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Public Opinion and China's Strategic Communication: Responses to Coercion and Persuasion

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Abstract

In this article we examine the effectiveness of foreign state influence strategies, examining how strategic messaging affects public attitudes to a specific policy issue—in this case whether China should be permitted to invest in nuclear power infrastructure in the UK. Deriving a range of arguments from official Chinese news articles we use a survey experiment to test whether foreign publics react differently to coercive and persuasive messages, whether perceptions of threat or economic dependence affect responses, and whether counter-coercion by close and powerful allies can moderate the effect of China's messaging. Our findings show that perceptions of security threat are a significant impediment to strategic messaging, with even gentle persuasion generating a backlash, shifting public views against the messaging state's position.

Introduction

At a Chinese Communist Party Central Committee study session in late May 2021, China's leader Xi Jinping urged his colleagues to 'improve the influence of international communication, ... the persuasiveness of Chinese discourse and the ability to guide international public opinion', calling for 'targeted communication strategies' to make China's 'voice heard on major issues' (Xu 2021). China's leaders recognise that shaping global public opinion is important not only to improve China's image but also to influence contentious policy debates in which China has a key stake. In many countries these debates have coalesced around issues of Chinese investment and national security, where politicians must balance the need for foreign funding and technology with the security risks associated with allowing Chinese companies to build infrastructure such as ports, railways and telecommunications networks (Meunier et al. 2014). If China's communication strategy can convince foreign publics that these projects are necessary and safe then the politicians who decide whether they will go ahead will face less public pressure to reject them.

A substantial body of literature has explored how China's government has attempted to craft a generally positive image of the country among publics around the world (Cook et al. 2022; d'Hooghe 2021; Kurlantzick 2023; Thussu et al. 2018; Wang 2022), and researchers have begun to examine how China employs economic threats or other forms of coercive diplomacy aimed at policy elites to achieve its desired objectives in international disputes (Hanson et al. 2020; Harrell et al. 2018; Miller 2022). While in the field of IR a growing number of studies have examined state attempts to shift foreign publics' views on specific policy issues, such as sanctions (Rhee et al. 2024), human rights or climate change (Koliev et al. 2022), researchers testing the effects of China's public diplomacy have focused on general public perceptions of China (Mattingly and Sundquist 2023), thus we still have little understanding of how international publics might respond to Chinese government coercion or persuasion aimed at shaping their views on a particular policy debate. In this paper, we seek to address this gap by examining the effectiveness of the Chinese government's messaging at influencing the views of foreign publics on specific policy issues. In addition, we consider whether foreign publics react differently to threats and persuasive messages from China. We address whether preconceptions about China's economic and security relationship with their country affect their response, and what happens when they encounter competing messages from China and the United States on the same issue. We do this through a survey experiment that tests the British public's response to real-world messages drawn from Chinese state media on a live policy issue in UK-China relations. This issue-China's involvement in the construction of a new generation of nuclear power stations in the UK-sits at the intersection of a range of public concerns, including national security, economic development, energy security and climate change. Like many countries, the UK faces a dilemma over whether it should welcome Chinese

investment for its potential economic benefits or seek to place limits on it due to concerns about China's threat to national security or liberal democratic values (Stanley 2024). The UK is one of the most important targets of China's global strategy to influence public opinion, with a 2022 Freedom House report ranking Britain equal second out of 30 countries, alongside the United States and behind only Taiwan, in terms of the effort expended by the Chinese government to influence the country's media (Cook et al. 2022, 26).

Our research uses a survey experiment on a nationally representative sample of the British public to test whether the messages affect public attitudes towards China General Nuclear Power Group (CGN) building nuclear power stations in the UK. This survey experiment is based on a preliminary media study, set out in online Appendix A, which identifies Chinese messaging. Using a Structural Topic Model (STM) we systematically classify topics in the state-run China Daily newspaper that involve UK-China relations. The STM allows us to systematically analyse the core themes in the China Daily's news reporting and enhances our confidence that the nuclear issue was a core component of the paper's reporting on the UK (Robert et al. 2014; 2016). We combine Machine Learning with in-depth qualitative readings to identify both coercive and persuasive messages produced by China's official media. These messages express possible consequences associated with the ending of CGN's involvement in the construction of a new generation of British nuclear power stations. Our experiment tests not only the direct effect of the different messages on attitudes, but also how they interact with respondents' preconceptions about the importance of China to the British economy and the national security threat it might pose, balanced against competing messaging from the United States aimed at shifting views against the Chinese investment.

We find that Chinese economic coercion as well as more subtle attempts at persuasion are ineffective and generate a backlash. This is particularly the case for those who perceive China as a security threat, with those who view China as less threatening also unconvinced by both coercive and persuasive messages. Beliefs about China's importance to the British economy are not significant drivers of the public's response to Chinese messaging, nor does the response shift in the face of counter-coercion by the United States. The British public is highly sceptical of all communication that comes from the Chinese government, whether coercion or persuasion, with concerns about security threats acting as a significant impediment to Chinese strategic messaging.

This article makes a number of contributions to the literature on coercive and public diplomacy as well as China's strategic communication. First, we look beyond state responses to economic coercion to examine how a foreign public reacts to such messaging, testing for evidence of a backlash but with an expanded analysis that considers respondent predispositions and includes a comparison between coercive and persuasive messages. We also innovate in the way we derive government (in this case Chinese) narratives from our media study, generating realistic messages informed by machine learning techniques and qualitative reading to use in our survey experiment. We extend existing research on China's international communication by looking at public responses to messaging on a specific policy issue instead of respondents' general views of China. Finally, we unpack public responses to foreign state communications by examining how preconceptions about nations lead to heterogenous responses to messages. Overall, the article contributes to our understanding of the (in)effectiveness of both coercive and public diplomacy at influencing public opinion, while adding to the growing literature on current debates about China's role in the construction of foreign state infrastructure.

This paper comprises five sections. The first section provides a review of the literature identifying the paucity of research that systematically analyses how public opinion responds to coercive/non-coercive messages and the growing research examining Chinese coercive diplomacy. The second section outlines a theoretical framework that sets out our approach to examining coercion and persuasion mechanisms. The third section briefly outlines how the

media messages are identified, while full details of the media study's methods and results are provided in Appendix A and B. The fourth section sets out the design of the survey experiment, and reports the results. The final section discusses implications of our findings and future research directions.

1.0 Previous Research

It is only recently that we are starting to see the beginnings of a research agenda focused on the public opinion consequences of coercive diplomacy, specifically in relation to the use of economic sanctions (Frye 2019). Generally, studies of coercive diplomacy's effectiveness have tended to focus on outcomes at the state level (Haynes 2012; Schultz 2001). This focus is surprising as one of the key mechanisms to influence elite calculations is coercive techniques that create discord amongst the public, which exerts public pressure that influences elite thinking (Allen 2008). However, there is a significant gap in the literature around the response of publics to coercion in target states. This gap has been partially addressed through work that considers public reactions to economic sanctions. The conventional thinking is that when an objectionable policy is the focus of sanctions the public should become more negative towards that policy and more critical of their own government (Kaempfer, Lowenberg and Mertens 2004; Allen 2008). Alternatively, there may be a backlash effect where the public respond aggressively towards the sanctioner and rally around the government (Nooruddin 2002; Seitz and Zazzaro 2019; Gueorguiev, McDowell and Steinberg 2020, 1556; Sejersen 2021). The backlash effect should generate support for the offending policy, with attitudes towards the opponent's demands hardening. Empirical studies of these potential mechanisms have provided mixed evidence for both the conventional and the backlash mechanisms.

Alexseev and Hale (2020) find little evidence that Vladimir Putin was able to generate rally effects or divert blame for economic pain in response to Western sanctions over Crimea and the Donbas. Where backlash has been identified it is not usually uniform in its effects.

Generally, backlash is more likely in democracies and hybrid states than in autocracies (Alexseev and Hale 2020). Sanctions may result in an increase in support for the offending policies but not for the leader (Grossman et al. 2018). Frye (2019), using a series of survey experiments, finds that economic sanctions tend not to generate a straight rally effect, rather there is a partisan divide. Putin sceptics tend to reduce their support for both the government and the offending policy, whereas Putin loyalists rally against the sanctioning power (Frye 2019). Research on the impact of Chinese economic sanctions is generally quite scarce with Sung and Park's (2022) ground-breaking article being the first to examine backlash against Chinese economic sanctions against South Korea for deploying Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD). Examining both public opinion and consumer choice data they find that there was a backlash that increased support for THAAD and hostility towards China. However, their consumer analysis suggests that the public do not change their economic behaviour in relation to Chinese goods. In essence, their work finds that sanctions have multidimensional effects (Sung and Park 2022).

Looking at the specific literature on Chinese coercive diplomacy, we find increasing academic interest as China consolidates its military and economic power and becomes more assertive on the international stage. Hanson et al. (2020) identified 152 uses of coercive diplomacy since 2010 with dramatic increase in 2018. Of those 152 incidents the UK was targeted four times – twice relating to Huawei's involvement in the UK's digital infrastructure, once involving the UK creating a pathway to citizenship for Hong Kong residents and once relating to the invitation of the Dalai Lama to the UK (Hanson et al. 2020). Generally, research has tended to focus on the macro-behaviour of the Chinese government rather than its effects on public opinion in targeted countries (Wiegand 2009). One of the earliest studies focussed on China's use of coercive diplomacy during the Cambodian peace process, finding that China combined diplomatic, economic, and military policy instruments to successfully achieve its

regional objectives (Ross 1991). A sustained focus on China's use of coercive diplomacy occurred primarily after 2000 when Beijing began to demonstrate its willingness to use coercive instruments to achieve policy aims, despite continuing to publicly deny that it uses economic coercion against other states (Glaser 2021). Miller (2022) notes that China's economic coercion towards democracies often lacks specific demands. He argues that there are strategic benefits to China for doing this, including avoiding triggering the kind of public backlash that would increase a democratic leader's audience costs and harden their bargaining position, and making it easier for China to claim victory in the dispute due to the absence of a clear outcome. Conversely, Gloria (2021) argues that China's reluctance to openly employ or even acknowledge the legitimacy of economic sanctions as a foreign policy tool is due to its need to maintain its identity as a victim in international disputes. With the exception of Sung and Park's (2022) article described above we see very little research conducted on the public opinion effects of Chinese use of coercive instruments. Furthermore, there is not yet any research examining how public opinion responds to threats from China.

The literature on mass responses to public diplomacy has tended to focus on how the public respond to high-level visits from foreign dignitaries, with results from two key studies pointing to the complex outcomes associated with attempts to influence public opinion in foreign countries (Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2009; Goldsmith, Horiuchi and Matush 2021). In the Goldsmith and Horiuchi (2009) study they identify the risk of backlash against foreign visits, particularly if the messaging state is not viewed as credible or trustworthy, which is an area we will explore by examining threat perception and message response. While Goldsmith and Horiuchi (2009) found risk of backlash they also identified that high-level visits have the ability to increase the approval of the visiting state. In fact, both studies also found that high-level visits from elites including heads of state resulted in increases in approval for those states in the country that had been visited. This increase in approval did not immediately fade away

and had a lingering effect on mass perceptions of foreign nations (Goldsmith, Horiuchi and Matush 2021).

Looking specifically at China, researchers have examined the organisation (Wang 2022) and content (Lams 2018) of China's international communication, using concepts such as soft power (Edney et al. 2020; Gill 2020), public diplomacy (d'Hooghe 2021), and strategic narratives (Hagström and Gustafsson 2021) in their analysis of China's efforts to shape global views. Others have looked at more specific tactics such as the expansion of Confucius Institutes (Hartig 2016), the use of Twitter by state media and diplomats (Huang and Wang 2019) or China's 'mask diplomacy' during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kowalski 2021). However, the vast majority of this work focuses on the factors driving these strategies and the structural features that make them more or less likely to succeed, with less emphasis on directly testing how foreign publics respond to China's strategic messaging. While there are many studies of international attitudes to China, these do not generally look at Chinese messaging and instead use variables such as political system, level of development, or ideology to explain respondent attitudes (e.g. Xie and Jin 2022; Welsh and Chang 2015; Chu 2021; Gries et al. 2012). Rare exceptions include studies by Min and Luqiu (2021), who compare South Korean and American responses to Chinese propaganda, finding that nationality as well as perceptions of credibility have an effect on message reception, and Mattingly and Sundquist (2023), who examine Indian responses to Twitter messages from Chinese diplomats, finding that positive messages improve perceptions but negative nationalist messages undermine perceptions of China. While important contributions, these studies examine the effects of propaganda on general favourability toward the Chinese government and people rather than testing attitudes toward specific policy outcomes that China might seek to influence. In this article, we seek to build on the current literature by contributing an analysis of the public opinion responses to coercive and persuasive messaging.

2.0 Theorising Chinese Strategic Communications and Reception

In this section, we unpack the key drivers behind public responses to coercive and persuasive diplomacy, highlighting how message content and individual preconceptions about the messaging state influence public reactions. First, we justify the theoretical focus on public opinion, arguing that public fear of economic pain or public support for certain policy actions are mechanisms that messaging states can use to pressure a democratic (and in numerous cases non-democratic) government to comply with demands. Second, we innovate around the type of message that is crafted by the messaging state to examine the potential for different strategies to have varying levels of success. Explicit coercive threats are one option for a state trying to influence mass attitudes, but openly threatening the target state has the potential to spectacularly backfire, which in turn can increase public resistance to the coercer's demands (Gueorguiev et al. 2020; Powers and Altman 2023). Thus, messages that identify potential consequences to policy choices but avoid linking these consequences to any action by China may have the potential to influence public opinion through persuasion while facing less risk of a backlash. Finally, we examine how perceptions of China influence public responses to demands. We hypothesise that mass reactions to China's communications will not be uniform and are instead conditioned by perceptions of China as a national security threat and perceptions of economic dependence on China. Overall, we outline the role public opinion plays in influencing the effectiveness of coercive diplomacy, how responses will vary to coercive and persuasive messages and according to preconceptions about the coercing state.

We focus on the reception of Chinese government public messaging on a specific policy issue because this has been largely neglected in the literature and because of a clear shift under Xi Jinping's leadership to a more assertive diplomatic and foreign propaganda strategy that is willing to more forcefully argue China's position to foreign audiences. At the same time, however, it is important to clarify some of our assumptions about China's strategic messaging in order to contextualise our analysis and findings. We assume that in making coercive or persuasive public statements about a policy decision being made in the UK, the Chinese government has at least some desire to shape the views of the British public. We recognise that not every message about international affairs put out by the Chinese government, including those that appear to be aggressively aimed at other states, will be solely intended to change the views of foreign audiences. This is because when China publicly communicates a coercive message it may also be interested in projecting a resolute or strong image to its own people, to members of its diaspora communities abroad, or even to publics in other states that are bystanders to the dispute. We measure whether a message is successful or not in terms of its reception among the public of the target state while acknowledging that the Chinese government's external propaganda goals and strategy are often heavily influenced by domestic political concerns (Wang 2022). So although our focus is on the response of the British public to China's messages, a broader assessment of whether the messaging is successful in terms of the Chinese government's overall strategic objectives requires considering a range of factors that are beyond the scope of this study.

At the same time, even when the Chinese government does intend to shift British or other international public opinion, the strategic messages of the kind we focus on here represent only one possible technique among many. China's propaganda apparatus employs approaches ranging from modern public relations and public diplomacy (d'Hooghe 2015) to Leninist-style 'United Front' work (Brady 2017) to influence foreign views. The long-term and general nature of much of this work distinguishes it from the kinds of specific messages we are testing in our study. Nevertheless, if the Chinese government aims to shift foreign public views on contemporary policy debates in the short term then coercive messaging is one plausible option for doing so, even if it is just one component of a broader strategy.

2.1 Coercive Diplomacy and Public Opinion

Successful coercive diplomatic strategy is based on inflicting-or threatening to inflict-unacceptably high costs on the leadership, which makes compliance with coercers' demands an attractive option (Escriba-Folch and Wright, 2010; Marinov, 2005; Lektzian and Souva 2007; Alexseev and Hale 2020). There are numerous mechanisms by which coercers can affect the calculations of the target, ranging from military threats where the target regime's survival is directly in peril (Sechser 2018; Zegart 2020) to smart sanctions that focus on the ability of regime members to travel or targeting their individual wealth (Drezner 2011; Park and Choi 2022). Attempts by states to influence foreign public opinion as part of a coercive strategy are based on a belief that the public will influence elite calculations. Research into public policy suggests that elites respond to public attitudes (Beyer and Hanni 2018; Sevenans 2021). In terms of foreign policy responsiveness, a recent study by Chu and Recchia (2022) using an experiment found that British MPs were responsive to polling data when making decisions about sending naval forces to the South China Sea. Placing pressure on the public provides a plausible coercive mechanism that influences government choices in democracies. Threats of external costs have the potential to influence public perceptions about specific policy choices the elite are making. If the public are less supportive of government choices relating to Chinese infrastructure investments it has the potential to influence the decision-making calculation of elites. The crucial questions are will the public respond positively, negatively, or indifferently to Chinese government communications and does the type of message influence public reactions?

2.2 Communication Mechanisms

Building on the literature relating to coercive and public diplomacy we specify two plausible communication strategies designed to influence foreign public opinion on a specific policy issue. For each of these we explain how they relate to the Chinese government's objective to encourage public support for CGN's investment. The first strategy involves a coercive messaging mechanism, where the communicating state tries to bully the public in the target state into supporting a policy or face significant negative consequences. In this case China threatens to stop investing in the UK if the British government removes CGN from its nuclear infrastructure. The coercive message is specifically designed to affect individual cost/benefit calculations by threatening to impose costs that have negative implications for the British economy and UK national welfare. We hypothesise that coercive mechanisms have significant potential to backfire as communicating a threat to the public identifies the coercer as an enemy. Backing an enemy's policy clearly appears not to be in the national interest and as such leads to a drop rather than an increase in approval.

In response to the concerns relating to backlash we examine whether a less confrontational approach would be a more effective strategy for increasing compliance with a communicating state's demands. The second type of message aims to communicate information to persuade a target state's population to support a policy. Fitzpatrick (2010) identified six categories of public diplomacy (influence, informational, relational, promotional, political and warfare). We synthesise the informational and influence approach to affect public attitudes towards a policy. The informational approach is designed to inform and educate to influence perceptions of a state. However, in our case we are using an informational approach to persuade a sceptical public about the benefits of a policy (Fitzpatrick 2010, Zaharna 2014). The informational approach is designed to share information to raise consciousness about a political issue and to shape attitudes and behavioural preferences amongst the public (Zaharna 2014). In this case the Chinese government provides information about the negative consequences of ending CGN's involvement in the UK's nuclear infrastructure in an attempt to shape public attitudes. It differs from the coercive strategy as it is not trying to bully the target population with threats of retaliation, rather the strategy is to persuade by highlighting potential consequences (our experimental treatments specify consequences that are unrelated

to any future policy response from China). We hypothesise that informational persuasion strategies are less likely to result in backlash as the communicator is not positioning itself in opposition to UK national interests, leading to hypothesis 1.

H1: Threatening messages will be more likely to backfire than persuasive messages.

We do not expect mass attitudes towards to either coercive or persuasive messages will be uniform. Instead, preconceptions about China should lead to heterogenous responses to Chinese government messaging.

2.3 Preconceptions and China's Messaging

Individual responses to China's strategic communications are an interaction between the message and individual perceptions about the coercer. There are two plausible mechanisms that influence public reactions to Chinese government messages. First, perceptions about the level of national security threat that China represents to the UK should systematically influence public reactions to coercion or persuasion from China. Second, perceptions about the economic importance of China to the UK should influence individual willingness to support Chinese infrastructure investments in the face of Chinese government demands.

The information updating approach (Gueorguiev et al. 2020) suggests that when a state attempts to coerce another it signals that it views a particular policy change as desirable. Thus, a preconceived idea that China is a threat to UK national security is expected to lead to resistance to Chinese threats. By attempting to coerce the UK, China is providing further evidence to respondents that it will benefit from a change in UK policy, and so, for a high threat perceiver, compliance with the demands would be good for an enemy and as such bad for the UK. Here we suggest that this logic may also apply even when the messaging is an attempt to persuade rather than coerce. If respondents view China as a significant national security threat, they may be more likely to believe that giving China what it wants is never advisable, even when it signals its desires through persuasive messaging that lacks any explicit threat. China's attempts to persuade may not been seen as credible because actors who are viewed as national security threats are not seen as trustworthy (Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2009). For a low threat perceiver, on the other hand, compliance with Chinese messages is acceptable as it is not perceived as strengthening an opponent that threatens to UK national security. The persuasive message is viewed as more credible coming from a trustworthy source. Here, the focus is solely on the potential costs to the UK; costs identified by China are taken on face value, influencing decisions through standard cost-benefit calculations. The costs of complying with China's demands will be thought of as being lower than the costs of resisting, leading to hypothesis 2.

H2 (Threat perception): Those who perceive China to be a threat to national security will resist Chinese messages whereas those who do not perceive China to be a threat will comply with Chinese messages.

It is also possible that rather than using the content of messages to make rational calculations about the interests of an enemy, those who perceive China to be a threat will react emotionally and become more anxious and negative as soon as China is mentioned. If respondents react in this way it would be the combination of being predisposed to view China as a threat and being primed to think about China that would generate opposition to Chinese involvement in the nuclear power plant.¹ In our experiment the control group, experimental treatments and dependent variable all mention China, so if this priming were the sole explanatory mechanism then we would expect to see no significant difference between the control and treatment groups when comparing the responses of those who view China as a threat. We explore this further in the results section.

¹ We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this explanation.

The next mechanism is based on individual preconceptions about economic interests and the importance of China. The economic interests mechanism works through individual concerns about the damage that Chinese coercion might have on the UK economy. A belief about the importance of China for the UK economy will affect the cost-benefit calculations of the respondent (Gueorguiev et al. 2020). For those respondents who place a high value on Chinese investment in the UK, the threatened loss will be too costly and will make the respondents more willing to comply with Chinese demands all other things being equal. In contrast, those individuals who feel that China is relatively unimportant for the UK economy will be less concerned about losing Chinese investment. The cost of resisting Chinese demands will be low for those individuals who perceive that China is relatively unimportant. Where warnings are directly made about future economic investments, those individuals who believe that China is economically important to the UK will be especially compliant to Chinese demands, leading to hypotheses 3.

H3 (Economic importance): The greater the perceived importance of China for the UK economy the more likely an individual is to comply with Chinese demands.

These two mechanisms speak to the quandary that politicians in Britain and many other countries are facing in regard to China (Stanley 2024). China clearly is an enormously important economic power that the British government needs to engage with. Meanwhile, China is also an authoritarian state whose national interests may divert significantly from British national interests. This is especially true if it comes into conflict with the UK's primary security partner, the United States. The issue of economic benefit and security threat is particularly relevant to issues relating to economic investments, with considerable suspicion

relating to the Belt and Road Initiative and the possibility that infrastructure investments could be used as potential leverage for future coercion or even "weaponised" in a crisis scenario.²

2.4 Ally Counter-Messaging

The final area we examine is the effect of counter-messaging by the United States. We are interested in examining how a middle-tier power is susceptible to countervailing coercive pressures. With the UK having left a powerful economic bloc following Brexit, it is potentially more susceptible to coercive pressures from the two dominant states. There is clearly an asymmetric power and trading relationship between the UK and the US/China. Both the US and China have significant capabilities to coerce the UK and without membership of the EU the British government has limited capacity to push back. As such we anticipate that the British public may be quite susceptible to pressures from both the US and China. As shown in Table 1, we focus on US warnings about reducing security cooperation with the UK. This represents a realistic threat having been articulated by the Trump administration in relation to the UK government allowing Huawei to build its digital infrastructure. Mark Esper, who was President Trump's defence secretary, stated:

"Reliance on Chinese 5G vendors could render our partners' critical systems vulnerable to disruption, manipulation and espionage. It could also jeopardise our intelligence and communication-sharing capabilities, and by extension it could jeopardise our alliances."³

Warnings about security cooperation and the US-UK alliance represents a plausible threat and is expected to reduce individual compliance with Chinese government demands, leading to hypothesis 4.

² <u>https://www.mi5.gov.uk/news/speech-by-mi5-and-fbi</u> (accessed 2 November 2022).

³ "US defence secretary warns Huawei 5G will put alliances at risk", Patrick Wintour, *The Guardian*, 15th Feb 2020.

H4 (Counter-messaging): US threats to reduce security cooperation with the UK will reduce respondent compliance with Chinese demands.

We also expect that there will be heterogenous treatment effects amongst those individuals who value the importance of the US alliance for UK national security and those that do not. We would expect that those who value the US alliance will be more likely to comply with US counter-coercion than those who do not, leading to the fifth and final hypothesis:

H5 (Alliance importance): The greater the perceived importance of the US alliance for UK national security the more likely an individual is to comply with US demands.

Overall, we developed five hypotheses that link message type and individual preconceptions about China to compliance or resistance to the Chinese government's demands. In the next section we outline how we selected the different messages related to coercion and persuasion.

3.0 Survey Experiment Message Identification

We selected the *China Daily* to examine strategic communications relating to CGN's involvement in the UK's nuclear infrastructure as it is China's primary publication for expressing state views to international audiences (Chen and Wang 2022, 2), and its content has appeared as paid supplements in more than 30 newspapers around the world, including prominent publications such as the *New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal* and the UK's *Daily Telegraph* (Lim and Bergin 2018). While the average member of the British public will be unlikely to have read *China Daily* content, analysis of this newspaper reliably provides us with the range of narratives that China's government aims to project to general international audiences and therefore the messaging that British or other English-speaking people are likely to encounter if and when they are exposed to China's views on a particular issue.

Our experiment focuses on whether China General Nuclear (CGN) should be permitted to build and run nuclear power plants in the UK. The media analysis identifies one threat and three persuasive statements in Chinese government messages about CGN. In order to systematically analyse Chinese messaging relating to the UK's nuclear infrastructure we used a combination of Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques and qualitative reading of key articles to demonstrate that the nuclear issue was both important in China's relations with the UK and that the messages we identified were not simply cherry picked. We downloaded 15,553 China Daily articles from 1 January 2014 until 1 June 2021. To identify the main topics or themes relating to the UK in the China Daily we use the Structural Topic Model (STM) package developed by Roberts et al. (2019) to analyse the cleaned newspaper stories. The STM approach has been used to broadly examine foreign policy messaging (Maracchione 2023; Maracchione and Jardine 2024) and twitter responses to public diplomacy (Maracchione et al. 2024). We will be using it to identify broad themes in China Daily's reporting about Britain, helping us to generate externally valid messages for the later experiment. The STM approach allows us to identify which words cluster together, with these clusters being identified as a topic or theme (Czymara and van Klingeren 2021). The STM, unlike a standard Latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) model, also allows us to examine shifts in the importance of topics over time by including a time covariate (Roberts et al. 2019). The results of the STM indicate that the China Daily reported most on the nuclear issue towards the end of 2015 and that by 2021 there was a renewed and growing discussion about China's nuclear investments in the UK (see online Appendix A). We are interested in Chinese government messaging about the benefits associated with Chinese investment in British infrastructure projects and the potential costs of removing Chinese companies from these projects. From the topics returned by the STM, we selected topic 3, which relates to allowing Chinese companies to build the next generation of British nuclear power stations. This was selected as it both speaks to a national infrastructure

project with security implications, currently was not a major public policy issue and had not been resolved. We anticipate that the *China Daily* would be producing media content prior to any decision to influence elites and public opinion. Unpacking topic 3, we examine what words have been used to emphasise the importance of the project. Overall, word frequency analysis shows that the main focus of *China Daily* stories about CGN's nuclear investments in the UK speak to climate change and emissions, electricity supply and the costs of the project. The use of the STM allows us to be more confident about the external validity of the messaging treatments chosen for the experiment. There was a focus on nuclear investments in the *China Daily*'s reporting and the messages selected for the experiment were prevalent in *China Daily* stories about Chinese investment in the UK's nuclear infrastructure. Further details of the media study methods and results are provided in online Appendix A.

Building on the results of the STM, we drill further into *China Daily* messages about nuclear by looking at four news articles that directly speak to the issue of a) the benefits associated with CGN's involvement in the Hinkley Point nuclear power project and b) the potential consequences for the UK of ending the project. These were labelled China Daily 2015a, China Daily 2015b, China Daily 2017 and China Daily 2021.⁴ For a detailed discussion of the qualitative study see online Appendix A. From our readings of the four articles and the STM we see clear themes emerge from the *China Daily* stories about CGN's investment in the UK. *China Daily* identifies benefits associated with the inward investment from China, namely a) provide jobs and reduce project time, b) allow the UK to hit climate change targets and c)

⁴ "China, UK sign landmark deals worth \$62b", Wu Jiao and Zhang Chunyan, *China Daily Global*, 22/10/2015, (China Daily 2015a)

[&]quot;Fruitful China-Britain energy cooperation sets model for global climate battle", *China Daily Global*, 27/10/2015, (China Daily 2015b)

[&]quot;Chinese investment in the UK is an opportunity not a threat", Liu Xiaoming, *China Daily Global*, 22/8/2017, (China Daily 2017)

[&]quot;Cutting CGN 'against UK interests" Wang Mingjie, China Daily Global, 5/8/2021, (China Daily 2021)

secure the UK's energy supply. It also identifies investment consequences for the UK if CGN's involvement is ended. We use these general themes to construct the experimental treatments.

4.0 Survey Experiment Data and Methods

The data to test the hypotheses are taken from a survey experiment specifically designed to test public reactions to various statements from both China and the United States. Both countries are aiming in diametrically opposing directions to influence government decisions relating to CGN's investment in the UK's new generation of nuclear power stations. The experiment was embedded in a survey that examined British public perceptions of China.⁵ The location of the experiment and the surrounding observational variables was randomly rotated to address any concerns relating to question ordering systematically influencing responses. The surveys were administered over the internet by YouGov, whose 300,000 panel members formed the sampling frame. (Most of these are actively recruited by targeted campaigns via non-political websites, rather than volunteering for the panel. Similarly, respondents are not able to choose which surveys to take part in: they are either sampled for a given data collection or not.) Although these are non-probability samples, YouGov has a strong record in generating results representative of the British electorate, as measured by their accuracy in predicting elections. The fieldwork was conducted between 4th and the 8th of November 2021 resulting in a sample size of 3,125.

The survey experiment is based on a vignette presented in the form of a statement. The statement is based on CGN's involvement in building a new generation of nuclear power plants for the UK. There is an initial introduction to the statement that is common to all respondents which is followed by two sets of manipulations relating to coercive and persuasive messages with the core manipulation speaking to Chinese government messaging and the secondary

⁵ The survey experiment received ethical approval from the University of York's Economics, Law, Management and Sociology ethics committee (ELMPS).

manipulation relating to US counter-messaging. The first manipulation relating to Chinese messages has four treatments. The content of these messages-reduced future investment, risks to energy supply, risk to emission targets and increased costs of the project—are set out below. The messages and language are derived from the STM and qualitative readings (outlined in Appendix A). We keep the messages simple and clear in order to prevent leakage, allowing us to directly identify how specific messages from the Chinese government affect attitudes (Tomz and Weeks 2013). The second manipulation relating to US counter-coercion has one treatment, which is damage to US-UK security collaboration. This combination of China's messages and US threats results in a 5 x 2 factorial design. Following the vignette, respondents are asked "Would you support or oppose ending the contract with China General Nuclear (CGN)?" Responses range from Strongly Support (1) to Strongly Oppose (5). This serves as the main dependent variable in our analysis. We also make use of three covariates that we interact with the experimental treatments. Respondents were asked to rate the level of threat from China and how important China is to the British economy. We also included a covariate that asked how important the US alliance was for UK national security. Table 1 below outlines the experimental design.

Table 1. Experimental Treatments

Opening Vignette		Currently the British Government is considering the future involvement of China General Nuclear (CGN) nuclear power group in the construction of the Hinkley Point civilian nuclear power plant.
Chinese Coercion/Persuasion	Control Group	Opening Vignette Only

Experimental Design and Wordings

	Investment Coercion Treatment	The Chinese Government has stated that ending of CGN's involvement at Hinkley Point will lead to a reduction in future Chinese investment in the UK.
	Energy Supply Persuasion Treatment	The Chinese Government has stated that ending of CGN's involvement at Hinkley Point will delay the project which would have made a significant contribution to meeting the UK's energy needs.
	Climate Change Persuasion Treatment	The Chinese Government has stated that ending of CGN's involvement at Hinkley Point will prevent the UK from hitting its carbon emission targets.
	Cost Persuasion Treatment	The Chinese Government has stated that ending of CGN's involvement at Hinkley Point will significantly increase the cost of the project.
US Counter-Coercion	US Threat Treatment	A US Government spokesperson stated that China's involvement in the UK's energy infrastructure will damage UK-US alliance ties.
Dependent Variable		Would you support or oppose ending the contract with China General Nuclear (CGN)?

Covariates:

Threat Perception: Do you think China is or is not a threat to UK National Security? 1 A very large threat to 4 No threat at all. 5 Don't Know.

Economic Importance: How important, if at all, do you think China is to the British economy? 1 Very Important to 4 Not Important at all. 5 Don't Know

US Alliance Importance: Do you think the UK's alliance with the United States improves or worsens the UK's national security? 1 Improves a great deal to 4 Worsens a great deal. 5 Don't Know

Dependent Variable: Would you support or oppose ending the contract with China General Nuclear (CGN)? 1 Strongly Support to 5 Strongly Oppose. 6 Don't Know

4.1 Survey Experiment Results

We use a series of OLS regression models to analyse the impact of the experimental treatments on opposition to ending CGN's involvement in the next generation of UK nuclear power stations. The five experimental treatments were compared against a baseline control group, who were given the opening vignette without any further information. We present the main findings as an Average Treatment Effect (ATE) graph (figure 1). In Appendix B we present several different models to examine the robustness of the findings to a variety of different model specifications and for the inclusion of a variety of control variables. The experimental treatments are robust to changes in model specification.





Figure 1 presents average treatment effects against the control group. We find evidence to suggest that strategic coercion and persuasion from the Chinese government are either counterproductive or ineffective. Not only was the threat to cut future investment counterproductive, the results demonstrated that most persuasion attempts are also counterproductive with respondents being less likely to comply with the Chinese government's wishes. At best was the effect of the cost persuasion treatment which was statistically indistinguishable from the control group. Threatening or persuasive messaging by the Chinese government is either counterproductive or ineffective. Likewise, we find no evidence for counter-messaging effectiveness. There is no backlash against US demands, rather they are not considered. There is already sizeable cynicism about Chinese messaging and, as such, US counter-messaging is not needed to affect decision-making.

Next, we investigate the heterogeneous effects of the experimental treatments. Are respondents with certain preconceptions more or less susceptible to Chinese and US government messaging? We interact all four Chinese message treatments with two preconceptions about China (threat perception and economic importance to UK perception), and interact the US message treatment with perceptions about the importance of the US alliance for UK security. It is our expectation that those with favourable views of China will be more susceptible to Chinese communications than those without, and that those who value the US alliance will be more susceptible to US counter-coercion. By including preconceptions and interacting them with Chinese and US messaging we find that individual threat perceptions moderate the effects of the experimental treatments, whereas economic concerns do not. Information updating and messenger credibility is clearly an important mechanism to help explain individual reactions to Chinese Government messaging. The full model is presented in appendix B, Table IB, model VI. Below we will be primarily focussing on the interaction between threat perception and message.

Firstly, providing a quick summary of the results we find that the effectiveness of Chinese coercive diplomacy is a function of both the message itself and preconceptions about China. We see that Chinese government messaging still appears to be counterproductive although we now observe that the cost message is counterproductive rather than simply ineffective while the energy supply message is ineffective and no longer counter-productive. US counter-coercion continues to have no effect. In terms of individual perceptions only the belief that China is not a threat has an impact on maintaining CGN's involvement in the UK's nuclear infrastructure. Perceptions about China's economic importance and perceptions about the importance of the US alliance have no direct effect on support for CGN.

Focussing now on the interactions, we find heterogeneous treatment effects for those individuals who perceive China not to be a threat. At first glance it appears that the more respondents believe China is not a threat the greater their level of openness to messages relating to both coercion and persuasion.⁶ However, the interaction effect is not simple. Following good practice, we test hypotheses relating to interaction terms visually (Brambor, Clark and Golder 2006). The marginal effects for the treatments use 84% confidence intervals which is the graphical equivalent to p<0.05 (Goldstein and Healey 1995, 175). Figure 2 presents the marginal effects for each of the experimental treatments interacted with the China threat perception variable. Figure 2 is broken down into four subfigures that represent the interaction between the different messages and threat ((2a) Investment Coercion, (2b) Climate Change, (2c) Cost Increases, (2d) Damage to Energy Supply). Table 2 shows how different perceivers of Chinese threat respond to Chinese government messages. The table shows the percentage

⁶ While the ATE graph makes it difficult to see that costs and energy supply messages interacted with threat perception are significant a look online appendix table IB (model VI) shows that they are indeed significant at the 0.05 level.

change in compliance with Chinese government communications compared to the control group. Positive scores suggest that the respondents become more compliant, negative less, and where it says insignificant we are unable to distinguish any effect of the message.

Fig. 2: Heterogenous Treatment Effects between Threat Perception and Chinese Government Messaging.



Table 2: Percentage Change in Compliance with Chinese Government Message Relative to Control Group.

Perceived Size of China Threat	Investment Coercion (2a)	Climate Target Persuasion (2b) Percentag	Cost Increase Persuasion (2c) ge Change	Energy Supply Persuasion (2d)
Very Large	-23	-25	-21	-19
Fairly Large	-9	-9	-8	-8
Fairly Small	Insignificant	Insignificant	Insignificant	Insignificant
Very Small	Insignificant	+14	Insignificant	Insignificant

Figure 2 indicates that those who are unthreatened by China tend to generally be more supportive of CGN's involvement. The interaction terms in figure 2 and table 2 also demonstrate that those who are unthreatened by China tend not to respond to Chinese government messaging in any direction. There is one exception—Chinese government messaging about emissions targets (Figure 2b) leads those who are very unthreatened to become 14 per cent more supportive of CGN's involvement in UK nuclear infrastructure. When respondents view China as being a very large threat or even a fairly large threat they are more likely to be more against CGN's involvement in the UK's nuclear infrastructure. Looking at table 2 we see that those who are very threatened by China are most likely to react negatively to Chinese government communications, with the reduction in compliance ranging from 25 per cent for the climate change message to 19 per cent for the energy supply message. Those moderately threatened by China tended to be around 8 or 9 per cent less compliant. Exposure

to Chinese government messaging tends to harden the positions of those who are threatened. We do not observe a differentiation in respondents' attitudes based on persuasion or coercion.

As discussed above there is also the potential that respondents who feel China is a threat will become more anxious and negative simply because China is mentioned in the experiment. There is some evidence to support this argument, as all respondents who feel threatened by China are less willing to support China's nuclear investment than those who are unthreatened. However, we still find that threatened respondents in the treatment groups that were exposed to Chinese government messages were *more likely* to reject Chinese nuclear investments than those in the control group, who were not exposed to any specific Chinese messages but were exposed to references to China in both the vignette and the dependent variable (see figure 2). Anxiety may explain part of the response from those who are predisposed to view China as a threat, but the differences we see here between control and treatment group responses suggest exposure to a message from the Chinese government provides those individuals with information that shifts their views in a way that goes beyond just a visceral reaction to China being mentioned.

In essence Chinese government messages interact with prior beliefs about the China threat and lead to a rejection of policy change, as argued by the information updating theory. The interaction effect provides support for the threat perception hypothesis—messages tend to work less well against high threat perceivers than low threat perceivers. There seems to be little upside to using coercive or even persuasive messages on the UK public as low threat perceivers would generally be just as happy to support Chinese investments regardless of China's messaging (with the exception of emission target messages).

We find no interaction effects between perceptions of Chinese economic importance and the treatments, nor do we find perceptions relating to the importance of the US alliance affect reactions to US counter-coercion. Likewise, we find no evidence to suggest that US

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counter-coercion moderates the effects of specific Chinese government messages. Rather, the British public are so hostile to Chinese government influence strategies that US government messaging is not needed. Overall, the model suggests that Chinese messaging is ineffective, regardless of whether it involves persuasion or coercion, rather it is largely counter-productive, working to reduce support for Chinese government aims. These findings support the information updating approach. If you believe China is a threat then you are unwilling to give China what it wants and especially unlikely to if the Chinese government either tries to coerce or persuade you. Concerns about Chinese government coercive capacity growing through the use of investments certainly is not supported in these results. The overall results suggest that the public opinion mechanism does not work for a Chinese government trying to put pressure on the UK, given there is sizeable evidence of backlash. The main effects suggest that Chinese coercive diplomacy will tend to have a counterproductive effect on public opinion, reducing the potential for mass attitudes to act as a fruitful mechanism for coercion.

In summary, the interaction effect provides support for the threat perception hypothesis—messages tend to work less well against high threat perceivers than low threat perceivers. There seems to be little upside to using coercive or even persuasive messages on the UK public. However, we find no evidence to support the economic importance hypothesis. The inclusion of a covariate relating to respondents' perceptions about the importance of China for the UK economy has an insignificant main effect and has insignificant interactions with the China messaging treatments. Even when we remove China threat perceptions from the analysis, we still observe no effect for perceptions about the importance of China's economy for the UK (Table IB, model III Appendix B). Thus, these findings suggest that threat perception rather than economic concerns drive public attitudes towards CGN's involvement in the UK's nuclear programme. Finally, we find no evidence to support the effect of US alliance threats on attitudes towards CGN, nor do we find there is any interaction between preconceptions about the importance of the UK's alliance with the United States and response to US threats. However, as we suggest earlier there is a sizeable amount of scepticism amongst the British public about China and so US alliance threats appear to be unnecessary to influence attitudes.

5. Conclusion

In this paper we investigated public responses to strategic messaging about China's involvement in UK nuclear power plants. We were specifically interested in comparing coercive and persuasive messages and whether there was any potential for these statements to backfire, increasing rather than reducing hostility to CGN's involvement in the UK's energy infrastructure. We found that the Chinese government uses a variety of messages to shift views on the importance of Chinese involvement in the UK's nuclear energy programme. Messages have been mainly directed towards emissions targets, but future investment and energy supply were also highlighted by in depth qualitative reading of *China Daily* articles. Our survey experiment suggests that rather than being an effective tool for manipulating public attitudes, both coercive and persuasive messages by China have significant potential to backfire. We find a sizeable amount of evidence for the information updating thesis, with individuals who believe that China is a threat more likely to respond negatively to Chinese coercive diplomacy. None of the identified messages are wholly effective. There is strong backlash among those who are threatened by China and unresponsiveness amongst those that are not. We did find some evidence to support environmental messaging had an effect on those people who felt unthreatened by China but again amongst the threatened population even a non-aggressive environmental message still results in backlash.

These findings have implications for a number of different areas of study. In terms of coercive diplomacy we find evidence of a public opinion backlash effect that supports previous research by Gueorguiev et al. (2020) on information updating. Perceptions that the coercing state poses a security threat heighten this backlash response but perceptions of its economic

importance have little effect. Even when messages are couched in terms of the benefits for the target state they still generate a negative response. If the state is perceived as a threat its messages will be perceived as untrustworthy and not credible. This finding also adds to previous public diplomacy and communication research that identifies instances when states' attempts at strategic communication led to unintended consequences, such as official apologies to foreign states that generate a negative response at home (Kitagawa and Chu 2021) or certain high-level diplomatic visits that trigger a backlash from the host state's public (Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2009).

Finally, the backlash against China's messaging, particularly among those who perceive China as a security threat, has implications for the study of China's international communication. Our findings indicate that a productive strategy to garner support for Chinese investment would likely involve reducing the UK public's perception of China being a security threat. While our STM method did not identify any threat-reduction messages and thus we were unable to test their effects on respondent attitudes, it is possible that the Chinese government could produce a message that effectively allays the fears of the British public. By supplementing an STM approach with such hypothetical messages, future research could examine the possibility of more effective persuasion, even if such messages are not currently being produced by the Chinese government. More generally, Chinese officials might be wise to keep silent about their preferred outcomes for particular policy debates in other countries and instead engage in broad-based public diplomacy intended to improve China's image and reduce general threat perceptions among foreign publics. Another option would be to focus on behind-the-scenes influence over key decision makers through the kinds of 'United Front' activities that are another important component of China's foreign propaganda apparatus. The Chinese government has long employed a strategy that attempts to use proxy voices such as so-called "foreign friends" to speak to overseas audiences on its behalf (Brady 2015, 53-4).

Given the evidence we find for a backlash against strategic messages that are identifiable as coming from the Chinese government, this strategy is likely to prove crucial if China is to successfully persuade sceptical foreign publics. Future research should examine whether the identity of the messenger affects the reception of Chinese strategic messages. However, a coercive message from the Chinese government may be intended for audiences other than the public in the target state. If this is the case, then China's government may be willing to risk backlash as long as it can appear tough in the eyes of its own people or other key audiences. As Wang (2022) points out, China's external propaganda under Xi Jinping is increasingly concerned with projecting an image of China as a great power and is heavily bound up with nationalism and the domestic propaganda system, which makes it difficult to tailor messages to make them more acceptable to foreign audiences. Future research could also test whether publics in states that are not the direct target of strategic messages exhibit a similar backlash effect when they observe others being the subject of Chinese coercion or persuasion.

We still have little idea whether responses to coercive diplomacy and non-coercive messaging differ depending on which state is the source of the message. A question remains around whether the British public would be more responsive to these messages if they were not from China but from a friendlier or militarily weaker state. Further research is needed to examine both the message and the messenger's influence on backlash and successful coercive diplomacy.

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APPENDIX A

Message Identification Method

Using Nexis Advance we downloaded 15,553 articles published in the *China Daily* between 1 January 2014 until 1 June 2021. We selected articles where the UK or Britain or British were mentioned anywhere in the article. The time period was selected mainly down to practicality; Nexis Advance did not contain many articles from the *China Daily* prior to 2014, likewise it gave us seven years coverage relating to current Chinese government priorities. Several articles were duplicated in the raw data. We identified those articles that were highly similar (at least 95% overlap), published in the same year. We used Gruber (2019) to import the articles, identify any duplicates (with at least 95% overlap) and delete them. We deleted stop words, terms occurring in more than a fifth or less than 0.1% of all articles, we removed non-letter characters and stemmed the word terms, using the *quanteda* package (Benoit et al. 2018). This resulted in a final dataset of 15,206 unique articles and 10,668 terms.

Topic models are often referred to as an "unsupervised" method for natural language processing where the content of topics is inferred from the data rather than assumed *a priori* by the researcher (Roberts et al. 2014). The STM is a mixed membership model where a document is represented as blend of different topics (the number of topics is referred to as a K), using a latent Dirichlet allocation model (Blei et al. 2003) alongside the relevant meta-data the STM identifies the proportion/prevalence of the dataset that relates to each of the specific topics. Traditional LDA models assume a constant prevalence of topics in the dataset whereas the STM innovates by including relevant covariates found in the metadata and examining whether topic prevalence is constant or whether it varies by these covariates (see Roberts et al. 2014 for a detailed discussion of the method). For our study we include a time covariate, which allows us to examine changes in topic prevalence over between 2014 and 2021, giving us a good sense of changing priorities in Chinese government messaging about the UK.

Message Identification Results

Using a STM we systematically identify the topics that the *China Daily* focuses on in relation to the UK. We are specifically interested in examining those topics that relate to Chinese infrastructure investments, the messages that the Chinese government uses to promote its UK investments and any messages designed to deter the UK from ending those investments. We follow standard practice by delving into articles closely related to the topic to identify the context associated with the words identified in the topic model (Jacobs and Tschotschel 2019: Roberts et al. 2019). We will specifically examine opinion pieces about CGN's involvement in the UK's nuclear power programme. Not only can we examine the construction of narratives in the qualitative reading of the articles, we can also refer back to the topic model to gain a sense of how prevalent these arguments are in *China Daily* stories about the UK and nuclear power. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods gives us both a systematic review of the articles associated with nuclear power and a nuanced understanding of how those words have been constructed to influence attitudes.

While the STM is an unsupervised machine-learning model, we still need to identify the appropriate number of topics to be analysed. Using the *SearchK* function we create a series of diagnostic tests that aid our decision-making about the appropriate number of topics, presented in Figure 1A. Balancing choices around semantic coherence and Held-Out Likelihood statistics as well as our own reading of the articles we settled on a K of 23, suggesting that the *China Daily* printed articles that contained approximately 23 topics or themes relating to the UK.





We then move on to the overall distributions of topics identified by the STM and then examine the topic relating to the UK's nuclear programme. The STM produces two posterior probability distributions with the first relating to the overall spread of topics found in the newspaper article and the second how those distributions vary over time. Every article consists of all topics but with varying probabilities ranging from 0 (topic not mentioned) to 1 (article talks only about this topic). Figure 2A shows the average probability of this topic being present in the articles over the period 2014-2021. On average we see that Brexit was the most reported story about the UK, which is not surprising as leaving the EU represented a significant realignment of the British state's foreign relations. Brexit may also present the Chinese government with an opportunity to engage with a British government that is looking for new trade relations and investment. Covid (topic 17) surprisingly comes quite a long way down the topic prevalence ordering, however this is simply a function of its recent emergence as a major public health and foreign policy issue. At its peak, Covid is prevalent in over 35 per cent of news articles about Britain in 2020.

Diagnostic Values by Number of Topics

We identify three areas that specifically relate to infrastructure. Topic 9 relates to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), topic 12 relates to Huawei and topic 3 relates to CGN's involvement in the UK's nuclear infrastructure. The focus on the BRI is not surprising as it is the strategic priority for the Xi administration (Rolland 2017). Huawei (topic 12) has the second greatest prevalence and was a particularly contentious area for UK-China relations. We decided not to use this topic for the public opinion experiment as Huawei featured heavily in the British media and has been resolved, with the British government terminating Huawei's involvement in the UK's digital infrastructure.⁷ Finally, topic 3 relates to allowing Chinese companies to build the next generation of British nuclear power stations, a contentious issue with possible security implications. After the STM analysis we analyse *China Daily* editorials on the subject, identifying language that is used to justify CGN's investments in the newest generation of UK nuclear power stations and potential consequences for terminating the company's involvement.

Figure 2A. Average Topic Prevalence 2014-2021



Top Topics

⁷ <u>https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-53403793</u> (accessed 31/10/22)

Examining Figure 3A, we see that UK nuclear investments have remained a fairly consistent topic in the paper, reaching a peak of 5 per cent of UK related stories in 2015 when the nuclear deal was signed with David Cameron, and dropping to a low-point of 2 per cent of UK related stories in 2020 as most of the newspaper's focus was on Covid-19 but is now increasing again as talk of ending CGN's investment is growing in the UK.

Figure 3A. Nuclear Investment Prevalence Over Time



Unpacking the nuclear investment topic (topic 3), we examine what words have been used to emphasise the importance of the project. We use four indicators to identify word prevalence and importance. We look at the highest probability (highest prob) of a word being prevalent in the topic, which simply outlines the presence of the most frequent words that appear in this topic. Highest probability does not examine the uniqueness of the words to this specific topic. To get to the distinctive nature of the particular topic we use FREX, which identifies those words in the topic that are both frequent and not shared with other topics (Grimmer et al. 2022). Related to FREX, Lift identifies uniqueness by dividing words present in the topic by their frequency in other topics, giving greater weight to words that appear less frequently in other topics. Finally, Score is similar to Lift in that it divides the log frequency of the word in the nuclear topic by the log frequency of the word in the other 22 topics (Roberts et al. 2019).

Across all four indicators we see that the *China Daily* emphasises green technology, energy supplies, emissions, climate and costs. The FREX indicator suggests that the *China Daily* is pushing messages that relate to emissions targets in comparison to non-renewables such as coal and gas. A clear and identifiable message from this topic speaks to issues relating to climate change and the importance that this project plays in helping the UK hit its emissions targets. The Lift indicator also identifies the names of the projects, the specific names of the reactors but in terms of benefits identifies electricity supply and emissions as important as does the Score measure. Table 1A presents the top twenty words in order estimated through different methods.

Indicator	
Highest Prob	Energy, Project, Nuclear, Power, Export, Green, Climate, Plant, Technology, Construct, Billion, Product, Electricity, Operation, Emissions, Railway, Supplies, Steel, Gas, Carbon
FREX	Emissions, Energy, Carbon, Steel, Coal, CGN, Gas, Railway, Hinkley, Rail, Climate, Green, Reactor, EDF, Plant, Export, Electricity, Fuel, Solar, Renewables
Lift	HPR1000, Sizewell, co2, Hualong, Areva, Electricity, HS2, CGN, CNNC EDF, Gigawatt, Kilowatt, Shale, Emissions, Byd, Modular, BP, CNOOC, Turbine, Dioxide
Score	Nuclear, CGN, Emissions, Reactor, Energy, Hinkley, Export, EDF, Climate, Carbon, Hualong, Project, Electricity, Byd, Technology, Plant, Coal, Gas, Infrastructure, Offshore

Table 1A. Word Frequency in Topic 3 by Different Indicators

Qualitative Study

Three articles (2015a, 2015b, 2021) explicitly examine the benefits associated with China investing in the nuclear project and the fourth article (2017) is an opinion piece written by China's ambassador to the UK outlining the potential consequences of terminating CGN's involvement. Looking at the first three articles (2015a, 2015b and 2017) we find that there are three areas that tend to be focused on when conveying the benefits of Chinese investment in the nuclear industry:

1. <u>Investment and Prosperity:</u>

a. "secure deals worth about 40 billion pounds" (China Daily 2015a)

b. "the largest inward investment ever in the UK" (China Daily 2015a)

c. "create 26,000 jobs" (China Daily 2017)

d. "cooperation on trade and investment could further deepen and bear more golden fruits and deliver more benefit to the Chinese and British people" (China Daily 2017)

2. Energy Supply:

a. "supply electricity to 6 million homes" (China Daily 2015a)

b. "6 million British homes will be powered" (China Daily 2015b).

c. "The UK needs infrastructure-new energy. So if Chinese investment is making that happen sooner than it would happen.... That will obviously be positive for the UK economy" (China Daily 2015a)

3. <u>Climate Change Targets:</u>

a. "also gives body to their shared resolve to combat the common threat of climate change" (China Daily 2015 b)

b. "clean power resources" (China Daily 2015b)

c. "generating green, low carbon growth" (China Daily 2017)

d. "zero-emissions" (China Daily 2015a)

Overall, we find the themes map on to the themes identified in the topic model (Table 1A above). In particular, the deeper qualitative reading of the three articles (2015a, 2015b, 2017) clearly speaks to investment, energy supply and climate change. When we examine the China Daily 2021 article, we see the same three themes relating to ending CGN's involvement in the project.

1. <u>Damage Future Investment:</u>

a. "domino effect' and damage the United Kingdom's reputation as a credible global partner."

b. "If such cooperation is suspended under duress, this will be against the UK's interests in terms of benefiting from China's advanced technology and capital investment"

2. <u>Damage Energy Supply:</u>

a. "The UK will lose nuclear capacity faster than any other developed nation".

b. "half of Britain's nuclear capacity is due to be retired by 2025, and all but one station by 2030".

3. <u>Undermine Climate Change Goals:</u>

a. "against the UK's interest in.... developing clean energy to achieve its planned carbon neutrality goal".

Appendix B

Table IB

Model Specifications and Robustness

Variables	Model I Baseline	Model II Chinese Threat Perception and Interaction s	Model III China Economicall y Important and Interactions	Model IV US Alliance Important and Interaction s	Model V US Threat Interaction with China Threat Perception s	Model VI Full Model
		Experi	iment Treatm	ients		
Investment Coercion	226 (.078)***	830 (.221)***	422 (.366)	256 (.087)***	212 (.081)***	-1.143 (.429)***
Climate Change Persuasion	211 (.078)***	921 (.217)***	064 (.366)	269 (.087)***	181 (.081)**	885 (.421)**
Cost Persuasion	139 (.079)*	773 (.232)***	541 (.379)	163 (.09)*	154 (.083)*	979 (.445)**
Energy Supply Persuasion	171 (.079)***	664 (.224)***	.501 (.358)	175 (.088)**	168 (.082)***	252 (.427)
Damage US Alliance	.010 (.079)	0.13 (.052)	.039 (.052)	.437 (.227)**	063 (.142)	.336 (.231)
		-		1 7 7 0		

Perceptions of China and US

China Not a	.173		.386	.160
Threat	- (.068)**	-	(.043)***	(.077)**

China Economicall - y Important	.202 (.083)**	.112 (.091)
US Alliance -	099	.336
Important -	(0.53)*	(.231)

Perceptions of China Threat Interacted With Experimental Treatments

Investment Coercion *	.288				.292
China Not Threat	(.096)***	-	-	-	(.106)***
Climate Change Persuasion* China Not Threat	.348 (.095)***	-	-	-	.433 (.106)***
Cost Persuasion * China Not Threat	.287 (.010)***	-	-	-	.219 (.111)**
Energy Supply Persuasion * China Not Threat	.231 (.097)**	-	-	-	.211 (.107)**

Perceptions of China's Economic Importance Interacted With Experimental Treatments

Investment Coercion * China - Economicall y Important	.062 (.120)	.086 (.129)
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Climate		
Change	054	007
Persuasion*	054	087
China	(.121)	(.131)
Economicall		× ,
y Important		
Cost		
Persuasion *	.130	.110
China -	- (124)	- (126)
Economicall	(.124)	(.150)
y Important		
Energy		
Supply		
Persuasion*	218	117
China		- (127)
Economicall	()	(.127)
y Important		

Perceptions of US Alliance Interacted with Experimental US Threat Treatment

Damage US Alliance * US Alliance Important	-	-	-	144 (.076)*	-	104 (.077)
Damage US Alliance * China Not Threat	-	-	-	-	.035 (.062)	-
Constant	2.8845	2.223	2.818	3.104	1.973	2.127
	(.06)***	(.254)***	(.067)***	(.169)***	(.111)***	(.344)**
N	2432	2213	2223	2000	2213	1822
F	2.16*	19.67***	4.23***	5.07***	25.73***	11.85***
R ²	0.004	0.08	0.02	0.02	0.08	0.10
Root MSE	1.2338	1.212	1.236	1.258	1.216	1.212

Figure IB





Table IIB

Robustness Check

Model Specification with Controls

Variables	Model I Full with controls		
Investment Coercion	-1.169 (.432)***		
Climate Change Persuasion	945 (.425)**		
Cost Persuasion	917 (.449)**		
Energy Supply Persuasion	310 (.431)		
Damage US Alliance	.323 (.233)		
China Not a Threat	158 (.077)**		
China Economically Important	.137 (.091)		
US Alliance Important	004 (.057)		
Investment Coercion *China Not Threat	.310 (.107)***		
Climate Change Persuasion*China Not Threat	.412 (.107)***		
Cost Persuasion *China Not Threat	.229 (.112)**		

Energy Supply Persuasion *China Not Threat	.218 (.108)**
Investment Coercion * China Economically Important	.083 (.129)
Climate Change Persuasion* China Economically Important	047 (.133)
Cost Persuasion * China Economically Important	.072 (.138)
Energy Supply Persuasion* China Economically Important	105 (.127)
US Response *US Alliance Important	102 (.078)
Woman	.054 (.059)
High School	183 (.139)
University	253 (.139)*
25-34	.07 (.153)
35-44	101 (.148)
45-54	035 (.148)
55-64	082 (.146)

N F R ² Root MSE	1770 7.58*** 0.12 1.1997
Constant	2.514 (.391)***
Other ID	397 (.156)**
Green ID	670 (.200)***
Brexit Party ID	212 (.227)
Nationalist ID	458 (.162)***
Lib Dem ID	370 (.12)***
Labour ID	177 (.094)*
Conservative ID	312 (.089)***
65+	017 (.141)