

Supporting Unwinnable Wars: In-Groups, Out-Groups, and Public Opinion on Conflict

Lauren Sukin^{*†}

February 16, 2022

Abstract: Scholars have often found that the public makes consequentialist decisions about war, driven by calculations about military effectiveness. In contrast, this paper argues internalized biases can encourage fighting adversaries even under unfavorable strategic conditions. I test this argument with a survey experiment on the effects of the nuclear and conventional balance of power on the U.S. public's preferences for conflict initiation with and nuclear escalation against China. I find high levels of support for the use of force, regardless of the balance of power. Respondents are not reactive to strategic considerations about conflict outcomes; instead, greater proportions of respondents supporting conflict initiation and nuclear escalation anticipate losing a war against China than winning one. Respondents' in-group associations and out-group biases play a significant role in explaining this behavior.

Word Count (Without Tables/Footnotes): 9,228

***Acknowledgements:** The author would like to thank the Stanford Institute for Research in the Social Sciences for their support. The author would also like to thank participants at the 2020 Southern Political Science Association conference, the 2021 International Studies Association conference, and the Nuclear Reading Group at the Center for International Security and Cooperation for their feedback.

[†]Lauren Sukin, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Political Science, Stanford University, 616 Serra Mall, Stanford CA 94305, (650) 723-1806.

1 Introduction

Much of the existing literature on public support for the use of force has suggested that the American public often makes foreign policy decisions within a highly consequentialist framework, privileging military effectiveness over other considerations.¹ For example, Press, Sagan, and Valentino² find that Americans are more concerned about military effectiveness than norms about the use of nuclear weapons. They show substantial willingness among the American public to support nuclear strikes when those strikes provide concrete advantages over the use of conventional weapons. Similarly, in a 2015 survey, Sagan and Valentino³ found that a majority of Americans are willing to use nuclear weapons, violating anti-nuclear norms and norms around non-combatant immunity use, in order to protect U.S. forces.

Other work suggests that non-consequentialist factors shape public attitudes about conflict. For example, some scholars argue that closely held values—such as the nuclear taboo or norms against strategic bombing—can overcome or constrain consequentialist reasoning.⁴ These studies argue that the public’s willingness to support the use of force has clear and important limits around certain ethical considerations, legal doctrines, and other norms. A recent review article by Michal Smetana and Carmen Wunderlich, for example, explains the need for continued research on the mitigating effects of norms on public support for the use of nuclear weapons. Since “the possibility of nuclear weapons use has returned into the realms of the imaginable,” they write, the norm of “(non-)use of nuclear weapons remains a

1. Joseph Grieco et al., “Let’s get a Second Opinion: International institutions and American public support for war,” *International Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2011): 563–583; Scott D Sagan and Benjamin A Valentino, “Not just a war theory: American public opinion on ethics in combat,” *International Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (2018): 548–561.

2. Daryl Press, Scott Sagan, and Benjamin Valentino, “Atomic Aversion: Experimental evidence on taboos, traditions, and the non-use of nuclear weapons,” *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (2013): 188–206.

3. Scott Sagan and Benjamin Valentino, “Revisiting Hiroshima in Iran: What Americans really think about using nuclear weapons and killing noncombatants,” *International Security* 42, no. 1 (2017): 41–79.

4. Charli Carpenter and Alexander H Montgomery, “The stopping power of norms: saturation bombing, civilian immunity, and US attitudes toward the laws of war,” *International Security* 45, no. 2 (2020): 140–169; Nina Tannenwald, “Stigmatizing the bomb: Origins of the nuclear taboo,” *International Security* 29, no. 4 (2005): 5–49.

topic worth serious scholarly re-engagement.”⁵

However, less work has explored how identity might actually encourage, rather than discourage, hawkish views. In this paper, I articulate a theory of public attitudes towards military conflict, where the public’s views on the use of force do not prioritize consequentialist cost-benefit analyses related to military effectiveness. However, unlike much of the work on conflict norms, I argue that the non-strategic nature of public decision-making does not necessarily imply resistance to the use of force. Instead, I argue that prominent internalized biases and deep-seated opposition to enemy powers can incentivize public support for the use of force even when the exercise of force might not be strategic.

This paper uses an original survey experiment on the U.S. public to determine when military effectiveness—with respect to both conventional and nuclear weapons—affects U.S. public preferences on conflict with an adversary. In order to test public receptiveness to consequentialist logic, this design varies the likely effectiveness of the use of force by manipulating the balance of power between the United States and China. Respondents are then asked about their preferences for responding to an ongoing U.S.-China security crisis. Respondents report their preferences regarding both war declaration and military escalation.

This research finds little support for a consequentialist theory of public attitudes about conflict. Instead, I show evidence that neither conventional nor nuclear superiority significantly influences respondents’ support for declarations of war against China. Instead, across different configurations of the balance of power, support for war is high. Moreover, respondents also support significantly escalatory behaviors, such as the use of nuclear weapons, regardless of whether the United States or China possesses military superiority.

This suggests that public support for the use of force is not determined by the likelihood of victory. What, then, drives the prevalent pattern of public support for a war against China—even when warfare would not be strategic, such as when the balance of power is not in the United States’ favor? I find that the strength of respondents’ in-group associations

5. Michal Smetana and Carmen Wunderlich, “Nonuse of Nuclear Weapons in World Politics: Toward the Third Generation of “Nuclear Taboo” Research,” *International Studies Review*, 2021,

and out-group biases—that is, how strongly they identify with like individuals and how strongly they oppose outsiders—plays a significant role in explaining this pattern. While in-group and out-group dynamics have been studied in work on party politics, race, and ethnic conflict, these factors—and the study of personal identity more broadly—have largely been sidelined in international relations.⁶ Yet bringing these theories into the conceptualization of intrastate conflict provides valuable insights.⁷ This theoretical approach also adds to the recent turn in international relations towards examining political microfoundations, or the individual patterns of behavior that can aggregate on the state level.⁸

These findings challenge existing perspectives about public support for the use of force. Respondents to this survey experiment largely do not make rationalist, strategic calculations about the use of force. Instead, these findings highlight the role of personal biases in attitudes about conflict.

2 Explaining Public Support for Conflict

2.1 The Consequentialist Approach

Realist theories of international relations teach that the balance of power plays a key role in determining the likelihood of a military campaign’s success. Knowing whether victory is likely is an important factor for military strategy, and states should be more likely to enter conflicts, make threats, and engage in brinkmanship when their expectations of winning a

6. There is, however, some notable work on leader characteristics, critical security studies, and race in international relations that investigates personal identity. See, for example: Mark B Salter et al., *Race and racism in critical security studies*, 1-suppl, 2021, 3–7; Michael Horowitz, Rose McDermott, and Allan C Stam, “Leader age, regime type, and violent international relations,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49, no. 5 (2005): 661–685; Michael C Horowitz et al., “Sizing up the adversary: Leader attributes and coercion in international conflict,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, no. 10 (2018): 2180–2204; Duncan Bell, “Race and international relations: introduction,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 26, no. 1 (2013): 1–4; Tilden J Le Melle, “Race in international relations,” *International Studies Perspectives* 10, no. 1 (2009): 77–83

7. Kelebogile Zvobgo and Meredith Loken, “Race Is Critical to the Field of International Relations,” *Foreign Policy*, June 2020,

8. Joshua D Kertzer, “Microfoundations in international relations,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 34, no. 1 (2017): 81–97.

military confrontation are sufficiently high as to justify the likely costs.⁹ If this is true, states must fear challenges from stronger adversaries.

Superiority in numbers of both conventional and nuclear weapons could provide a warfighting advantage.¹⁰ Some scholars have argued states with more nuclear weapons than their opponents can act more aggressively or perform better in competitions of brinkmanship. This is because they are able to inflict more damage on their opponents if a nuclear war should break out.¹¹ Such scholars contend that sustaining relatively less damage indicates meaningful success, even in a nuclear war. Because of this, states with nuclear superiority, like those with conventional superiority, should take more risks.¹² Militarily superior states should also take more aggressive actions and be less willing to reach peaceful compromises.¹³

If a favorable balance of power is indeed a strong indicator of the likelihood of success in a conflict, then we should also expect that a favorable balance of power would increase public support for military action. Military superiority can help states impart more damage than they sustain, achieve their war aims, and secure faster victories. Since the public has been shown to be casualty-averse, to prefer operations that are more likely to succeed, and to opt for shorter-duration conflicts, military superiority should be a critical consideration for the

9. James Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (1995): 379–414; Thomas Schelling, "Arms and Influence," in *Strategic Studies* (Routledge, 2008), 96–114.

10. However, this is debated. Others contend superiority provides no advantage, since nuclear wars cannot be meaningfully won. This perspective expects small, survivable arsenals to be sufficient deterrents and would predict low support for conflict against nuclear powers regardless of the balance of forces. See: Glenn Herald Snyder and Paul Diesing, *Conflict Among Nations: Bargaining, decision making, and system structure in international crises* (Princeton University Press, 2015); Bernard Brodie, "The Atomic Bomb and American Security," *Yale Institute of International Studies Memorandum*, no. 18 (1945); Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Cornell University Press, 1984); Robert Jervis, "Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn't Matter," *Political Science Quarterly* 94, no. 4 (1979): 617–633; Todd Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, "Crisis Bargaining and Nuclear Blackmail," *International Organization* 67, no. 1 (2013): 173–195.

11. Marc Trachtenberg, "The Influence of Nuclear Weapons in the Cuban Missile Crisis," *International Security* 10, no. 1 (1985); Richard Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance* (Brookings Institution, 1987); Matthew Kroenig, "Nuclear Superiority and the Balance of Resolve: Explaining Nuclear Crisis Outcomes," *International Organization* 67, no. 1 (January 2013): 141–171, ISSN: 0020-8183, 1531-5088, accessed April 22, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818312000367>, <http://www.journals.cambridge.org/abstract.S0020818312000367>.

12. Matthew Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy: Why Strategic Superiority Matters*, Bridging the Gap (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), ISBN: 978-0-19-084918-4.

13. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War."

public’s views on military force.¹⁴ That is, if domestic actors in fact prefer more “winnable” wars (and if military superiority is understood to provide meaningful strategic advantages) then superiority should be correlated with increased support for military action, while a lack of military superiority should, in contrast, diminish support for conflict.

Scholars of public opinion have tested this argument, finding evidence of a consequentialist streak in public attitudes. Press, Sagan, and Valentino,¹⁵ for example, find that “public attitudes about whether to use nuclear weapons are driven largely by consequentialist considerations of military utility.” In later work, Sagan and Valentino¹⁶ similarly argue that “Americans appear to be willing both to support the use of whatever weaponry is deemed most effective militarily and to kill foreign civilians on a massive scale whenever such attacks are considered useful.”¹⁷ Other studies have also find significant willingness to target civilians—both with nuclear weapons and conventional weapons.¹⁸ Similarly, scholars have found that Americans show little sense of a “deep morality” about noncombatant immunity; instead, they largely exhibit indifference towards or show a willingness to forgive civilian deaths.¹⁹

14. Christopher Gelpi, Peter Feaver, and Jason Reifler, *Paying the Human Costs of War: American public opinion and casualties in military conflicts* (Princeton University Press, 2009); Charles Hyde, *Casualty Aversion: Implications for policy makers and senior military officers*, technical report (Naval War College, Newport R.I., 2000); Hugh Smith, “What Costs will Democracies Bear? A review of popular theories of casualty aversion,” *Armed Forces & Society* 31, no. 4 (2005): 487–512.

15. Press, Sagan, and Valentino, “Atomic Aversion: Experimental evidence on taboos, traditions, and the non-use of nuclear weapons,” 188.

16. Sagan and Valentino, “Revisiting Hiroshima in Iran: What Americans really think about using nuclear weapons and killing noncombatants.”

17. In contrast, Carpenter and Montgomery (“The stopping power of norms: saturation bombing, civilian immunity, and US attitudes toward the laws of war”) find some support for the civilian immunity norm in a modified replication of this study.

18. Alexander B Downes, *Targeting civilians in war* (Cornell University Press, 2011); Alida R Haworth, Scott D Sagan, and Benjamin A Valentino, “What do Americans really think about conflict with nuclear North Korea? The answer is both reassuring and disturbing,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 75, no. 4 (2019): 179–186; Sagan and Valentino, “Not just a war theory: American public opinion on ethics in combat”; Scott Sagan et al., “Does the Noncombatant Immunity Norm Have Stopping Power? A Debate,” *International Security* 45, no. 2 (2020): 170–186.

19. Scott D Sagan and Benjamin A Valentino, “Just war and unjust soldiers: American public opinion on the moral equality of combatants,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 33, no. 4 (2019): 411–444; Eric V Larson and Bogdan Savych, *Misfortunes of war: Press and public reactions to civilian deaths in wartime* (Rand Corporation, 2007); John Tirman, *The deaths of others: the fate of civilians in America’s wars* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

This lack of sensitivity to civilian casualties is generally interpreted as evidence of consequentialism in the public consciousness. That is, because the public is seemingly willing to sacrifice the protection of civilians in exchange for achieving war aims, they must be focused not on the means and morality of warfare but on its ends. Indeed, the U.S. public has been shown to be sensitive to information about the outcomes and effectiveness of attacks, such as whether attacks are endorsed by trusted institutions or military officials and whether they are likely to result in casualties among U.S. forces.²⁰ The public also appears to take into account the risks of retaliation when assessing support for or opposition to strikes.²¹ In a notable review of all public opinion polls on Americans' support for the use of force from 1981 through 2005, Eichenberg²² finds significant evidence of consequentialist behavior, as the public is regularly attuned to the risks of conflict.

Eichenberg²³ writes: “the resulting success or failure of the mission are important determinants of public support...support actually increases when the intervention is successful, regardless of the level of casualties (and decreases when the mission fails).” This study not only finds that success influences retroactive assessments, but it also finds that forward-looking perceptions of risk and information about an operation's likelihood of success matters. Eichenberg²⁴ concludes that there is “a preference among the U.S. public for less risky military actions (e.g., air strikes) as opposed to more risky actions (e.g., the commitment of troops).”

20. Grieco et al., “Let's get a Second Opinion: International institutions and American public support for war”; Brian C Rathbun and Rachel Stein, “Greater goods: morality and attitudes toward the use of nuclear weapons,” *Journal of conflict resolution* 64, no. 5 (2020): 787–816; Scott Sigmund Gartner, “The multiple effects of casualties on public support for war: An experimental approach,” *American political science review* 102, no. 1 (2008): 95–106; David L Eckles and Brian F Schaffner, “Risk tolerance and support for potential military interventions,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (2011): 533–544; James Golby, Peter Feaver, and Kyle Dropp, “Elite military cues and public opinion about the use of military force,” *Armed Forces & Society* 44, no. 1 (2018): 44–71.

21. Lauren Sukin, “Experimental evidence on determinants of support for nuclear use in response to threats of nuclear retaliation.,” *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 26, no. 3 (2020): 336; David Allison and Stephen Herzog, “Retaliation Risk, Strike Justification, and Public Support for Nuclear Use,” *Working Paper*, 2022,

22. Richard C Eichenberg, “Victory has many friends: US public opinion and the use of military force, 1981–2005,” *International security* 30, no. 1 (2005): 140–177.

23. Eichenberg.

24. Eichenberg.

Public opinion has also been shown to be subject to other costs of conflict, such as its economic impact.²⁵ Interpreting these costs may not always be straightforward, though. Baum and Groeling²⁶ note that information about the costs and benefits of military operations is rarely objective; instead, perceptions of likely effectiveness are usually filtered through the agendas of political elites. Importantly, though, the public responds to cues that enable consequentialist risk-calculus.

The public's concerns about the costs of conflict may be largely self-motivated. For example, conscription has been found to decrease public support for war because it increases individuals' expectations of the costs they will have to pay in a conflict.²⁷ Similarly, individuals are reportedly more responsive to casualties when the fallen soldier is from their home state than when such personal ties are lacking.²⁸ Collectively, much of the scholarship on public opinion about warfare suggests not only that the public prefers lower-cost wars, but also that the probable success or failure of an operation is a crucial consideration in the formation of public opinion.

If the public indeed interprets military strategy within a consequentialist lens, then we would expect higher receptivity to the use of force when attacks are more likely to be more effective. Because the balance of power dictates the likelihood an attack is effective, we would also expect that a more favorable balance of power should also increase the public's support for the use of force. This relationship is illustrated in Figure 1. That is, the consequentialist approach suggests the following hypothesis:

H1: Support for conflict and conflict escalation should increase as the balance of

25. Seiki Tanaka, Atsushi Tago, and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, "Seeing the Lexus for the olive trees? Public opinion, economic interdependence, and interstate conflict," *International Interactions* 43, no. 3 (2017): 375–396; Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, Atsushi Tago, and Seiki Tanaka, "Spurred by threats or afraid of war? A survey experiment on costs of conflict in support for military action," *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy* 25, no. 2 (2019).

26. Matthew A Baum and Tim Groeling, "Reality asserts itself: Public opinion on Iraq and the elasticity of reality," *International Organization* 64, no. 3 (2010): 443–479.

27. Michael C Horowitz and Matthew S Levendusky, "Drafting support for war: Conscription and mass support for warfare," *The Journal of Politics* 73, no. 2 (2011): 524–534.

28. Douglas L Kriner and Francis X Shen, "How citizens respond to combat casualties: the differential impact of local casualties on support for the war in Afghanistan," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76, no. 4 (2012): 761–770.



Figure 1: Illustration of H1 (Consequentialist Hypothesis)

power becomes more favorable.

While the consequentialist approach argues that the public will be willing to use force when doing so is strategic, some scholarship has instead suggested that there are important moral limits on public opinion. One such example is the concept of the “nuclear taboo.” Tannenwald²⁹ argues that a moral prohibition on the use of nuclear weapons has characterized the longstanding pattern of nuclear non-use. Tannenwald traces the history of the taboo in the United States, showing that the moral foundations of the U.S. public and leadership repeatedly constrained the use of nuclear weapons. Scholars have also identified the presence of the nuclear taboo in a number of other nuclear states.³⁰ The nuclear taboo literature has largely centered on the beliefs and behaviors of political elites, although scholars have also suggested that presence of a prevalent moral aversion to the violence of nuclear weapons should also prevent enthusiasm for the use of these weapons among the general public.

Yet scholars who identify such a nuclear non-use norm have often commented on its fragility or explored its limits.³¹ For example, Sukin³² finds reluctance among the U.S. and

29. Nina Tannenwald, “The nuclear taboo: The United States and the normative basis of nuclear non-use,” *International organization* 53, no. 3 (1999): 433–468.

30. Thazha Varkey Paul, *The tradition of non-use of nuclear weapons* (Stanford University Press, 2009); Mike M Mochizuki, “Japan tests the nuclear taboo,” *Nonproliferation Review* 14, no. 2 (2007): 303–328; Zafar Khan, *Pakistan and the New Nuclear Taboo: Regional Deterrence and the International Arms Control Regime*, 2013; David Allison, Stephen Herzog, and Jiyoung Ko, “Under the Umbrella: Nuclear Crises, Extended Deterrence, and Public Opinion,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Forthcoming, Lauren Sukin, “Credible Nuclear Security Commitments Can Backfire: Explaining Domestic Support for Nuclear Weapons Acquisition in South Korea,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64, no. 6 (2020): 1011–1042.

31. Elvira Rosert and Sonja Schirmbeck, “Zur Erosion internationaler Normen. Folterverbot und nukleares Tabu in der Diskussion,” *Zeitschrift für internationale Beziehungen*, 2007, 253–287; George H Quester, “If the nuclear taboo gets broken,” *Naval War College Review* 58, no. 2 (2005): 70–92; Lynn Eden, “The contingent taboo,” *Review of International Studies* 36, no. 4 (2010): 831–837; Reid BC Pauly, “Would US Leaders Push the Button? Wargames and the Sources of Nuclear Restraint,” *International Security* 43, no. 2 (2018): 151–192.

32. Sukin, “Experimental evidence on determinants of support for nuclear use in response to threats of

South Korean publics to nuclear first-strikes, but she also shows that citizens are attentive to strategic information about the risks of nuclear use. Davis Gibbons and Lieber³³ predicts that the nuclear non-norm may not be durable, noting that the underlying logic may be more about the strategic value of the non-use precedent—as with the norm against strategic bombing—than a moral prohibition. Press, Sagan, and Valentino³⁴ similarly find evidence of a precedent-based rationale for nuclear non-use among the public, reiterating the idea that the public prioritizes strategic logics. Even Tannenwald³⁵ notes that the taboo may have weakened during President Trump’s administration, although she identifies several policies that could help extend the taboo’s life moving forward.

2.2 Incorporating In-Groups and Out-Groups

In contrast to the consequentialist approach, I argue that identity critically informs public opinion on conflict. Existing scholarship has also pointed to some individual-level characteristics that may intersect with attitudes about international security. For example, some studies have found that women are often less supportive to conflict, although the effects of gender can also be more nuanced.³⁶ Historical memory and age may also alter support for the use of nuclear weapons.³⁷

Some personal values—like a sense of retributiveness—have also been explored in the nuclear retaliation.”

33. Rebecca Davis Gibbons and Keir Lieber, “How durable is the nuclear weapons taboo?,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 42, no. 1 (2019): 29–54.

34. Press, Sagan, and Valentino, “Atomic Aversion: Experimental evidence on taboos, traditions, and the non-use of nuclear weapons.”

35. Nina Tannenwald, “How strong is the nuclear taboo today?,” *The Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2018): 89–109.

36. For example, women may be more receptive to information about casualties and less likely to display overconfidence. See: Richard C Eichenberg, “Gender difference in American public opinion on the use of military force, 1982–2013,” *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2016): 138–148; Richard C Eichenberg, *Gender, War, and World Order* (Cornell University Press, 2019); Dominic DP Johnson et al., “Overconfidence in wargames: experimental evidence on expectations, aggression, gender and testosterone,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 273, no. 1600 (2006): 2513–2520; Rose McDermott, “Sex and death: Gender differences in aggression and motivations for violence,” *International Organization* 69, no. 3 (2015): 753–775.

37. Benoit Pelopidas, “The next generation (s) of Europeans facing nuclear weapons: forgetful, indifferent but supportive? EU Non-Proliferation Consortium, Non-Proliferation Papers No. 56 March 2017,” 2017,

literature. Retributiveness is generally understood to generate support for the use of force; individuals who support the death penalty for example, are also more likely to support political violence.³⁸ Individuals prone to anger may exhibit similar patterns.³⁹ Other emotional states—such as fear and anxiety—have also been connected to attitudes about nuclear use.⁴⁰

I argue that these emotions can be activated by personal identity and by perceptions of an adversary’s identity. Scholars have previously found that the interaction between the identities of an attacker and a target can shape attitudes about the appropriateness of violence. For example, one explanation for the democratic peace centers on perceptions of morality. Studies have shown that citizens in democratic states are less likely to support the use of force against other democracies than against autocracies.⁴¹ This is, at least in part, because democratic citizens views attacks against other democratic states as less moral than attacks against autocratic governments.⁴² Perceptions of shared state identity have similarly also been shown to matter in public attitudes on alliance politics.⁴³

While shared identity might temper support for violence, differences of identity can heighten it. Individuals may perceive those in out-groups in fundamentally different ways than in-group members.⁴⁴ In combat settings, biases against out-groups can influence support for violence. Sagan and Valentino⁴⁵ demonstrate that Americans are less willing to risk

38. Peter Liberman, “An eye for an eye: Public support for war against evildoers,” *International Organization* 60, no. 3 (2006): 687–722; Peter Liberman, “Retributive Support for International Punishment and Torture,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 57, no. 2 (2013): 285–306; Sagan and Valentino, “Revisiting Hiroshima in Iran: What Americans really think about using nuclear weapons and killing noncombatants”; Rathbun and Stein, “Greater goods: morality and attitudes toward the use of nuclear weapons.”

39. Peter Liberman and Linda Skitka, “Vicarious retribution in US public support for war against Iraq,” *Security Studies* 28, no. 2 (2019): 189–215.

40. Frank Sauer, *Atomic Anxiety: Deterrence, taboo and the non-use of US nuclear weapons* (Springer, 2015).

41. Robert Johns and Graeme AM Davies, “Democratic peace or clash of civilizations? Target states and support for war in Britain and the United States,” *The Journal of Politics* 74, no. 4 (2012): 1038–1052; Michael R Tomz and Jessica LP Weeks, “Public opinion and the democratic peace,” *American political science review* 107, no. 4 (2013): 849–865.

42. Tomz and Weeks, “Public opinion and the democratic peace.”

43. Jonathan A Chu, Jiyoung Ko, and Adam Liu, “Commanding Support: Values and Interests in the Rhetoric of Alliance Politics,” *International Interactions*, 2021, 1–27.

44. For a review of the scientific bases for these perceptions, see: Pascal Molenberghs, “The Neuroscience of In-Group Bias,” *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews* 37, no. 8 (2013): 1530–1536.

45. Scott D Sagan and Benjamin A Valentino, “Weighing Lives in War: How National Identity Influences American Public Opinion about Foreign Civilian and Compatriot Fatalities,” *Journal of Global Security*

the lives of compatriots than foreigners. Building on this finding, Hua and Jamieson⁴⁶ show that this behavior is dependent on the compatriots' race. They find that Americans are more resistant to conflict when the casualties will fall among those in their racial in-group than in racial out-groups. Some scholars have even argued that there is an ethical obligation to overweight the lives of compatriot combatants relative to foreign civilians,⁴⁷ although the more commonly advocated "due care" principle instead suggests a special obligation for combatants to protect foreign civilians.⁴⁸

On the state level, adversarial political relations create and sustain deep-rooted antagonism through feelings of both superiority and inferiority. Loyal citizens may have learned notions of their own superiority, which can worsen fears of challengers. Concerns about being overtaken by adversaries often constitute a form of status threat.⁴⁹ Consider Cold War rhetoric painting the Soviet Union not just as a geopolitical rival but also an "evil empire" coming for the American way of life, the prominent rhetoric of "rogue" states in the War on Terror, or Anglo-German antagonism in the late 19th century, which extended to the economic, ideological, military, cultural, and even personal spheres.⁵⁰

Status threats incentivize hostile policies towards out-groups. For example, hatred against out-groups has been shown to hinder negotiation and compromise as well as to shift motive attribution such that the out-group is seen as more aggressive.⁵¹ In extreme cases, this hatred

Studies 5, no. 1 (2020): 25–43.

46. Whitney Hua and Thomas Jamieson, "Whose lives matter? Race, public opinion, and military conflict," *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 2022, 1–23.

47. Seth Lazar, "Associative duties and the ethics of killing in war," *Journal of Practical Ethics* 1, no. 1 (2013); Iddo Porat and Ziv Bohrer, "Preferring One's Own Civilians: May Soldiers Endanger Enemy Civilians More than They Would Endanger Their State's Civilians," *Geo. Wash. Int'l L. Rev.* 47 (2015): 99.

48. walzer

49. On status threat, see: Diana Mutz, "Status Threat, Not Economic Hardship, Explains the 2016 Presidential Vote," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 19 (2018): E4330–E4339; Maureen Craig and Jennifer Richeson, "On the Precipice of a "Majority-Minority" America: Perceived status threat from the racial demographic shift affects White Americans' political ideology," *Psychological science* 25, no. 6 (2014): 1189–1197; Maureen Craig, Julian Rucker, and Jennifer Richeson, "Racial and Political Dynamics of an Approaching "Majority-Minority" United States," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 677, no. 1 (2018): 204–214.

50. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise of Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860-1914* (George Allen & Unwin, 1980).

51. Eran Halperin et al., "Anger, Hatred, and the Quest for Peace: Anger can be constructive in the absence of hatred," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 55, no. 2 (2011): 274–291; Adam Waytz, Liane Young, and Jeremy Ginges, "Motive Attribution Asymmetry for Love vs. Hate Drives Intractable Conflict," *Proceedings of the*

can manifest as dehumanization.

Dehumanization of out-groups can contribute to the willingness to use force—including with nuclear weapons—against an out-group.⁵² In conflict settings, dehumanization has primarily been shown to occur during asymmetric warfare, genocides, and massacres, but media framing of longstanding or salient adversaries can also show patterns of dehumanization.⁵³ For example, U.S. media images of China during the Cold War emphasized dehumanizing images such as “a vast horde of ‘reds’, a faceless, invincible mass that threatened all of Asia.”⁵⁴

Enmity among adversaries can spiral, making hostile policies increasingly attractive. For example, Joseph Nye argues that American alarmism about China has influenced broader attitudes among the public and policymakers in the United States, leading to a widespread consensus view of China as a significant global threat. Negative perceptions of China contribute to the current, broad understanding that the state’s intentions are hostile.⁵⁵

Mutual hostilities informs policy preferences. As William Callahan writes, mutually negative perceptions between adversaries can “spin out of control in ways analogous to an arms race. Ultimately this mutual estrangement is a serious security issue. It risks producing policy shifts that would facilitate the move from symbolic conflict to actual military conflict.”⁵⁶ This malicious cycle breeds distrust and discontentment on both sides. These perceptions, in turn, lead to the adoption of further hostile policies.

National Academy of Sciences 111, no. 44 (2014): 15687–15692.

52. Paul Slovic et al., “Virtuous violence from the war room to death row,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117, no. 34 (2020): 20474–20482.

53. Ifat Maoz and Clark McCauley, “Threat, dehumanization, and support for retaliatory aggressive policies in asymmetric conflict,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 52, no. 1 (2008): 93–116; Love Calissendorff, Johan Brosché, and Ralph Sundberg, “Dehumanization amidst massacres: An examination of Dinka-Nuer intergroup attitudes in South Sudan,” *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 25, no. 1 (2019): 37; Emile Bruneau and Nour Kteily, “The enemy as animal: Symmetric dehumanization during asymmetric warfare,” *PloS one* 12, no. 7 (2017): e0181422.

54. Alexander Liss, “Images of China in the American print media: A survey from 2000 to 2002,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 12, no. 35 (2003): 299–318.

55. Denny Roy, “The ‘China Threat’ Issue: Major arguments,” *Asian Survey* 36, no. 8 (1996): 758–771; Peter Hays Gries, “Social Psychology and the Identity-Conflict Debate: Is a ‘China threat’ inevitable?,” *European Journal of International Relations* 11, no. 2 (2005): 235–265.

56. William Callahan, “How to Understand China: The dangers and opportunities of being a rising power,” *Review of International Studies* 31, no. 4 (2005): 707.

Antagonism in state politics can trickle down to public perceptions. Moments of crisis involving an adversary can expand to generate widespread, combative views against individual co-ethnics of the adversary state. These in-group vs. out-group dynamics are not necessarily, but they can be, explicitly racialized. For example, Li and Nicholson Jr⁵⁷ show how the racialization of the COVID-19 threat translated into salient anti-Asian attitudes in the United States. Resultant public hostility then informs policy choices. For example, anti-Chinese attitudes have been theorized as explanatory components of U.S. trade and immigration policy towards China.⁵⁸

From this perspective, support for conflict with an adversary may be less about whether or when a conflict can be won and more about combating a cultural or ideological enemy. The immense importance of this objective could lead states to pursue even ill-advised combative strategies. Antagonistic sentiments could strengthen the case for war. Viewing their adversaries as revisionist and aggressive, states may believe it necessary to engage in aggression—even when the odds of victory are not in their favor.

That is, when the risks of acquiescence are posed in cultural or ideological terms, the costs of war may be seen as worthwhile, even if victory is highly unlikely. Moreover, longstanding enmity may shift perceptions of conflict objectives; if punishing the adversary is seen as valuable for its own sake, even a war likely to be lost may be seen as a worthwhile endeavor. Figure 2 illustrates the effects of in-group associations and out-group biases on attitudes about conflict with adversaries. This approach predicts the following:

H2: Support for conflict and conflict escalation should be high regardless of whether the balance of power is favorable or unfavorable.

An added nuclear dynamic can worsen these perceptions. In China's case, nuclear proliferation was, from the beginning, seen as a signal China was a rival to be reckoned with.

57. Yao Li and Harvey Nicholson Jr, "When "Model Minorities" become "Yellow Peril": Othering and the racialization of Asian Americans in the COVID-19 pandemic," *Sociology Compass* 15, no. 2 (2021): e12849.

58. Amy Hanser, "Yellow Peril Consumerism: China, North America, and an era of global trade," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36, no. 4 (2013): 632–650; Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 1998).

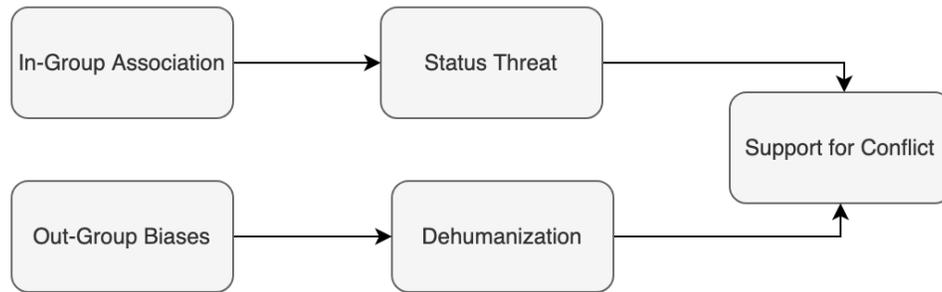


Figure 2: Illustration of H2 (In-Group/Out-Group Hypothesis)

As William Burr and Jeffrey Richelson write, Kennedy thought the Chinese would be “our major antagonists of the late 60’s and beyond,’ and [that] a nuclear China would endanger the U.S. position in Asia.”⁵⁹ The Kennedy Administration even considered military prevention against Chinese nuclear facilities. Today, concerns about the Chinese nuclear arsenal continue to be salient. The Biden administration has listed China as its top nuclear threat and repeatedly expressed concerns about increased Chinese investments in nuclear delivery capabilities such as missile silos and hypersonic missiles.⁶⁰

Nuclear possession is not only seen through the lens of strategic hostility, but it can also be interpreted as a sign of moral failing, as the Bush Administration’s “Axis of Evil” rhetoric implied.⁶¹ Media coverage of nuclear programs, such as Iran’s, often emphasize moral, racial, and ideological enmity.⁶² Nuclear acquisition has been stigmatized via its associated with themes of evil, rogueness, deviance, and outlawry.⁶³ While China’s nuclear program pre-dates the Nonproliferation Treaty, which played a critical role in solidifying

59. William Burr and Jeffrey Richelson, “Whether to “Strangle the Baby in the Cradle”: the United States and the Chinese nuclear program, 1960–64,” *International Security* 25, no. 3 (2001): 67.

60. Greg Myre, “Biden’s National Security Team Lists Leading Threats, With China At The Top,” *NPR*, April 2021,

61. Ken Kyle, “US Nationalism and the Axis of Evil: US policy and rhetoric on North Korea,” *Humanity & Society* 25, no. 3 (2001): 239–262.

62. Foad Izadi and Hakimeh Saghaye-Biria, “A Discourse Analysis of Elite American Newspaper Editorials: The case of Iran’s nuclear program,” *Journal of communication inquiry* 31, no. 2 (2007): 140–165.

63. Maria Rost Rublee, “Constructivism and Social Psychology in Peace Studies: Understanding nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament in East Asia,” in *Peace Forum*, vol. 24, 34 (2009), 17–21; Thomas Graham Jr, “Nuclear Nonproliferation and Nuclear Terrorism,” *Transnat’L Law*. 17 (2004): 89; Michal Smetana, “(De-)stigmatising the Outsider: Nuclear-armed India, United States, and the global nonproliferation order,” *Journal of International Relations and Development* 23, no. 3 (2020): 535–558.

these norms, now-widespread associations between nuclear weapons and these themes may influence current-day perceptions of China and other nuclear-armed adversaries.

In-group associations have previously been linked to support for nuclear use. Smetana and Vranka⁶⁴ argue that the public’s “moral foundations” influence their support for the use of conventional, chemical, and nuclear weapons. They argue that so-called “binding foundations,” which include views on authority, social purity, and in-group foundations are jointly associated with support for the use of force. They find that those individuals with high binding foundations scores are more likely to support the use of force and, moreover, that they are not consistently sensitive to information about the relative costs of different kinds of attacks. Rathbun and Stein⁶⁵ find similar results. Not only are binding foundations correlated with higher support for the use of nuclear weapons, but individuals who score higher on measures of binding foundations are less sensitive to information about the effectiveness of nuclear strikes. These studies, however, have focused on casualty estimates for single strikes as a measure of effectiveness, rather than the overall likelihood of victory or the probability of accomplishing war aims. In doing so, these studies focus on respondents’ desire to avoid harm to their in-groups, rather than their willingness to impart harm on out-groups. These studies also do not tease apart the influence of specific values incorporated in binding foundations, integrate out-group biases into their framework, or fully explore the causal mechanisms linking foundational views to attitudes about conflict.

Scholars have often focused on the role of the balance of power in conflict, arguing that attitudes about conflict can be explained through a rationalist logic. This approach, however, ignores the crucial role of personal identity and out-group biases. I argue that, in adversarial pairs of states, longstanding threat perceptions become embedded, leading to assumptions about the opponent’s hostility, morality, and rationality. These attitudes can contribute to public support for conflict, even when the odds of victory are not favorable. In this way,

64. Michal Smetana and Marek Vranka, “How moral foundations shape public approval of nuclear, chemical, and conventional strikes: new evidence from experimental surveys,” *International Interactions* 47, no. 2 (2021): 374–390.

65. Rathbun and Stein, “Greater goods: morality and attitudes toward the use of nuclear weapons.”

fear of out-groups can contribute to the pressure a government faces to fight its enemies and can place limits on the usefulness of consequentialist frameworks for understanding public attitudes about political violence.

Studies of public opinion can test the microfoundations of political behavior and provide clues as to how foreign policy elites would react under similar circumstances.⁶⁶ Although this study focuses on public attitudes, these conceptions of individual identity are prevalent both among the U.S. public and political elites. In-group ‘love’ and out-group ‘hate’ are both commonly and increasingly featured rhetoric types in the Democratic and Republican parties.⁶⁷

Additionally, public opinion can influence political elites in numerous ways. Media sources, lobbies, and political parties not only inform public thinking but can also act as agents of the public.⁶⁸ Political parties reflect public attitudes on foreign policy through the agenda-setting, campaign funding, and voting powers of the public, among other pathways.⁶⁹ In turn, parties shape the views and platforms of political elites. The public can also more directly influence the views of political elites via policy networks and other sources of coalition-building.⁷⁰ For example, public advocacy around nuclear energy, nuclear waste, arms control, and disarmament have been influential in changing various nuclear policies in a number of countries.⁷¹ Retrospective voting is one notable way in which the public can

66. Joshua Kertzer, “Re-Assessing Elite-Public Gaps in Political Behavior,” *American Journal of Political Science*, 2020.

67. Karyn Amira, Jennifer Cole Wright, and Daniela Goya-Tocchetto, “In-group love versus out-group hate: Which is more important to partisans and when?,” *Political Behavior* 43, no. 2 (2021): 473–494.

68. Thomas Risse-Kappen, “Public Opinion, Domestic Structure, and Foreign Policy in Liberal Democracies,” *World Politics* 43, no. 4 (1991): 479–512.

69. Russell Dalton, *Citizen Politics: Public opinion and political parties in advanced industrial democracies* (CQ Press, 2013).

70. Risse-Kappen, “Public Opinion, Domestic Structure, and Foreign Policy in Liberal Democracies.”

71. Shu-Hsiang Hsu, “Advocacy Coalitions and Policy Change on Nuclear Power Utilization in Taiwan,” *The Social Science Journal* 42, no. 2 (2005): 215–229; Keith Krause, “Transnational Civil Society Activism and International Security Politics: From landmines to global zero,” *Global Policy* 5, no. 2 (2014): 229–234; Anne Harrington, Eliza Gheorghe, and Anya Loukianova Fink, “What Arguments Motivate Citizens to Demand Nuclear Disarmament?,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 73, no. 4 (2017): 255–263; Andrew Tompkins, *Better Active Than Radioactive!: Anti-nuclear Protest in 1970s France and West Germany* (Oxford University Press, 2016); Luther Carter, *Nuclear Imperatives and Public Trust: Dealing with radioactive waste* (Routledge, 2015).

more directly affect political candidates and shape party politics.⁷² Key elements of the U.S. foreign policy apparatus are sensitive to public opinion. For example, Erik Lin-Greenberg finds that “public opposition makes military leaders less likely to recommend the use of force.”⁷³ In the United Kingdom, political leaders have similarly been found to be receptive to the results of public polling on foreign policy topics.⁷⁴ Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo⁷⁵ likewise find that Israeli leaders are responsive to public attitudes on foreign policy issues.

3 Experimental Design

To examine the public’s strategic and non-strategic reasoning on military policy, I designed and implemented an experiment on a 3,075-person representative sample of the U.S. public. The survey was fielded from March 3rd, 2020 through March 14th, 2020.⁷⁶ The survey was run on Lucid’s Marketplace platform. The respondent sample was representative of the U.S. public using quotas for age, gender, education, and income. Research finds respondents on Lucid’s platforms track well with U.S. national benchmarks, suggesting Lucid’s convenience sampling is an appropriate strategy for social scientific studies.⁷⁷

The survey experiment presents respondents with a hypothetical crisis situation involving militarized conflict between the United States and China over Guam. This scenario allows an examination of respondents’ attitudes about conflict with an adversarial power. Respondents

72. Andrew Healy and Neil Malhotra, “Retrospective Voting Reconsidered,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 16 (2013): 285–306, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-032211-212920>; Michael Tomz, Jessica Weeks, and Keren Yarhi-Milo, “Public Opinion and Decisions about Military Force in Democracies,” *International Organization* 74, no. 1 (2020): 119–43, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020818319000341>.

73. Erik Lin-Greenberg, “Soldiers, Pollsters, and International Crises: Public opinion and the military’s advice on the use of force,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 17, no. 3 (2021): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orab009>.

74. Jonathan Art Chu and Stefano Recchia, “Does public opinion affect the preferences of foreign policy leaders? Experimental evidence from the UK parliament,” *Journal of Politics*, 2021,

75. Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo, “Public Opinion and Decisions about Military Force in Democracies.”

76. See Appendix A.5 for ethics details. Respondents who failed either of two attention checks and respondents who took less than two minutes to complete the survey were dropped. This approach drops 1,292 respondents, or 29.6% of the initial set of respondents who consented to take the survey. See Appendix A.4 for a discussion of survey timing.

77. Alexander Coppock and Oliver McClellan, “Validating the Demographic, Political, Psychological, and Experimental Results Obtained from a New Source of Online Survey Respondents,” *Research & Politics* 6, no. 1 (2019): 2053168018822174.

are told that, following “skirmishes between the Chinese and American navies in the South China Sea, Chinese troops invaded Guam and seized control of the island.” This scenario was chosen because it is a militarised incident that would require an immediate U.S. response.⁷⁸

The treatment consists of varying the nuclear balance of power and the conventional balance of power between the United States and China. In doing so, the severity of Chinese’s rise relative to the United States is manipulated.⁷⁹ Each respondent was randomly assigned one of three nuclear balance of power conditions: “China’s nuclear forces are [**significantly more powerful than/equally as powerful as/significantly less powerful than**] American nuclear forces.” Similarly, each respondent was randomly assigned one of three conventional balance of power conditions: “China’s non-nuclear forces are [**significantly more powerful than/equally as powerful as/significantly less powerful than**] American non-nuclear forces.”⁸⁰ In total, there were nine possible treatment options.⁸¹

The language of “more” and “less” powerful is intentionally vague, so as to be understandable for respondents with little background knowledge about military strategy. These treatments are strong, if imprecise, and should therefore alter respondents’ perceptions about the relative strength of U.S. and Chinese forces. If respondents believe that stronger militaries make victory more likely—and if they prefer to fight wars with higher odds of victory—then they should exhibit more support for the use of force when the balance of power is in their favor. An earlier study, detailed in the Appendix, treats respondents with precise numbers of weapons and finds similar results.⁸²

I exploit variation in the stated balance of power between China and the United States

78. Respondents are told Guam is a territory of the United States, residents of Guam are citizens of the United States, and U.S. troops are stationed on Guam.

79. While it is possible some respondents already knew the strength of China’s military capabilities relative to those of the United States, this highly specific level of knowledge is unlikely to be widespread. Moreover, because the experiment was framed as a hypothetical, respondents should uptake the treatment even if they had prior knowledge. The survey includes controls for respondents’ pre-treatment assessments about the Chinese threat and respondents’ self-reported level of knowledge about military policy; the inclusion of these control variables helps resolve possible concerns associated with respondents’ baseline levels of knowledge regarding the Chinese military.

80. Emphasis original.

81. See Appendix A.3 for details on design.

82. See Appendix A.4.

to determine how military advantages and disadvantages influence policy preferences. Respondents were asked how they would most prefer to respond to the crisis. Specifically, respondents were asked whether they would “support or oppose a decision by the United States to declare war on China,” as well as what military strategy against China respondents preferred the United States to implement should a war occur. Respondents were asked about a variety of possible options, including a proportional response involving a conventional attack on Chinese forces in Guam, a conventional attack on mainland China, and nuclear first and second strike attacks against Chinese forces on Guam or against mainland China.⁸³

I measure whether the balance of power is understood as making the use of force more effective by asking respondents about their expectations regarding the probability of U.S. victory in a conflict with China. Recall that perceptions of military effectiveness drive public support for the use of force in the consequentialist framework. If a favorable balance of power is indeed understood as providing a military advantage, then the consequentialist theory would also expect that a favorable balance of power should increase support for the use of force.⁸⁴ On the other hand, if respondents understand the military advantages of a favorable balance of power—but do not increase support for the use of force under more favorable strategic conditions—then we could conclude public attitudes are not attentive to the military-strategic calculations at the core of the consequentialist approach.

Examining the public’s views on whether and how conflict should occur is important because the public has the power to inform these choices. Leaders must generate or anticipate

83. Surveys of public opinion on nuclear use have generally given respondents only the options of using or not using nuclear weapons, thereby making it impossible to observe nuances that might exist in respondents’ preferences for when and how to use nuclear weapons. In this survey, I attempt to capture some of this variety by asking respondents to choose from a set of strategic options that encompass a more accurate depiction of the ways in which crises can escalate. In this way, I provide more in-depth information on the circumstances under which support for nuclear use might emerge during a crisis. For a discussion of the importance of providing multiple strategic options for the use of nuclear weapons, see: Sukin, “Experimental evidence on determinants of support for nuclear use in response to threats of nuclear retaliation.”

84. If, on the other hand, there were no connection between the balance of power and expectations of victory, this would either suggest a failure of the treatment to convey variation in the strategic balance between U.S. and Chinese forces or it would suggest that the public does not understand or does not respond to the balance of power as existing scholarship expects.

public consent for foreign policy initiatives, especially for high-cost efforts like wars.⁸⁵ Public attitudes can set an agenda for which foreign policy options are politically possible, since leaders who implement unpopular policies can be punished at the polls. Via audience costs, public opinion constrains executive decision-making in democracies—as well as in autocracies with leaders that are accountable to a selectorate.⁸⁶ Hawkish domestic interests or rally-around-the-flag effects can work in the opposite direction, encouraging leaders to engage in conflict.⁸⁷ Thus if the public makes consequentialist decisions about force, leaders may have an easier time entering into wars when the balance of power is in their favor. If constructions of identity are more important, leaders may be incentivized to fight adversaries even when the chance of victory is low.

But the public's views on ethical military conduct can also constrain—albeit perhaps only weakly—leaders' choices.⁸⁸ The public holds opinions on the types of weapons and strategies that are acceptable to apply. As the highly-publicized debate over the use of drones exemplifies, such views can have significant political costs.⁸⁹ Therefore, understanding when the public might espouse ethical objections to certain types of attacks, such as those involving nuclear assets, can help delineate when the public would or would not constrain leaders' choices.

85. Long-duration policies can be especially susceptible to public pressures. Consider opposition to the war in Iraq, which became costly for political leadership. See: Douglas Kriner and Francis Shen, "Responding to War on Capitol Hill: Battlefield casualties, congressional response, and public support for the war in Iraq," *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 1 (2014): 157–174; Dan Reiter and Allan Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

86. Kenneth Schultz, "Looking for Audience Costs," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45, no. 1 (2001): 32–60; Jessica Weeks, "Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime type and signaling resolve," *International Organization* 62, no. 1 (2008): 35–64; Michael Tomz, "Domestic Audience Costs in International Relations: An experimental approach," *International Organization* 61, no. 4 (2007): 821–840.

87. Jong Lee, "Rallying around the Flag: Foreign policy events and presidential popularity," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (1977): 252–256.

88. Adam S Chilton, "The laws of war and public opinion: An experimental study," *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics: JITE*, 2015, 181–201; Beth A Simmons, "The Laws of War and Public Opinion: An Experimental Study: Comment," *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics (JITE)/Zeitschrift für die gesamte Staatswissenschaft* 171, no. 1 (2015): 202–207.

89. Sarah Kreps and Geoffrey Wallace, "International Law, Military Effectiveness, and Public Support for Drone Strikes," *Journal of Peace Research* 53, no. 6 (2016): 830–844; Andreas Krieg, "Externalizing the Burden of War: the Obama Doctrine and US foreign policy in the Middle East," *International Affairs* 92, no. 1 (2016): 97–113; Aqil Shah, "Do US Drone Strikes Cause blowback? Evidence from Pakistan and beyond," *International Security* 42, no. 4 (2018): 47–84.

4 Results

4.1 The Non-Effect of Military Superiority

The consequentialist understanding suggests that attitudes about conflict are determined by military-strategic factors such as the likelihood of victory. This approach leads to two observable predictions. First, support for war against China should be more likely while the United States has a material advantage. Similarly, support for escalatory measures should be higher when the balance of power is more favorable. If the balance of power is indeed crucial for securing military victories, then to the extent the public prefers more winnable wars, public support for conflict initiation and escalation should be attuned to changes in the balance of power.

An alternate approach argues the balance of power should not predict support for conflict or conflict escalation. I anticipate embedded conceptions of hostility to drive individuals to choose combative conflict initiation and escalation policies even in the absence of concrete warfighting advantages (*H2*).

I find little evidence the balance of power influences respondents' support for conflict. Respondents were asked to indicate whether and how much they supported or opposed a U.S. declaration of war against China. On average, 54% of respondents strongly or somewhat supported war. An additional 23% of respondents neither supported nor opposed a war declaration, while the remaining 23% strongly or somewhat opposed it. The pattern of majority support for war remains consistent regardless of the nuclear or conventional balance of power between the United States and China, as shown in Figure 3.⁹⁰

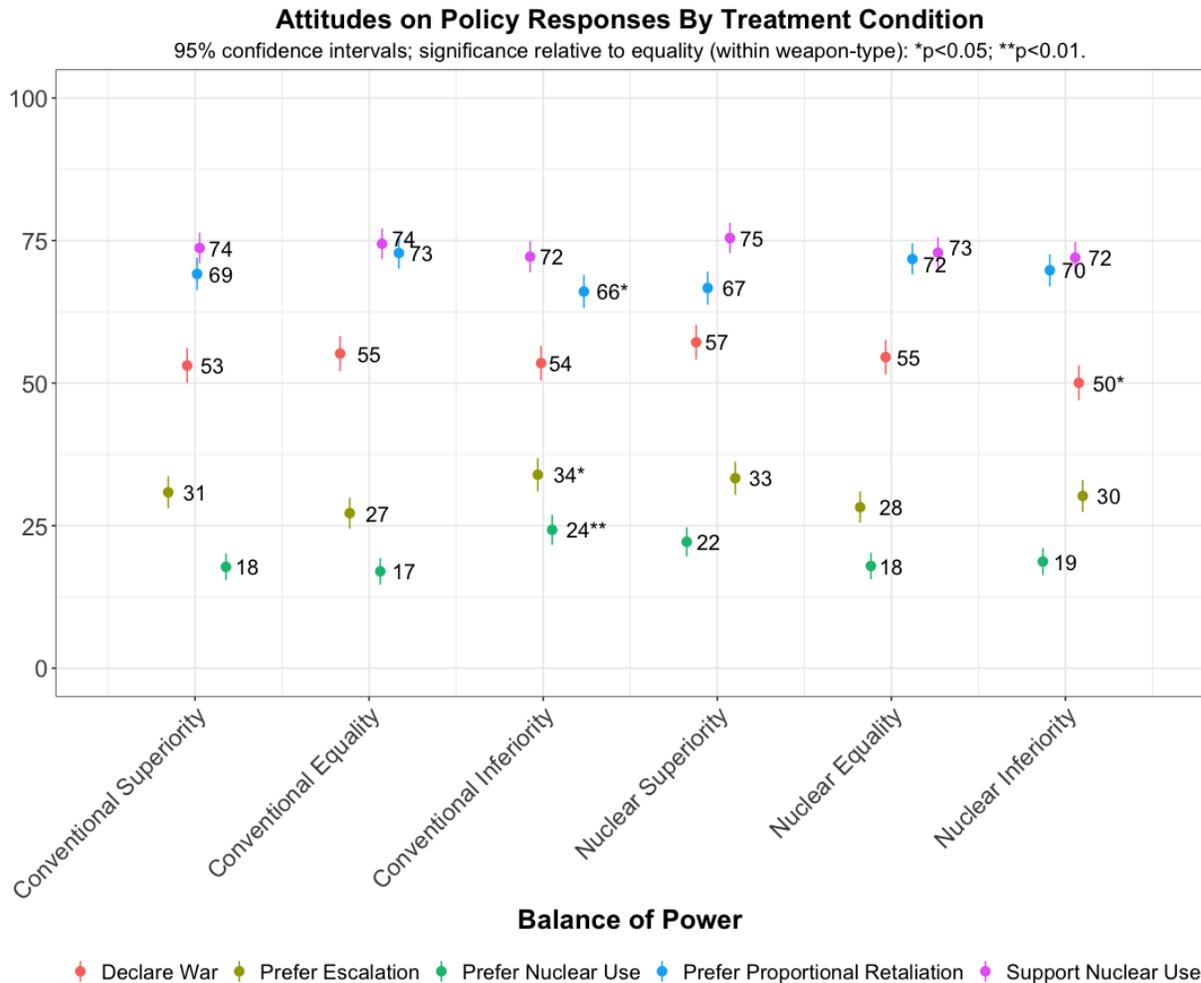
Figure 3 depicts respondents' average support for various policy responses to the crisis scenario between the United States and China. The lack of variation in support for war as the balance of power changes contradicts the expectations of the consequentialist approach (*H1*).⁹¹ Superiority appears not to be understood to provide a substantively meaningful

90. See Appendix A.1 for confirmatory regression results.

91. In only one treatment condition—nuclear inferiority—is there a significant difference between respon-

advantage and inferiority to not provide a substantively meaningful disadvantage. Consistently high levels of support for war instead reflect the predictions of $H2$, where preferences for conflict are separate from a military-strategic logic.

Figure 3



There is also little evidence the nuclear or conventional balance of power influences respondents' support for escalatory measures. Respondents who supported a war against

China was significantly lower when the U.S. nuclear arsenal was inferior to the Chinese nuclear arsenal, relative to both the treatment where the U.S. nuclear arsenal was equal to and the treatment where it was superior to the Chinese nuclear arsenal as well as when the U.S. conventional arsenal was equal to the Chinese conventional arsenal. However, these treatment effects are fairly small. For example, there is only a five percentage point difference between support for declaring war when the U.S. nuclear arsenal is inferior to the Chinese nuclear arsenal and support when it is equal.

China were asked about their most preferred next step for the U.S. military to take. They could choose a proportional retaliation policy, where the United States would use conventional weapons to attack Chinese forces on Guam, or they could choose one of two types of escalatory measures. The first involved a conventional attack on mainland China, while the second called for a nuclear attack against China.

For all treatments, the most preferred response is the proportional one.⁹² In comparison, initial preferences for escalation are low. This may suggest Chinese forces effectively deterred public support for escalation (however, willingness to escalate is significantly higher than initial preferences for escalation).

Support for escalatory measures is largely independent from the balance of power, contrary to the consequentialist expectations of *H1*. For example, respondents supporting war advocate for nuclear attacks against China at the same rate when the U.S. nuclear arsenal is superior as inferior. The consequentialist approach would suggest escalation should be related to the balance of power; states should be more willing to engage in risk-taking if they anticipate a higher payoff. Yet respondents do not appear to be making assessments in this way. Instead, attitudes about escalation are largely impervious to changes in the relative balance of military capabilities.

Although respondents initially prefer proportional responses, their overall willingness to support the use of nuclear weapons was very high, in line with *H2*. 73% of respondents indicate they would support a U.S. decision to use nuclear weapons against mainland China, even if doing so was not their first-choice policy. Half of respondents report they would support a nuclear first strike against mainland China, while an additional 23% would support a nuclear second strike. Respondent willingness to approve U.S. nuclear use is not responsive to changes in the nuclear or conventional balance of power. Thus even when respondents are told the U.S. nuclear arsenal is “significantly less powerful” than the Chinese nuclear

92. Conventional inferiority slightly decreases preferences for a conventional attack on Guam, but only relative to force equality. Nuclear superiority did not have a significantly different effect than nuclear equality or nuclear inferiority.

arsenal, they are no less willing to support nuclear use.

Could respondents simply not be sufficiently well-informed to make strategic decisions in response to information about the balance of power? Respondents understand the consequences of nuclear use; 81% report nuclear use would cause high levels of damage to the Chinese military, and 87% anticipate high damage to Chinese civilians. Moreover, the median respondent self-reports knowing “some” about American foreign policy and has an associate’s degree.

Respondents also effectively receive the treatment. When told Chinese non-nuclear or nuclear forces are more powerful than U.S. nuclear or non-nuclear forces, 85% of respondents agree the United States does not possess nuclear superiority or conventional superiority, respectively. When told U.S. non-nuclear forces are more powerful than their Chinese counterparts, 90% of respondents agree China does not possess conventional superiority. Similarly, when told U.S. nuclear forces are more powerful than Chinese nuclear forces, 95% of respondents agree China does not possess nuclear superiority.

Similarly, treatments on the nuclear and conventional balance of power between the United States and China cause respondents to update their perceptions of how threatening Chinese forces are. When respondents are told Chinese conventional forces are superior, only 11% of respondents view these forces as “significantly” or “somewhat” nonthreatening; conversely, when U.S. forces are said to be superior, the percentage of respondents viewing these forces as nonthreatening is more than twice as large. Similarly, when the Chinese nuclear arsenal is more powerful than the American one, only 6% of respondents are not threatened by Chinese nuclear forces. When the U.S. nuclear is more powerful, the percentage of respondents who do not find Chinese nuclear forces threatening is more than twice as large. This suggests respondents understand the strategic implications of the balance of power—and respond to the treatment as such—even if they do not update their policy preferences in response.⁹³

93. One could also be concerned that respondents simply think that a small number of nuclear weapons is a sufficient deterrent; this could explain non-responsiveness to information about the nuclear balance of

These results call into the question the consequentialist understanding. This survey's results suggest public indifference to the odds of victory. Instead, I find majority support for declaring war against China following a militarized crisis, regardless of the nuclear or conventional balance of power. In addition, I find robust, high levels of willingness to approve a significant escalatory measure: the use of nuclear weapons against mainland China. Almost three-quarters of respondents indicate they would approve nuclear use, even when told the United States' nuclear arsenal is far inferior to its Chinese counterpart. While respondents initially prefer more proportional responses, willingness to accept significant escalation suggests limits to deterrence.

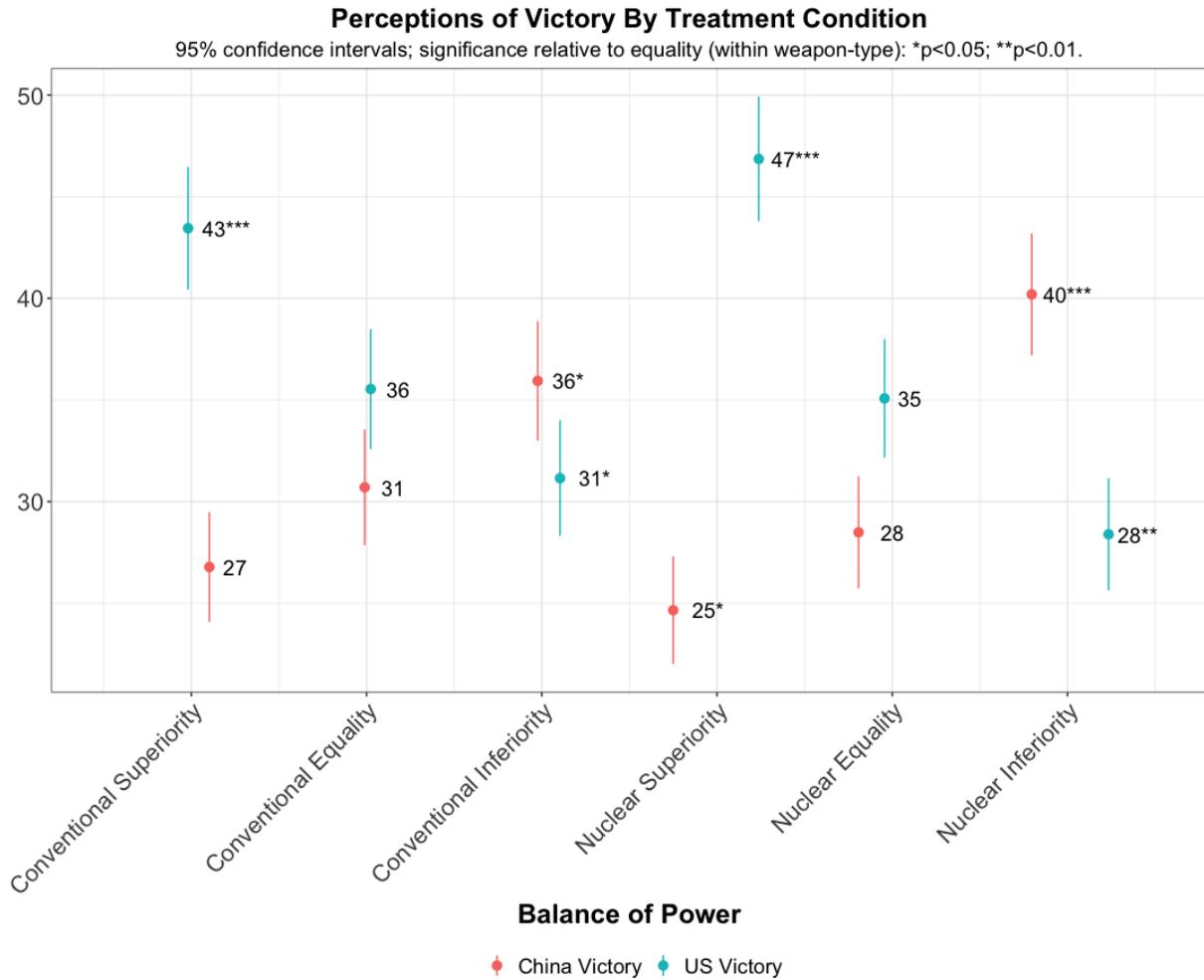
4.2 Making Non-Strategic Calculations

Military superiority does not drive respondents' support for declaring war against China. Instead, respondents exhibit high levels of support for war and escalation, even when told the United States is at a severe military disadvantage relative to China. This persists across changes in the conventional and nuclear balance of power. These results may suggest respondents are not (or are not only) making military-strategic calculations when assessing the use of force.

I test this implication further by examining perceptions about the likelihood of victory against China. The consequentialist approach would expect military superiority will be perceived as providing a meaningful increase in the chances of victory. In turn, expectations of winning should increase support for conflict. Figure 4 shows respondents do generally understand that there is a connection between military superiority and the likelihood of winning a war. Both conventional and nuclear superiority significantly increase anticipation of victory against China and decrease anticipation of loss. Respondents, then, are actively receiving and understanding the implications of the balance of power treatments as the consequentialist model and as existing scholarship on the balance of power would predict.

power. However, this would anticipate low support for the use of force, but respondents generally do not act as if deterred by the Chinese nuclear arsenal.

Figure 4



Despite this, the expected connection between expectations of victory and support for conflict is lacking. Supporting conflict does not necessarily indicate respondents anticipate winning. Of respondents who support a U.S. declaration of war against China, only 48% expect the United States to win that war. As Table 1 shows, there are more respondents who support a declaration of war while anticipating losing than there are respondents who support a declaration of war while anticipating winning. This demonstrates a break in the causal chain of the consequentialist theory; in contrast to that theory's expectations, higher chances of victory are not correlated with increased support for conflict.

In fact, many respondents expressly disagree that the likelihood of winning is an important

component of the decision to go to war. Only 18% of respondents strongly agree “the U.S. should only fight wars it is likely to win.” An additional 21% somewhat agree with the maxim. A majority do not agree anticipation of victory should be a precondition for war. While consequentialist approaches center the perceived probability of victory in utility functions for war, this does not appear to reflect the framework many respondents use to determine their policy preferences.

Table 1: The majority of respondents supporting a declaration of war and the majority of respondents supporting nuclear use anticipate losing a war against China.

		Anticipate Victory?	
		No	Yes
Support Declaration of War?	No	35%	11%
	Yes	28%	26%
Support Nuclear Use?	No	19%	7%
	Yes	44%	29%

Moreover, many respondents are willing to endure significant penalties as a result of a war with China. While the consequentialist approach expects public sensitivity to the cost of conflicts, respondents are, instead, quite willing to fight even when doing so is very costly.

55% of respondents who thought not declaring war would be better for the U.S. economy, and 56% of respondents who thought not declaring war would save more American lives still supported declaring war against China. This suggests respondents who supported wars that they anticipated losing were not simply over-optimistic about the economic or military costs of those wars.

Indeed, respondents that supported declaring war against China still understood it would be costly. In open-ended explanations of their support for a declaration of war, respondents wrote it “may be a bad idea, because they’re stronger than the United States.” They wrote that “war would likely result in significant casualties,” and that they “would be terrified of the events that would follow.” These comments—and many other like them—illustrate that respondents are not just uninformed about or inattentive to the costs of conflict. Instead, respondents understand the immense consequences of fighting a war against China—and yet

they are willing to support doing so.

These patterns apply not just to respondents' support for war, but also to support for escalation. A greater number of respondents supporting nuclear use anticipate failure than victory. Of respondents who support nuclear use, only 39% believe a war against China would be won by the United States. Respondents are also willing to use nuclear weapons even when made aware of large costs. 76% of those who expressed support for nuclear use were still willing to do so even after being told it was "certain that China would respond by using nuclear weapons against the United States."

Similarly, 72% of respondents continued to support nuclear use even after being told it was illegal to do so under international law.⁹⁴ Respondents who support nuclear use also independently anticipate high costs. 68% of respondents who support nuclear use predict inaction would save more lives. 45% expect inaction would be more economically strategic than war; this is more than twice the percentage of respondents opposing nuclear use who think inaction would be better for the U.S. economy. Public willingness to use nuclear weapons against China is therefore not only high, but it is also persistent, both to changes in the balance of power and to information about the costs of nuclear use.

These results show respondents understand the military-strategic value of having a favorable balance of power. They view victory as more likely when the U.S. is more powerful than China. Nevertheless, the consequentialist causal chain fails to explain public support for the use of force. Respondents are willing to undertake strategies that they expect will fail. Support both for declaring war and for using nuclear weapons are high among respondents who anticipate the United States would lose to China.

4.3 Support for Losing Battles

What explains the persistence of support for conflict under unfavorable conditions, such as when costs are high, the United States possesses strategic disadvantages, or the antici-

94. The actual legality of nuclear use is debated. See: Scott Sagan and Allen Weiner, "The Rule of Law and the Role of Strategy in US Nuclear Doctrine," *International Security* 45, no. 4 (2021): 126–166.

pated outcome is losing the war? The consequentialist approach suggests that, under these conditions, there should be many cooperative bargains preferable to war. The most preferred outcome should therefore generally not be conflict under these conditions.⁹⁵ Yet respondents continue to support conflict in disadvantageous circumstances.

I argue that support for a improbably victorious war against China can be explained by deeply held antagonistic views about China. In keeping with that approach, Table 2 finds five measures of in-group and out-group beliefs highly correlated with support for war against China.⁹⁶

Of these five in-group and out-group beliefs, three distinguish between war-supporters who anticipate victory and those who anticipate loss. Respondents who supported war and anticipated victory were more likely to be nationalist than respondents who supported war and anticipated loss. This may be because some highly nationalist respondents over-estimated the likelihood of U.S. victory against China. However, all respondents supporting war saw being American as, on average, between very and somewhat important to their identities.

Respondents supporting an unwinnable war were also more prone to agree they were bothered by the idea of an America where most people are not white.⁹⁷ They were also more likely to agree diversity comes at the expense of white people. These views suggest strong in-group associations and out-group fears.

95. Following Fearon (“Rationalist Explanations for War”), three elements could change that calculus. States will choose to fight wars if 1) the object of the war is not divisible; 2) states over-estimate the probability of victory; or 3) there is a strongly perceived offensive advantage. The first condition does not apply in this crisis scenario (unless, perhaps, respondents have a strong us-or-them perception of competition with China.) The treatment eliminates uncertainty about capabilities. Neither do respondents over-estimate the probability of victory, as Figure 4 shows. Respondents should not perceive a strong offensive advantage, since China is the first-mover in the crisis. Continued high support for war and escalation under conditions of inferiority show an offensive advantage is not perceived. Further discussion of offensive advantage follows.

96. Correlations persist after controlling for partisanship; see Appendix A.2.

97. Respondents’ race is highly associated with the beliefs outlined in Table 2, but note that both white and non-white respondents exhibit each belief. White respondents are 11 percentage points more likely to support declaring war against China than non-white respondents, but they are not significantly more likely to approve of nuclear use. However, non-Asian respondents are more likely to approve of nuclear use against China than are Asian respondents. On average, neither white nor non-white respondents are more likely to support the use of force when the balance of power is more favorable than when it is less favorable.

Note I do not measure specific anti-China attitudes in order to avoid priming effects. Instead, I use measures of general tendencies towards out-group discrimination in order to capture respondents susceptible to this logic. Other scholars have similarly found an association between out-group discrimination and militaristic approaches towards China. For example, Kim⁹⁸ finds that individuals with higher anti-Asian resentment scores are more likely to support hawkish policies towards China.

In-group associations and out-group biases not only increase overall levels of hostility, but they also uniquely explain respondents' willingness to support policies they think will fail. That is, they change how respondents react to the chance of victory.

Table 2: Respondents' mean attitude scores on in-group/out-group beliefs are shown. Responses are scored from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates strong agreement and 5 indicates strong disagreement. Stars indicate significance in a two-tailed t-test comparison with the "Anticipate Loss" category. ***p<0.001; **p<0.01.

In-Group/Out-Group Beliefs	Oppose War	Anticipate Victory	Anticipate Loss
Minorities use racism as an excuse more than they should.	2.68***	2.35	2.33
I often feel like a stranger in my own country.	2.81***	2.82***	2.59
Being American is important to my identity.	2.16***	1.62***	1.86
An America where most people are not white bothers me.	3.55***	3.58***	3.16
Diversity almost always comes at the expense of whites.	3.03***	2.86**	2.66

In-group associations and out-group biases also explain the public's support for the highly costly strategy of nuclear use. Compared to those who oppose nuclear use, supporters more often believe minorities use racism as an excuse (63% vs. 41%), feel demographic change has made them a stranger in their own country (50% vs. 38%), identify their American citizenship as an important part of their identity (78% vs. 60%), feel bothered by the idea of a nonwhite majority in America (31% vs. 15%), and believe diversity comes at the expense of white people (49% vs. 26%). Across several measures, then, in-group and out-group beliefs are highly correlated with support for the use of nuclear weapons.⁹⁹

In-group and out-group attitudes vary between supporters of nuclear use who anticipate

98. D.G. Kim, "Anti-Asian Racial Resentment and American Public Opinion on China," *Paper presented at the 2020 American Political Science Association Annual Meeting*, 2021,

99. This is true even after controlling for partisanship. See Table A.2 in the appendix.

victory and those who anticipate loss. Those who support nuclear use when it is perceived to be inadequate for victory feel more like a stranger in response to increasing demographic change in America. They are also more bothered by the idea of an America where most people are not white.¹⁰⁰ These attitudes reflect strong fears of out-groups. Identity, then, plays a role in explaining the pattern of support for nuclear use even when that strategy is expected to fail. These results suggest the importance of out-group bias in support for nuclear use, even when it is perceived as non-strategic for victory.

Table 3: Respondents’ mean attitude scores on in-group/out-group beliefs are shown. Responses are scored from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates strong agreement and 5 indicates strong disagreement. Stars indicate significance in a two-tailed t-test comparison with the “Anticipate Loss” category. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$.

In-Group/Out-Group Beliefs	Oppose War	Anticipate Victory	Anticipate Loss
Minorities use racism as an excuse more than they should.	2.97***	2.29	2.36
I often feel like a stranger in my own country.	3.00***	2.74*	2.61
Being American is important to my identity.	2.37***	1.60***	1.90
An America where most people are not white bothers me.	3.84***	3.50***	3.17
Diversity almost always comes at the expense of whites.	3.38***	2.75	2.67

In-group and out-group sentiments are apparent in the open-ended responses of individuals who supported an unwinnable war. These respondents often justified their choices with negative conceptions of China or references to American moral superiority. For example, many respondents highlighted negative characteristics of China, calling the country a “warhammer” or saying: “China has a bad human rights record,” “China can’t be trusted,” “China just thinks they can take over the world,” “China doesn’t want peace,” and “China might kill people and we have to stop [them].” Others declared “I don’t like China,” or “they are a problematic nation.”

Often, respondents emphasized the otherness of China; several noted the communist nature of China’s government and many referenced tensions between China and the United States or its allies. These responses reflect strong in-group associations and out-group biases. For example, one respondent wrote simply that the United States and China “don’t

100. However, these respondents are also less nationalist (perhaps because more nationalist respondents tend to over-estimate the probability of victory.)

get along now, so it would be a good idea [to declare war.]” Inherent conceptions of superiority over China also played a role in respondents’ support for war. “China did not respect us!” one respondent declared. Many others emphasized American superiority, writing, for example: “We are the greatest country in the world.” These views may contribute to perceptions that even an unlikely military victory against China would be worth pursuing by raising the stakes of conflict. Respondents are not solely engaging in the strategic-military calculations expected by the consequentialist approach; instead, otherization of out-groups figures centrally.

4.4 Mechanism Test: Violence Against Civilians

The identity-based approach articulated in this paper anticipates a pattern of otherization and demonization of adversaries, expanding beyond state politics to include discrimination against associated individuals. One observable implication is that respondents may be more willing to—or may even expressly desire to—harm adversary civilians.

Indeed, I find high levels of support for violence against Chinese non-combatants, despite generally high theoretical support for the non-combatant immunity norm. Abstract support for this norm is strong: 73% of respondents strongly or somewhat disagree that “it is okay to deliberately target civilians in an enemy country during a war.”¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, almost three-quarters of respondents state they would approve of nuclear use on mainland China, even while understanding the effects of nuclear weapons on civilians. (87% of respondents agree nuclear strikes would cause significant or devastating damage to Chinese civilians.)

Table 4 shows the percentage of respondents approving U.S. nuclear strikes on mainland China under different conditions. Any U.S. nuclear attack would have devastating consequences on civilians. Yet respondents are quite willing to approve. Half would support some form of nuclear first use against China. 16% would support immediate nuclear use, while 25% would support nuclear first use if conventional efforts on Guam failed to cause China’s

101. 55% strongly disagree with this statement.

surrender. 11% would support nuclear first use if U.S. conventional attacks on mainland China failed to succeed, and 15% would support nuclear first-use if China attacked a U.S. state with conventional weapons. Support for nuclear second strikes is also robust, with 41% total support. Substantial minorities of respondents support nuclear second strikes both if China were to use nuclear weapons against U.S. forces on Guam and if China were to attack a U.S. state with nuclear weapons. 18% of respondents support both first and second use of nuclear weapons, while 32% only first use and 24% only support second strikes. Respondents' willingness to use nuclear weapons against populated mainland China reveals willingness to kill massive numbers of Chinese civilians.

Table 4

Condition for U.S. Nuclear Strike on Mainland China	Approval
I would not support a U.S. nuclear attack on mainland China under any circumstances.	25%
Total Approval of Nuclear Non-Use	25%
If China attacked the contiguous United States, Hawaii, and/or Alaska with nuclear forces.	29%
If China attacked U.S. troops on Guam with nuclear forces.	28%
Total Approval of Nuclear Second Strike	41%
If China attacked the contiguous United States, Hawaii, and/or Alaska with non-nuclear forces.	15%
If a U.S. non-nuclear attack on mainland China failed to make China surrender.	11%
If a U.S. non-nuclear attack on Chinese troops in Guam failed to make China surrender.	25%
Immediately after Chinese troops invaded and seized control of Guam	16%
Total Approval of Nuclear First Use	50%

I find high approval rates for nuclear use against China, regardless of the nuclear balance of power. Moreover, I find high support for nuclear use irrespective of the perceived likelihood of victory. These patterns are consistent with the predictions of *H2*, while contradicting those of the consequentialist (*H1*) theory on the nuclear balance of power. Moreover, consistent and high approval for nuclear use is not driven by hawkish attitudes or expected costs of inaction. Instead, the curious pattern of willingness to use force—even when this strategy is

expected to fail—is uniquely correlated with respondents’ in-group and out-group biases.

4.5 Addressing Counterarguments

In-group associations and out-group biases play an important role in respondents’ willingness to use overwhelming force against China. These beliefs also explain the public’s lack of receptivity to strategic calculations about conflict. In this section, I explore two other possible explanations for why respondents might be willing to use force when doing so is not strategic. The first argues that high level of aggression explain this behavior, while the second highlights perceptions about the costs of inaction in the face of China’s provocation. I argue neither approach adequately explains respondents’ preferences.

4.5.1 Aggression & Punishment

One alternative explanation would suggest that respondents are highly aggressive and simply prefer the exercise of violence under any conditions. As a result, respondents would not be attentive to the costs of conflict, such as whether a war is more likely to be won or lost.

However, this does not appear to be the case. Respondents who support a declaration of war while anticipating loss actually express support for pacifist norms rather than aggressive ones. Compared to war-supporters who anticipated victory, these respondents are more likely to agree with the nuclear taboo (71% vs. 62%) and believe the use of military force only makes problems worse (55% vs. 32%).

Similarly, few respondents strongly agree that the situation calls for punishment. Only 24% of respondents strongly agree that “countries that start wars deserve to be punished.”¹⁰² Moreover, attitudes about first-movers in international crises do not significantly vary be-

102. Nevertheless, a milder form of the norm persists: 72% of respondents report between somewhat disagreeing and somewhat agreeing with the view. A sense that China deserves to be punished for being the aggressor has a small effect on support for the use for force. Those who support declaring war against China are 6 percentage points more likely to strongly agree that first-movers should be punished, while respondents who approve of nuclear use against China are 9 percentage points more likely to disapprove of first-movers.

tween those who support the use of force against China who expect the United States to lose a war against China and those who expect the United States to win. Attitudes about the punishment of first-movers therefore cannot explain *why* the consequentialist logic fails in this case.

Respondents with strong preferences about the preservation of international law might also believe that violations of territorial integrity, such as China's actions on Guam, merit a strict response. Respondents generally do express strong support for international law; two-thirds believe it is very important the United States comply with international law. However, when taking into account the balance of power, respondents' views on international law do not correlate with support for declaring war on or for escalating against China. Thus views about punishment for violations of international law do not explain respondents' insensitivity to consequentialist calculations.

Individuals who supported a war against China scored higher on a measure of vengefulness—support for the death penalty—than individuals who opposed war (73% vs. 57%). Scholars have previously connected attitudes about retributive justice to preferences about conflict initiation.¹⁰³ However, vengefulness does not significantly vary between war-supporters who anticipated victory (72%) and loss (74%). This again shows that support for a 'losing battle' against China is not uniquely driven by aggression.

Respondents take a similar tack when deciding to support the use of nuclear weapons—despite high costs and a prevalent anticipation of failure. As with supporters of war declarations, supporters of nuclear use do not simply seem to be more aggressive. Respondents who support nuclear use while anticipating losing a war against China support pacifist norms at similar rates as supporters who anticipate victory. In comparison to supporters of nuclear

103. McDermott, Rose, Lopez, Anthony C., and Hatemi, Peter K., "Blunt Not the Heart, Enrage It': The Psychology of Revenge and Deterrence" [in en-US], Library Catalog: tnsr.org, *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 1 (November 2017), accessed June 13, 2020, <https://tnsr.org/2017/11/blunt-not-heart-enrage-psychology-revenge-deterrence/>; Liberman, "Retributive Support for International Punishment and Torture"; Rachel Stein, "War and Revenge: Explaining Conflict Initiation by Democracies" [in en], Publisher: Cambridge University Press, *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 3 (August 2015): 556–573, ISSN: 0003-0554, 1537-5943, accessed June 15, 2020.

use who anticipate victory, those who anticipate failure report being more morally opposed to the use of nuclear weapons (63% vs. 59%) and more likely to believe the use of military force only makes problems worse (49% vs. 33%). These individuals are no more likely to support the use of death penalty (70% vs. 72%).¹⁰⁴ Neither pacifist nor retaliatory values explain the lack of connection between expectations of victory and preferences on the use of nuclear weapons.

4.5.2 Costs of Inaction

Respondents' preferences could potentially also be explained by perceptions that the overall costs of inaction in the face of Chinese expansionism are higher than the costs of war. This argument would suggest that respondents are, in fact, making cost-benefit calculations about the use of force, but that expectations about the consequences of failing to use force supersede the costs of fighting a war that is unlikely to be won.

This also does not appear to be the case. Respondents who support a war they expect to lose against China are less likely to believe China poses a security threat (56% vs. 68%) and are no more likely to believe choosing not to fight against China would harm the United States' reputation (78% vs. 80%), make other countries act more aggressively (78% vs. 79%), or make a future fight against China more likely (70% vs. 69%). These preferences also suggest there is not a strongly perceived offensive advantage. Respondents who support war and anticipate losing are not more likely to expect prompt action against China to prevent heavy future costs. These findings further undermine the consequentialist approach.

Neither do expectations about the costs of nuclear use explain why support for nuclear use is high when respondents expect it to fail. Instead, those who support nuclear use in the face of likely defeat are more likely to expect inaction to be a viable option. These respondents are less likely than nuclear-use-supporting respondents who anticipate victory to believe inaction would hurt the United States' global reputation (71% vs. 75%). They are

104. Those who opposed nuclear use were less supportive of the death penalty (51%), more supportive of the nuclear taboo (72%), and more likely to view military force as counterproductive (55%).

also less likely to believe inaction would lead to military aggressiveness by other nations (71% vs. 75%), and they are just as likely to expect inaction would lead to a future U.S.-China war (64% vs. 66%). Compared to respondents who support a nuclear war they anticipate winning, respondents who anticipate losing do not necessarily view that option as more strategic than refusing to fight against China. They do not appear to anticipate a more significant, long-term offensive advantage to the use of nuclear weapons.¹⁰⁵ This emphasizes that preferences for nuclear use when victory is unlikely do not make sense in a strictly consequentialist framework.

5 Conclusion

While the literature on the balance of power has generally focused on how relative military capabilities should affect states' choices, these theories have clear implications for public preferences. To the extent the consequentialist approach is correct that large militaries provide tangible strategic advantages, the domestic public should exhibit more support for the use of force in cases when the balance of power tips in their favor. The consequentialist theory suggests relative capabilities should shape conflict by changing perceptions of the likelihood of victory.

I offer a contrasting theory, which explains why individuals may be willing to use force against adversaries even in disadvantageous circumstances. I theorize strong in-group associations and out-group biases develop in the context of enmity. These beliefs create hostility against adversary powers and skew policy preferences towards aggressiveness and inflexibility.

This paper tests these theories with a survey experiment about a militarized crisis between the United States and China in the South Pacific. After varying the nuclear and conventional balance of power between U.S. and Chinese forces, the survey asks respondents to report preferences for crisis response. I assess attitudes about declaring war on and using nuclear

105. However, expectations of cost may explain why some respondents support nuclear use and others oppose it. Respondents opposing nuclear use see inaction as less costly: 62% anticipate reputation costs to inaction; 58% anticipate inaction to lead to aggression; and 46% expect inaction to result in a later war against China.

weapons against China.

I find minimal evidence the balance of power influences public preferences on conflict initiation or escalation. Support for declarations of war and approval of nuclear use are consistently high, regardless of the nuclear or conventional balance of power. These results suggest limits to deterrence. Even when the costs of war are understood to be high, the public is willing to take action. The results also raise questions for the consequentialist approach, since public support for conflict persists even when strategic conditions are unfavorable.

Indeed, the public does not appear to make strategic military calculations as consequentialist theories would expect. The majority of respondents who support a war against China also anticipate losing that war. Similarly, only a minority of respondents who support nuclear use against China expect victory.

What explains this odd preference? I show that respondents' who support 'unwinnable' wars and nuclear use when they expect the U.S. to lose have stronger in-group associations and out-group biases than supporters who anticipate victory. These beliefs feature prominently in respondents' explanations for their support for conflict and conflict escalation. Moreover, I find respondents very willing to use violence against civilians, again suggesting out-group biases play a critical role in shaping public preferences on conflict.

While this study focuses on the U.S. public's attitudes about China, many other U.S. adversaries have been similarly otherized. Future research could examine the role of status threat in U.S. foreign policy towards other long-standing adversaries, such as Iran, Russia, or North Korea. In-group associations and out-group biases also commonly feature in disputes across the globe. Contestation over minority rights issues hamper Turkey-Greece relations; religious disagreements overlie animosity between India and Pakistan; a history of racial animus animates competition between China and Japan. Future scholarship could further integrate the study of race and identity into scholarship on public opinion in these and others global conflicts.

To date, scholarship on public support for the use of force has largely found the pub-

lic to be consequentialist. However, this paper highlights the need to better incorporate understandings of race and identity into research on military and foreign policy. In particular, I find that in-group associations and out-group biases may play an important role in shaping public preferences on these topics. These results illustrate a potential source of pressure on policymakers facing crisis decisions against adversary powers. The public may approve of—or could even openly advocate for—aggressive policies, even when these policies would be strategically disadvantageous. In this way, the public could enable or contribute to escalation, whether against adversaries that are more powerful or less.

A Appendix

A.1 Regression Results

Table A.1: Nuclear inferiority has a small, significant effect on support for conflict initiation; otherwise, there is no effect of the balance of power on conflict initiation or escalation. The base category for both the conventional and nuclear balance of power is force equality.

	<i>Binary Dependent Variables:</i>			
	Support Declaration of War		Approve of Nuclear Use	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Conventional Inferiority	-0.017 (0.022)	-0.008 (0.021)	-0.022 (0.020)	-0.011 (0.019)
Conventional Superiority	-0.021 (0.022)	-0.010 (0.021)	-0.007 (0.020)	0.001 (0.019)
Nuclear Inferiority	-0.045** (0.022)	-0.039* (0.021)	-0.009 (0.019)	-0.002 (0.019)
Nuclear Superiority	0.026 (0.022)	0.024 (0.021)	0.025 (0.020)	0.022 (0.019)
Knowledge		0.074*** (0.008)		0.050*** (0.007)
Age		0.004*** (0.001)		-0.001* (0.001)
Education		-0.0001 (0.006)		-0.005 (0.005)
Female		-0.010 (0.019)		-0.051*** (0.017)
Republican		0.144*** (0.019)		0.150*** (0.017)
Kids		-0.022 (0.019)		0.051*** (0.017)
Veteran		0.090*** (0.029)		0.072*** (0.026)
Constant	0.558*** (0.020)	0.200*** (0.040)	0.739*** (0.018)	0.580*** (0.036)
Observations	3,075	3,064	3,075	3,064
R ²	0.004	0.089	0.002	0.071
Adjusted R ²	0.003	0.085	0.0002	0.068
Residual Std. Error	0.498 (df = 3070)	0.477 (df = 3052)	0.442 (df = 3070)	0.426 (df = 3052)
F Statistic	2.926** (df = 4; 3070)	26.947*** (df = 11; 3052)	1.180 (df = 4; 3070)	21.282*** (df = 11; 3052)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

A.2 Effects of In-Group/Out-Group Beliefs

Table A.2: In-group/out-group beliefs are scored from strong approval (1) to strong disapproval (5). In binary models, each belief has a significant correlation with the outcome variables; in the multivariate models shown here, with an added control for partisanship, several beliefs maintain their association with support for conflict initiation and escalation.

	<i>Binary Dependent Variables:</i>	
	Approve of Nuclear Use	Support Declaration of War
	(1)	(2)
Racism Excuse	-0.018** (0.008)	-0.018** (0.009)
Stranger	0.007 (0.007)	0.013 (0.008)
Democrats Too Concerned with Appeal to Nonwhites	-0.026*** (0.008)	-0.015 (0.009)
Nationalism	-0.054*** (0.007)	-0.057*** (0.008)
Nonwhite America Bothers	-0.013* (0.007)	0.004 (0.008)
Diversity At Whites' Expense	-0.025*** (0.008)	-0.001 (0.009)
Republican	0.071*** (0.018)	0.120*** (0.021)
Constant	1.028*** (0.028)	0.654*** (0.032)
Observations	3,075	3,075
R ²	0.095	0.051
Adjusted R ²	0.093	0.049
Residual Std. Error (df = 3067)	0.421	0.486
F Statistic (df = 7; 3067)	45.884***	23.558***

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

A.3 Survey Design

The full survey text and flow are available in the online appendix. The experimental treatment reads as follows, with options in brackets randomized evenly across all respondents. All emphasis shown is original.

Now, you are going to be asked some questions about what would happen if China invaded Guam, which is an island territory of the United States located in the western Pacific Ocean.

The United States military has troops stationed on Guam. Residents of Guam are citizens of the United States.

Please read the following questions carefully.

[Page Break]

Imagine that after months of skirmishes between the Chinese and American navies in the South China Sea, Chinese troops invaded Guam and seized control of the island.

At this time, U.S. military officials believe:

- China’s **nuclear** forces are [significantly more powerful than/equally as powerful as/significantly less powerful than] American nuclear forces.
- China’s **non-nuclear** forces are [significantly more powerful than/equally as powerful as/significantly less powerful than] American non-nuclear forces.

A.4 2019 Results

The survey results are unlikely to be affected by the timing of the COVID-19 crisis. On the March 3rd, 2020 opening of the survey, the total number of COVID-19 cases in the United States was just 177. By the last day of the survey, March 14th, that had risen to 2,323. In comparison, there were 145,813 known cases on the last day of March. It was not until March 13th that President Donald Trump declared COVID-19 a national emergency. Only 301 respondents completed the survey on March 13th or 14th. Dropping these respondents does not meaningfully change the results. Beginning on March 12th, respondents were asked about their level of concern regarding COVID-19 and their trust in the U.S. government to handle the situation. 46% of respondents who answered these questions reported viewing COVID-19 as very concerning, and an additional 26% found it somewhat concerning. 64% of respondents who answered these questions were very or somewhat confident in the U.S. government's ability to address COVID-19.

The survey results also match the findings of a pre-test run between September 20th, 2019 and October 2nd, 2019. The pre-test, detailed here, shows high levels of public support for nuclear use—including nuclear first use—against China. The pre-test found little effect of the balance of power on attitudes about conflict with China. The nuclear balance of power had no effect on respondents' support for nuclear use against China, while conventional inferiority led to a small (between 3 and 4 percentage points) decrease in respondents' support for air strikes against mainland China. However, there was no advantage of conventional superiority relative to equality, and in every treatment condition, more than three-quarters of respondents supported air strikes.

The pre-test was a study of a 1,758-person representative sample of Americans using Lucid's Fulcrum technology from 9/20/19–10/2/19. Respondents were told: "Now, you are going to be asked some questions about what would happen if China invaded Guam, which is an island territory of the United States located in the western Pacific Ocean. Residents of Guam are citizens of the United States. Please read the following questions carefully. Imagine

that after months of skirmishes between the Chinese and American navies in the South China Sea, Chinese forces have invaded Guam, where approximately 7,000 U.S. troops are stationed. The Chinese military has used bombs and heavy artillery. China has threatened to escalate the conflict further if the United States does not agree to recognize China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea and end the war.”

Respondents were given a treatment that varied the nuclear balance of power between the United States and China. This treatment read: “At this time, experts estimate that China has approximately [5/50/300/1,500/3,000] strategic nuclear weapons in its arsenal, while the United States has approximately 1,500 strategic nuclear weapons.”

Respondents were then asked: “Which of the following strategies would you prefer the United States to take?” and presented with four options: “Attack China immediately with nuclear weapons; Attack China with nuclear weapons only if the U.S. cannot repel Chinese troops using conventional force; Attack China with nuclear weapons only if China uses nuclear weapons first; Do not attack China with nuclear weapons under any circumstances.”

Respondents were also given a treatment that varied the balance of air power between the two countries. This treatment read: “At this time, experts estimate that a war with China would primarily rely on air power capabilities. China has approximately [50/500/2,000/5,000] fighter and bomber aircraft, while the United States has approximately 2,000.”

Respondents were then asked: “Which of the following strategies would you prefer the United States to take?” and presented with four options: “Attack mainland China with U.S. military aircraft immediately; Attack mainland China with U.S. military aircraft only after the U.S. fails to repel Chinese troops from Guam using other conventional methods’ Attack mainland China with U.S. military aircraft only if China attacks mainland U.S. with military aircraft first; Do not attack China with U.S. military aircraft under any circumstances.” These treatment options are visually represented in **Figure A.1**.

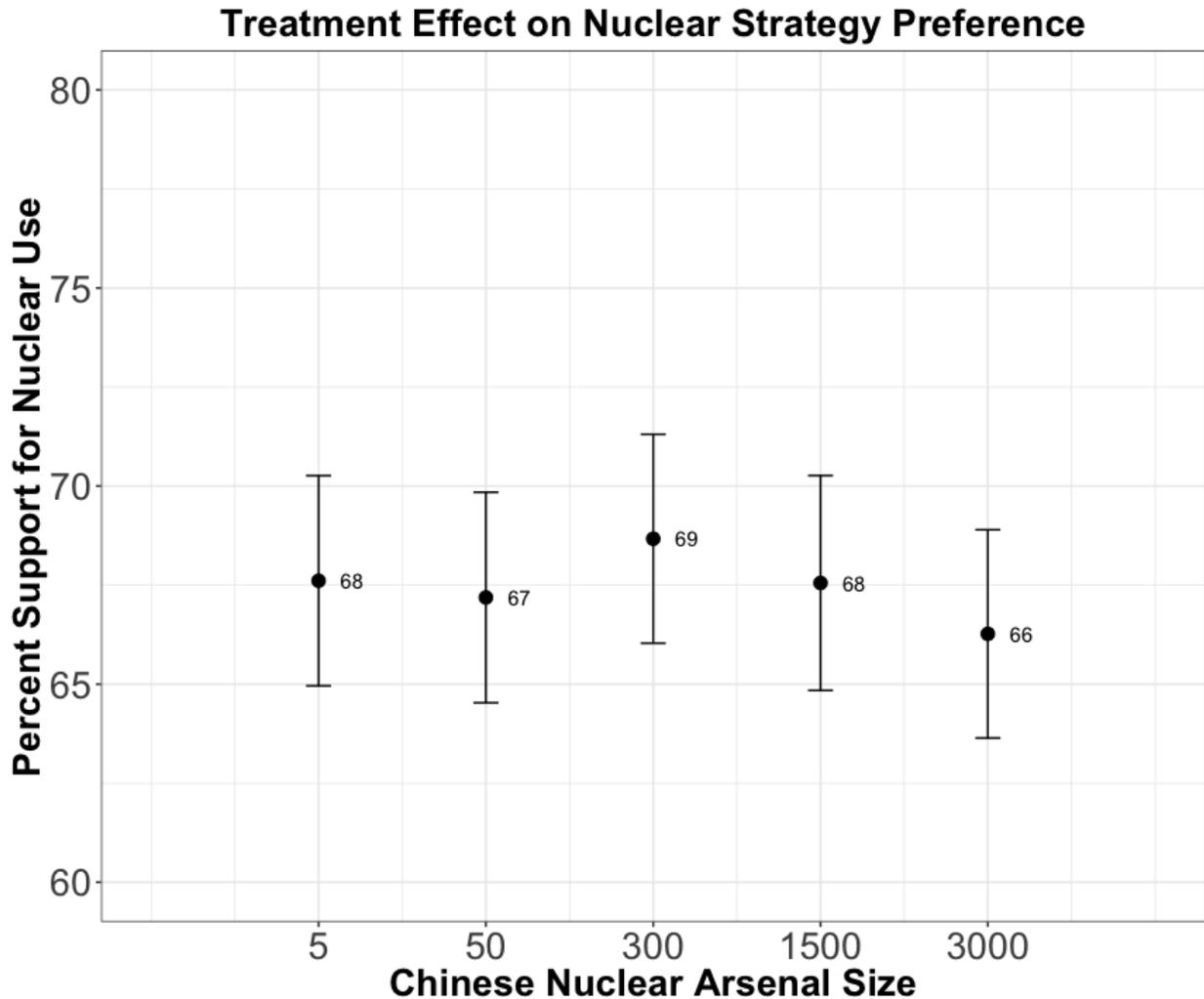
The nuclear balance of power has no effect on respondents’ support for nuclear use, as shown in **Figure A.2**. For two-thirds of all respondents, the preferred strategic option

Figure A.1: Experimental Design

All Respondents Receive the Following Background:	
<p>Now, you are going to be asked some questions about what would happen if China invaded Guam, which is an island territory of the United States located in the western Pacific Ocean. Residents of Guam are citizens of the United States. Please read the following questions carefully. Imagine that after months of skirmishes between the Chinese and American navies in the South China Sea, Chinese forces have invaded Guam, where approximately 7,000 U.S. troops are stationed. The Chinese military has used bombs and heavy artillery. China has threatened to escalate the conflict further if the United States does not agree to recognize China's territorial claims in the South China Sea and end the war.</p>	
Nuclear Treatment Text:	Conventional Treatment Text:
<p>At this time, experts estimate that China has approximately _____ strategic nuclear weapons in its arsenal, while the United States has approximately 1,500 strategic nuclear weapons. Which of the following strategies would you prefer the United States to take?</p>	<p>At this time, experts estimate that a war with China would primarily rely on air power capabilities. China has approximately _____ fighter and bomber aircraft, while the United States has approximately 2,000. Which of the following strategies would you prefer the United States to take?</p>
Chinese Nuclear Arsenal Size Options:	Chinese Air Force Size Options:
<p>5 50 300 1500 3000</p>	<p>50 500 2000 5000</p>
Nuclear Strategy Preference Options:	Conventional Strategy Preference Options:
<p>Immediate 1st Strike: "Attack China immediately with nuclear weapons." Delayed 1st Strike: "Attack China with nuclear weapons only if the U.S. cannot repel Chinese troops using conventional force." 2nd Strike: "Attack China with nuclear weapons only if China uses nuclear weapons first. " No Strike: "Do not attack China with nuclear weapons under any circumstances."</p>	<p>Immediate 1st Strike: "Attack mainland China with U.S. military aircraft immediately." Delayed 1st Strike: "Attack mainland China with U.S. military aircraft only after the U.S. fails to repel Chinese troops from Guam using other conventional methods." 2nd Strike: "Attack mainland China with U.S. military aircraft only if China attacks mainland U.S. with military aircraft first." No Strike: "Do not attack mainland China with U.S. military aircraft under any circumstances."</p>

was some version of nuclear use against China, compared to one-third of respondents who chose not to use nuclear weapons against China. This indicates the public has a fairly high willingness to use nuclear weapons, regardless of the nuclear balance of power. The public is also willing to support nuclear first use against China.

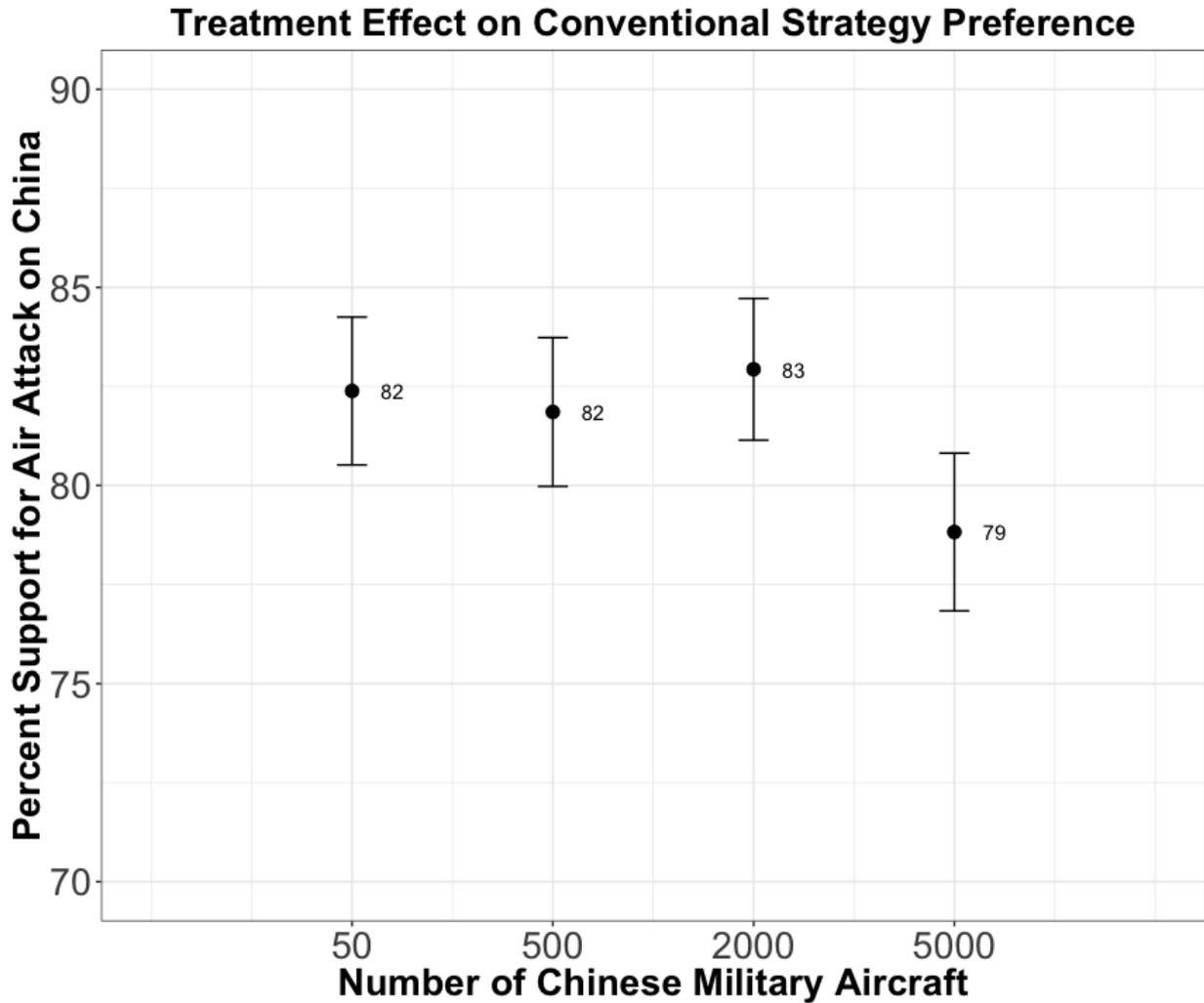
Figure A.2



The conventional balance of power has minimal effects on respondents' support for attacks on China. In every treatment condition, more than three-quarters of respondents support air strikes against China. Even when U.S. airpower is significantly inferior to Chinese air power, the vast majority of respondents support the use of air attacks against Chinese forces. **Figure A.3** shows that support for a conventional attack on China is slightly higher when

the balance of power between the U.S. and Chinese air forces is equal or favors the United States than when it favors China. However, these effects are substantively small, ranging only between 3 and 4 percentage points.

Figure A.3



This data is included in the appendix and not the main paper because there are concerns about data reliability. The initial set of respondents was 3,386 individuals. However, only 1,758 passed the attention check question. (The results above exclude respondents who failed the attention check) The attention check question asked respondents:

Most modern theories of decision making recognize that decisions do not take place in a vacuum. Individual preferences and knowledge, along with situational variables can greatly impact the decision process. To demonstrate that you've read this much, just go ahead and select both red and green among the alternatives below, no matter what your favorite color is. Yes, ignore the question below and select both of those options. What is your favorite color?

The low pass rate could be related to the fact that the survey was fielded during Lucid's transition from the Academic Beta service to the Academic Pro service. The main paper contains a replication and modification of this survey, which was fielded using Lucid's Marketplace service. This service allows researchers substantially more control over the fielding process than the Academic Beta or Academic Pro platforms.

A.5 Human Subjects Research

The surveys were conducted using Lucid's Academic Beta (2019) or Marketplace (2020) technologies. Both provide surveys to various secondary companies and platforms that recruit survey respondents. All respondents were provided with compensation in line with their usual rates at those secondary companies and platforms.

All surveys were approved by the researcher's home institution's Institutional Review Board. The board concluded that "the only involvement of human subjects in the research activities will be in one or more of the categories that are exempt from the regulations." The exemption was provided because the research was deemed to be:

research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §.111(a)(7).

The research met criteria i. and ii. of the above exemption standard. No limited review of the research was required. There was no visual or auditory recordings involved in the data collection process. The surveys were conducted online.

The researcher's ethics training was up-to-date at the time of the surveys' design and

execution, and the researcher had studied survey designed as well as implemented previous surveys with IRB approval. The surveys did not target any vulnerable populations; the samples were representative samples of the adult (18+) U.S. population. Respondents were compensated; compensation was approved by the researcher's IRB. No deception was used. Respondents actively consented to take the surveys and could leave the surveys at any time. The text of the consent form for both the 2019 and 2020 surveys follows:

DESCRIPTION: You are invited to participate in a research study to enhance understanding of public preferences on military and social issues. You will be asked to answer questions on a survey, which will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. You will receive monetary compensation for your participation.

PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS: If you have read this form and have decided to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. The alternative is not to participate. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. The results of this research study may be presented at scientific or professional meetings or published in scientific journals. Your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study. There are no risks or benefits associated with this study.

CONTACT INFORMATION: Questions: If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this research, its procedures, risks and benefits, write to the Protocol Director at [REDACTED]

Independent Contact: If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a participant, please contact the [REDACTED] Institutional Review Board (IRB) to speak to someone independent of the research

team at [REDACTED]. You can also write to [REDACTED.]

Do you wish to participate in this study?

- Yes. I want to participate in this study and consent to all of the above.
- No. I do not want to participate in this study and do not consent to all of the above.

More details on the questions used in the survey are available in the Online Appendix. The surveys were conducted in full compliance with the Principles and Guidelines for Human Subjects Research approved at the 2020 Spring Council APSA Meeting. The IRB approval form for this research can be provided upon request.