Russian Invasion of Ukraine and Chinese Public Support for War*

Deniz Aksoy† Ted Enamorado‡ Tony Zirui Yang§

January 22, 2024

Abstract

This study examines how the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent Western responses influence public opinion toward the use of force in China. Using two original, pre-registered online survey experiments, first in June 2022 and then in June 2023, we show that the Russian invasion is associated with a modest but statistically significant increase in Chinese support for using military force in international affairs in general and against Taiwan in particular. However, information about Western military measures aiding Ukraine curbs the modest impact of the invasion. Such information is especially effective in diminishing support for an outright military invasion of Taiwan. Causal mediation analyses reveal that the Russian invasion influences public opinion by inducing optimistic expectations of military success and pessimistic expectations of peaceful conflict resolution. These findings underline the possibility that foreign military aggression and subsequent international countermeasures can be determinants of domestic public opinion toward using military force.

Keywords: Public Opinion, War, Russian Invasion of Ukraine, China, Taiwan

Word Count: 7,990

*The three authors have contributed equally to the research. Tony Yang (tzyang2016@gmail.com) is the corresponding author. We thank the participants at the International Relations seminar at Washington University in St. Louis and the 57th North American Meeting of the Peace Science Society for their helpful comments. We are also grateful for the financial support from the Weidenbaum Center at Washington University in St. Louis.

†Associate Professor of Political Science, Washington University in St. Louis.

‡Assistant Professor of Political Science, Washington University in St. Louis.

§Assistant Professor of Political Science, Emory University

1 Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has increased concerns over military aggression worldwide. Expressing such concerns, Marco Rubio, US senator from Florida, noted: "[Putin's invasion] does not just impact Ukraine, it becomes the model that China, Iran, [and] North Korea will follow" (Kine 2022). Japan's prime minister, Kishida Fumio, also expressed concerns about Russian aggression emboldening China in its military coercion over Taiwan (The Economist 2022). Similarly, prominent news agencies and policy journals have questioned how Russia's actions influence China's ambitions and speculated that Western reactions to the invasion could potentially deter further military aggression around the globe (Blumenthal 2022; Hua 2022; Kine 2022; Myers and Qin 2022).

These public debates highlight the possibility that foreign military aggression and subsequent international reactions could influence domestic political leaders and the public, shaping their opinions about using military force in international affairs. To empirically explore this possibility, our study focuses on the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Chinese public opinion toward using military force in general and against Taiwan in particular. Given the current public debate on whether Russian aggression would influence China, our examination of Chinese public opinion is timely and significant. Building on the burgeoning literature on public opinion toward the use of force (Bell and Quek 2018; Dill and Schubiger 2021; Fang and Li 2020; Grieco et al. 2011; Incerti et al. 2021; Li and Chen 2021; Quek and Johnston 2017; Tomz and Weeks 2013, 2020; Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo 2020; Weiss 2013, 2019; Weiss and Dafoe 2019), we ask: *how do the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent Western economic and military responses influence public support for the use of military force in China*?

We identify two sets of determinants of public opinion toward the use of force: (1) instrumental considerations that directly concern the costs and benefits of using military force, and (2) non-instrumental considerations that are more closely related to the normative assessments about using military force (Dill and Schubiger 2021; Fang and Li 2020; Grieco

et al. 2011; Kertzer et al. 2014; Tomz and Weeks 2013). We lay out several theoretical expectations about how each set of factors can shape Chinese public opinion following the Russian invasion and the subsequent Western military and economic reactions.

Through two original, pre-registered online survey experiments, the first in June 2022 with 4,008 respondents and the second in June 2023 with 3,193 respondents, we show that the Russian invasion leads to a modest but statistically significant increase in the Chinese public support for using military force in general and against Taiwan in particular. Causal mediation analyses reveal that both instrumental and non-instrumental factors contribute to the treatment effects we uncover. Specifically, the Russian invasion increases the perception that peaceful conflict resolution is infeasible and that employing military force can be morally acceptable. Moreover, the invasion amplifies optimism regarding military success, contributing to the support for using military force. However, the invasion does not substantially impact the perceived economic and military costs of using military force or heighten perceptions of foreign threats to China among the respondents.

Additionally, we investigate the effects of Western military and economic countermeasures against Russia. Our findings reveal that information about Western military countermeasures curbs the modest effects of Russian aggression, leading to reduced support for using force. Particularly noteworthy, Western military actions diminish support for an outright military invasion of Taiwan, while their impact on reducing support for more subtle military approaches, like military coercion of Taiwan, is negligible. In contrast, we find that Western economic measures penalizing Russia only marginally offset the effect of the invasion.

Our study makes significant contributions to the literature on public opinion toward foreign affairs in general (Dill and Schubiger 2021; Fang et al. 2022; Gartner 2008; Grieco et al. 2011; Kertzer et al. 2014; Tomz and Weeks 2013, 2020; Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo 2020) and in non-democracies like China (Fang and Li 2020; Incerti et al. 2021; Li and Chen 2021; Liu and Li forthcoming; Weeks 2012; Weiss 2014, 2019; Weiss and Dafoe 2019). While previous research on public opinion toward using military force has primarily focused on the

influence of domestic factors, potential adversaries, and conflict-specific factors, our study highlights the possibility that military aggression abroad can influence domestic support for using military force. We find evidence for this dynamic in the case of Russian aggression against Ukraine and Chinese public opinion. Our findings point to promising new avenues for future research to examine whether similar dynamics emerge in other contexts and the conditions under which they do. We elaborate on these extensions in the conclusion.

2 Public Support for the Use of Force

Despite the perception that non-democratic governments like China are unrestricted by public opinion when making policy decisions, a growing body of research in comparative politics and international relations shows that public support can be influential even in non-democracies (Chen and Xu 2017; Dickson 2016; Geddes and Zaller 1989; Incerti et al. 2021; Li and Chen 2021; Weeks 2012; Weiss 2014) and that non-democratic governments invest significant resources in propaganda and censorship to shape public opinion (Gehlbach and Sonin 2014; King, Pan and Roberts 2013; Rozenas and Stukal 2019).

In the realm of foreign policy, public opinion toward using military force can be important for several reasons. First, even leaders in non-democracies may encounter audience costs from both the political elites and the masses while managing foreign relations, especially in single-party states with civilian leaders like China (Li and Chen 2021; Weeks 2008, 2012; Weiss 2014; Weiss and Dafoe 2019). Research shows that single-party states with civilian leaders behave similarly to their democratic counterparts in handling international conflicts (Weeks 2012). For example, both Li and Chen (2021) and Weiss and Dafoe (2019) find that Chinese leaders suffer from public backlash for unpopular foreign policies. Moreover, decisions to use military force are closely linked to regime legitimacy, and disregarding public opinion on these matters may challenge the foundations of non-democratic regimes (Weeks 2008, 2012). In China, for example, international conflicts are closely tied to Chinese nationalism and the

legitimacy of the Communist Party (Dickson 2016; Mattingly and Chen 2022; Weiss 2014). Such conflicts frequently become the focal point for citizens to rally around and protest, affecting the regime's image and stability (King, Pan and Roberts 2013; Weiss 2014). When US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi disregarded Beijing's warnings and visited Taiwan in August 2022, the Chinese public expressed anger and frustration over the inadequate response from the People's Liberation Army, putting pressure on the party leadership (Bloomberg 2022).

Given the potential domestic constraints that Chinese leaders may encounter, one likely channel through which military aggression abroad (such as the Russian invasion) may impact bellicosity at home (such as China's potential aggression against Taiwan) is the former's impact on domestic public opinion. Specifically, the Russian invasion could shape Chinese public opinion toward their government's use of force by informing the public about instrumental factors such as the potential costs, benefits, and consequences of using military force and by shaping non-instrumental, normative judgments of using force.

2.1 Instrumental Considerations

Instrumental considerations primarily relate to the perceived costs and benefits of using military force. In democracies, instrumental factors significantly influence public support for deploying the military in foreign affairs (Dill and Schubiger 2021; Gartner 2008; Tomz and Weeks 2013). For instance, Gartner (2008) and Dill and Schubiger (2021) show that increasing the economic and military costs of war (e.g., American military casualties) significantly reduces public support for military involvement. Similarly, the perceived likelihood of military success raises the perceived benefits of using force and increases support for it. In non-democracies, however, previous studies suggest instrumental considerations play a lesser role in shaping public opinion. For instance, Weiss and Dafoe (2019) finds that military costs have null effects on Chinese individuals' approval of their government's foreign policy decisions. Similarly, Li and Chen (2021) shows that less than 20% of Chinese respondents disapprove of their government's foreign policies due to instrumental reasons, as opposed to

over 60% for non-instrumental reasons.

We expect the Russian invasion of Ukraine to send mixed signals to the Chinese public regarding the costs and benefits of using military force. On the one hand, Russia has faced severe economic and military costs and failed to achieve complete territorial control or regime change in Ukraine, potentially increasing the perception that using military force is costly and unlikely to succeed. On the other hand, the Russian economy has shown resilience, bolstered by rising oil and gas prices and a relatively stable currency following the initial impact of Western measures. Additionally, the Russian Army has occupied most of the Donbas region and several major cities in Eastern Ukraine (at least by June 2023). More importantly, Chinese media tends to emphasize Russia's military and economic strength rather than its vulnerabilities (Lu et al. 2022). Accordingly, we expect information on the Russian invasion to lead to a small yet positive increase in Chinese public support for using military force. We expect the effect to be small because of the mixed information about the costs of conflict in China and the existing evidence suggesting that citizens in non-democracies may be less responsive to the costs of using military force. Additionally, we expect specific information about the Western economic and military measures against Russia to influence instrumental considerations, decreasing public support for using force by decreasing the perceived likelihood of success and increasing the perception that using force is costly.

Another instrumental factor that the public can learn from international conflicts is the level of threats from adversaries. An increased sense of threat can raise the perceived benefits of using force. According to Tomz and Weeks (2013), the perception of foreign threats is the strongest mediator between the adversary's regime type and the American public's support for wars. Similarly, research on China suggests that foreign threats, particularly from the United States, tend to boost hawkishness and decrease the willingness to back down (Quek and Johnston 2017; Weiss and Dafoe 2019). We expect the Russian invasion to increase the perception of foreign threats among the Chinese public. The Chinese government's

propaganda repeatedly emphasizes NATO's eastward expansion as the root cause of the Russian invasion and highlights Russia's "legitimate security concerns" (Al Jazeera 2022). Thus, we anticipate the Russian invasion to increase the perception of Western threat and support for using military force among the Chinese respondents. Additionally, information about Western countermeasures against Russia can further augment the public perception of threats from the West and increase support for using force.

2.2 Non-Instrumental Considerations

Non-instrumental considerations are less directly linked to the cost and benefit calculations but are more closely associated with normative assessments about the use of military force. Existing research underlines several non-instrumental considerations that can shape public support for military actions: morality, legality, and the feasibility of alternative peaceful resolutions (Dill and Schubiger 2021; Fang and Li 2020; Fang et al. 2022; Kertzer et al. 2014; Tomz and Weeks 2013).

Morality is a critical predictor of attitudes toward using military force in foreign affairs (Kertzer et al. 2014). Individuals may perceive the use of force as moral and justifiable based on several factors, including adversaries' regime type (Tomz and Weeks 2013) and the targeting of civilians versus non-civilians (Dill and Schubiger 2021). We expect morality to play a significant role in shaping Chinese public opinion. Previous research on China's grand strategy highlights the importance of "righteousness" in using force in Chinese political thought and culture (Johnston 1998). A large segment of the Chinese public believes that China is a peace-loving country that never engages in wars unless it is righteous to do so (Johnston 1998; Quek and Johnston 2017; Weiss 2019). One important "righteous" course is the protection of territorial integrity. In fact, both China and Russia frequently emphasize territorial integrity and historical ownership of certain territories to justify hawkish policies. Putin's rhetoric, claiming Ukraine is part of Russia and denying a separate Ukrainian identity, can potentially reinforce the belief in the righteousness of using military force among the

Chinese. According to the US State Department briefings and multiple journalistic sources, such Russian rhetoric is dominant in the Chinese media.[1] As such, the Russian invasion can bolster the perception that using military force is righteous and justifiable, and subsequently increase support for using force.

A distinct yet closely related non-instrumental consideration is the perceived feasibility of peaceful resolutions. When morality or "righteousness" plays a significant role in shaping public opinion toward using force, the adversary is perceived as immoral and unrighteous (Johnston 1998). This perception can make compromises with the adversary unacceptable and peaceful resolutions unlikely. Such pessimistic views of peaceful conflict resolution can bolster support for military force. For example, in conflicts involving historical territorial disputes, the Chinese public is less willing to pursue peaceful conflict resolution and compromise because they deem historically owned territories as indivisible (Fang and Li 2020) and territorial wars as righteous. We expect the Russian aggression to lead to pessimistic perceptions about peaceful conflict resolution among the Chinese public. First, if the public perceives Russian aggression as a righteous act for territorial integrity, they are unlikely to envision a peaceful resolution. Second, long-lasting tension between Russia and the West can inform Chinese citizens about the low feasibility of peaceful resolutions. During the past decades, the West and Russia have made significant efforts for peace, most notably through NATO's Partnership for Peace program and the Minsk Agreements in 2014 and 2015, yet these efforts did not effectively prevent conflict in Ukraine.

A final non-instrumental consideration is the legality of using force (Dill and Schubiger 2021). Many scholars and policymakers underline that Russia violates the Charter of the United Nations (United Nations 2022). If the Russian invasion prompts respondents to think about potential violations of international laws, it can diminish support for using military force. While this reasoning is more likely in democracies (Dill and Schubiger 2021), we

[1]See: https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/10/china/china-russia-disinformation-campaign-ukraine-intl-dst-hnk/index.html and https://www.state.gov/briefings-foreign-press-centers/how-the-prc-amplifies-russian-disinformation

nonetheless empirically examine the possibility that legality plays a role in China.

In summary, we expect the Russian invasion to influence Chinese public support for using force through two sets of mechanisms. First, the invasion can affect instrumental calculations, bolstering public confidence in potential military success and increasing threat perceptions from the West, thus leading to heightened Chinese hawkishness. However, additional information about Western economic and military measures against Russia should increase the perceived cost of using force and decrease support for it. Second, the invasion may also spur Chinese hawkishness through its impact on non-instrumental considerations, by generating the perception that the use of military force is morally justifiable and peaceful conflict resolution is unfeasible.[2]

3 Experimental Design

We conducted two online survey experiments in China to examine the impact of the Russian invasion on public opinion toward using military force, the first in June 2022, shortly after the conflict began, and the second in June 2023, a year and a half after the conflict's onset. The second experiment allowed us to assess whether initial findings rely on the timing of the first experiment.[3]

We recruited 4,008 and 3,193 participants in the two surveys, respectively. The participants were recruited from a Chinese online survey platform and then directed to Qualtrics, an American-based website, where they completed the survey anonymously.[4] We employed a quota sampling strategy to recruit respondents (older than 18) from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. The demographic characteristics of our samples are presented in Appendix Table A1. Both males and females, respondents from various age groups, and all major geographical regions were adequately represented in the samples. Although respondents in our

[2]We present all our pre-registered hypotheses in Appendix B.1.

[3]Both studies received approval from the Institutional Review Board at the researchers' home institution and were pre-registered at Open Science Framework.

[4]Prior studies have established that employing online platforms is a reliable and less expensive method for enlisting participants in survey experiments (Chang and Krosnick 2010; Mullinix et al. 2015).

samples had higher education levels than the general population, highly educated individuals tend to be more politically active, making them more likely to influence foreign policies. Thus, educated individuals are a particularly relevant group for our study. We also show that our results remain substantially unchanged even after adjusting for weights to match our target population – specifically, the population of internet users in China (See Appendix Tables B1 and B2).

Both surveys began by gathering information on respondents' demographic characteristics and political predispositions. Next, we presented respondents with an excerpt from an actual news report from Xinhua News Agency, a Chinese state-affiliated media organization.[5] We randomly assigned participants into one of three treatment groups, each receiving a distinct excerpt about the Russian invasion of Ukraine.[6] Our baseline (control) group received an excerpt about a Chinese festival reported at the same time as the other excerpts. The design emulates the "selective-history design" previously used in surveys on Chinese public opinion regarding military force (Weiss and Dafoe 2019).

The first treatment groups in the two surveys were presented with a vignette about the Russian invasion. In Experiment 1, the first treatment group read the following vignette:

> *"Russian President Putin declared the commencement of a specialized military operation in Ukraine. Presently, armed conflicts between the Russian and Ukrainian armies are ongoing within Ukraine. The two nations' governments have not yet arrived at an agreement on how to resolve the military conflict or reach a consensus regarding Ukraine's political status."*

In Experiment 2, the first treatment group read the following vignette:

> *"A series of recent developments in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine have garnered significant attention. In addition to the ongoing stalemate in the war,*

[5]Excerpts for Experiment 1 were from February 2022, around the time of the initial invasion. Excerpts for Experiment 2 were from mid-May 2023, just before the survey.

[6]In Experiment 1, we included a fourth treatment condition where respondents were presented with information about the absence of Western military involvement. Balance checks can be found in Appendix A.

both Russia and Ukraine regularly experienced targeted attacks by the opposing side. In Ukraine, in the early hours of the 16th local time, reporters from Xinhua News Agency heard dense explosions in the capital Kyiv. Ukrainian officials said that Russia carried out an exceptionally intensive air strike on Kyiv that day, and the Ukrainian air defense system was intercepting the target."

We maintained the original wording in the news reports to replicate the information environment in China. The other two treatment groups in each experiment received the same information regarding the Russian invasion as the first group, along with supplementary details on Western countermeasures. Specifically, the second treatment group in both experiments received additional information about the Western economic measures, while the third treatment group received information about the Western military measures in response to the invasion. We present the vignettes in Appendix D.

Following the vignettes, we measured respondents' support for their government's use of force in general and against Taiwan in particular. First, we asked whether respondents think China should rely more on military strength to achieve its foreign policy objectives, a question directly from previous surveys conducted in China (Quek and Johnston 2017; Weiss 2019; Weiss and Dafoe 2019). Second, we asked whether respondents think China should rely more on military force to "reunify" Taiwan, which allows us to empirically assess how the Russian invasion affects Chinese calculus against Taiwan (Blumenthal 2022; Hua 2022; Kine 2022; Myers and Qin 2022).[7]

It is worth noting that the phrase "using military force to reunify Taiwan" can be interpreted in various ways, including both waging a unification war against Taiwan and applying military pressure to coerce Taiwan into accepting reunification.[8] Therefore, in Experiment

[7]In Experiment 1, the wording of this question was intentionally strong to address potential ceiling effects. It stated: "If peaceful reunification cannot be achieved within three years, then Taiwan should be reunified by force." However, in Experiment 2 we revised the wording to: "China should rely more on its military strength to reunify Taiwan." This clearer statement avoids issues of combining treatment conditions and hypothetical scenarios in measuring the outcome.

[8]We thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

2, we ask more detailed questions about Taiwan. We directly borrow from Liu and Li (forthcoming) and ask for respondents' approval of (1) outright invasion of Taiwan, (2) military coercion of Taiwan,[9] (3) economic sanction and coercion of Taiwan, (4) maintaining the status quo, and (5) keeping the separate political systems, with unification not necessarily being the end game.

We examine both instrumental and non-instrumental mechanisms through which the treatments can influence Chinese public opinion. For instrumental calculations, we assess the role of perceived threats to China, perceived economic and military costs, and perceived likelihood of military success. Additionally, we examine the role of non-instrumental considerations, including the perceived morality, legality, and feasibility of peaceful resolutions. The wording of all questions is presented in Appendix E.

4 Results

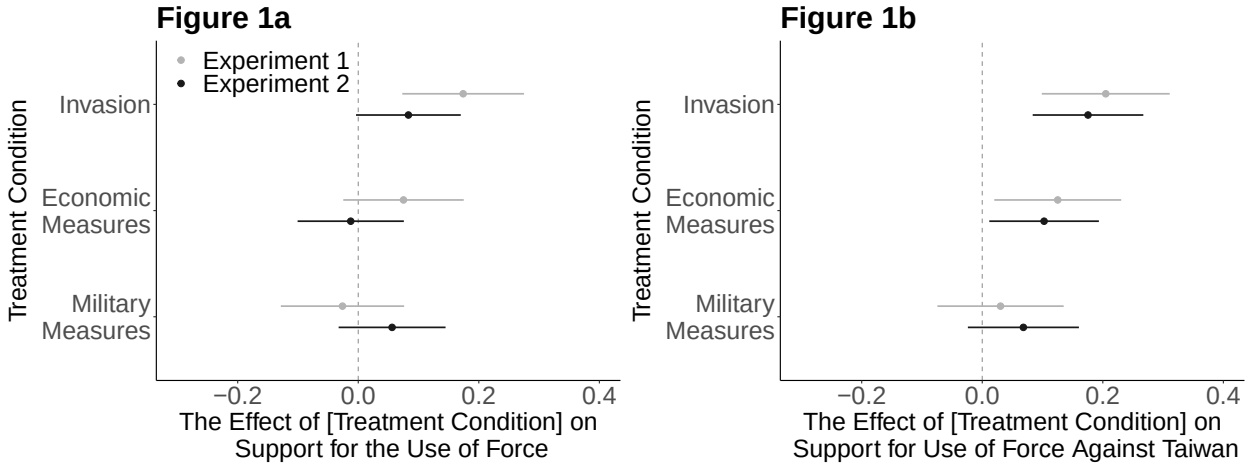
4.1 Main Findings

Figure 1 presents the main findings on public support for using military force in general (Figure 1a) and against Taiwan in particular (Figure 1b). Each treatment group is compared to the control group exposed to the festival vignette. The plots display the mean differences for each outcome variable, along with their corresponding 95% confidence intervals. The gray coefficients and confidence intervals represent Experiment 1, while the black ones represent Experiment 2.

Figure 1a shows that the invasion treatment leads to a modest increase in the support for using military force in general. In Experiment 1, the invasion vignette led to a 0.17 unit increase on a five-point scale compared to the control group, with an adjusted p-value (adj-p) correcting for multiple hypothesis testing (Benjamini and Hochberg 1995) equal to 0.0024.

[9]Military coercion includes limited military campaigns on the outskirts of Taiwan, coercing Taiwanese authorities to accept unification.

Figure 1: **The Effect of Each Treatment Condition on Support for the Use of Force in General (Figure 1a) and Against Taiwan (Figure 1b).**



Note: Outcome variables are measured on five-point scales; higher values represent more support. Coefficients are from OLS regressions (with 95% confidence intervals), representing the difference-in-means between each treatment group and the control group.

However, in Experiment 2, the coefficient for the invasion treatment is smaller (a 0.08 unit increase) than the one in Experiment 1 and not statistically significant after correcting for multiple hypothesis testing. Figure 1b shows that the invasion treatment more consistently induces a statistically significant increase in support for using military force against Taiwan. The treatment led to a 0.21 unit increase on a five-point scale (adj-$p = 0.0007$) in Experiment 1 and a 0.18 unit increase (adj-$p = 0.0024$) in Experiment 2.[10]

To provide an intuitive interpretation of the treatment effects, we created two binary outcome variables measuring support for using force in general and against Taiwan in particular: 1 indicating "somewhat support" or "strongly support" and 0 otherwise. In Experiment 1, slightly less than half of the control group supported using force in general and against Taiwan. Following exposure to the Russian invasion vignette, the percentage of respondents who support using force in general and against Taiwan increased by more than 8 percentage

[10]Appendix B.2 shows that robustness of our findings when accounting for pre-treatment covariates. Appendix B.3 shows the absence of marked heterogeneity in the impact of the invasion treatment among subsets defined by pre-treatment covariates.

points if compared to those in the control group (adj-$p = 0.002$ and 0.0017, respectively). In Experiment 2, around 57% of the control group supported using force in general and against Taiwan in particular. Compared to Experiment 1, the treatment effect for using force is smaller and cannot be statistically distinguished from zero (a 3.9 percentage points increase, adj-$p = 0.25$) but remains of a similar magnitude for the support for the use of force against Taiwan (an 8.1 percentage points increase, adj-$p = 0.015$).[11] Overall, the invasion treatment led to a modest but non-negligible increase in public support for using military force.

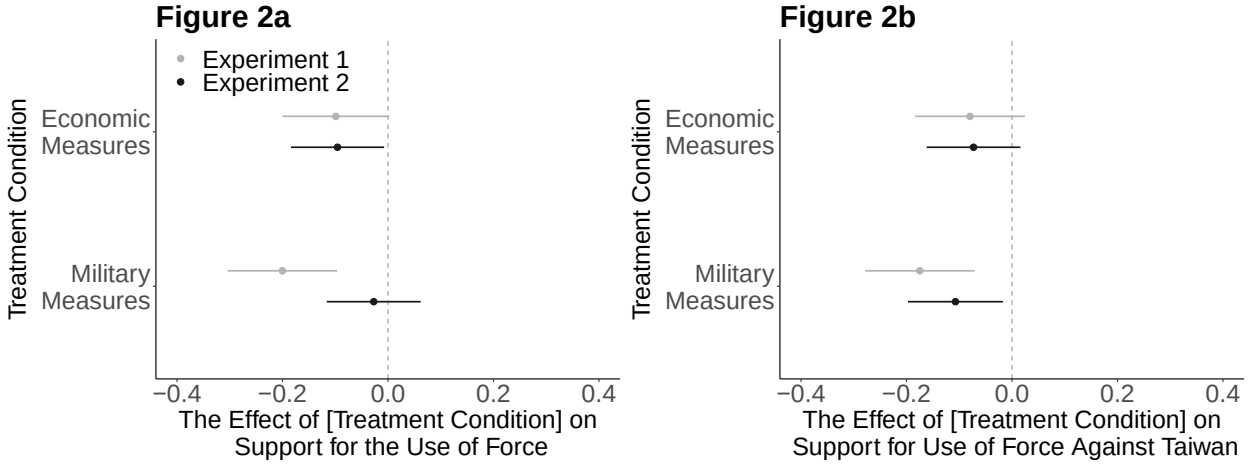
What are the effects of Western economic and military measures against Russia? Following additional information on economic measures, the initial increase in support for the general use of force was reduced in both experiments (middle bars in Figure 1a). However, respondents still maintained higher support for using force against Taiwan than those in the control group (middle bars in Figure 1b). In contrast, when providing respondents with additional information about Western military measures, the initial increase in support for using force in general and against Taiwan cannot be statistically distinguished from zero (bottom bars in Figure 1). Overall, the findings suggest that information on military countermeasures may be more effective than economic countermeasures in curbing the emboldening effects of the Russian invasion.

To further illustrate the efficacy of Western countermeasures, Figure 2 shows results using the invasion treatment group as the baseline. As Figure 2 illustrates, economic measures weakly mitigate the effect of the Russian invasion for general use of force (0.10 unit decrease) and against Taiwan in particular (around a 0.07 unit decrease). However, in both cases, such mitigation cannot be statistically distinguished from zero at the 5% level after correcting for multiple hypothesis testing. Figure 2 also shows that information on military measures diminishes support for the general use of force only in Experiment 1 (0.20 unit decrease, adj-$p = 0.0007$), but reduces support for using force against Taiwan in both experiments (0.18 unit decrease with an adj-$p = 0.0024$ in Experiment 1, and a 0.11 unit decrease with

[11] The treatment effects represent approximately 19% of the standard deviation for using force against Taiwan in both experiments.

an adj-$p = 0.06$ in Experiment 2). Overall, the results suggest that information on military measures limits the bolstering impact of invasion on support for using force.

Figure 2: **The Effect of Each Treatment Condition vis-à-vis the Invasion Treatment on Support for Use of Force in General (Figure 2a); Against Taiwan (Figure 2b)**.



Note: Outcome variables are measured on five-point scales; higher values represent more support. Coefficients are from OLS regressions (with 95% confidence intervals), representing the difference-in-means between each treatment group and the invasion group.

We summarize the main results in Table 1. Panel A shows treatment effects when the baseline group is the control group. Panel B shows treatment effects when the baseline group is the invasion treatment group.

Next, we examine how the Russian invasion and the subsequent countermeasures influence endorsements of particular ways of using military force against Taiwan in Experiment 2. Consistent with the findings of Liu and Li (forthcoming), we find slightly over half of our respondents express support for both outright invasion (58%) and military coercion (53%). Figure 3 shows that the invasion treatment leads to a modest increase in support for both war and military coercion, with a slightly larger effect on coercion (0.16 unit increase, adj-$p = 0.009$) than war (0.11 unit increase, adj-$p = 0.06$). Moreover, these modest treatment effects on military coercion are persistent even after providing additional information about Western economic (0.12 unit increase, adj-$p = 0.06$) and military countermeasures (0.11 unit increase, adj-$p = 0.06$). Conversely, support for an outright reunification war cannot be

Table 1: **Summary of the Main Results**

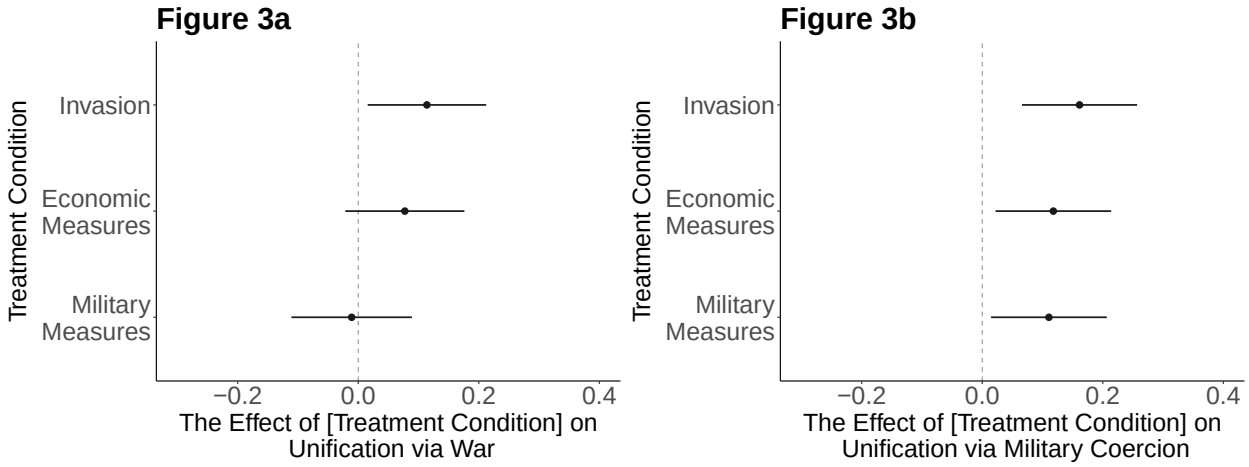
	Experiment 1		Experiment 2	
	Support for the Use of Force:		Support for the Use of Force:	
	In General	Against Taiwan	In General	Against Taiwan
Panel A: Treatment Effects (Baseline: Control Group)				
Invasion	0.17	0.21	0.08	0.18
p-value	[0.0008]	[0.0001]	[0.07]	[0.0002]
adjusted p-value	[0.0024]	[0.0007]	[0.12]	[0.0028]
Economic Measures	0.08	0.13	−0.01	0.10
p-value	[0.15]	[0.02]	[0.78]	[0.03]
adjusted p-value	[0.19]	[0.04]	[0.83]	[0.06]
Military Measures	−0.03	0.03	0.06	0.07
p-value	[0.62]	[0.57]	[0.21]	[0.14]
adjusted p-value	[0.62]	[0.62]	[0.26]	[0.19]
Baseline Support	3.35	3.30	3.57	3.58
N	3207		3193	
Panel B: Treatment Effects (Baseline: Invasion Treatment Group)				
Economic Measures	−0.10	−0.08	−0.10	−0.07
p-value	[0.06]	[0.13]	[0.04]	[0.11]
adjusted p-value	[0.10]	[0.19]	[0.07]	[0.18]
Military Measures	−0.20	−0.18	−0.03	−0.11
p-value	[0.0001]	[0.0010]	[0.55]	[0.02]
adjusted p-value	[0.0007]	[0.0024]	[0.63]	[0.06]
Baseline Support	3.53	3.50	3.66	3.75
N	2409		2411	

Note: Outcome variables are measured on five-point scales; higher values represent more support. Coefficients represent the difference-in-means between each treatment group and the baseline group. p-values and adjusted p-values, corrected to control the false discovery rate (Benjamini and Hochberg 1995) at the 5% level across all hypotheses for each study, are in brackets. Table B3 in the Appendix confirms these findings using Bonferroni's family-wise error rate correction instead.

statistically distinguished from zero after presenting additional information about Western countermeasures. Thus, military measures appear to be more effective in mitigating the invasion's impact on boosting support for an outright invasion of Taiwan.[12]

[12]In Appendix B.2, we present results for additional unification approaches, including economic sanctions and maintaining the status quo.

Figure 3: **The Effect of Each Treatment Condition (Experiment 2) on Support for Taiwan's Unification via War (Figure 3a) and on Support for Taiwan's Unification via Military Coercion (Figure 3b)**.



Note: Outcome variables are measured on a five-point scale; higher values represent higher support. Coefficients are from OLS regressions (with its 95% confidence interval), representing the difference-in-means between each treatment group and the control group.

There are two concerns we would like to address here. The first concern is potential non-compliance. Due to Chinese respondents' potential real-life exposure to information about the Russian invasion, our vignettes may fail to elicit beliefs among some respondents, attenuating the treatment effects (Kane, Velez and Barabas 2023). To partly address this concern, in Experiment 2, we use news excerpts reported merely days before the survey, increasing the likelihood that the vignettes provide new and current information. Nevertheless, our estimates can be interpreted as intent-to-treat (ITT) effects, providing conservative measures of the complier average causal effect, i.e., the treatment effect on those responsive to manipulation. ITTs do not require additional assumptions for identification and offer valuable insights into the relationship of interest. Since our second experiment largely replicates the initial findings, we are confident that the uncovered patterns are not spurious but show evidence for a modest but statistically significant increased hawkishness following exposure to information on the invasion.

The second concern is the potential for positive emotions elicited by the festival vignette in the control group. In constructing the festival vignettes, we aimed to control the priming of state media and avoid information related to invasion, military, and war. However, it is possible that the festival vignettes might have triggered positive and peaceful emotions (e.g., love, happiness, calm) that can create a "feel-good" treatment group which establishes a different baseline than a neutral control group. In Appendix C, we show that as long as the proportion of "feel-good" individuals is not too large (more than half), our main findings are likely to be driven by individuals for which a festival vignette acts as a neutral message. Additionally, we show our main conclusions are unaltered when accounting for pre-treatment covariates such as age, gender, education, and income, which have been identified as strong predictors of positive emotions (see Bottan and Perez-Truglia 2011). Nevertheless, due to our inability to directly observe whether a respondent exposed to a festival vignette experiences a "feel-good" reaction or a more neutral one, we acknowledge this limitation and source of potential bias when interpreting our findings.

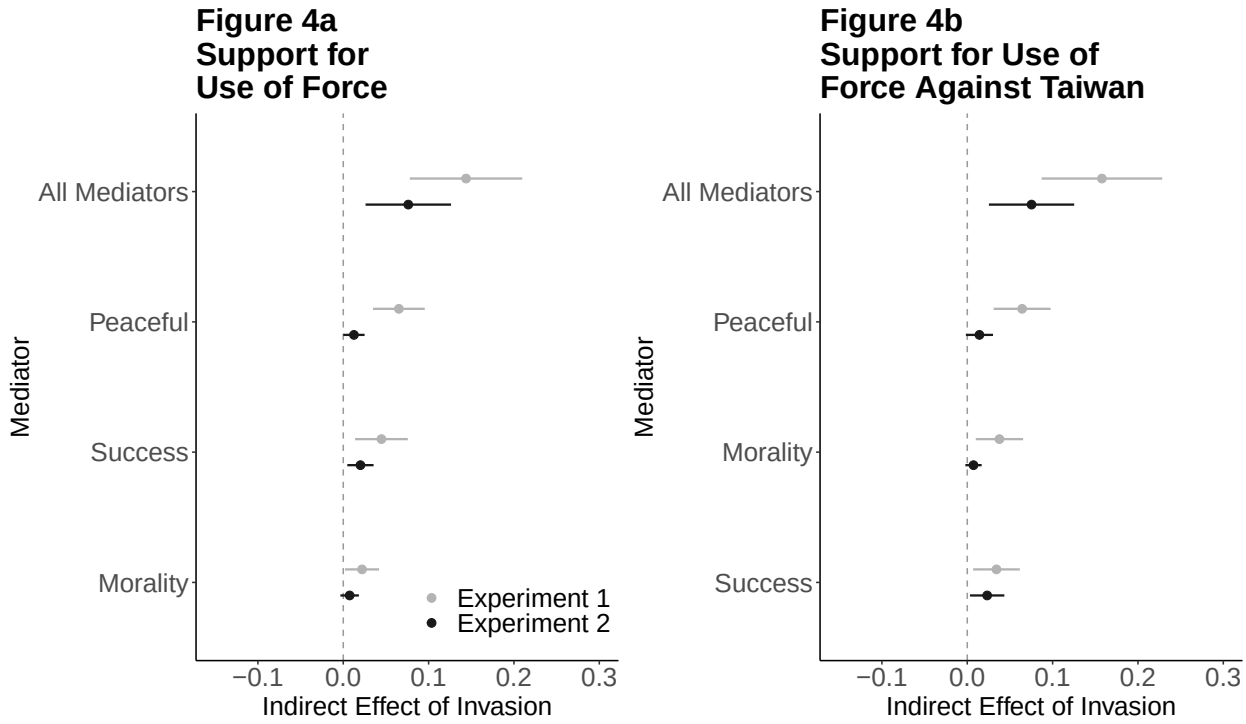
4.2 Mechanisms

Why does the Russian invasion result in a modest but statistically significant increase in Chinese hawkishness? To answer this question, we examine the direct and indirect effects of the invasion treatment.[13] We adopt the causal mediation framework of VanderWeele and Vansteelandt (2014) and Yu, Fan and Wu (2014), which allows for multiple mediators to contribute concurrently to the indirect effect of the treatment.[14] Figure 4 presents the indirect effect (horizontal axis) of the invasion treatment on the support for the use of force in general (Figure 4a) and against Taiwan in particular (Figure 4b). On the vertical axis, we list the mediators that explain most of the variation in the indirect effect (from top to bottom): All mediators combined, the perceived feasibility of peaceful resolutions (scale

[13]Mediation analyses of other treatment groups reveal similar patterns and are presented in Appendix B.4.

[14]Note that the traditional one-at-a-time mediation approach of Imai et al. (2011), reveals similar patterns as our results presented below (see Appendix B.4).

Figure 4: **Mediation Analysis for Support for Use of Force in General (Figure 4a) and Against Taiwan (Figure 4b)**



Note: Treatment condition: Invasion.
The plot presents the indirect effects by mediators and their corresponding 95% bootstrap confidence intervals (500 bootstrap samples). The mediators presented in this figure are the perceived feasibility of peaceful resolutions (scale reversed), perceived likelihood of success, and perceived morality of using force. For each outcome, the mediators are listed from top to bottom in the order of importance found for Experiment 1. All items are measured on a five-point scale.

reversed),[15] the perceived likelihood of success, and the perceived morality of using force. Appendix Figures B7 and B9 present the mediation analysis for all treatment conditions and mediators.

Overall, the first experiment exhibited mediation effects that are larger in magnitude compared to the second experiment. In Experiment 1, non-instrumental factors explained about 50% of the total effect of the invasion treatment on both outcomes. Specifically, the

[15]The original scale goes from strongly disagreeing (1) to strongly agreeing (5) that a peaceful resolution is feasible. The invasion treatment decreases the perceived feasibility, which leads to higher support for wars. We revert the scale in the mediation analysis so that all coefficients are positive for easier comparisons.

perceived feasibility of peaceful resolutions and the perceived morality of using military force were the most influential factors. However, in Experiment 2, the mediation effect through non-instrumental factors decreased to approximately 25% and 12% of the total impact of the invasion treatment on the general use of force and against Taiwan, respectively. We also do not find evidence for the additional non-instrumental factors included in Experiment 2, including the perceived legality.

Furthermore, Figure 4 demonstrates that the Russian invasion consistently leads to modest boosts of public confidence in the likelihood of military success. In Experiment 1, the perceived likelihood of success ranked second in importance among all mediators after the perceived feasibility of peaceful resolutions, accounting for approximately 20% of the total effect of the invasion treatment. The second experiment reaffirms this finding, indicating that the perceived likelihood of success is equally, if not more, influential than the combined effects of the perceived feasibility of peaceful resolutions and perceived morality. In contrast, other instrumental factors like perceived economic and military costs play negligible roles, explaining less than 5% of the total effect in both experiments.[16]

Overall, the mediation analysis reveals the relevance of both instrumental and non-instrumental considerations. In terms of non-instrumental factors, our findings align with previous evidence that citizens in China tend to perceive international conflicts through the lens of "righteousness" and justifiability (Fang et al. 2022; Johnston 1998; Li and Chen 2021; Weiss and Dafoe 2019). The pro-Russian information environment in China, as reported by recent scholarly research (Lu et al. 2022), the State Department, and major news sources,[17] might be presenting the Russian invasion as a highly justifiable instance of military aggression to Chinese respondents. Consequently, when they are asked about their support for using military force, such justification might influence their thought processes and boost support for using military force to achieve political goals.

[16]Appendix Figures B6 to B9 provide a breakdown of the direct and indirect effects for each treatment condition and mediator.

[17]For example, see the Guardian coverage `https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/28/china-spends-billions-on-pro-russia-disinformation-us-special-envoy-says`

The close connection between China's international conflicts and the historical ownership of territories, nationalism, and irredentism may further explain why the perceived feasibility of peaceful resolutions and the perceived morality of wars are among the most influential mediators (Fang and Li 2020). The frequent exposure of the Chinese public to Russia's war propaganda, which denies Ukraine's statehood and distinct national identity, is likely to heighten this connection. This narrative is similar to the Chinese one used in its international disputes, such as Taiwan, Diaoyu/Senkaku Island, and the South China Sea. The Russian invasion might have reinforced the belief among the Chinese public that peaceful negotiation is less effective and feasible, and that using force is a justifiable option. Furthermore, the failure of the NATO Partnership for Peace program and the Minsk agreements might have decreased the confidence of Chinese citizens in peace agreements with the West.

Regarding instrumental considerations, our findings suggest that Chinese respondents place greater weight on the likelihood of military success than the military and economic costs of using force. These findings align with previous research conducted in authoritarian regimes (e.g., Fang and Li 2020, Li and Chen 2021, and Weiss and Dafoe 2019), which indicates that individuals in such regimes are less sensitive to costs but more focused on the potential to acquire favorable outcomes through the use of military might.

Chinese respondents' persistent optimism about the likelihood of military success from 2022 to 2023 is somewhat puzzling. However, this might be due to the media environment in China leading to positive evaluations of the Russian Army's performance (Lu et al. 2022). Across all experimental groups in Experiment 2, Chinese respondents rated the Russian Army highly, with an average rating of 7.4 out of 10. Moreover, approximately 35% of the respondents believed the Russian Army's performance exceeded their expectations, while less than 20% said it under-performed. Despite the battlefield stalemate, the Russian invasion seems to increase the perception that military force can bring success. Another possible explanation for this finding is that the Russian invasion increases the belief that China would be successful militarily, particularly against Taiwan, while the West is preoccupied

with the conflicts in Europe.

5 Conclusion

This study is motivated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and subsequent public debates on whether international military aggression can shape public opinion on military force in other countries observing the aggression. We conducted two online survey experiments in China to analyze whether the Russian invasion boosted Chinese hawkishness, a timely and crucial case. We find that reminders of the Russian invasion lead Chinese respondents to exhibit a modest but non-negligible increase in support for using military force in general and against Taiwan in particular. Moreover, we find that additional information on Western military countermeasures against Russia might be more effective in limiting the emboldening effect of the Russian invasion than economic countermeasures.

Causal mediation analyses indicate that the bellicosity is driven by a combination of non-instrumental considerations, such as pessimistic perceptions of peaceful conflict resolution, and instrumental considerations, such as the perceived likelihood of military success. Conversely, we find no evidence that the perceived military and economic costs, the perceived foreign threats to China, or the legality of using force significantly influence Chinese public opinion. These results partly align with the existing research, which highlights the role of non-instrumental factors, such as whether military conflicts are perceived as moral and justifiable, in shaping foreign policy decisions within authoritarian regimes like China (Fang and Li 2020; Kertzer et al. 2014; Li and Chen 2021; Weiss and Dafoe 2019).

As of December 2023, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is ongoing, which is a starkly different outcome than initially expected by most observers at the outset of the war in late February 2022. As the conflict has dragged on and Russia faced challenges in taking and holding territory, its downstream influence on Chinese public opinion might have potentially changed. To assess the impact of ongoing events in the war, we conducted our experiment

twice: first in June 2022 and the second in June 2023. Interestingly, we find the course of the conflict had little effect on Chinese public opinion, as our findings remain largely consistent across the two experiments.

Our study points out a novel source of determinants of public opinion toward the use of force and paves the way for promising future research directions. We focus on one of the most significant contemporary international conflicts, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and provide systematic evidence that foreign military aggression can influence domestic public opinion toward the use of force. Beyond the China context, we believe that similar experiments in other countries can help us assess the extent to which Russian aggression bolsters support for military aggressions globally. More importantly, further research can examine whether international military aggression has different effects on public opinion in observer countries depending on factors such as the aggressor's regime type, the similarity between the aggressor and observer country regimes, or their alliance ties. Overall, our study demonstrates that the impact of international military aggression on domestic public opinion on the use of force is a promising area of future research.

References

Al Jazeera. 2022. "China Warns US over Russia's 'Legitimate Security Concerns'.". **URL:** *https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/27/china-warns-us-over-ukraine-interference-in-winter-olympics*

Bell, Mark and Kai Quek. 2018. "Authoritarian Public Opinion and the Democratic Peace." *International Organization* 72(1):227–242.

Benjamini, Yoav and Yosef Hochberg. 1995. "Controlling the False Discovery Rate: A Practical and Powerful Approach to Multiple Testing." *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society. Series B.* 57(1):289–300.

Bloomberg. 2022. "China Disappointment at Taiwan Response Puts Pressure on Xi.". **URL:** *https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-08-03/china-disappointment-over-taiwan-response-puts-pressure-on-xi?leadSource=uverify%20wall*

Blumenthal, Dan. 2022. "Beijing Could Run Russia's Playbook on Taiwan." *Foreign Policy* .

Bottan, Nicolas and Ricardo Perez-Truglia. 2011. "Deconstructing the Hedonic Treadmill: Is Happiness Autoregressive?" *The Journal of Socio-Economics* 40(3):224–236.

Chang, Linchiat and Jon Krosnick. 2010. "Comparing Oral Interviewing with Self-Administered Computerized Questionnaires. An Experiment." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 74(1):154–167.

Chen, Jidong and Yiqing Xu. 2017. "Why do Authoritarian Regimes Allow Citizens to Voice Opinions Publicly?" *The Journal of Politics* 79(3):792–803.

Dickson, Bruce. 2016. *The Dictator's Dilemma: The Chinese Communist Party's Strategy for Survival*. Oxford University Press.

Dill, Janina and Livia Schubiger. 2021. "Attitudes Toward the Use of Force: Instrumental Imperatives, Moral Principles, and International Law." *American Journal of Political Science* 65(3):612–633.

Fang, Songying and Xiaojun Li. 2020. "Historical Ownership and Territorial Disputes." *The*

Journal of Politics 82(1):345–360.

Fang, Songying, Xiaojun Li, Atsushi Tago and Daina Chiba. 2022. "Belief in Territorial Indivisibility and Public Preferences for Dispute Resolution." *Political Science Research and Methods* 10(4):759–775.

Gartner, Scott. 2008. "The Multiple Effects of Casualties on Public Support for War: An Experimental Approach." *American Political Science Review* 102(1):95–106.

Geddes, Barbara and John Zaller. 1989. "Sources of Popular Support for Authoritarian Regimes." *American Journal of Political Science* pp. 319–347.

Gehlbach, Scott and Konstantin Sonin. 2014. "Government Control of the Media." *Journal of Public Economics* 118:163–171.

Grieco, Joseph, Christopher Gelpi, Jason Reifler and Peter Feaver. 2011. "Let's Get a Second Opinion: International Institutions and American Public Support for War." *International Studies Quarterly* 55(2):563–583.

Hua, Sha. 2022. "Mockery of West, Warnings to Taiwan Fill Chinese Social Media After Ukraine Invasion ." *The Wall Street Journal* .

URL: *https://www.wsj.com/articles/mockery-of-west-warnings-to-taiwan-fill-chinese-social-media-after-ukraine-invasion-11645798598*

Imai, Kosuke, Luke Keele, Dustin Tingley and Teppei Yamamoto. 2011. "Unpacking the Black Box of Causality: Learning about Causal Mechanisms from Experimental and Observational Studies." *American Political Science Review* 105(4):765–789.

Incerti, Trevor, Daniel Mattingly, Frances Rosenbluth, Seiki Tanaka and Jiahua Yue. 2021. "Hawkish Partisans: How Political Parties Shape Nationalist Conflicts in China and Japan." *British Journal of Political Science* 51(4):1494–1515.

Johnston, Alastair. 1998. *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*. Vol. 75 Princeton University Press.

Kane, John, Yamil Velez and Jason Barabas. 2023. "Analyze the attentive and bypass bias: Mock vignette checks in survey experiments." *Political Science Research and Methods*

11(2):293–310.

Kertzer, Joshua, Kathleen Powers, Brian Rathbun and Ravi Iyer. 2014. "Moral Support: How Moral Values Shape Foreign Policy Attitudes." *The Journal of Politics* 76(3):825–840.

Kine, Philim. 2022. "Russia's Ukraine Moves Fuel China's Ambitions and Taiwan's Fears." *Politico* .

URL: *https://www.politico.com/newsletters/politico-china-watcher/2022/01/27/putins-ukraine-playbook-is-xis-taiwan-primer-00002608*

King, Gary, Jennifer Pan and Margaret Roberts. 2013. "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression." *American Political Science Review* 107:326–343.

Li, Xiaojun and Dingding Chen. 2021. "Public Opinion, International Reputation, and Audience Costs in an Authoritarian Regime." *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 38(5):543–560.

Liu, Adam and Xiaojun Li. forthcoming. "Assessing Public Support for (Non-) Peaceful Unification with Taiwan: Evidence from a Nationwide Survey in China." *Journal of Contemporary China* .

Lu, Yingdan, Jack Schaefer, Kunwoo Park, Jungseock Joo and Jennifer Pan. 2022. "How Information Flows from the World to China." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* .

Mattingly, Daniel C and Ting Chen. 2022. "The Missionary Roots of Nationalism: Evidence from China." *The Journal of Politics* 84(3):1638–1651.

Mullinix, Kevin J, Thomas J Leeper, James N Druckman and Jeremy Freese. 2015. "The Generalizability of Survey Experiments." *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 2(2):109–138.

Myers, Steven and Amy Qin. 2022. "Both Sides of Taiwan Strait Are Closely Watching Ukraine's Crisis." *The New York Times* .

URL: *https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/07/world/asia/taiwan-china-ukraine-*

russia.html

Quek, Kai and Alastair Johnston. 2017. "Can China Back Down? Crisis De-escalation in the Shadow of Popular Opposition." *International Security* 42(3):7–36.

Rozenas, Arturas and Denis Stukal. 2019. "How Autocrats Manipulate Economic News: Evidence from Russia's State-controlled Television." *The Journal of Politics* 81(3):982–996.

The Economist. 2022. "Parallels with Taiwan Colour Asian Views of the War in Ukraine." *The Economist* .

Tomz, Michael and Jessica Weeks. 2013. "Public Opinion and the Democratic Peace." *American Political Science Review* 107(4):849–865.

Tomz, Michael and Jessica Weeks. 2020. "Human Rights and Public Support for War." *The Journal of politics* 82(1):182–194.

Tomz, Michael, Jessica Weeks and Keren Yarhi-Milo. 2020. "Public Opinion and Decisions about Military Force in Democracies." *International Organization* 74(1):119–143.

United Nations. 2022. "Russia's Invasion of Ukraine is a Violation of the UN Charter, UN Chief Tells Security Council.".
URL: *https://unsdg.un.org/latest/announcements/russias-invasion-ukraine-violation-un-charter-un-chief-tells-security-council*

VanderWeele, Tyler and Stijn Vansteelandt. 2014. "Mediation Analysis with Multiple Mediators." *Epidemiologic Methods* 2(1):95–115.

Weeks, Jessica. 2008. "Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve." *International organization* 62(1):35–64.

Weeks, Jessica. 2012. "Strongmen and Straw Men: Authoritarian Regimes and the Initiation of International Conflict." *American Political Science Review* 106(2):326–347.

Weiss, Jessica Chen. 2013. "Authoritarian Signaling, Mass Audiences, and Nationalist Protest in China." *International Organization* 67(1):1–35.

Weiss, Jessica Chen. 2014. *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China's Foreign Rela-*

tions. Oxford University Press.

Weiss, Jessica Chen. 2019. "How Hawkish is the Chinese Public? Another Look at "Rising Nationalism" and Chinese Foreign Policy." *Journal of Contemporary China* 28(119):679–695.

Weiss, Jessica Chen and Allan Dafoe. 2019. "Authoritarian Audiences, Rhetoric, and Propaganda in International Crises: Evidence from China." *International Studies Quarterly* 63(4):963–973.

Yu, Qingzhao, Ying Fan and Xiaocheng Wu. 2014. "General Multiple Mediation Analysis With an Application to Explore Racial Disparities in Breast Cancer Survival." *Journal of Biometrics & Biostatistics* 5:1–9.