sensitive to the appearance of hewing to public opinion. As the *People's Daily* chief editor wrote: "History and reality have shown us that public opinion and regime safety are inseparable."[10] One Chinese scholar even claimed: "the Chinese government probably knows the public's opinion better and reacts to it more directly than even the U.S. government."[11]

Multiple government agencies monitor public sentiment on foreign affairs, providing the leadership daily briefs of online commentary. With almost 650 million "netizens" in China, the government employs more than 2 million 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.[12] The chief editor of the *People's Daily* called the internet the "biggest variable" *(zui da bianliang)* in managing public opinion.[13]

The Chinese government uses propaganda, surveillance, and censorship to monitor and manage popular sentiment.[14] Yet the efficacy of these tools in shaping public opinion remains unclear, particularly in international crises. Citizens may discount government statements as biased propaganda[15]. As Pool notes, "the public learns to read between the lines. It

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[9]Debs and Goemans (2010), Goemans (2000).

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

[11]As quoted in Reilly (2013), p. 35.

[12]"Wangluo yuqing fenxishi 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.

[13]"Bawo hao zheng zhi jia ban bao de shidai yaoqiu," *Renmin Ribao*, March 21, 2016.

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

[15]Slantchev (2006).

becomes accustomed to interpreting clues to the truth that are buried in the unreliable information available to them."[16] But propaganda may also 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.

2.1 Managing Public Reactions

Our study looks at how governments use rhetoric and propaganda in international crises to shape public reactions, particularly when the government does not take tough military action. Much government rhetoric and propaganda in international crises appears to serve functions not captured by audience cost theory, which holds that leaders pay domestic costs for failing to fulfill public threats. These threats may be explicit (such as an ultimatum) or implicit (such as troop mobilization). Domestic publics are said to disapprove because empty threats betray the nation's honor, harm the nation's credibility, or reveal the leader's incompetence.[17] Despite experimental evidence of audience costs,[18] scholars have questioned their role in historical crises.[19] Several scholars have argued that explicit statements of commitment are relatively rare. Snyder and Borghard note: "leaders see unambiguously committing threats...as imprudent. They almost always seek to retain significant flexibility, rather than lock in" (Snyder and Borghard, 2011, 437). Downes & Sechser (2012, 461) similarly acknowledge that threats of force are more often implied than explicit. Even Schelling (1966, 67) wrote that "most commitments are ultimately ambiguous in detail. Sometimes they are purposely so."

In addition to evaluating whether unfulfilled threats generate public opinion costs, we investigate four other rhetorical and propaganda strategies that the Chinese government has

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[16]De Sola Pool (1973b), p. 463.

[17]Fearon (1994a); Smith (1998); Schultz (2012); Sartori (2002); Levy et al. (2015); Guisinger and Smith (2002); Debs and Weiss (2016).

[18]Tomz (2007, 823); Trager and Vavreck (2011); Levendusky and Horowitz (2012); Chaudoin (2014); Davies and Johns (2013); Kertzer and Brutger (2016); for non-experimental studies of audience costs in authoritarian regimes, Weeks (2008) examines the role of elites, while Weiss (2013) analyzes the role of street protests.

[19]Snyder and Borghard (2011); Trachtenberg (2012); Slantchev (2012).

used to bolster popular support while keeping international tensions short of conflict.

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 to achieve future victory or vengeance. By recasting inaction as consistent with honorable behavior, such biding time narratives may bolster popular support for inaction. This strategy frames escalation as foolhardy and inaction as shrewd rather than humiliating. 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."[20] Biding time messages invoke the benefits of restraint by making implicit or vague references to the future, without specific commitment to take action. However, the impact of biding time justifications on public opinion has not been systematically examined.

Chinese officials have frequently emphasized strategic forbearance, with the "lie low and bide time" principle (*tao guang yang hui*) characterizing China's grand strategy for nearly three decades.[21] While this maxim implies the future assertion of Chinese power, it does not necessarily mean that China plans to challenge US primacy.[22] If such narratives are effective at bolstering public support for international restraint, then recent Chinese "assertiveness"[23] in its territorial and maritime disputes is less likely to reflect domestic pressure than deliberate strategy.

In designing the Biding Time frame, we used statements by Political Commissar of the PLA General Logistics Department General Liu Yuan, whose views President Xi Jinping has affirmed on several occasions.[24] In excerpts published by the popular newspaper *Global Times*, Liu emphasized that China should not be baited into war in the East China Sea, calling it a "trap" set by other powers to derail China's rise.[25]

> $H_\mathbf{B}$ (Biding Time): *Statements that justify inaction by invoking future success will increase public approval.*

Second, we evaluate nationalist propaganda about historical humiliations by external adversaries. Governments seeking to bolster their domestic legitimacy often invoke nationalist references to a shared history of national struggle against foreign mistreatment and trauma.[26] This frame, invoked in China as the "Century of National Humiliation,"[27] puts

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[20]As quoted in Legro (2007, 519).

[21]Chen and Wang (2011).

[22]Swaine (2010, 7).

[23]Johnston (2013).

[24]China Leadership Monitor, No. 36, January 6, 2012.

[25]http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion_world/2013-02/3614115.html.

[26]Snyder (1991); Mansfield and Snyder (2007); Bunce and Wolchik (2010).

[27]Gries (2004); He (2009); Zhao (2004); Wang (2014).

current military inferiority in the context of the nation's longer-term trajectory of rising to surpass foreign enemies and seeks to rally or mobilize the public toward that end.

Such nationalist narratives could have diverse effects. Reminding respondents of 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 "rally-round-the-flag" after the use of force or other dramatic events.[28] Because authoritarian leaders routinely employ nationalist appeals without always using force, it is important to investigate the effect of nationalist propaganda on public approval, particularly when the government does not take action.

Invoking past losses may also alter how respondents evaluate the status quo, reminding them of how far the nation has come in defending its interests. Like biding time, messages about nationalist history tie the current dispute to a long-term struggle, giving a more honorable interpretation to temporary inaction.

On the other hand, reminders 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.

> $H_{\mathbf{N}}$ (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.[29] Chinese officials have sometimes invoked the costs of war to dampen the public's appetite for confrontation. As tensions between Japan and China escalated, General Liu Yuan warned that war would be "very cruel and costly."[30] 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.

> $H_{\mathbf{C}}$ (Cost of War): *Statements that justify inaction by invoking the costs of war will increase public approval.*

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[28]See, e.g., Mueller (1973); Lai and Reiter (2005).

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

[30]"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`.

Another common but underexamined species of rhetoric 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." From the perspective of audience cost theory, bluster is puzzling since it implies a threat that is unaccompanied by military action. In China, for instance, the government publicly announced an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) proscribing US behavior but then failed to take tough measures to enforce that proscription.

Other examples of bluster include statements by President Trump 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."[31] 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.,"[32] 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. Fearon also raised the possibility of bluster 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, 1994a, 580).

What is the logic of bluster? Why would domestic audiences approve of empty threats? We offer three possible explanations for future research to explore and disentangle. First, some audiences may interpret tough talk as strength and 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. A leader who makes loud, confident demands may appear to be advancing the national interest, absent persuasive claims to the contrary. In low-information environments, individuals may reflexively trust their leader and discount critics who point to the lack of follow-through as biased.

Second, citizens may recognize that using military force is not feasible but judge 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. Verbal protests could also communicate to potential allies one's displeasure with the transgression and transgressor, as well as to mitigate loss in the

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[31] "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.

[32] "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.

"contest of expectations" with the adversary,[33] communicating that some arrangement will be challenged when one has the power to do so.

Third, bluster 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. 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.[34]

$H_{\mathbf{B}}$ (Bluster): *Tough but vague threats to use force may increase public approval, even when the threats are unfulfilled or unaccompanied by military action.*

While the benefits of bluster often run counter to audience costs, one logic is more likely to dominate under some conditions. If threats are unfulfilled, public opinion costs are more likely to arise when the threat is specific than when the threat is vague.

$H_{\mathbf{A}}$ (Audience Costs): *Explicit threats to use force should increase domestic disapproval when unfulfilled or unaccompanied by military action.*

To evaluate whether bluster can generate public approval while specific threats generate audience costs, we designed two treatments that varied the specificity of the threatened consequences. We also look at the effect of mobilization, an act that is often regarded as making an implicit threat and expression of resolve (Tomz, 2007); (Slantchev, 2005); (Fearon, 1994b). [35]

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[33]Dafoe et al. (2014).

[34]Schultz 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).

[35]While in principle a mobilization could be understood as a more explicit threat than a verbal threat, in practice we expect most mobilizations without verbal threats are more implicit.

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) after completing our anonymous, US-based Qualtrics survey. Respondents came from provinces across China and different income, educational, and urban/rural backgrounds. The gender and age distribution were particularly comparable to the general population of internet users in China (see Supplementary File C.2). Educational attainment in our sample somewhat exceeded the general netizen population, as in other recent online surveys.[36]

We manipulated key aspects of what respondents read about the dispute before asking their opinion of the government's foreign policy performance.[37] The first experiment employed a prevalent design, which we refer to as the *hypothetical design*. Hypothetical scenarios provide greater freedom to design vignettes to match the theoretical framework. By avoiding contextual idiosyncrasies, abstract hypothetical scenarios may yield more generalizable inferences. However, respondents may react differently to hypothetical than actual crises. 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 think of real world examples in answering questions about abstract scenarios, introducing a form of bias akin to confounding biases in observational studies (Dafoe et al., 2018). For example, Chinese respondents who read that an unnamed "neighboring country" is a powerful democracy and a US ally are more likely to think of Japan, plausibly influencing their responses in unintended ways. Indeed, 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 of selective-history designs are Tingley (2017), which reminds some American respondents about China's ADIZ, and Huang (2018), which looks at the effect of real-world Chinese

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[36]Huang (2015a).

[37]We assigned manipulations according to a set of conditional probability rules detailed in Supplementary Files D and E.

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 (forthcoming).

Evaluating the selective presentation of information about previous crises is especially relevant 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.[38] In such designs, estimated effects may be attenuated relative to their real world counterparts because surveys are a less realistic, potent, and saturated source of information than what governments can broadcast through sustained television and radio coverage. If our manipulations affect opinion, then so should stronger manipulations in the real world.

Selective-history designs can also help estimate the impact of events in a crisis. 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 survey 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 than when they first occurred, if effects increase with exposure.[39]

Ultimately, both hypothetical and selective-history designs have strengths and limitations. By combining the two, researchers can evaluate the observable implications of theories from multiple angles.

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[38]See, for example, China Central Television, April 3, 2013, http://bit.ly/1h3k5Sa

[39]A 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.

3.1 Hypothetical Design

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 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) implausible.

Because the crisis we consider is more likely to impact core Chinese interests (including sovereignty over claimed land and water) than a 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.

Respondents read the following vignette. 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.[40] 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. [*The disputed territory was part of the land China lost during the Century of National Humiliation* OR *no mention.*]

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

Respondents then read none, some, or all of the following (assigned in an independent factorial manner, except only one of the two rhetorical cues, *Biding Time* or *Cost of War*, was given):[41]

- *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.

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

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[41]Two other independently assigned conditions, noted in the appendix, are not relevant here and are analyzed in other work.

the South China Sea, implying that such statements matter.[42] Still, the imprecise nature of the threatened consequences make it unlikely that we would observe audience costs arising due to inconsistency. Because the threat of "defensive emergency measures" is a relatively mild version of bluster, effects are likely to be underestimates of what tougher (but still vague) threats could generate, such as "fire and fury."

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.[43]

- *Bluster (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 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."

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[42]US 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.

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

- *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.[44] 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?

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 who did not receive the particular treatment. Per our preanalysis plan, the primary specification is a linear regression model that controls only for conditions that we experimentally manipulated.[45]

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[44]For full details on the surveys, see Appendices D and E.

[45]These 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.

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.

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.[46]
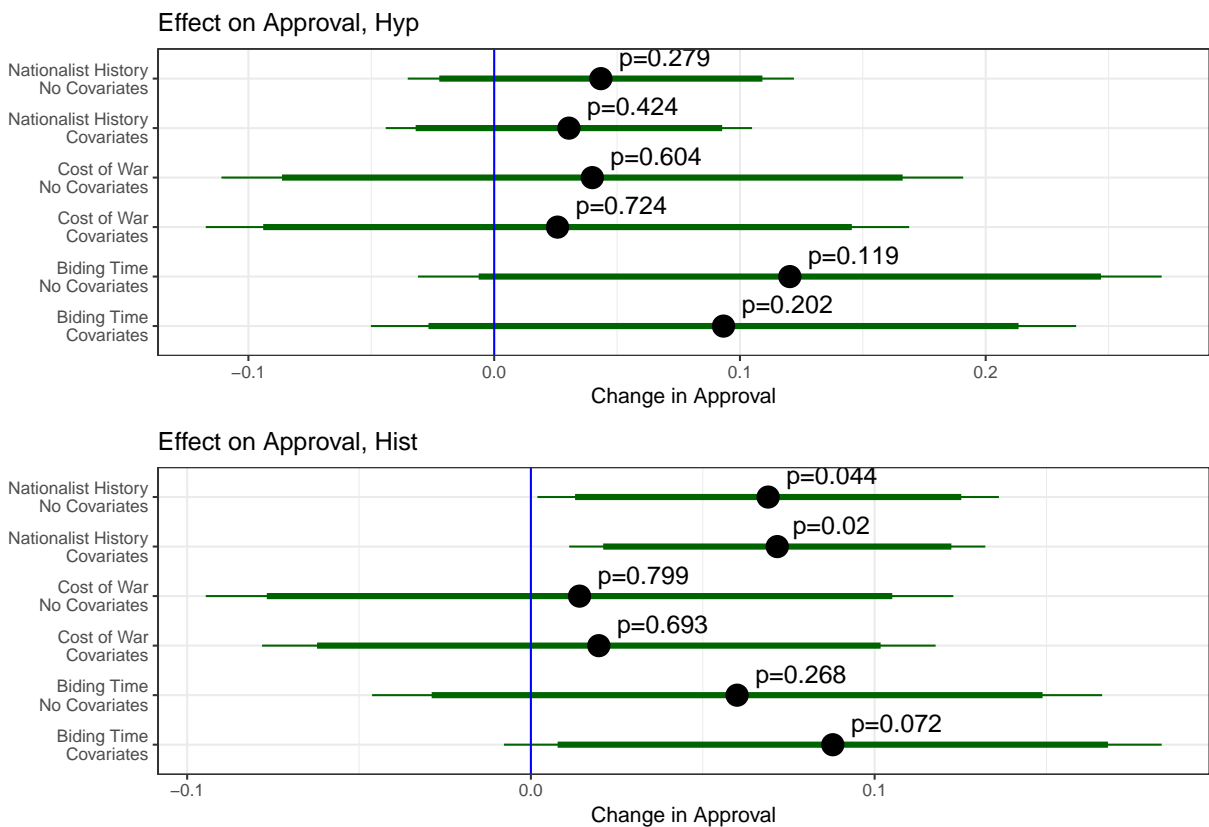

Figure 1: Effects of Government Rhetoric and Propaganda. Estimated effect of rhetorical frames on public approval of the government's actions relative to the control group. The *Biding Time*, *Nationalist History*, and *Cost of War* treatments all increased approval, but the effects were only statistically 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.

Many respondents who received the Biding Time treatment explained in their own words

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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 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 government threats that were ultimately unfulfilled. Consistent with audience costs, the Explicit Threat treatment reduced approval of the government's performance. However, reminding respondents of China's *ADIZ* threat increased approval, consistent with the view that audiences may reward leaders for tough but vague statements absent 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 (see 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.
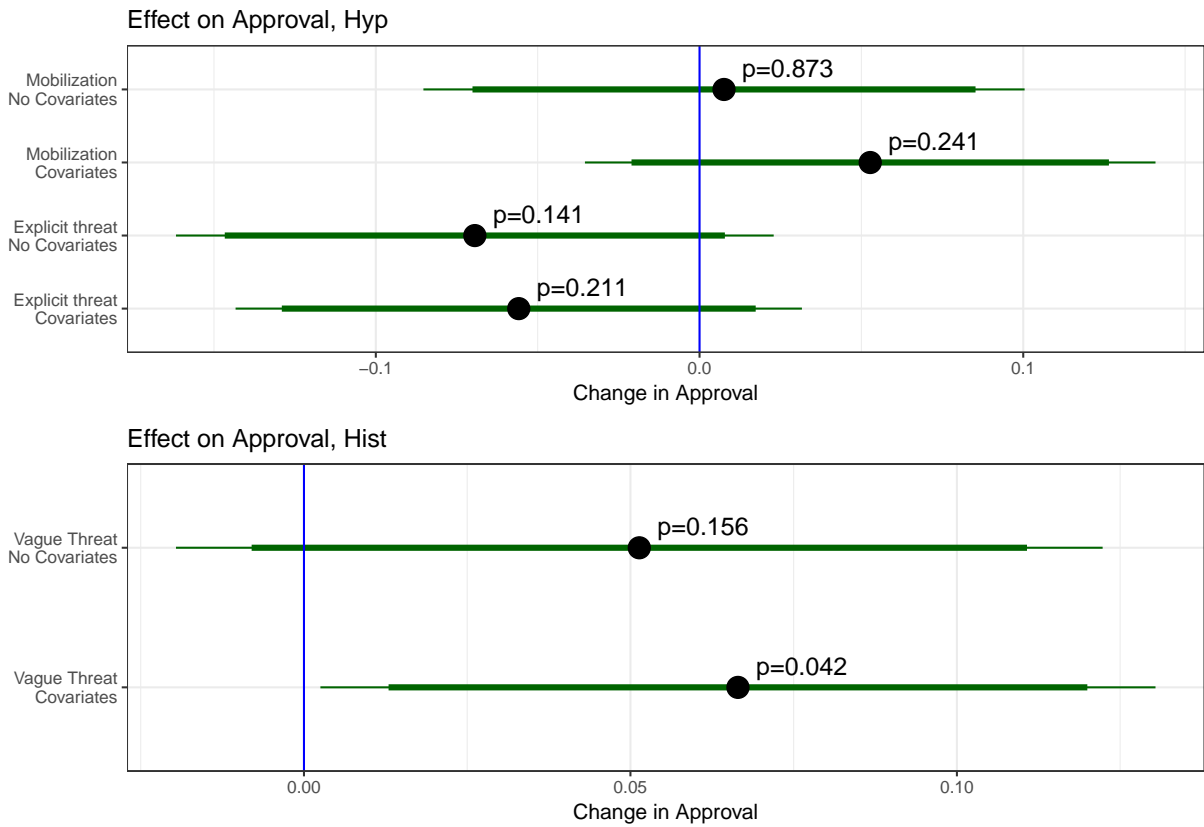
Figure 2: Audience Costs and Bluster. Estimated effect of the use of threats by the government on public approval of the government's actions relative to the control group. Explicit Threats decreased public approval, while Vague Threats increased public approval, though not always at conventional standards 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.

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 scenario's outcome. The selective history design ended: "to this day, the United States continues to fly military planes through China's surrounding waters and that "China has not used force to stop this", whereas the hypothetical design concluded: "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 leader's performance in many real-world crises may anticipate the possibility of future action, particularly for protracted disputes with periodic flare-ups. Often a leader's decision to "stay out" of a conflict is later reversed, as Levy et al. (2015, 990) and Quek (2017) note.

By asking respondents to explain their answers, we obtained qualitative data on the underlying mechanisms driving our results. We found evidence consistent with several theories of why respondents would disapprove of the government's failure to fulfill explicit threats. Concerning honor, one respondent wrote: "Strong start, weak finish, lost national honor (*hu tou she wei, sang shi guo jia rong yu*)." Concerning inconsistency, another respondent wrote, "All words, no action (*guang shuo bu zuo*)." 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 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 jiejue, 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 weihu guojia zhuquan, you yao daju wei zhong, weihu heping fazhan de kongjian huanjing, suoyi guojia you li you li you jie de chuli wenti*)."

Recognizing that China would have difficulty successfully challenging the US at present, many who 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 (2016), 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 Chinese attitudes may help explain the benefits of bluster. At the start of the survey, we assessed respondents' general views. Two prescenario questions evaluated how hawkish or concerned respondents were about defending the national honor.[47] Far more respondents were hawkish or neutral than dovish, and most felt that it was important or very important to defend the national honor, even if it meant international conflict or instability (see Supplementary Files). This distribution of hawkish beliefs does not appear to be distinctive to our online sample. In a separate US-China survey, 10% of American respondents endorsed risking war to maintain their country's claims, compared with 40% of Chinese respondents. As noted in the Supplementary Files, our respondents' beliefs about the desirability of using military means to achieve China's foreign policy goals were roughly comparable to the face-to-face, GPS-assisted survey of urban residents conducted by the Research Center on Contemporary China.[48] 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.

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[47]The 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?"

[48]One pre-scenario question was identical to Question B3 in the 2012 China-US Security Perceptions Survey. See http://www.for-peace.org.cn/upload/20140410/1397141067591.pdf

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 not robustly significant. A potential explanation is self-censorship and inattentiveness, as detailed in Supplementary File A.5. Subsequent studies should evaluate the robustness of our conclusions and probe addtional implications, theoretical extensions, and underlying mechanisms.

First, scholars should invest more in understanding how authoritarian 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,[49] 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."[50] 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

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[49]Trager and Vavreck (2011); Levendusky and Horowitz (2012)

[50]Reuters, September 21, 2017, http://reut.rs/2xZx9Fu.

go."[51] 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 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*

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[51]Vipin 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/.

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 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 perceived provocation, can rhetorical emphasis on past humiliation or future success bolster support for inaction? We reserve for future research these important questions.

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