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Modelling Chinese Youth Support for Military Intervention in the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands: Beyond Nationalism and Militarism

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Abstract

Research on public opinion and foreign policy in China has focused on nationalism as the driver behind public support for the use of force. However, nationalism is just one of many potentially significant factors that can increase support for military deployments. In this article we build a mediation model to test the relative effects of psychological predispositions, foreign policy attitudes, perceptions of the opposing state and calculations about the likely outcome of the conflict on support for China sending naval forces to the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. We find that dislike of the Japanese government and a belief that China would be victorious in a conflict with Japan are both powerful predictors of support for the use of force. Nationalism and militarism directly increase support but also indirectly increase it via different pathways. Nationalists are more confident in a Chinese victory while militarists have a stronger dislike of the Japanese government.

Keywords

China, public opinion, conflict, nationalism, psychology

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Introduction

Research into the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy in China has primarily focused on the issue of nationalism (Chubb 2018; Gries et al. 2011; Reilly 2014; Sinkkonen 2013; Weiss 2014; Zhao 2013). A broad range of scholarship on Chinese nationalism has investigated questions relating to its distinctive features (Callahan 2010; Gries et al. 2011; Zhao 2004), whether or not it can be controlled by China's authorities (Reilly 2014, 2011; Weiss 2014) and whether it is increasing (Johnston 2016/17). Underpinning much of this concern over nationalist public sentiment in China is the belief that Chinese nationalism is closely linked to support for the use of military force. Since the end of the Cold War occasional large-scale protests in China against the actions of foreign powers such as Japan and the United States have generated significant concern over the possibility that China's leaders might be pressured by their domestic public into escalating a regional conflict (Shirk 2008). More recently worries about the interplay between nationalist opinion and military tension between China and other countries have resurfaced. A new generation of high-profile Chinese diplomats have been accused of using public statements on social media to stoke nationalist sentiments, while the deadly clashes between Chinese and Indian troops in June 2020 over disputed territory in the Himalayas highlight the ongoing risk of military conflict in the region.

Despite the efforts of some scholars (Weiss 2019; Quek and Johnston 2017/18; Chubb 2014) to disaggregate Chinese nationalism from hawkishness or militarism—the belief that the use of military power is an effective way to solve foreign policy problems—nationalism is often assumed to be the only significant driver of public support for Chinese military deployment. Yet, as research in other countries has shown, nationalism is just one of many factors that can increase public support for the use of military force (Crowson 2009a; Gelpi et al. 2006; Herrmann et al. 1999; McFarland 2005; Tomz and Weeks 2020). In particular, potential drivers such as individuals' underlying psychological predispositions and calculations about whether a conflict would likely be successful or not have never been tested in the Chinese context.

In this article we investigate how support in China for escalating a territorial dispute with Japan is driven by a combination of psychological predispositions, foreign policy attitudes, perceptions of Japan and cost-benefit calculations about the likely outcome of the conflict. By developing and testing a theoretical framework that links psychological constructs to other potential drivers of support for military action, we conduct the first study into the effects of Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) on Chinese respondent attitudes towards the use of military force. These two concepts have been referred to as the 'lethal union' because together they affect a variety of pro-conflict attitudes (Altemeyer 1998). We test not only their direct effect on support for military force but also their indirect effect via their impact on nationalism, militarism, perceptions of Japan and estimates about the likely outcomes of a Sino-Japanese conflict.

We build a mediation model to examine the relative effects of these factors on support for sending naval forces to secure the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Using a sample of Chinese students we demonstrate that the belief that China would win a conflict with Japan and dislike of the Japanese government are both powerful predictors of support for the use of force. While both militarism and chauvinistic nationalism directly increase support for sending naval forces to the Islands they indirectly affect support through different pathways. Militarists are more likely to dislike the Japanese government, which increases support for the use of force, whereas nationalists are generally more likely to believe in the superiority of Chinese military forces and are therefore more confident that China would be victorious. Finally, we demonstrate that although RWA appears to be an important driver of conflict support both directly and through negative attitudes towards the Japanese government, the other half of the 'lethal union' has no pathway to conflict support.

This study offers a new perspective by moving beyond existing models of Chinese public opinion and foreign policy that only consider factors such as nationalism or militarism. By developing a mediation model we are able to draw more precise conclusions not only about why nationalism and militarism are potential drivers of public support for armed conflict in the region, but also about the other factors, such as public antipathy toward a particular foreign power and beliefs about the likely outcome of a conflict, that bolster support for the use of force. By grounding our study in the context of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Island conflict with Japan and demonstrating that the particular dynamics of the dispute matter to our respondents, we pave the way for future public opinion research into other specific conflict dyads involving China and its neighbours.

This article contains five sections. The first examines previous literature on public support in China for the use of military force. Section two outlines the theoretical drivers behind attitudes towards military intervention. The third section examines the dataset, highlighting the difficulties associated with collecting data in authoritarian states and showcasing the wide array of questions that were collected on national security issues. Section four uses a series of multivariate models to analyse the drivers behind support for dispute escalation. The final section provides some concluding thoughts and discusses avenues for future research.

Previous Research

Research on public support in China for the use of military force has focused primarily on Chinese nationalism and its effect on foreign policy. Following the end of the Cold War, scholars began to identify Chinese nationalism as a potential threat to regional security (Downs and Saunders 1998; Friedberg 1993/94, 18; Whiting 1995). During this period China witnessed a rise in aggressive nationalist rhetoric from both official and popular sources. China's 'patriotic education campaign,' designed to shore up support for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the wake of the Tiananmen Square protests and the public's apparent loss of faith in Marxist ideology, promoted a

nationalist discourse focused on past grievances associated with the actions of foreign enemies (Callahan 2010; Wang 2012). Alongside this growth in official nationalist rhetoric, media pluralisation in the 1990s provided more opportunity and incentives for grassroots nationalist expression (He 2007). Concerns over this discourse were compounded by the outbreak of angry and sometimes violent protests following international incidents involving the United States and Japan (Gries 2004). This led Chinese nationalism to be characterised as irredentist, insecure and anti-foreign (Callahan 2010; Friedman 2001; Whiting 1995) and an important factor in heightening regional tensions (Cottillon 2017; Yahuda 2013).

Much of the research into Chinese nationalism highlights the threat it poses to regional security because of the potential for assertive or aggressive nationalist public opinion to influence foreign policy in a way that increases the likelihood of international conflict. There is some disagreement within the literature about the degree to which China's authoritarian government is vulnerable to popular pressure. Some have argued that China's leaders need to maintain good foreign relations to achieve other key objectives, such as economic development (Downs and Saunders 1998; Zhao 2004), and that the CCP has the tools to suppress nationalist protests if they become problematic (Reilly 2011; Weiss 2014). Zhao (2013) has argued that an increasing convergence between the policymaking elite's sense of nationalism and popular nationalism makes a 'strident' approach to China's international disputes more likely.

Despite contrasting scholarly views on the ability and willingness of China's leaders to resist pressure from nationalist public sentiment, it remains plausible that nationalist public opinion could push China's foreign policy in a direction that leads to inter-state conflict. The two main pathways by which this could occur are what Chubb (2018) calls the 'legitimacy deficit model' and the 'elite contention model.' According to the first model, authorities who rely on a nationalist narrative to underpin the CCP's legitimacy claims could face significant public pressure to take military action in the face of a perceived foreign threat or be branded sell-outs or traitors. While not dictating foreign policy outcomes, public opinion could place constraints on the leadership by imposing audience costs on any decision to make concessions in an international crisis (see Quek and Johnston 2017/18). Alternatively, domestic events could spark a legitimacy crisis, incentivising the authorities to distract the population from internal political problems by exaggerating foreign threats and manufacturing an external military crisis. In addition to these crisis scenarios, legitimacy-seeking leaders could attempt to enhance their country's international prestige through the acquisition of new military capabilities or implementing more assertive defence policies that risk destabilising relations with its neighbours (Ross 2009, 50).

In the second model, actors within the political system could seek to use nationalist sentiment to exert leverage over rivals (Chubb 2018, 162). Individual leaders could support hardline policies in order to protect themselves against nationalist criticism from their rivals. Alternatively, groups within the system who benefit from heightened international tension, such as militaries seeking larger budgets, may stoke nationalist

feelings to marginalise more dovish voices and pressure leaders into taking a harder line.

Although research into the relationship between Chinese nationalism and foreign policy has become increasingly sophisticated in its scrutiny of nationalism as a potential driver of regional conflict, the definition of nationalism employed in this analysis is often overly broad and imprecise (Johnston 2016/17). While qualitative studies of Chinese nationalism have long argued that the dominant form of public nationalism is highly chauvinistic, marked by a belief in the cultural and moral superiority of the nation, some researchers have also used quantitative methods to attempt to disaggregate various strands of nationalist belief in China. Like the broader literature on public opinion and foreign policy (Federico et al. 2005; Kosterman and Feshbach 1989), some Chinese survey research distinguishes between patriotism, which is treated as an inward-looking sense of pride in one's own country, and nationalism, which involves a belief that one's own country is superior to others (Gries et al. 2011; Sinkkonen 2013). While some studies explicitly treat nationalist sentiment as implying support for more assertive or aggressive foreign policy (Chubb 2018, 160), others draw a more precise distinction between national identity and hawkish or militarist foreign policy views in their analysis of public support for particular policy positions (Chubb 2014; Quek and Johnston 2017/18; Weiss 2019). In this article we focus on chauvinistic nationalism, which in other contexts has been shown to increase support for the use of military force (Herrmann et al. 2009, 741–742), and we distinguish this nationalism from militarism in our analysis. We explain this approach to nationalism further in our theory section below.

In contrast to the extensive literature on Chinese nationalism there remains little specialised research into contemporary Chinese militarism. Some research notes the militaristic content of popular nationalist cultural products such as films and television programmes (Callahan 2010). A small number of scholars have highlighted the ways in which military education in China is designed to shape youth attitudes. Hughes (2017, 63–64) examines military education and argues that the 'strategic myths' it reproduces generate a sense of crisis over sovereignty that then justifies efforts to build a powerful military and strengthen the state and economy to stave off foreign threats. Genevaz (2019) claims that national defense education is not intended to promote the military per se, but rather to foster discipline and compliance among students, who are often a problematic social group that the CCP struggles to control.

Among the extensive research into nationalism in China and its implications for regional stability there is little quantitative empirical analysis of the effects of nationalistic attitudes on public support for military intervention. One important exception is a study by Quek and Johnston (2017/18), who use a survey experiment to test public responses to a crisis scenario involving the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, finding that in many cases the audience costs to China's leaders of backing down in a conflict could be reduced through the use of certain strategies. Another survey looks at public support for military intervention in China's maritime territorial disputes, finding that support for military force is highest among middle-class respondents, young people

are more nationalistic but less supportive of military action, and overall there is greater support for negotiation and arbitration than for the use of force to resolve disputes (Chubb 2014, 10).

Considering the attention paid to nationalism's impact on public and elite opinion in China it is surprising to see so little investigation into whether factors such as RWA or SDO might play a role in shaping pro-conflict attitudes. Numerous studies outside China have demonstrated that both RWA and SDO are psychological precursors to nationalist and militarist attitudes and consistently increase support for conflict. In terms of militaristic tendencies both Right-Wing Authoritarians (RWAs) and Social Dominants (SDs) have been shown to exhibit aggressive tendencies (Van Hiel et al. 2020). RWAs tend to support expenditure on military programmes (Pratto et al. 1994), sending troops to Iraq (McFarland 2005), military action in Afghanistan (Bonanno and Jost 2006) and using military force during the war on terror (Crowson 2009a, 2009b). In terms of nationalist attitudes both RWAs and SDs demonstrate considerable prejudice towards outgroups (Sibley and Duckitt 2008). This anti-outgroup sentiment has consistently predicted nationalism and dislike of other countries (Altemeyer 1996; Osborne et al. 2017; Pratto et al. 1994).

The vast majority of research into public support for the use of force in China has focused on nationalism, with some attention to militarism or hawkishness. However, we are not aware of any studies in the Chinese context that attempt to integrate factors such as beliefs about the likely outcome of a conflict, respondents' psychological predispositions or attitudes towards the opposing people or government into their analysis. Below we build and test a theoretical model that explores all these potential factors.

Theoretical Framework

Previous studies of public support for military action have tended to use a cognitive interactionist framework in which situational and predispositional variables interact to drive support for war (Herrmann et al. 1999; Tomz and Weeks 2020). However, this tells us little about public support for pre-emptive military intervention when there is little to no situational evidence and individuals instead have to rely on their prejudices about that opponent and their own estimates about the likelihood of success. We argue that both deep-seated psychological predispositions and broad foreign policy attitudes drive prejudices about the opposing country (in this case Japan), influencing both motivation and estimates of success, which in turn makes the escalation of military force an attractive option.

We develop an integrative model that links different blocs of attitudes to support for sending naval forces to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands (Figure 1). At the base of these blocs are psychological predispositions, followed by foreign policy attitudes, then perceptions of Japan followed by estimates about the likely outcome of military intervention, all of which influence support for pre-emptively sending military forces to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. By foreign policy attitudes we mean views that relate to

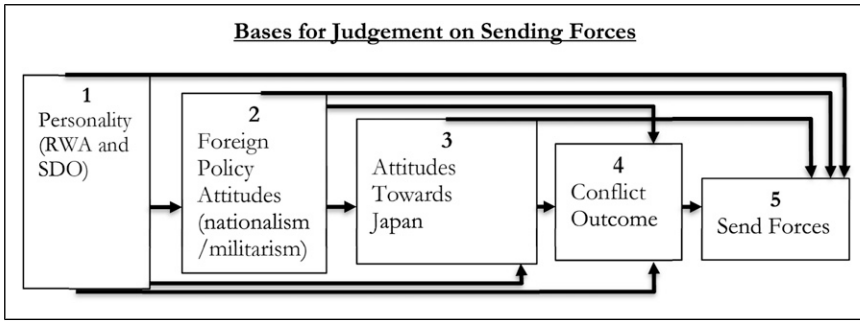

Figure 1. Bases for Judgement on sending forces.

China's relationships and interactions with other states in general, not attitudes to specific countries or foreign policy choices, which appear elsewhere in our model. Militarism and chauvinistic nationalism are the two foreign policy attitudes most relevant to support for the use of military force. We hypothesise that RWA and SDO are antecedents of nationalistic and militaristic attitudes which in turn precede specific attitudes towards Japan and towards the effectiveness of military action, all of which impact on attitudes towards the use of military force. The blocs on the far left are further away from the specifics of the conflict but influence blocs that more directly speak to military intervention. We expect that the further the bloc is away from the decision to send military forces to the Islands the smaller its effect, so we would expect that bloc 1 has a smaller influence on military intervention than bloc 4. Below we move through each bloc of variables and present hypotheses relating to both direct and indirect influences on support for military action. The variables organised from left to right both directly impact on support for escalation and are mediated through variables that are more closely related to decisions about war and peace.

Figure 1 summarises the overall framework of analysis and below we unpack the effects of each of the blocs on attitudes towards military intervention. Firstly, we look at psychological predispositions with our overall thesis being that deep-seated psychological predispositions formed in childhood will influence a wide range of political attitudes (Safra et al. 2017). We hypothesise that psychological predispositions will influence foreign policy attitudes, perceptions about Japan, estimates about the conflict outcome and support for escalating the dispute. Our specific focus is on RWA and SDO, which have been referred to as the 'lethal union' (Altemeyer 1998) and shown to both directly (MacFarland 2005; Jackson and Gaertner 2010) and indirectly increase support for military intervention (Crowson 2009a; Osborne et al. 2017).

RWAs tend to be submissive to authority, stick closely to social conventions and are particularly supportive of aggression when authorised by elites (Altemeyer 1996, 1998). Authoritarian attitudes stem from a harsh childhood that engenders a view of the world as a threatening place where social conformity helps the individual reduce that threat (Duckitt 2001; Altemeyer 1998). Heightened threat perception explains the direct

impact on support for conflict, with military force considered a legitimate option to impose control and stability on an inherently dangerous world (McFarland 2005). McFarland (2005) in his analysis of support for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 found that RWA tends to increase the perception that Iraq is a threat, leading to an increase in support for military action. We expect that RWA directly increases perceptions of Japan being a threat, which increases support for sending naval forces to the region.

While RWA and SDO are similar and directly influence support for military intervention, their mechanisms of influence are different. RWAs view the world as a threatening place where the use of military power places order on a dangerous, chaotic environment. SDs differ in that they have a perception of superiority, an urge to dominate others and a lack of empathy about the human costs of military action (Duckitt 2001; Pratto et al. 1994). They are power maximisers, seeing the world as a 'competitive jungle' (Duckitt et al. 2002) and as such tending to support wars that they view as expressing their country's military dominance over others (Pratto et al. 1994). Therefore, we would expect that both SDO and RWA will increase support for sending naval forces to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.

H1. *SDO and RWA directly increase support for sending naval forces to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands*.

While there are clearly strong theoretical reasons to expect that both RWA and SDO will directly impact on support for sending naval forces to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands we are particularly interested in examining their relationship to both militarism and nationalism and how these foreign policy attitudes influence perceptions about Japan and perceptions about any conflict over the Islands. We expect that both RWA and SDO will have an indirect impact on support for sending naval forces by increasing nationalist and militarist attitudes.

Looking at militarism first, we find that there are a considerable number of definitions associated with the term (e.g. Eckhardt and Newcomber 1969, 210; Winter et al. 2001, 139). We broadly conceive of militarism as a belief in the efficacy of military power to solve foreign policy problems. Both SDO and RWA have been shown to be strongly correlated with militarism (McFarland 2005). RWA impacts on militarism as it increases a perception of the world being a threatening place and a belief that military power can place order on a disorderly world (Cohrs et al. 2005). People who exhibit high levels of SDO will tend to favour military solutions to problems as they are in favour of dominating and controlling resources and people (Mayton II et al. 1999) and military coercion is the most direct and observable way for one group to dominate and control another. We would therefore expect that both RWA and SDO will increase militaristic attitudes and those attitudes will increase support for sending naval forces to secure and control the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.

H2. *RWA and SDO increase the likelihood of an individual exhibiting militaristic foreign policy attitudes and militaristic attitudes increase support for sending naval forces to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands*.

In the constitutive discursive sense in which nationalism is the 'ideological means by which nation-states are reproduced' (Billig 1995, 6; see also Calhoun 1997), nationalism not only makes it possible that a public might support their nation fighting a war against another but also that a war might be fought on behalf of 'the nation' in the first place. In this study we are concerned with examining the drivers of individuals' support for the use of military force rather than the social construction of nations and national identity, but we must still specify which nationalist beliefs matter most, because only certain configurations of nationalism are correlated with xenophobia (Li and Brewer 2004) and support for war (Pratto et al. 1998). Our study focuses on *chauvinistic nationalism* because this is the kind of nationalism that is most directly linked to support for the use of military force (Herrmann et al. 2009, 741–742). In contrast to patriotism or national attachment, which are based on inward-looking positive feelings of love for or attachment to the nation, chauvinistic nationalism involves a love for one's own country that comes at the expense of other nations, which are viewed as inferior (Kosterman and Feshbachk 1989; Herrmann et al. 2009, 725–726). Chauvinistic nationalists, who Schatz et al. (1999) call 'blind patriots', tend to be strongly loyal to the nation, believe that their nation is superior to others, are intolerant of criticism and wish to dominate other nations (Osborne et al. 2017). We therefore expect that chauvinistic nationalism is correlated with support for sending naval forces as nationalists perceive the Islands to be Chinese by right and believe that the relative costs of conflict are low because inferior nations like Japan are unlikely to be able to put up much resistance. We also note that nationalism may lead to militarism, rather than being two independent variables as specified in our theoretical framework and path model. We conduct a robustness check for alternative specifications with findings discussed below.

We anticipate that both RWA and SDO will increase nationalistic attitudes, in turn increasing support for military intervention. There is a straightforward relationship between SDO and increased chauvinistic nationalism. SDO reflects a preference for group-based hierarchy, with the in-group being higher than outgroups. Here we would expect that Chinese nationalism reflects SDO thinking, with the Chinese in-group being superior to other nations, specifically the Japanese outgroup (Duckitt et al. 2002; Pratto et al. 1994). RWA should also increase nationalistic sentiment due to threat perception rather than hierarchical thinking. An individual who exhibits high-levels of RWA should want their country to remain united and cohesive to guarantee security in the face of threats from others in the international system (McFarland 2005, 362).

H3. *RWA and SDO increase the likelihood of an individual exhibiting nationalistic foreign policy attitudes and nationalistic attitudes increase support for sending naval forces to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.*

Militarism relates to respondents' attitudes towards the utility of military force and the necessity of war beyond simply defending the nation's borders (Scotto and Reifler 2017). It is conceptually distinct from nationalism because it involves the belief that military solutions are both necessary and effective to resolve international problems

rather than the perception of national superiority. A respondent could be militaristic but not nationalistic, as they may simply perceive that military force is the preferred way to solve foreign policy problems. However, nationalism could lead to militarism, as contempt for other nations makes the use of force appear relatively easy. We also hypothesise that militarists will be less concerned about the potential risks and costs associated with military force. If respondents perceive military force to be an effective way to deal with international problems because they see the costs as relatively low then we would expect militarists to be less concerned about economic sanctions and Japanese alliance partners. Alternatively, respondents who generally support military solutions to foreign policy problems might not support escalating a specific conflict with Japan if they view the current state of the Chinese military as weak in comparison to Japan or the United States.

H4. *Militaristic attitudes will increase the likelihood of respondents believing that China will be successful in a military intervention on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands*.
H5. *Militaristic attitudes will reduce concern about the potential costs associated with military intervention on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands*.

Nationalists may also believe the costs of conflict would be low and that China would secure victory over Japan in a conflict scenario. The underpinning causal mechanism would be different from militarism in that the driver behind nationalists' cost estimates is belief about the inherent superiority of Chinese military forces rather than a general belief in the effectiveness of military force. We therefore expect that nationalist attitudes will increase perceptions of the likelihood of victory and reduce risk estimates.

H6. *Nationalistic attitudes will increase the likelihood of respondents believing that China will be successful in a military intervention on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands*.
H7. *Nationalistic attitudes will reduce concern about the potential costs associated with military intervention on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands*.

The next two blocs of variables relate to the specific relationship between China and Japan. Firstly, we examine how Chinese respondents view both the Japanese people and the Japanese government. This provides us with a likeability heuristic which we believe will influence attitudes towards a potential military conflict (Gries 2014; Scotto and Reifler 2017). We also include a bloc of variables specifically related to respondent perceptions about the likely outcome of a potential conflict, which previous studies suggest influence attitudes towards military action (Gelpi et al. 2006).

The like ability heuristic has been used extensively in studies of party identification and voting behaviour (Kirkland and Coppock 2018). When individuals have low-levels of political knowledge and interest they use information shortcuts or heuristics to aid their decisions (Downs 1957). The like ability heuristic has also been applied in studies of public perceptions of other countries (Gries 2014). We anticipate that respondents will generally have low knowledge about foreign affairs and may rely heavily on a like ability heuristic when thinking about foreign policies. We break this down into two

areas: the like ability of the Japanese people and of the Japanese government. We believe that general perceptions of the Japanese government will have a stronger effect on support for sending naval forces to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands than perceptions of the Japanese public. The Japanese government is more likely to be held responsible for policies that are disapproved of than the Japanese public. However, we anticipate that a dislike of both the Japanese people and government will directly influence support for intervention.

H8. *Dislike of the Japanese people and Japanese government will increase support for sending naval forces to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands*.

We do not anticipate that militarism will drive dislike of the Japanese people or government as it speaks to the effectiveness of military action rather than any thoughts of national superiority. However, we anticipate that nationalists will dislike both the Japanese government and people. In Chinese nationalist narratives, particularly since the 1980s, the nation's moral and cultural superiority is often reinforced by emphasising the cruelty and aggression exhibited by Imperial Japan towards China (He 2007). We also assume that SDO will directly increase dislike of the Japanese people and government because of the hierarchical thinking discussed earlier. SDO should increase the levels of nationalism which in turn will mediate the effect of SDO on attitudes towards both the Japanese people and government. We would anticipate that RWAs would dislike the Japanese government as a direct threat to China's security but will be relatively unconcerned about the Japanese people, although perceptions of the Japanese people may well be mediated through nationalism.

H9. *Nationalistic attitudes will increase dislike of the Japanese people and government*.

The final bloc of predictors relates to strategic calculations about the likely outcome of a conflict. There are two areas we believe directly speak to the likelihood of success: respondent estimates about the ability of China's military forces to prevail in a military confrontation and concerns about Japan's use of economic sanctions against China for sending forces to the Islands. Perceptions about the likelihood of success are key drivers behind support for military intervention and tolerance for military casualties (Gelpi et al. 2006). When individuals make decisions about supporting military action they engage in cost-benefit calculations (Boettcher and Cobb 2006). What is the likelihood of victory? What are the economic costs? The overall increase in costs is anticipated to reduce support for escalation. We hypothesise that respondents with less concern about the consequences of conflict and/or who believe that the chances of victory will be high are much more likely to support dispute escalation.

H10. *The greater the perception of likelihood of military success the greater the level of support for sending naval forces to the Islands*.

H11. *The greater the concern about the consequences of escalating the dispute with Japan the lower the level of support for sending naval forces to the Islands*.

We recognise that there are plausible concerns about reverse causality in relation to cost-benefit calculations. Individuals may simply be downplaying the risks associated with conflict because they want to support invading the Islands. With observational data we are unable to identify the direction of causality between costs/benefits and support for war. However, our research follows on from previous studies that suggest estimates of success increase support for continuing a military intervention although not for initiating a conflict (Gelpi et al. 2005/2006; Gartner and Segura 1998). We note that the evidence base for the public being an attentive audience has been questioned elsewhere, with suggestions that the public is generally inattentive to foreign affairs and will tend to follow elite cues (Berinsky 2007). Regardless of causal direction we believe that cost-benefit calculations are correlated with support for military intervention either as a predictor or as a correlate. When drawing conclusions we acknowledge that the causal direction between success estimates and support is uncertain.

The theoretical framework disentangles a complex relationship between the variables by placing a structure on the relationship between deep-seated psychological predispositions, perceptions of other countries, estimates of likely outcomes and individual support for military conflicts. Due to the complex relationship between the variables with both direct and mediated relationships we have specified a large number of testable hypotheses. However, with the development of mediation modelling techniques we are able to test these hypotheses and outline specific pathways that increase support for dispute escalation.

Dataset and Operationalisations

Gathering public opinion data on sensitive issues relating to politics and foreign relations can be very difficult in authoritarian countries such as China. For the most part, research into Chinese foreign policy attitudes has looked to employ either online surveys or narrower surveys of students or scholars to work around the practical restrictions on data gathering (e.g. Davies et al. 2020; Gries et al. 2011; Sinkkonen, 2013; Huang, 2015). Where large-scale surveys have been conducted they are unable to ask questions about sensitive political topics such as attitudes towards military intervention against Japan (Hanson and Shearer, 2009; van der Noll and Dekker, 2016). Some studies, such as our own, are able to ask a wide variety of detailed political questions but with a more limited sample, while others are able to gather representative views but cannot access the kind of detailed responses in a range of areas that allow us to build the model that we do in this article.

Our dataset was gathered from four universities in three different Chinese cities and provinces between October and December 2014. Respondents anonymously completed a paper survey containing more than one hundred questions about China's foreign relations (see also Davies et al. 2020). We believe that using anonymous paper questionnaires rather than online surveys maximises the confidence of the respondents in the confidentiality of their answers, especially in China where online discussions of political issues are routinely monitored and controlled. We had no way of identifying

who had filled in a specific survey instrument and as such we expect that issues of social desirability and satisficing will be minimised. The convenience sample involved respondents from a broad range of student types, including students of social sciences, physical sciences and vocational studies. Before collecting the data we ran a focus group with Chinese students at a British university in order to ensure the terminology used in the Chinese-language survey was appropriate and could easily be understood by students with no prior expertise in the subject matter.

This dataset is younger and contains more women than a demographically representative sample. The median age of the sample is 22 and the mean 20. This is younger than the mean age of the Chinese population, which is 38.[1] However, as we are only drawing conclusions about Chinese student attitudes this seems to be broadly in line with the age cohort for undergraduates. Our sample consists of 25 percent first year students, 35 percent second year and 35 percent final. 5 percent are postgraduates, which again broadly aligns with university age cohorts. The biggest difference is that 75 percent of our sample were women, whereas according to the most recent Chinese government data 51 percent of undergraduates at Chinese universities are women.[2] We weighted the data by gender to reflect the imbalance and test if there were any effects on the model results. We found that the support for escalation model was substantively unaffected with no changes to direct or indirect pathways to the Navy to Diaoyu variable. However, we did find that RWA no longer had an effect on fear of sanctions or attitude towards the Japanese people, but neither of these outcome variables influenced support for sending forces to the Islands. We used the unweighted model as we were unsure as to what the underlying process was that led to differences in gender balance between our sample and the population of students.[3]

Variables

Support for Sending Naval Forces to Islands. Sending of naval forces to secure control of the Diaoyu Islands. 0 Not at all approve to 6 Very much approve.

Victory. Takes on the value 1 if respondents believe China will win a war with Japan over the Diaoyu Islands and 0 otherwise.

Fear of Economic Sanctions. To what extent are you worried about Japan imposing economic sanctions on China? 0 Not at all worried to 6 Extremely worried.

Attitudes Towards the Japanese People. To what extent do you have friendly feelings towards Japanese people? 0 Not at all to 6 A great degree.

Attitudes Towards the Japanese Government. To what extent do you have friendly feelings towards the Japanese government? 0 Not at all to 6 A great degree.

Nationalism. This measure is based on three questions all scored 1 Disagree strongly to 5 Agree strongly.

- Generally speaking, China is better than other countries.
- If people criticise China, I get upset or angry.
- I would support my country right or wrong.

Militarism. This measure is based on three questions. 1 Disagree strongly to 5 Agree strongly.

- The best way to ensure peace is through military strength.
- China should be strong and tough in dealing with other nations.
- The use of military force only makes problems worse.

Right-Wing Authoritarianism. This measure is based on three questions. 1 Disagree strongly to 5 Agree strongly.

- People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences.
- People in China should be more tolerant of those who lead unconventional lives.
- Young people today don't have enough respect for traditional Chinese values.

The RWA items were taken from Evans, Heath and Lalljee's (1996) libertarian-authoritarian scale and have been extensively validated using British mass samples. The scale for each question begins at 1 for Strongly disagree to 5 Strongly agree. The combined scale ranges from 3 (lowest level of RWA) to 15 (highest level of RWA).

Social Dominance Orientation. This measure is based on three questions.

- Some people should have more wealth/resources than others.
- It is not a problem if some people have more of a chance in life than others.
- No one group should dominate in society.

The scale for each question begins at 1 for Strongly disagree to 5 Strongly agree. The combined scale ranges from 3 (lowest level of SDO) to 15 (the highest level of SDO).

Method

We run three sets of models to assess the impact of the predictors on support for sending naval forces. Firstly, we run an ordered logit model that analyses the direct effect of all the variables on the dependent variable. We report the results in Online Appendix B. We then increase the complexity of the model to replicate the theoretical framework outlined above (Figure 1) by conducting a mediation analysis using a Generalised Structural Equation Modelling framework. Finally, following the parsimony principle

(Kelloway 1998), we strip the model of any insignificant relationships and then run a likelihood ratio test to examine whether the inclusion of the extra variables in the unconstrained model make a significant difference to model fit. The likelihood ratio test suggests that the insignificant paths do not improve the overall fit of the model (X^2 = 17.94 ($p < .32$)). As such we discuss the stripped-down Model II in detail. Mediation analysis presents the total effects of the predictors, broken down into direct and indirect effects (McKinnon 2008), which provides a complex picture of how psychological predispositions, foreign policy attitudes and prejudices directly and indirectly influence support for sending naval forces. By conducting both sets of models we can compare the relative predictive power of our hypothesised relationship against a more conventional approach.

We recognise that we are placing a structure on the data, suggesting that there is a causal order with predispositions coming prior to foreign policy attitudes and so forth. This is problematic in that no cross-sectional observational design can test for causality (although models that use cross-sectional observational data often claim to do so). We have strong theoretical reasons to build our model this way as it seems unlikely that attitudes towards Japan cause psychological predispositions, whereas the reverse is plausible. Likewise, we test for alternative specifications relating to the 'causal' ordering of nationalism and militarism, and we compare our mediation model against a standard unmediated ordered logit model which places a simple direct causal structure on the data. Using a path model we are better able to identify the mechanisms that influence support for sending naval forces to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. In Online Appendix C we conduct non-parametric mediation analysis to assess whether the mediators were sensitive to any unobserved confounders (Imai et al. 2011). The results were robust.

Results

The ordered logit model identified that a dislike of the Japanese government and a belief that military intervention will be successful are the strongest predictors of support for sending naval forces. The relative effect of RWA, militarism and nationalism are statistically significant but the effects are substantively small (Online Appendix B for further discussion). The full mediation model provides a fuller analysis of the relationship between the variables and support for dispute escalation. First we discuss the overall model findings (Table 1) and then the substantive impact of the variables (Table 2).

As the model is complicated we examine the results by first looking at the direct effects of the variables on support for sending naval forces before examining the effects on other variables that come earlier in the causal chain. As discussed above we look at Model II (represented in Figure 2), which shows the path model for the variables that were significant at the 95 percent level based on the unconstrained full model. We begin by examining the effect of psychological predispositions. As was the case with the ordered logit model, (Online Appendix B) SDO has no direct effect on support for

Table 1. Model Estimates

Variable	Model I Full Model	Model II Parsimonious
Navy to Islands		
RWA	0.150 (0.061)**	0.157 (0.060)***
SDO	−0.017 (0.052)	
Militarism	0.161 (0.048)***	0.162 (0.048)***
Nationalism	0.136 (0.045)***	0.135 (0.044)***
Attitude to Japanese people	0.022 (0.069)	
Attitude to Japanese Government	−0.459 (0.092)***	−0.468 (0.080)***
Fear of sanctions	−0.091 (0.068)	
Victory	0.492 (0.179)***	0.508 (0.177)***
Victory		
RWA	0.084 (0.063)	
SDO	0.008 (0.054)	
Militarism	0.029 (0.051)	
Nationalism	0.188 (0.047)***	0.197 (0.046)***
Attitude to Japanese people	−0.124 (0.07)	
Attitude to Japanese Government	0.035 (0.094)	
Fear of sanctions		
RWA	−0.086 (0.053)**	−0.086 (0.052)*
SDO	0.104 (0.045)**	0.108 (0.045)**
Militarism	−0.053 (0.042)	
Nationalism	−0.016 (0.038)	
Attitude to Japanese people	−0.017 (0.061)	
Attitude to Japanese Government	0.402 (0.079)***	0.408 (0.069)***
Attitude to Japanese people		
RWA	0.118 (0.052)**	0.118 (0.052)**
SDO	−0.099 (0.044)**	−0.099 (0.044)**
Militarism	−0.09 (0.041)**	−0.090 (0.041)**
Nationalism	−0.185 (0.038)***	−0.185 (0.038)***
Attitude to Japanese Government		
RWA	−0.162 (0.054)***	−0.159 (0.054)***
SDO	−0.045 (0.045)	
Militarism	−0.169 (0.044)***	−0.166 (0.044)***
Nationalism	−0.150 (0.040)***	−0.150 (0.040)***
Militarism		
RWA	−0.010 (0.050)	
SDO	−0.031 (0.041)	
Nationalism		
RWA	−0.039 (0.051)	
SDO	−0.029 (0.042)	

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Variable	Model I Full Model	Model II Parsimonious
N	602	602
X^2	115.09***	
LR test		17.94

*<0.10 **< 0.05 ***<0.01.

Table 2. Effect Sizes.

Variable	Total Effect Size	Direct (Effect Size) (% of Total)	Indirect (Effect Size) (% of Total)
RWA	0.08	0.065 (81%)	0.014 (19%)
SDO	Insignificant	Insignificant	Insignificant
Militarism	0.108	0.083 (77%)	0.025 (23%)
Nationalism	0.103	0.068 (52%)	0.035 (48%)
Attitude to Japanese people	Insignificant	Insignificant	Insignificant
Attitude to Japanese Government	−0.266	−0.265	−0.001
Fear of sanctions	Insignificant	Insignificant	NA
Likelihood of victory	0.341	0.341	NA

sending forces. We also find that SDO has no pathway to influence respondent support for sending force. It does increase a general dislike of the Japanese people and increases fear of sanctions, but these variables have no significant influence on support for military escalation, which we discuss below. While one half of the 'lethal union' fails to have an effect, the other half has both direct and indirect effects. RWA increases support for intervention (B = 0.157 ($p < .01$)), indicating that deference towards authority and a heightened threat perception increases willingness to use military force. Respondents tend to support dispute escalation through threat perception rather than through a perception of superiority and lack of empathy about the human costs of military action. Moving along the chain we find that both militarism (B = 0.162 ($p < .01$)) and nationalism (B = 0.135 ($p < .01$)) increase support for naval intervention. A belief in the efficacy of military action is unsurprisingly linked to support for sending naval forces. Finding a significant result for nationalism but not for SDO suggests that it is the specific belief about the superiority of China rather than a desire to dominate others that drives support for escalation.

Further along the causal chain we find that positive perceptions of the Japanese people have no significant impact on support for military commitments. As we discussed earlier, SDO tends to drive a dislike for the Japanese people, which is irrelevant to respondent perceptions about the use of military force. We do find that attitudes towards the Japanese government have a strong impact (B = −0.468 ($p < .01$)) in that

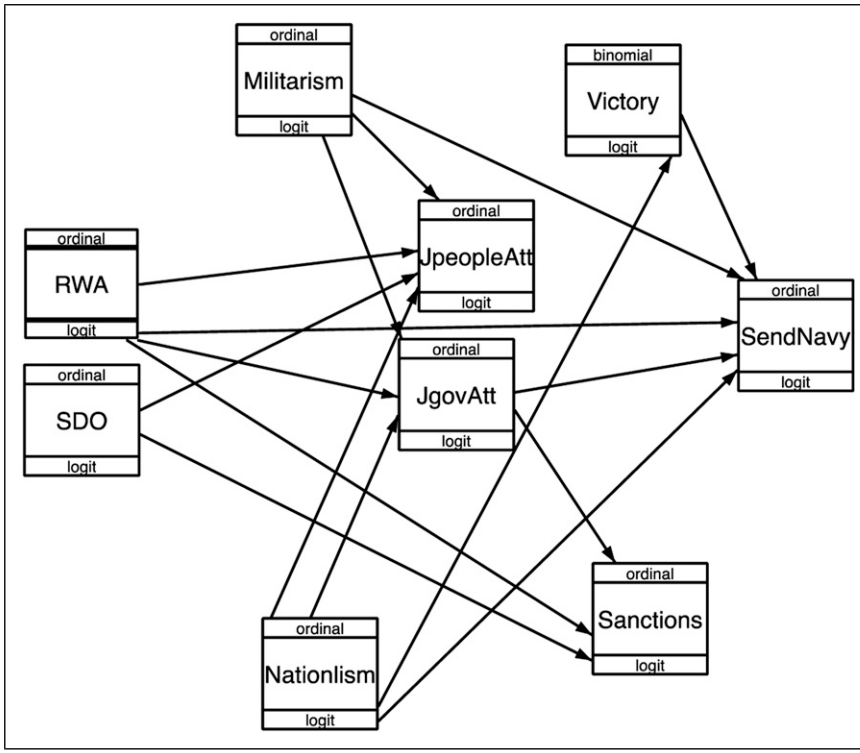

Figure 2. Model results.

the more respondents like the Japanese government the less willing they are to support intervention. As the mean attitude towards the Japanese government is 0.977 on a 0 (least positive) to 6 (most positive) scale (Online Appendix A), a huge proportion of our sample dislike the Japanese government, which in turn drives support for military intervention. Attitude towards Japan's government is one of the strongest direct predictors of support for the use of force. Individual calculations about support for escalation appear to be driven by estimates of policy rather than a dislike of the Japanese people.

Examining the final bloc of predictors we find no evidence that respondents are concerned about economic sanctions. The costs of economic sanctions are insufficiently significant to deter respondents from supporting further military action. There may be three dimensions to this finding. Firstly, respondents may not believe that sanctions will be placed on China; secondly, respondents do not believe the economic pain of sanctions is severe enough to scare them; and thirdly, even if they view sanctions as painful, respondents are willing to suffer to take the Islands. However, consistent with previous research in the US context (Gelpi et al. 2006), a belief that their

country will be victorious increases respondent support for dispute escalation (B = 0.508 ($p < .01$)). Belief in victory makes the conflict more attractive and increases a willingness to accept costs (Gelpi et al. 2006). However, causality could be in the reverse direction, with those individuals who support military intervention justifying it by arguing that it will succeed. Either way, respondents need to evaluate or justify escalation in terms of the likelihood of success. We are interested in separating out how psychological factors influence support for escalation both directly and mediated through different mechanisms. For example, chauvinistic nationalists are more likely to support escalation both directly and mediated through success estimates, whereas militarists do not take into account success estimates when they support conflict, they are just attracted to military action.

Right-Wing Authoritarianism, nationalistic and militaristic attitudes have broadly similar direct effects in our sample. As we move up the causality chain we find that where there is significance, variables that are closer to the specifics of the dispute (such as attitudes towards the opponent and likelihood of victory) have a much greater direct effect. However, if we only examine direct effects then we are unable to account for the possibility that psychological and attitudinal variables have a mediated influence on estimates about the opponent and the likely outcomes of the dispute. We now examine these indirect effects, showing that RWA, militarism and nationalism have another more circuitous route to influencing support for military intervention.

Working backwards from support for intervention we first examine perceptions of victory, finding that only nationalism increases it (B = 0.197 ($p < .01$)); nationalists believe their country is militarily superior to Japan and that they should win any conflict. We find no evidence that militarism increases the belief that China is more likely to win any conflict with Japan. This would seem to support our alternative suggestion that Chinese militarists may not be particularly confident in China's current military capabilities. Although militarism increases support for intervention it does so without the need to estimate the likelihood of victory. We find that neither SDO nor RWA has any influence on victory estimates.

Respondent concerns about economic sanctions are generally driven by psychological predispositions and attitudes towards the Japanese government. SDs are more concerned about the resulting economic sanctions (B = 0.108 ($p < .05$)) whereas RWAs are less concerned (B = −0.086 ($p < .05$)). Militarism and nationalism also appear to have no influence on fear of economic sanctions, leading to a rejection of hypotheses 9 and 10. While attitudes towards the Japanese people have no significant effect on fear of economic sanctions, attitudes towards the Japanese government do (B = 0.408 ($p < .01$)); having less respect for the Japanese government reduces the belief that Japan will be able to effectively sanction China. The results tell us about the types of individuals who are concerned about the economic consequences of sanctions. However, as discussed above, concern about economic sanctions appears to have very little deterrent effect on support for military escalation.

Several variables influence respondent attitudes towards the Japanese people. SDO increases dislike of the Japanese people (B = −0.099 ($p < .01$)), which fits the literature

on SDO orientation and nationalistic attitudes. RWA however, tends to increase the positive image of Japanese (B = 0.118 ($p < .05$)), which was unexpected and merits further research, but had no direct or indirect bearing on dispute escalation. Both militarists (B = −0.09 ($p < .05$)) and nationalists (B = −0.185 ($p < .01$)) have significantly more negative perceptions of the Japanese people. Nationalism is unsurprisingly related to a sense of superiority over the Japanese people, whereas militarism was not expected to be related to a dislike of Japanese people. It should be noted that the effect of nationalism was stronger than for militarism. The findings provide insight into the drivers of attitudes towards the Japanese people but these attitudes are unrelated to support for intervention; there is no mechanism through this variable for SDO, RWA, militarism and nationalism to affect support for sending naval forces to the Islands.

However, when we examine attitudes towards the Japanese government we find an indirect pathway to support for naval force. While SDO has no impact on attitudes towards the Japanese government, RWA has a statistically significant negative effect (B = −0.159 ($p < .01$)). RWAs appear to direct their antipathy towards Japan's government rather than its people. RWA impact on support for intervention is both direct and indirect by reducing approval of the Japanese government and therefore increasing the conditions to support military action. Likewise both militarism (B = −0.166 ($p < .01$)) and nationalism (B = −0.150 ($p < .01$)) reduce positive attitudes towards the Japanese government, which in turn increases support for military deployments. Perceptions of Japanese government behaviour are clearly a powerful driver of support for sending naval forces and this perception is influenced by psychological predispositions and foreign policy attitudes. Finally, we find that neither RWA nor SDO have a significant influence on either militarism or nationalism. Further research is warranted on this finding. Are there external influences on respondent nationalist and militarist identities such as propaganda that trump the influence of pre-dispositions?

Table 2 shows both the direct and indirect effect sizes of the significant variables on support for sending naval forces to the Islands. A belief in a Chinese victory has the strongest total effect at 0.341, followed by a dislike of the Japanese government at −0.266 (the more respondents like the Japanese government the less supportive they are of military action). Militarism has the next largest total effect (0.108), with 77 percent of that effect being direct but with 23 percent mediated through a dislike of the Japanese government. Likewise, nationalism has a broadly similar total effect (0.103) but that effect has a greater level of dispersion between directly impacting on respondent support for military action (52 percent of total effect) and the rest being mediated through perceptions of success (48 percent). Finally, looking at RWA, the total effect is 0.08 with 81 percent of that effect being direct and the other 19 percent being mediated through a general dislike of the Japanese government. The key mediator is attitudes towards the Japanese government, which mediates RWA, nationalism and militarism, with all three variables increasing dislike of Japanese government behaviour.

The models go some way to explain attitudes towards the Japanese people, with SDO, militarism and nationalism increasing dislike for them. Surprisingly RWAs

appear to be more positive towards the people of Japan, instead directing their dislike at the Japanese government. However, a broad dislike of the Japanese public has no influence on support for military action, with our respondents being able to discern differences between government behaviour and national characteristics as a motive for military escalation. Overall, we find a complex picture emerges of the key drivers behind individual attitudes towards sending military forces to the Islands. The predictors that more directly influence attitudes towards military intervention, specifically estimates of the likelihood of victory, influence attitudes towards sending naval forces more strongly. However, individual psychology also influences support for military intervention through a range of pathways.

Conclusion

This paper presents the first study of Chinese student support for sending naval forces to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Using a mediation model we demonstrated that there are numerous inputs into individual calculations about support for the deployment of military forces. The findings demonstrate that there is a complex interplay between psychological predispositions, foreign policy attitudes, perceptions about Japan, and the likely outcome of a conflict on support for sending naval forces. This study found little evidence of a lethal union of forces between RWA and SDO, with only RWA having both a direct and indirect influence on support for military force. Towards the other end of our model, where respondents are more likely to be making cost-benefit calculations, we find little concern over the possible effect of Japanese economic sanctions in a conflict scenario. We do find that both nationalism and militarism have both a direct and indirect effect on support for a more aggressive response to the dispute. While the role nationalism plays in Chinese public attitudes towards Japan and support for aggressive foreign policies is well known, the role of militarism has tended to receive much less focus. We found that militarism played a significant role both in making naval deployments more appealing but also increasing dislike of the Japanese government, which is a significant pathway to explain support for a more aggressive posture.

The study found that decision-making about support for sending force to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands is based around a mix of strategic calculations about the outcome of a conflict, foreign policy attitudes and a deep-seated dislike of the Japanese government. The belief that China will be victorious had by far the strongest effect (fed by nationalist foreign policy attitudes), suggesting that respondents were making cost-benefit calculations (or at least justifying support in cost-benefit terms) about an international conflict even if they were influenced by nationalist sentiments. This indicates a certain nationalist logic to support for the use of force in which feelings of superiority lead to a belief that China will prevail in a future conflict, making such a conflict appear to be a relatively low risk and therefore reasonable proposition. In line with Quek and Johnson's (2017/18) findings that in a conflict over the Islands the effective de-escalation strategies available to Chinese government include not only shaping public

views of the costs of conflict but also appealing to specific identities, this study shows that both sentiment and reasoning need to be taken into account when examining the interplay between Chinese nationalism and military conflict.

The second strongest effect was a dislike of the Japanese government but not of the Japanese people. The mix of a visceral dislike of the Japanese government combined with a belief that the costs of conflict are low and the chances of victory are high reduce a potential constraint on the Chinese government from escalating the dispute with Japan, and could in fact provide incentives for diversionary conflicts. Attitudes towards the Japanese people are quite negative but do not have a significant effect on support for dispute escalation. The dislike driving the willingness to engage in military conflict with Japan appears not to be about the inherent characteristics associated with the people but rather the image of the Japanese government. While we do not know the exact mechanism at play here, it seems reasonable to posit that Japan's policies, including its past behaviour, and how this is represented in and disseminated by China's news media, popular culture and education system, are important drivers of this negative image. This suggests that if China's leaders want to dampen down support for military action they would need to encourage more positive views of the Japanese government's behaviour, such as by describing Japan as reasonable, friendly and a long-term partner of China. However, this would be difficult in a crisis scenario where the public would likely be calling on the government to punish Japan for specific behaviour and even over the longer term it is far from clear that China's leaders view reducing public support for the use of military force as desirable. If behaviour is the key driver of dislike for the Japanese government then improved relations could be possible if the Japanese government changed some of its policies, but this might also depend on how those policies were represented in public discourse in China. We would suggest that detailed empirical study of the drivers of Chinese public attitudes towards Japan and the Japanese government would be a fruitful avenue for future research.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. https://www.statista.com/statistics/232265/mean-age-of-the-chinese-population/ (accessed April 26, 2022)
2. http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202112/t20211231_1825801.html (accessed April 26, 2022)
3. Results available from contact author.

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