

Russian Invasion of Ukraine and Chinese Public Support for War*

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Abstract

This study examines how the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent Western responses to the invasion influence public opinion on the use of military force in China. Using two original, pre-registered survey experiments, first in June 2022 and then in June 2023, we show that the Russian aggression increases Chinese support for using military force in international affairs in general and against Taiwan in particular. However, information about Western military measures aiding Ukraine curbs the emboldening impact of the invasion. Such information is especially effective in diminishing support for an outright military invasion of Taiwan. Causal mediation analyses reveal that the Russian invasion influences public opinion by inducing optimistic expectations of military success and pessimistic expectations of peaceful conflict resolution. These findings underline the possibility that authoritarian military aggression abroad and subsequent Western reactions can influence public opinion toward using military force in other autocracies.

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

Word Count: 7,933

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1 Introduction

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

These public debates highlight the possibility that international military aggression by an authoritarian government and the subsequent Western reactions can potentially influence political leaders and the public in other autocracies, shaping their views about using military force in international affairs. To empirically explore this possibility, our study focuses on the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Chinese public opinion toward using military force in general and against Taiwan. Given that most of the current public debates focus on the impact of Russian aggression on China, our examination of Chinese public opinion is timely and significant.

Building on the burgeoning literature on public opinion toward the use of force (Bell and Quek 2018; Dill and Schubiger 2021; Fang and Li 2020; Grieco et al. 2011; Incerti et al. 2021; Li and Chen 2021; Quek and Johnston 2017; Tomz and Weeks 2013, 2020; Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo 2020; Weiss 2013, 2019; Weiss and Dafoe 2019), we ask *how do the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent Western economic and military responses influence public support for the use of military force in China.*

We identify two sets of factors that can influence public opinion toward the use of force: (1) instrumental considerations that are directly related to the perceived costs and benefits of using military force, and (2) non-instrumental considerations that are more closely related

to the normative assessments about using military force (Dill and Schubiger 2021; Fang and Li 2020; Grieco et al. 2011; Kertzer et al. 2014; Tomz and Weeks 2013). We lay out several theoretical expectations about how each set of factors can shape Chinese public opinion following the Russian invasion and the subsequent Western military and economic reactions.

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

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

Our study contributes to the literature on public opinion toward foreign affairs in general (Dill and Schubiger 2021; Fang et al. 2022; Gartner 2008; Grieco et al. 2011; Kertzer et al. 2014; Tomz and Weeks 2013, 2020; Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo 2020) and in autocracies in particular (Fang and Li 2020; Incerti et al. 2021; Li and Chen 2021; Liu and Li forthcoming; Qi, Zhang and Lin 2022; Weeks 2012; Weiss 2014, 2019; Weiss and Dafoe 2019). While

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

This study also addresses current concerns surrounding how Russian aggression can increase bellicosity, especially among autocracies engaged in irredentism (Hale and Siroky 2022; Siroky and Hale 2017), and the effectiveness of potential countermeasures. Our findings directly relate to the impact of Russian aggression on China, providing empirical evidence of heightened Chinese public hawkishness following the invasion. Nevertheless, we show that Western military responses can limit Chinese public support for using military force. It is important to note that, during the study period, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict was ongoing and highly salient. Hence, we approach projections about the durability of its impact with caution. Future studies during subsequent periods and across different countries will aid in comprehensively evaluating its repercussions on global public support for the use of military force in foreign affairs.

2 Public Support for the Use of Force in Autocracies

Despite the perception that autocrats are unrestricted by public opinion when making policy decisions, a growing body of research in comparative politics and international relations shows that public support can be consequential in autocracies (Chen and Xu 2017; Dickson 2016; Geddes and Zaller 1989; Incerti et al. 2021; Li and Chen 2021; Weeks 2012; Weiss 2014), and authoritarian governments invest significant resources in propaganda and censorship to

shape public opinion (Gehlbach and Sonin 2014; King, Pan and Roberts 2013; Rozenas and Stukal 2019).

In the realm of foreign policy, public opinion toward using military force can be especially important for autocrats for several reasons. First, autocratic leaders may encounter audience costs from both the political elites and the masses while managing foreign relations, especially in single-party states with civilian leaders like China (Li and Chen 2021; Weeks 2008, 2012; Weiss 2014; Weiss and Dafoe 2019). As such, single-party states with civilian leaders tend to behave similarly to their democratic counterparts in handling international conflicts (Weeks 2012). For example, both Li and Chen (2021) and Weiss and Dafoe (2019) find that Chinese leaders suffer from public backlash for unpopular foreign policies similar to democratic leaders. Moreover, in autocracies, decisions to use military force can be linked to regime legitimacy, and disregarding public opinion on these matters may challenge the foundations of dictatorial rule (Weeks 2008, 2012). In China, for example, international conflicts are closely tied to Chinese nationalism and the legitimacy of the Communist Party (Dickson 2016; Mattingly and Chen 2022; Weiss 2014). Such conflicts frequently become the focal point for citizens to rally around and protest, affecting the regime's image and stability (King, Pan and Roberts 2013; Weiss 2014). For example, when US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi disregarded Beijing's warnings and visited Taiwan in August 2022, the Chinese public expressed anger and frustration over the inadequate response from the People's Liberation Army, putting pressure on the party leadership (Bloomberg 2022).

Given the potential importance of public opinion in foreign affairs and domestic constraints that civilian dictators may encounter, one likely channel through which authoritarian military aggression abroad (such as the Russian invasion) may impact bellicosity at home (such as China's potential use of force against Taiwan) is through the former's impact on public opinion. In particular, the Russian invasion could shape Chinese public opinion toward their government's use of force by providing information about the potential costs, benefits, and consequences of using military force.

In the following sections, we outline our expectations about how the Russian invasion influences the Chinese public by drawing on existing research on the determinants of public opinion toward the use of force. We identify two primary sets of factors: (1) instrumental considerations, which pertain to the costs and benefits of using military force; and (2) non-instrumental considerations, which relate to the justifiability of using military force.

2.1 Instrumental Considerations

Instrumental considerations primarily concern the perceived costs and benefits of using military force. In democracies, instrumental factors significantly influence public opinion toward military involvements (Dill and Schubiger 2021; Gartner 2008; Tomz and Weeks 2013). For instance, Gartner (2008) and Dill and Schubiger (2021) reveal that increasing the economic and military costs of war (e.g., American military casualties) significantly reduces public support for military involvement. Similarly, the perceived threat from adversaries and the likelihood of military success can increase support by raising the perceived benefits of using force. However, previous studies suggest that instrumental considerations play a lesser role in shaping public opinion in autocracies, compared to democracies. For instance, Weiss and Dafoe (2019) finds that military costs have null effects on Chinese individuals' approval of their government's foreign policy. Similarly, Li and Chen (2021) shows that less than 20% of Chinese respondents disapprove of their government's foreign policies due to instrumental reasons, as opposed to over 60% for non-instrumental reasons.

We expect the Russian invasion of Ukraine to send mixed signals to the Chinese public regarding the costs and benefits of using military force. On the one hand, Russia has faced severe economic and military costs and failed to achieve complete control over Ukrainian territory or regime change, potentially increasing the perception that using military force is costly and unlikely to succeed. On the other hand, the Russian economy has shown resilience, bolstered by rising oil and gas prices and a relatively stable currency following the initial impact of Western measures. Additionally, the Russian Army has successfully occupied

most of the Donbas region and several major cities in Eastern Ukraine (at least by June 2023). More importantly, Chinese media have emphasized Russia's military and economic strength rather than its vulnerabilities, leading us to expect a weak increase in Chinese public support for using military force. We expect the positive effect to be small because of the mixed information about the costs of conflict and the existing evidence suggesting that citizens in autocracies may be less responsive to the costs of conflicts than their democratic counterparts. Moreover, we expect specific reminders about the Western economic and military measures against Russia to influence instrumental considerations by increasing the perception that using force is costly. Accordingly, such information is likely to decrease public support for using force.

Another instrumental factor that the public can learn from international conflicts is the level of threats from adversaries. An increased sense of threat can raise the perceived benefits of using force. According to Tomz and Weeks (2013), the perception of foreign threats is the strongest mediator between the adversary's regime type and the American public's support for wars. Similarly, research on autocracies also suggests that foreign threats influence public support for the use of force (Quek and Johnston 2017; Weiss and Dafoe 2019). For example, in the case of China threats from the United States tend to boost hawkishness and decrease the willingness to back down (Quek and Johnston 2017; Weiss and Dafoe 2019). We expect the Russian invasion to increase the perception of foreign threats among the Chinese public. The Chinese government's propaganda repeatedly emphasizes NATO's eastward expansion as the root cause of the Russian invasion and highlights Russia's "legitimate security concerns" (Al Jazeera 2022). Thus, we anticipate the invasion to increase the perception of Western threat and support for using military force among the Chinese respondents. Additionally, exposure to information on Western economic and military measures against Russia should further augment the public perception of threats from the West and increase support for using force.

2.2 Non-Instrumental Considerations

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

Morality is one of the most important predictors of attitudes toward foreign affairs (Kertzer et al. 2014). Studies in democracies indicate that individuals may perceive the use of force as moral and justifiable based on several factors, such as adversaries' regime type (Tomz and Weeks 2013) or the targeting of civilians versus non-civilians (Dill and Schubiger 2021). For instance, military actions may be perceived as more morally justifiable against dictatorships than democracies, resulting in higher support for wars against the former.

We expect morality to play a crucial role in shaping Chinese public opinion. Previous research on China's grand strategy highlights the importance of "righteousness" in using force in Chinese political thought and culture (Johnston 1998). A large segment of the Chinese public believes that China is a peace-loving country that never engages in wars unless it is righteous to do so (Johnston 1998; Quek and Johnston 2017; Weiss 2019). An essential source of such "righteousness" lies in the significance of territorial integrity. That is, using force for the sake of territorial integrity is highly likely to be considered righteous among the Chinese public. Both China and Russia frequently emphasize territorial integrity and historical ownership of certain territories to justify their hawkish policies. Putin's rhetoric, claiming Ukraine is part of Russia and denying a separate Ukrainian identity reinforces the belief in the righteousness of wars that protect territorial integrity. As such, we expect the Russian invasion to bolster the perception that using military force can be morally justifiable and subsequently increase support for it.

A distinct yet closely related non-instrumental consideration is the perceived feasibility

of peaceful resolutions. When morality or “righteousness” plays a significant role in shaping public opinion toward using force, the adversary is perceived as immoral and unrighteous (Johnston 1998). This perception makes compromising with an unrighteous adversary unacceptable and peaceful resolutions unlikely. Such pessimistic views on peaceful conflict resolution can help justify using military force. For example, in conflicts involving historical territorial disputes, the Chinese public is less willing to compromise because they deem the historical territory as indivisible (Fang and Li 2020) and territorial wars as righteous. We expect the Russian aggression to lead to pessimistic perceptions about peaceful conflict resolution among the Chinese public. First, if the public perceives Russian aggression as a righteous act for territorial integrity, they are unlikely to envision a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Second, long-lasting tension between Russia and the West can inform Chinese citizens about the feasibility of peaceful resolutions. During the past decades, the West and Russia have made significant efforts for peace, most notably through NATO’s Partnership for Peace program and the Minsk Agreements in 2014 and 2015, yet these efforts did not succeed in preventing conflict in Ukraine.

Finally, another non-instrumental consideration highlighted in the literature is the legality of using force (Dill and Schubiger 2021). In democratic contexts, research suggests that the public considers international law while forming opinions toward military involvement. Regarding the Russian invasion, many scholars and policymakers underline that Russia’s actions violate Ukraine’s territorial integrity and the Charter of the United Nations (United Nations 2022). Accordingly, the invasion could diminish support for military operations by prompting respondents to think about potential violations of international laws. While we find this reasoning more likely in democracies with sufficient information on international law, we expect it to play a limited role in autocratic contexts.

In summary, we expect the Russian invasion of Ukraine to influence Chinese public support for using force through two sets of mechanisms. First, the invasion can affect instrumental calculations, bolstering public confidence in potential military success and increasing

threat perceptions, thus leading to heightened Chinese hawkishness. However, additional information about Western economic and military measures against Russia should increase the perceived cost of using force and decrease support for it. Second, the invasion may also spur Chinese hawkishness through its impact on non-instrumental considerations, instilling that military force is morally justifiable while peaceful conflict resolution remains unfeasible.¹

3 Experimental Design

We conducted two online survey experiments in China to examine the impact of the Russian invasion on public opinion regarding the use of military force. The first experiment was conducted in June 2022, shortly after the conflict began, while the second experiment took place in June 2023, approximately a year and a half after the conflict’s onset. We recruited 4,008 and 3,193 participants in the two surveys, respectively. The second experiment allowed us to assess the potentially transient nature of the initial findings and their reliance on the timing of the first experiment.²

The demographic characteristics of our samples are presented in Appendix Table A1. Both males and females, various age groups, and all major geographical regions were adequately represented in the samples. Although our samples had higher education levels than the general population, highly educated individuals tend to be more politically active, making them more inclined to influence foreign policy issues. Thus, more educated individuals are a particularly relevant group for our study. However, we also show that our results remain substantially unchanged even after adjusting the weights to match the population of internet users in China (See Appendix Tables B1 and B2).

Both surveys began by gathering information on respondents’ demographic characteristics and political predispositions. Next, we presented respondents with an excerpt from a news report from Xinhua News Agency, a Chinese state-affiliated media organization. We

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

²Both studies received approval from the Institutional Review Board at the researchers’ home institution and were pre-registered at Open Science Framework.

randomly assigned participants into one of three treatment groups, each receiving a distinct excerpt about the Russian Invasion of Ukraine, and a control group, which received an excerpt about a Chinese festival reported during the same time as the other excerpts.³ All vignettes are actual excerpts from Xinhua news reports.⁴ The design emulates the “selective-history design” previously used in surveys on Chinese public opinion regarding military force (Weiss and Dafoe 2019).

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

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

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

“A series of recent developments in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine have garnered significant attention. In addition to the ongoing stalemate in the war, both Russia and Ukraine regularly experienced targeted attacks by the opposing side. In Ukraine, in the early hours of the 16th local time, reporters from Xinhua News Agency heard dense explosions in the capital Kyiv. Ukrainian officials said that Russia carried out an exceptionally intensive air strike on Kyiv that day, and the Ukrainian air defense system was intercepting the target.”

We maintained the original wording in the news reports, including the phrase “*special military operation*,” to replicate the information environment in China. The other two

³In Experiment 1, we included a fourth treatment condition where respondents were presented with information about the absence of Western military involvement. Balance checks (pre-treatment covariates) for each treatment group and experiment can be found in Appendix A.

⁴Excerpts for Experiment 1 were from February 2022, around the time of the initial invasion. Excerpts for Experiment 2 were from mid-May 2023, just before the survey.

treatment groups in each experiment received the same information regarding the Russian invasion as the first group, along with supplementary details on Western countermeasures. Specifically, the second treatment group in both experiments received additional information about the Western economic measures, while the third treatment group received information about the Western military measures in response to the invasion. We present the vignettes in Appendix C.

Following the vignettes, we measured respondents’ support for their government’s use of force in general and against Taiwan in particular. First, we asked whether respondents think China should rely more on military strength to achieve its foreign policy objectives, a question directly from previous surveys conducted in China (Quek and Johnston 2017; Weiss 2019; Weiss and Dafoe 2019). Second, we asked whether respondents think China should rely more on military force to “reunify” Taiwan, which allows us to empirically assess the impact of the Russian invasion on China’s decision to use military force against Taiwan (Blumenthal 2022; Hua 2022; Kine 2022; Myers and Qin 2022).⁵

It is worth noting that the phrase “using military force to reunify Taiwan” can be interpreted in various ways, including both a unification war against Taiwan and applying military pressure to coerce Taiwan into accepting reunification.⁶ Therefore, in Experiment 2, we ask more detailed questions about using force against Taiwan. We directly borrow from Liu and Li (forthcoming) and ask for respondents’ approval of (1) outright invasion of Taiwan, (2) military coercion of Taiwan,⁷ (3) economic sanction and coercion of Taiwan, (4) maintaining the status quo, and (5) keeping the separate political systems, with unification not necessarily being the end game. In sum, the questions on using military force in general and against Taiwan serve as our main outcomes of interest in the empirical analysis.

⁵In Experiment 1, the wording of this question was intentionally strong to address potential ceiling effects. It stated: “If peaceful reunification cannot be achieved within three years, then Taiwan should be reunified by force.” However, it was revised to: “China should rely more on its military strength to reunify Taiwan” in Experiment 2. This clearer statement avoids issues of combining treatment conditions and hypothetical scenarios in outcome measurement questions. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

⁶We thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

⁷Military coercion includes limited military campaigns on the outskirts of Taiwan, coercing Taiwanese authorities to accept unification.

We examine possible mechanisms through which the Russian invasion and Western reactions can influence Chinese public opinion, including both instrumental and non-instrumental factors highlighted in the literature. For instrumental calculations, we assess perceptions of threats to China, perceptions of costs and benefits of using military force, and the likelihood of success of using military force.⁸ Additionally, we examine the role of non-instrumental considerations, including perceived morality of using force, perceived legality of using force, and the feasibility of peaceful resolutions. The wording of all survey questions can be found in Appendix D.

4 Results

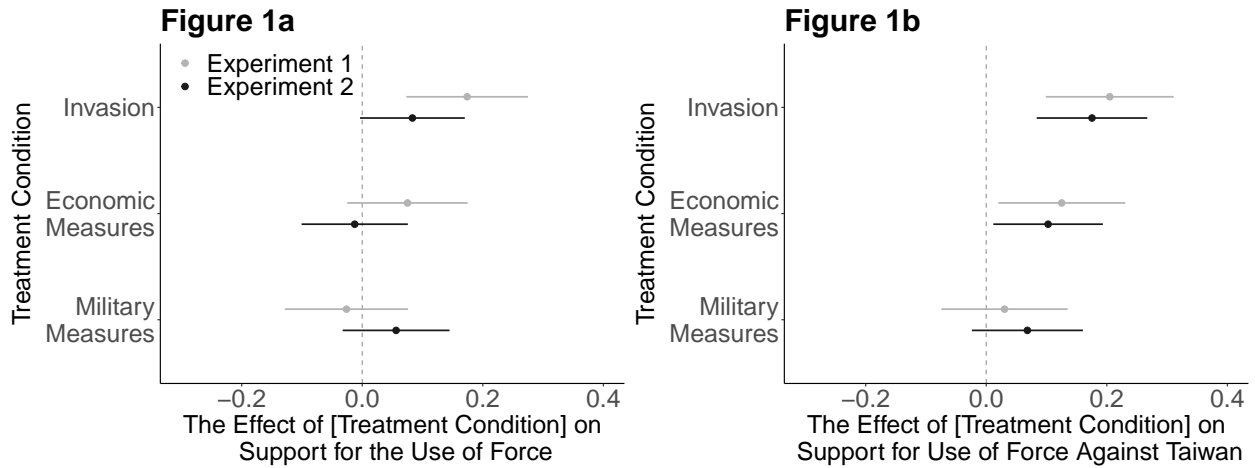
Figure 1 presents the main findings of the two experiments. Figure 1a illustrates the impact of treatments on public support for using military force in general, while Figure 1b presents the results for the use of force against Taiwan in particular. Each treatment group is compared to the control group,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

The results presented in Figure 1a indicate that exposure to information about the invasion increases support for utilizing military force in general. In Experiment 1, the invasion treatment led to a 0.17 unit increase on a five-point scale ($p < 0.01$) compared to the control group. In Experiment 2, the impact of invasion treatment is positive with a slightly reduced coefficient and level of statistical significance (0.08 unit increases, $p = 0.06$).

Figure 1b shows that information about the invasion consistently boosts support for using force against Taiwan in both experiments. In Experiment 1, the invasion treatment resulted in a significant 0.21 unit increase on a five-point scale ($p < 0.01$). Similarly, in Experiment 2, the invasion treatment led to an increase of 0.18 units ($p < 0.01$) in support of using military

⁸We ask questions about general threat perceptions and threats from the US in particular.

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



Note: Outcomes are measured on five-point scales; higher values represent more support. For each outcome, the plot presents the coefficient from OLS regressions (with 95% confidence intervals) representing the difference-in-means (Average Treatment Effect) between each treatment condition and the control group.

force against Taiwan.⁹

To provide a more direct interpretation of treatment effects, we create binary outcome variables: 1 indicating “somewhat” or “strong support” for the use of force and 0 otherwise. We find that, in Experiment 1, slightly less than half of the control group supports using force in general and against Taiwan in particular. When reminded of the Russian invasion, these percentages increased by over 8 percentage points to 57.8% and 56.4%, respectively. In Experiment 2, the baseline support for the use of force in the control group surpassed that of Experiment 1, with 57% of participants indicating support for both outcomes. Notably, the treatment effect of invasion was smaller for using military force in general (3.9 percentage points) but remained significant for support against Taiwan (8.1 percentage points).¹⁰ Overall, our findings consistently show evidence that invasion treatment increases public support

⁹The robustness of our findings, when accounting for pre-treatment covariates, is demonstrated in Appendix B.2, while the absence of marked heterogeneity in the impact of the invasion treatment among subsets defined by pre-treatment covariates is presented in Appendix B.3.

¹⁰The treatment effects represent approximately 19% of the standard deviation for the use of force against Taiwan in both experiments.

for using military force.

What are the effects of information about Western economic and military measures? When reminded of Western economic measures against Russia (middle horizontal bars), the initial increase in support for the general use of force disappears in both experiments (Figure 1a). However, even after receiving information about Western economic measures, respondents maintained a significantly higher willingness to use force against Taiwan than the control group respondents (Figure 1b), leading to a 0.13 unit increase ($p = 0.02$) in Experiment 1 and a 0.10 unit increase ($p = 0.03$) in Experiment 2.

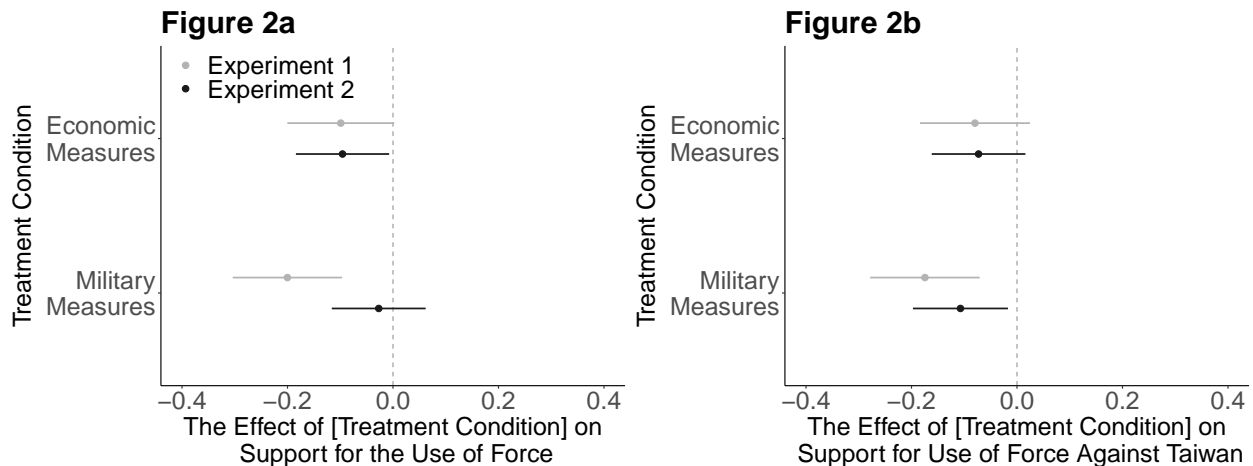
When reminded of Western military measures against Russia (bottom horizontal bars), the initial increases in willingness to use military force in general and against Taiwan vanished. In other words, information on Western military measures curbs the emboldening impact of the Russian invasion. Overall, the findings suggest that in China, information on Western military countermeasures may be more effective than economic countermeasures in curbing the hawkishness triggered by the Russian invasion.

To provide more precise illustrations of the mitigating effects of Western economic and military measures, Figure 2 displays the differences between each treatment condition and the invasion treatment.¹¹ When the invasion treatment is considered as the baseline, information about Western military measures significantly reduces the impact of the invasion on public support for using military force against Taiwan (Figure 2b). In Experiment 1, information about military measures led to a 0.18 unit decrease ($p < 0.01$), and in Experiment 2, it resulted in a 0.11 unit decrease ($p = 0.02$). However, for the general use of force (Figure 2a), the impact of military measures is significant only in Experiment 1 (0.20 unit decrease, $p < 0.01$), while in Experiment 2, the effect is not statistically significant (0.03 unit decrease, $p = 0.55$). Furthermore, we find that Western economic measures mitigate the emboldening effects of the Russian invasion. Yet, these effects are relatively subtle and only become

¹¹Note that the economic measure and military measure vignettes are supplementary to the invasion vignette. Consequently, each comparison allows us to assess the significance of the additional information by marginalizing the influence of the invasion treatment.

statistically significant when examining their impact on the support for the use of force in general (top horizontal bars in Figure 2a).

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

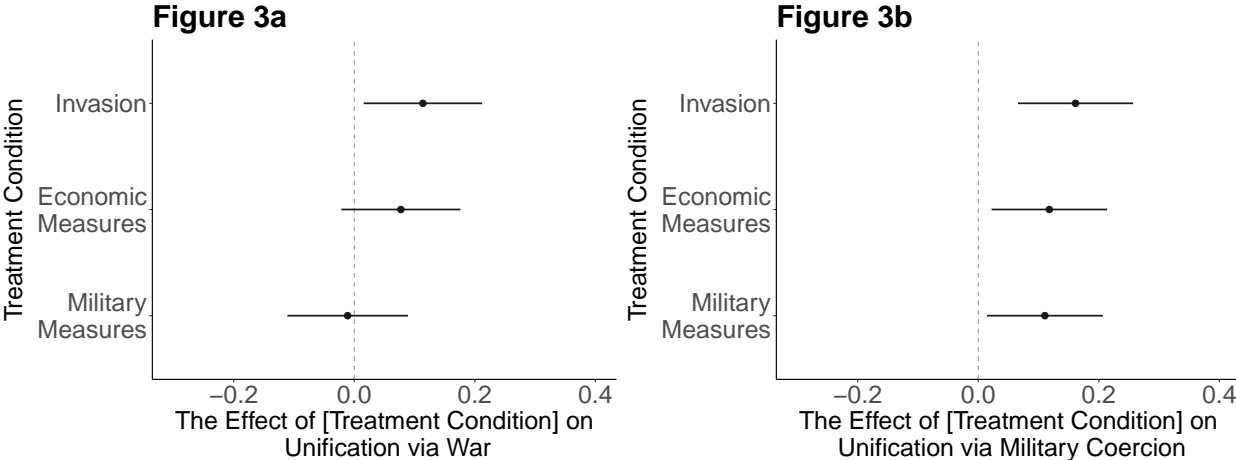


Note: Outcomes are measured on five-point scales; higher values represent more support. For each outcome, the plot presents the coefficient from OLS regressions (with 95% confidence intervals) representing the difference in means between each treatment condition and the invasion group.

Next, we examine how the Russian invasion and the subsequent Western measures influence endorsements of particular ways of using military force against Taiwan. In Experiment 2, we asked detailed questions about different ways of using military force against Taiwan. Figure 3 shows the impact of our treatments on respondents' support for (1) a unification war, and (2) military coercion short of war (Figure 3a and Figure 3b, respectively). Consistent with the findings of Liu and Li (forthcoming), slightly over half of our respondents express support for both outright invasion (58%) and military coercion (53%). Regarding the effects of our experimental treatments, as illustrated in Figure 3, the invasion treatment significantly increases support for both war and military coercion, with a larger effect on coercion (0.16 unit increase, $p < 0.01$) than war (0.11 unit increase, $p = 0.02$). Moreover, the significant treatment effects on coercion are also more persistent even after presenting additional information about Western economic (0.12 unit increase, $p = 0.02$) and military measures (0.11 unit increase, $p = 0.02$). Conversely, the effects on support for war cannot

be statistically distinguished from zero after presenting additional information about Western measures. Thus, Western military measures appear to be more effective in mitigating support for an outright invasion of Taiwan, while they have smaller impacts on reducing support for less risky approaches such as military coercion.¹²

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



Note: Both outcome variables are measured on a five-point scale; higher values represent higher support. For each outcome, the plot presents the coefficient from an OLS regression (with its 95% confidence interval) representing the difference-in-means between each treatment condition and the control group.

An issue we would like to address is potential non-compliance. Due to Chinese respondents’ constant real-life exposure to information about the Russian invasion, our vignettes may fail to elicit beliefs among some respondents, which might attenuate the treatment effects (Kane, Velez and Barabas 2023). To address this concern, in Experiment 2, we use news excerpts reported merely days before the survey, increasing the likelihood that the vignettes provide new and current information to the respondents. Nevertheless, our estimates can be interpreted as intent-to-treat (ITT) effects, providing conservative measures of the complier average causal effect (CACE), i.e., the treatment effect on those responsive to manipulation

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

(Angrist and Pischke 2008). ITTs do not require additional assumptions for identification and offer valuable insights into the relationship of interest. While instrumental variable and attention checks approaches can help obtain accurate treatment effects, they can introduce post-treatment and priming biases (Kane, Velez and Barabas 2023; Blackwell et al. 2023).¹³ Since our second experiment largely replicates the initial findings, we are confident that the uncovered patterns are not spurious and show evidence for increased hawkishness following exposure to information on the invasion.

4.1 Mechanisms

Why does the Russian invasion boost Chinese hawkishness? To answer this question, we examine the direct and indirect effects of the invasion treatment.¹⁴ We adopt the causal mediation framework of VanderWeele and Vansteelandt (2014) and Yu, Fan and Wu (2014), which allows for multiple mediators to contribute concurrently to the indirect effect of the treatment.¹⁵ Figure 4 presents the indirect effect (horizontal axis) of the invasion treatment on the support for the use of force in general (Figure 4a) and against Taiwan in particular (Figure 4b). On the vertical axis, we list the mediators that explain most of the variation in the indirect effect (from top to bottom): All mediators combined, the perceived feasibility of peaceful resolutions (scale reversed),¹⁶ the perceived likelihood of success, and the perceived morality of using force. Appendix Figures B7 and B9 present the mediation analysis for all treatment conditions and mediators.

Overall, the first experiment exhibited larger mediation effects than the second one. In Experiment 1, non-instrumental factors explained about 50% of the total effect of the

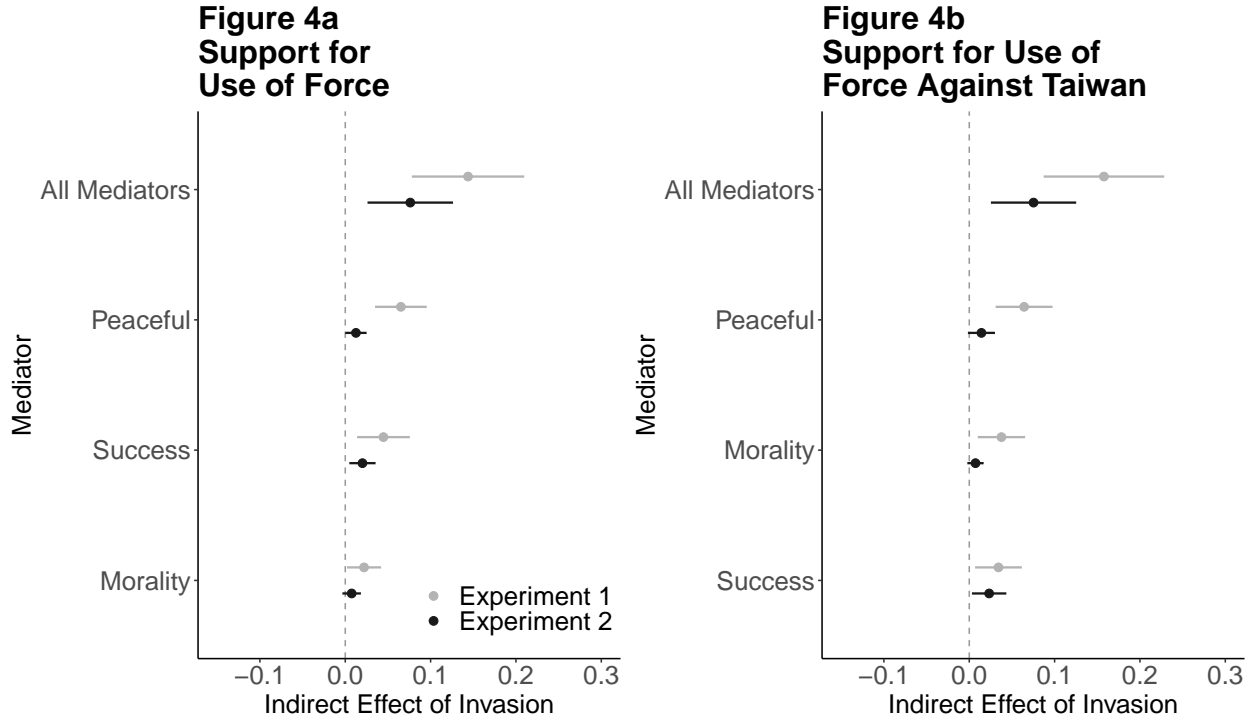
¹³Moreover, attention checks for the treatment may not necessarily identify problems related to non-compliance. While they might show that respondents are attentive to the information, they do not confirm whether respondents are actually responsive or susceptible to manipulation based on that information.

¹⁴Mediation analyses of other treatment groups reveal similar patterns and are presented in Appendix B.4.

¹⁵Note that the traditional one-at-a-time mediation approach of Imai et al. (2011), reveals similar patterns as our results presented below.

¹⁶The original scale goes from strongly disagreeing (1) to strongly agreeing (5) that a peaceful resolution is feasible. The invasion treatment decreases the perceived feasibility, which leads to higher support for wars. We revert the scale in the mediation analysis so that all coefficients are positive for easier comparisons.

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



Note: Treatment condition: Invasion.

The plot presents the indirect effects by mediator and their corresponding 95% bootstrap confidence intervals (500 bootstrap samples). The mediators presented in this figure are the perceived feasibility of peaceful resolutions (scale reversed), perceived likelihood of success, and perceived morality of using force. For each outcome, the mediators are listed from top to bottom in the order of importance found for Experiment 1. All items are measured on a five-point scale; higher values represent more support. Appendix Figures B7 and B9 present the mediation analysis for all treatment conditions and mediators.

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

Furthermore, Figure 4 demonstrates that the Russian invasion of Ukraine consistently

increases public confidence in the likelihood of military success from using force, leading to greater hawkishness. In Experiment 1, the perceived likelihood of success ranked second in importance (among all mediators) after the perceived feasibility of peaceful resolutions, accounting for approximately 20% of the total effect of the invasion treatment. The second experiment reaffirms this finding, indicating that the perceived likelihood of success is equally, if not more, influential than the combined effects of the perceived feasibility of peaceful resolutions and perceived morality. In contrast, other instrumental factors like perceived economic and military costs have negligible roles, explaining less than 5% of the total effect in both experiments.¹⁷

Overall, the mediation analysis reveals the relevance of both instrumental and non-instrumental considerations. In terms of non-instrumental factors, our findings align with theoretical arguments suggesting that individuals in autocracies, particularly China, tend to perceive international conflicts through the lens of “righteousness” and justifiability (Fang et al. 2022; Johnston 1998; Li and Chen 2021; Weiss and Dafoe 2019). The pro-Russian information environment in many autocracies, including China, likely reinforces the perceived morality of the Russian invasion. Consequently, when respondents are asked about their support for the use of military force, this perception likely influences their thought processes and boosts support for using military force to achieve political goals.

The close connection between China’s international conflicts and the historical ownership of territories, nationalism, and irredentism may further explain why the perceived feasibility of peaceful resolutions and the perceived morality of wars are among the most influential mediators (Fang and Li 2020). The frequent exposure of the Chinese public to Russia’s war propaganda, which denies Ukraine’s statehood and claims that it is part of Russia, is likely to heighten this connection. This narrative is similar to the one used by China in many of its international disputes, such as Taiwan, Diaoyu/Senkaku Island, and the South China Sea. The Russian invasion might have reinforced the belief among the Chinese public

¹⁷Appendix Figures B6 to B9 provide a breakdown of the direct and indirect effects for each treatment condition and mediator.

that peaceful negotiation is less effective and feasible, and that the use of force is a morally justifiable option. Furthermore, the failure of the NATO Partnership for Peace program and the Minsk agreements in 2014 and 2015 might have decreased the confidence of Chinese citizens in peace agreements with the West.

Regarding instrumental considerations, our findings consistently demonstrate that Chinese respondents place greater importance on the likelihood of military success than the military and economic costs of using force. These findings align with previous research conducted in authoritarian regimes (e.g., Fang and Li 2020, Li and Chen 2021, and Weiss and Dafoe 2019), which indicates that individuals in such regimes are less sensitive to costs but remain responsive to the outcomes of military conflicts.

An intriguing puzzle arises concerning Chinese respondents' persistent optimism about the likelihood of success from using force despite the lackluster performance of the Russian Army. To understand why Chinese respondents maintain this optimism, in Experiment 2, we asked them to rate the performance of the Russian Army in the conflict. Respondents across all treatment groups rated the Russian Army highly, with an average rating of 7.4 out of 10. Moreover, approximately 35% of respondents believed the Russian Army's performance exceeded expectations, while less than 20% believed it underperformed. Thus, despite the battlefield stalemate, the Russian invasion seems to increase Chinese confidence in the potential for military success if they were to employ military force in international conflicts.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

This study addresses how public opinion toward using military force in autocracies, with a focus on China, is affected by authoritarian aggression abroad, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent reactions of Western countries. Understanding the downstream effects of the Russian invasion on public opinion in China is particularly timely and crucial, given the ongoing debates about how the Russo-Ukrainian conflict might influence China's

decision-making regarding a potential invasion of Taiwan (Blumenthal 2022; Hua 2022; Kine 2022; Myers and Qin 2022).

Our findings reveal that when reminded of Russian aggression, Chinese citizens exhibit heightened support for their government’s use of military force in general and against Taiwan in particular. Causal mediation analyses indicate that the effects of the invasion are driven by a combination of non-instrumental considerations, such as pessimistic perceptions of peaceful conflict resolution, and instrumental considerations, such as the perceived likelihood of military success. Conversely, we find no evidence suggesting that the military and economic costs of using force, the perception of foreign threats to China, or the legality of using force significantly influence Chinese public opinion. These results partly align with existing research, underscoring the pivotal role played by non-instrumental factors, such as whether military conflicts are perceived as moral and justifiable, in shaping foreign policy decisions within authoritarian regimes (Fang and Li 2020; Kertzer et al. 2014; Li and Chen 2021; Weiss and Dafoe 2019).

As of July 2023, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is still ongoing, which is a starkly different outcome than initially expected by most observers at the outset of the war in late February 2022. As the conflict has dragged on and Russia faced challenges in taking and holding territory, its downstream influence on Chinese public opinion might have potentially changed. To assess the impact of ongoing events in the war, we conducted our experiment twice: first in June 2022 and the second a year later in June 2023. Interestingly, we find that the course of the conflict over the last year has had little effect on Chinese public opinion, as our findings remain largely consistent across the two experiments. Consequently, our main findings are not short-lived artifacts of the first several months of the conflict.

Our study makes valuable contributions to the literature on public opinion toward the use of force, while also paving the way for promising future research directions. The public debates surrounding the Russian invasion underscore the potential influence of military aggression by authoritarian governments on public opinion toward the use of military force

in other autocracies. Our research provides compelling evidence for this dynamic in the most important contemporary case, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, showing that Russian actions have significant effects on individuals' views of the use of force in China. This study opens many fruitful avenues for future scholarly work in this area. Conducting similar experiments in other authoritarian contexts will help assess the extent to which Russian aggression might enhance hawkishness elsewhere. Additionally, further research can delve into whether international military aggression by non-authoritarian regimes produces similar effects on individuals in democratic or authoritarian countries. Overall, our study opens a new and promising area of research to examine whether and how international military aggression abroad influences public support for military aggression at home.

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