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The Dog That Barks: Understanding Propaganda Campaigns on Territorial Disputes

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

The Dog That Barks: Understanding Propaganda Campaigns on Territorial Disputes

by

Yaping Wang

Why do authoritarian states promote media coverage of foreign disputes in some contexts, but censor coverage in others? The use of media on matters of foreign policy is prevalent in both autocracies and democracies, yet their functions, especially in autocracies, are not well understood. This dissertation seeks to explain a statecraft autocratic leaders are especially adept at and are commonly engaged in – propaganda campaigns on territorial disputes. This project thus provides a window into the domestic constraints and motivations of authoritarian foreign policy and the resulting statecraft in managing its domestic publics on foreign policy issues.

In explaining the adoption or non-adoption of propaganda campaigns, I develop a (mis)alignment theory that proposes two independent variables – existing public opinion and state foreign policy intent. I argue that together and interactively, the juxtaposition of these conditions drives a popular autocrat to employ media as a tool of statecraft to “bridge” the opinion gap between the public and the state. When the gap is between a pacifist public and a hardline state, the state uses a propaganda campaign to mobilize public support for a potentially risky policy. Conversely, when the gap is between a militant public and a government favoring peaceful resolutions, the state might counterintuitively also adopt a propaganda campaign, but in this case to subdue public opinion. Like a dog that barks but does not bite, autocratic leaders could use propaganda campaigns to keep up the appearances of a hard stand, thus to fend off nationalist criticisms, to save face, and to maintain social stability, while allowing the public to

let off steam through the echoing and the venting functions of the media. An absence of the gap would explain an absence of propaganda campaigns. The pacifying propaganda campaign is worth special notion because it is not commonly understood, but is commonly practiced by authoritarian states, and increasingly so as a way in dealing with rising nationalist sentiment in many of these countries. A medium-*n* congruence test of nineteen Chinese diplomatic crises on territorial disputes and process-tracing four of these crises, using primary sources and content analysis of the Chinese official newspaper *People's Daily*, render strong support for this theory.

This project contributes to domestic theories of international disputes by focusing on the role of public opinion and media in an authoritarian context. It also contributes to the Comparative Politics literature on authoritarian public opinion by moving the testing field of the complex state-society relations in authoritarian states from domestic politics to the international policy arena.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BAS	Beijing Area Study
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
BSI	Baidu Search Index
CCP or CPC	Communist Party of China
CMC	Central Military Commission (China)
CMS	China Marine Surveillance
CNOOC	China National Offshore Oil Corporation
CPD	Central Propaganda Department (China)
CPV	Communist Party of Vietnam
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies
DOC	Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
FONOP	Freedom of Navigation Operations (United States)
ITLOS	International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea
LAC	Line of Actual Control
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
PCA	Permanent Court of Arbitration
PLA	People's Liberation Army (China)
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy (China)
PRC	People's Republic of China
ROC	Republic of China (Taiwan)
SRV	Socialist Republic of Vietnam
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
VWP	Vietnam Workers' Party

Chapter 1: Introduction

A curious yet understudied phenomenon in international disputes is states' publicity strategies – how widely a dispute is made known and how strongly a dispute is made felt by the state to the public. Sometimes in order to encourage reportage of a dispute, governments actively feed information to the media; other times they purposefully keep a dispute out of the public's sight. Among some of today's hottest interstate disputes, from Crimea, the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, Jammu and Kashmir, the South China Sea, to the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, we see at display this curious variation in states' media behaviors both across time and between disputes. Authoritarian states, who have direct control of the media and engage in a large share of the world's interstate disputes, are particularly masterful at this statecraft.

Examples of the use of this statecraft abound in the contemporary history of international conflicts and diplomatic crises. In the background of two incidents over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands between China and Japan in 2010 and 2012, “[Chinese] authorities have ordered major satellite broadcasters across the nation to feature shows of patriotic or anti-fascist themes.” As a result, news coverage of the dispute and anti-Japanese dramas flooded the Chinese TV screens.¹ Three new public holidays, all involving the Japanese invasion during World War II, were also instated by Chinese authorities. When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014, the state-controlled media launched an aggressive propaganda campaign painting the violent separatists as “supporters of federalization” and justifying the incursion as “rescuing Russians and Russian-speakers from the depredations of Fascists.”² On a long-standing dispute between China and

¹ “Anti-Japanese Dramas to Flood Chinese TV Screens Next Month,” *South China Morning Post*, August 28, 2014, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1581474/anti-japanese-dramas-flood-chinese-tv-screens-next-month>, accessed May 31, 2018.

² “In Ukraine, Russia Plays a Weighted Word Game,” *New York Times*, April 16, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/17/world/europe/in-ukraine-russia-plays-a-weighted-word-game.html>, accessed May 31, 2018; Dougherty 2014.

Vietnam over the South China Sea, the 1988 military clash between the two countries “was vividly recalled and widely covered by Vietnam’s [state-controlled] media” at the battle’s 28th anniversary in 2016.³ At the dawn of the release of an international tribunal ruling on the maritime disputes in the South China Sea between China and the Philippines, China mounted an aggressive public relations blitz dismissing the court’s jurisdiction over the case and accusing the U.S. militarism in the disputed area.

What makes these campaigns particularly puzzling is their contrast with the stark opposite – media censorship and the muted disputes. For example, the border dispute between China and North Korea have remained quiet for decades. On the same dispute between China and Japan described above but three decades earlier, just months before the then Chinese Premier Deng Xiaoping’s visit to Japan in 1978 to finalize the peace treaty to end the Sino-Japanese War, over eighty Chinese fishing boats appeared unprecedentedly in the waters around the disputed islands.⁴ The Chinese reporting on this incident was close to none. *People’s Daily* had no explicit mention of it at all.⁵ Analogously, before Putin’s propaganda campaign at the time of the Russian invasion, the state-controlled media first shied away from reporting the issue. “Treading carefully, many mainstream Russian newspapers are giving prominence to stories other than Ukraine, including President Vladimir Putin attending the opening ceremony of a new football stadium in Moscow.”⁶ In the same fashion, the 1988 Spratlys clash between Vietnam and China

³ “Did 1988 Battle Anniversary Hint Rise in Vietnam-China Tensions?” *Asia Times*, March 23, 2016, <http://www.atimes.com/did-1988-battle-anniversary-hint-rise-in-vietnam-china-tensions/>, accessed May 31, 2018.

⁴ Tretiak 1978.

⁵ *People’s Daily* archives within fifteen days after the incident occurred on April 12, 1978 had no direct mention of the incident at all. Only when China’s Sino-Japanese Friendship Society President Liao Chengzhi met with Japan’s Socialist Democratic Federation delegation headed by Hideo Den the day after the incident, Liao remarked that “signing the peace treaty between the two countries was historical trend, it cannot be stopped by disruptive forces who conspire to create obstacles,” – only alluding to the incident.

⁶ “Russian media report ‘invasion of Ukraine,’ *BBC News*, August 28, 2014 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28965597>, accessed May 31, 2018.

had remained a taboo topic for nearly three decades in Vietnam until recently. Similarly, alleged border clashes between Saudi Arabia and Yemen in the 1980s were never confirmed by the Saudi authorities and were kept from the public sight.⁷

Why does a state make deliberate efforts to publicize an otherwise quiet dispute? In particular, what makes an autocrat who has the wherewithal to censor contents allow or even encourage coverage of a territorial dispute? Understanding this powerful statecraft being used so skillfully by autocrats in the world's hottest conflict zones is the task of this dissertation. This dissertation hence studies the motivations of and the ways by popular authoritarian states in using media to influence public opinion on territorial disputes.

Studying the domestic media perspective of territorial conflicts draws upon and contributes to the domestic theories of international relations. For example, in *Useful Adversaries*, Thomas Christensen shows how Mao and Truman used external threats to mobilize domestic support for domestic national programs, which had inadvertent foreign policy implications.⁸ Randall Schweller uses the difficulty in rallying domestic public support for a hegemonic bid to explain why great powers forgo opportunities of regional expansion and thus the puzzle of under-aggression and under-expansion of great powers.⁹ Along a similar line, Fareed Zakaria argues that it is the lack of extractive and mobilization capacity that had delayed the emergence of American superpower.¹⁰ This study follows the footsteps of this line of work, but focuses on the role of public opinion and media in the conduct of foreign policy in international conflicts and diplomatic crises.

⁷ Allcock et al 1992, 398.

⁸ Christensen 1996.

⁹ Schweller 2009.

¹⁰ Zakaria 1999.

Studying how authoritarian states manipulate rhetoric for the sake of foreign policy also has great practical significance. The frequent “rhetorical wars” or “wars of words” between countries, in which the control and manipulation of state mouthpieces and public opinion take center stage, have become one important, if not the most important, feature of today’s international relations. This is partly due to the expanded role of mass media in international relations, adding an eminent spectacle effect to the conduct of foreign policy. In addition, the advent of nuclear weapons and mutually-assured destruction has rendered interstate wars rare. But at the same time, conflicts of interests have not dissipated; on the contrary, they have been on the rise as our world flattens and expands, with new problems emerging at ever faster speeds. As a result, states have retreated to using mouthpieces instead of actual weapons to settle their disputes and pursue their foreign policy goals. Understanding the role of this statecraft, particularly its causes and consequences, in one of the most contentious type of interstate disputes – territorial disputes, is thus of paramount significance to world peace and order. Besides, given the lack of transparency in authoritarian states, the media aspect offers a window to look into the domestic pressures and constraints these autocrats face at home. If interpreted correctly, the messages a state conveys through the mass media could also help us read their foreign policy preferences.

Existing studies come in short in explaining authoritarian states’ media behaviors on international disputes. Two domestic theories of international relations have implications for this empirical question, but neither examines it directly. The audience cost theory implies that leaders publicize a dispute as a hand-tying strategy to enhance threat credibility in foreign coercions.¹¹

¹¹ For a classic version of the audience cost theory, see, for example, Fearon 1994; Schultz 2001. Weeks’ and Weiss’ works expand the gift of generating audience cost from democracies to most autocracies. See Weeks 2008; Weiss 2013 and 2014.

Diversionsary war theory suggests that leaders publicize a dispute to divert public attention away from a domestic crisis, or to stoke nationalism to consolidate regime.¹² Three other literatures are related, but also come in short in providing a comprehensive picture. While the use of media has traditionally been the subject of Media Studies and Political Communication, this discipline focuses on the approaches and techniques than on the political rationale, using cases in American domestic politics or war-time propaganda rather than international disputes and diplomatic crises.¹³ The literatures on authoritarian public opinion and on Chinese nationalism are important foundations for this study, but the former engages predominantly with domestic politics,¹⁴ and the latter either does not examine media in a systematic way or does not theorize beyond China.¹⁵

This dissertation develops and tests a state-public (mis)alignment theory that explains authoritarian media maneuvers on interstate disputes. This theory differs from the audience cost and the diversionsary war theory in that it argues that the state manipulates public opinion through the use of media, for the objectives of bringing the public in line with the preferred foreign policy, not for the purpose of enhancing foreign coercions or creating a diversion. I do not, however, argue that these theories have no force in determining state media behaviors. The regime survival assumption of the diversionsary war theory is embedded in my argument. I also find that audience cost might be adept at explaining the cases in which the state and the public

¹² See, for example, Christensen 1996; Lake 1992; Levy and Vakili 1992; Russett 1990; Smith 1996; Stoll 1984.

¹³ For classic works in media studies, see Bernays 1928; Ellul 1965; Jowett and O'Donnell 1992; Lasswell 1927. For an overview of Political Science study of the relationship between public opinion, mass media and foreign policy in a democratic setting, see Baum and Potter 2008.

¹⁴ See, for example, Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016; Distelhorst and Hou 2017; King, Pan and Roberts 2013; Levitsky and Way 2010; Lorentzen 2013; Malesky and Schuler 2010; Manion 2014; Meng, Pan, and Yang 2017; Truex 2017. In the realm of foreign policy, see Bell and Quek 2017.

¹⁵ For studies on Chinese nationalism in foreign policy, see, for example, Fewsmith and Rosen 1978; Gries 2004; Quek and Johnston 2018; Reilly 2012; Shirk 2007; Zhao 2004, 2005, and 2013.

are aligned for a hardline policy. But given its limited scope condition that requires an ongoing coercion, my theory is able to explain a significant share of cases that fall out of this scope.

Because of the scant research on this subject, I limit my scope to the extreme cases where state media maneuvers are the most visible – in authoritarian states,¹⁶ who have direct control of the mass media, and on territorial disputes,¹⁷ the most incendiary type of disputes susceptible to state manipulations. By focusing on these extreme cases as an initial step, I hope in the future to evaluate the extent to which my theory applies to democracies and other types of interstate disputes.¹⁸ Even though democracies also enjoy diverse ways to influence public opinion via mass media,¹⁹ and that the commercialization of media and the development of the internet weakens autocratic control of the media, authoritarian states still have more direct control of information flow and more straightforward means to influence public opinion than democracies. The concern that democracies and autocracies might have different approaches and that democracies' approach might be more ambiguous make it reasonable to confine my research scope to authoritarian states. Authoritarian states are also involved in the majority number of territorial disputes in the twentieth century, thereby guaranteeing sufficient number of cases where the theory could be tested and applied to. In the Huth and Allee Territorial Claims Data of

¹⁶ For definition of authoritarian regimes, I adopt Geddes' (1999; 2003) and Weeks' (2012; 2014) definition to include personalist, military, single-party, or amalgams of these pure types. Press in sixty-six countries or territories are rated by the Freedom House in 2016 as "not free," while seventy-three others as "partly free." That's a total of one hundred and thirty-nine countries/territories. See Freedom House 2017. The following authoritarian countries, for example, have state-dominated media: Azerbaijan, Belarus, Cambodia, China, Ethiopia, Iran, Mozambique, Rwanda, Venezuela, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe. "In all these countries, communist, postcommunist, and noncommunist alike, established systems circumscribe news and information for mass audiences and shape the dominant political narrative." See Walker and Orttung 2014, 71.

¹⁷ Territorial disputes in this study are the presence of disagreements over the delimitation of border or the ownership of territory among commonly recognized states.

¹⁸ The MIDs dataset proposes three principal objects that a state sought to change, based on which interstate disputes could be about territory, policy, or regime. Besides territorial disputes, a policy dispute is when one state wants "to change the foreign policy behavior of another state"; a regime dispute is when a state wants "to change the government of another state." See Jones et al. 1996, 178.

¹⁹ See, for example, Baker and Oneal 2001; Baum, 2003; Baum, 2004; Baum and Potter 2008; Carruthers 2011.

348 territorial disputes during 77 years from 1919 to 1995,²⁰ authoritarian dyads account for 43.7 percent of dyad-years, while mixed authoritarian-democratic dyads account for 45.1 percent of dyad-years. That is a total of 88.8 percent of the universe of disputes in the twentieth century.

Despite arguments that territoriality is becoming less and less important due to the effects of globalization and trade, territorial disputes continue to wreak havoc in recent years in the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and Ukraine. The control and manipulation of publicity is particularly salient in territorial disputes. This is because first, territorial issues are exceptionally inflammatory as “people tend to respond to territorial issue intensely.”²¹ Second, territory can be a symbol to be manipulated for nationalistic purposes, either through ethnic or identity ties or historical possession (ancestral land). Often infused with intangible values such as sovereignty, irredentism, religious divinity, historical glory or humiliation, etc., territorial disputes are particularly “malleable” for states to shape public perceptions. Territorial disputes, therefore, could afford the clearest views of the puzzling variation in states’ use of publicity, thus offering an arena most conducive to discovering the causal mechanisms.

Propaganda campaigns are government-orchestrated, concerted efforts to attract public attention to a dispute by the use of mass media. I argue that autocratic states use propaganda campaigns to bridge the opinion gap between the public and the state. When the public does not support a hardline policy, but that is what the state prefers, the state uses a propaganda campaign to mobilize the public. When the public and the state diverge the other way – if the public is already strongly agitated, but the state desires a moderate policy, I argue the state would seek to subdue the strong public opinion by counterintuitively also adopting a propaganda campaign. But in this case, the purpose of the propaganda is to keep up the appearances of a hard stance to

²⁰ Available at <http://www.gvpt.umd.edu/huth/>.

²¹ Tir 2010, 413.

meet the public demand, while moderating public opinion by echoing their emotions and letting them vent, eventually making way for a preferred moderate policy. Thus, authoritarian propaganda has two contrasting functions – to agitate and to pacify, depending how the state and the public are misaligned. On the flip side, when the public and the state are aligned, both favoring a hardline or a moderate policy, the state does not need to work with a disagreeing public through propaganda; it just goes ahead with its intended policy.

The pacifying use of propaganda deserves highlighting, because that is *not* how we usually interpret aggressive foreign propaganda. Not only commoners, even the intelligence community routinely reads aggressive propaganda as hint of aggressive policy intent. But if the pacifying use of propaganda truly exists, our common belief can be dangerously misleading.

In order to gauge the salience of the theory across time and space, I first test my theory with a medium-*n* congruence test using a sample of nineteen diplomatic crises on territorial disputes between China and other countries. Then leveraging primary sources gathered from Chinese and Vietnamese archives and fifty-seven interviews, as well as content analysis of the Chinese official newspaper *People's Daily*, I evaluate the causal processes by tracing four cases representative of each possible combination of public opinion and state policy intent – the Sino-Vietnamese Border War during 1979-1990, the Sino-Philippine arbitration case in 2016, the Sino-Vietnamese cable-cutting incidents in 2011, and the Sino-Vietnamese oil rig crisis in 2014.

This study makes three contributions. First, it seeks to elucidate our understanding of an understudied phenomenon of increasing empirical prevalence – authoritarian states' use of mass media in interstate disputes. By incorporating domestic variables into the analysis of international disputes from the angle of a new empirical puzzle, I hope to reinvigorate the well-established literature on domestic politics of international relations. Second, the theory dwells on

the nature of state-society relations in authoritarian states and the fact that these regimes increasingly need to work with its domestic audience. Corresponding to a rising wave of popular authoritarianism in world politics, this study enriches the literature on authoritarian public opinion by moving the context to the international arena. Third, this study informs policy makers of a less-known but commonly-practiced use of propaganda – a pacifying use. This could serve as an antidote to the currently over-simplistic view of foreign propaganda. Reading foreign propaganda more sophisticatedly could also help policy-makers to make better-informed foreign policy decisions.

The remainder of the dissertation is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 2 lays out in greater detail the conceptual and theoretical bases of the study. I flesh out the assumptions, the concepts, and the logic of the theory. In addition to addressing the potential inferential threats to the theory, I also derive alternative explanations to the empirical puzzle from existing literatures of audience cost and diversionary war.

Chapter 3 has two sections. The first section outlines the research design used to test my and the alternative explanations; the second section reviews the development and the features of the Chinese propaganda system, with comparisons to other authoritarian regimes. In the method section, I present how the medium-*n* congruence test and the process-tracing shall proceed. I present and justify the sampling, the case selection, the data sources used for these tests, the measurements for the variables, as well as the observable implications for the proposed and the alternative casual mechanisms. The section on the Chinese propaganda system serves as a background introduction in which these tests are grounded in. Comparisons to other authoritarian regimes could help extend the theory to cases beyond China.

The empirical tests of the argument are to be found in Chapter 4 through 7. Chapter 4 demonstrates the results of the congruence test, evaluating the overall consistence of the results and examining the deviant cases. The next three chapters cover the process-tracing of four cases, the Sino-Vietnamese Border War during 1979-1990 (Chapter 5), the Sino-Philippine arbitration case in 2016 (Chapter 6), the Sino-Vietnamese cable-cutting incidents in 2011, and the Sino-Vietnamese oil rig crisis in 2014 (with the latter two cases in Chapter 7). Besides evaluating the Chinese media strategy in these cases, Chapter 7 also includes an analysis of the Vietnamese side of the story, which helps extend the geographical application of the theory.

In Chapter 8, I conclude by summarizing the empirical evidence, assessing the theory's contribution and limitations, as well as possible extensions of the argument and future research.

Chapter 2: The (Mis)Alignment Theory

When are territorial disputes let known to the public, sometimes even *made* known, compared to other times when they are shrouded in secrecy? Under what conditions does a state decide to ramp up the rhetoric of a dispute by the use of mass media? What purposes do these propaganda campaigns serve to the state interests? This chapter develops a state-public (mis)alignment theory of propaganda campaigns as strategic state action in response to the (mis)alignment of existing public opinion and state foreign policy intent. This theory has important implications for studies on domestic politics and international relations, since it suggests the *interaction* of domestic factors and foreign policy, rather than using one to explain the other like most “second image” theories or “second image reversed” theories do.²² It also adds nuances to Putnam’s “two-level game” by substantiating a relationship between the domestic and international imperatives.²³ Additionally, the theory also enriches the emerging literature on authoritarian public opinion by moving the theoretical setting from domestic politics to the international arena.

I argue that popular autocrats hike up domestically the rhetoric of a foreign dispute, especially a territorial dispute, when public opinion and state policy intent on the issue are at odds with each other. When public opinion is moderate or weak, but state foreign policy intent is hardline, states hike up the dispute to mobilize domestic public for the hardline policy that risks conflicts. But when public opinion is hardline, yet state foreign policy intent is moderate, states counterintuitively hike up the dispute as a strategy to pacify the public. On one hand, the harsh rhetoric helps the government to keep up the appearances of a hard stand to meet the public demand. On the other, the state mollifies public opinion by echoing their emotions and letting them vent, with the goal of easing off the public pressure for a hardline policy that risks

²² Gourevitch 1978.

²³ Putnam 2009.

escalations. In either scenario, the strong rhetoric works as a “bridging” instrument to close the gap between the state and the public before the intended foreign policy is carried out. This is important for autocrats who care about public support, while at the same time have the wherewithal - its strong propaganda machines - to effectively affect public opinion to meet its needs. On the contrary, when the state and the public are aligned, the state does not bother with a propaganda campaign; it just goes ahead with the intended foreign policy - hardline or moderate.

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, I identify and justify my theoretical assumptions. Next, I then the dependent variable and the independent variables and draw out the causal logic of my theory by explicating how the two different kinds of propaganda work. Finally, I derive alternative explanations from existing theories.

I. Theoretical Assumptions

The (mis)alignment theory developed here explains authoritarian propaganda campaigns on territorial disputes. I make three assumptions about the nature of authoritarian states and the state-society relations: 1) these states are rationally led, and their top priorities are regime survival against domestic competitors and state security against external threats; 2) the public could exert some pressure on the state’s foreign policy, and that is why the state cares about public opinion; 3) but such pressure is limited because the state is also capable of effectively influencing public opinion.

The first assumption is about the nature of actors. By rationally led, I mean that regimes seek survival and states as international actors maximize interests against risks and costs in their foreign policy. I assume that leaders act according to the expected utility from a cost-benefit perspective. Their rationality may be bounded and information may not be complete. But I rule

out the cases in which leaders' personality or emotions, but not rational calculations, sway their decisions. I do not assume unitary actors - leaders are affected by political pressure from the public. But for the purpose of parsimony, I assume only two domestic actors - the state²⁴ and the public;²⁵ I exclude the role of bureaucracies, factions, interest groups or individuals within these two actors.²⁶ So the proposed theory should work to the extent that reality resembles such a simplification - that is, when the effects of the differences *within* the state or *within* the public could be ignored. This simplification of reality is represented in some but not all cases. As such, I do not claim my theory will explain all state propaganda strategies on territorial disputes, but an ample number of cases that fit the assumptions specified here.

The second and the third assumptions are about the nature of authoritarian state-society relations. These are the core assumptions driving the theory. On one hand, the public could exert some amount of pressure on the state, so that public opinion matters to the state in terms of foreign policy decision-making. The public has to play some, not utterly submissive, role in the state's foreign policy decision making. There are very few countries in the world in the contemporary times that do not meet this criterion, but perhaps North Korea could be one example. On the other, the state is capable of effectively influencing public opinion towards its likes. In other words, public opinion matters in authoritarian states, but its influence is not decisive; the state is not omnipotent, but it is capable of changing public opinion to meet its policy needs.

²⁴ I use the word "state" in two senses: one relative to the domestic public, equivalent to "the regime," "the government," and "the leaders," meaning the governing body; the other is used relative to other states, including both the governing body and the public but at an international level.

²⁵ I use "the public" and "the society" interchangeably.

²⁶ A vast body of literature studies the effects of interest groups and individuals on war. See, for example, Allison 1999; De Mesquita 2005; Legro 1996; Snyder 1993; Van Evera 1998.

These are important assumptions about state-society relations in authoritarian states that could find strong support in existing literature. These two assumptions about state-society relations in authoritarian foreign policy are an extension from the notion of state autonomy in a Neoclassical Realist tradition and are grounded in the literature of authoritarian public opinion in domestic politics.²⁷ Even beyond authoritarian states, there is variation in the degree of state autonomy vis-à-vis society. Lobell, Ripsman and Taliaferro write in the Introduction to *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* that “The degree of state autonomy vis-a-vis society varies over time and across different states. This variation, in turn, affects whether states respond to international pressures in a timely and efficient fashion.”²⁸ While there is ongoing debate about how much influence the public has over the state and the state over the public in authoritarian states, the consensus is a two-way interaction. Fewsmith and Rosen argue that public opinion “has begun to play a role [in Chinese foreign policy], albeit one that remains restricted and significant only under certain conditions.”²⁹ Reilly’s study of strong anti-Japan sentiment among the Chinese public shows an evolving government strategy composed of tolerance and responsiveness on one hand, and persuasion and repression on the other.

On one hand, there is increasing evidence suggesting that genuine, bottom-up public opinion does exist and play an active role in authoritarian politics, and that explains why authoritarian states have to care and respond.³⁰ Gries delineates how China’s extreme popular nationalism, once government-instigated, has taken on a life of its own.³¹ Chen, Pan and Xu finds that top-down oversight and bottom-up societal pressures could pressure local governments

²⁷ The authoritarian public opinion literature examines whether, why, and how autocrats respond to public opinion, usually in domestic politics. Many works cited are part of this literature.

²⁸ Lobell et al, 2009, 27.

²⁹ Fewsmith and Rosen 1978, 152.

³⁰ See, for example, Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016, Truex 2014; Malesky and Schuler 2010; Manion 2014; Meng, Pan, and Yang 2014.

³¹ Gries 2004.

to respond to citizen demands.³² Truex's, Manion's, and Malesky and Schuler's respective study on Chinese and Vietnamese parliamentary bodies offer evidence that although not without limits, these authoritarian states do respond to the needs of local constituents.³³ Meng, Pan and Yang's experiment of provincial- and city-level leaders in China are receptive to citizen suggestions unless they perceive antagonism between the state and citizens.³⁴

The marketization and the advance of the Internet and social media has equipped the public with a longer reach to a diverse pool of information, the ability to express their opinions more freely than before, and the ability to mobilize among themselves, thus to pressure or constrain the state. Guobin Yang describes the various ways the Internet has revolutionized popular expression and activism in China.³⁵ Scholars have documented various functions of the Internet, such as networking and organization of activism,³⁶ political satire,³⁷ and public shaming ("human flesh searches (ren rou sousuo)"),³⁸ all of which the public can use to incur social changes, sometimes even to pressure the state.

On the other, the influence of public opinion is often limited, especially on issues of national interest such as foreign policy. Although this is still part of a larger debate, this assumption is supported by a significant number of studies on the relations between public opinion and foreign policy in authoritarian states.³⁹ The point here is not to engage in this debate, but rather to take the assumption in the agency of the state in influencing public opinion that has been amply demonstrated by existing studies. This school of thought argues that while possibly

³² Chen et al 2016.

³³ Truex 2017; Manion 2014; Malesky and Schuler 2010.

³⁴ Meng et al 2017.

³⁵ Yang 2009.

³⁶ Sullivan and Xie 2009.

³⁷ Yang and Jiang 2015.

³⁸ Ong 2012; Gorman 2016.

³⁹ See, for example, Chubb 2018; Fewsmith and Rosen 1978; Gries 2004; Quek and Johnston 2018; Reilly 2011 and 2014; Zhao 2004, 2005, and 2013.

more influential in democracies, public opinion is usually not influential enough in autocracies to sway a state's decision on foreign policy. For example, Zhao argues that Chinese foreign policy before 2008 was not dictated by nationalist sentiment; after 2008, there was a convergence of assertive foreign policy and nationalist appeals, but that was because the Chinese government was more willing to play to the nationalist demands, not because they were compelled to.⁴⁰

Chubb develops a methodological framework to test the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy. He finds that popular nationalism has little to do with China's assertive maritime policy since 2006 on five recent maritime dispute cases. Quek and Johnston's survey experiment study suggests that China "may have more agency in the face of public opinion during a crisis than they themselves may believe."⁴¹ Frames such as China's peaceful identity, the economic cost of war, the availability of other tools such as U.N. mediation and economic sanctions, have proven to be effective in deescalating public opinion.

The limited role of public opinion in authoritarian states is because it is relatively easy and cheap for autocratic leaders to change public opinion to their likes, through various frames, information gathering, traditional media and the internet, censorship, allowing protests selectively, quasi-democratic institutions, etc.⁴² Tsai enumerates the various new "networked" techniques the CCP has mastered to consolidate its control of public opinion.⁴³ Repnikova and Fang enumerates the Chinese state's revamped mass persuasion in online forms – digital versions of state media, the government's official social media accounts, and the government's promotion of patriotic bloggers.⁴⁴ Esarey, Stockmann, and Zhang find evidence in Chinese

⁴⁰ Zhao 2013.

⁴¹ Quek and Johnston 2018, 11.

⁴² See, for example, Quek and Johnston 2018; Shirk 2007; King, Pan, and Roberts 2013; Levitsky and Way 2010; Lorentzen 2013

⁴³ Tsai 2016.

⁴⁴ Repnikova and Fang 2018. For government's adoption of official microblogs, also see Schläger and Jiang 2014.

television public service advertisements that even the public is supportive of state propaganda efforts to guide public opinion.⁴⁵ This study applies these findings from the context of domestic politics to international politics and focuses on one way autocrats cope with the role of public opinion in international disputes – through mass media.

The importance of understanding and controlling public opinion is recognized by authoritarian rulers. In an editorial, China's main official newspaper *People's Daily* proclaims that "Territorial disputes are extremely complex, involving the people's emotions and sometimes becoming bound up with domestic disputes. Unless extra restraint is taken, emotions could get out of control, which would doubtless result in unintended consequences."⁴⁶ Lacking the information feedback commonly provided by democratic institutions such as free elections and free press, authoritarian leaders make up for this information deficiency by a myriad of unique means. These include, for example, allowing small-scale, narrowly economic protests as harbingers of public opinion,⁴⁷ adopting large-scale social surveys and polls to gauge public opinion,⁴⁸ maintaining loose control of certain social space (although not without limits) to allow civil groups to grow and provide feedback to the government,⁴⁹ tolerating investigative journalism and critical reporting on a number of domestic issues to let them function as watchdogs for the state,⁵⁰ allowing citizen petitions,⁵¹ and using the Internet as a reflection of public opinion.⁵²

The authoritarian public opinion literature also demonstrates that the autocratic regimes

⁴⁵ Esarey et al 2017.

⁴⁶ Zhong Sheng, "Bie rang Nanhai wenti ganrao hezuo daju (Don't let the South China Sea problems interfere with the general situation of cooperation)," *People's Daily*, August 20, 2011, 3.

⁴⁷ Lorentzen 2013.

⁴⁸ Thornton 2011.

⁴⁹ Weller 2012.

⁵⁰ Repnikova 2017.

⁵¹ Dimitrov 2014 and 2015.

⁵² Meng et al 2017.

are selective in adopting democratic institutions,⁵³ in tolerating protests,⁵⁴ in censoring content,⁵⁵ and in responding to citizen demands.⁵⁶ Part of the reason that they are selective is that some interests could be compromised to make up the appearance of accommodating public opinion, but other interests, such as those related to national security or regime survival, could not be compromised. It is, therefore, reasonable to believe that autocratic leaders are not likely to yield on foreign policy issues to public opinion, which are issues of national interest but of relatively low relevance to citizens' daily lives, especially when cheaper alternatives are available. To appear accommodating to public opinion, they usually select on issues of high relevance to the public livelihood such as social welfare.

The prototype regime that best meets the second and the third assumption is what comparativists have coined as “popular authoritarianism.” Popular authoritarianism is the type of autocratic regime that “relies on popular support to maintain the continuance of one-party rule.”⁵⁷ Instead of basing its top-down legitimacy on an ideology or the monopoly of force, popular authoritarian regimes’ “right to rule is more and more based on bottom-up legitimacy.”⁵⁸ But that legitimacy is based on a stronghold on the monopoly of information and the control of public opinion. China, Iran, Russia, Venezuela, Vietnam are examples of popular authoritarianism. “Competitive authoritarianism”⁵⁹ and “illiberal democracies”⁶⁰ are also close to this prototype.

Slater (2003) and Weeks (2012) develop two conceptual dimensions to delineate a two-

⁵³ Levitsky and Way 2010.

⁵⁴ For example, Chen 2012; King et al 2013; Li 2014; Lorentzen 2013; O'Brien and Li 2006; Weiss 2013 and 2014.

⁵⁵ King et al 2013.

⁵⁶ For example, Malesky and Schuler 2010; Manion 2014; Meng et al 2014; Truex 2017.

⁵⁷ Brady 2008, 191.

⁵⁸ Brady 2009, 451.

⁵⁹ Levitsky and Way 2010.

⁶⁰ Bell et al 1995; Mutalib 2000; Smith 2005; Smith and Ziegler 2008; Zakaria 1997 and 2007.

by-two typology of different autocratic regimes: militarism (or infrastructural power) and personalism (or political power). Organized along these two dimensions, there are four autocratic regime types: machine, junta, boss and strongman, with machine and junta being non-personalist regimes, boss and strongman being personalist regimes, machine and boss being non-military regimes, and strongman and junta being military regimes. It is generally believed that personalist regimes have more freedom in conducting foreign policy and military regimes have more vested interests in preferring escalation than other foreign policy options. As a result, there should be variations across these different types of autocracies, but as long as the “public opinion matters” assumption is met, all four kinds are included in this study.

II. Propaganda Campaigns, State Foreign Policy Intent, and Public Opinion

Propaganda campaigns are government-orchestrated, concerted efforts to attract public attention to a dispute by the use of mass media. A government attracts public attention by the volume and the salience of the message: volume is how much or how often a dispute is featured; salience is whether a dispute is featured in prime sections or at prime times of a media program. Therefore, a propaganda campaign distinguishes itself from normal media coverage by the high volume and salience of the coverage, and also by its nature of being intentional and deliberate, rather than being accidental or event-driven. Propaganda campaigns can be likened to the dissimilar twin of censorship. It has the same origin – the state, and the same essence – news and information manipulation, but different and almost opposite appearances – propaganda campaigns is hiking up; censorship is damping down. It is close to “reverse censorship” mentioned in King et al. 2017 but travels far beyond social media posts fabrication.⁶¹

⁶¹ King et al. 2017, 484.

Domestic propaganda campaigns on a foreign dispute could be regarded either as a domestic policy or a foreign policy depending on how they are viewed. They are domestic in the sense that their targets are domestic audiences and they are implemented domestically via domestic media outlets. Their goals might be domestic. They are foreign in the sense that their content is foreign-related and their goals might be foreign as well. Note that I do not differentiate the content of the message the state tries to convey through the propaganda campaigns other than it being related to the territorial dispute. The specific content and the tone in which the content is delivered could probably define different kinds of propaganda, which might warrant a whole new project. Given the scarce research on the subject, this dissertation focuses on the dimension of volume and salience of state media coverage as a first step, rather than opening up to the myriad perspectives and tones the coverage could take.

I argue that propaganda campaigns are a strategic state action in response to the (mis)alignment of two conditions – state foreign policy intent and existing public opinion. Popular autocrats hike up domestically the rhetoric of a foreign dispute, especially a territorial dispute, when these two conditions are out of sync. The aggressive propaganda works to close the state-society gap before the intended policy is carried out.

The first condition, a state's foreign policy intent, is a state's intended policy against a particular target country during a specific crisis on a dispute. This can be characterized as hardline or moderate. A hardline policy is the unprovoked threat, display, or use of force or economic sanctions; or when provoked, escalated responses. A moderate policy involves territorial compromise, "shelving" a dispute, or passive and proportionate responses to provocations. "Shelving" a territorial dispute is defined as deferring settlement, peaceful or military, and avoiding territorial compromise and escalations. It is usually achieved by putting

the dispute aside or “freezing” it to the status quo. Proportionate response is defined as in-kind response of similar scale. Some may argue that a proportionate response should be categorized as a hardline policy, since it may involve a reactive provocation. I argue that territorial disputes provide a unique context for a passive and proportionate response to be defensive in nature. When challenged on a territorial dispute, the lack of action could be deemed as tacit consent of the initial breach and could be used in the future against the country who fails to act. As a result, in-kind response of similar scale is almost necessarily called for even when maintaining the status quo is the objective.

The second condition, the existing public opinion, is the public knowledge, sentiment, and policy orientation against a foreign rival during a specific crisis on a dispute *before* a state responds to the crisis. There are three aspects of public opinion that a propaganda campaign aims to affect - the extent of public knowledge, the intensity of public emotion, and the policy orientation of public opinion: the “knowledge” describes how public a dispute is, that is, how many people know about a dispute; the “emotion” captures how strongly the people who know about the dispute feel about it; the “orientation” can be characterized as hardline or moderate, following the same definitions of being “hardline” or “moderate” described above in terms of the state’s policy orientation. In relation to the state foreign policy intent, the “orientation” dimension of public opinion is the most relevant. Additionally, public opinion can be weak if the dispute is little known (public knowledge) or weakly felt (public sentiment). I collapse the “moderate” public opinion with the “weak” public opinion into one category, as they have similar effects on state media behaviors.

As shown in Table 2.1, combinations of state foreign policy intent and existing public opinion form four scenarios, resulting in the adoption (scenarios I and II) and the non-adoption

(scenarios III and IV) of propaganda campaigns.

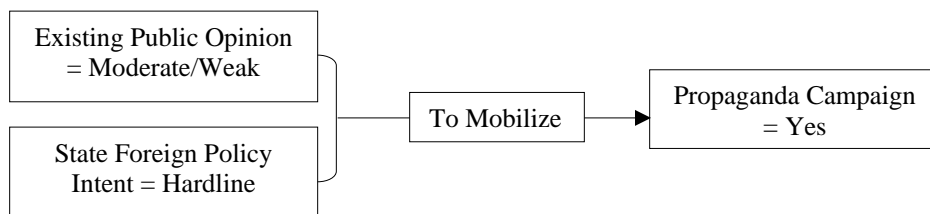
Table 2.1: The State-Public Alignment Theory

		State Foreign Policy Intent	
		Hardline	Moderate
Existing Public Opinion	Moderate/Weak	I. Propaganda Campaigns to Mobilize	IV. No Propaganda Campaigns
	Hardline	III. No Propaganda Campaigns	II. Propaganda Campaigns to Pacify

III. The Mobilizing Propaganda

Depending on how the values of the independent variables diverge, the “bridging” process could take one of two distinct causal pathways. When existing public opinion on a dispute is moderate or weak, yet the state prefers a hardline policy, the state launches a propaganda campaign to prepare the public and garner public support for its hardline policy. This is what I call the mobilizing propaganda. This causal logic is reflected in the diagram in Figure 2.1:

Figure 2.1: (Mis)Alignment Theory Causal Diagram I



This mobilizing use of propaganda is intuitive and commonly known. A hardline policy on a territorial dispute, by definition, is the unprovoked threat, display, or use of force or economic sanctions; or when provoked, escalated responses. A preferred hardline policy would necessarily raise the probability of conflict, and conflicts demands material and human resources of the nation. But if the public opinion on the issue is moderate or weak, meaning either people prefer a moderate policy, or not many people know about it or the people who do know do not consider it

important enough to risk conflict, a popular autocrat who cares about public opinion (by assumption) would want to mobilize the public before the hardline policy is carried out.

The mobilizing campaigns, however, are not uncontroversial in academic settings. For a similar scenario, both the diversionary war theory and the audience cost theory would predict the same outcome – the adoption of propaganda campaigns, but with different motivations. For the diversionary logic, the state launches a propaganda campaign to divert public attention away from a domestic crisis, ultimately for the sake of domestic stability; for the audience cost logic, the state makes a dispute public to tie its own hands to enhance its threat credibility for coercive purposes, ultimately for the sake of foreign policy. In the alignment logic, however, the state launches a propaganda campaign for the sake of both domestic stability and foreign policy. It is about achieving balance between public opinion that the state has to to some extent cater to for the sake of domestic stability and keeping its foreign policy goal. This is a new story of authoritarian resilience, both at the domestic level vis-à-vis its domestic public and at the international level vis-à-vis a foreign rival.

This part of my theory draws inspiration from Thomas Christensen's two-level game "mobilization" model in his *Useful Adversaries*.⁶² He argues that leaders (Truman in 1947-50 and Mao in 1957-58) manipulates international crises for domestic political purposes. Specifically, they exaggerate external threats through crusading ideological rhetoric to mobilize domestic support for unpopular national strategies. In the case of Truman in 1947-50, when the need for military expenditure expansion contradicts the public desire to lower taxes and end conscription, Truman resorted to anti-Communist rhetoric, which resulted in the unintended confrontation with China. The same logic applies to Mao in 1957-58, when Mao used the

⁶² Christensen 1996.

confrontation with the U.S. over Taiwan and anti-Imperialist rhetoric to mobilize domestic support for the Great Leap Forward program.

My theory shares some important elements in the independent variables, the causal mechanism, and the dependent variable - the juxtaposition of state and popular intention on certain policy, overcoming domestic mobilization obstacles, and the resulting rhetoric. However, my theory departs from Christensen's "mobilization" model in the logic of the two-level game, in the sense that his mobilization model is about using external crises for the sake of domestic policy, while mine is about using external crises for the sake of both domestic stability and foreign policy. For Christensen, foreign policy (U.S.-China confrontation) is an inadvertent consequence, while mine is part of the motivation. Besides, state rhetoric is the intervening variable for Christensen, whereas it is the dependent variable of my study.

The mobilizing part of my theory also draws upon a number of other representative works in the Neoclassical Realist approach. In explaining the puzzle of under-aggression and under-expansion of great powers, Randall Schweller stresses the great powers' difficulty in rallying domestic public support for such hegemonic bids.⁶³ Along a similar line, in explaining the delayed American ascendance as a world superpower, Fareed Zakaria cites the lack of extractive and mobilization capacity.⁶⁴ These works all emphasize the state's domestic imperative owing to its public. In explaining a different puzzle, the mobilizing theory elaborated here expands the scope of this emphasis to authoritarian states and their policy in international crisis.

This part of my theory also falls in line with the "threat inflation" argument made by renown scholars such as John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt in a number of policy publications

⁶³ Schweller 2009.

⁶⁴ Zakaria 1999.

provoked by the 2003 Iraq War.⁶⁵ This argument uses the Iraq War as a classic example in which an external threat was “inflated” by the state through manipulating and dominating the political discourse and the media. I make the same line of argument but focus on authoritarian states where media manipulation is supposedly easier.

In a mobilizing propaganda campaign, the state calls for the agenda-setting, the priming, and the framing effects of the mass media.⁶⁶ First, people need to know about a dispute if it is not already widely known, especially when the dispute is about remote and sparsely-populated borderlands or uninhabited outlying islands. The first function of the media is to raise awareness of a particular issue, or what Media Studies call “agenda-setting.” Agenda-setting refers to the “ability [of media] to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda.”⁶⁷ It affects in particular the public knowledge aspect of public opinion mentioned in previous text. By increasing the extent and frequency of coverage of a particular dispute in the media, the state forces attention to that dispute. Moreover, the increased awareness could also heighten the perceived importance of the disputed territory. The positive correlation between awareness and perceived importance – what social psychologists call “availability heuristic,” has been repeatedly confirmed by psychological experiments.⁶⁸ That is, the more the public hears about a dispute, the greater importance they are likely to associate to the dispute.

Second, the priming role of media works through “stimulat[ing] related thoughts in the minds of audience members.”⁶⁹ It is about the accessibility of information (just like the agenda-

⁶⁵ Mearsheimer 2011 and 2013; Walt 2009, 2010 and 2013.

⁶⁶ For works on these media effects, see, for example, Berkowitz 1984; Brown and Deegan 1998; McCombs and Shaw 1972; McCombs and Reynolds 2002; Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007; Weaver 1981.

⁶⁷ McCombs and Reynolds 2002, 1.

⁶⁸ Tversky and Kahneman 1973; 1974.

⁶⁹ Straubhaar et al. 2013, 421.

setting effect), association of related ideas, and activation of one thought triggering another.⁷⁰

For example, the Chinese propaganda campaign on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute with Japan in 2012 were not necessarily on the territorial issue itself, but instead took on the theme of anti-fascism. Yet the recall of Japanese intrusion during World War II is likely to trigger a similar reaction in the Chinese public about the more recent events.

Last but not the least, media framing directly affects people's attitudes towards a dispute, specifically the public sentiment and policy orientation aspects of public opinion. Framing "is based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences."⁷¹ When publicizing a territorial dispute, the propaganda almost always legitimizes a state's own territorial claim to the detriment of the other(s)'s, whitewash one's own behaviors, or victimizing oneself and accusing the other(s) for aggression. These tend to induce strong public emotion on the issue. Framing has been taken seriously by social psychologists. Tversky and Kahneman argue for the significant effects of frames on preferences;⁷² Nelson et al specifies the psychological mechanisms by which framing affects public opinion and proved through experiments that mass media can profoundly influence public opinion even through unintended frames.⁷³ In addition, the war mobilization role of mass media has been long argued by the media and war literature. Carruthers illustrates the media's role in painting war as "defensive, just and unavoidable: an overdue rectification of past wrongs and/or a preemptive aversion of future assault by an enemy whose malignance is clear but whose inferiority will ensure rapid defeat."⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Domke et al. 1998.

⁷¹ Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007, 11.

⁷² Tversky and Kahneman 1981.

⁷³ Nelson et al 1997.

⁷⁴ Carruthers 2011, 16.

By utilizing these three media effects, the state mobilizes public opinion towards the following positions about a hardline policy and the potential of conflicts: 1) that the territory would be worth the costs of conflicts; and 2) that conflicts are defensive and necessary. Through this mobilization process, the state is able to bring public opinion in line with the preferred hardline policy.

If the mobilizing mechanism is at work, we should observe the following implications:

Ha1 (State Concern): Government officials express concerns about the moderate/weak public opinion and the need to mobilize. Given the state's hardline policy intent, the existing moderate/weak public opinion should cause leaders' concerns. These expressed concerns, especially if expressed privately, reveal their motivations to bridge the gap.

Ha2 (Media Directives): The state issues media plans or directives to media outlets to mobilize the public. The mobilization should leave traces within the state apparatus, especially for "government-orchestrated, concerted efforts" such as these propaganda campaigns. Traces like these should amount to "smoking gun" evidence.⁷⁵

Ha3 (Inflammatory Content): Media content is inflammatory – self-victimizing, accusing others for aggression, or implying injustice. As mentioned earlier in the framing effect, the themes and the tones of the articles should generally be inflammatory to achieve a mobilizing objective.

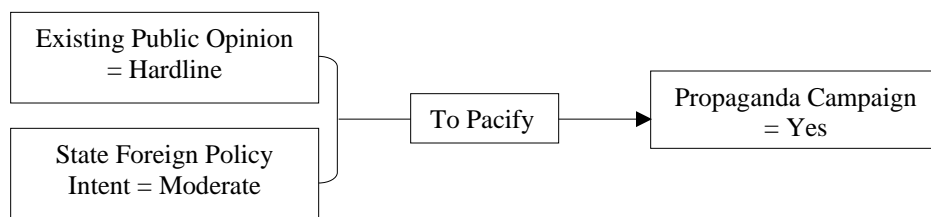
Ha4 (Motivation Disappears): Media coverage diminishes as execution of a hardline policy comes to an end. As the goal of the propaganda campaign is to prepare the public for a hardline policy, the campaign should come to a stop when that goal is achieved, that is, when the hardline policy ends.

⁷⁵ See Collier 2011.

IV. The Pacifying Propaganda

When the values of the independent variables diverge the other way, that is, when public opinion is hardline, yet the state prefers a moderate policy, the state might also resort to a propaganda campaign counterintuitively to mollify public opinion to bring it in line with the intended moderate policy. But this time, the “bridging” process takes a disparate causal pathway from mobilization - what I call a pacifying propaganda. The causal logic is reflected in the diagram in Figure 2.2:

Figure 2.2: (Mis)Alignment Theory Causal Diagram II



A hardline public opinion means that not only the issue is widely known, but also the public is intensely agitated towards aggressive state actions risky of conflicts. Yet the state might prefer a moderate policy that seeks to avoid conflicts by offering territorial compromises, putting the dispute aside, or merely passively and proportionately responding to provocations by the foreign rival. I argue that when faced with such a state-society divergence, a popular autocrat who cares about public opinion (by assumption) would want to subdue public opinion by also launching a propaganda campaign.

In contrast to the mobilizing use of propaganda, this second use – to pacify an otherwise agitated public, although also commonly practiced, is less known and has not been theorized. Dispute propaganda, despite its disputative content and sometimes provocative tone, is still a

significant step back from real military actions. Like a dog that barks but does not bite, a popular autocrat could use propaganda campaigns to meet the public demand to keep up the appearances of a hard stand, while at the same time allowing public emotions to subside through echoing and venting, thus easing off the public pressure for a substantially hardline policy that carries real escalatory consequences. In this way, these media campaigns are essentially staged shows to satisfy and to calm down an angry public and a pretense to cover up a restrained policy intent. The pacifying logic is in tension with the audience cost theory, which always sees such propaganda as hands-tying. But here, pacifying rhetoric is essentially hand-freeing. This logic should apply particularly to 1) countries that have strong nationalist traditions and, 2) controversial issues that have already gained salience through previous militarization and media exposure.

Pacifying propaganda campaigns have two specific functions to bring an angry public closer to a moderate policy. One is appeasing the public by keeping up the appearances of a hard stance. Ordinary people care more about public discourse than following up on the actual policy, especially on matters of territory and sovereignty where national dignity is at stake, but only a minority of people are affected on the ground. Recent survey experiments conducted in China show that citizens approve of government “bluster” – tough but vague talk, without necessarily being followed by tough action.⁷⁶ Additionally, Media Studies have long argued for the short attention span of the general public on some social issues.⁷⁷ The “issue attention cycle” hypothesis describes the public opinion and the media cycle during which a problem “suddenly leaps into prominence, remains there for a short time, and then – though still largely unresolved –

⁷⁶ Weiss and Dafoe 2017.

⁷⁷ See, for example, Baumgartner and Jones 2010; Bodensteiner 1995; Downs 1972.

gradually fades from the center of public attention.”⁷⁸ Issues that only affect a minority of people on a day-to-day basis, that are caused by social arrangements beneficial to a powerful few, and that are not intrinsically exciting in a sustained way, are likely to go through the cycle.⁷⁹ Foreign policy issues, especially those concerning remote periphery borders or uninhabited islands, fit the description. Because nationalists often equate a moderate foreign policy with weakness and failure, a strong state rhetoric helps fend off nationalistic criticism, save face, and maintain social stability.

The other function of a pacifying propaganda campaign is to moderate public emotion by making use of the echoing and the venting functions of the media. The “catharsis theory” in psychology claims that violence in media releases pent-up anger and reduces aggression.⁸⁰ Similarly, dispute propaganda could soothe an angry public simply by talking about it, echoing public sentiment, or offering rational analysis of the issue. Besides, venting on “participatory” media such as social media or online forums also releases anger. Recent research on social media confirms such an effect.⁸¹ This venting function, however, is a recent phenomenon with the advent of the Internet. Before the creation and the spread of these online venting venues, the media relies predominantly on the echoing functions of traditional media and guiding public opinion through balanced information and rational analysis. In these smart ways, a propaganda campaign releases the pressure for an aggressive policy, so that a preferred moderate policy could prevail. The moderate policy is usually carried out quietly after the public has cooled off and has moved on to other headlines in the news.

A pacifying campaign is thus distinct from a mobilizing campaign not only in its

⁷⁸ Downs 1972, 28.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

⁸⁰ Murray and Feshbach 1978.

⁸¹ Cairns and Carlson 2016; Hassid 2012; MacKinnon 2008.

objective but also in its content and means. It should still seek to attract public attention in terms of the media's agenda-setting function, but it should perform differently in terms of priming and framing. The goal of the campaign, despite its copious volume just like the mobilizing campaign, is to reorient the hardline public opinion towards more rational and moderate policy choices and to release the public anger. A pacifying campaign, just like a mobilizing campaign, could certainly fail – sometimes it encounters public pushbacks or even backfire. Propaganda is an art about winning the hearts and minds, so it takes time to be effective. But sometimes the time window of a crisis does not allow enough time for a propaganda campaign to be successfully implemented. Sometimes an exogenous shock might disrupt a propaganda campaign and divert the public attention. In light of these possibilities, the theory is limited in that it does not consider enough of the outcomes of these campaigns. But the frequent occurrence of the pacifying campaigns regardless of their outcomes deserves our devotion to them in this dissertation and deserves to be made explicit, especially given our relatively poor understanding about them.

One specific challenge is a possible “ratchet effect” that public opinion, once riled up, might not be able to retrench to the *status quo ante*. Authoritarian states cultivating nationalism to consolidate regime might have trouble paring it down to the pre-mobilization level. The sustained intense Chinese nationalism against Japan on the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands provides a plausible example that such a “ratchet effect” might exist. Yet we should not underestimate the public's oblivion of the past, given the short attention span of the public. Seeing how the Chinese people have been able to carry on close people-to-people relations with the United States after an outpour of intense emotions during the Belgrade embassy bombing crisis in 1999 should strengthen our confidence in this regard. Nor should we underestimate the state's ability in overcoming strong popular nationalism in the conduct of foreign policy. Quek

and Johnston confirms the effectiveness of numerous frames the Chinese government could use to deescalate in the face of strong public opinion.⁸² Weiss also finds that “the Chinese government has been effective at both stoking and quashing nationalist sentiment over the South China Sea.”⁸³ So the bottom line is that mobilizing today does not foreclose choices of pacifying tomorrow.

Another challenge is the inescapable aspect of foreign policy implications and their preemptive effect in turn to the state leaders making the decisions. Although this project focuses on the domestic propaganda, because of the foreign content of the issues, the international ramifications are an inescapable concern. On one hand, a domestic campaign could have a spillover effect on a foreign audience if the domestic campaign is observed by foreign governments especially the foreign rival, or if the content of the domestic campaign is reported in the international media. This spillover effect is implicit in Christensen’s mobilization model. For Christensen, it was Truman and Mao’s domestic-oriented rhetoric that resulted in the unintended confrontation between the two powers.⁸⁴ The risk of a spillover challenges the pacifying logic in that a foreign rival may interpret an aggressive but pacifying campaign as a hardline position by the government and reacting with its own hardline position. This dynamic can lead to a conflict that neither side wanted. A pacifying campaign could therefore be self-defeating for a goal of successfully implementing a moderate policy. On the other, a feedback loop might exist if the concern for possible spillover effects on a foreign rival restrains a state’s media behavior in a certain way. Expectations of unwanted escalations might in turn keep a state

⁸² Quek and Johnston 2018.

⁸³ Kacie Miura, Jessica Chen Weiss, “Will Beijing cut Trump some slack after that phone call with Taiwan?” *Washington Post Monkey Cage*, July 14, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/12/06/will-beijing-cut-trump-some-slack-after-that-phone-call-with-taiwan/?utm_term=.30954c7ec9e1, accessed June 1, 2018.

⁸⁴ Christensen 1996.

from pursuing a pacifying propaganda campaign.

These risks of foreign ramifications and their feedback effect to the state leaders certainly exist, but they are not deterministic. First, there is a natural barrier between a domestic media campaign and an international one, especially if their language source and media carriers are different. Second, a pacifying campaign, as mentioned earlier, is distinct from a mobilizing one in terms of content and means. So if such a campaign caught the attention of the foreign rival at all, its pacifying characteristics should also be noticed. These characteristics should at least caution the foreign rival from jumping to hardline conclusions. Third, states sometimes have private and credible channels to convey their intentions to the other state in order to preempt unintended external consequences. A main function of track two or track 1.5 dialogues is to offer backchannels like this. The literature on the prevalence of secret diplomacy in international politics has demonstrated the existence of credible private diplomatic channels. For example, Yarhi-Milo argues for the credibility of secret assurances, which often defies a prima facie understanding of existing scholarship on costly signals especially audience cost theory. She argues that possible revelation of the secret assurance, either intentional or not, by the adversary or third parties, could incur a risk of domestic punishment for the initiator due to existing domestic opposition, thereby rendering a credible signal of cooperative intentions.⁸⁵ Fourth, a myriad of conflict reduction measures are at states' disposal.⁸⁶ For example, Senese and Vasquez find that ritualized dispute behaviors reduce the probability of war.⁸⁷ Some dramatic yet routinized, low-cost confrontations have proven to be tacitly understood by the foreign rival to be merely symbolic and domestic-oriented. Take the Korea-Japan dispute on the

⁸⁵ Yarhi-Milo 2013.

⁸⁶ Azar 1972;

⁸⁷ Senese and Vasquez 2005.

Dokdo/Takeshima Islands for example, recalling ambassadors to express protests each time the dispute flares up has become a routinized practice that both countries understand to be geared towards satisfying a nationalist domestic audience and would not overreact to it. Finally, state media have certain techniques to echo the angry public sentiment without inflaming the tensions with the foreign rival. For example, Vietnamese media during the 2014 Sino-Vietnamese oil rig crisis echoed the anti-China public emotion only in foreign observers' assessments instead of direct condemnation.

If the pacifying mechanism is at work, we should observe the following implications:

Hb1 (Nationalistic Criticisms): The state is exposed to nationalistic criticisms. A government under nationalist attacks will be more motivated to align the public to its preferred moderate policy.

Hb2 (Bark but No Bite): Official statements are harsh, but without any substantive threats of punishment. To keep up the appearances of a hard stand and to fend off nationalist criticisms, a government needs to adopt a particularly harsh rhetoric, sometimes even in hyperbole and colorful language. But the absence of any substantive threats of punishment belies its real moderate intentions. In the end, it is all bark but no bite.

Hb3 (Non-Inflammatory Content): Media content is informative and analytical, not inflammatory. Besides echoing the hardline public emotion to release their anger, a significant portion of the media content should be geared towards guiding public opinion towards rational thoughts, so that the public would be less likely to resort to violence or collective actions that might endanger social stability or regime security.

Hb4 (Hoop Test for Venting Mechanism): Venting venues such as social media and online forums are open, and venting is allowed or even encouraged. This is a necessary

condition for the venting function of the media to work.

Hb5 (Motivation Disappears): Media coverage diminishes as a moderate policy is carried out. As the goal of the media campaign is to subdue public opinion for a moderate policy, the campaign should come to a stop when that goal is achieved, that is, when the moderate policy is rolled out.

V. The Alignment

When the state and the public are aligned, either for a hardline or a moderate policy, or when the public does not know or care when the state intends for a moderate policy, the state lacks the aforementioned incentives to work with a disagreeing public through a propaganda campaign. In other words, there is no need to mobilize an already hardline public or to mollify an already moderate/weak public. The state just moves ahead with its intended policy.

VI. Competing Explanations

In explaining states' motivations in hiking up the rhetoric of a dispute, International Relations theories offer two alternative explanations. In short, they suggest that states arouse public opinion on international disputes, particularly territorial disputes:

1. for the purpose of engaging audience cost to prevail in coercions with the foreign rival ("audience cost"); or

2. in order to divert public attention away from domestic problems to foreign disputes and/or to strengthen regime legitimacy ("diversionary war").

The "audience cost" and the "diversionary war" arguments are both two-level-game theories, but the "audience cost" argument stresses a state's foreign agenda - to prevail in international

coercions, whereas the “diversionary war” argument emphasizes a state’s domestic ends - to survive a domestic crisis or to strengthen regime at home. In comparison, the (mis)alignment theory develops Putnam’s framework that underlines a “general equilibrium” between diplomacy and domestic politics and adds specificity to it. In the space below, I elaborate these alternative explanations, in order to lay the foundation for testing them in later chapters alongside the (mis)alignment theory. The purpose of testing these alternative explanations is in no way to “defeat” these two theories but is merely to establish the possibility of the “misalignment” rationale *in addition to* the other theories out there.

1. Audience Cost

Audience cost is the potential cost leaders have to pay if they back down from their publicly-made threat to another state. Audience cost theory contends that by making threats public, states willfully tie their hands to signal resolve in standing firm.⁸⁸ A classic version of the audience cost theory links regime type to states’ ability to generate audience cost and to use it to enhance threat credibility,⁸⁹ but Weeks expands the gift of generating audience cost from democracies to most autocracies.⁹⁰ She argues that audience cost is conditioned on the ability and willingness of domestic audience to sanction/punish leaders and on the visibility of the cost to foreign leaders. Except for “personalist” regimes and certain types of monarchies, most autocracies also have the ability to generate audience cost. Weiss’ study on authoritarian states’ management of anti-foreign protests corroborates this finding and introduces a mechanism through which authoritarian regimes generate audience cost - by managing anti-foreign protests.⁹¹ She argues

⁸⁸ Fearon 1994.

⁸⁹ Fearon 1994; Schultz 2001.

⁹⁰ Weeks 2008 and 2012.

⁹¹ Weiss 2013 and 2014.

that because protests in authoritarian states are costly to repress and risky for going out of control, authoritarian states are able to generate audience cost to signal the resolve to stand tough by tolerating popular mobilization, or conversely, to signal the willingness to cooperate by stifling popular mobilization. All in all, at the core of the audience cost logic is an inherent trade-off that frequently confronts leaders between enhancing threat credibility and increased scrutiny over their foreign policy choices. The former could lead a state to prevail in a crisis without a fight, and the latter to more constraints in foreign policy and greater risks of domestic punishment if the outcome is not good.

The audience cost theory involves two logical steps that have rarely been distinguished from each other, but nevertheless warrant a distinction. The first step is whether audience cost exists for a specific regime or regime type. On this, audience cost theorists usually investigate the ability of a specific regime type to generate audience cost.⁹² This depends on the ability and willingness of domestic audience to sanction leaders if the leaders were to back down from a publicly-made threat and whether the audience views backing down negatively.⁹³ In this logical step, we are mainly concerned about a domestic audience. Audience cost is the dependent variable; we study the effect of regime type on the generation of audience cost.

The second step is whether such costs can help states to signal resolve in standing firm - a story about turning a liability into a leverage. On this, we are concerned about whether a state has the ability to translate audience cost into enhanced threat credibility in coercions. This depends on whether the audience cost is visible and convincing to foreign leaders. In this step, we are mainly concerned about an audience of foreign leaders. As Schultz points out, ultimately,

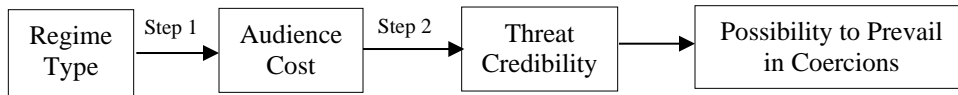
⁹² Eyerman and Hart 1996; Fearon 1994; Partell and Palmer 1999; Prins 2003; Schelling 1963; Schultz 2001; Weeks 2008.

⁹³ Weeks 2008.

what matters is not the generation of audience cost, but the perception by the opponent of the audience cost.⁹⁴ If the audience cost is perceived to be great, then the threat credibility is great, then the party that lacks credibility will be more likely to back down. Here, audience cost is the independent variable; we study the effects of audience cost on threat credibility and foreign policy outcomes.

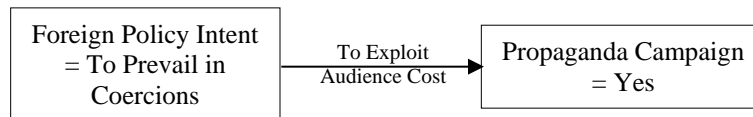
The above two logical steps are reflected in the following diagram in Figure 2.3.

Figure 2.3: Two Logical Steps of Audience Cost Theory



Publicity comes in the first step - the generation of audience cost. Only if a domestic audience is aware of and is concerned about an issue, can the public act upon this knowledge to punish leaders for backing down from a publicly-made threat. So public knowledge is a precondition for the ability of domestic audience to sanction leaders, and hence the existence of audience cost. Therefore, the audience cost theory would suggest that propaganda is used to generate audience cost in order to enhance threat credibility in coercions. In other words, it is a state’s foreign policy intention to prevail in coercions, through exploiting audience cost, that motivates the state to hike up the publicity of a dispute. The causal diagram in Figure 2.4 captures this logic.

Figure 2.4: Causal Diagram of the “Audience Cost” Argument



Therefore, propaganda campaigns can be regarded as a self-binding mechanism, leveraged

⁹⁴ Schultz 2001.

ultimately to force the foreign rival to back down. If a state's policy intention is to prevail in a coercion, it might intentionally constrain its choices to demonstrate its resolve by raising publicity of the dispute. But as some critiques of the audience cost theory go, leaders rarely push themselves into a corner and leave no leeway for backing down. Besides, audience cost has a rather limited scope – states have to be engaged in a foreign coercion.

If an audience cost logic is at work, we should observe the following hypotheses, some of which directly contradict those for the (mis)alignment theory.

Hc1 (Hoop Test about Scope): The propaganda campaign should be adopted during an ongoing coercion with the foreign rival. The audience cost theory is a theory about coercions. Without ongoing coercions, the audience cost theory becomes irrelevant. Negotiations are signs of an ongoing coercion but are not a necessary condition, as sometimes bringing a target state to the negotiation table itself could be a coercive goal. In most circumstances, I examine whether the state has made demands to the foreign rival.

Hc2 (Tying Hands): Officials make public threats with substantive punishment. The key of an audience cost logic is that the state makes a clear threat public so that backing down would be costly and less attractive. This, in turn, enhances the threat credibility and forces the opponent who fears a collision to back down. This contrasts Hb2 of the (mis)alignment theory in whether the harsh official rhetoric commits the state to a substantive punishment. If the state issues no public threat, or the threat the state issues is vague in terms and hollow in content, then the state is not committed to a domestic cost, and the propaganda is likely for the purpose of mobilizing or pacifying the domestic public, rather than for a foreign coercive purpose.

Hc3 (Bargaining Advantage): On average, given the occurrence of the propaganda campaign, the international outcome should be more favorable to the government. This is

borrowed and adapted from Weiss' work on anti-foreign protests. She reasons that "Once the government has tied its hands and demonstrated resolve by allowing anti-foreign protests, the burden of conciliation falls to the foreign government. On average, therefore, anti-foreign protests should lead to a more advantageous bargain for the authoritarian government."⁹⁵ She also points out that the actual outcome also depends on the strategic interactions with the other parties, so that negotiations may collapse, and crises may escalate. Propaganda campaigns, like anti-foreign protests, could also be a costly signal to show the state's resolve. So once engaged, the international outcome should be more favorable to the initiating state.

Hc4 (Motivation Disappears): Media coverage diminishes as the coercion succeeds or fails. The propaganda campaign should end when the coercion has succeeded or has failed, because that is when the coercive motivation disappears. This directly contradicts Ha4 and Hb5 of the (mis)alignment theory.

2. Diversionary War

Diversionary war theory stipulates that state leaders use international conflicts to divert public attention from domestic problems.⁹⁶ Further, invoking nationalism through hiking up international disputes might also help strengthen regime legitimacy at home – the so-called "rally around the flag" effect.⁹⁷

In summary, the diversionary war literature suggests four diversionary logics:

1. Scapegoating: divert public attention away from domestic problems by creating or magnifying external "enemies";

⁹⁵ Weiss 2008, 27.

⁹⁶ Russett 1990; Smith 1996; Stoll 1984.

⁹⁷ Levy and Vakili 1992.

2. Bolstering regime legitimacy: stoke nationalism and rally around the flag – strengthen domestic unity and regime legitimacy;
3. Rent-seeking: states as “monopoly supplier of protection,” create or exaggerate foreign threats to “sell” their protection to society;⁹⁸ and
4. Mass distraction: Leaders provoke external crises sometimes to “protect their legislative agendas or programs at home.”⁹⁹

The logic of the diversionary argument is summarized in Figure 2.5.

Figure 2.5: Causal Diagram of the Diversionary Argument



The limitation with this argument is that resorting to nationalism for regime legitimacy is a dangerous venture. For one, it increases the chance of unwanted conflicts that might eventually wear off the nationalist sentiments. The audience cost theory argues that diversions are too risky because they tie a government’s hands. Two, the anger of the mass might turn inward and backfire to threaten regime survival.¹⁰⁰ State leaders are aware of these risks. Existing literature on state-instigated nationalism has not reached a conclusion on why and when states would overcome such trade-offs and deliberately pursue such a risky policy. Managing nationalism within control is, after all, a delicate game. Besides, for authoritarian states where domestic stress is a constant concern and governing legitimacy is always a valued good given the non-

⁹⁸ Lake 1992.

⁹⁹ Christensen 1996; Downes 2009.

¹⁰⁰ Weiss 2013 and 2014.

democratic nature of the government, it remains a puzzle as why stoking nationalism through hiking up territorial disputes is not a constant effort. It also does not explain why states choose some disputes but not others to attract the public eye for regime consolidation purposes. Despite these shortcomings, diversionary war theory has often been used to explain authoritarian international behaviors because of its emphasis on domestic politics and regime survival at home, which are critical in understanding authoritarian foreign policy. So it deserves our attention here.

If the diversionary logic is at work, we should observe the following hypotheses, some of which directly contradict those for the (mis)alignment theory.

Hd1 (Hoop Test about Scope): States are more likely to adopt a propaganda campaign on a foreign dispute when they face severe domestic challenges. Because of the risks involved in inciting public anger, it is likely that states only resort to scapegoating and diversionary logics when they are faced with severe domestic challenges. These domestic challenges should be severe enough to cause legitimacy crisis at home that makes diversionary strategies appealing.

Hd2 (Motivation Disappears): Media coverage diminishes as the predominant domestic challenge, if any, subsides. Diversion is no longer needed when the motivating domestic challenge is alleviated. This directly contradicts Ha4 and Hb5 of the (mis)alignment theory and Hc4 of the audience cost theory.

3. The Audience Cost and Diversionary Logic in Relation to the (Mis)Alignment Theory

For comparison reasons, I put the audience cost and the diversionary logic in the framework of the state-public (mis)alignment theory. In relation to the proposed two conditions – existing public opinion and state foreign policy intent, the audience cost theory is the most relevant to the

scenarios in which state foreign policy is hardline. This is because coercion is more commonly associated with hardline policies – the threat, display, or use of force and economic sanctions, or escalated responses when provoked. So in scenarios I and III, the audience cost theory would predict propaganda campaigns if there is concurrent coercions. An archetypal scenario of audience cost is to have a hardline public opinion and a hardline state foreign policy intent, similar to the conditions in scenario III. If an audience cost logic is at work in scenario III, a state would publicize a dispute to a hardline domestic audience, and use that as a costly signal to foreign states to buttress threat credibility. Thus, in this scenario, the audience cost theory would predict the adoption of a propaganda campaign, whereas my theory would predict the opposite – the absence of a propaganda campaign. Coercions in moderate policy choices are more rare – territorial compromises would not require coercions; shelving a dispute might but rarely do; reactive and proportionate responses when provoked also might require coercions in order to deter or compel the aggressor to stand down. So in scenarios II and IV with moderate state policy intent, the state might still engage in coercions and hence adopt a propaganda campaign, but such scenarios are less common than the hardline state intent scenarios.

Diversionsary war is also more likely in the hardline state policy scenarios I and III. This is because a hardline foreign policy and its resulting escalation could more easily create a diversion. In scenario I, whereas in my theory the propaganda prepares the public for a hardline policy, in diversionsary war theory the propaganda diverts public attention. Although the predicted media discourse is the same, the motivating logic is different. Diversionsary is solely concerned with a domestic crisis or regime survival at home, while the (mis)alignment theory is about mobilizing the public to support the hardline policy. In scenario III, diversionsary war would predict the opposite outcome of my theory – a propaganda campaign for diversionsary

purposes, whereas my theory would predict none. In scenario II with a hardline public opinion and a moderate state policy intent, the state might utilize a diversionary rhetoric campaign to divert public attention but opts for a moderate policy later. The prediction is the same with the (mis)alignment theory, but for different logics – to divert or to pacify. When a moderate state is faced with a moderate/weak public opinion (scenario IV), diversion is less likely because the state would need to instigate the public through a diversionary rhetoric campaign. If the state has other easier options, such as other potential issues with existing hardline public opinion, the state could choose the other options to divert public attention than going through all the trouble to use this one.

Table 2.2 summarizes these alternative explanations in relation to the (mis)alignment theory.

Table 2.2: Alternative Hypotheses in Comparison

		State Foreign Policy Intent	
		Hardline	Moderate
Existing Public Opinion	Moderate /Weak	I. Div: PC to Divert AC: PC to Coerce Alignment: PC to Mobilize	IV. Div: PC Unlikely but Possible AC: PC Unlikely but Possible Alignment: No PC
	Hardline	III. Div: PC to Divert AC: PC to Coerce Alignment: No PC	II. Div: PC to Divert AC: PC Unlikely but Possible Alignment: PC to Pacify

(PC: Propaganda Campaigns; Div: Diversionary War; AC: Audience Cost; Alignment: (Mis)Alignment)

To evaluate these theories, I would need to assess the actual outcomes of the cases and see which theory’s predictions the case outcomes are consistent with. For scenario I and II where the predicted outcomes are the same, I would need to look into the causal logic of the cases and assess which theory is the motivating story.

VII. BRINGING THE THEORIES TOGETHER

The preceding sections have outlined the assumptions, the causal mechanisms, and the observable implications of the state-public (mis)alignment theory. I have also reviewed the alternative theories which do not directly address, but nevertheless have theoretical implications for, my empirical puzzle. I conclude this theoretical discussion by examining how these theories relate to each other. Table 2.3 summarizes their contrasting observable implications, which will be further assessed in the following empirical chapters, particularly in the process-tracing chapters.

Table 2.3: Contrasting Observable Implications

(Mis)Alignment – Mobilizing	(Mis)Alignment – Pacifying	Audience Cost	Diversionsary
Ha1 (State Concern): Government officials express concerns about the moderate/weak public opinion and the need to mobilize.			
Ha2 (Media Directives): The state issues media plans or directives to media outlets to mobilize the public.			
Ha3 (Inflammatory Content): Media content is inflammatory – self-victimizing, accusing others for aggression, or implying injustice.	Hb3 (Non-Inflammatory Content): Media content is informative and analytical, not inflammatory.		
Ha4 (Motivation Disappears): Media coverage diminishes as execution of a hardline policy comes to an end.	Hb5 (Motivation Disappears): Media coverage diminishes as a moderate policy is carried out.	Hc4 (Motivation Disappears): Media coverage diminishes as the coercion succeeds or fails.	Hd2 (Motivation Disappears): Media coverage diminishes as the predominant domestic challenge, if any, subsides.
	Hb1 (Nationalistic Criticisms): The state is exposed to nationalistic criticisms.		
	Hb2 (Bark but No Bite): Official statements are harsh, but without any substantive threats of punishment.	Hc2 (Tying Hands): Officials make public threats with substantive punishment.	
	Hb4 (Hoop Test for Venting Mechanism): Venting venues such as social media and online forums are open, and venting is allowed or even encouraged.		
		Hc1 (Hoop Test about Scope): The propaganda campaign should be adopted during an ongoing coercion with the foreign rival.	Hd1 (Hoop Test about Scope): States are more likely to adopt a propaganda campaign on a foreign dispute when they face severe domestic challenges.
		Hc3 (Bargaining Advantage): The international outcome should be more favorable to the government.	

Chapter 3: Research Design and the Chinese Propaganda System

The first part of this chapter describes a research design to test the (mis)alignment theory and the alternative explanations sketched out in Chapter 2. The second part reviews the background of the Chinese propaganda system. In the method section, I delineate the research scope, introduce the mixed methods used, describe and justify the case selections for each method, the data sources, and the measurements adopted for each variable. The background section provides a brief introduction to the Chinese propaganda system, tracing its development, summarizing its main features, decision processes, and control mechanisms, and comparing the Chinese system to other authoritarian systems.

I. Research Design

1. Case Selection and Method

The population of cases for this study is all diplomatic crises on territorial disputes since World War II that involve authoritarian states. For definition of “diplomatic crises,” I use Brecher (1979)’s definition of foreign policy crisis of a single state: “All three [criteria] are perceptions held by the highest-level decision-makers: (a) a threat to basic values, with a simultaneous or subsequent (b) high probability of involvement in military hostilities, and the awareness of (c) finite time for response to the external value threat.”¹⁰¹ I interpret “high probability of involvement in military hostilities” as an involvement of one or more Militarized Interstate Disputes (MIDs). “Militarized interstate disputes are united historical cases of conflict in which the threat, display or use of military force short of war by one member state is explicitly directed

¹⁰¹ Brecher 1979, 447. The selection of cases in this dissertation, however, are not based on the ICB data. This is because the ICB data stops at 2007 while many of the cases studied here took place after 2007; and the cases in this study are confined within territorial disputes but the ICB data include all international crises. For the ICB data, see <http://www.icb.umd.edu/dataviewer/>, accessed May 29, 2018.

towards the government, official representatives, official forces, property, or territory of another state.”¹⁰²

I also limit my scope to territorial disputes in which not the whole territory of a nation is at stake. In other words, this excludes the kind of disputes that challenges the very existence of a state, in which case willful compromise of the disputed territory is usually not a viable option. These cases are excluded because of the fundamental challenge the disputes are to the state survival, so different causal mechanisms might be at work from the classic interstate territorial disputes. This exclusion includes 1) homeland disputes where two or more governments occupying different parts of a formerly single country question the very existence of and seek to annex one another, such as North Korea and South Korea, Mainland China and Taiwan. These are essentially regime disputes, not territorial disputes; and 2) intrastate territorial disputes that occurs within a state when domestic groups seek secession from the mother state, such as Quebec in Canada, Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom.¹⁰³ But I include both land border and off-shore disputes, as the land features generally should not affect the propaganda strategies a state adopts.

I test my and the alternative theories in a sample of nineteen Chinese diplomatic crises with a medium-*n* congruence test and process tracing. These nineteen cases selected are all China’s diplomatic crises on all its territorial disputes. Six of China’s total eighteen territorial disputes experienced diplomatic crises. Only eleven of these nineteen crises experienced

¹⁰² Jones et al 1993, 163.

¹⁰³ For “disputes” in general, I adopt the definition from the Militarized Interstate Disputes (MIDs) dataset: “a ‘dispute’ refers to the engagement in argument, the call into question, or the contestation over one or more unresolved issues between two or more actors” (Jones et al, 168.) These actors must be “diplomatically recognized member states of the global system” (Small and Singer 1982, 39-50.) Disputes are not necessarily militarized, so are interstate territorial disputes. Militarization needs to involve the threat, display, or use of force. “Incidents” are militarized episodes of a dispute “that range in intensity from threats to use force to actual combat short of war” (Jones et al 1993, 163).

propaganda campaigns, so I have both the “1”s and the “0”s. Table 3.1 lists all these crises with the territorial dispute involved, the number of crises on each dispute and their years, and the number of propaganda campaign(s) each dispute incurred and their years.

Table 3.1: Six Disputes, Nineteen Crises, and Eleven Propaganda Campaigns

Disputes	Diplomatic Crises	Propaganda Campaigns
India, Border	Seven (1959, 1962, 1967, 1986, 2013, 2014, 2017)	Three (1959, 1962, 2017)
Soviet, Border	One (1969)	One (1969)
Vietnam, Border	One (1979-1991)	One (1979-1991)
Japan, Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands	Four (1978, 2005, 2010, 2012)	Three (2005, 2010, 2012)
Vietnam, South China Sea	Four (1974, 1988, 2011, 2014)	One (1974)
Philippines, South China Sea	Two (2012, 2016)	Two (2012, 2016)

I choose China for three reasons. First, because each propaganda campaign needs to be identified in the country’s own language, it is unfeasible for one single author, due to one person’s limited language ability, to identify all propaganda campaigns of all territorial disputes in the whole world. China offers a rare opportunity with a rich pool of diplomatic crises over a variety of territorial disputes. Being a country with the most borders in the world, China has involved in eighteen unique territorial disputes with eighteen neighboring countries since its foundation in 1949. Its disputes vary widely in topography, population, natural resource stocks, strategic endowments, historical legacies and dispute country.¹⁰⁴ Second, choosing one state has the advantage of holding constant the country-specific particularities such as history, economic development, culture, etc. Although China’s political system is unique in many ways, its control of media is representative of and emulated by other non-democracies. A second half of this chapter will detail the particularities and the commonness of China’s propaganda system. Third, as the country continues to rise, the Chinese management of the mass opinion of a 1.4-billion

¹⁰⁴ For a comprehensive study of all these territorial disputes, see Fravel 2008.

population in its foreign affairs is probably the most consequential to global security in the future.

In selecting the nineteen Chinese territorial crises, because of the territorial scope, I debated about whether to include two cases that the territorial dispute was only part of the crisis. One is the Sino-Japanese crisis in 2005. The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute was only a small part of the crisis. Besides the territorial dispute, the crisis originated from Japan's bid for the United Nations Security Council and also involved a dispute on Japanese history textbooks. So it was a mixture of various disputes. The other is the Sino-Vietnamese border war in 1979-1991. The border conflicts, although a major dispute amidst the war, was accompanied by a number of other issues such as Vietnam's mistreatment of ethnic Chinese, disagreement in policy towards the Soviet Union, etc. The ultimate decision to include these two cases was based on the very reason of why the study is confined within territorial disputes, that intangible values of these territories are salient and easy to manipulate by the state so that state media manipulations, if any, would be readily observable.

I adopt a medium-*n* research design appropriate to the sample size that incorporates the congruence method. The congruence method works by “ascertain[ing] the value of the independent variable in the case at hand” and “ask[ing] what prediction or expectation about the outcome of the dependent variable should follow from the theory.”¹⁰⁵ I then check the overall consistence between the predicted and the actual outcomes of the cases. The goal of the congruence test is not to provide definitive evidence for causality, because the relationship could be spurious even given overwhelming consistence. Rather, I use it as a plausibility probe to test the salience of the theory across time and space.

¹⁰⁵ George and Bennett 2005, 181.

Choosing one single country, nevertheless, does pose a potential challenge in that the cases might not be independent from each other, temporally or geographically. Temporally, it is possible that the independent variables – existing public opinion and state foreign policy intent in *one* crisis, are products of the dependent variable – state media behavior in a *previous* crisis. In other words, states “inherit” public opinion and foreign policy choices from an array of historical factors including past actions of their own – previous propaganda strategies. Take the Sino-Indian border dispute for example, as shown in Table 3.1, it incurred a total of seven crises, three of which provoked propaganda campaigns. So it is possible that the propaganda campaign in 1959 might affect the existing public opinion in the 1962 crisis. It is also possible that the independent variables or the dependent variable in one crisis are not independent from those same variables in previous crises. In other words, public opinion in previous crises might affect public opinion in subsequent crises; state foreign policy intent in previous crises might affect state foreign policy intent in subsequent crises; state propaganda strategies in previous crises might affect state propaganda strategies in subsequent crises. These possibilities could not be ruled out. This would be a problem if there is a “ratchet effect” in public opinion. But as already discussed in Chapter 2, given the public’s short attention span and the authoritarian state’s ability to deescalate, a possible “ratchet effect,” even if truly exist, is not unsurmountable.

Geographically, it is also possible that China’s dispute episodes with Vietnam in the South China Sea are not independent from those with the Philippines in the South China Sea, especially if these crises cluster around the same time. These would be problems if I were to conduct a large-*n* statistical analysis because of the assumption of independence in many statistical tests. But these should not be a problem to the medium-*n* design I have laid out above as I am not claiming an average effect. Notwithstanding, the path dependence and interrelatedness between the cases do

deserve extra caution in their actual evaluations and special attention to the sequence of events. The temporal setup of the theory also helps ease this tension because in each single crisis, *existing* public opinion and state foreign policy *intent* at the beginning of a crisis naturally occur *before*, so are *exogenous* to a state media strategy that follows.

This potential challenge also stresses the importance of paying attention to the sequence of events which calls for the method of process tracing. After the medium-*n* congruence test, I process-trace four of the nineteen cases, to assess the causal logic of the theory. A detailed tracing of events can demonstrate whether it is the proposed causal mechanisms, rather than the alternative mechanisms, that are at work. My strategy of case selection for the process-tracing is to choose the most similar cases that cover all four scenarios of my theory, so that my independent variables vary. In Table 3.2, I place all nineteen cases in Table 2.1 according to their values on the independent variables. These cases are all unique in their own ways, but a consideration of similar dyads and similar time frames yields the selection of these four: the Sino-Vietnamese border war during 1979-1991, the Sino-Philippine arbitration case on the South China Sea in 2016, the Sino-Vietnamese cable-cutting incidents in the South China Sea in 2011, and the Sino-Vietnamese oil rig crisis in 2014.

These four cases, three between China and Vietnam and one between China and the Philippines, three that occurred in the 2010s and one in 1980s, are far from being perfectly similar, but they are the most similar available. India, Japan, and the Soviet Union all have very unique historical relationships with China. Vietnam and the Philippines are the most similar countries in my options and have cases that cover all four boxes of the table. The Sino-Vietnamese clash in the Spratlys in 1988 could be another choice, but it is also unique in that it broke out in the middle of a war between the same two countries. Hence the bolded four cases in

Table 3.2 are chosen. By controlling the country-dyad and time particularities, the result should strengthen our belief in the explanatory power of the theory. In process-tracing these four cases, the observable implications drawn from my and the alternative theories listed in Chapter 2 will be evaluated respectively.

Table 3.2: Nineteen Chinese Diplomatic Crises Placed in My Theoretical Framework
(The cases for process tracing are bolded)

		State Policy Intent	
		Hardline	Moderate
Existing Public Opinion	Moderate /Weak	Sino-Indian Border 1962 Sino-Soviet Border 1969 Sino-Vietnamese Paracels 1974 <i>Sino-Vietnamese Border 1979-1991</i> Sino-Vietnamese Spratlys 1988	Sino-Indian Border 1959, 1967, 1986, 2013 and 2014 Sino-Japanese Diaoyu/Senkaku 1978 <i>Sino-Vietnamese Oil Rig Crisis 2014</i>
	Hardline	Sino-Japanese Diaoyu/Senkaku 2010 <i>Sino-Vietnamese Cable-Cuttings 2011</i> Sino-Philippines Scarborough Shoal 2012	Sino-Japanese Various Dispute 2005 Sino-Japanese Diaoyu/Senkaku 2012 <i>Sino-Philippines Arbitration 2016</i> Sino-Indian Border 2017

2. Primary Data Sources

The primary data for this study come from nine collections of Chinese and Vietnamese archives and fifty-seven semi-structured interviews I conducted in China. I visited the archives at the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Centre for China Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the library of the School of International Studies at Peking University, the Center for Cold War International History Studies at East China Normal University, municipal archives of Pingxiang, Guangxi Province and of Wenshan, Yunnan Province of China, the No. 3 National Archives of Vietnam in Hanoi, the National Library of Vietnam, and the No. 2 National Archives of Vietnam in Ho Chi Minh City. The archives include declassified government documents (internal communications and minutes of closed-door meetings) and leaders' personal memoirs/diaries. I also rely on the personal collections of a couple of historians.¹⁰⁶ These

¹⁰⁶ I thank Professor Shen Zhihua and Professor Kosal Path in sharing materials.

collections are particularly valuable as they once were but are no longer accessible in some of the above archives. Additionally, I also visited the Carter Library and the United Nations Archives for materials on the Sino-Vietnamese border war case.

I also conducted fifty-seven semi-structured interviews in China in May and June 2017, with individuals who were directly involved in the state policy-making or policy-execution in the four process-tracing cases and a few other crises in the nineteen congruence test cases.¹⁰⁷ These include seven former government officials, forty journalists and editors (covering all major Chinese news outlets), and ten scholars.

For officials, I asked about the general procedures of media-policy making on foreign disputes, especially during times of crises. I asked their specific experience in the crises under study – including the role of his/her organization, his/her responsibilities, what transpired on the policy side during the crisis. I then ask about their experience in the lens of the alignment and the alternative theories – affirming the values of the independent and the dependent variables and testing the salience of the causal logic. For example, I asked about the target audience, the motivations, and the goals of a propaganda campaign if any, or the reasons for their absence; how was such a campaign implemented and whether they thought the goals were achieved; when did the campaign end and why did it end; how they perceived public opinion and whether it was a concern; whether there was ongoing coercion and whether the state initiated a campaign with the motivation of gaining leverage in the foreign coercion; whether there were other domestic concerns that the state wanted to divert the public attention away from.

For journalists and editors, I focused more on the execution of the media policy: what policy guidance they had received; how it changed over time as the crisis developed; how they

¹⁰⁷ IRB Reference No.: 2017-0197-00, Institutional Review Board for the Social and Behavioral Sciences, University of Virginia.

implemented the policy; if they were sent to the dispute site, what they saw and what were they expected to report and not to report; were they given a quota to write; were there special considerations in terms of what angle to take, what sources to use, what location or time to place the news, etc. I also asked about their professional impressions of the public opinion. The interview questions to government officials, journalists, and editors are listed in Appendix II.

For scholars who were involved in the policy making, I asked similar questions to the officials. But since these scholars were involved mostly in the foreign policy making rather than media policy making, my questions to them focused on interpreting the state foreign policy intentions and how it changed over time if it did. I also asked whether and how media policy was part of the internal policy deliberation and what functions are they supposed to play.

These primary sources are probably the closest to offering smoking gun evidence. They are particularly useful for affirming/disaffirming the values of the proposed conditions – public opinion and state foreign policy intent. They are also critical in validating/invalidating the theory's causal logic. They do this by demonstrating the internal deliberations on leaders' foreign policy intent and their perception of public opinion, as well as by shedding light on the state's inner thinking on media strategies of foreign disputes.

The archival and interview source, however, is not always available for all cases. For example, archives are limited to the older cases and interviews are limited to the researcher's personal connections. I supplement these with secondary sources, such as surveys and historical accounts, to be described in detail in the next section. Besides, when archives and interviews are available, situations maybe complicated as different sources might represent distinct organizational and personal interests and perspectives, and they might therefore contradict each other. This is why in the process of my archival research and interviews, I followed a rule of

agreement. That is, I should continue to seek alternative and diverse sources on any one variable in any one case I am trying to code until I can find overwhelming agreement among the majority of sources available. In other words, if I find sources that contradict each other, I should keep looking for alternative sources until I find a majority agreement. For example, when I found multiple interviews to people with diverse backgrounds largely repetitive of previous interviews I had conducted, I knew I had satisfied the rule of agreement.

There were rarely cases where no agreement emerged from the interviews. The only exception is on the state policy intent in the more recent cases. For example, on China's decision to place the oil rig in the disputed area in 2014 that had provoked the crisis, interviews disagreed on whether the top leadership was directly involved. As information like this is extremely sensitive, the lack of information has spawned many speculations even with interviewees who claim to have various "access" to the central decision body. Given this disagreement, it is, therefore, hard to make a definitive judgement. But the consensus is that the decision was not well-informed and most possibly a miscalculation. This is enough to conclude that the initial Chinese provocation was not deliberate and probably erroneous. All in all, disagreements are rare and limited on the state intent in the more recent cases; even when there are disagreements, the disagreements are mostly on the details, so they are not substantial obstacles in making an overall judgement on the state intent.

The political sensitivity on the subject matter put significant constraints to the archives and the interviewees I was able to access. The timing of the interviews taking place in the summer of 2017 was also associated with political tightening under the Xi Jinping administration and ahead of the 19th Party Congress in October 2017. In Vietnam, for example, many of the archives I requested were not granted permission for access as long as they contain the word

“border dispute.” The Chinese Foreign Ministry’s archives were reopened in 2017 after several years’ closing off to the public, but I found that many previously declassified documents were reclassified. So in this regard, working with historians and accessing to their personal collections were critical to the success of this project, especially to the one historical case in Chapter 5. Many people also turned away my invitation for interview because of the political sensitivity. Benefiting from having lived and worked in China for over two decades, I relied heavily on my personal network and had rare access in the field.

3. Measurements and Coding Rules

Table 3.3 lists the measurements of the variables in the congruence test and the process tracing, with the coding rules, observables and data sources for each variable. Treating official media as a proxy, I measure the dependent variable – the adoption/non-adoption of propaganda campaigns, mainly by conducting content analysis of China’s most authoritative official newspaper, *People’s Daily*. *People’s Daily* represents the mainstream official line – other media rarely stray away from it. As one of the most long-standing state media outlets – in existence since as early as 1946, it offers a relatively time-consistent measurement of state media behavior in China. According to interviews with retired editors who have decades of experience working in China’s state media system, *People’s Daily* is one of the few official media that have stayed relatively static over time in terms of style and influence.¹⁰⁸ China Central Television (CCTV) News transcripts offer another measurement. Compared to *People’s Daily* which are read primarily by party cadres, CCTV reaches the masses. But CCTV News only exists since 2003. Besides, it rarely covers China’s foreign disputes. When it does, it mostly just copies Ministry of Foreign

¹⁰⁸ Interview 4, May 19, 2017, Washington DC; Interview 5, May 19, 2017, Washington DC; Interview 7, May 22, Washington DC.

Table 3.3: Measurements of the Dependent and the Independent Variables

Variables	Definition/Coding Rules	Data Sources and Observables
DV: Adoption/Non-Adoption of Propaganda Campaigns	Government-orchestrated, concerted efforts to attract public attention to a dispute by the use of mass media	Content analysis of <i>People's Daily</i> : a propaganda campaign is identified only when these conditions are met: 1) Minimum coverage requirement: TWO front-page and TEN any-page articles a month, and 2) Continuous requirement: if a campaign lasts longer than a month, newspaper coverage needs to meet the minimum coverage requirement each month continuously, although ONE month' lapse is allowed.
IV ₁ : State Policy Intent (Hardline or Moderate)	Hardline: unprovoked threat, display, or use of force or economic sanctions; when provoked, escalated responses Moderate: territorial compromise; shelving a dispute (deferring settlement); passive and proportionate responses to provocations	1) Archives and Interviews: records of internal deliberations; recollections by officials and analysts with privileged access; 2) Logical deduction from international and domestic factors about state incentives to pursue a hardline or moderate policy; 3) Secondary sources: accounts of the actual policy pursued.
IV ₂ : Existing Public Opinion (Hardline or Moderate/Weak)	Whether the public favors a hardline or a moderate policy <i>before</i> the state responds to a crisis situation. Public opinion is coded as "weak" if the public does not know or care strongly about the dispute	1) Interviews and Archives: state officials' perception about public opinion prior to or at the beginning of a crisis; 2) Surveys taken prior to or at the beginning of a crisis: thermometer towards the target country; 3) Baidu Search Index: average daily search volume during the one-year pre-crisis period; 4) Spontaneous anti-foreign protests prior to or at the beginning of a crisis; 5) Social media: expression of public emotion prior to or at the beginning of a crisis; 6) Interviews with journalists and editors: professional observation of public opinion prior to or at the beginning of a crisis; 7) Secondary sources: historical accounts of public opinion prior to or at the beginning of a crisis.

Affairs (MoFA) statements or *People's Daily* editorials. Therefore, I resort to CCTV news transcripts only as a supplementary measure for the more recent cases.

For this purpose, I hand-collected all *People's Daily* articles between 1949 and 2017 that are directly on the subject of the six territorial disputes, covering all nineteen diplomatic crises. An article needs to have a dispute as the first main subject to be included in the dataset. Take a news report about leaders meeting, for example, the dispute in question needs to be the main issue discussed by the leaders. The article will be filtered out if it only mentions the dispute in passing. By this criterion, I manually filtered out all non-relevant and not-directly-relevant articles, and ended up with 7,334 articles on the border dispute with Vietnam, 626 articles on the border dispute with the Soviet Union, 1,723 articles on the border dispute with India, 1,294 articles on the maritime dispute with Vietnam, 1,150 articles on the maritime dispute with the Philippines, and 1,037 articles on the maritime dispute with Japan.

The monthly numbers of front-page articles and those of all articles are then tallied along six timelines. A propaganda campaign is identified only when the monthly number of front-page articles exceeds two and the monthly number of all relevant articles exceeds ten. Although these numbers are arbitrary, they were suggested by Chinese editors who had worked for decades in the propaganda system and were agreed by all journalists interviewed to be reasonable. The campaign continues until those numbers drop below the standards, although one month's lapse is allowed to account for special occasions, such as holidays, and distracting random events, such as natural disasters.

Many propaganda campaigns are so prominent that are hard to miss by anyone. These include, for example, the ones during the Sino-Indian border war in 1962, the Sino-Vietnamese border war in 1979-1990, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute in 2012, and the Sino-Philippines

arbitration case in 2016. These campaigns easily pass the quantitative qualifiers and are indisputable. However, the operational boundary between propaganda campaigns and normal media coverage are not always clear-cut. Propaganda campaigns and their dissimilar twin censorship should be considered as two extremes on a spectrum, with normal coverage in-between, rather than two distinct categories. This fuzziness in the conceptual boundary between propaganda campaigns and normal media coverage has created a challenge for accurate measurement and tensions with the arbitrary quantitative cutoffs described above.

To mitigate this challenge, I identify the borderline cases generated by the arbitrary quantitative cutoffs and examine them with further evidence including other state media coverage, leaked policy directives if available, and opinions of area specialists. The four borderline cases by the quantitative standards are: the 1988 Sino-Vietnamese Clash in the Spratlys, the 2010 Sino-Japanese Boat Incident near Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, the 2012 Sino-Philippines Scarborough Shoal Standoff, and the 2014 Sino-Vietnamese Oil Rig Standoff. The 1988 Sino-Vietnamese Clash in the Spratlys had sheer salience but no volume; the other three borderline cases only had volume but little salience. Further investigations conclude that the 1988 and the 2014 Sino-Vietnamese cases did not incur propaganda campaigns; the other two involved some state publicization efforts but with reservations, so were ambiguous. Chapter 4 will examine in more detail three of these borderline cases. Chapter 7 will look into the Sino-Vietnamese oil rig crisis. But the bottom line here is that three of the four borderline cases based on these quantitative criteria are deviant cases, so the results of the congruence test would not be negatively impacted if the cutoffs were moved up or down – they might show even more consistence.

Both the number of front-page articles and that of all relevant articles are important measurements for the scale of the propaganda, because when a state means to propagandize, it attracts public attention by both the salience of the message and the volume of reporting. Front-page articles are important because it indicates a high priority the official newspaper, and hence the state, gives to the dispute. If we see a significant number of articles appearing elsewhere in *People's Daily* but never on the front page, it could very likely be event driven – meaning the state is only passively responding to provocative events. Because the public will likely hear about the events from other sources, not responding at all would be inappropriate, so the state chooses to merely allow, but not encourage, media coverage, thus in essence not propagandizing the issue. The number of all relevant articles is also important because the volume itself indicates the state's willingness to raise public attention. If it is solely a number of front-page articles without a great number of all relevant articles, it means that the state takes the issue seriously (a hardline stand), but it does not intend to propagandize it.

Table 3.4 presents the summary statistics of the propaganda campaigns or the absence thereof on all nineteen cases. I catalog the start, the end dates and the duration of the propaganda campaigns, if a campaign is adopted, or the state, the end dates and the duration of a crisis, if a campaign is not present; the number of front-page articles and that of all relevant articles during each campaign, as well as their monthly averages.

When these quantitative measurements generate borderline results, which concerns four of the nineteen cases, I resort to qualitative measures of a mixture of sources,

I measure the first independent variable – a state's foreign policy intent, by 1) looking into the state policy deliberations in archives and interviews, 2) deducing logically from international and domestic factors on whether a hardline or a moderate policy would be

Table 3.4: Summary Statistics of Media Coverage on China's Nineteen Diplomatic Crises
(PC: Propaganda Campaign. Propaganda campaigns are bolded; ambiguous cases are in italic.)

#	Year	Case	PC Start Date ¹	PC End Date	Duration (Days)	No. of Front-Page Articles	No. of All-Relevant Articles	Average No. of Front-Page Articles/Month	Average No. of All-Relevant Articles/Month
1	1959	Sino-Indian Border Skirmish at Longju and Kongka Pass	9/10/1959	11/27/1959	77	17	91	6.6	35.5
2	1962	Sino-Indian Border War	6/1/1962	12/31/1963	570	346	1034	18.2	54.4
3	1967	Sino-Indian Border Clashes at Nathu La and Cho La	9/13/1967	9/26/1967	13	0	7	0.0	16
4	1969	Sino-Soviet Border Conflict	3/3/1969	9/21/1969	198	56	445	2.8	2.2
5	1974	Sino-Vietnamese Clash in the Paracels	1/12/1974	2/18/1974	36	7	12	5.8	10
6	1978	Fishing Boat Incident near Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands	4/12/1978	5/11/1978	29	N/A ²	N/A	N/A	N/A
7	1979	Sino-Vietnamese Border War	11/5/1978	3/31/1990	4164	579	7195	4.2	51.8
8	1986	Sino-Indian Border Standoff at Sumdorong Chu	5/1986	8/1987	457	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
9	1988	Sino-Vietnamese Clash in the Spratlys	2/23/1988	4/28/1988	65	7	10	3.2	4.6
10	2005	Japanese History Textbook, Diaoyu/Senkaku, and Japan's Bid for the UNSC	4/1/2005	6/1/2005	61	13	163	6.4	80.2
11	<i>2010</i>	<i>Sino-Japanese Boat Incident near Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands</i>	<i>9/9/2010</i>	<i>11/6/2010</i>	<i>57</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>1.1</i>	<i>16.3</i>
12	2011	Sino-Vietnamese Cable-Cutting Incidents in the South China Sea	5/26/2011	6/26/2011	31	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
13	2012	<i>Sino-Philippines Scarborough Shoal Standoff</i>	4/12/2012	6/4/2012	53	1	64	0.6	36.2
14	2012	Japanese Nationalization of Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands	9/3/2012	10/31/2012	58	25	137	12.9	70.9
15	2013	Sino-Indian Border Standoff at Ladakh	4/15/2013	5/5/2013	20	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
16	2014	Sino-Vietnamese Oil Rig Standoff	5/2/2014	7/17/2014	74	0	36	0.0	14.6
17	2014	Sino-Indian Border Standoff at Ladakh	8/18/2014	10/1/2014	44	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
18	2016	Sino-Philippines South China Sea Arbitration	6/1/2016	8/1/2016	61	9	206	4.4	101.3
19	2017	Sino-Indian Border Standoff at Doklam	6/27/2017	8/4/2017	38	2	17	1.6	13.4

¹ If there is no PC, then dates mark the beginning and the end of a potential PC or of the crisis.

² "N/A" means that the numbers of articles are so small that they are negligible.

favorable, given the government's goals are regime survival at home and state security abroad, and 3) looking at what policy the state ended up pursuing. Because of their respective limitations, these three sources/observable implications should corroborate each other. In the rare cases they contradict each other, they are weighted according to the sequence they are listed above. I do not measure a state's policy intent by publicly-expressed intentions. This is because given states' incentives to misrepresent, states rarely convey their real intentions to their opponents. Even if they do, their credibility is almost always in doubt.¹⁰⁹

State foreign policy intentions could also be deduced logically from a constellation of international and domestic factors. If these factors undoubtedly point to a favorable hardline or moderate policy, then assuming the rationality of the actors should lead to the conclusion that they would pursue a favorable policy to the nation and the regime itself.

Lastly, the actual policy that a state ended up pursuing is also indicative of the state policy intentions. Actions are usually reflective of intentions unless actions are unscrutinized or miscalculated. If that is the case, subsequent actions would then reveal a state's real intentions.

I measure the other independent variable – existing public opinion, by a range of indicators listed below. In adjudicating contradictory sources, they are weighted according to the sequence they are listed. Recall that public opinion has three dimensions – public knowledge, sentiment, and policy orientation. Policy orientation can be hardline or moderate. If either public knowledge or sentiment is weak, then public opinion is considered weak. To control for the temporal setup of the theory and to preclude reversed causality, public opinion has to be “existing,” so that these measures have to be taken prior to, or at the beginning of a crisis, so essentially *before* a state responds to a crisis. These measurements are: 1) Interviews and

¹⁰⁹ James D. Fearon, “Rationalist explanations for war,” *International organization*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (1995): 379-414.

Archives: state officials' perception about public opinion; 2) Surveys: thermometer towards the target country; 3) Baidu Search Index (BSI): average daily search volume; 4) Spontaneous anti-foreign protests; 5) Social media: expression of public emotion; 6) Interviews with journalists and editors: professional observation of public opinion; 7) Secondary sources: historical accounts of public opinion, with all measurements taken prior to or at the beginning of a crisis.

Public opinion surveys that are taken right before or at the beginning of a crisis could be used to evaluate existing public opinion. For this purpose, I rely mainly on the Beijing Area Study (BAS) and occasionally on the Pew Research Center Global Attitudes and Trends Datasets.¹¹⁰ These surveys usually carry data on thermometer towards the target country. A substantially low country thermometer towards the target country can indicate a strong emotion and a hardline policy orientation.

The Baidu Search Index (BSI), an analytic tool that tracks the daily search activity on given keywords on China's most dominant search engine, offers a useful measurement for the level of public attention in China, but only for cases after the BSI was launched in 2011. If the average search volume of the key word of the name of the dispute during the one-year pre-crisis period is substantially lower than the all-time average,¹¹¹ then public opinion should be considered weak. Besides BSI, a few published studies on social media trends by private companies and research institutes are useful on some of the more recent cases. Among these, I find the *South China Sea Public Opinion Newsletter* published by the Collaborative Innovation

¹¹⁰ I thank Professor Iain Johnston for sharing the BAS data. For the Pew Research Center Global Attitudes and Trends Datasets, see <http://www.pewglobal.org/datasets/>.

¹¹¹ "All-time" is calculated from January 1, 2011, when BSI data became available, to October 25, 2017, when this research was conducted.

Center of South China Sea Studies at Nanjing University comprehensive and consistently objective.¹¹²

Large-scale and widespread anti-foreign protests and conspicuous surges of nationalistic social media posts across a variety of social media platforms are indicators of a strong and hardline public opinion. But further investigations into the sources of these protests and social media surges are needed to exclude possible government instigation. This could be done relatively easy by interviewing citizens and journalists who participated or observed the protests and the social media surges. Besides, if the protests or the social media posts expressed dissatisfaction towards the government, that could be an indicator of genuine public opinion as well. Public opinion perceived by government officials, media editors, or recorded by historical accounts could be measuring any of the three public opinion dimensions.

In measuring “thick” concepts such as state foreign policy intent and public opinion, I face significant challenges. First, the hardline/moderate dichotomy of state policy intent is a mere simplification of the reality. A state’s foreign policy is usually a mixture of both elements or a point on a spectrum rather than one of two categories. I try to overcome this challenge by having clear definitions of each category and leveraging on internal documents and interviews with people in the “inner circles.” The more detailed case studies in Chapter 5-7 do offer more nuances than the congruence test in Chapter 4, so we should not read too much into specific values of the variables in the congruence test. The congruence test only offers a broad picture of the overall consistence. Second, most of the evidence are not available for all of the cases especially on the public opinion variable, so there is not a consistent measurement that are comparable across the cases. Fortunately, many of the historical cases are easy to make

¹¹² See <https://nanhai.nju.edu.cn/nhyqjb/list.htm>.

judgements of, as the public knowledge of these disputes were low, and there are more data available on the more recent cases and most of them do not contradict, but rather reinforce, each other. All in all, although far from ideal, the rubrics listed in Table 3.3 and elaborated here are efforts to make the measurements of these variables more objective, transparent, and replicable than traditional qualitative studies. As more documents become available in the future, these tests should be reevaluated for accuracy.

II. The Chinese Context

This section provides an overview of the Chinese propaganda system in terms of its development, main features and comparison to other autocratic regimes. This overview is necessary as it provides an important background to the empirical tests that are to follow. It also helps us estimate the extent to which the theory tested in a Chinese setting would apply to other authoritarian states.

1. Development

The Chinese media control has evolved tremendously over the seven decades the nineteen Chinese crises span. The most prominent changes are the commercialization of the Chinese media and the rise of the Internet. The state control over media became diffused and more sophisticated in the process. But whether this diffusion means a weakened or a strengthened control is still of debate. Partly due to its own cultivation, the Chinese government is also faced with a stronger popular nationalism, which enriches the variation among these cases. But what has not changed over time is the general rationale to publicize or not publicize an interstate dispute.

In the Mao Zedong era, propaganda was the hallmark of the central political control. As early as the revolutionary era, Mao regarded propaganda as the “first most important task of the Red Army.”¹¹³ Mao learned much of the organizational structure and control techniques from the Soviet and the Nazi governments.¹¹⁴ The main pillar of the Maoist “thought work” (sixiang gongzuo) was indoctrination and mass persuasion. The media, all under the tight control of the central government, was regarded as the “throat and tongue” of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Despite the limited reach of the traditional media due to the technological constraints of the time, the Chinese government had a variety of other “thought control” channels and techniques that reached far and deep into the Chinese public. These channels and techniques included community- and village-based ideological study groups, loudspeaker systems in almost every village, pamphlets, the deployment of traveling propaganda teams (xuanchuan dui), “thought reform” (sixiang gaizao) or brainwashing in prisons, creating and promoting “models” or exemplars to be emulated, as well as spreading documents and slogans to be memorized.¹¹⁵

The Chinese propaganda system had completed its transition by the end of the twentieth century from a totalitarian system with “thought control” to a new authoritarian one with soft “guiding” and “channeling” of public opinion.¹¹⁶ Although these two systems differ in style and specific means, they are not quite different in terms of control of public opinion; and whether the degree of control has strengthened or weakened is still being debated.

¹¹³ Party Documents Research Office of the CPC Central Committee (Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiu shi) 1993, 96.

¹¹⁴ For comprehensive studies of the propaganda systems and techniques of the Third Reich, see Welch 1993. For studies of the Soviet propaganda, see Ebon 1987; Inkeles 1950; Kenez 1985.

¹¹⁵ See studies of the Maoist propaganda techniques, see, for example, Chang 1997; Houn 1961; Lifton 1961; Liu 1971; Schoenhals 1992; Schurmann 1971; Whyte 1974; Yu 1964.

¹¹⁶ Maria Repnikova summarizes Maoist media control to have the features of “more uniformity of political discourse, deployment of violence and explicit top-down directives,” whereas the new authoritarian media control is “somewhat flexible.” See Repnikova and Fang 2018, 2.

Amidst this transition, the first change came in the late 1970s as China geared towards reform and open during Deng Xiaoping's era. The Chinese media experienced marketization and privatization.¹¹⁷ Media outlets were privatized to various degree. Although the state retained a fast grip to the official media and maintained the majority shares in them, many others to a large degree had to change their mindsets about funding and profitability. Besides political motivations, economic incentives started to play a larger role in reporting decisions. Besides adhering to the state lines to ensure their political survival, newspapers now have to write stories that sell to ensure their economic survival.

Subsequently, the advance of information technology brought the second change – the rise of the Internet and the spread of social media, such as micro-blogging. Since China was first connected to the Internet in 1995, the number of Internet users skyrocketed from 111 million (8.5 percent of the population) in 2005 to 731 million (53.2 percent of the population) in 2016, now constituting 20 percent of the internet users worldwide.¹¹⁸ Concomitantly, strong popular nationalism began to surface in the 1990s, with the publication of the best-selling book titled “China Can Say No” in 1995 as a symbolic benchmark. This trend was manifested in the mushrooming of nationalist online forums, such as “qiangguo luntan” (Strong China Forum) managed by *People's Daily*, and “Tiexue” (Iron Blood), the emergence of vocal PLA generals,¹¹⁹ and the more and more frequent anti-foreign protests during times of diplomatic crises.¹²⁰

These changes posed both challenges and opportunities to the Chinese propaganda system. On one hand, some scholars argue for their erosive effects on the state control over the

¹¹⁷ Stockmann 2013.

¹¹⁸ Calculated on data from the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC).

¹¹⁹ Chubb 2013.

¹²⁰ Weiss 2008, 2013 and 2014.

media and the society. Lynch contends that the administrative fragmentation, property-rights reform, and technological advance have reduced the Party's control over the traditional "thought work."¹²¹ Taubman points out that "the scope and ease of obtaining information on the Web," "the communication capabilities available to users," and "the decentralized nature of the Internet" pose challenges to the non-democratic rule.¹²² Yang's work delineates the strong activism and creative protest forms nurtured by the Chinese cyberspace.¹²³ But all these scholars recognize that the Chinese state still retains the ultimate control of the media and public opinion.

On the other, Chinese propagandists have quickly adapted to the new environment and upgraded their game. The new challenges have apparently propelled the transition and the adaptation of the Chinese propaganda system, which Min Jiang coined as the "coevolution of the internet, (un)civil society and authoritarianism."¹²⁴ With the spread of the Internet came the creation of the "great firewall," as well as a number of legal, organizational, and personnel support that came with it. These supports include, for example, the real name registration policy implemented in 2016 as part of the Cybersecurity Law, the establishment of the Cyberspace Administration of China (guojia hulianwang xinxi bangongshi) and the Central Leading Group for Internet Security and Informatization (zhongyang wangluo anquan he xinxihua lingdao xiaozu), as well as the recruitment of an army of state-funded nationalist trolls, the so-called 50 cent party.¹²⁵ The Xi Jinping government also reconfigured the institutional framework to govern the Internet, placing digital technologies at the heart of its propaganda work and created a more centralized and streamlined control process.¹²⁶

¹²¹ Lynch 1999.

¹²² Taubman 1998.

¹²³ Yang 2009.

¹²⁴ Jiang 2016.

¹²⁵ For studies on the 50-cent party, see, for example, Han 2015; King et al. 2017; Miller 2016.

¹²⁶ Creemers 2017.

The state strategy also became more sophisticated. In the aftermath of the Tiananmen crackdown, Chinese President Jiang Zemin introduced the “guidance of public opinion” (yulun daoxiang), emphasizing the “soft” approach of directing public opinion rather than the traditional forceful approach of indoctrination.¹²⁷ President Hu Jintao refined this soft approach further to the “channeling of public opinion” (yulun yindao). On January 23, 2007, Hu first brought up the term when addressing to CCP Politburo members. He said “[we should] grasp the online discourse power, enhance our ability to channel online discussions, emphasize the art of ‘channeling,’ actively leverage new technologies, increase positive coverage, and promote a positive mainstream discourse.”¹²⁸ In a speech addressing delegates participating the National Propaganda Thought Work Meeting (quanguo xuanchuan sixiang gongzuo huiyi) in 2008, Hu again used the term “enhance our ability to channel public opinion.”¹²⁹ When Hu visited the Strong China Forum at *People’s Daily* in June 2008, he fleshed out the idea to full scale. He said “[We should] strengthen our traditional media and new media and form a new setting for channeling public opinion...”¹³⁰ Borrowing from the wisdom of the legendary leader Yu the Great in taming the floods by effective “channeling” rather than mere obstruction, “channeling public opinion” stresses the need to leverage the market force and the Internet to “draw public sentiments in useful directions,” rather than simple censorship and oppression.¹³¹ “Channeling is less focused on suppressing negative news coverage and more concerned with spinning news in a direction favorable to the leadership.”¹³² The deployment of a gargantuan 50 cent army is only

¹²⁷ Xu 2004. Xu was then Vice Minister of the Central Propaganda Department and head of the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT).

¹²⁸ For full-text of the speech, see <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64093/64094/5324268.html>, accessed February 22, 2018.

¹²⁹ Full speech available at <http://www.hbnu.edu.cn/sqjhz/hjt2.htm>, accessed February 22, 2018.

¹³⁰ Available at <http://tv.people.com.cn/GB/28140/141316/index.html>, accessed February 22, 2018.

¹³¹ Bandurski 2015; Chubb 2016, 269.

¹³² Bandurski 2010.

one step among many towards forming that “new setting for channeling public opinion,” through inundating the Internet with positive, state-fabricated messages.

Eyeing these changes, some scholars, in contrast to the first group of scholars who saw the erosive and liberating power of the market and the Internet to the state monopoly of media and public opinion, argue for a strengthened state control. Brady contends that the Chinese propaganda machine has reinvented itself and strengthened its hold to the Chinese society not despite, but because of its marketization and globalization.¹³³ Stockmann argues that the effect of marketization depends on the institution design of the state. In the case of China and many other authoritarian states, marketization sustains, rather than destabilizes, authoritarianism.¹³⁴ Stockmann and Gallagher delineate how the marketized Chinese media as reinvented propaganda outlets has boosted citizens’ trust in the authoritarian legal system to resolve grievances rather than resorting to protests.¹³⁵ Esarey shows that in the case of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003, the state utilizes the commercial incentives of media to encourage them to produce content that are popular but politically acceptable.¹³⁶ Mackinnon demonstrates how China has utilized the “networked authoritarianism” to bolster its regime legitimacy.¹³⁷ By tracing the physical network infrastructure control, the content control, and foreign influence on the network in China, Harwit and Clark prove that the state is the unmistakable powerful hand shaping the Internet in China.¹³⁸ Morozov further confirms the repressive nature of the Internet in China and Iran and breaks the delusion that the Internet is necessarily liberating.¹³⁹

¹³³ Brady 2008. A similar argument is made in Brady and Wang 2009.

¹³⁴ Stockmann 2013.

¹³⁵ Stockmann and Gallagher 2011.

¹³⁶ Esarey 2005.

¹³⁷ Mackinnon 2011.

¹³⁸ Harwit and Clark 2001.

¹³⁹ Morozov 2012.

In the realm of foreign policy, these developments in the Chinese propaganda system have mixed effects. Diversification of information sources makes it harder, if not impossible, for the government to hide a dispute entirely, but the state has a legion of resources and means to play it down, or to direct public opinion towards useful ways. The rise of the Internet also resulted in broader public engagement in foreign policy. Together with the stronger nationalist sentiment in the public, these changes put more constraints to decision-making in foreign policy. But that does not mean that the state is necessarily constrained, as with the explosion of new technologies, the state is also equipped with newly founded power to overcome these potential constraints. In the end, what has not changed is the effective state control over media and public opinion and the basic state rationale in adopting or not adopting a propaganda campaign on a foreign dispute, as this study seeks to demystify.

2. Features

The Central Propaganda Department (CPD), the CCP propaganda epicenter, commands an extensive range of media outlets and government branches in the bureaucratic system. This amounts to over 3,442 television stations, 1,906 newspapers, and 10,014 periodicals in 2015,¹⁴⁰ as well as a dozen corresponding institutional organs in the State Council and the People's Liberation Army (PLA).¹⁴¹ The CCP propaganda also reaches deep. In the Mao era, this was reflected in the study sessions and loudspeakers in every village; Nowadays, this is reflected in

¹⁴⁰ National Bureau of Statistics of China 2016.

¹⁴¹ For comprehensive studies on the organizational structure of the Chinese propaganda system, see Brady 2008; Shambaugh 2007.

the 98.77 percent TV coverage and a 53.2 percent internet penetration rate of the whole country.¹⁴²

At the pinnacle of the system, the decision making on domestic media policy on foreign policy issues falls under the purview of the Central Leading Group on Propaganda and Ideological Work (zhongyang xuanchuan sixiang gongzuo lingdao xiaozu), with the consultation of the Foreign Affairs Leading Group (waishi lingdao xiaozu) because of the foreign policy content. The long-term and medium-term policies are delivered in the National Propaganda Thought Work Meetings (quanguo xuanchuan sixiang gongzuo huiyi) and the annual National Conferences of Propaganda Department Directors (quanguo xuanchuan buzhang huiyi). The speeches and other important guidelines are then transmitted either orally at propaganda department meetings at lower levels or through internal publications.¹⁴³ Short-term guidelines on the themes and issues to be highlighted in the coming week are determined by a working group within the Central Propaganda Department and issued to senior editors at their regular meetings with the CPD officials.¹⁴⁴ During times of diplomatic crises, depending on the level of the escalation, the two aforementioned corresponding Leading Small Groups might get involved and daily instructions on what and what not to cover and how to cover them are transmitted through the CPD to senior editors at major official media outlets, and then further down to the editors on duty. Some of these event-based article- or topic-specific daily directives have been leaked by editors to *China Digital Times*, which keeps an online archive of these directives.¹⁴⁵ These directives, called the “zhenlibu zhiling (The Truth Department directives),” although useful, need

¹⁴² TV coverage data is from National Bureau of Statistics of China 2016. Internet penetration rate is from CNNIC 2016.

¹⁴³ Shambaugh 2007, 54.

¹⁴⁴ Brady 2008, 19.

¹⁴⁵ These directives are available at <https://goo.gl/6edxde>, accessed February 22, 2018.

to be further corroborated because of their unknown source. This is why interviewing senior editors who experienced these nineteen diplomatic crises are particularly helpful, as the editors interviewed might disclose the policy instructions they received during the crises.

The CCP maintains control over news reporting via several mechanisms.¹⁴⁶ The first is monetary, through direct ownership and financial incentives such as financial rewards to media outlets and bonuses to journalists who stay within the limits of the state propaganda.¹⁴⁷ The second is personnel. The Party appoints the top management of all official media outlets. The third is legal and structural, through licensing, required organizational sponsorship, etc.¹⁴⁸ The fourth is brute force, through censorship, closedowns of media outlets, and imprisonment of journalists. The fifth is administrative, through the editor responsibility system. The chain of approval of an article is held responsible, not just the author. The last but not the least is coercive. Through combinations of rewards and threats of punishment, the state sets examples to inspire self-censorship. The state also purposely makes the limits of state tolerance obscure and state inspections random to facilitate self-censorship of journalists and Internet users.¹⁴⁹

3. Comparison to Other Autocracies

Compared with other authoritarian propaganda systems, the Chinese system is of no difference in substance, but only varies in degree. China is ranked as “one of the world’s most restrictive media environments” by Freedom House with a press freedom score of 87 out of 100 in 2016,¹⁵⁰ after eleven other countries/territories. On the top of the list are North Korea, Turkmenistan,

¹⁴⁶ Some of these categories are borrowed from and explained in more detail in Hassid 2010, 8-10.

¹⁴⁷ Brady 2008, 110; Esarey 2005.

¹⁴⁸ Brady 2008 has a section examining the legal regulations as a means of control in China. See Brady 2008, 104-8.

¹⁴⁹ Stern and Hassid 2012.

¹⁵⁰ The higher the score is, the less free the country is.

Uzbekistan, Crimea, Eritrea, Cuba, Equatorial Guinea, Azerbaijan, Iran, Syria and Bahrain.¹⁵¹

Press in sixty-six countries/territories are rated as “not free,” while seventy-three others as “partly free.” The essence of an unfree press is consistent – news and information circumscribed for mass audiences and a dominant political narrative shaped by the ruling power.¹⁵² The specific approaches and techniques may vary, but even on a tactical level, these states are starting to learn from each other’s experiences.

A number of features help extend the Chinese setting of the empirical tests in this study to other authoritarian states. First, like China, most authoritarian states have experienced similar developments such as the commercialization and digitization processes described above.

Countries such as Jordan, Afghanistan, Iran, Morocco, Egypt, Singapore, Malaysia, Syria, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and many others all experienced these global waves of commercialization and digitization.¹⁵³ Although they each may have unique experiences, they scatter on a spectrum of different degrees of liberalization and retained authoritarianism that can be observed in China. Jonathan Becker describes the differences between a totalitarian media system in the Soviet Union and a neo-authoritarian media system in the present-day Russia, including “the degree of relative autonomy vis-à-vis the state, the breadth of negative and positive control, the degree of pluralism and the mechanisms of control, not to mention ideological context.”¹⁵⁴

Second, internet censorship is prevalent on a global scale. In 2013, the world witnessed a general trend of decline in Internet Freedom, displayed in “broad surveillance, new laws

¹⁵¹ Freedom House, “Freedom of the Press 2017: Table of Country Scores,” <https://freedomhouse.org/report/table-country-scores-fotp-2017>, accessed February 23, 2018.

¹⁵² Walker and Orttung 2014, 71.

¹⁵³ These examples are summarized in Stockmann 2007, 4-6. For further details, see Jones 2002 (on Jordan), Rawan 2002 (on Afghanistan), Rodan 1998 (on Singapore and Malaysia), Ayish 2002 (on Syria, UAE, and Qatar).

¹⁵⁴ Becker 2004, 144.

controlling web content, and growing arrests of social-media users.”¹⁵⁵ “In Asia alone in the last several years, incidents in India, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam (not a comprehensive list) have highlighted the restrictions that a variety of regimes are putting in place.”¹⁵⁶

China is a leader on Internet censorship. China hosts the annual World Internet Conference. Initiated by China, the conference is one of China’s global efforts to defend its rights to govern its Internet to its likes without foreign interference – an idea hiding behind the concept “Internet sovereignty” coined and chanted by China at the conference.

Its sophisticated methods are being emulated worldwide. “Beijing readily shares its expertise with other regimes, reportedly including those in Belarus, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe.”¹⁵⁷ In Vietnam, where the Internet is relatively freer, the government also maintains various means to censor content. For example, Google is required to maintain its servers inside Vietnam, so that it is easier for Hanoi to censor content when needed to.¹⁵⁸ “In September [2013], the state introduced Decree 72, which restricted all websites and social media from publishing anything that ‘provides information that is against Vietnam.’”¹⁵⁹ In Russia, a law signed in 2013 allows the state to shut down websites with inappropriate content. “More than 20,000 websites were blocked at the year’s end.”¹⁶⁰ “A 2014 law requires any website, blog, or public social-media account with more than 3,000 daily viewers to register with Roskomnadzor [the Russian telecommunications regulator] as a media outlet and comply with the regulations accompanying

¹⁵⁵ Freedom House, “Freedom on the Net 2013: Despite Pushback, Internet Freedom Deteriorates,” <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/freedom-net-2013>, accessed February 23, 2018.

¹⁵⁶ Greitens 2013, 263.

¹⁵⁷ Walker and Orttung 2014, 78.

¹⁵⁸ Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2014, Vietnam,” 2014, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/vietnam>, accessed February 23, 2018.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Freedom House, “Russia: Freedom of the Press 2016,” <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2016/russia>, accessed February 23, 2018.

that status, including bans on anonymous authorship and legal responsibility for comments posted by users.”¹⁶¹

Third, like China, the control strategies have become more subtle and sophisticated. The “channeling” strategy and the emphasis on positive, state-sourced content is not unique in China. Similar to China’s 50 cent party, Vietnam has a “Force 47” and Russia has a “troll army.” “A reliable cast of government-approved pundits” are regularly featured on Russian mainstream televisions.¹⁶² Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez has 4.21 million twitter followers,¹⁶³ some of whom he offered financial rewards for following him.¹⁶⁴ During the Arab Spring, Bahraini authorities flooded social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook with pro-regime content.¹⁶⁵

These similarities between the Chinese propaganda system and the rest of the authoritarian world gives us more confidence in extending the argument beyond China.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Walker and Orttung 2014, 81.

¹⁶³ As of February 23, 2018.

¹⁶⁴ “Hugo Chávez rewards three-millionth Twitter follower with new home,” *The Guardian*, June 2, 2012.

¹⁶⁵ Aday et al. 2012, 8.

Chapter 4: Congruence Test of Nineteen Chinese Diplomatic Crises

This chapter presents and discusses the results of the congruence test on nineteen Chinese diplomatic crises. The first section presents the overall results, which suggest strong patterns consistent with the (mis)alignment theory. The second and the third sections discuss the two deviant cases and the two ambiguous cases in detail, exploring possible explanations for their deviation.

I. Test Results

Table 4.1 presents the nineteen Chinese crises as well as the two critical variables – existing public opinion and state policy intent, which I claim explain the adoption/non-adoption of propaganda campaigns. For each case, I identify the values of these variables. Appendix I provides a brief justification for each of these judgements according to the rubrics listed in Table 3.3. Based on the values of these variables, I deduce whether my theory would predict a propaganda campaign. Finally, by comparing the predicted and the actual outcomes of the cases, I reach a summary judgement of whether my theory is correct in predicting the propaganda campaigns.

Except for four cases, the test has shown overall consistence between the predicted and the actual outcomes, which suggests a historical pattern. Notably, two of the four deviant cases are ambiguous on the scale of propaganda.

Table 4.2 places all these cases in the theoretical framework and marks the deviant cases in bold and the ambiguous cases with asterisks. As shown, the pacifying propaganda cases did particularly well and all four of them were predicted correctly. Notably, they all took place in the twenty-first century, suggesting a more contemporary setting of the causal mechanism. The

Table 4.1: Predicted and Actual Outcomes on China's Nineteen Diplomatic Crises on Territorial Disputes
(PC: Propaganda Campaign. Deviant cases are in bold in the "Theory" column; ambiguous cases are marked with asterisks.)

#	Year	Case	Existing Public Opinion	State Policy Intent	Predicted Outcome	Actual Outcome	Theory
1	1959	Sino-Indian Border Clashes at Longju and Kongka Pass	Moderate/Weak	Moderate	No PC	PC to Mobilize	False
2	1962	Sino-Indian Border War	Moderate/Weak	Hardline	PC to Mobilize	PC to Mobilize	True
3	1967	Sino-Indian Border Clashes at Nathu La and Cho La	Moderate/Weak	Moderate	No PC	No PC	True
4	1969	Sino-Soviet Border Conflict	Moderate/Weak	Hardline First, Moderate Later	PC to Mobilize	PC to Mobilize	True
5	1974	Sino-Vietnamese Clash in the Paracels	Moderate/Weak	Hardline	PC to Mobilize	PC to Mobilize	True
6	1978	Fishing Boat Incident around Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands	Moderate/Weak	Moderate	No PC	No PC	True
7	1979	Sino-Vietnamese Border War	Moderate/Weak	Hardline	PC to Mobilize	PC to Mobilize	True
8	1986	Sino-Indian Border Standoff at Sumdorong Chu	Moderate/Weak	Moderate	No PC	No PC	True
9	1988	Sino-Vietnamese Clash in the Spratlys	Moderate/Weak	Hardline	PC to Mobilize	No PC	False
10	2005	Japanese History Textbook, Diaoyu/Senkaku, and Japan's Bid for the UNSC	Hardline	Moderate	PC to Pacify	PC to Pacify	True
11	2010	Japanese Coast Guard's Arrest of a Chinese Trawler Captain near Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands	Hardline	Hardline	No PC	PC to Coerce	False*
12	2011	Sino-Vietnamese Cable-Cutting Incidents in the South China Sea	Hardline	Hardline	No PC	No PC	True
13	2012	Sino-Philippines Scarborough Shoal Standoff	Hardline	Hardline	No PC	PC to Coerce	False*
14	2012	Japanese Nationalization of Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands	Hardline	Moderate First, Hardline Later	PC to Pacify	PC to Pacify	True
15	2013	Sino-Indian Border Standoff at Ladakh	Moderate/Weak	Moderate	No PC	No PC	True
16	2014	Sino-Vietnamese Oil Rig Standoff	Moderate/Weak	Moderate	No PC	No PC	True
17	2014	Sino-Indian Border Standoff at Ladakh	Moderate/Weak	Moderate	No PC	No PC	True
18	2016	Sino-Philippines South China Sea Arbitration	Hardline	Moderate	PC to Pacify	PC to Pacify	True
19	2017	Sino-Indian Border Standoff at Doklam	Hardline	Moderate	PC to Pacify	PC to Pacify	True

mobilizing propaganda scenario and the moderate - moderate scenario did fine as well, with one deviant case in each box. The hardline - hardline scenario did the poorest, with two out of three cases falling out of the theoretical prediction, although both two were ambiguous on the dependent variable. This leads to the belief that this quadrant is falsified. It however does not invalidate the overall argument. This is because when the alignment incentive is absent, it is possible that other incentives are present, such as an audience cost incentive in the hardline – hardline scenario. The results in this quadrant confirm the existence of an audience cost incentive especially when existing public opinion and state foreign policy intent are both hardline. The states’ refraining from going all out on these propaganda campaigns also confirms previous challenges to the audience cost theory and adds nuances to state’s hands-tying behaviors. The confirmation of the overall theoretical framework, together with the falsification of this quadrant, also suggests that the conditions proposed are sufficient, but not necessary for the adoption of propaganda campaigns.

Table 4.2: Deviant Cases in Theoretical Framework

		State Policy Intent	
		Hardline	Moderate
Existing Public Opinion	Moderate /Weak	Sino-Indian Border 1962 Sino-Soviet Border 1969 Sino-Vietnamese Paracels 1974 Sino-Vietnamese Border 1979-1991 Sino-Vietnamese Spratlys 1988	Sino-Indian Border 1959 Sino-Indian Border 1967 Sino-Indian Border 1986 Sino-Indian Border 2013 Sino-Indian Border 2014 Sino-Japanese Diaoyu/Senkaku 1978 Sino-Vietnamese Oil Rig Crisis 2014
	Hardline	Sino-Japanese Diaoyu/Senkaku 2010* Sino-Vietnamese Cable-Cuttings 2011 Sino-Philippines Scarborough Shoal 2012*	Sino-Japanese Various Dispute 2005 Sino-Japanese Diaoyu/Senkaku 2012 Sino-Philippines Arbitration 2016 Sino-Indian Border 2017 ¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ I hold some reservation on the most recent Sino-Indian border incident in Doklam, as events are still developing at the time of writing this dissertation.

It also deserves our attention to ruminate over the fact that all pre-1990 cases in Table 4.1 have moderate/weak public opinion. This is partly due to the natural development of these territorial disputes that the disputes were less known at their inception, and partly due to the development of the Chinese propaganda system that the public's access to information was relatively more limited in the pre-1990 era. It might seem like a problem that all pre-1990 cases have weak public opinion, but it would only be a problem if there is a confounding factor associated with time. To qualify as a confounding factor, it would have caused both the independent variables and the dependent variable. As suggested in Chapter 3, the Chinese propaganda system transitioned from a Maoist totalitarian system characterized by indoctrination and "thought work" to a new authoritarian system with "soft" but not necessarily weaker control underlining the "guiding" and the "channeling" of public opinion. So what have changed are the public's expanded access to information, and the specific means of state control over media and public opinion; what have not changed are the essence and the outcome of control. Although it is plausible that the public's access to information and the state's specific means to control public opinion could have affected public opinion, but it would be a stretch to argue that they would have any effect on a state's foreign policy intent on a dispute or a state's decision to publicize or not publicize a dispute. What have also changed before and after 1990 are the social economic situations, but it is hard to imagine any social economic factor is accountable for both the independent and the dependent variables. China has become richer. But could social economic development account for public opinion, state foreign policy intent, and state propaganda decisions? Hardly.

Table 4.3 summarizes the results of the test by averaging the numbers of published articles in each scenario. Because of the small number of cases and the fact that several of these

cases are path dependent or interrelated, I am not claiming an average effect, so it makes no sense to calculate or report a P-value. But the misaligned scenarios show substantially higher media exposure than the aligned ones. Besides the overall consistence demonstrated in Table 4.1, this overall contrast between the misaligned and aligned scenarios in the average numbers of articles in Table 4.3 also suggests a strong correlation.

Table 4.3: Average Monthly Numbers of Front-Page Articles and of All-Relevant Articles

		State Policy Intent	
		Hardline	Moderate
Existing Public Opinion	Moderate/Weak	8.0, 37.7	1.0, 9.7
	Hardline	0.5, 18	6.3, 66.4

The following section evaluates the four deviant cases and explores why they differ from the (mis)alignment theory predictions.

II. Two Deviant Cases

An investigation of the deviant cases reveals that they could be explained by either a variation of the (mis)alignment theory or ad hoc factors such as the presence of an ongoing war. On the 1959 Sino-Indian border case in which both the public and the state preferred a moderate policy, China stayed remarkably quiet at the beginning despite an aggressive Indian media campaign, which was consistent with the theory’s prediction. The outcome began to deviate from the theory when the Chinese leaders reluctantly launched a propaganda campaign, in part to counter the Indian campaign, and in part to prepare the Chinese public for an increasingly hostile environment.

While the case outcome is not what the theory predicts, the fact that the Chinese government felt the need to prepare the public for an increasingly hostile environment is consistent with the fundamental logic of the (mis)alignment theory. The Sino-Vietnamese clash in the Spratlys in

1988 occurred amidst a war between the two countries, so the Chinese public needed little mobilization.

1. The 1959 Sino-Indian Border Clashes at Longju and Kongka Pass

Like many of China's territorial disputes, the Sino-Indian border dispute is a historical product – the colonial legacy and the lack of prior delimitation. The situation was further aggravated by a lack of administration due to its remote location. The McMahon Line established at the 1913-14 Simla Conference by Great Britain was the only delimitation effort in history, but was rejected by the then newly founded Republic of China (ROC) on the basis of the lack of authority of the Tibetan representatives and was subsequently negotiated only between the British and the Tibetan representatives, without Chinese representation.¹⁶⁷ These problems formed the crux of the dispute that arose shortly after the independence of India and the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

The Sino-Indian border dispute first broke out into armed conflicts in August 1959, five months after the Tibetan uprising and Dalai Lama's fleeing to India. Two bloodshed events occurred in the disputed area – the August 25 incident at Longju and the October 21 incident at the Kongka Pass.

Public Opinion: Moderate/Weak

The border issue was hidden from the public view before 1959. Not a lot of people knew about it and those who did know, in this case the state leaders, did not feel strongly about it to even put it on the negotiation table. The Chinese leaders insisted that conditions were not yet “ripe for

¹⁶⁷ Lamb 1966.

settlement.”¹⁶⁸ They were unwilling to discuss the issue and tried side-stepping it at several occasions when the two sides could have discussed about it. These occasions include when China and India negotiated about India’s trading privileges and Tibet’s political status in 1953-1954, when Jawaharlal Nehru and Zhou Enlai exchanged visits in 1954, and when a Chinese magazine *China Pictorial* showed large areas of Indian-claimed territory as Chinese in 1958 and that once again propelled Nehru to request a clarification from the Chinese side which was only brushed aside by Beijing.

State Policy Intent: Moderate

China sought to resolve the dispute with India through peaceful negotiations. After a small border conflict broke on August 25, 1959, Mao Zedong held a politburo meeting, and concluded that China would “seek to resolve the border issue through negotiations.”¹⁶⁹ Wu Lengxi, who attended the meeting, recalls that Mao said “Before the negotiations, [we] should suggest [to the Indian counterpart] to keep the status quo, neither side should move their troops, and random, small strife on the ground should be resolved by ad hoc agreements.”¹⁷⁰ Wu was at the time the head of Xinhua News Agency and General Editor of *People’s Daily*, and also the Politburo’s record keeper for relations with the Soviet Union. This recollection of Mao’s decision is corroborated by a declassified CIA study on March 2, 1963: “By fall 1959, the Chinese leaders had decided to switch from a policy of no negotiations on an overall border settlement, coasting

¹⁶⁸ Han 1987, 218.

¹⁶⁹ Wu 1999, 209.

¹⁷⁰ Wu 1999, 212.

along on the basis of the existing status quo, to one of preliminary discussions with a view to an eventual overall settlement.”¹⁷¹

Predicted Outcome: No Propaganda Campaign

Actual Outcome: Propaganda Campaign to Mobilize

Given the weak public opinion and the moderate state policy intent, the state should have not pursued a propaganda campaign based on the causal logic of the (mis)alignment theory, because in this case the state and the public were actually aligned. But the Chinese state did launch a propaganda campaign, although brief.

Table 4.4 lists the number of relevant articles in *People's Daily* during the 1959 campaign. I also list a few months before and after for comparison. Based on my operational definition of a propaganda campaign – at least two front-page and ten any-page articles a month, with one-month lapse allowed – the months of September, October and November qualify as the campaign duration. In September, *People's Daily* published a total of sixty-two articles on the subject, with ten in the front pages. But the number of articles reduced sharply from September to October. The month of October does not meet the minimum number of any-page articles and counts as a lapse month. The numbers in November picked back up slightly but not nearly as high as those of September and the campaign ended there. So overall, the campaign was modest and short-lived, with a total of ninety-one articles including seventeen front-page articles during seventy-seven days.

¹⁷¹ Central Intelligence Agency. “The Sino-Indian Border Dispute: Section 1: 1950-59,” The CAESAR, ESAU, and POLO series, DD/I Staff Study, Reference Title POLO XVI, March 2, 1963, www.archieve.claudearpi.net/maintenance/uploaded_pics/polo-07.pdf, accessed May 30, 2018.

Table 4.4: Number of *People's Daily* Front-Page and Any-Page Articles Around the 1959 Sino-Indian Border Dispute Propaganda Campaign

Year	Month	No. of Front-Page Articles	No. of All Articles
1959	Mar	0	0
1959	Apr	3	0
1959	May	2	1
1959	Jun	1	0
1959	Jul	0	0
1959	Aug	0	0
1959	Sep	10	62
1959	Oct	3	8
1959	Nov	4	21
1959	Dec	1	8
1960	Jan	1	8
1960	Feb	0	3

Why did the Chinese government feel the need to propagandize the issue even when the public was aligned with its policy intent? First, it is important to note that when India launched an aggressive media campaign against China starting from March after the Tibetan uprising and Dalai Lama's fleeing to India, China had initially stayed remarkably quiet in contrast, manifested in the low number of articles between March and August, for as long as half a year. In a conversation between Chinese Vice Minister Zeng Yongquan and Charge d'Affaires of the Soviet Embassy in China S. Antonov, Antonov commented that "China kept silent even though the whole world was fussing about it."¹⁷²

Even after China responded by launching its own propaganda campaign, the campaign was moderate and brief, as demonstrated earlier. The account of Wu Lengxi reaffirms the restrained nature of this campaign and discloses that this was under Mao's directive. In a meeting with Wu and the Politburo Standing Committee members on September 15, 1959, Mao said that

¹⁷² "Memorandum of Conversation Between Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Zeng Yongquan and Charge d'Affaires of the Embassy of the Soviet Union in China S. Antonov," September 10, 1959, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PRC FMA 109-00873-12, 76-79. Obtained by Dai Chaowu and translated by 7Brands. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114757>.

they should “consider bringing the public debate with India on the border issue to a stop soon.” “Before putting it to a stop, we should publish an editorial ... to clarify that our engagement in this debate is against our will. The debate has its benefits – it can present both sides’ positions and expose the truth on the border issue. But we do not want to continue the debate; we still hope to resolve the issue through negotiations.”¹⁷³

Second, China’s propaganda campaign was a result of increased threats perceived by the leaders and the strategic need to prepare the public. Two things took place around September 1959 that affected the Chinese leaders’ threat perception. One, the two incidents elevated the salience of the dispute. With India’s media campaign, the pressure for China to respond reached a tipping point. The mounting pressure to respond to the Indian media campaign is confirmed in the memoir of Wu Lengxi. Wu laments that “The Party’s original intention was not to use the border incident to accuse India. We did not want to make a great deal of it. But India publicized it first, then slandered China, and accused China of being an “invader,” whipping up an anti-China wave around the World. This forces us to respond; we cannot but debate with Nehru, with whom we established the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. This is against our will, but out of necessity.”¹⁷⁴

Two, it became clear during this time that the Soviet Union was siding with India. The first sign was a Soviet News Agency TASS statement without incorporating the Chinese opinion.¹⁷⁵ Moscow’s attitude became clear when Khrushchev visited China and criticized China’s role in the dispute on October 2.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ Wu 1999, 215.

¹⁷⁴ Wu 1999, 214.

¹⁷⁵ “Memorandum of Conversation Between Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Zeng Yongquan and Charge d’ Affaires of the Embassy of the Soviet Union in China S. Antonov,” 1959; also see Wu 1999, 213-14.

¹⁷⁶ “Discussion between N.S. Khrushchev and Mao Zedong,” 1959. Archive of the President of the Russian Federation (APRF), f. 52, op. 1, d. 499, ll. 1-33, copy in Volkogonov Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of

All these factors augured a worsening security environment for China. Under these circumstances, China felt the need to prepare the public for an increasingly hostile environment despite its moderate policy intention. While the case outcome is not what the theory predicts, the facts that the Chinese campaign was a very much delayed and restrained one and that the Chinese government felt the need to prepare the public for an increasingly hostile environment are consistent with the fundamental logic of the (mis)alignment theory.

2. The 1988 Sino-Vietnamese Clash in the Spratlys

The Spratly Islands are a group of islands in the South China Sea disputed between six claimants, including People's Republic of China (China), Republic of China (Taiwan), Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei. Both land features in the area and the maritime rights derived from the ownership of these land features are being disputed. The dispute involves not only resource conflicts over fish and energy, but also the strategic shipping routes that connects the Pacific Ocean to the Indian Ocean, carrying one third of global shipping.¹⁷⁷ Moreover, the dispute also draws the attention of the United States because of the American commitment to its Asian allies and the competition of influence between China and the U.S. in the Western Pacific. Chapter 6 will provide a more detailed background to the South China Sea dispute in general.

In March 1987, China took the opportunity of a UNESCO-commissioned task of building observation posts in the Spratlys to expand its control there. This led to a series of confrontations between the Vietnamese and the Chinese navies which culminated to a brief battle near the Johnson South Reef on March 14, 1988.

Congress, Washington, D.C. History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive.
<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112088>.

¹⁷⁷ "How much trade transits the South China Sea?" Center for Strategic and International Studies China Power Project. <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>, accessed April 16, 2018.

Public Opinion: Moderate/Weak

The Chinese public had little knowledge of the offshore dispute in the Spratly Islands, so public opinion was weak.

State Policy Intent: Hardline

The international conditions were favorable for China to pursue a hardline policy. With the Soviet Union still bogged down in Afghanistan and the U.S. enjoying a relatively harmonious relationship with China, the prospect of a possible third-party intervention was low.

Eyeing the UNESCO Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC)'s worldwide ocean survey as an opportunity, China volunteered to build observation posts in the Spratlys with the goal of increasing its presence in the area. Although the Chinese and the Vietnamese recollections are contradictory as to who fired the first shot in the battle,¹⁷⁸ China in the end seized control of six land features in the area including the Johnson South Reef.

Predicted Outcome: Propaganda Campaign to Mobilize

Actual Outcome: No Propaganda Campaign

This case is unique in the sense that it occurred amidst a war between the two countries. The year 1988 marks the ninth year into the Sino-Vietnamese Border War. Although the Chinese public opinion on this particular dispute was weak (having little knowledge), it was strong and hardline against Vietnam with whom the Chinese people had been fighting a major war. The Chinese

¹⁷⁸ For Chinese accounts of the battle, see Yang 2014; Wang 2015; for Vietnamese accounts, see “Deadly Fight Against Chinese for Gac Ma Reef Remembered,” *TN News*, March 14, 2013, <http://www.thanhniennews.com/society/deadly-fight-against-chinese-for-gac-ma-reef-remembered-3235.html>, and “Vietnamese Soldiers Remember 1988 Spratlys Battle against Chinese,” *Thanh Nien News*, March 14, 2016, <http://www.thanhniennews.com/politics/vietnamese-soldiers-remember-1988-spratlys-battle-against-chinese-60161.html>, accessed May 30, 2018.

public needed no extra mobilization for this brief battle on the side of the war. During the 65 days of the crisis, *People's Daily* published 7 front-page articles, but only 10 articles all-together. The significant number of front-page articles confirmed China's hardline position and high priority given to the issue. Yet China did not publicize the dispute in volume, evident in the low number of all relevant articles, because it did not need to, given the prior mobilization due to the war.

III. Two Ambiguous Cases

The two ambiguous cases, the 2010 Sino-Japanese fishing boat incident and the 2012 Sino-Philippines Scarborough Shoal standoff, seem to suggest an audience cost argument, given the concurrent coercions in both cases. But further investigation is needed to confirm such a logic. Interestingly though, neither of these "propaganda campaigns" are without reservations, which implies the state's hesitation in engaging too much audience cost which would undermine social stability and foreign policy flexibility.

1. The 2010 Sino-Japanese Boat Incident Near Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands

The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute concern a group of uninhabited islands in the East China Sea. Japan, having maintained the de facto control of the Islands since 1895 except for a 1945-1972 period of post-war U.S. administration, does not recognize the existence of the dispute. China holds that the Islands had always been possessed by China before the first Sino-Japanese War in 1894 and was a Japanese seizure which should be returned to China after the Second World War. The dispute was sidestepped when the two countries normalized relationship in 1972 and signed a peace treaty in 1978. But the dispute deteriorated as the history issue broke out in

the 1980s, on which the Chinese complain about the Japanese reluctance to admit its atrocities to the Chinese people and many other people in Asia during World War II. The territorial dispute concern resources such as fish and alleged oil reserves. The Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan binds the United States to come to Japan's aid should a war broke out in the defense of the territory.

On September 7, 2010, the Japanese Coast Guard arrested a Chinese fishing trawler captain who allegedly rammed his vessel into Japan Coast Guard ships near the disputed Islands. Beijing demanded the immediate release of the captain. When Japan decided to hold the captain for further investigation, China responded aggressively. Japan eventually released the captain on September 25. Widespread anti-Japanese protests took place in China in mid-October.

Public Opinion: Hardline

By the 2010 incident, nationalist sensitivities towards Japan had become acute among the Chinese public. The Beijing Area Study (BAS) reaches a representative sample of Beijing residents in eleven years between 1998 and 2015, and has data on the respondents' country thermometer towards North Korea, Japan, America, South Korea, Vietnam and the Philippines. The BAS shows that the Chinese public's thermometer towards Japan stayed in the low 30s ever since the 2005 Sino-Japanese crisis over history textbook and Japan's bid to the United Nations Security Council, which remained the lowest in all countries surveyed.

Table 4.5: Chinese Public Thermometer Towards Japan, 1999-2015 (Source: Beijing Area Study)

Survey Date	Average Thermometer Towards Japan (0-100)	Change from Previous Year
2/1999	50.3	
1/2000	47.4	-5.77%
3/2001	44.5	-6.12%
3/2002	34.9	-21.57%
3/2003	45.2	29.51%
5/2004	36.7	-18.81%
5/2005	29.9	-18.53%
5/2007	33.2	11.04%
5/2009	33	-0.60%
10/2013	31.3	-5.15%
6/2015	30	-4.15%

State Policy Intent: Hardline

Beijing perceived the Japan Coast Guard's handling of the incident a departure from the status quo. In Beijing's perspective, Japan's previous handling of such incidents usually involved expelling or deporting the intruders. But in this case, the Japanese authorities arrested and detained the captain based on Japanese domestic law. Intentional or not, the Japanese behavior asserts Japan's *de jure* sovereignty over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, which constitutes a direct challenge to the status quo. Accepting the legality of such actions would compromise China's claim to the disputed Islands.

However, China's response to such a provocation was excessive and escalatory.¹⁷⁹

China's escalated responses included suspending high-level exchanges with Tokyo, detaining four Japanese nationals for allegedly entering restricted military area, and informal economic sanctions impacting tourism and rare earth mineral exports to Japan.¹⁸⁰ In addition, when Tokyo

¹⁷⁹ See, for example, Mochizuki 2010.

¹⁸⁰ "Relations between China and Japan worsen over filming of military targets," *Guardian*, September 23, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/sep/23/china-japan-relations-video-filming>; "Amid Tension, China

released the captain, instead of reciprocating with defusing the tension, Beijing demanded an apology and compensation.

Predicted Outcome: No Propaganda Campaign

Actual Outcome: Propaganda Campaign to Coerce?

During the fifty-seven days of the crisis, *People's Daily* published a total of thirty-one articles on the dispute, only two of which were in the front pages. These numbers bordered on the criteria set forth in the measurement of a propaganda campaign. To determine whether China's propaganda during the crisis count as a propaganda campaign, we need to take a closer look into other official media reporting and leaked policy directives.

It appeared that China did make conscious efforts to publicize the dispute, yet with clear reservations. Besides *People's Daily's* reporting, CCTV flagship news program at seven o'clock, Xinwen Lianbo (Network News), covered the dispute on four evenings between September 13 and October 5. This was unusual considering that the program rarely covered foreign disputes. But apparently the coverage on the September 18th public events commemorating the Japanese invasion during WWII did not mention about the ongoing territorial crisis. A leaked policy directive on *China Digital Times* confirms that this disconnection was ordered by propaganda officials. The directive told media outlets to report the commemorating events as "business as usual" and "[they] should not be connected to the recent incident involving the arrest of the fishing boat crew."¹⁸¹ CCTV 10pm Wanjian Xinwen (Evening News) had more coverage of the dispute, broadcasting events on eleven out of twenty nights between September 11 and

Blocks Vital Exports to Japan," *New York Times*, September 22, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/23/business/global/23rare.html?mcubz=0>, accessed May 30, 2018.

¹⁸¹ Zhenlibu (The Truth Department). "Diaoyudao Zhuangcuan Shijian (Diaoyu Islands Boat Collision Incident)." *China Digital Times*. September 17, 2010. <https://goo.gl/nCFyAH>, accessed May 30, 2018.

September 30. CCTV also featured the issue in its “Xin Shiye (New Horizon)” program on October 20 and 21.¹⁸²

The state’s serious reservation was reflected in several leaked state directives dated between September 10 and October 19, which could be summarized into three main policies. First, the state ordered the media to use the Xinhua copies only, and not to conduct their own interviews or report their own stories.¹⁸³ This was validated by the fact that fourteen of the thirty-one *People’s Daily* articles were copies of MoFA statements. Second, the state instructed the media not to place these reporting on prominent sections or during prime times.¹⁸⁴ This could explain the small number of front-page articles and the little primetime TV coverage. Third, the state did not allow online discussions or comments, and requested any inciting or action-driven posts be censored.¹⁸⁵

Explanation

The content of the *People’s Daily* articles seemed to imply an audience cost story. At the beginning of the crisis, China could use the harsh rhetoric to engage an audience cost to coerce Japan into releasing the captain and offering an apology China had demanded. But Beijing at the

¹⁸² “Xunhang Diaoyudao (Patrolling the Diaoyu Islands).” Xinshiye (New Horizon). CCTV. October 20 and 21, 2010. <http://tv.cntv.cn/video/C22733/fa3ef7a9ae6e45ad6cc07d8e9f53bf1d> and <http://tv.cntv.cn/video/C22733/f6af12a02f3946e406f6a6892e7dff2>, accessed May 30, 2018.

¹⁸³ Zhenlibu (The Truth Department). “Guanyu Diaoyudao Zhongri Yuchuan Jiufen Shijian (About the Sino-Japanese Boat Incident near Diaoyu Islands).” *China Digital Times*. September 10, 2010. <https://goo.gl/1ZCpBc>, accessed May 30, 2018.

¹⁸⁴ Zhenlibu (The Truth Department). “Guanyu Rifang Renyuan Shanchuang Wo Junshijinq (About Japanese Citizens Illegally Entering Restricted Military Area).” *China Digital Times*. September 30, 2010. <https://goo.gl/is5UnK>, accessed May 30, 2018.

¹⁸⁵ Zhenlibu (The Truth Department). “Guanyu Riben Fanghuai Wo Bei Kouya Chuanzhang Yi Shi (About Japan Releasing Detained Chinese Captain).” *China Digital Times*. September 24, 2010. <https://goo.gl/8UQuLh>, accessed May 30, 2018.

same time appeared hesitant to invoke too much nationalism, so it kept a lid on the media coverage.

2. The 2012 Sino-Philippines Scarborough Shoal Standoff

The Scarborough Shoal, or known as Huangyan Dao in Chinese, is a chain of reefs, rocks and an inner lagoon in the South China Sea. China, Taiwan and the Philippines have conflictual claims to the Shoal. On April 8, 2012, a Philippine navy frigate cornered several Chinese fishing vessels in the lagoon at the Scarborough Shoal, based on reasons of suspected poaching. Two China Marine Surveillance (CMS) ships soon arrived, interposing themselves between the frigate and the fishing vessels to prevent an arrest, triggering a two-month standoff between the two countries in the Shoal.

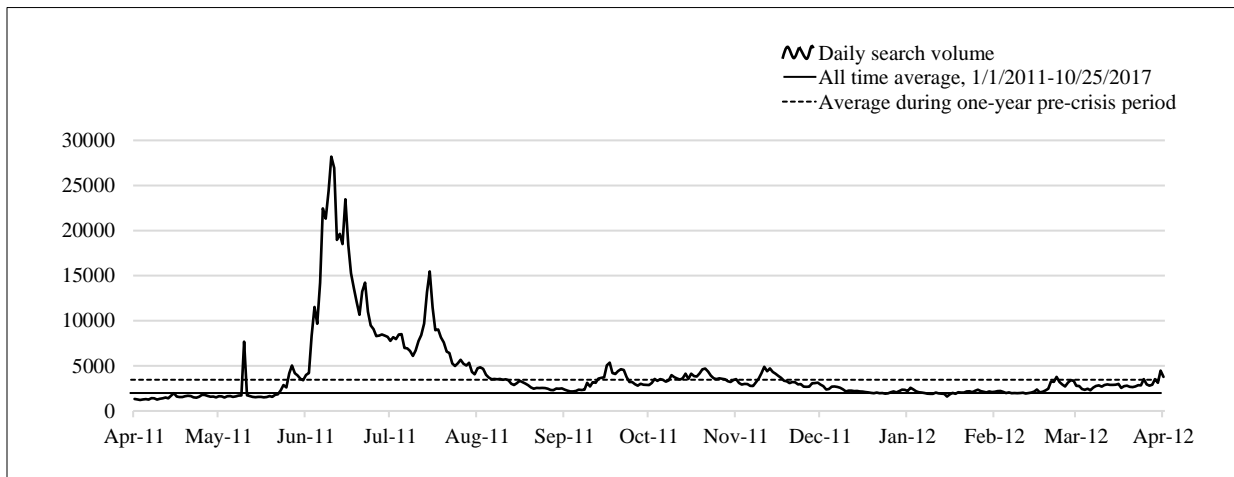
Public Opinion: Hardline

Before the crisis began, there had already been widespread knowledge and strong nationalist sentiment in China about the South China Sea dispute, especially against the Philippines during 2011, just months before the crisis broke. The strong nationalist sentiment on the South China Sea dispute was a recent phenomenon starting from around 2009 due to the heightened tension that captured the attention of commercial media and hawkish Chinese online forums, the increased U.S. involvement since 2010, and the Chinese government's increased willingness to allow publicity of the dispute. In June and July 2011, China experienced a "wave of public mobilization" on the South China Sea issue.¹⁸⁶ A search of the term "South China Sea" in the

¹⁸⁶ Chubb 2016, 210. In footnote 70, Chubb quotes Reilly's definition of a wave of mobilization as a "rapid shift in public opinion and popular emotions, growing political activism, and expanded sensationalist coverage in popular media and on the Internet." See Reilly 2011, 24.

BSI shows notable surges in June and July 2011 and a weekly average index of four thousand during the one-year pre-crisis period (Figure 4.1). For comparison, the weekly average during the one year before the Sino-Vietnamese oil rig crisis in 2014 was just about one thousand and seven hundred, which I interpret as low. The all-time average of search volume during non-crisis periods between January 1, 2011 and October 15, 2017 is 2,773.¹⁸⁷ So an index average of four thousand during non-crisis period should be considered high.

Figure 4.1: Daily Search Volume of “South China Sea” on Baidu.com, 4/8/2011-4/8/2012



As the news of the confrontation spread, online forums and social media were flooded with intense public reactions. Bottom-up mobilization such as small-scale protests outside the

¹⁸⁷ The period between January 1, 2011 and October 15, 2017 is the period the BSI data is available. The indices are not the actual number of daily searches but an indicator that reflects the “relative” level of search activity. The formulae are not transparent, but it takes in account China’s increasing population of internet users, so these data are comparable over time and between different keywords searched. I also excluded data during the three crisis periods related to the South China Sea because the data during these crises would puff up the average. The excluded periods include 5/26-6/26/2011 during the Sino-Vietnamese cable cutting incidents, 4/12-6/4/2012 during the Sino-Philippines Scarborough Shoal standoff, and 6/1-8/1/2016 during the Sino-Philippines arbitration crisis. If not excluding these periods, the all-time average is 5,479.

Philippine Embassy and hacking attacks were spontaneously initiated by the public.¹⁸⁸ These further confirm the existing hardline public opinion.

State Policy Intent: Hardline

China's disproportionate escalations from the very onset of the crisis indicate a hardline policy intent. This was manifested in its uncompromising behavior on the sea and informal economic sanctions. The Chinese decision to send CMS ships to confront the Philippine naval frigate and to prevent the arrest of the Chinese fishermen departed from previous Chinese behaviors and reflected a change towards more aggressiveness. Previously, China "had never attempted to impose punishment beyond diplomatic protests in response," on "a string of comparable cases of Philippine authorities detaining PRC fisherfolk at the atoll."¹⁸⁹ After the initial standoff, in an attempt to ease the tension, Manila withdrew the navy frigate and replaced it with a coast guard vessel and a Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources vessel.¹⁹⁰ But instead of reciprocating the gesture, China reinforced its presence by sending its most advanced fishery patrol ship, the *Yuzheng 310*, joining two other ships that had already been there.¹⁹¹ The number of Chinese ships in the area continued to rise and reached fourteen on May 3.¹⁹² Shortly after the retreat of both parties at the threat of an oncoming typhoon, Chinese vessels returned to the Shoal, establishing a regular presence until October 2016.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁸ "Chinese hackers attack more Philippine websites," *ABC-CBN News*, May 12, 2012, <http://news.abs-cbn.com/nation/05/12/12/chinese-hackers-attack-more-philippine-websites>, accessed May 30, 2018.

¹⁸⁹ Chubb 2016, 283.

¹⁹⁰ Thayer 2012.

¹⁹¹ "Chinese Patrol Ship Yuzheng-310 Reaches Waters off Scarborough Shoal," *The China Times*, April 20, 2012, <http://thechinatimes.com/online/2012/04/3107.html>, accessed May 30, 2018.

¹⁹² "Chinese Boats Crowding Shoal," *Philippine Star*, May 3, 2012, <http://www.philstar.com:8080/headlines/802659/chinese-boats-crowding-shoal>, accessed May 30, 2018.

¹⁹³ "Philippines and China Ease Tensions in Rift at Sea," *The New York Times*, June 18, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/19/world/asia/beijing-and-manila-ease-tensions-in-south-china-sea.html>; Ratner 2013; "Chinese Vessels Leave Disputed Fishing Grounds in South China Sea", *The New York Times*, October 28,

In terms of economic sanctions, although the alleged banana ban was refuted by some scholars,¹⁹⁴ China went out of its way in publicizing the travel advisory, the reduction of China Southern Airlines flights to Manila, and the fruit quarantine – all coincided with the crisis and all were reported by *People's Daily*.¹⁹⁵ China Youth Travel Service, a state-owned national tourist company, also offered to reimburse tour packages.¹⁹⁶ These acts, taken together, were suspicious of at least an unofficial sanction, if not a formal one.

Predicted Outcome: No Propaganda Campaign

Actual Outcome: Propaganda Campaign to Coerce?

During the fifty-three days of the crisis, *People's Daily* published a total of sixty-four articles on the topic, with only one article in the front page. That one front-page article was on the launch of a deep-water drilling rig “Hai Yang Shi You 981” in the South China Sea, rather than directly on the crisis itself. These numbers border on the criteria set forth in the measurement of a propaganda campaign. So to determine whether China’s propaganda during the crisis justifies as a propaganda campaign, I need to take a closer look into other official media reporting.

China did make deliberate efforts to publicize the dispute. But like the Sino-Japanese boat incident in 2010, the media efforts were lukewarm. During the fifty-three days of the crisis,

2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/29/world/asia/south-china-sea-scarborough-shoal.html?_r=0, accessed May 30, 2018.

¹⁹⁴ Poh 2017.

¹⁹⁵ “Guojia Zhijian Zongju dui Jinkou Feilvbin Shuiguo Jiaqiang Jianyanjianyi (General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine Stepping Up Quarantine of Imported Philippine Fruits),” *People's Daily*, May 11, 2012, 4; “Guojia Lvyouju Tixing Chufei Biyao Zhongguo Youke Ying Zanhuan Fufei Lvyou (National Tourism Administration Advises Chinese Tourists to Suspend Travel to the Philippines),” *People's Daily*, May 14, 2012, 4; “Nanhang Tiaojian Fufei Hangban (China Southern Airlines Reduces Flights to the Philippines),” *People's Daily*, May 15, 2012, 10.

¹⁹⁶ “Guojia Lvyouju.”

the Chinese MoFA had twenty-nine press conferences addressing the issue. Many of the questions at these press conferences were pre-arranged. The state media reporting mirrored these MoFA statements. CCTV Network News did not mention the standoff. But CCTV Evening News broadcasted on the issue every other night during April 11-18. Vice Foreign Minister Fu Ying delivered a stern message to the Philippine Embassy Charge D'affaires on May 7 accusing the Philippines in making "serious mistakes" and threatening that China has "made all preparations to respond to any escalation of the situation by the Philippine side." The message was publicized on the MoFA website the next day and was followed by a flurry of media reports. On May 8, CCTV covered the issue again in the 10pm Evening News and featured the issue in its "Huanqiu Shixian (Global View)" program with expert commentators.¹⁹⁷ *People's Daily* published four articles on the dispute on May 9. Although with none in the front page, these took up half of an entire page three. *China Youth Daily*, *PLA Daily* and *China Newsweek* all had headlines on the dispute in the following days. To sum up, media coverage was comprehensive, but little in the front-pages and no prime-time TV coverage. Although leaked policy directives are not available, we can tell from the reporting patterns that this was a lukewarm propaganda campaign with clear reservations, if it counts as a campaign at all.

Some might argue that the state propaganda on the Scarborough Shoal standoff might be due to the developing Bo Xilai scandal in a diversionary logic. But it is hard to believe that the Chinese government created the whole standoff or escalated the tension embracing the risks involved just to divert public attention away from the Bo Xilai scandal, since China had cheaper and easier means for such purposes. Besides, the fact that the state did not shy away from

¹⁹⁷ "Zhuanjia Jianyi Baoli Xingdong Huiying Feilvbin Dui Huangyandao Gaiming Chaibiao (Experts Recommend Violent Response to Philippines Changing of Huangyan Island's Name and Demolishing the Markers)." Huanqiu Shixian (Global View). CCTV. May 9, 2012. <https://news.qq.com/a/20120509/000261.htm>, accessed May 30, 2018.

publicizing the Bo Xilai scandal, and even featured the story in more prominent places than the territorial dispute, defies a diversionary logic. On April 11 – the same day the Scarborough Shoal standoff was made public, *People's Daily* featured in its front page the news of the Politburo's decision to try Bo Xilai, whereas it made no mention of the Scarborough Shoal crisis until the next day, on page three.¹⁹⁸ CCTV Network News, which did not mention the Scarborough Shoal crisis at all throughout the crisis, devoted a substantial amount of time on the Politburo's decision.¹⁹⁹

The Chinese propaganda might be explained by the audience cost theory. Negotiation to resolve the standoff started on April 19, was suspended by the Philippines on April 27, and reopened again on May 10. Throughout this period, China might be using the harsh public rhetoric and public attention for coercive purposes – first to coerce the Philippine navy to back off, then to stop the Philippines from involving the United States and stoking domestic nationalism, and also to urge the Philippines to go back to the negotiation after it was suspended.

IV. Conclusion

The congruence test on nineteen Chinese diplomatic crises on territorial disputes in this chapter indicates a strong correlation between the state-public (mis)alignment and state's adoption/non-adoption of propaganda campaigns. The two deviant cases could either be explained by a variation of the theory, or ad hoc factors such as an ongoing war amidst the crisis. The weakest link seems to be the hardline - hardline cases, where audience cost might explain two of the three

¹⁹⁸ "Firmly Support the Party Central Committee's Correct Decision," *People's Daily*, April 11, 2012, 1; "Chinese Marine Surveillance Ships Stops Philippine Naval Vessel Harassing Chinese Fishing Boats," *People's Daily*, April 12, 2012, 3.

¹⁹⁹ For CCTV Network News transcript on April 11, 2012, see <http://cctv.cntv.cn/lm/xinwenlianbo/20120411.shtml>, accessed May 30, 2018.

cases in that category. But even on these cases, the scale of the propaganda was moderately noticeable, with observable state publicity efforts though not without reservations. This shows that the government was hesitant to involve too much audience cost that might undermine social stability or tie its hands in foreign policy implementation. These results, however, do falsify the hardline - hardline quadrant, suggesting the proposed conditions are sufficient but not necessary.

Overall, the results confirm a strong correlation that warrants a closer examination into the proposed causal mechanisms. Chapter 5 will trace the Sino-Vietnamese border war in 1979-1991 to see whether the propaganda campaign was a mobilization effort. Chapter 6 will investigate the Sino-Philippines arbitration case in 2016 to see whether the propaganda campaign was used to pacify public opinion. Chapter 7 will examine two negative cases to see whether the absence of a propaganda campaign was indeed due to a state-public alignment. As an aside, Chapter 7 also includes the Vietnamese side of the story in the 2014 oil rig crisis, further confirming the pacifying mechanism and extending the theory's application to another authoritarian regime.

“If there is something big to happen, there must first be propaganda. Public opinion must be made before opening fire. This is the importance of propaganda – it mobilizes people’s hearts and wins their support.”

– Author’s interview to a retired journalist who reported on the Sino-Vietnamese border war that broke out in 1979 and lasted a decade.²⁰⁰

“Why have we delayed the attack? ... we want to create public opinion... Our repeated toleration will enable everyone to know the aggressiveness of the Cuba in the East. Only through such exposure can we ... educate the people... and strengthen the morale of the broad masses of our officers and men. At a suitable time, we may launch fierce attacks and win a sweeping victory over our enemies.”

– In a leaked report by Geng Biao, a Chinese Politburo member and the then secretary general of the Central Military Commission (CMC), addressing to an enlarged Politburo meeting on January 16, 1979.²⁰¹

Chapter 5: The Sino-Vietnamese Border War – A Mobilizing Propaganda Campaign

The Sino-Vietnamese border war in 1979-1990 is the last war China has fought. It began in the background of the Cold War and the Sino-Soviet split, and ended after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. It was sparked by the specific problems on the Sino-Vietnamese border, but had global implications for balance of power. This is a fascinating case associated with a number of historic events including the exodus of Chinese Vietnamese in 1978-1979, the conclusion of the Vietnam-Soviet security alliance, the normalization of Sino-U.S. relations, Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia, etc. Also prominent about the case was the impressive propaganda campaign the Chinese government had promulgated. This chapter reviews that part of the history and uses the historical facts to test one scenario of the (mis)alignment theory and the competing theories.

The case has only been moderately studied by a few Cold War historians and has not been used much in political science studies.²⁰² A number of historical studies came out in the

²⁰⁰ Interview 40, June 8, 2017, Beijing.

²⁰¹ Geng, Biao. 1981. “Geng Biao’s Report on the Situation of the Indochinese Peninsula.” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 11 (3): 379–91, 390.

²⁰² For example, Chanda 1986; Chen 1987; Duiker 1986; Hood 1993; Ross 1988.

2000s and 2010s due to newly available Russian, Chinese and Vietnamese archives after the collapse of the Soviet Union.²⁰³ But these scholars do not agree on the causes of the war. Several other aspects of the case, such as the U.S. role in the war, the specific timing of the Chinese decision for the war, are still being debated or left unresolved because of the lack of available evidence.

For clarification on the details of the case, I not only reviewed these historical studies, but also visited several Chinese, Vietnamese, and American archives and interviewed a number of former Chinese officials and journalists involved in the conflict. Some of these materials are used for the first time. But the goal here is not to study the case comprehensively like historical works do, but to evaluate the logic of the proposed and competitive theories against their empirical expectations of the case. This case study focuses on the period from the deterioration of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship roughly from 1975 leading up to the outbreak of the war on February 17, 1979. The war involves much more than the border dispute, but because of the scope of this dissertation on territorial disputes, this case study focuses on the border dispute and includes details on other aspects of the war only when necessary.

Before I begin, I should provide a short introduction to the primary sources used for this case study and the way I used them. Besides secondary studies in Chinese and English, I resort to mainly five groups of primary-source materials.²⁰⁴ First are memoirs, diaries, and talks of, or written works by political leaders, mainly Chinese leaders, for example, selected works of Deng Xiaoping, selected works of Hoang Van Hoan, articles written by Li Jiazhong, etc. The Chinese vice-premier Deng Xiaoping was allegedly the mastermind behind the Chinese attack in 1979.

²⁰³ Goscha 2017; Khoo 2011; Ni 2010; O'Dowd 2007; Roberts 2006; Westad and Quinn-Judge 2006; Westad et al. 1998; Womack 2006; Zhai 2000; Zhang 2015.

²⁰⁴ These sources are cited in the complete form first and in shortened form subsequently. The shortened forms are bracketed in the bibliography.

Hoang Van Hoan was a founding leader and a politburo member of the Vietnam Workers' Party (VWP) and Vietnam's ambassador to Beijing during 1950-1957. He was later exiled to Beijing because of his pro-China position. Li Jiazhong was China's ambassador to Vietnam from 1995 to 2001 and was personally involved in the border negotiations following the post-war normalization of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship. There are many more of this kind, which will be introduced when necessary as they are referenced.

Second are memoirs, diaries, and talks of, or written works by high-ranking military officials and soldiers participating in the war, for example, Zhou Deli's memoir *Personal Recollections of a High-Ranking Chief of Staff*, Zhang Zhen Memoir, an article published by Long Xiang. Both Zhou Deli and Zhang Zhen were high-ranking military officials closely involved in the decision-making and the implementation of the military campaign. Long Xiang was a veteran who participated in the 1979 combat.

Third are internal documents authored by various Chinese political organs, such as the Xinhua News Agency's International Department, various branches (including the intelligence department) within the PLA or the PLA regional units, as well as the provincial governments in the two Chinese border provinces, Yunnan and Guangxi. These documents were circulated internally. They were sometimes submitted to the upper echelons as background materials. Some of these were declassified and made available in archives. Others were accessed from a few historians' personal collections.

Fourth are Vietnamese archives including political leaders' internal speeches such as "Comrade B," a speech by Le Duan, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), as well as internal meeting memorandums and documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defense. Some of these were made available by the Wilson Center' Cold

War International History Project. I accessed others from the National Archives in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City and a number of historians' personal collections.

Fifth are English original sources available at the Carter Library and the United Nations Archives. The Carter Administration was both an observer and a participant in the Soviet-China-Vietnam-Cambodia dynamics in Southeast Asia. Given the far and deep reach of the U.S. intelligence service and the observer role of the U.S. in the conflict, some declassified intelligence files and accounts by U.S. officials are useful for fact checking and are overall more objective than some Chinese, Vietnamese and Soviet accounts. The accounts of Deng Xiaoping's visit to the U.S. immediately preceding the war are critical for analyzing China's motivation and preparation for the war. The U.N. Archives have rich materials China and Vietnam submitted to the U.N. on Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, the Chinese refugee issue, the Sino-Vietnamese border dispute, as well as China's invasion of Vietnam.

In the cases that these sources contradict each other – the Chinese and Vietnamese sources often do, I adjudicate between them by referring to 1) American original sources, if available, but also keeping in mind the U.S. interests in the matter; 2) secondary studies by historians. For example, Vietnamese documents flatly deny the mistreatment of ethnic Chinese by the Vietnamese authorities.²⁰⁵ The arguments sent by the Vietnamese and the Chinese representatives to the U.N. often contradict each other. On this, I take the agreement reached by historians that the mistreatment of ethnic Chinese is a historical fact. Another example is that the Chinese flatly deny the penetration of Vietnamese airspace by the Chinese fighters in July

²⁰⁵ See, for example, Vietnam MoFA, "Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on Question of Hoa People in Viet Nam," June 6, 1978, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, S-0442-0365-01, United Nations Archives and Records Management Section. Obtained for CWIHP by Charles Kraus. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/118403>.

1978.²⁰⁶ I consider the overflights as facts, as the U.S. declassified documents recorded these similar penetrations not just once, but at multiple times.²⁰⁷

But I also recognize that the real story should be much more nuanced and complicated than any one side of the story. On this, I take advantage of having access to Chinese, Vietnamese, American documents, and sometimes materials from other countries. Whenever possible, I try to use multiple sources of information to triangulate at what really transpired. For example, the Chinese archives do not mention about the Chinese rejection of entry of more refugees from July 12, 1978, but the Vietnamese archives do, and American archives also confirm this. Besides validating the source by the interests of the author, their purpose, and intended audience, I also try to understand the materials in the context of the larger strategic dynamics during the Cold War.

Below, I first describe the propaganda campaign launched during this crisis, before presenting a narrative of events that unfolded. I then analyze the case in the lens of the (mis)alignment theory and the competing theories, evaluating their respective predictions against the case.

I. A Massive Propaganda Campaign

Broadly speaking, Beijing's rhetoric became openly negative against Vietnam from late May 1978. But at first, it was primarily about the Chinese refugee issue. The first refugee article in *People's Daily* appeared on May 27, 1978 in the front page, with the title "The Chinese

²⁰⁶ "Wo waijiaobu xinwensi fayanren jiu yuenan waijiaobu niezao huangyan fabiao tanhua: suwei zhongguo feiji 'qinfan' yuenan lingkong shijian chun xi pingkong niezao (Remarks by Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson on the Vietnamese Fabrication of Our Penetration into Vietnamese Air Space)," *People's Daily*, July 13, 4.

²⁰⁷ "Research Paper Prepared in the National Foreign Assessment Center, Central Intelligence Agency: The Sino-Vietnamese Border Dispute," Carter Library, National Security Affairs, Staff Material, Far East, Oksenberg Subject File, Box 49, Mondale 8/79 China trip: Briefing Material: 3/78-8/79. Top Secret.

Government to Send Ships to Pick up the Overseas Chinese Persecuted by the Vietnamese Authorities.”²⁰⁸ In a speech in September 1978 on the occasion of the National Day of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV), Vietnam Prime Minister Pham Van Dong accused Beijing of “recently whipp[ing] up an anti-Vietnam psychosis among the Chinese people, fabricat[ing] the absurd stories of ‘Vietnam ostracizing the Hoa [Chinese] people,’ ‘opposing China,’ and so on.”²⁰⁹

As the refugee issue, especially the expulsion of Chinese residents at the border, bled into the border dispute, the media rhetoric started to pick up on the border dispute. The first article on the border dispute appeared on August 15, 1978, with the title “Director of the Department of Asian Affairs at Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Summoned Vietnamese Representative in Beijing and Strongly Protested against the Invasion of Yunnan Border by Armed Vietnamese Police.”²¹⁰

Starting from November 1978, the Chinese government launched a massive propaganda campaign against the Vietnamese on a number of issues between the two countries. This campaign lasted over a decade and totaled 7,195 *People’s Daily* articles, including 579 front-page articles, averaging at 51.8 articles and 4.2 front-page articles a month. These numbers are impressive because, as previously mentioned, the public has short attention span on matters that affect only a minority of people on a day-to-day basis. This sustained extensive media coverage therefore has to be a state effort.

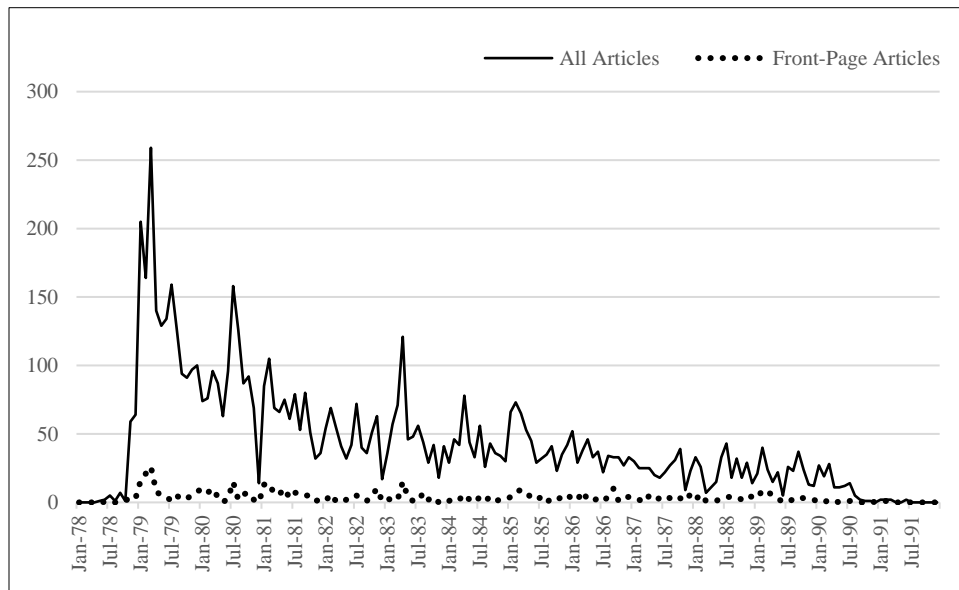
²⁰⁸ “Wo guo zhengfu jue ding pai chuan qianwang Yuenan, jie yun bei Yue dangju pohai de huaqiao huiguo,” *People’s Daily*, May 27, 1978, 1.

²⁰⁹ “Speech made by Pham Van Dong,” September 05, 1978, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, S-0442-0365-03, United Nations Archives and Records Management Section. Obtained for CWIHP by Charles Kraus. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/118418>.

²¹⁰ “Wo Waijiaobu Yazhousi fuzeren yuejian Yue zhuhua shiguan daibiao, qianglie kangyi Yuenan wuzhuang gong’an ruqin wo Yunnan bianjing,” *People’s Daily*, August 15, 1978, 5.

Figure 5.1 illustrates the monthly numbers of relevant articles in *People's Daily* on the dispute. The solid line follows the count of all relevant articles and the dotted line the count of front-page articles. As the graph demonstrates, media reports picked up dramatically in November 1978 and peaked in March 1979. The campaign, despite ups and downs that likely reflect the occurrence of events, sustained over a period of ten years and gradually tapered off by the year 1990.

Figure 5.1: Monthly Count of *People's Daily* Articles on the Sino-Vietnamese Border Dispute, 1978-1991



II. From 1975 to 1979, History in Short

What then had propelled this massive propaganda campaign? What purposes did this campaign serve? Before getting to that question, this section first traces the series of events, organized by themes and timing, that led up to the outbreak of the war.

The Sino-Vietnamese relationship used to be a relationship intimately characterized by Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh as “comrade plus brother.” In 1963, Chinese vice-chairman Liu Shaoqi described the relationship in the following terms: “Our friendship has a long history. It is

a militant friendship, forged in the storm of revolution, a great class friendship that is proletarian internationalist in character, a friendship that is indestructible.”²¹¹

Ironically, the once “indestructible” relationship began to sour from the mid-1970s even before the Vietnam War ended on April 30, 1975. A number of problems plagued the relationship: Vietnam having to choose sides between China and the Soviet Union due to the Sino-Soviet split; Vietnam’s maltreatment of the ethnic Chinese residents in Vietnam; heightened border tensions; and Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia. These problems culminated in China’s attack of Vietnam in February 1979, which developed into a decade-long war. The war was in part spurred by the territorial dispute, but it involved several other disputes as well.

1. Historical Grievances

Historical grievances did exist underneath the “comrade plus brother” relationship. They only surfaced after the relationship had gone sour. One issue was the Geneva Accords that divided Vietnam into the North and the South at the 17th Parallel. Some Vietnamese leaders blamed the Chinese in coercing Vietnam into accepting the partition. Another was North Vietnam’s reunification efforts, which some Vietnamese leaders held grudge against China’s discouragement. These grudges were not necessarily justified, but the fact that they did exist in some leaders’ mind and that they were used by the Vietnamese authorities later to stoke anti-China sentiment deserves some notion here.

On the Geneva Accords, Le Duan explicitly blamed the Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai: “When we had signed the Geneva Accords, it was precisely Zhou Enlai who divided our country

²¹¹ Cited in Khoo 2011, 201.

into two [parts].”²¹² This blame was not groundless since Mao himself expressed regrets at a meeting with the Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong in November 1968: “In the past, I did say that we had made a mistake when we went to the Geneva conference in 1954. At that time, President Ho Chi Minh wasn’t totally satisfied. It was difficult for President Ho to give up the South, and now, when I think twice, I see that he was right.”²¹³ After the Chinese attack in February 1979, the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry released a document entitled “The Truth about Vietnam-China Relations over the Last 30 Years.” This was a major Vietnamese condemnation of the Chinese action. In it, Vietnam also publicized this historical grievance it had held privately for a long time. It accused Zhou Enlai in making “substantial political concessions [with the French] which were detrimental to the interests of the peoples of Vietnam...”²¹⁴ It alleged that Zhou forced Vietnam into agreeing to the partition of Vietnam into two zones.

However, in Hoang Van Hoan’s recollection, the division was a necessary compromise and a negotiation success that pushed the division line in Hanoi’s favor from originally-proposed 13th or 16th parallel to the 17th parallel. Hoan disclosed that negotiation was proposed by Ho Chi Minh himself in November 1953. Hoan argued that the partition was not forced upon Vietnam by Zhou. During the break of the conference, Hoan and Zhou went to Liuzhou to discuss with Ho where Ho was resting. Ho agreed with the partition plan and estimated that the other parties

²¹² “Comrade B on the Plot of the Reactionary Chinese Clique Against Vietnam,” 1979, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, People’s Army Library, Hanoi. Obtained and translated for CWIHP by Christopher Goscha. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112982>. The document was known to be a speech given by Le Duan because of Duan’s known alias as “Anh Ba (Brother Number Three)” and the style of the language. Stein Tønnesson estimates that the speech was addressed to “a small group of party leaders” shortly after China’s decision to withdraw its troops on March 5, 1979, but before Hoang Van Hoan’s exile to China in July 1979. See Tønnesson and Goscha 2001, 273.

²¹³ “77 Conversations,” 139.

²¹⁴ Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 1980. “The Truth about Vietnam-China Relations over the Last 30 Years [Condensed].” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 10 (3): 325–44, 328.

would at most compromise to the 17th parallel, which turned out to be the division line eventually accepted at the conference.²¹⁵

As for the blame on reunification, Le Duan said in his 1979 speech that “After our country had been divided into northern and southern zones in this way, he [Zhou Enlai] once again pressured us into not doing anything in regard to southern Vietnam. They forbade us from rising up [against the US-backed Republic of Vietnam].”²¹⁶ This again might be only a prop used by the Le Duan regime to stoke hatred against the Chinese government. As Chen Jian concludes: “the Beijing leadership neither hindered nor encouraged Hanoi’s efforts to ‘liberate’ the South by military means until 1962.” They are “not enthusiastic” about the Vietnamese military struggles in the South, which “was basically an initiative by the Vietnamese themselves,” but “Beijing took no active steps to oppose a revolution in South Vietnam.”²¹⁷

2. Vietnam: Caught in the Middle of the Sino-Soviet Split and Alignment with the Soviets

One main cause many historians argued for the eventual break of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship was the Sino-Soviet split.²¹⁸ The cause was a geopolitical one, as the Soviets could use Vietnam to expand its sphere of influence in Southeast Asia and counter China from the south, and China feared an encirclement. As Le Duan said during his trip to Beijing in November 1977, “On various questions, our two countries have different viewpoints, [but the] most important difference relates to how we view the Soviet Union and the United States.”²¹⁹ As early as in 1966, Zhou Enlai warned Le Duan: “After Kosygin returned from Hanoi, the Soviets used

²¹⁵ Hoang, Van Hoan. 1988. “YueZhong Zhandou de Youyi Shishi Burong Waiqu (The Reality of the Sino-Vietnamese Friendship in Fighting Ought Not to Be Distorted).” In *Selected Works of Hoang Van Hoan*, 13–34. Beijing: Renmin, 18.

²¹⁶ “Comrade B.”

²¹⁷ Chen 1995, 357-58.

²¹⁸ For example, Goscha 2017; Khoo 2011.

²¹⁹ Wang 1999, 67.

their support to Vietnam to win your trust in a deceitful way. Their purpose is to cast a shadow over the relationship between Vietnam and China, to split Vietnam and China, with a view to further controlling Vietnam to improve [their] relations with the US and obstructing the struggle and revolution of the Vietnamese people.”²²⁰

As history played out, the Sino-Soviet rivalry did drive a wedge between the two former “comrades and brothers.” In a conversation between Deng Xiaoping and Le Duan and a few others as early as April 1966, Deng expressed the concern several times whether Vietnam was suspicious of Chinese intention because China’s “overenthusiasm” in the Vietnam issue (since Mao expressed such concern earlier). Although Le Duan refuted such suspicion, we can see his efforts and difficulty in trying not to offend the Soviets and the Chinese at the same time. Duan said that “I have had an argument with Khrushchev on a similar problem. Khrushchev said the Vietnamese supported China’s possession of the atomic bomb so China could attack the Soviet Union. I said it was not true, China would never attack the Soviet Union.” He even tried to reduce the tension between China and the Soviet Union by saying that “So my personal opinion is that China, while upholding the revolutionary banner, should cooperate with reformist countries [implying the Soviet Union] to help them make revolution. It is our judgment as well as our policy line.”²²¹ This effort, given the deep rift between China and the Soviet, was futile. In fact, for years Vietnam pursued a straddling policy not to offend either side, but straddling did not resonate well with the Chinese. The Vietnamese leadership was also divided within itself. With the pro-Soviet faction led by Le Duan gaining more traction and external developments such as China’s rapprochement with the U.S., the Vietnamese balancing act became more and more difficult.

²²⁰ “77 Conversations,” 91.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 91-96.

The struggle was also evident in the Sino-Soviet dispute over aid to Vietnam. Zhou Enlai told Pham Van Dong in October 1965: “I do not support the idea of Soviet volunteers going to Vietnam, nor [do I support] Soviet aid to Vietnam. I think it will be better without it.”²²²

Vietnam, on the other hand, certainly did not want to give up the Soviet aid just because the Chinese desired so. In another conversation in April 1966, Zhou felt so strong about the Soviet aid that he did not even want the two aids mentioned together: “It is OK that you praise the Soviets [for giving] great aid. But that you mention it together with Chinese aid is an insult to us.”²²³

China’s ultra-left ideology and the hardship resulting from the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution certainly did not help drawing the Vietnamese closer. China’s economic hardship resulting from the Cultural Revolution made its international aid a great burden. But exporting revolution was one tenet of Mao’s Great Cultural Revolution. So despite much difficulty, Beijing tried its best to carry on its aid programs to North Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Thus, the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 gave Beijing a legitimate reason to finally cut down on its aid to Vietnam and concentrate more resources on its domestic difficulty. In September 1975, Le Duan visited Beijing to press for more aid. But Mao reminded Duan that “Today, you are not the poorest under heaven. We are the poorest. We have a population of 800 million. Our leadership is now facing a crisis.”²²⁴ Although a zero-interest loan was provided, no grant or nonrefundable aid was given.²²⁵ In contrast, Duan’s subsequent October visit to Moscow proved to be much more fruitful. The Soviets promised \$3 billion in aid for the period of 1976-1980, \$1 billion of

²²² Ibid., 87.

²²³ Ibid., 94.

²²⁴ Ibid., 192.

²²⁵ Guo 1992, 273; Khoo 2011, 118.

which was grant aid.²²⁶ Duan and the Soviet leader Brezhnev also signed a joint communiqué with “effusive praise bestowed on the Soviets.”²²⁷ The communiqué confirmed the “comprehensive relationship” between the two countries and agreed that they “cooperate closely” in international affairs, proclaiming that the relationship had entered into an “important new phase” of “comprehensive development.”²²⁸ Brezhnev also praised Vietnam to be a “solid outpost for socialist countries in Southeast Asia.”²²⁹ The warm rhetoric emitting from Duan’s Moscow trip formed a stark contrast to his Beijing trip.

In his memoir, the former justice minister of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam, Truong Nhu Tang revealed that movement towards alignment with the Soviets had already began “as far back as 1969” and Ho Chi Minh’s death that year made the change easier. In the infighting between the pro-Soviets (Le Duan and Poliburo member Le Duc Tho) and the “neutralists” (General Vo Nguyen Giap, Hoang Van Hoan, and former Foreign Minister Xuan Thuy), the pro-Soviets had already won a “clear victory” by 1974.²³⁰ The fact that Hoang Van Hoan lost all his positions at the VWP’s Fourth Party Congress in December 1976 was another clear sign.²³¹ But because Hanoi still needed the Chinese aid, the policy change was kept unannounced.

In action, Hanoi indeed became more and more tilted towards the Soviets. Vietnamese archival sources show that Vietnam began to forge military alignment secretly with the Soviet Union from late 1975 on. “On 30 December 1975, with an urgent request from the Ministry of Defense, Pham Van Dong agreed to send a military delegation to bring ‘secret documents’ of the

²²⁶ Khoo 2011, 118.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Guo 1992, 112.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Tang 1985, 248.

²³¹ Khoo 2011, 119.

Ministry of Defense to Moscow and to maintain total secrecy as they traveled through China.”

The secret documents were lists of military supplies Hanoi requested from Moscow.²³² Despite the end of the war with the U.S., Vietnam requested the Soviet “1) to prioritize the delivery of the anti-aircraft missiles SA-75M and battle ships, 2) to supply modern radars and equipments to strengthen Vietnam’s capability to defend its sky and sea, 3) to urgently begin the construction of defense projects the Soviets have pledged to help.”²³³

On June 28, 1978 Vietnam joined the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON), a Soviet-led economic alliance system to counter the Western Bloc’s Marshall Plan. The dollar amount of Soviet military aid to Vietnam jumped ten times from 75-125 million US dollars in 1977 to 600-800 million US dollars in 1978.²³⁴ On November 3, 1978, Hanoi signed a military treaty with Moscow. This treaty dispelled any doubts of Beijing of a formal Vietnam-Soviet military alliance. In Deng’s talk with President Carter during this visit to the U.S. right before the war, Deng condemned that “Vietnam has become totally Soviet controlled,” and “an important factor in the Soviet ‘Asian collective security system.’”²³⁵

3. A Betrayal in Hanoi’s Eyes: Beijing’s Secret Rapprochement with Washington

Beijing’s secret rapprochement with the U.S sowed further mistrust between the two former allies. Vietnam considered it as a betrayal. During his secret visit to Beijing on July 9-11, 1971,

²³² Path 2008, 299, quoting Vice Minister of Defense Tran Sam’s letter (Number 551/QP) to the Prime Minister’s Office on 26 December 1975, titled “Send Officials to Work in the Soviet Union.” In The Ministry of Defense. “Document on defense cooperation with China for 1976.” National Archives No. 3, Collection of the Prime Minister’s Office, Folder 10090, 1.

²³³ Path 2008, 299-300, quoting The Ministry of Defense. “Document on defense cooperation with the Soviet Union in 1976.” National Archives No. 3, Collection of the Prime Minister’s Office, Folder 10090, 6-9.

²³⁴ Khoo 2011, 113.

²³⁵ “Memorandum of Conversation,” Washington, January 29, 1979, Carter Library, National Security Affairs, Staff Material, Office, Outside the System File, Box 47, China: President’s Meeting with Vice Premier Deng: 1–2/79. Top Secret.

Henry Kissinger raised the Vietnam issue to the Chinese leaders and “attempted to wed China’s interest in resolving the Taiwan issue to Washington’s interest in closing the Vietnam War.”²³⁶ But in the interests of reserving the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, Beijing decided to ignore Kissinger’s request to pressure Hanoi.²³⁷ To dispel any concern, Zhou Enlai flew to Hanoi immediately after Kissinger’s visit to brief the Vietnamese of the meeting. Zhou informed Hanoi of the U.S.’ intention to “link the settlement of the Indochina problem with the settlement of the Taiwan problem,” but assured that the Vietnam problem should take priority. “We do not demand that the Taiwan problem be settled first.”²³⁸

Nonetheless, Hanoi still suspected that Beijing negotiated a U.S. withdrawal of troops from Taiwan at the price of “press[ing] Hanoi to accept a compromise solution with the United States.”²³⁹ Pham Van Dong visited Beijing in November 1971 and asked Mao to cancel the planned Nixon trip, but was refused.²⁴⁰ When informing the Vietnamese side that Nixon during his first visit to China in February 1972 would also like to discuss about the Vietnam question, the Vietnamese side rejected sternly: “Vietnam is our country, we don’t allow you to discuss with the United States the question of Vietnam. You have already admitted your 1954 mistake [referring to the Geneva Conference mistake], so you should not commit another one.”²⁴¹ In fact, as disclosed by a classified Vietnamese document obtained by the Chinese in 1979, Hanoi had already regarded China as an enemy after Nixon’s visit in 1972. But Hanoi needed to “concentrate on fighting one enemy” – the United States, so it did not “announce its animosity

²³⁶ Zhai 2000, 113.

²³⁷ Ross 1994, 40.

²³⁸ “The Truth,” 337.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Zhai 2000, 114, quoting Hersh 2013, 442. “Hersh’s account was based on his interview with North Vietnamese deputy foreign minister Nguyen Co Thach in Hanoi in August 1979. Thach had been present with Pham Van Dong in Beijing in November 1971.”

²⁴¹ “The Truth,” 338.

[towards China] at that time.”²⁴² After Nixon’s visit, Zhou again tried to dispel any suspicion. But Le Duan told Zhou on March 3, 1972: “Nixon has met with you already, comrade. Soon they [the US] will attack me even harder.”²⁴³ Duan believed that “the two [the U.S. and China] had discussed how to hit us harder, including B-52 bombing raids and the blocking of Haiphong [harbor]. This was clearly the case.”²⁴⁴

4. Regional Competition and Vietnam’s Invasion of Cambodia

The Sino-Vietnamese regional competition in Southeast Asia, especially Vietnam’s rapid expansion of influence into Laos and Cambodia, was a catalytic cause of the Chinese 1979 attack. This regional competition also played into the larger strategic rivalry between China and the Soviet Union. The Soviets were long aware of Hanoi’s intention and exploited it as part of its strategy in Southeast Asia. In a report to Moscow in as early as February 1973, the Soviet ambassador to Hanoi described his perception of Hanoi’s ambition.

“The program of the Vietnamese comrades for Indochina is to replace the reactionary regimes in Saigon, Vientiane, and Phnom Penh with progressive ones, and later when all Vietnam, and also Laos and Cambodia, start on the road to socialism, to move toward the establishment of a Federation of the Indochinese countries. This course of the VWP flows from the program of the former Communist party of Indochina.”²⁴⁵

Beijing recognized this dynamic as well and saw the Soviets as the “behind-the-scenes supporter of the Vietnamese authorities in seeking regional hegemonism” and Vietnam as the Soviets’

²⁴² “Tiezheng rushan, qirong dilai: bei wo jiaohuo de liangfen yuejun wenjian baolu yuenan dangju qinjian fanhua zhenxiang (Ironclad Evidence – Two Seized Vietnamese Documents Exposed the Truth about Vietnam’s Invasion of Cambodia and Anti-China Scheme),” *People’s Daily*, March 31, 1979, 5.

²⁴³ “Comrade B.”

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Morris 1999, 66.

“junior partner.”²⁴⁶ In a leaked report by Geng Biao, a Chinese Politburo member and the then secretary general of the CMC, addressed to an enlarged Politburo meeting on January 16, 1979, Geng demonstrated clear understanding of this dynamic:

“As a matter of fact, as early as before the liberation of South Vietnam, Vietnam had harboured malicious intention. The small handful of its war maniacs, at the instigation of their social-imperialist behind-the-scenes boss, had wanted to encroach on Cambodia, drawing it into the So-called “Indochina Alliance,” and turning it into the springboard and base of social-imperialism in its attempt to realize its global strategic plan and expand into Southeast Asia.”²⁴⁷

The incorporation of Laos into Vietnam’s sphere of influence was confirmed in February 1976, soon after the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) was founded. The statement, just like the Soviet understanding, stressed the common origin of the two parties and explicitly called the relationship a “special relationship.” The “special relationship” was further validated by a twenty-five-year Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation signed in July 1977.²⁴⁸ The Treaty allowed for continued stationing of Vietnamese troops in Laos, preferential trade terms for Vietnam, and permitting Vietnam to work in Lao propaganda apparatus – essentially making Laos a satellite state of Vietnam’s.

Cambodia’s Khmer Rouge regime, however, was more of a “renegade.” Vietnam saw Cambodia’s anti-Vietnamese Khmer Rouge as their most imminent threat. The Vietnamese MoFA report in July 1977 noted that “The Communist Party of Kampuchea has always been on

²⁴⁶ “Yuenan dangju weishenme yao tiaopi YueJian bianjing chongtu? (Why did the Vietnamese authorities provoke the Cambodian-Vietnamese border conflict?), *People’s Daily*, July 12, 1978, 2.

²⁴⁷ Geng Biao Report, 380.

²⁴⁸ Woodside 1979, 7.

a collision course with us on international arena.”²⁴⁹ As the CIA analyzed in June 1978, “Cambodia is pivotal in the rift between China and Vietnam since it is the current focus of their rivalry for regional influence. Hanoi seems determined to bring a more malleable regime to power in Phnom Penh, while China shows no sign of willingness to soften its support of the current Cambodian leadership.”²⁵⁰

In a conversation with the Chinese leader Hua Guofeng in September 1977, the Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot alleged the collusion between the Soviet Union, Vietnam, and Cuba on an attack against Cambodia. He also tried to convince the Chinese leader of Vietnam’s regional ambition: “Not only does Vietnam want to annex Cambodia and Laos. It also wants to occupy the whole of Southeast Asia.”²⁵¹ From 1975, China increased economic and military support to Cambodia. In Hanoi’s perspective, Vietnam also feared an encirclement by China and Cambodia, and complained about Beijing’s “big-nation expansionist and great-power hegemonistic ambitions toward our country and other countries in the region.”²⁵²

The Khmer Rouge regime feared the Vietnamese influence to the point of paranoia. Domestically, the Pol Pot-Ieng Sary leadership purged anyone with ties to Vietnam. This was later known as the Cambodian genocide. Internationally, they engaged in border clashes with the Vietnamese. These clashes were isolated at first and gradually increased in scale. With Soviet’s backing, Vietnam launched a full-scale invasion of Cambodia on Christmas Day in 1978. In January 1979, Vietnam managed to occupy Cambodia and it replaced the Khmer Rouge government with a puppet government.

²⁴⁹ Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 1977, “Report on our foreign affairs in the first sixth months of 1977,” National Archives No. 3, Collection of the Prime Minister’s Office, Folder 10160, 3.

²⁵⁰ “Intelligence Assessment Prepared in the National Foreign Assessment Center, Central Intelligence Agency: The Peking–Hanoi–Phnom Penh Triangle,” Carter Library, National Security Affairs, Staff Material, Office, Unfiled Files, Box 127, [China] 4/75–1/81. Secret.

²⁵¹ “77 Conversations,” 194.

²⁵² Pham Van Dong Speech.

In his conversation with President Carter during his visit right before the war, Deng used Vietnam's regional ambition to legitimize the planned military attack. Deng also complained that "the so-called Indochinese Federation is to include more than three states...The three states is only the first step. Then Thailand is to be included."²⁵³

5. Signs of A Worsening Relationship: The Refugee Issue and the Border Dispute

In a conversation with Le Duan in September 1975, Deng recognized that "There have been some problems in the relations between our countries." He also expressed concern about the anti-China propaganda that the Vietnamese media and textbooks were portraying China as "the threat from the North."²⁵⁴ On top of the historical grievances, the geopolitical misalignment in relation to the Soviet Union and the United States, and the regional competition, the Sino-Vietnamese relationship was also plagued by a number of problems on the ground, among which the most prominent were the refugee issue and the border dispute. These two problems overlapped at the border.

The Refugee Issue

In February 1976, the Vietnamese authorities started citizen registration programs in the South.²⁵⁵ These programs forced the ethnic Chinese residents to adopt Vietnamese citizenship or leave, although many of whom had stayed in Vietnam for decades or even generations. In early 1977, Vietnam adopted a "purifying" policy in the border areas, and ostracized the border residents to the Chinese side.²⁵⁶ In March 1978, Hanoi released a "socialization" decree, causing

²⁵³ "Deng-Carter Conversation on 1/29/1979."

²⁵⁴ "77 Conversations," 192.

²⁵⁵ Tang 2000, 421.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

“large and unmanageable numbers” of fleeing Chinese to arrive in South China.²⁵⁷ Starting from July 12, 1978, suspecting of the infiltration of Vietnamese spies, China refused to take any more refugees unless they “have documents issued by the Chinese Embassy in Hanoi and Vietnamese exit visas.”²⁵⁸ By early 1979, the total Chinese expelled from Vietnam reached as many as 280,000.²⁵⁹ From August 8 to September 26, Beijing and Hanoi held negotiations over the issue, but did not make any progress because of the deeply divided opinions.

The two sides did not even agree on the basic facts. In a Chinese MoFA statement dated June 9, 1978, China claimed that “The Vietnamese side started early in 1977 to push a policy of purifying the border area in the provinces adjacent to China and expel back to China groups of border inhabitants who had moved from China to settle down in Viet Nam a long time ago...The numbers of expelled Chinese have increased daily over the past two months, from several hundred a day in early April to several thousand a day in late May, with their total exceeding 100,000 by the end of May.”²⁶⁰ Vietnam, however, blamed China for spreading rumors and “deceived Hoa (Chinese) people in leaving Viet Nam on masse.”²⁶¹ Hanoi condemned Beijing in “inventing the story about Vietnam ‘ostracizing, persecuting, and expelling’ Hoa people,” and declared that “The policy of the Party and Government of Vietnam towards Hoa people in Vietnam is correct and consistent. It is based on Marxism-Leninism and proletarian internationalism, in keeping with the agreement between the two parties, and with the basic and

²⁵⁷ CIA Research Paper; also see Guo 1992, 117.

²⁵⁸ “YueNan dangju paiqian tewu hunru bei qugan hui guo de nanqiao zhong citan qingbao (Vietnamese Spies Disguised as Refugees to Collect Intelligence), *People’s Daily*, July 12, 1978, 4; CIA Research Paper.

²⁵⁹ Tang 2000, 421.

²⁶⁰ “Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China on the Expulsion of Chinese Residents by Viet Nam,” June 12, 1978, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, S-0442-0365-01, United Nations Archives and Records Management Section. Obtained for CWIHP by Charles Kraus. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/118404>.

²⁶¹ “Four Notes Transmitted by the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam,” June 20, 1978, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, S-0442-0365-01, United Nations Archives and Records Management Section. Obtained for CWIHP by Charles Kraus. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/118405>, 7.

long-term interests of Hoa people in Vietnam.”²⁶² Whatever their reasonings were, after the dusts have settled, historians agree and mounting evidence confirm that the discrimination and expulsion of ethnic Chinese by the Vietnamese authorities was a historical fact. But the point here is that the refugee issue reflected a deep rift between the two countries that had become increasingly difficult to reconcile.

The talks on the issue of the overseas Chinese ended in bitter accusations in September 1978. The Chinese delegation head Zhong Xidong accused the Vietnamese side in “turning the talks into a forum for its anti-China propaganda.” These negotiations confirmed to China, as Zhong said, that “the ostracism of Chinese nationals by the Vietnamese authorities was part of its anti-China policy. Your switch from a policy of friendship towards China to an anti-China policy was prompted by the needs of Viet Nam and also by those of the Soviet Union. Your attitude at these talks further proves that the anti-China policy is your established policy. In order to push regional hegemonism, the Vietnamese authorities need to use the question of Chinese nationals to sow discord between China and the Southeast Asian countries...”²⁶³

The Border Dispute

The Sino-Vietnamese land border was 1,347 kilometers long, bordering two Chinese provinces – Guangxi and Yunnan, and seven Vietnamese provinces, namely Dien Bien, Lai Chau, Lao Cai, Ha Giang, Cao Bang, Lang Son, and Quang Ninh. 164 spots of the border were disputed, totaling disputed area of 227 square kilometers.²⁶⁴

²⁶² Vietnam MoFA Statement on the Hoa People.

²⁶³ “Chinese Government Delegation Leader’s Statement at 8th Session of Sino-Vietnamese Negotiations,” October 05, 1978, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, S-0442-0365-03, United Nations Archives and Records Management Section. Obtained for CWIHP by Charles Kraus.
<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/118420>.

²⁶⁴ Li 2005, 58.

The root of the border dispute was a lack of demarcation. The militarization of the dispute and its escalations, however, reflected the larger strategic conflict between Beijing and Hanoi, as well as between Beijing and Moscow. The border was demarcated by the Qing-French Treaty of 1887 with about 300 border pillars. But because of the old age of the treaty and the constraints of technology in the old times, the maps were not accurate enough to reflect the complex terrains in the border area. Many areas between the widely-spaced border pillars remained un-demarcated. Some pillars were damaged over the years. Some rivers had changed course.²⁶⁵ The two governments had exchanged documents in 1957-58 agreeing to the principle of observing the status quo.²⁶⁶ But because of the poor demarcation, the two sides disagreed on where the border actually was and blamed each other for encroachment and violating the earlier agreement.

In September 1975, Deng commented to Le Duan about the border dispute: “It’s nothing more than a problem of dozens of acres here or there. The dispute itself is not big. It shouldn’t be a difficult problem.”²⁶⁷ But the territorial dispute became one of the focal points that caused escalation of tension and the eventual Chinese attack. Because of the lack of demarcation, the local authorities, both Vietnamese and Chinese, in the context of increasing animosity between the two countries, engaged in tit-for-tat land grabbing and violence, which created further difficulties for negotiation between the leaders.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ “Yijiuqiqi nian liu yue shi ri Li Xiannian fu zongli tong Pham Van Dong zongli tanhua beiwanglu (Memorandum of the Meeting between Vice-Premier Li Xiannian and Prime Minister Pham Van Dong on June 10, 1977),” *People’s Daily*, March 23, 1979, 1. This Chinese version, published in *People’s Daily* after the break of the war, is a written memo Li Xiannian read to Pham Van Dong at the beginning of their meeting. The Vietnamese version, kept in No. 3 Archives in Hanoi, has rich detail on the conversation between the two that ensued. See “Minutes of the meeting between Prime Minister Pham Van Dong and Vice-Premier Li Xiannian in Beijing on 10 June 1977,” National Archives No. 3, Collection of the Prime Minister’s Office, Folder 10460.

²⁶⁷ China International Studies Editorial Board. 1981. “ZhongYue Guanxi de Zhenxiang (The Truth about Sino-Vietnamese Relationship).” *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu (China International Studies)*, no. 2: 1–14., 8.

²⁶⁸ Path 2008, 304-305.

There was evidence that both sides tried to constrain the local authorities from provoking border incidents. In July 1975, the Chinese State Council and the CMC released an order “requiring the local authorities to strictly follow the border policies and foreign affairs disciplines, and to prevent frictions and avoid conflicts.”²⁶⁹ Similarly, on the Vietnamese side, a directive was sent to the border provinces from the Prime Minister’s Office in July 1977, requiring the local authorities to “strictly follow the instruction of the Party Central Committee to decisively defend our territorial integrity, make every effort to prevent the Chinese encroachment, but avoid causing problems that the Chinese can use to blame us.”²⁷⁰ But perhaps because these policies were not always in place or maybe the implementation was not effective, these policies did not help getting the number of border clashes in check. The number of border clashes increased substantially year after year, from 125 episodes in 1974, to 423 in 1975, to 926 in 1976, to 1,940 in 1977, to 2,175 in 1978.²⁷¹

Vietnamese sources confirm the deterioration of the border situation, though blaming the Chinese for the responsibility. The MoFA report for the first six months of 1976 wrote:

“At the border between the two countries, China has intensified their encroachment on our territory; the number of encroachments, points of encroachment, and the number of Chinese people mobilized [to reside] have increased more than the last six months of 1975, concentrating at the border provinces. Cao Lang and Lao Cai provinces are strategically important for our economy. Chinese fishing boats have encroached far into

²⁶⁹ “Guanyu ZhongYue bianjing diqu bianfang gongzuo ruogan zhengce wenti de guiding (Regulations on Several Policy Issues Regarding Frontier Defense Work in the Border Areas between China and Vietnam),” in PRC Youyi (Friendship) Pass Border Inspection Station ed., PRC Youyi (Friendship) Pass Border Inspection Station Log, 1992, 11. Unpublished/internal.

²⁷⁰ Hoang Du, Deputy Chief of the Prime Minister’s Office sent to the People’s Committee of border provinces on 11 July 1977. “Tasks for the border provinces to prepare for the border negotiations with China.” National Archives No. 3, Collection of the Prime Minister’s Office, Folder 10464, 32-33.

²⁷¹ Min 1993, 2; Womack 2006, 199. According to Womack, the 1978 number of 2,175 was reported by Vietnam; the number report by China that year was 1,108.

our territorial sea in the South, up to Spratlys Islands (Truong Sa). We have taken initiatives to propose bilateral dialogue between the two countries' delegations to push for bilateral economic relations, not allowing the relation to be cold, although we are determined to defend our territorial integrity.”²⁷²

Similarly, the Chinese blamed the Vietnamese for the problem. In Li Xiannian's memorandum to Pham Van Dong in June 1977, Li criticized the Vietnamese action on the dispute:

“[T]he Vietnamese comrades delayed the commencement of the negotiation with us and continued to allow the lower levels [local People's Committees at the borders] to illegally intrude into our territory, and then claimed possession over our land. They hindered what should have been normal work of our border defense forces, causing troubles and destruction to our people's normal livelihood at the border, and violently assaulted our people, in a concerted attempt to unilaterally and forcefully change the status quo at the border. Because of that, border skirmishes have increased in the past few years; the situation there has become increasingly more serious – even there were cases where the Vietnamese border defense forces opened fire on our people at the border of Yunnan and Guangxi.”²⁷³

Beijing and Hanoi initially resorted to peaceful negotiations to resolve the dispute. Negotiations were held twice, once between August and November in 1974 and the other between October 1977 and August 1978. Both failed due to a deep rift in opinions, and these often turned into an accusation forum. Li Jiazhong, an interpreter at the 1977 negotiations, recalls that “their positions were too far apart. [they] cannot find a meeting point. The comments were almost

²⁷² Path 2008, 268, quoting Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 1976, “The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' report on the first six months' foreign affairs in 1976,” National Archives No. 3, Collection of the Prime Minister's Office, Folder 9833, 3.

²⁷³ Pham Van Dong and Li Xiannian Meeting Memo Chinese Version.

always finger-pointing at each other, sometimes with words quite harsh and acerbic... The lack of mutual trust made it difficult to communicate. The two sides only agreed that the border had already been delimited and that the border should be demarcated based on the Qing-French Treaty and the changed terrains. But beyond this, nothing was agreed upon.”²⁷⁴

In fact, the Vietnamese archives show that before the second round of negotiations started in October 1977, the Vietnamese government entrusted the local authorities to gather evidence for the Chinese encroachment in preparation for negotiations. The directive called the local cadres to “collect all existing contracts and physical evidences and so forth, as proof of our possession of the territory encroached by the Chinese,” to “take pictures of all territory encroached upon by the Chinese and border posts suspected of being removed by the Chinese,” and to “closely and timely follow the changing situation of border areas including the situation on the Chinese side and must report to the central government in a timely fashion.”²⁷⁵ This measure, although it may have meant no harm, was abused by local authorities in causing even more clashes at the border.²⁷⁶

On August 25, 1978, near the Youyi (Friendship) Pass between Vietnam’s Lang Son and China’s Pingxiang, the Vietnamese army and Vietnamese police expelled 2,500 refugees across the border, beat and stabbed many refugees and “nine Chinese civilian border workers” whom the Vietnamese claimed to be “Chinese army men ‘in civilian clothing’.”²⁷⁷ The Vietnamese subsequently occupied the Pu Nian Ling area, which China claimed to be Chinese territory.²⁷⁸ The Vietnamese troops soon “set up barbed wire” and “built machinegun emplacements” near

²⁷⁴ Li 2005, 60.

²⁷⁵ “Tasks for the border provinces,” 32-33.

²⁷⁶ Path 2008, 310.

²⁷⁷ Zhou, Deli. 1992. *Yige Gaoji Canmouzhang de Zishu (Personal Recollections of a High-Ranking Chief of Staff)*. Nanjing: Nanjing Chubanshe, 240-42. Also see CIA Research Paper.

²⁷⁸ *Yige Gaoji Canmouzhang*, 240-42.

the area.²⁷⁹ The occurrence of the Youyi Pass incident poisoned the atmosphere of the border negotiations and the refugee negotiations and eventually doomed both.

By July 1978, Vietnam started to build a defense line with “bamboo and metal stakes, barbed wire and minefields” along the border. After the border negotiations had failed in late September, “Deputy Premier Li Xiannian told...personnel on 1 October that the dispute had gone beyond possible conciliation and that the situation would not be helped even if China were ‘to cede’ its two border provinces to Vietnam.”²⁸⁰ China started to forcibly tear down the Vietnamese fences, which only exacerbated the situation.

In response to the border problem and the refugee exodus, China started to take a more hardline approach. In May 1978, China conducted provocative overflights over the land border area and the Gulf of Tonkin, sometimes penetrating into Vietnamese airspace. This shows that Beijing had no qualms escalating the tension as early as in May. Hanoi, on the other hand, tried to limit the dispute on the ground level. It did not issue a protest until July 10 and the Vietnamese air force did not respond with their own fighters until September 14.²⁸¹ Besides, according to an CIA analysis, “as a result of the killing of Chinese and signs of an imminent invasion of Kampuchea,” China started an “open fire” policy on the border between December 13 and 23 in 1978, which permitted the border personnel to “open fire, not only in retaliation, but on sight of Vietnamese personnel,” as well as to “initiate aggressive, forward patrolling up to and beyond Vietnamese border defense posts.” The Chinese side also started to introduce PLA units into what used to be fist-fights at the border.²⁸²

²⁷⁹ CIA Research Paper.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Ibid.

6. The Point of No Return: The Break of the Relationship

In a memorandum from National Security staff Michael Oksenberg to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs Zbigniew Brzezinski on May 25, 1978, Oksenberg appraised his recent China trip and commented that the Chinese perception of Vietnam surprised him. He commented "The Chinese concern about Vietnam is extremely great, certainly much more than I had anticipated."²⁸³ The June CIA assessment also concluded that "the relationship between Peking and Hanoi has moved into a new and probably protracted stage of political warfare..."²⁸⁴ By summer of 1978, the Sino-Vietnamese relationship had shown signs of breaking up in all aspects – in rhetoric, diplomatic representations, economic assistance, and military strategy.

First, the tension between the two countries came out into the open. Not only did the two leaderships talk about their differences publicly, but they talked about them in vilifying tones. In Pham Van Dong's speech on the occasion of the Vietnamese National Day in September 1978, he denounced China's "dark and perfidious scheme" in "enticing, coercing and organizing tens of thousands of Hoa people in Viet Nam to leave for China," so that China could accuse Vietnam of "ostracizing, persecuting and expelling" these people. On the border problem, "They organized all kinds of people to cross the border illegally, they used armed forces to encroach upon our border, used military aircraft to violate our air space, and naval crafts to encroach upon Viet Nam's territorial waters, and built fortifications and concentrated their armed forces directed against Viet Nam."²⁸⁵ The Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping also did not hide his hostility against Vietnam publicly. At a diplomatic event in July 1978, as recalled by a Thai diplomat who

²⁸³ "Memorandum from Michel Oksenberg of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski)," Washington, May 15, 1978, Carter Library, National Security Affairs, Staff Material, Far East, Oksenberg Subject File, Box 56, Policy Process: 5/16–31/78. Secret; Sensitive.

²⁸⁴ "Intelligence Assessment."

²⁸⁵ Pham Van Dong Speech.

were present at the event, “the moment the topic of Vietnam came up, one could see something change in Deng Xiaoping. His hatred [for the Vietnamese] was just visceral.” “He spat forcefully into this spittoon and called the Vietnamese ‘dogs’.”²⁸⁶

Second, diplomatic representations were downgraded. In June 1978, Beijing cancelled the appointment of consul-general to Ho Chi Minh City and notified Hanoi to close down three consulates-general in China.²⁸⁷

Third, the economic relationship also zeroed out. China had halted all aid programs to Vietnam and had called back all Chinese experts by the end of July.²⁸⁸

Last but not the least, militarily, the General Political Bureau of the Vietnamese People’s Army released orders on July 8 to adopt an “offensive strategy” against China and to “attack and counterattack within and beyond the border.” Two weeks later, the Vietnamese Communist Party’s Fourth Plenary Session labeled China as Vietnam’s “most direct and dangerous enemy” and a “new combat target,” and called for “doing everything to defeat China.”²⁸⁹ The session “passed a resolution alleging China’s hegemonic ambition to annex Vietnam.” It also reached the decision to send people abroad to carry out anti-China activities in other Southeast Asian countries.²⁹⁰ On September 28-30, the Vietnamese army conducted a military exercise having China as an imaginary opposing force.²⁹¹

²⁸⁶ Cited in Chanda 1986, 261.

²⁸⁷ “Notes of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam,” July 24, 1978, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, S-0442-0365-03, United Nations Archives and Records Management Section. Obtained for CWIHP by Charles Kraus. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/118417>.

²⁸⁸ “Zhongguo zhengfu zhaohui Yuenan zhengfu, wo beipo tingzhi dui Yue jingji jishu yuanzhu diaohui gongcheng jishu renyuan (The Chinese government delivered a diplomatic note to the Vietnamese government; we are forced to stop our economic and technology aid to Vietnam and to recall our engineers and technicians),” *People’s Daily*, July 4, 1978, 1; Path 2008, 355.

²⁸⁹ Han 1987, 285-286. Also see *Xu Shiyong*, 30, and Hoang 1988, 11.

²⁹⁰ Hoang 1988, 11.

²⁹¹ Chengdu Military Region Intelligence Department, *YueNan junshi dashi ji (Vietnam Military Affairs Timeline)*, Junshi yiwen chubanshe (Military Translation Work Press), 1990, 123. For Internal Use. Obtained from a historian, who wishes to stay anonymous.

7. Decision for War

All these propelled China to consider using military force preemptively against Vietnam.

In September, the General Staff of the PLA convened for the first time to contrive a war plan against Vietnam.²⁹² The meeting was convened under the theme of “how to counter Vietnam’s encroachment on Chinese territory.” At the meeting, the key PLA persons involved in the decision making were informed of the atrocities the Vietnamese authorities had committed to the ethnic Chinese and Vietnam’s continuous military deployment on the border. They reached a consensus on launching a military campaign against Vietnam but could not agree on the scale of the attack. The goal of the military campaign was determined to be punitive, but also coercive, namely, to force Vietnam’s retreat from Cambodia, to stop the border encroachment, as well as to check Vietnam’s and hence the Soviet’s regional ambition in Southeast Asia.

It could also be deduced from Deng Xiaping’s array of diplomatic maneuvers from as early as September to right before the launch of the attack in February that he was clearly planning on a major action that was expected to have international ramifications. Deng started a series of foreign visits starting from North Korea in September 8-13, followed by Japan in October 22-29, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore in November 5-14, his historic visit to the United States from January 29 to February 5, and then Japan again right before the attack. Part of the purpose could be gauging world opinion on the Vietnam issue, testing waters for a potential Chinese attack, and gaining support. Chanda’s estimate of the Chinese decision was even earlier: “a Peking official revealed to me that during one of its regular weekly meetings in early July

²⁹² For details of the meeting, see *Yige Gaoji Canmouzhang*, 239-43.

1978, the Chinese politburo decided to ‘teach Vietnam a lesson’ for its ‘ungrateful and arrogant’ behavior.”²⁹³

According to the recollection of General Zhang Zhen, the then director of PLA’s Logistics Department and deputy chief of the General Staff from 1979 to 1985, a second meeting was convened by the CMC on November 23. At this meeting, the PLA generals “studied the situation at the border,” and confirmed “the necessity of a self-defense counter-attack.”²⁹⁴ On December 31, an expanded politburo meeting was held to discuss specifically about the attack.²⁹⁵ The meeting decided “regardless the result of the war, our army will stop pursuing the enemy after reaching Lang Son and Cao Bang, and will retreat immediately.”²⁹⁶

The biggest risk for an attack on Vietnam would be a Soviet intervention. After all, the Vietnam-Soviet military treaty was signed just a few months back in early November; the ink was still fresh. It would be an ultimate test for the strength of the Vietnam-Soviet alliance and China’s resolve. A possible Soviet attack could take one of two forms: a massive attack in the form of direct invasion that threatens China’s survival and a small-medium attack that only hampers China’s military advance in the south. Although the first form was unlikely, the chance still existed; the second form was likely.

The danger of a Soviet intervention was indeed real. In 1975-76, China and the Soviet Union each had 300,000 troops deployed along the border.²⁹⁷ But the Soviet force was much superior than the Chinese in terms of weaponry. The deployment of the SS-20 intermediate-range ballistic missiles and the Backfire bomber on the border was unmatched by the Chinese

²⁹³ Chanda 1986, 261.

²⁹⁴ Zhang, Zhen. 2003. *Zhang Zhen Huiyilu (Memoirs of Zhang Zhen)*. Vol. 2. 2 vols. Beijing: Jiefangjun., 165-66.

²⁹⁵ Ibid. Also see Xie, Hainan, Zufa Yang, and Jianhua Yang. 2011. *Yang Dezhi Yisheng (The Life of Yang Dezhi)*. Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi., 302.

²⁹⁶ *Zhang Zhen*, 165-66.

²⁹⁷ Robinson 1991, 297.

side.²⁹⁸ M.S. Kapitsa, a member of the Soviet collegiums, head of the first Far Eastern Department of the Soviet MoFA, told the First Deputy Foreign Minister of Mongolia on February 9, 1979: “If there is a need to strike against China to protect Vietnam, we’ll let you know. Our Far Eastern forces, and the Zabaikal military district are receiving special orders.”²⁹⁹ A Chinese veteran of the war recalls in his memoir that the soldiers were first trained at a location with extreme cold, where they jokingly called “Siberia.” They were then sent secretly to the South but carried winter coats with them.³⁰⁰ This detail reveals that Beijing was prepared for a Soviet attack from the north, but the Chinese troops were not great in number to fight two wars at the same time, so they were prepared to send some troops back to the northern border if such needs arose. As revealed later, before the Chinese attack on Vietnam, Beijing had put its troops on the Sino-Soviet border on emergency war alert, and had evacuated about 300,000 civilians from the northern border.³⁰¹

This was, as believed by many, why Deng only planned for a limited war, so that Beijing could achieve its political goals while avoiding a Soviet intervention. In Zhou Deli’s memoir, Deng’s directive was “speedy advance, speedy withdrawal” (su zhan su hui).³⁰² A limited lesson with restraint was also what Deng told Carter during his visit to the U.S. As estimated, the time it would take the Soviet Union to mobilize its troops deployed along the Sino-Soviet border to launch a major strike against China in order to hamper the Chinese effort in the south would be

²⁹⁸ Khoo 2011, 105.

²⁹⁹ “Mongolian Record of Conversation with Soviet Officials in Moscow, February 1979,” February 09, 1979, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Mongolian Foreign Ministry Archive, Ulaanbaatar, fond 2, dans 1, kh/n 440b. Obtained and translated for CWHIP by Sergey Radchenko.
<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113310>.

³⁰⁰ Long, Xiang. 2010. “Yi Pian Bu Xiang Xie de Huiyilu: Dui Yue Ziwei Huanjizhan Qinshen Jingli (A Memoir That I Did Not Want to Write: Personal Experience in the Self-Defensive Counter-Attack against Vietnam.”
http://www.360doc.com/content/11/0124/10/64111_88646058.shtml.

³⁰¹ Chang 1985, 88-89.

³⁰² *Yige Gaoji Canmouzhang*, 257.

at least half a month.³⁰³ As it turned out, from China's launch of the attack on February 17 to its announcement of retreat on March 5, the military campaign lasted exactly sixteen days. A limited war could also dispel the domestic concern that the war efforts might distract from China's economic reform program.

8. Preparations for War: Deng's U.S. Visit and Troop Deployment

To deter a possible Soviet intervention, a major diplomatic effort was expediting the normalization of the U.S.-China relations. This is not to say that the normalization was solely for the purpose of deterring a possible Soviet attack – it might have played some role in incentivizing Beijing, but the normalization and Deng's visit right before the attack could certainly have had such an effect on the Soviet's consideration.

At a CCP politburo meeting on November 2, 1978, Deng asked the Foreign Ministry to “accelerate the normalization of relations with the United States.”³⁰⁴ Deng himself was personally involved in the negotiations that led to the signing of the Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations on December 15, 1978.

At the invitation of President Carter, Deng visited the United States on January 29 - February 5. In his conversation with President Carter on January 29th, Deng revealed his plan to punish Vietnam with a “limited” military action. He laid out the many reasons China should use force against Vietnam – Vietnam's alignment with the Soviets, its regional ambitions, its threats to China at the border, and the need to “disrupt Soviet strategic dispositions” and “putting a halt” on Vietnam's “rampant ambitions.” “We consider it necessary to put a restraint on the wild

³⁰³ Min 1993, 58.

³⁰⁴ *Deng Xiaoping Nianpu 1975-1997 (Chronicles of Deng Xiaoping 1975-1997)*, 2004. Vol. 1. 2 vols. Zhongyang wenxian (Central Party Literature Press), 417.

ambitions of the Vietnamese and to give them an appropriate limited lesson.” Deng also said that the Chinese leadership had considered the possibility of a chain reaction, mainly a reaction from the Soviets. He estimated that a large reaction was unlikely. Given the “winter time” and that “large-scale operations in the North are not easy,” “if our action in the South is quickly completed, they won’t have time to react.” China had also considered the possibility of a large reaction in the worst scenario. In that case, “we are not afraid.” Given the Soviets’ limited deployment in the Far East and the time needed to shift forces, “we can hold out.” Deng asked for America’s “moral support in the international arena.”³⁰⁵ President Carter did not provide a definitive answer on the spot. He only expressed that “It would be difficult for us to encourage violence. We can give you intelligence briefings. We know of no recent movements of Soviet troops towards your borders.”³⁰⁶

The next day, in his private meeting with Deng, Carter read his own notes to Deng and continued the discussion on Vietnam. In the note, Carter tried to discourage Deng. He said a military action would be “a serious mistake” and made the argument that such “a token action” would not be the best course to halt the Vietnamese ambitions and would do much damage to China’s international image, or even the settlement of Taiwan. He also cited the risks of escalations and of China being quagmired in such a conflict.³⁰⁷ But Deng insisted about the attack and said the matter had been “thoroughly vetted at the top of the Chinese government.” He stressed that the situation would only get worse if China did not counter with force and promised

³⁰⁵ “Deng-Carter Conversation on 1/29/1979.”

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ “Oral Presentation by President Carter to Chinese Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping,” Washington, January 30, 1979, Carter Library, Brzezinski Donated Material, Geographic File, Box 9, China (People’s Republic of), President Meeting with (Vice Premier) Deng Xiaoping: 12/19/78–10/3/79.

that the attack would only last “10-20 days, to be followed by withdrawal.” Deng said he would appreciate America’s intelligence sharing.³⁰⁸

Later documents do suggest the U.S. Intelligence sharing. Robert Gates recalls in his memoir that Carter and Deng had reached an agreement for technical intelligence cooperation against the Soviet Union.³⁰⁹ In his book “About Face,” Mann claims that Brzezinski met with Chinese ambassador Chai Zemin daily during the Chinese attack, turning over American intelligence on Soviet military deployments at the Sino-Soviet border.³¹⁰ Although the U.S. public discourse after the attack suggested that the U.S. did not want to be seen as a collaborator in the Chinese attack, it did try to deter a possible Soviet intervention through private channels. In a special coordination meeting on the subject attended by Cyrus Vance, Richard Holbrooke, Stansfield Turner, Zbigniew Brzezinski, David Aaron, Michel Oksenberg and several others, the group suggested the need to consider the option of informing Moscow, “if the Soviets appear to be moving toward acquiring Cam Ranh Bay for a naval base,” that “their action could lead to our reconsideration of our position that we would not enter into a security relationship with the People’s Republic of China.”³¹¹

On December 8, 1978, the Chinese CMC ordered the Guangzhou and Kunming Military Regions to get ready for military action against Vietnam by 10 January 1979.³¹² On December 25, the Guangxi -Vietnamese border was closed as troops arrived nearby.³¹³ On December 30,

³⁰⁸ “Memorandum of Conversation,” Washington, January 30, 1979, Carter Library, National Security Affairs, Staff Material, Office, Outside the System File, Box 47, China: President’s Meeting with Vice Premier Deng: 1–2/79. Top Secret.

³⁰⁹ Gates 2015, 413.

³¹⁰ Mann 2000, 100.

³¹¹ “Summary of Conclusions of a Special Coordination Committee Meeting,” Washington, February 19, 1979, Carter Library, National Security Affairs, Staff Material, Office, Meetings File, Box 14, Folder 20, SCC Meeting #141 Held 2/19/79, 2/79. Secret.

³¹² *Yige Gaoji Canmouzhang*, 246; also see Min 1993, 18.

³¹³ *Yige Gaoji Canmouzhang*, 269-71.

“the Vietnam Army chief of staff held an emergency meeting...[predicted] there will be major conflicts at the border...[they] put the Northern Regional Force on an emergency war alert.”³¹⁴ When Deng visited U.S. in late January, he no longer tried to hide China’s intention to use force. He addressed a press conference at the end of his visit: “We call the Vietnamese the Cubans of the Orient. If you don’t teach them some necessary lessons, their provocations will increase ... But as to what action to take, we will have to wait and see. I can say two things: one, we Chinese mean what we say; and two, we do not act rashly.”³¹⁵ During his trip to Japan the following week, he once again confirmed to journalists that “there has been necessary military deployment.”³¹⁶ At a CCP Politburo expanded session that discussed further about the military campaign on February 11, Beijing issued orders to Guangxi and Yunnan military commands to launch the attack on Feb 17.³¹⁷ On February 14, the CCP Central Committee announced and justified an attack in a notice sent to party organizations of the provinces, military regions, government ministries, and asked them to disseminate the information to party cadres at all levels and basically all Chinese citizens.³¹⁸ It was essentially war announced. The rest was history.

The Chinese troops fought a difficult war, but they managed to advance to as far as Lang Son. Lang Son was the last geographic barrier near the border. Past Lang Son, it was all plains, with a road and a railway connecting to Hanoi. The grave situation called the Vietnamese MoFA to issue an emergency retreat order of all foreign embassies in Hanoi on March 5.³¹⁹ Yet on the

³¹⁴ *YueNan Junshi Da Shi Ji*, 125.

³¹⁵ *Beijing Review*, February 9, 1979, 13-14.

³¹⁶ Min 1993, 8.

³¹⁷ Zhou, Junlun, ed. 1999. *Nie Rongzhen Nianpu (Chronicles of Nie Rongzhen)*. Beijing: Renmin., 1147; Jiang, Feng, Xiaochun Ma, and Yishan Dou. 1991. *Yangyong Jiangjun Zhuan (Biography of General Yang Yong)*. Beijing: Jiefangjun., 496-97.

³¹⁸ For content of the notice, see Min 1993, 34.

³¹⁹ Min 1993, 63.

same day, China declared withdrawal. By March 16, the Chinese troops had withdrawn completely to the Chinese side of the border.

Nonetheless, the war continued. On the same day Beijing announced withdrawal, Hanoi issued a national mobilization order enlisting all age-appropriate citizens (men with ages between 18 and 45 and women between 18 and 35) into the army and mobilizing all resources for the war.³²⁰ The border clashes continued. The two sides engaged in several more conflicts that dragged on for a decade.

III. In the Lens of the (Mis)Alignment Theory

In the text that follows, I examine whether the propaganda campaign before and during the Sino-Vietnamese border war could be explained by the misalignment of public opinion and state policy intent and whether mobilization was one of the driving forces for the adoption of the propaganda campaign. I first evaluate how well the theoretical assumptions apply to the case. I then make judgements about the values of the independent variables and see if the predicted outcome is consistent with the actual outcome, just like what I did in the congruence test for each case. This is followed by tracing the mobilization process to test the theory's observable implications elaborated in Chapter 2. In this part, I also assess the proposed agenda-setting, the priming, and the framing effects of mass media and see how they worked in the mobilization process. I then test the observable implications of the competing theories in their ability in explaining the case.

³²⁰ "The Announcement, Decision, and Order on National Mobilization by Vietnam National Congress and President," "The Decision for the Militarization of All Citizens by the Vietnam Government," March 5, 1979, in Xinhua News Agency International Information Group ed., *Woguo dui Yue ziwei huanjizhan ziliao ji* (Collections of Materials on Our Country's Self-Defense Counterattack against Vietnam, March 1979. For Internal Use. 83-85.

1. Rational Actor and the Role of Public Opinion in Foreign Policy Making in China of 1980s

Overall, the assumptions of the (mis)alignment theory fit the case. The first assumption is about the rational nature of the state actor – they seek regime survival domestically against competitors and state security internationally against external threats. The role of bureaucracies, factions, interest groups or individuals within the state should be minimal. The fact that China’s action and reaction in the war were largely driven by the strategic considerations in relation to Vietnam, the Soviet Union, and the United States, as demonstrated in the narrative of the case, confirms such an assumption.

Some scholars stress the individual role of Deng Xiaoping in pursuing the war. For example, Zhang Xiaoming argues that “the decision to go to war was largely his alone. He formulated the arguments, he made the case, and he had the faith and confidence of the PLA. His will carried the day.”³²¹ Not denying Deng’s personal role in pushing for the war, the decision, however, was not dictated by his personality or emotions, but rather it was calculated rationally based on the strategic security needs of China – the threat of the Soviet Union and Vietnam’s tilting towards the Soviets and its expansion of influence in Southeast Asia. Even Zhang himself made the argument elsewhere in his book that “Beijing’s decision to go to war with Vietnam in 1979 was largely based on Deng’s assessment of China’s strategic situation, with a focus on what Soviet expansion meant to global security and what responsibility China should share for maintaining the balance of world power.”³²²

A possible concern for the simplification of two domestic actors – the state as one actor and the public as another, is the power struggle between Deng and Hua Guofeng, the then

³²¹ Zhang 2015, 54.

³²² Zhang 2015, 39.

chairman of the CCP and the CMC, that coincided with the early decision period of the war. But as to be argued in the competing theories section later, Deng's motivation to go to war was not to use it as an opportunity in his power struggle with Hua. By November 1978, Deng had already gained the upper hand in the upper echelon and did not need to use a costly war to confirm his already dominant position within the Party. Overall, despite the fact that the military and the border provinces each had their parochial interests in the subject, their divergence in opinions, if any, only mattered on a granular level, not on the grand level of pursuing the war, or the propaganda strategy. In this view, the Chinese state could be regarded as one coherent actor in motivating and pushing for the war, and hence the propaganda campaign that preceded it.

The role of public opinion in foreign policy making in China of the late 1970s and the 1980s also fit the second and the third assumptions, namely, the public could exert some pressure on the state's foreign policy, but not to the degree that it can dictate foreign policy, because the state could manipulate public opinion to tailor its needs. As discussed previously in the "background" section in Chapter 3, the Chinese propaganda system was at the crossroads of commercialization and liberalization in the late 1970s and 1980s, so it had the characteristics of both the Mao and the Deng eras. The Mao era featured airtight state control of public opinion through a state media apparatus vividly described as the "throat and tongue" of the Party. Public opinion was not decisive in the leaders' decision for war, but public influence was also not negligible especially on major foreign policy decisions such as war. The state mainly took a top-down indoctrination approach towards influencing public opinion towards its foreign policy needs. Public opinion was evaluated by the state, only in the sense of acknowledging the basis of the "thought work," not in the sense that it might affect foreign policy making. An example that demonstrates this relationship is the timing, the target audience, and the content of the notice

released by the CCP Central Committee on February 14, 1979 to the lower echelons and further to the masses. On the eve of the attack, the notice explained the reasons for the attack and asked the cadres “to pass on this information to the masses and border residents and to report back any reactions the public might have.”³²³ The fact that the public was notified at the last moment confirmed that it was not part of the decision-making process. But at the same time, public opinion mattered, so that the state cared to notify the public and to ask the cadres to report on it.

Throughout the 1980s up until the collapse of the Soviet Union, which coincided with the Tiananmen Square student protests and the end of the Sino-Vietnam War, the state control of media softened; the media experienced privatization; and public opinion experienced a period of liberalization. But the state maintained a dominant control over media and public opinion. It supplemented its previous direct control with more nuanced means, such as through majority shareholding, controlling the appointment of top personnel, financial rewards to media outlets and journalists, legal and structural regulations, etc. But this was still before the advent of the Internet age, and before the rise of the popular nationalism, so the state did not have to deal with the challenges posed by the spread of the Internet and the ultranationalism. The relationship between the state and the public remained within the confines of the theoretical assumptions.

2. Public Opinion: Moderate/Weak

Before 1978, the Chinese public had little knowledge about the border dispute, let alone feeling strongly about it. In the 1970s, well before the advent of the digital age, the only source of news for the Chinese people was the official media outlets firmly gripped in the government’s hands. Before the dispute emerged in 1973, what the official media had been instilling into the Chinese

³²³ Min 1993, 34.

people's mind was a brotherly relationship with Vietnam featuring the Chinese people's staunch support of Vietnam's independence cause. Even when border skirmishes swelled to 926 in 1976, *People's Daily* had no mention of it; the Chinese people had been kept in the dark.³²⁴

The Chinese domestic political and economic background of the war even fueled some resistance. The year 1978 marks the beginning of the economic reform and opening-up, after a decade of political turmoil in the Cultural Revolution. The public sentiment was ripe for economic development and rehabilitation. "The newly adopted economic reform and opening-up policy brought great hope for a return to normalcy and increasing prosperity."³²⁵ People feared a war might disrupt it. Zhang Xiaoming's work comments specifically on the public opinion in the border provinces of Guangxi and Yunnan prior to the war: "Public opinion in these two provinces was pessimistic about Beijing's war decision. The local communities had undergone much hardship in the Cultural Revolution and had made considerable sacrifices for the Vietnamese war effort...these areas remained socially and economically backward. Nevertheless, citizens there hoped that economic reform – now the highest national priority – would bring peace, development, and better standards of living. The people and local governments in these two provinces seemed unenthusiastic about the Chinese attack on Vietnam and feared that the military action would conflict with the economic development agenda."³²⁶ The refugee issue also burdened the border provinces the most. According to the *History of Yunnan Province*, 35,342 Chinese refugees from Vietnam up until late 1980 was displaced and

³²⁴ Min 1993, 2.

³²⁵ Zhang 2015, 40.

³²⁶ Zhang 2015, 85.

resettled to Yunnan.³²⁷ A war on the border would use more resources from these provinces and cause the influx of even more refugees.

Lack of enthusiasm for the war, or even resistance to it, was especially common among soldiers. Even after mobilization and deployment orders were issued in December 1978, many soldiers were not sure “whether the military campaign was righteous or not, active or passive, invasion or counterattack.”³²⁸ They did not understand why “we support Vietnam in the past but punish it today.”³²⁹ A retired government official attests in an interview that, “Voicing oppositions against the war, some offspring of government officials even used their connections to flee the military.”³³⁰

Historical works generally confirm this lack of enthusiasm towards the war in the PLA and the public.³³¹ Andrew Scobell notes the “mixed views of the public” and the “varying opinions” of the intellectuals. A lack of enthusiasm for the war among the general public was picked up by foreign correspondents and freely voiced by intellectuals.³³² During a visit to Kunming in August 1979, even after the war broke, Nayan Chanda reports that he was struck by “the population’s total apathy toward an exhibition in Kunming about China’s victorious ‘counterattack in self-defense’.”³³³

³²⁷ Yunnan Province Foreign Affairs Office. 1996. *Yunnan Province History: Foreign Affairs History*. 53 vols. Kunming: Yunnan renmin., 149.

³²⁸ Political Teaching Office of PLA Nanjing Advanced Infantry School. 1979. *ZhongYue Bianjing Ziwei Huanji Zuozhan Zhengzhi Gongzuo Jingyan Xuanbian (Selected Experiences of Political Work during the Counterattack in Self-Defense on the Sino-Vietnamese Border)*. Nanjing: Nanjing junqu gaoji bubing xuexiao., 7.

³²⁹ General Office of the General Political Department, ed. 1980. *ZhongYue Bianjing Ziwei Huanji Zuozhan Zhengzhi Gongzuo Jingyan Xuanbian (Compilation of Experiences of Political Work during the Counterattack in Self-Defense on the Sino-Vietnamese Border)*. Vol. 1. Beijing: Zongzhengzhibu., 7.

³³⁰ Interview 40, June 2017, Beijing.

³³¹ Zhang 2015, 67; Chanda 1986; Scobell 2003, 140.

³³² Scobell 2003, 140.

³³³ Chanda 1986, 361.

3. The Misalignment: A Hardline State Policy Intent

But China was determined to “teach Vietnam a lesson.” To be clear, China acted in restraint at the emergence of the refugee issue and the border dispute. This was evident not only in its internal deliberations, but also in its efforts to negotiate the matter. The meeting between Pham Van Dong and Li Xiannian in June 1977 was probably the last honest exchange between the top leaderships seeking to overhaul the deteriorating relationship. But that meeting also signaled a change in the relationship – that the two sides started to shed the pretense of cordiality and started to talk candidly about their problems, sometimes acrimoniously. In the meeting, Li Xiannian handed a written memorandum to Dong listing a litany of complaints of Vietnamese anti-China policy in words and in action.

In the Chinese written memo, Li listed Vietnam’s anti-China rhetoric, increased tension at the land border, the Vietnamese obstruction of the maintenance of a railroad on the Chinese side of the border, the maritime dispute over the Paracels, the Spratlys and the Gulf of Tonkin, and Vietnam’s mistreatment of ethnic Chinese in Vietnam.³³⁴ In the Vietnamese archives recording Dong and Li’s subsequent unprepared discussion, Pham discredited his earlier recognition of China’s sovereignty over the Paracels and explained that the 1958 consent was made under the pressure of war.³³⁵

The conversation, however, arrived at no progress. In fact, during Le Duan’s last Beijing visit in November 1977, just a few months after the Li – Dong talk, Duan acted as though the conversation had never happened. Duan sought additional Chinese aid, praised the brotherly

³³⁴ Pham Van Dong and Li Xiannian Meeting Memo Chinese Version.

³³⁵ Pham Van Dong and Li Xiannian Meeting Memo Vietnamese Version.

Sino-Vietnamese relationship as usual, and completely ignored the problems Li had raised to Dong.³³⁶

As these problems further deteriorated, the summer of 1978 marked a change in China's position. The Chinese overflights that penetrated into the Vietnamese airspace was an escalated response to the border clashes. As the animosity thickened to a breaking point in rhetoric, diplomatic, economic, and military aspects of the relationship in the summer of 1978, and as the refugee negotiations and the border negotiations failed in September, the PLA generals deliberated on a preemptive attack. The planned attack, although labeled as "punitive" and "self-defense," was preemptive and escalatory in nature. This hardline policy was debated and confirmed subsequently.

The international environment was also conducive to a Chinese hardline policy. Vietnam's tilting towards the Soviet Union, the number one external threat of China's at the time, eventually led to the conclusion of a formal Vietnam-Soviet alliance in November 1978. Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia in December 1978 further augmented this geopolitical threat to China from the south. In efforts to break the Soviet encirclement, China normalized relationship with the United States and Japan. During Deng's visit to the U.S. right before the attack, although President Carter did not support the idea of an attack, he did not voice strong objections either. Before that, Deng had completed several foreign visits and he conveyed to Carter that he "expects divided international reactions [to the attack]." The Soviet Union would also need time to mobilize troops deployed along the Sino-Soviet border if it were to intervene. Thus, the global environment was conciliatory for a limited, yet destructive Chinese action against Vietnam.

³³⁶ Zhang 2015, 37.

China's eventual hardline position was of little debate in international history. The 1979 campaign was a massive military operation involving seventeen Chinese armies of regular forces, totaling 220,000 troops.³³⁷ According to Vietnamese sources, "Beijing fielded almost 600,000 regular troops including 11 army corps and many unattached divisions, about 700 aircraft of various kinds, almost 600 tanks and armored vehicles, and thousands of artillery pieces."³³⁸ The battle fought as far as to deep in the northern part of Vietnam. Despite the final withdrawal, it was an operation on a foreign country's soil. Despite the claimed Vietnamese provocations, the scale of the Chinese so-called "counter-attack" was disproportionate in response.

4. Mobilization

Once starting off this war path, mobilizing the public became a necessity given widespread lack of public enthusiasm. It was largely the state-public misalignment on the issue that had motivated the propaganda campaign to mobilize. The case corroborates the observable implications of a mobilizing campaign listed in Chapter 2.

Ha1 (State Concern): Government officials express concerns about the moderate/weak public opinion and the need to mobilize. Given the state's hardline policy intent, the existing moderate/weak public opinion should cause leaders' concerns. These expressed concerns, especially if expressed privately, reveal their motivations to bridge the gap.

³³⁷ Min Li, 19.

³³⁸ Truong-Chinh, "The Vietnamese people are determined to defeat any aggressive schemes of Chinese expansionism and hegemonism," *Nhan Dan*, February 17, 1982. Truong-Chinh was a member of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) Politburo and President of the Council of State. The piece was published on the third anniversary of the attack.

Interview of a retired government official discloses that the Chinese leadership was particularly concerned about the lack of public enthusiasm about the war. “The public might not comprehend this one-eighty-degree change – to them it seemed like a one-eighty-degree change, though to us it was accumulated reaction to provocations after provocations.”³³⁹

This concern was also evident in the political work guidelines circulated internally within the Party organs and the PLA. Such concerns worried about public opinion especially soldiers’ morale in three aspects. First, concerns were expressed that people were not certain that the war was just. The attack target was a “comrade plus brother” in the past and public opinion might not turn fast enough to follow the transition. The attack territory was also foreign territory and concerns were expressed that the public, or soldiers, might have difficulty justifying such an action.³⁴⁰ Second, concerns were expressed that some soldiers, even those already deployed to the border, still believed that the Chinese government’s threats of punishment and military deployment were mere bluffing. “The focus of our work has changed to the four modernizations, [so we] don’t want to fight a war; our American and Japanese friends do not support a war either because they want to do business with us.”³⁴¹ Third, concerns were expressed that the public, or soldiers, were not confident that they would win. “Vietnam has been fighting for almost thirty years and their officers have battlefield experience.” “Our troops have not fought a war for more than twenty years, and all commanders of battalions and below do not have any battlefield experience at all.”³⁴²

³³⁹ Interview 25, June 2017, Beijing.

³⁴⁰ Political Teaching Office of PLA Guangzhou Military Region Infantry School. 1979. *ZhongYue Bianjing Ziwei Fanji Zuozhan Zhengzhi Gongzuo Ziliao* (Selected Materials on Political Work during the Counterattack in Self-Defense on the Sino-Vietnamese Border). Guangzhou junqu bubing xuexiao., 6.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 5.

³⁴² Ibid., 7.

In fact, this concern for a weak public opinion was so severe that it was one of the reasons that the Chinese leaders postponed the attack to February. In the leaked report addressing the expanded Politburo meeting in January 1979, Geng Biao claimed that one reason for delaying the attack was to prepare public opinion for the war. Although he stressed on the world public opinion, he also mentioned the need to “strengthen the morale of the board masses of our officers and men.” He said “our repeated toleration will enable everyone to know the aggressiveness of the Cuba in the East. Only through such exposure can we...educate the people...”³⁴³

Ha2 (Media Directives): The state issues media plans or directives to media outlets to mobilize the public. The mobilization should leave traces within the state apparatus, especially for “government-orchestrated, concerted efforts” such as these propaganda campaigns. Traces like these should amount to “smoking gun” evidence.³⁴⁴

In the war preparation, the Department of Propaganda, *People’s Daily* top editorial staff, and the General Political Department of the PLA were all closely involved, and they issued further guidelines to their subordinates for political mobilization. A retired propaganda official confirms that the CCP Central Committee issued propaganda guidelines as early as the refugee issue blew out in the summer of 1978 and continued to monitor the situation and issued more directives throughout the entire war.³⁴⁵ These policy directives included general guidelines on “exposing the Vietnamese crimes against Chinese citizens and border residents, on educating the people about the swollen regional ambitions of Vietnam and its brazen invasion of Cambodia, as

³⁴³ “Geng Biao Report,” 390.

³⁴⁴ Collier 2011.

³⁴⁵ Interview 25, June 2017, Beijing.

well as the socialist-imperialist ‘anti-China’ scheme of the Soviets behind the Sino-Vietnamese problems.” The various propaganda organs at the Central Propaganda Department (CPD), the PLA, and the state media outlets, also had specific guidelines on weekly themes to follow, how much each issue should be reported, where should they appear, and what arguments the articles should make.³⁴⁶ As the war continued, the propaganda efforts continued. “In 1985, the CCP’s propaganda department and the PLA’s political department intensified the campaign by sending war heroes and model soldiers selected from the entire armed forces to lecture around the country.”³⁴⁷

Besides influencing the general public, the political apparatus also ran full steam mobilizing the local communities and the soldiers. The local communities in the border areas in Guangxi and Yunnan provinces played an instrumental role in providing the PLA with personnel (militia) and logistical (food and housing) support. For example, Longzhou County in Guangxi organized 10,700 militiamen and women in support of the PLA; Maguan County in Yunnan organized 25,000 militiamen and women.³⁴⁸ These militiamen and women transported food and supplies, built roads, bridges, and trenches, carried and cared for the wounded, among many other jobs. In order to obtain these supports and mobilize the local communities, “the CCP propaganda departments of both provinces sent city, district, county, and subdistrict party organizations long lists of Vietnam’s alleged crimes against China, requiring that the information be used to educate the local populace and arouse their patriotism in support of the war. Guangxi Autonomous Region held more than 530 mass meetings with a total attendance of 263,400.”³⁴⁹

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ Zhang 2015, 174.

³⁴⁸ ZYBJ, 249, 257.

³⁴⁹ Zhang 2015, 86, citing from Local History Compilation Committee of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, ed. 1994. *Guangxi Tongzhi Junshi Zhi (General History of Guangxi: Military History)*. Nanning: Guangxi Renmin Press, 322.

The CCP committee of Yunnan Province issued a mobilization order that called upon the local communities to “do all for the front and do all for victory.”³⁵⁰

In the PLA, the mobilization efforts included denunciation meetings, setting up models and emulating heroes, exhibits and lectures by soldiers, villagers from the border areas, and Chinese refugees from Vietnam. One PLA political work guideline revealed that because of the limited time, mobilization was carried out on the road during the course of the deployment.³⁵¹ The several volumes published by the PLA’s Political Department on their experiences in mobilizing the soldiers serve as another piece of evidence of the mobilization process.³⁵² In an order issued on February 12, 1979, the CMC and the PLA General Political Department stipulated the main task of the political work was to “strengthen war preparation education, incite hatred towards the Vietnamese revisionists, continuously encourage the troop’s fighting mood.” “The focus of the war preparation education is to expose and condemn the crimes of the Vietnamese revisionists...[arouse] hatred, despise and disdain towards the Vietnamese revisionists...” “...listen to the radio stations...and read the newspapers, so that everyone can learn about the new expansionist crimes of the Vietnamese revisionists.”³⁵³

These orders further spelled out the goals of the war-preparation education as threefold: first, to clear the understanding of the fundamental changes in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship. The political work should educate the people that “Vietnam has become the Soviet revisionists’ lapdog, the ‘Cuba in the East,’ the hooligan in Asia, and a sinister enemy of our country.” “[We should] explain why we support Vietnam in its independence cause in the past, but have to

³⁵⁰ Zhang 2015, 86, citing from War Preparation and Aid-the-Front Leading Group of Yunnan Province, and Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party Committee of Yunnan Province, eds. 1991. *Yingxiong de Fengbei: Yunnan Renmin Shinian Zhiqian Jishi (Heroic Monument: True Record of the Ten-Year Aid-the-Front Work by the Yunnan People)*. Kunming: Yunnan Renmin Press, 531.

³⁵¹ ZYBJ, 6.

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ Ibid.

punish it today. Make understand we have no choice but to counterattack in self-defense and our war is a just war.” Second, the political work should clarify the relationship between “punishing Vietnam and the four modernizations.” “The war will not impede on our four modernizations. In fact, the Vietnamese aggression has posed an acute threat to the four modernizations...Only a severe punishment to the Vietnamese could protect our socialist modernization.” Third, the political work should help strengthen the troops’ confidence in winning the war. “Educate on them our advantages, our strengths.”³⁵⁴

Ha3 (Inflammatory Content): Media content is inflammatory – self-victimizing, accusing others for aggression, or implying injustice. The themes and the tones of the articles should generally be inflammatory to achieve a mobilizing objective.

The media content focused on arousing public animosity towards Vietnam. The themes ranged from accusing Vietnam’s brutal treatment of the ethnic Chinese, recalling the sacrifice the Chinese people had made for Vietnam, condemning the “ingratitude” of the Vietnamese and “returning good with evil,” their frequent “infringement” on Chinese territory, their expansionist ambitions and invasion of Cambodia, “colluding” with the Soviet revisionists and “slandering” China. All these inflammatory themes aimed to rally public support for a hardline policy.

The propaganda played the emotional card well. When reporting on the refugee issue, the articles used personal stories of the refugees and bloody images to condemn the cruelty of the Vietnamese authorities in persecuting the Chinese residents. In reporting on the border dispute, the articles recalled the great sacrifice the Chinese people had made for Vietnam, some of which were from personal experiences of border residents and veterans, and condemned the

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 7.

Vietnamese ingratitude in repaying good with evil. In exposing Vietnam's expansionist intention, the articles often cited arrogant remarks from the Vietnamese soldiers, such as "Phnom Penh has fallen. Aren't you afraid?" or "We will soon advance to Dongxing (a town in Guangxi) to have breakfast there."³⁵⁵ The articles portrayed Vietnam as a Soviet minion, often in mocking tones. After the war broke, the articles glorified the war efforts by providing examples of heroic soldiers, militiamen and women, and Vietnamese people who had positive experiences with the Chinese troops but negative ones with the Vietnamese troops.

Besides newspaper articles, the Chinese propaganda also resorted to other forms of media to arouse an emotional response from the public. Literature works such as Li Cunbao's *Gaoshan xia de huahuan* (*Wreaths of Flowers at the Foot of the Mountains*, 1982), which was later turned into a movie, extolled the heroic acts of the soldiers and incited patriotism among the public. There were other movies, such as "*Leichang xiangsishu* (*The Lives They Left Behind*, 1988)," and "*Changpaishan zhi zhan* (*The Battle of Changpaishan*, 1981)," as well as songs, such as "*Shiwu de yueliang* (*The Moon on the Fifteenth*, 1984)" and "*Xueran de fengcai* (*The Blood-Stained Valor*, 1987)." Some of these became very popular among the people. The popular song "*The Moon on the Fifteenth*" is about a soldier's warm thoughts of his wife and family at home, setting a positive tone to defending family at the border. The song "*The Blood-Stained Valor*" commemorates the soldiers who lost their lives in the war, whom the country will be forever indebted to. These works added a personal and humane touch to the patriotic themes. A retired journalist recalls, "when a college-student-turned soldier Xu Liang, who lost a leg in the war, was invited to the CCTV annual Chinese New Year gala to sing the song '*The Blood-Stained Valor*,' it brought many audience to tears."³⁵⁶

³⁵⁵ "Shi ke ren, shu bu ke ren (If this can be tolerated, what cannot?)," *People's Daily*, February 17, 1979, 1.

³⁵⁶ Interview 40, June 2017, Beijing.

Ha4 (Motivation Disappears for the Alignment Theory): Media coverage diminishes as execution of a hardline policy comes to an end.

As shown in Figure 5.1, the tapering off of the propaganda campaign in early 1990 coincided with the end of the war.

IV. Audience Cost?

As argued previously in Chapter 2, both the audience cost theory and the diversionary war theory would predict a propaganda campaign in this scenario, but with different motivations. Audience cost theory would predict that the state would launch a propaganda campaign for coercive purposes; diversionary war theory would predict that the state would launch a propaganda campaign to divert public attention from a domestic crisis.

Was China seeking to use the publicity for coercive purposes? I evaluate the fit of an audience cost argument by assessing the four audience cost hypotheses laid out in Chapter 2.

Hc1 (Hoop Test about Scope): The propaganda campaign should be adopted during an ongoing coercion with the foreign rival. The audience cost theory is a theory about coercions. Without ongoing coercions, the audience cost theory becomes irrelevant. Negotiations are signs of an ongoing coercion but are not a necessary condition, as sometimes bringing a target state to the negotiation table itself could be a coercive goal. In most circumstances, I examine whether the state has made demands to the foreign rival.

China's objective in the war was partly punitive – to teach its “treacherous” former ally “a lesson,” and was partly coercive – to curb the SRV and the Soviet's expansion plan in Southeast Asia and to alleviate the threat of Vietnam at the border as a disturbance to China's

economic reform and open programs. Concretely, Beijing demanded that Hanoi retreat from Cambodia and stop its encroachment at the border. This coercive goal was reflected in both the initiation and the end of the military conflicts – Vietnam’s regional ambition was used as a reason for the Chinese attack by Deng to Carter in 1978; the normalization of the relationship in 1991 was preconditioned on Vietnam’s retreat from Cambodia. China’s demands were clearly expressed by Vice-Premier Li Xiannian to Prime Minister Pham Van Dong in their meeting in June 1977. As mentioned earlier, the list included demands to stop the anti-China rhetoric in Vietnam, stop the conflicts at the border, stop the mistreatment of ethnic Chinese, etc. When the decision for war was deliberated in September 1978, the PLA leaders determined the military campaign to be punitive and coercive, for the goals of forcing Vietnam’s retreat from Cambodia, stopping Vietnam’s encroachment at the border, and check its regional ambitions.

Hc2 (Tying Hands): Officials make public threats with substantive punishment. The key of an audience cost logic is that the state makes a clear threat public so that backing down would be costly and less attractive. This, in return, enhances the threat credibility and forces the opponent who fears a collision to back down. If the state issues no public threat, or the threat the state issues is vague in terms and hollow in content, then the state is not committed to a domestic cost, and the propaganda is likely for the purpose of mobilizing the domestic public, rather than for a foreign coercive purpose.

As mentioned above, China expressed coercive demands privately as early as June 1977. But they did not publicize their demands until May 1978. The first *People’s Daily* article publicly demanding Hanoi to stop mistreating the ethnic Chinese was published on May 28, 1978, but without any explicit threat.³⁵⁷ The first public threat was not issued until October 27,

³⁵⁷ “Quanguo Qiaolian fuzeren, quanguo Zhengxie huaqiaozu chengyuan fabiao tanhua, jianjue yonghu wo zhengfu paichuan fu Yue jie qiao de jueding (Members of the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese and

1978 and the wording was vague – *People’s Daily* reported a MoFA statement that Vietnam should “bear the consequences and all responsibility” for “violating China’s territorial sovereignty.”³⁵⁸ This public threat only came *after* the bilateral relationship had passed the point of breaking and a war decision was already being deliberated. By November 10, the language of the warning became “do not turn a deaf ear to China’s warning!” in a *People’s Daily* front-page editorial, stronger in tone and in a more salient place of the paper but still hollow.³⁵⁹ On December 14, the Chinese threat became even stronger in tone: “China’s patience and restraint have limits” in a *People’s Daily* front-page report of a MoFA diplomatic note.³⁶⁰ This strong warning, although still vague, occurred only *after* China had already decided on a punitive attack at the Central Work Conference in November and the Chinese CMC had already issued deployment orders on December 8. The tone of the Chinese warning reached its peak on the launch day of the Chinese attack on February 17, 1979, with a *People’s Daily* article entitled “Shi ke ren, shu bu ke ren (If this can be tolerated, what cannot?)” in the front page.³⁶¹ The delay in making public threats and the fact that the threats remained vague demonstrates Beijing’s reluctance in engaging the public and tying its hands. Besides, for an audience cost logic to work, the threats should be made public before the coercion fails. But instead, the warnings strengthened gradually only *after* the situation became more and more dire, a war more and more

members of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Group of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference issued a speech and resolutely supported the decision of the Chinese government to send ships to Vietnam to pick up the victimized Chinese,” *People’s Daily*, May 28, 1978, 2.

³⁵⁸ “Wo guo Waijiaobu zhaohui Yuenan zhuhua shiguan, qianglie kangyi Yuefang qinfan Zhongguo lingtu zhuquan (Our Foreign Ministry delivered a diplomatic note to the Vietnamese embassy in China and strongly protested the violation of China’s territorial sovereignty by Vietnam),” *People’s Daily*, October 27, 1978, 4.

³⁵⁹ “What does Vietnam want to do? (Yuenan dangju xiang gan shenme?)” *People’s Daily*, November 10, 1978, 1.

³⁶⁰ “Wo guo Waijiaobu zhaohui Yuenan zhuhua dashiguan, qianglie kangyi Yuenan dangju buduan qinfan wo lingtu he zhizao yixilie de yanzhong liuxue shijian (Our Foreign Ministry delivered a diplomatic note to the Vietnamese embassy in China and strongly protested Vietnam’s repeated invasion of our territory and provoking a series of serious bloody events),” *People’s Daily*, December 14, 1978, 1.

³⁶¹ “Shi ke ren, shu bu ke ren (If this can be tolerated, what cannot?),” *People’s Daily*, February 17, 1979, 1.

probable, and the failure of the coercion more and more likely. Therefore, the warnings, especially those made public only after the war was decided, function more as stronger rhetoric to mobilize the public for war, not much for coercing Hanoi to reverse its course of action. The threat made on the day of the attack, hence the failure of the coercion, was obviously too late for a coercive purpose.

Hc3 (Bargaining Advantage): On average, given the occurrence of the propaganda campaign, the international outcome should be more favorable to the government. This is borrowed and adapted from Weiss' work on anti-foreign protests. She reasons that "Once the government has tied its hands and demonstrated resolve by allowing anti-foreign protests, the burden of conciliation falls to the foreign government. On average, therefore, anti-foreign protests should lead to a more advantageous bargain for the authoritarian government."³⁶² She also points out that the actual outcome also depends on the strategic interactions with the other parties, so that negotiations may collapse, and crises may escalate. Propaganda campaigns, like anti-foreign protests, could also be a costly signal to show the state's resolve. So once engaged, the international outcome should be more favorable to the initiating state.

It was not clear whether the occurrence of the propaganda campaign made the international outcome more favorable to China. The coercion had failed the moment China launched the military attack. Hanoi rallied up the whole country to fight back against China and the war dragged on for a decade. Hanoi eventually withdrew from Cambodia, but it was not due, even partly, to China's propaganda campaign; it was a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Hc4 (Motivation Disappears): Media coverage diminishes as the coercion succeeds or fails. The propaganda campaign should end when the coercion has succeeded or has failed,

³⁶² Weiss 2008, 27.

because that is when the coercive motivation disappears. This directly contradicts Ha4 and Hb5 of the (mis)alignment theory.

The coercion failed on February 17, 1979 when China resorted to military means, but the propaganda campaign only started to climax by then and continued on.

To summarize, although China had coercive goals in this crisis, its threats remained vague and were publicized in a delayed fashion. Some threats were made after a war decision was already made, or even on the day of the attack, so not allowing enough time for an audience cost logic to work. The publicity did not necessarily give China an advantage in the bargaining. The coercion failed but the propaganda continued. All these pieces of evidence are in tension with an audience cost logic.

V. Diversionary War?

Did the Chinese leadership propagandize the Sino-Vietnamese dispute for diversionary purposes? Let's answer that by examining the three observable implications of the diversionary war theory, together with the parallel implications of the (mis)alignment theory.

Hd1 (Hoop Test about Scope): States are more likely to adopt a propaganda campaign on a foreign dispute when they face domestic challenges. Because of the risks involved in inciting public anger, it is likely that states only resort to scapegoating and diversionary logics when they are faced with severe domestic challenges. These domestic challenges should be severe enough to cause legitimacy crisis at home that makes diversionary strategies appealing.

The only plausible crisis was one related to Deng's re-ascendance in the Party, his power struggle with the then chairman of the CCP Hua Guofeng, as well as his policy initiative for reform and open. Even after the fall of the Gang of Four, Hua carried on many of Mao's ideas

and policies. In a joint editorial published on February 7, 1977 by *People's Daily*, the *Journal of Red Flag*, and the *PLA Daily*, Hua proclaimed the slogan of “the Two Whatever’s”: “We will resolutely uphold whatever policy decisions Chairman Mao made, and unswervingly follow whatever instructions Chairman Mao gave.”³⁶³

Deng Xiaoping criticized the “Two Whatever’s” as against the essence of Marxism even before his full rehabilitation.³⁶⁴ Deng was rehabilitated in July 1977 at the Third Plenum of the Tenth Party Congress. He regained his positions as the vice-chairman of the CCP, vice premier, vice chairman of the CMC, and the PLA general chief of staff. Deng’s approach to ideology and China’s future development, partly due to Deng’s personal experience in the Cultural Revolution, diverged with that of Hua. Deng pushed for the rehabilitation of victimized party officials in the Cultural Revolution, including Chen Yun, Deng Yingchao, Hu Yaobang, Wang Zhen, and Liu Shaoqi posthumously. On May 11, 1978, *Guangming Daily* published a front-page editorial, entitled “Practice Is the Sole Criterion of Testing Truth.”³⁶⁵ This article imposed an implicit criticism against Hua’s “Two Whatever’s” and was explicitly endorsed by Deng at the All-Army Political Work Conference in the following month. Deng sharply criticized those who regard “Marxist theory as lifeless dogma” and “odd quotations from Marxist-Leninist works as a ready-made panacea.”³⁶⁶ He cited Mao’s own method of “seeking truth from facts,” and insisted that “only through practice can the correctness of one’s ideas be proved, and there is no other way of testing truth.”³⁶⁷ In line with Deng’s ideological position, Deng advocated for employing

³⁶³ Hua Guofeng, “Xue hao wenjian, zhua zhu gang (Study the Documents Well and Grasp the Key Link),” *People’s Daily*, February 7, 1977, 1.

³⁶⁴ CCP Central Documentary Editorial Committee 1993, 38.

³⁶⁵ “Shijian shi jianyan zhenli de wei yi biao zhun (Practice Is the Sole Criterion of Testing Truth),” *Guangming Daily*, May 11, 1978, 1.

³⁶⁶ CCP Central Documentary Editorial Committee, ed. 1993. *Deng Xiaoping Wenxuan (Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping)*. Vol. 2. 3 vols. Beijing: Renmin, 116.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.

the western capitalist elements to the four modernizations and the reform and open as the focus of future work.

By fall of 1978, Deng had gradually won the ideological debate and the power struggle against Hua. Studies regard Hua's toast at the National Day reception on September 30 as a clear sign that Hua decided to retreat. In that toast, Hua echoed Deng's position by saying that "we must emancipate our minds," which paraphrased Deng's position on the "emancipation of the minds."³⁶⁸ The Central Work Conference in November 1978 not only endorsed Deng's dominant role in the leadership, the reform and open policy, but also the decision to attack Vietnam. These three decisions were rubberstamped by the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress the following month.

Because of the coincidence of the decision to attack Vietnam and the Deng-Hua power struggle, some might argue that Deng Xiaoping was using the propaganda and the war as a diversion from the power struggle, and to rally support for a domestic economic program. But this argument is flawed in three aspects. First, the power struggle was not a public crisis that the public attention needed to be diverted from – it was more of behind-the-scene jockeying. The ideological debate that peaked in the summer of 1978 was more open, but it was not a regime-threatening crisis, so public attention did not need to be diverted from that either. Second, by November 1978, three months before the war broke, Deng had already gained the upper hand in the power struggle. He did not need a war to divert public attention from a struggle he had already won. But the critical war preparations, which took place after Deng's consolidation of power, went on. Third, the economic reform was an obstacle, rather than a motive, for the war. As already argued in the public opinion section, many people feared that a war might distract

³⁶⁸ Chen 1987, 74-75.

China's efforts at the reform, so were against it. Even Deng himself was worried the war would burden the economic modernization.³⁶⁹ He specifically consulted Chen Yun, a Politburo member and vice chairman of the CCP who later played a key role in promoting the economic reform, to weigh the pros and cons of the attack.³⁷⁰

Hd2 (Motivation Disappears for Diversionary War Theory): Media coverage diminishes as the predominant domestic challenge, if any, subsides. Diversion is no longer needed when the motivating domestic challenge is alleviated.

The disappearance of the predominant domestic challenge, in this case, the establishment of Deng's paramount power in the CCP leadership, took place in November 1978. But the propaganda campaign ended in early 1990. These considerations show that a diversionary war argument is also not supported by evidence.

VI. Conclusion

The Sino-Vietnamese border war in 1979-1990 and its accompanying propaganda campaign has proven to be an archetypical mobilization case. The misalignment between the apathetic public opinion before the war and the hardline state policy intent called for the state to launch the most aggressive and long-lasting propaganda campaign ever in the Chinese modern history. The propaganda campaign was pivotal in agitating the general public, the local communities in the border provinces, and the soldiers towards supporting the war with the devotion of labor, resources, and even lives. Ample historical evidence corroborates the observable implications

³⁶⁹ Zhang 2015, 58.

³⁷⁰ Zhu, Jiamu. 2000. *Chen Yun Nianpu (Chronicles of Chen Yun)*. Zhongyang wenxian (Central Party Literature Press), 235-36.

regarding leaders' concerns about the weak public opinion, concrete propaganda directives and mobilizing orders disseminated top-down, generally inflammatory media content to agitate the public, the border residents, and the soldiers against Vietnam, as well as timing of the end of the propaganda campaign.

“Sometimes the politically correct stuff [in the media] are just not enough for the people. Only the language we often find in *Global Times* [a well-known hawkish newspaper under *People’s Daily*] help the public vent their spleen. They help the people let off steam by resonating their feelings.”

– Author’s interview to a government official.³⁷¹

“When the tides are too high, the method of barrier blocking gives way to the drainage systems.”

– Author’s interview to an editor at an official media’s online forum.³⁷²

Chapter 6: The Sino-Philippines Arbitration on the South China Sea – A Pacifying Campaign

The Sino-Philippines arbitration crisis in June and July of 2016 is a case of a pacifying propaganda campaign, in which propaganda is used to pacify a hardline public opinion to meet the moderate state policy intention. The case is recent but well-documented thanks to the documentations from the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA). I also rely on interviews with Chinese officials, scholars, editors, and journalists, who were involved in the foreign policy decision making or the reporting on the issue. These interviews were conducted in the summer of 2017 when their memories of the events were still fresh. The case itself is important as it marks the lowest point in Sino-Philippines relations since the two countries normalized relationship in 1975.

I. A Hefty Propaganda Campaign

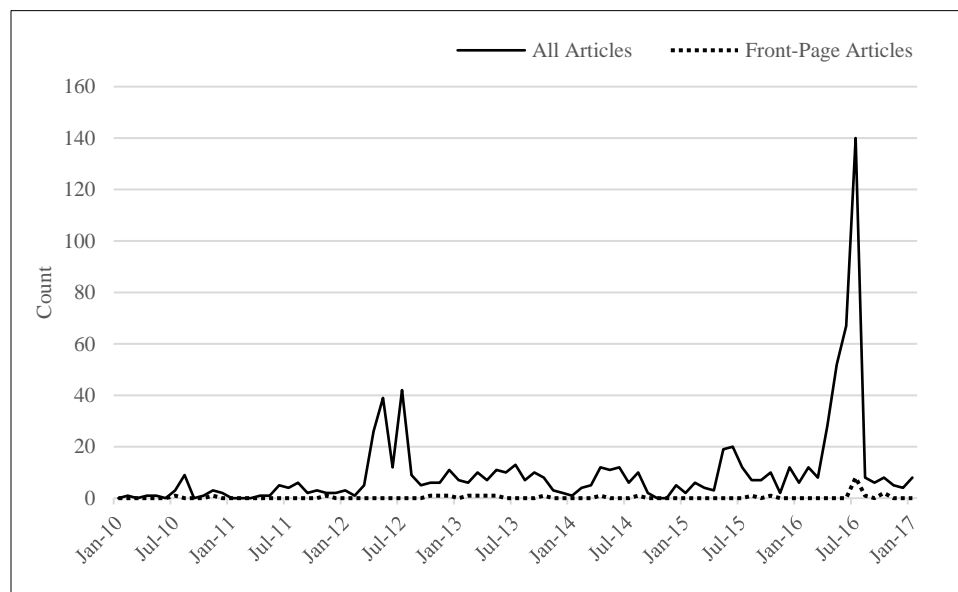
From June 1, 2016, China launched a hefty propaganda campaign. In a short period of sixty-one days, *People’s Daily* published a total of two hundred and six articles, nine of which were in the front pages. These included an eight-part series of commentaries between July 13 and July 23 by “Zhong Sheng,” a special byline used by the editorial staff of the *People’s Daily* International

³⁷¹ Interview 41, June 9, 2017, Beijing.

³⁷² Interview 34, June 5, 2017, Beijing.

Department, a homophone for “the voice of the Central.” The time series line plot of *People’s Daily* coverage between 2010 and 2016 in Figure 6.1 exhibits a massive spike in June-July 2016. Xinhua News also published a ten-part editorial series in the ten days leading up to the release of the ruling on July 12.

Figure 6.1: Monthly Count of *People’s Daily* Articles on the Sino-Philippines South China Sea Dispute, 2010-2016



Internal notes circulated at major state media outlets indicate that this campaign was directed by the top Chinese leadership and was well-coordinated. An internal note dated July 11 called the editors to “continue to follow the Party Central Committee’s directives... and fight well this public opinion battle which concerns our sovereignty, security, and development interests.” A note on July 12 read: “We have large volumes (of articles) to turn around in a short time today and tomorrow. We should be particularly careful when processing these manuscripts...(We should) fully convey China’s voice, reflect China’s position.” A note on July 13 noted the upcoming release of the arbitration award that afternoon and called “the editorial departments and relevant branches to follow the leadership’s command and the reporting plan previously prepared.” The note also enumerated the reporting strategies the editors should follow, such as

“release news, commentaries and interviews in bundled format on various platforms, report leaders’ speeches and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) statements in a timely manner; elaborate our (government’s) policy comprehensively and accurately, reject the illegal tribunal ruling... search for and take advantage of news and information that work in our favor...”³⁷³ An author interview with a government official also confirms that these media trends were “authorized.”³⁷⁴

This propaganda campaign was remarkable considering the traditional Chinese position of keeping the South China Sea dispute low-profile. Domestically, Beijing had been cautious in elevating the rhetoric on the South China Sea dispute. Even during the Scarborough Shoal crisis between China and the Philippines in 2012 and despite the extensive media coverage of the standoff, Beijing deliberately kept the news off the front pages and the prime times.³⁷⁵ Abroad, Beijing had always endeavored to avoid the internationalization of the issue and to keep the dispute off the agenda of multilateral forums. What then explains this hefty and deliberate propaganda campaign that reversed the low-profile approach?

It seems that the Chinese government refrained from pursuing a hardline policy during the arbitration crisis. The two governments repaired relationship when the Philippine new president Rodrigo Duterte visited China in October following the release of the award. If the propaganda campaign was not for mobilizing the public for a hardline policy like China did in the Sino-Vietnamese border war in 1979-1991, what then had motivated this propaganda campaign and what purposes did it serve?

³⁷³ These notes were quoted in various author interviews with Chinese journalists and editors in official media outlets, May 2017, Beijing.

³⁷⁴ Interview 12, May 26, 2017, Beijing.

³⁷⁵ See more detailed discussion in Chapter 4.

This chapter explains this propaganda campaign by applying the (mis)alignment theory. I argue that it is the misalignment of a hardline public opinion and a moderate state foreign policy intent that had propelled the state to launch this campaign. Yet divergent from the mobilizing motivation of the 1979-1990 campaign in the Sino-Vietnamese border case, this campaign had the opposite goal – to pacify a militant public and bring public opinion in line with an intended moderate foreign policy. In the text that follows, I first introduce the arbitration crisis and the South China Sea dispute writ at large. I then evaluate the assumptions, the independent variables, and the pacifying mechanisms of the (mis)alignment theory. I test whether the case bears out the observable implications of the theory in comparison to the audience cost and the diversionary war theory.

II. The Arbitration and The Crisis

On January 22, 2013, the Philippine government initiated an international arbitration case against China concerning maritime rights in the South China Sea. Manila handed to the Chinese Ambassador to the Philippines a Note Verbale containing a Notification and Statement of Claim that challenged before the Arbitral Tribunal China's nine-dash line claim in the South China Sea and its "unlawful" activities that "violate the sovereign rights and jurisdiction of the Philippines."³⁷⁶ The arbitration procedures and the back and forth of communications lasted

³⁷⁶ "Statement by Secretary of Foreign Affairs Albert del Rosario on the UNCLOS Arbitral Proceedings against China to Achieve a Peaceful and Durable Solution to the Dispute in the WPS," January 22, 2013, <http://www.philippineembassy-usa.org/news/3071/300/Statement-by-Secretary-of-Foreign-Affairs-Albert-del-Rosario-on-the-UNCLOS-Arbitral-Proceedings-against-China-to-Achieve-a-Peaceful-and-Durable-Solution-to-the-Dispute-in-the-WPS/d.phildet/>, accessed April 12, 2018. For full text of the Notification and Statement of Claim, see <http://www.philippineembassy-usa.org/uploads/pdfs/embassy/2013/2013-0122-Notification%20and%20Statement%20of%20Claim%20on%20West%20Philippine%20Sea.pdf>, accessed April 12, 2018.

three and half years. A diplomatic crisis arose on the dawn of the release of the award on July 12, 2016 and lasted about two months during June and July of 2016.

1. Manila's Grievances

The Philippines' initiation of the arbitration case against China could be traced back to the grievances held by Manila from the Scarborough Shoal standoff between April 8 and June 18, 2012. As described in more detail in Chapter 4 in one of the deviant cases, the Sino-Philippines standoff in the Scarborough Shoal is a case with a hardline public opinion and a hardline state policy intent, but the Chinese government launched a moderate propaganda campaign for coercive purposes. In that case, Beijing pursued a hardline foreign policy. It sent one of its most advanced China Marine Surveillance (CMS) ships, *Yuzheng 310*, to confront the Philippine ships. It adopted unofficial sanctions on the Philippine banana exports and tourism. After the 2012 standoff, China returned and gained de facto control of the Shoal despite mutual agreement of withdrawal. China had reportedly “strung a barrier across the mouth of the shoal to block Philippine access” and “kept surveillance ships nearby.”³⁷⁷

The Philippine grievance was evident in an interview by *Foreign Policy* with Philippine Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario. Rosario said: “A year before [we started the arbitration in 2013], they forced us out of the Scarborough Shoal, which is well within our economic zone. They continued to water-canon our fisherman, they chased down our boats, and deprived our fisherman of their livelihood. We consider these to be aggressive unilateral actions. This has

³⁷⁷ “Manila takes a stand,” *The Wall Street Journal Asia*, Jan 25, 2013, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323539804578261140985134254>, accessed April 13, 2018.

been happening for quite a long time.”³⁷⁸ Researcher Sourabh Gupta also holds that China’s occupation of the Scarborough Shoal was the “proximate provocation that led to the filing of the claim.”³⁷⁹

In October 2012, four months after the standoff dissipated, Vice-Foreign Minister Fu Ying became the first high-level Chinese official to visit Manila. Two days before her visit, the Philippines President Benigno Aquino revealed that there was a “little bettering of situation” with Beijing over the Shoal, but the situation was still “far from normal.”³⁸⁰ During Fu Ying’s trip, which was expected to mend the relationship after the standoff, Fu reportedly told Rosario “not to appeal to the U.N. to resolve the dispute... not to ‘internationalize’ the issue in forums such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), not to coordinate with any other country such as the U.S., and even not to issue press releases.”³⁸¹ Fu essentially wanted Manila to accept China’s *fait accompli* on the Scarborough Shoal.

The Scarborough Shoal standoff, Manila’s exposed vulnerability in the standoff, and Beijing’s subsequent occupation of the Shoal propelled Manila to strengthen security ties with Washington. Media reported that when receiving visiting U.S. State Department Assistant Secretary Kurt Campbell in Manila in December 2012, “the Philippines has said it wants to be in a better position to defend its claims in the South China Sea...the Philippines sees the United States as a party that can help to put it in a better position.”³⁸² The two sides started to negotiate on the “Framework Agreement on Increased Rotational Presence and Enhanced Defense

³⁷⁸ “Interview with Albert del Rosario: You Will Have Chaos and Anarchy,” *Foreign Policy*, October 5, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/10/05/you-will-have-chaos-and-anarchy-albert-del-rosario-philippines-south-china-sea/>, accessed April 13, 2018.

³⁷⁹ Gupta 2016.

³⁸⁰ “Aquino meets Chinese deputy foreign minister,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, October 20, 2012, <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/53302/aquino-meets-chinese-deputy-foreign-minister>, accessed April 13, 2016.

³⁸¹ “Manila takes a stand.”

³⁸² “Philippines Readies for Increased US Presence,” *Voice of America (Asia)*, December 12, 2012, <https://www.voanews.com/a/philippines-readies-for-increased-us-presence/1563463.html>, accessed April 13, 2018.

Cooperation.” This “rotational presence” would allow the United States the advantage of forward deployment in Southeast Asia, while maintaining the flexibility of not residing in the locations permanently so as to avoid the Philippine public pushback for permanent U.S. bases. (The Philippines asked the United States to leave both Subic Bay and Clark Air Base in 1991). It could, therefore, undercut China’s anti-access/area denial strategy.³⁸³ A ten-year “Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA)” was signed on April 28, 2014, during President Barack Obama’s first state visit. Evan Medeiros, U.S. National Security Council Director for Asian affairs, called the accord “the most significant defense agreement that we have concluded with the Philippines in decades.” President Obama tried to clarify the American objective: “Our goal is not to counter China. Our goal is not to contain China. Our goal is to make sure that international rules and norms are respected, and that includes in the area of maritime disputes.”³⁸⁴ This was interpreted by many analysts in China as alluding to the Scarborough Shoal standoff.

The other measure the Philippines took to get back at China was to challenge China’s claims and actions before the international tribunal. Manila presented to the Tribunal fifteen submissions in five broad areas: 1) China’s nine-dash line claim to the South China Sea is inconsistent with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and therefore invalid; 2) The land features in the Spratlys and the Scarborough Shoal are rocks, not islands under Article 121 of UNCLOS, so they are not capable of generating 200 nautical miles of Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) on their own and are only entitled to 12 nautical miles of territorial sea; 3)

³⁸³ For more on China’s anti-access/area denial strategy, see Cliff et al. 2007.

³⁸⁴ “U.S., Philippines sign 10-year defense agreement amid rising tensions,” *Washington Post*, April 28, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/us-philippines-sign-10-year-defense-agreement-amid-rising-tensions/2014/04/28/74a605d8-cec6-11e3-b812-0c92213941f4_story.html?utm_term=.c4cb49cf0842, accessed April 13, 2018.

The alleged Chinese harassment of the Filipino vessels are illegal; 4) The Chinese activities have damaged the marine environment, and in particular its land reclamation activities are harmful to the coral reef ecosystems; and 5) China's large-scale land reclamation activities are unlawful and do not confer additional maritime entitlements. The last two were updated in light of Chinese island building activities that became intensified in 2015.

2. Beijing's Position: Non-Acceptance and Non-Participation

In response to the Philippines' initiation of the arbitration, China presented a Note Verbale to the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines on February 19, 2013, rejected the arbitration, and returned the Notification and Statement of Claim to the Philippines. In its Note Verbale, China argued that the "direct cause" of the territorial disputes between the two countries in the South China Sea had been the "illegal occupation by the Philippines of some islands and reefs of China's Nansha [Spratly] Islands"; it would neither accept nor participate in the arbitration.³⁸⁵

Over the next few months, China elaborated its non-acceptance and non-participation position in three points. First, by unilaterally initiating this third-party arbitration process without Beijing's consent, Manila had violated its long-standing commitment to bilateral negotiations established through a series of bilateral instruments between the two countries and especially the DOC, which explicitly states that "The Parties concerned undertake to resolve their territorial and jurisdictional disputes ... through friendly consultations and negotiations by sovereign states directly concerned."³⁸⁶ By such agreements, Beijing believed that Manila's unilaterally seeking

³⁸⁵ "Note Verbale from the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Manila to the Department of Foreign Affairs, Republic of the Philippines, No. (13) PG-039," 19 February 2013, Memorial of the Philippines – Volume III, Annex 3, <https://www.pcacases.com/web/view/7>, accessed April 12, 2018.

³⁸⁶ Association of Southeast Asian Nations, "Declaration of the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea," November 2002, http://asean.org/?static_post=declaration-on-the-conduct-of-parties-in-the-south-china-sea-2, accessed April 16, 2018.

third-party arbitration was an act of bad faith. Hence the compulsory arbitration procedure should not apply and would have no force. Manila argued, however, that “the Philippines has exhausted almost all political and diplomatic avenues for a peaceful negotiated settlement of its maritime dispute with China,”³⁸⁷ but bilateral talks had led to nowhere. Beijing counter-argued that none of Manila submissions to the Tribunal had ever been discussed in bilateral talks. Second, Beijing held that the Tribunal had no jurisdiction over the case. It argued that the Tribunal had no jurisdiction over sovereignty issues and the Philippines’ submissions cannot be judged in isolation from sovereignty issues. “The Philippines ‘skillfully’ fragments a big dispute with China into various free-standing-appearing entitlement claims and activities claims in order to conceal the sovereignty-delimitation nature of the dispute or claims.”³⁸⁸ In other words, “the claims dress up many land territorial matters as simple questions of status or qualification of certain maritime features or skirt these territorial matters and take a shortcut to the entitlement questions, reversing the logical sequence.”³⁸⁹ Hence the Tribunal was overstepping its bounds in accepting the case. Third, Beijing argued that the arbitration was detrimental to regional stability and the international legal system. It held that Manila’s purpose was to hurt China’s territorial claim by manipulating international law. It violated the spirit of friendly bilateral consultations and set a bad example for international law.

Despite Beijing’s rejection and refusal to participate, a tribunal was formed in The Hague on June 21, 2013. Copies of administrative documents regarding the arbitration procedures and subsequent correspondence were transmitted to the Agent and Counsel for the Philippines and

³⁸⁷ The Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs, “SFA Statement on the UNCLOS Arbitral Proceedings against China,” January 22, 2013, <https://www.dfa.gov.ph/127-newsroom/unclos/216-sfa-statement-on-the-unclos-arbitral-proceedings-against-china>, accessed April 16, 2018.

³⁸⁸ Yee 2014, 663.

³⁸⁹ Yee 2014, 682. For similar argument, see Zhang 2016, 458.

the Chinese Embassy in the Netherlands. “Throughout the proceedings, the Chinese Embassy...reiterated that ‘it will neither accept nor participate in the arbitration unilaterally initiated by the Philippines.’”³⁹⁰ The Philippines officially presented its petition to the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) on March 30, 2014. The Chinese MoFA Spokesperson Hong Lei reacted by reiterating China’s “non-participation” and “non-acceptance” position. He emphatically rejected the arbitration:

“At the heart of the matter are the disputes between the two sides on the sovereignty over islands and reefs, and delimitation of maritime boundaries. Yet disputes such as these have already been excluded from arbitration procedures through a declaration made by China in 2006 pursuant to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). In this context, China’s rejection of the Philippines’ submission for arbitration is solidly based on international law, and China’s lawful rights as a party to UNCLOS should be truly respected.”³⁹¹

On December 7, 2014, the Chinese MoFA released a position paper “on the Matter of Jurisdiction in the South China Sea Arbitration Initiated by the Republic of the Philippines,” which further elaborated the legal basis of China’s position.³⁹² On February 6, 2015, the Chinese Ambassador to the Netherlands wrote to the members of the Tribunal and described China’s Position Paper as “having comprehensively explain[ed] why the Arbitral Tribunal ... manifestly

³⁹⁰ The Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), “Award in the Matter of the South China Sea Arbitration between The Republic of the Philippines and the People’s Republic of China,” (hereinafter referred to as “The Award,”), July 12, 2016, <https://www.pcacases.com/web/sendAttach/2086>, accessed April 12, 2018, 13.

³⁹¹ PRC MoFA, “Remarks by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei on the Philippines’ Submission of a Memorial to the Arbitral Tribunal in Relation to Disputes with China in the South China Sea,” March 30, 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/nanhai/eng/fyrbt_1/t1142356.htm, accessed April 12, 2018.

³⁹² PRC MoFA, “Position Paper of the Government of the People’s Republic of China on the Matter of Jurisdiction in the South China Sea Arbitration Initiated by the Republic of the Philippines,” (hereinafter referred to as “China’s Position Paper,”) December 7, 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/nanhai/eng/snhwtlcwj_1/t1368895.htm, accessed April 12, 2018.

has no jurisdiction over the case.”³⁹³ The Tribunal considered these communications, including China’s Position Paper, effectively “constitute[d] a plea concerning this Arbitral Tribunal’s jurisdiction,” and decided to bifurcate the proceedings by convening a hearing on jurisdiction and admissibility before considering the merits of the Philippines’ submissions.³⁹⁴

A hearing on jurisdiction was held from July 7 to 13, 2015. China reacted by saying: “[T]he arbitral proceeding unilaterally initiated by the Philippines...disregard... China’s legitimate rights... and [is] in breach of the agreement” affirmed by the two countries. China’s MoFA spokesperson claimed China, “a victim” under the Philippines’ “illegal occupation” of the Nansha Islands, “has been exercising utmost restraint.” “China opposes any move by the Philippines to initiate and push forward the arbitral proceeding” and “will never accept any imposed solution or unilaterally resorting to a third-party settlement.”³⁹⁵

The Tribunal issued its award on jurisdiction on October 29, 2015 and ruled that the it was “properly constituted” over the case and would continue with it.³⁹⁶ China protested the decision with strong language. It called the award on jurisdiction “null and void.” It declared the Philippines’ “obstinate pushing forward” of the arbitration as “abusing the compulsory procedures for dispute settlement under UNCLOS” and “a political provocation under the cloak of law.” The Philippines and the Arbitral Tribunal “have severely violated the legitimate rights” of China, “completely deviated from the purposes and objectives of the UNCLOS, and eroded the integrity and authority of the UNCLOS.” The arbitral proceeding “will lead to nothing.”³⁹⁷

³⁹³ PCA, “The Award,” 15.

³⁹⁴ PCA, “The Award,” 16.

³⁹⁵ PRC MoFA, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Remarks on the Conclusion of the Hearing on Issues Relating to Jurisdiction and Admissibility by the South China Sea Arbitral Tribunal Established at the Request of the Philippines,” July 14, 2015, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/nanhai/eng/fyrbt_1/t1281252.htm, accessed April 12, 2018.

³⁹⁶ PCA, “The Award,” 19.

³⁹⁷ PRC MoFA, “Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China on the Award on Jurisdiction and Admissibility of the South China Sea Arbitration by the Arbitral Tribunal Established at the

The U.S.' indirect role in the arbitration was also noteworthy. The U.S. is an ally of the Philippines. Although its position on the South China Sea dispute had been consistently "not taking sides," it was openly supportive of the arbitration. China strongly protested against the U.S. position throughout the case. In a press appearance with the visiting then-Philippine President Benigno Aquino on April 28, 2014, President Obama said: "the United States supports his [Aquino's] decision to pursue international arbitration concerning territorial disputes in the South China Sea."³⁹⁸ Daniel Russel, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State also talked positively about the arbitration at the Fifth Annual South China Sea Conference held by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) on July 21, 2015. Reacting to this, the Chinese MoFA spokesperson Lu Kang accused the U.S. acting like an "arbitrator outside the tribunal," and urged the U.S. to "live up to its pledge of not taking sides."³⁹⁹ In his testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs on April 28, 2016, the U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken confirmed that "we have worked very hard to establish across the region an understanding that this [the arbitration] is an appropriate mechanism."⁴⁰⁰

3. Into A Crisis

Request of the Republic of the Philippines," October 30, 2015, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1310474.shtml, accessed April 12, 2018.

³⁹⁸ The White House, "Remarks by President Obama and President Benigno Aquino III of the Philippines in Joint Press Conference," April 28, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/04/28/remarks-president-obama-and-president-benigno-aquino-iii-philippines-joi>, accessed April 16, 2018.

³⁹⁹ PRC MoFA, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang's Remarks on the US Statement about Issues Relating to the Arbitration Unilaterally Initiated by the Philippines," July 24, 2015, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/nanhai/eng/fyrbt_1/t1283808.htm, accessed April 12, 2018.

⁴⁰⁰ U.S. Congress, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, "America as a Pacific Power: Challenges and Opportunities in Asia," 114th Congress, 2nd session, April 28, 2016, <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing/hearing-america-as-a-pacific-power-challenges-and-opportunities-in-asia/>, accessed April 16, 2016.

A hearing on the merits was held on November 24-26 and November 30, 2015. As China had always declared, it did not attend the hearing. As time drew closer to the release of the award, the issue became more and more intense. During a visit to the U.S. on February 25, 2016, the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi accused the Philippines of “political provocation” in lodging the arbitration case against China without China’s consent.⁴⁰¹ On February 29, the Philippine Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario urged China to “respect the forthcoming ruling of the arbitral tribunal.”⁴⁰²

The situation developed into a full-blown diplomatic crisis as Beijing scrambled to deal preemptively with an expected negative ruling. The crisis lasted about two months in June and July 2016. Starting from early June, Beijing launched an aggressive domestic and worldwide propaganda campaign justifying its position and discrediting the Tribunal itself and the Philippines’ case. Besides the media campaign described at the beginning of this chapter, Chinese foreign policy makers, academics, and international law experts also came out to defend China’s position and its legal basis. On May 6, Director-General of the MoFA Department of Boundary and Ocean Affairs Ouyang Yujing gave a lengthy interview to Chinese and foreign media and explained China’s position in detail.⁴⁰³ On May 12, Director-General of the MoFA

⁴⁰¹ “China says Philippines guilty of ‘political provocation,’” Associated Press, February 25, 2016, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2016/02/25/1557009/china-says-philippines-guilty-political-provocation>, accessed April 12, 2018.

⁴⁰² “Philippines asks China to respect sea dispute arbitration,” *Reuters*, February 29, 2016, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-southchinasea-philippines/philippines-asks-china-to-respect-sea-dispute-arbitration-idUKKCN0W20RG>, accessed April 12, 2018.

⁴⁰³ PRC MoFA, “Director-General of the Department of Boundary and Ocean Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ouyang Yujing Gives Interview to Chinese and Foreign Media on South China Sea Issue,” May 6, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/nanhai/eng/wjbxw_1/t1365689.htm, accessed April 12, 2018.

Department of Treaty and Law Xu Hong also gave a briefing and fielded questions posed by journalists.⁴⁰⁴ These publicity endeavors were simply unseen before.

Beijing also started rallying international support. On May 20, China claimed more than 40 countries supported its position;⁴⁰⁵ On June 14, a question posed to the MoFA spokesperson Lu Kang at a regular press conference cited “nearly 60 countries ha[d] publicly endorsed China’s stance;⁴⁰⁶ That number rose to 70, reported by State Councilor Yang Jiechi in an interview to state media on July 15.⁴⁰⁷

Expecting the ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ summit to be held right after the release of the ruling, Chinese diplomats also worked to forestall the issuance of an ASEAN statement mentioning the ruling. Such mentioning in an official document of ASEAN would incur further reputational cost for China. On April 23, 2016, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi carried out a whirlwind tour of Brunei, Cambodia and Laos, resulting in a four-point consensus among the four countries. The consensus states that the South China Sea disputes are not an ASEAN-China issue; the disputes should be resolved through dialogues and consultations by parties directly concerned; no unilateral will should be imposed on them; countries outside the region should

⁴⁰⁴ PRC MoFA, “Briefing by XU Hong, Director-General of the Department of Treaty and Law on the South China Sea Arbitration Initiated by the Philippines,” May 12, 2016,

http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1364804.shtml, accessed April 26, 2018.

⁴⁰⁵ “China says more than 40 countries support its stance on South China Sea dispute,” *Reuters*, May 20, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-china/china-says-more-than-40-countries-support-its-stance-on-south-china-sea-dispute-idUSKCN0YB1EO>, accessed April 12, 2018.

⁴⁰⁶ PRC MoFA, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang’s Regular Press Conference on June 14, 2016,” June 14, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1372136.shtml, accessed April 12, 2018.

⁴⁰⁷ PRC MoFA, “Yang Jiechi Gives Interview to State Media on the So-called Award by the Arbitral Tribunal for the South China Sea Arbitration,” July 15, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1381740.shtml, accessed April 12, 2018. These numbers, however, are a little inflated. According to Sutter and Huang 2016, China “defined support for its position in a vague way that could elicit wider international support...it appeared that if a government or organization stated that it preferred that territorial disputes in the South China Sea should be settled through talks with the parties concerned, that was construed by Beijing as support for its position” (61). The Center for Strategic and International Studies also keeps an “Arbitration Support Tracker” that tracks the international support on the case (<https://amti.csis.org/arbitration-support-tracker/>). According to the CSIS tracker, there were 31 countries who supported China’s position prior to the ruling.

play a constructive role.⁴⁰⁸ This consensus implicitly supports China's position in resolving the dispute through bilateral negotiations, opposes the Philippines' approach in seeking third-party arbitration, and criticizes outside powers such as the U.S. and Japan in their involvement in the dispute.

Under the pressure from China, the ASEAN joint communiqué issued on July 24 turned out to be a watered-down version neglecting to mention the tribunal ruling. It only expressed concerns on the land reclamations but did not specify any country: "We remain seriously concerned over recent and ongoing developments and took note of the concerns expressed by some Ministers on the land reclamations and escalation of activities in the area, which have eroded trust and confidence, increased tensions and may undermine peace, security and stability in the region."⁴⁰⁹ Dissatisfied with the statement, the US, Japan, and Australia issued a statement the next day calling the parties to abide by the tribunal ruling,⁴¹⁰ which was later condemned by Wang Yi as "fanning the flames" and "inconsistent with the efforts being made by regional countries to safeguard stability in the South China Sea, inconsistent with the aspiration of regional people to lower the temperature surrounding the South China Sea situation, and inconsistent with the constructive role that non-regional countries should play."⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁸ PRC MoFA, "Wang Yi Talks about China's Four-Point Consensus on South China Sea Issue with Brunei, Cambodia and Laos," April 23, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1358478.shtml, accessed April 13, 2018.

⁴⁰⁹ ASEAN, "Joint Communiqué of the 49th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting, Vientiane, 24 July 2016," July 24, 2016, <http://asean.org/joint-communicue-of-the-49th-asean-foreign-ministers-meeting/>, paragraph 174, accessed April 13, 2018.

⁴¹⁰ "Japan-United States-Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue," July 25, 2016, https://foreignminister.gov.au/releases/Pages/2016/jb_mr_160725.aspx, accessed April 13, 2018.

⁴¹¹ PRC MoFA, "Wang Yi Refuting the Joint Statement by US, Japan and Australia: Peacekeeper or Troublemaker," July 27, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/activities_663312/t1384823.shtml, accessed April 13, 2018.

On June 29, the court announced its plan to issue the award on July 12. The Chinese MoFA acknowledged this in the spokesperson's remarks, summarizing the timeline of the case and China's position and criticizing the Philippines for breaching international law.⁴¹²

The situation showed signs of a turn, however, when Rodrigo Duterte sworn in as the new president of the Philippines on June 30. Duterte adopted a more conciliatory approach than his predecessor. He and his Foreign Secretary Perfecto Yasay met with the Chinese Ambassador to the Philippines on July 9. They agreed "not to make any provocative statements following the release of the ruling." The Duterte administration also expressed willingness to resume bilateral talks on sharing the South China Sea resources even if it won the lawsuit.⁴¹³

On July 12, the award was published, ruling on almost every point in favor of the Philippines and against China.⁴¹⁴ The Tribunal found that China's nine-dash line claim and related "historic rights" have no legal basis; none of the land features in the Spratlys or the Scarborough Shoal are capable of sustaining human habitation or an economic life of its own, and therefore are rocks, not islands, which are only entitled to 12 nautical miles of territorial sea; China has violated the sovereign rights of the Philippines in interfering with fishing and in risking collisions on the sea; the Chinese activities in the disputed area, particularly its fishing and land reclamation activities, has caused irreparable environmental damage; its artificial islands contravene the international legal dispute resolution proceedings and do not confer additional maritime rights.

⁴¹² PRC MoFA, "MFA Spokesperson Hong Lei's Remarks on the Arbitral Tribunal's Claim That It Would Soon Issue the So-called Final Award of the South China Sea Arbitration Unilaterally Initiated by the Philippines," June 29, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/nanhai/eng/fyrbt_1/t1376307.htm, accessed April 13, 2018.

⁴¹³ "Philippines 'wiling to share' South China Sea resources," *Global Times*, July 9, 2016, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/993126.shtml>, accessed April 13, 2018.

⁴¹⁴ PCA, "The Award".

This was an overwhelming victory for the Philippines, yet Manila chose not to flaunt it. The Philippine Foreign Secretary Yasay welcomed the result and called for “restraint and sobriety.”⁴¹⁵ His speech on TV was notably measured in contrast to the public fervor on the streets of Manila.⁴¹⁶

The U.S. issued a statement calling both parties to abide by the ruling.⁴¹⁷ Chinese MoFA spokesperson Lu Kang protested against the U.S. statement and sternly accused the U.S. of “turn[ing] a blind eye to the facts and endorsed a ruling that is illegal and invalid.” Lu also criticized the U.S. for being “selective” and hypocritical on matters of international law.⁴¹⁸

The Chinese government showered the country with official statements. The Chinese media was filled with reports. The Chinese President Xi Jinping, the PRC government, the Foreign Ministry, the National People’s Congress all issued statements on the ruling.⁴¹⁹ All declared the ruling being “null and void with no binding force.” The State Council Information Office released a white paper entitled “China Adheres to the Position of Settling Through

⁴¹⁵ “Philippines urges ‘restraint and sobriety’ after South China Sea ruling,” *Reuters*, July 12, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-ruling-philippines/philippines-urges-restraint-and-sobriety-after-south-china-sea-ruling-idUSKCN0ZS0W0>, accessed April 13, 2018.

⁴¹⁶ “After Victory at Sea, Reality Sets In for Philippines,” *New York Times*, July 15, 2016, A3.

⁴¹⁷ John Kirby (U.S. Department of State Assistant Secretary and Spokesperson), “Decision in the Philippines-China Arbitration,” July 12, 2016, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/07/259587.htm>, accessed April 13, 2018.

⁴¹⁸ PRC MoFA, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang’s Remarks on Statement by Spokesperson of US State Department on South China Sea Arbitration Ruling,” July 13, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/nanhai/eng/fyrbt_1/t1380409.htm, accessed April 13, 2018.

⁴¹⁹ “Xi Jinping Met with President of the European Council, Donald Tusk and President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker,” *Xinhua News*, July 12, 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2016-07/12/c_1119207979.htm, accessed April 13, 2018. Xi made remarks on the ruling during the meeting; PRC MoFA “Statement of the Government of the People’s Republic of China on China’s Territorial Sovereignty and Maritime Rights and Interests in the South China Sea,” July 12, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/nanhai/eng/snhwtlcwj_1/t1379493.htm, accessed April 13, 2018; PRC MoFA, “Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China on the Award of 12 July 2016 of the Arbitral Tribunal in the South China Sea Arbitration Established at the Request of the Republic of the Philippines,” July 12, 2016, <http://www.mfa.gov.cn/nanhai/chn/snhwtlcwj/t1379490.htm>, accessed April 13, 2018; The PRC National People’s Congress, “Statement of the People’s Republic of China National People’s Congress on the Award of 12 July 2016 of the Arbitral Tribunal in the South China Sea Arbitration Established at the Unilateral Request of the Republic of the Philippines,” July 14, 2016, http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/xinwen/2016-07/14/content_1993891.htm, accessed April 13, 2018.

Negotiation the Relevant Disputes Between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea.”⁴²⁰ Like China’s December 2014 Position Paper, the White Paper is a comprehensive document detailing the history of the dispute and the legal basis of China’s claim, and calling for bilateral negotiations for dispute settlement. China’s Vice-Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin attended the press release of the White Paper and answered questions. During the press release, Liu warned that the decision to establish an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the South China Sea would depend on “a comprehensive judgement” on “our threat perception.”⁴²¹ The Chinese bellicose stand, however, subsided dramatically within the week. The dispute faded out of people’s sight soon as Beijing and Manila took up steps to repair the relationship.

II. The Maritime Dispute Writ at Large

Before analyzing the case in the lens of the (mis)alignment theory and the alternative explanations, it is necessary to provide a brief background of the territorial dispute in question and the related issues that were at the core of the arbitration and the crisis.

The South China Sea is a half-closed marginal sea of the Pacific Ocean surrounded by mainland China and Taiwan in the north, Vietnam in the west, the Philippines in the east, and Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia in the South. It consists of over two hundred land features including small islands, shoals, atolls, banks, cays and other low-tide elevations. These land features are grouped into four island groups - Pratas Islands (Dongsha Islands), Paracel Islands

⁴²⁰ For full text of the white paper in Chinese, see http://www.xinhuanet.com/2016-07/13/c_1119210479.htm; in English, see http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2016-07/13/c_135509153_2.htm, both accessed April 13, 2018.

⁴²¹ PRC MoFA, “Vice-Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin Attends Press Release of the White Paper ‘China Adheres to the Position of Settling Through Negotiation the Relevant Disputes Between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea’ and Answers Questions,” July 13, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjb_673085/zygy_673101/liuzhenmin_673143/xgxw_673145/t1381069.shtml, accessed April 13, 2018.

(Xisha Islands), Macclesfield Islands (Zhongsha Islands), and Spratly Islands (Nansha Islands), with the Spratlys being the largest group. The entire sea covers 3.5 million square kilometers.⁴²²

Territorial disputes in the South China Sea involve both land features and maritime rights these land features generate under the UNCLOS clauses. These disputes exist among six sovereign states/regimes, namely China (People's Republic of China), Taiwan (Republic of China), Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei. China and Taiwan adhere to their historical rights to these land features and the maritime rights these territories generate. Their claims are usually ambiguously summarized by a nine-dash line based on a 1948 map, which predates the UNCLOS and delineates a large U-shaped area in the South China Sea as China's sovereignty covering an estimated 80 to 90 percent of the entire area. China and Vietnam contested the Paracel Islands, which were occupied by China after a conflict between China and the South Vietnam regime in 1974. The Spratlys are contested among all claimants. Currently, Vietnam occupies twenty-one features in the Spratlys, China seven, the Philippines nine, Malaysia five, Brunei one, and Taiwan one - the largest naturally formed feature in the Spratlys, the Taiping/Itu Aba Island.⁴²³ The arbitration concerned only the Spratlys and the Scarborough Shoal.

The value of the South China Sea lies in its economic and strategic importance. It has rich fishing stock and potential energy reserves. Critical shipping routes pass through the Sea, so it is strategic in terms of sea lanes of communication. As of 2016, about one third of global trade, an estimated value of \$3.4 trillion, traverses through it.⁴²⁴ It connects the Pacific Ocean

⁴²² PCA, "The Award," 1.

⁴²³ Alexander Vuving, "South China Sea: Who Occupies What in the Spratlys?" May 6, 2016, *The Diplomat*, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/05/south-china-sea-who-claims-what-in-the-spratlys/>, accessed April 16, 2018.

⁴²⁴ "How much trade transits the South China Sea?" Center for Strategic and International Studies China Power Project. <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>, accessed April 16, 2018.

with the Indian Ocean, so it is also key to projecting naval power, which has played a large role in the power play between China and the United States in the region. In the words of the former Chinese PLA navy commander, Admiral Liu Huaqing, “whoever controls the Spratlys will reap huge economic and military benefits.”⁴²⁵ In the Philippine Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario’s words, “They [China] want to be a maritime power but to be that, you need your own lake. We think they have selected the South China Sea as their lake.”⁴²⁶

Two related issues were at the core of the arbitration: fishing disputes and China’s land reclamation activities. The Scarborough Shoal standoff in 2012 originated from fishing disputes. The Philippine coast guards attempted to arrest Chinese fishermen for alleged poaching near the Scarborough Shoal, but were intercepted by Chinese coast guards, which led to the standoff that lasted for two months. After the two sides disengaged and retreated at the onset of a typhoon, the Chinese ships returned and seized control of the shoal. The Philippines fishermen complained that the Chinese had blocked off the lagoon from Philippine access. The situation near the shoal continued throughout the arbitration. On February 25, 2014, the Philippines Foreign Ministry protested China’s use of water cannon on Filipino fishermen near the Shoal.⁴²⁷ On February 4, 2015, the Philippines complained that a Chinese CMS ship had rammed three Philippine fishing boats near the shoal.⁴²⁸ The Chinese MoFA responded to these incidents by claiming that the Philippine vessels were in Chinese waters and the Chinese coast guard acted according to the

⁴²⁵ Liu 2004, 538.

⁴²⁶ “Interview with Albert del Rosario: You Will Have Chaos and Anarchy,” *Foreign Policy*, October 5, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/10/05/you-will-have-chaos-and-anarchy-albert-del-rosario-philippines-south-china-sea/>, accessed April 13, 2018.

⁴²⁷ “Philippines protests over South China Sea water cannon incident,” *Reuters*, February 25, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-southchinasea/philippines-protests-over-south-china-sea-water-cannon-incident-idUSBREA1O09P20140225>, accessed April 17, 2018.

⁴²⁸ “Philippines says Chinese ship rammed fishing boats in Scarborough Shoal,” *Reuters*, February 4, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-china/philippines-says-chinese-ship-rammed-fishing-boats-in-scarborough-shoal-idUSKBN0L81IM20150204>, accessed April 17, 2018.

law.⁴²⁹ A couple of fishing incidents in other areas of the South China Sea were also reported throughout the arbitration. For example, eleven Chinese fishermen were arrested by the Philippines police for alleged poaching near Half Moon Shoal (Banyue Jiao) in May 2014 and were later tried in a Philippine court.⁴³⁰ China insisted that the fishermen were in Chinese waters and the arrests were a “provocation.”⁴³¹

The other issue, China’s land reclamation activities in the Spratlys, was considered by the Tribunal as “aggravation and extension of the dispute during settlement proceedings” as part of the Philippine submissions. Before going into the details of China’s land reclamation activities, the alleged construction work by the Philippines on the Second Thomas Shoal (Ayungin or Ren’ ai Jiao) and a subsequent standoff between the two armed forces near the shoal deserve some attention here. On April 7, 2014, the Philippines presented additional submissions to the Tribunal regarding “China’s most recent actions in and around Second Thomas Shoal,” complaining China’s “prevention of the rotation and resupply of Philippine personnel” stationed there.⁴³² The dispute on the Second Thomas Shoal goes back to as early as 1999 when the Philippines purposefully wrecked a ship there to support a permanent presence near the shoal. China had protested several times since to have the Philippines tow away the vessel. China pointed out that the Philippines first used the excuse of “malfunction” of the ship and promised to tow it away (but never did), but then contradicted itself by admitting on March 14, 2014 that the vessel “was placed in Ayungin Shoal in 1999 to serve as a permanent Philippine Government

⁴²⁹ PRC MoFA, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei’s Regular Press Conference on February 5, 2015,” February 5, 2015, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1234787.shtml, accessed April 17, 2018.

⁴³⁰ “Chinese fishers face charges for crime in PH,” *Rappler*, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/57621-filing-charges-poaching-chinese-fishermen>, accessed April 17, 2018.

⁴³¹ “Philippines convicts Chinese fishermen of poaching rare turtles,” *BBC News*, November 24, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-30173962>, accessed April 17, 2018.

⁴³² PCA, “The Award,” 13.

installation.”⁴³³ Around the same time, Manila complained the Chinese blockage of “navy-commissioned civilian ships that was going to bring food and water to troops stationed in Ayungin.”⁴³⁴ But according to the Chinese MoFA spokesperson Qin Gang, the Philippine ships carried construction materials in an attempt to build permanent facilities on the shoal.⁴³⁵ The Tribunal eventually ruled that it lacked jurisdiction over this submission because of the involvement of military vessels.⁴³⁶

The Second Thomas Shoal incident sheds lights on the island upgrading activities committed by all parties of the dispute and provides an important background of the Chinese land reclamation activities. To be clear, China came in late in both the occupation and the facility building on the land features in the Spratlys. When it started to act in 1988 and fought a brief battle with Vietnam near the Johnson Reef (Chigua Jiao), it found itself left only with slim pickings, as the “best” ones had already been taken. China occupies seven very small features in the Spratlys. By the time it started to physically upgrade the features aggressively in 2014, it “was the only claimant country without an airstrip in the Spratlys.”⁴³⁷

But once it started, it started aggressively. The Chinese land reclamation activities were unprecedented both in scale and in speed. Since 2013, China has created 3,200 acres of new

⁴³³ PRC MoFA, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei’s Regular Press Conference on March 17, 2014,” March 17, 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1138083.shtml, accessed April 17, 2018; The Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs, “DFA Statement on China’s Allegation that the Philippines Agreed to Pull-out of the Ayungin Shoal,” March 14, 2014, <https://dfa.gov.ph/dfa-news/dfa-releasesupdate/2333-dfa-statement-on-china-s-allegation-that-philippines-agreed-to-pull-out-of-the-ayungin-shoal>, accessed April 17, 2018.

⁴³⁴ “PH sending ships to Ayungin despite blockade,” *Rappler*, March 13, 2014, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/52934-ph-sending-civilian-ships-ayungin-despite-blockade>, accessed April 17, 2018.

⁴³⁵ PRC MoFA, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang’s Remarks on Comments by the US State Department on China’s Expulsion of Philippine Ships that Transported Construction Materials to the Ren’ai Reef,” March 13, 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/nanhai/eng/fyrbt_1/t1137065.htm, accessed April 17, 2018.

⁴³⁶ PCA, “The Award,” 456.

⁴³⁷ You 2017, 5.

land.⁴³⁸ Hence, they were naturally more noticeable and unnerving to the other claimants. China insisted that the construction activities were for maritime purposes of “providing public service” to the region, not for militarization of the South China Sea.⁴³⁹ But this was hardly convincing to the other countries in the region, especially the Philippines and the U.S. On February 16, 2016, satellite imagery obtained by Fox News showed that China had deployed an advanced surface-to-air missile system Hongqi 9 to Woody Island (Yongxing dao) in the Paracels.⁴⁴⁰ Pointing to the U.S. freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) which penetrated into 12 nautical miles of the Chinese-occupied land features, China blamed the U.S. for the militarization of the South China Sea. China’s deployment of Hongqi 9 on Woody Island on February 16 seemed to be a tit-for-tat response to the USS Wilbur’s passing near the Triton Island on January 31, given the close timing and geographic proximity as both were within the Paracels Island Group. But the deployment of Hongqi 9 further deteriorated the threat perceptions of the Southeast Asian claimants and the United States. Even worse, the news came just as U.S. President Obama was welcoming ASEAN leaders for a summit in California and China’s most recent “provocation” became the “elephant in the room.”

On July 30, 2014 and May 21, 2015, Manila wrote twice to the Tribunal expressing grave concerns about China’s dredging, artificial island-building, and construction activities on seven

⁴³⁸ CSIS, “China Island Tracker,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, <https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/china/>, accessed April 17, 2018.

⁴³⁹ Chinese leaders and MoFA has repeated this point at various occasions. For example, PRC MoFA, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on April 9, 2015,” April 9, 2015, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1253488.shtml, accessed April 18, 2018; or see Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin’s speech at the 10th East Asia Summit in Malaysia, cited in “Military Facilities Aren’t Militarization in the South China Sea: Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister,” *The Diplomat*, November 23, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/11/military-facilities-arent-militarization-in-the-south-china-sea-chinese-deputy-foreign-minister/>, accessed April 18, 2018.

⁴⁴⁰ “Exclusive: China sends surface-to-air missiles to contested island in provocative move,” *Fox News*, February 16, 2016, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2016/02/16/exclusive-china-sends-surface-to-air-missiles-to-contested-island-in-provocative-move.html>, accessed April 18, 2018.

features it occupied, namely, Cuarteron Reef (Huayang Jiao), Fiery Cross Reef (Yongshu Jiao), Johnson Reef (Chigua Jiao), Hughes Reef (Dongmen Jiao), Gaven Reefs (Nanxun Jiao), Subi Reef (Zhubi Jiao), and Mischief Reef (Meiji Jiao)⁴⁴¹ It asked the Tribunal to judge on the legality and the environmental impacts of the Chinese activities, as well as whether the artificial features would generate additional maritime entitlements. Manila also resorted to ASEAN to respond to the Chinese reclamation. On January 22, 2015, ahead of an ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat, Philippines Foreign Secretary Rosario denounced China's construction work a "threat" to all ASEAN countries and called the participants to discuss about the reclamation.⁴⁴² Ahead of an ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Summit on April 26, 2016, Rosario once again called the ASEAN countries to act collectively to halt China's reclamation, but apparently failed to raise widespread support.⁴⁴³

The Philippines also developed closer ties with the U.S. and Japan as a response to their weakened security in the region due to China's reclamation. To the U.S., the Chinese reclamation impinges more on China's naval power projection capabilities in the Pacific, and less on the sovereignty dispute. As such, the U.S. reactions seemed even stronger and more substantial than those of the Philippines. The tug of war between the U.S. and China in the South China Sea became an important thread in the background of the ongoing arbitration.

The U.S.' response to the Chinese reclamation had three components: 1) name and shame: release satellite images to expose China's reclamation activities and incur an international reputation cost for China; 2) conduct FONOPs that directly challenge China near

⁴⁴¹ PCA, "The Award," 13, 16.

⁴⁴² "PH to take up China reclamation before ASEAN," *Rappler*, January 22, 2015, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/81657-philippines-china-reclamation-asean>, accessed April 17, 2018.

⁴⁴³ "Philippines calls on ASEAN to urge China to halt land reclamation," *Reuters*, April 26, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-asean-summit-southchinasea/philippines-calls-on-asean-to-urge-china-to-halt-land-reclamation-idUSKBN0NH03P20150426>, accessed April 17, 2018.

the artificial islands; 3) provide diplomatic and military assistance to Southeast Asian claimants to strengthen an extended deterrence to China. On the first component, the IHS Jane's Defense Weekly and the CSIS continuously released satellite images of China's dredging activities, which sustained the attention of western media for quite some time.

On the second component, the U.S. carried out at least five FONOPs near China-occupied land features and all of them were highly publicized. On May 20, 2015, America's most advanced surveillance aircraft P8-A Poseidon flew over the Fiery Cross Reef. With a CNN correspondent on board, the action broadcasted live to the public the Chinese construction scene and the Chinese warning to the U.S. aircraft to leave immediately.⁴⁴⁴ On Oct 27, 2015, a U.S. missile destroyer, USS Lassen, sailed to within 12 nautical miles of the Mischief and Subi reefs, causing a Chinese warship to shadow its movements and provoking an angry response from Beijing and its summoning of the U.S. ambassador.⁴⁴⁵ On January 30, 2016, a U.S. missile destroyer, USS Curtis Wilbur, passed within 12 nautical miles of the Triton Island of the Paracels.⁴⁴⁶ On April 19, 2016, a U.S. Pacific Command air contingent flew near the

⁴⁴⁴ "Exclusive: China warns U.S. surveillance plane," *CNN*, May 20, 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/05/20/politics/south-china-sea-navy-flight/index.html>, accessed April 17, 2018.

⁴⁴⁵ " 'Hope to see you again': China warship to U.S. destroyer after South China Sea patrol," *Reuters*, November 5, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-usa-warship/hope-to-see-you-again-china-warship-to-u-s-destroyer-after-south-china-sea-patrol-idUSKCN0SV05420151106>, accessed April 18, 2018; "Beijing summons US ambassador over warship in South China Sea," *The Guardian*, October 27, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/27/us-warship-lassen-defies-beijing-sail-disputed-south-china-sea-islands>, accessed April 18, 2018.

⁴⁴⁶ "U.S. missile destroyer sailed close to island claimed by China," *Washington Post*, January 30, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/01/30/u-s-missile-destroyer-sailed-close-to-island-claimed-by-china/?utm_term=.8c30902f3a21, accessed April 18, 2018.

Scarborough Shoal.⁴⁴⁷ On May 10, 2016, a U.S. destroyer USS William P. Lawrence passed within 12 nautical miles of the Fiery Cross Reef.⁴⁴⁸

On the third component, besides increasing military assistance and strengthening defense cooperation, the U.S. also criticized the Chinese action and offer support to the other claimants at multilateral forums. At the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in May 2015, U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter reacted to China's reclamation: "There should be no mistake: the United States will fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows...America, alongside its allies and partners...will not be deterred from exercising these rights...after all, turning an underwater rock into an airfield simply does not afford the rights of sovereignty or permit restrictions on international air or maritime transit."⁴⁴⁹ When addressing to the APEC meeting in Manila on November 18, 2015, President Obama singled China out and asked it to halt its reclamation activities.⁴⁵⁰

III. In the Lens of the (Mis)Alignment Theory

In the text that follows, I evaluate how well the theory explains the propaganda campaign adopted during the arbitration crisis in June and July 2016. I first assess whether the theoretical assumptions made under the theory are applicable to the case. I then evaluate evidence to

⁴⁴⁷ U.S. Air Force, "PACAF A-10s, HH-60s fly first air contingent missions in Philippines," April 22, 2016, <http://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/740671/pacaf-a-10s-hh-60s-fly-first-air-contingent-missions-in-philippines/>, accessed April 18, 2018.

⁴⁴⁸ "USS William P. Lawrence passes China-claimed reef," *Associated Press*, May 10, 2016, <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2016/05/10/uss-william-p-lawrence-passes-china-claimed-reef/>, accessed April 19, 2018.

⁴⁴⁹ Ashton Carter, "A Regional Security Architecture Where Everyone Rises," speech delivered at IISS, Shanri-La Dialogue, Singapore, May 30, 2015, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/606676/>, accessed April 18, 2018.

⁴⁵⁰ "Obama Calls on Beijing to Stop Construction in South China Sea," *New York Times*, November 18, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/19/world/asia/obama-apec-summit-south-china-sea-philippines.html>, accessed April 18, 2018.

determine the values of the independent variables. I find that existing public opinion was hardline, but the state intended for a moderate foreign policy. I argue that given this setup of conditions, the state launched a propaganda campaign to pacify the public opinion to meet the foreign policy demand. I trace the pacifying process to see whether and how well empirical evidence supports the observable implications of the theory.

1. Theoretical Assumptions of Rational Actor and State-Public Interactions on Foreign Policy

On the first assumption that the state is rationally-led and its top priorities are regime survival against domestic competitors and state security against external threats, the Chinese government in the 2016 arbitration crisis acted largely as a unitary, rational actor whose decisions were based on rational calculations of domestic concerns and external threats. The chain of reactions between China and the Philippines and between China and the U.S. are classic manifestations of the Realist security dilemma in international security. Take China's land reclamation for example, the Chinese action was motivated by the long-term strategic need to catch up with the other claimants, and to enhance its naval projection power with perceived growing threats from the U.S. in the Asia Pacific. It was also spurred by the recent Philippine attempt to upgrade the Second Thomas Shoal, which gave it a feel of urgency resulting from a deteriorating claim strength in the South China Sea.

Some may argue that China's policy of non-participation in the arbitration was unwise and therefore irrational. Indeed, my interview with senior policy advisor consulted by the state on the issue revealed that there were internal criticisms against the decision of non-participation,

even after the decision was made.⁴⁵¹ The next sections will elaborate China's inner thinking on the non-participation decision. But to summarize the point for the purpose here, the whole decision-making process reflected thorough vetting at the highest level. According to my interview with relevant government official, comprehensive considerations of legal expert advice was also part of the decision-making process and an internal legal document was produced on this matter.⁴⁵² This further confirms the rationalist assumption of the state actor in this case. The fact that China had resolutely and consistently followed through with the policy strengthens our confidence in this assumption as well.

Some scholarly work stresses the parochial institutional role of various state agencies in the South China Sea dispute. For example, You argues for the centrality of the PLA both in the policy making at the top and the enforcement at the front-line.⁴⁵³ Goldstein demonstrates the impact of the competition between various government branches on the dispute.⁴⁵⁴ But these arguments had little applicability to the arbitration crisis. We can see from the narrative of events throughout the three and half years that the arbitration lasted, the PLA and other state agencies played little part. Perhaps due to the nature of the arbitration and the high national reputational stakes the case involved, the decision was highly centralized. Besides, since Xi Jinping took office in 2012, he had not only consolidated his personal power through a widespread anti-corruption campaign, but also had streamlined the decision-making process, particularly on foreign policy issues, through a number of organizational restructuring efforts. Right now, the decision-making apparatus on the South China Sea dispute is composed of a Central Leading

⁴⁵¹ Interview 19, May 29, 2017, Beijing.

⁴⁵² Interview 41, June 9, 2017, Beijing.

⁴⁵³ You 2017.

⁴⁵⁴ Goldstein 2010. Other works along similar lines of argument include Saunders and Scobell 2015 and International Crisis Group 2012.

Small Group on the Protection of Maritime Interest at the top, headed by Xi himself, and the State Maritime Administration in charge of the daily policy management and the China Coast Guard in policy enforcement.

As for the second and the third assumptions that public opinion has to play some, neither utterly submissive, nor overwhelmingly decisive, role in a state's foreign policy making, they are also applicable to this case. The case took place in today's digital age where information flow is a lot freer despite China's sophisticated censorship system. As pointed out in Chapter 3 in the background section, concomitant with the freer flow of information is a more expressive and active public who were easily inflamed by popular nationalism. Therefore, public opinion has arguably played a larger role in the state's foreign policy making. The fact that the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) ordered the media "not to hype" and "not to spread the news" on "recent illegal demonstrations" a week after the release of the award indirectly shows that the state cared about public opinion.⁴⁵⁵ These demonstrations targeted KFC as a scapegoat for the American support of the arbitration, and the government felt the need to take the situation under control exactly because of the potential power of public opinion.

But as also argued in Chapter 3 in the background section, this more expressive and active public opinion does not necessarily mean a weakened state control. As the case played out, public opinion was never a critical factor in any of the critical decisions throughout the case, either the decision to not participate into the arbitration, or the conciliatory stance to make up with Manila soon after the release of the award. The elusive role the factor of public opinion played in the state decision making was evident in all the interviews conducted to the government officials and policy analysts involved in the case. This seeming paradox in the

⁴⁵⁵ Zhenlibu (The Truth Department), "Feifa jihui youxing xinxi (Information on illegal gatherings and demonstrations)," *China Digital Times*, July 18, 2016, <https://goo.gl/VrRV3Z>, accessed April 24, 2018.

relations between public opinion and state foreign policy making, as I argued in Chapter 3, is due to the legion of resources and means available at the state's disposal to influence public opinion to meet foreign policy needs. The pacifying propaganda, the focus of this chapter, is an important one of these means.

2. A Hardline Public Opinion

China's land reclamation activities and the U.S. FONOPs near China's artificial islands throughout 2015 and especially in the first half of 2016 significantly elevated the salience of the dispute in the Chinese public. There was a chain of reactions between the U.S. and China in the first half of 2016 and a downward spiral in the security relationship that reached a crisis level. As mentioned in the narrative of events earlier, China's aggressive island-building activities spurred a U.S. response in conducting FONOPs near China's artificial islands. The U.S. destroyer USS Wilbur's passing through 12 nautical miles of the Triton Island of the Paracels on January 30, 2016 may have provoked China to deploy the surface-to-air missile system to the Woody Island on February 16. The Chinese deployment of the missile further deteriorated the security perceptions of the Southeast Asian countries and the U.S., whose leaders happened to be convening in California talking about the security situation in the region. The U.S. further reacted by dispatching an aircraft carrier navy group to the South China Sea in early March.⁴⁵⁶ Since January 2016, the U.S. conducted FONOPs near China-claimed islands almost every month leading up to the release of the award.

⁴⁵⁶ "Navy aircraft carrier group moves into contested South China Sea," *Washington Post*, March 3, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/03/03/navy-aircraft-carrier-group-moves-into-contested-south-china-sea-pentagon-says/?utm_term=.67a7ece17ac2, accessed April 19, 2018.

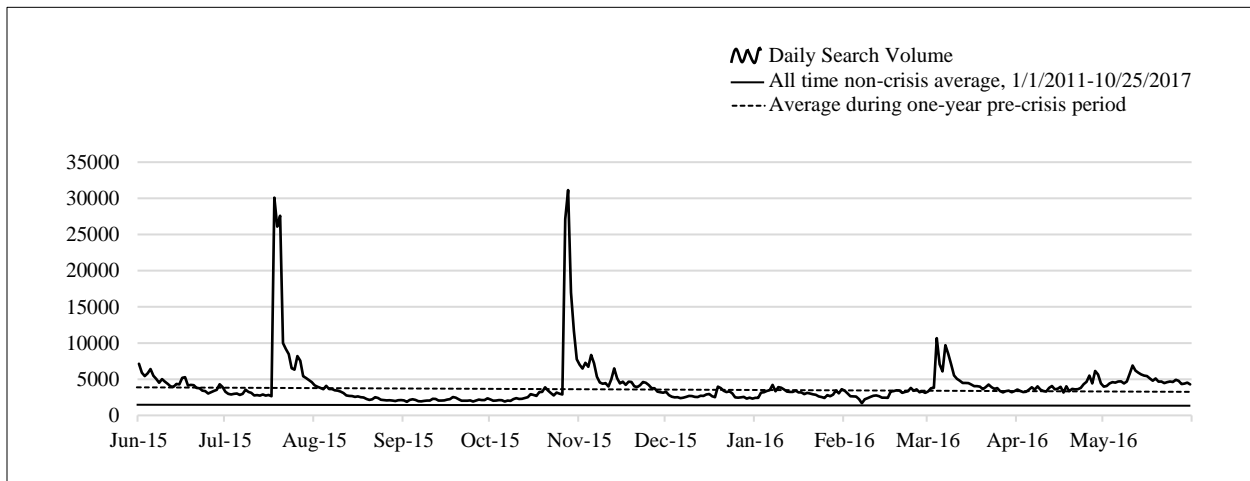
This rising tension was accompanied by a rancorous debate about who was really militarizing the South China Sea, featuring angry responses of high-level officials at prominent international arenas such as the Shangri-La Dialogue, the APEC summit, and the ASEAN summits. All of these caught the attention of the media and the public both internationally and within China. This, in the background of the Sino-Philippines arbitration, raised the awareness and intensified the emotions among the Chinese public. Before the arbitration entered into a crisis status in June and July of 2016, the public had already been amply agitated.

There was no credible public opinion survey measuring the Chinese public opinion taken right before the crisis towards this particular dispute, but the Beijing Area Study (BAS)⁴⁵⁷ survey carried out between April 10 and June 30, 2015 ranked the Philippines the second lowest in the country thermometers (36 out of 100), only after Japan (30 out of 100), against whom the Chinese nationalistic sentiment was notoriously acute.

The Baidu Search Index (BSI), an analytic tool that tracks the daily search activity on given keywords on China's most dominant search engine baidu.com, offers a useful measurement for the level of public attention in China. Figure 6.2 shows an average of about four thousand in the search index for the word "South China Sea" during the one-year pre-crisis period, with several surges throughout the year. For comparison, the all-time average of search volume during non-crisis periods between January 1, 2011 and October 15, 2017 is 2,773. The average during the one year before the Sino-Vietnamese oil rig crisis in 2014 was below eighteen hundred, which I interpret as low level of public attention.

⁴⁵⁷ The Beijing Area Study is an annual opinion survey of Beijing residents in social and economic life. It started to add an international component from 1998. The question of country thermometer on the Philippines was added in 2013.

Figure 6.2: Daily Search Index of the Word “South China Sea” on Baidu.com, 5/31/2015-5/31/2016



The existing hardline public opinion was also evident in the initial public response. The court’s announcement sparked an enormous public outcry on the Internet. During July 1-20, the number of relevant microblog posts soared to over five million, mostly from China’s leading microblog Sina Weibo.⁴⁵⁸ Large-scale protests, despite their actual absence, were well expected, and the security of the Philippine Embassy in Beijing was strengthened. Scattered protests occurred in a number of cities, with people standing outside KFC restaurants condemning the U.S.’ involvement and calling for a boycott.⁴⁵⁹

3. The Misalignment: A Moderate State Policy Intent

Despite Beijing’s harsh rhetoric, strong evidence affirms its preference for a moderate policy. Interviews of scholars with privileged access to policy-making revealed that Beijing from the very beginning “wanted the issue to go away.”⁴⁶⁰ After Manila first initiated the case, there had been heated internal debates about whether to participate in the arbitration.

⁴⁵⁸ Jiang and Luo 2016, 60.

⁴⁵⁹ “KFC Targeted in Protests Over South China Sea,” *New York Times*, July 19, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/20/world/asia/south-china-sea-protests-kfc.html>, accessed April 19, 2018.

⁴⁶⁰ Interview 19, May 29, 2017, Beijing.

Beijing faced a difficult choice. If it were to participate and lose a high-profile case like this, the domestic implications would be severe. It would also have regional ramifications on China's other offshore disputes. The chance of losing the case was high. China's nine-dash line claim predates the UNCLOS, so in many aspects it was not compatible with the UNCLOS clauses. The nine dashes do not even have coordinates and it was not clear what the dashes really mean. Beijing had deliberately left it ambiguous, in the hope of maintaining the status quo so it would neither "win" or "lose" an inch of its "ancestor land." Besides, Chan and Li's interviews with analysts from various Chinese think tanks suggest that China feared that "the process will not be fair as the President of the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), Shunji Yanai, is Japanese by nationality."⁴⁶¹ Even observers such as Greg Poling predicted in February 2016 that "the judges will almost certainly rule that China's nine-dash line is not a valid maritime claim and that China is not entitled to any historic rights beyond the regime of territorial seas, exclusive economic zones, and continental shelves laid out in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)."⁴⁶² Also, there was no precedent on any of China's territorial disputes to be resolved by international arbitration, so China was suspicious of such an approach. For the same reason, by declaring on August 28, 2006 the UNCLOS exclusion term Article 298, China had purposely excluded itself from the jurisdiction of international arbitration of disputes concerning maritime boundary delimitation, historic bays and titles, and military use of the ocean.⁴⁶³

⁴⁶¹ Chan and Li 2015, 38-39.

⁴⁶² Gregory B. Poling, "A Tumultuous 2016 in the South China Sea," CSIS Commentary, February 18, 2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/tumultuous-2016-south-china-sea>, accessed April 19, 2018.

⁴⁶³ For China's declaration under Article 298, see United Nations Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea, "Declarations and Statements," http://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/convention_declarations.htm#China%20after%20ratification; for content of Article 298, see http://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/convention_declarations.htm, accessed April 19, 2018.

By not participating, China would lose the opportunity to influence the ruling in its favor. For example, after the Philippines initiated the case on January 22, 2013, China would have the right to appoint an arbitrator, even a Chinese national. The tribunal based the hearing on China's 2014 Position Paper and the letters sent to the Tribunal by the Chinese Ambassador to the Netherlands, but these would be far less substantial than a real representation. Non-participation would also damage China's soft power and taint China's international image. Professor Jerome Cohen of the New York University School of Law comments that "This (non-participation and non-acceptance) makes China look bad to the world community ... Now it looks like a bully that rejects its legal obligation to settle a dispute under UNCLOS."⁴⁶⁴ This view was shared by many. Poling says that "Being branded an international outlaw will involve significant reputational costs for Beijing. It will undermine China's narrative that it is a responsible rising power that deserves a greater hand in global governance. It will make other countries wary of Chinese commitments and will drive regional states even closer to Tokyo and Washington."⁴⁶⁵

After weighing the pros and cons of both choices, and consulting thoroughly with international legal experts, Beijing made a decision to not participate nor accept the arbitration. Throughout this process, punishing or threatening to punish the Philippines for challenging China in front of the International Tribunal was given little consideration, if any.⁴⁶⁶ Subsequent events proved that Beijing refrained from punishing Manila. Instead, China engaged in diplomatic efforts to make the Philippines drop the case. But such endeavors apparently failed – Manila was determined to pursue the case. As the case continued to develop and the situation

⁴⁶⁴ "Beijing looks like a 'bully' by rejecting arbitration on South China Sea issue," *South China Morning Post*, May 25, 2013, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1245471/beijing-looks-bully-rejecting-arbitration-south-china-sea-issue>, April 19, 2018.

⁴⁶⁵ Gregory B. Poling, "A Tumultuous 2016 in the South China Sea," CSIS Commentary, February 18, 2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/tumultuous-2016-south-china-sea>, accessed April 19, 2018.

⁴⁶⁶ Interview 12, May 26, 2017, Beijing; Interview 19, May 29, 2017, Beijing.

became more and more clear with an impending ruling, China's behavior became largely "reactive" and "remedial."⁴⁶⁷ The domestic and international propaganda campaign, the diplomatic efforts to forestall an ASEAN statement mentioning the ruling, and the international campaign to rally support for China's position, as mentioned in previous texts, were all components of the "reactive" and "remedial" policy.

Actions speak louder than words. Even at the height of the crisis in late June, Beijing wasted no time in congratulating Rodrigo Duterte, who had just been sworn in as the Philippines' new president. This is a strong indicator Beijing was seeking new diplomatic channels to resolve the issue and not seeking escalation or retaliation. Duterte said he was honored to receive the congratulatory message from the Chinese President Xi Jinping and continued to release positive signals to improve the relationship.⁴⁶⁸ Xi reciprocated by expressing that he was "willing to work with Duterte to push for improvement of relations between their two countries," notably leaving out the ongoing arbitration.⁴⁶⁹

After the tribunal released its ruling, Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin said at a July 13 press conference that China had "noted that the new Philippine government led by President Duterte was positive about resuming dialogue with China and moving forward the bilateral relationship from different aspects. We welcome that with our door widely open."⁴⁷⁰ Beijing was ready to turn the page. In Feng Zhang's analysis, "This [Beijing's] position of ignoring the award while seeking negotiation with the Philippines is clear from two important documents the Chinese government released immediately after the award: a statement about China territorial

⁴⁶⁷ Interview 6, May 22, 2017, Beijing; Interview 19, May 29, 2017, Beijing.

⁴⁶⁸ "Philippines president-elect Duterte hails China's Xi Jinping as 'great president'," *Xinhua News*, June 1, 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-06/01/c_135404541.htm, accessed April 19, 2018.

⁴⁶⁹ "Xi congratulates new Philippine president on inauguration," *Xinhua News*, June 30, 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-06/30/c_135478948.htm, accessed April 19, 2018.

⁴⁷⁰ PRC MoFA, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang's Regular Press Conference on July 14, 2016," July 14, 2016, <http://www.chinaconsulatechicago.org/eng/fyrth/t1381622.htm>, accessed April 19, 2018.

sovereignty and maritime rights in the South China Sea and a white paper on settling the disputes with the Philippines through negotiation. Both documents mention the so-called nine-dash line map only in passing. Instead, the statement announces China's readiness to make practical temporary arrangements with the Philippines to reduce tension and seek cooperation."⁴⁷¹

On August 8 after the tribunal ruling, the Philippines sent former president Fidel V. Ramos as special envoy to Hong Kong as an "icebreaker" to renew friendship with the Chinese. Ramos met with Fu Ying, Chairperson of the Foreign Affairs Committee of China's National People's Congress and Wu Shicun, President of the National Institute for South China Sea Studies. They issued a statement in their personal capacities, which focused on cooperation and dialogue and did not mention about the ruling.⁴⁷² Ramos also expressed his government's interest in engaging in formal discussions to ease tensions with China.⁴⁷³ Ramos' visit tested waters for the Chinese receptivity of a new Philippine conciliatory position and the subsequent visit by President Duterte proved that his good will was reciprocated.

Besides sending cooperative signals to and reciprocating the good will of the Duterte government, Beijing also made a number of cooperative and conciliatory gestures. These behaviors were simply not of a state intending for a hardline policy. On the July 24 China-ASEAN Foreign Ministers' summit right after the release of the ruling, besides the wrestling of keeping the language mentioning the ruling off the Joint Communiqué (as elaborated in earlier texts), Beijing notably made a concession by promising ASEAN not to carry out land

⁴⁷¹ Feng Zhang et al, "China's Claims in the South China Sea Rejected," *ChinaFile*, July 13, 2016, <http://www.chinafile.com/conversation/chinas-claims-south-china-sea-rejected>, accessed April 19, 2018.

⁴⁷² "Ramos the icebreaker: former Philippine president heads to Hong Kong to test China waters," *South China Morning Post*, August 8, 2016, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2000842/former-philippines-president-fidel-ramos-heads-beijing>; for content of the joint statement, see <https://www.chinausfocus.com/news/2016/0812/3714.html>, accessed April 19, 2018.

⁴⁷³ "Philippines wants formal talks to ease tensions with China, says ex-president Ramos," *South China Morning Post*, August 12, 2016, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2002784/philippines-wants-formal-talks-ease-tensions-china-says>, accessed April 19, 2018.

reclamation on the Scarborough Shoal. Besides the Joint Communiqué, the summit also issued a Joint Statement of the Foreign Ministers of ASEAN Member States and China on the Full and Effective Implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea.⁴⁷⁴ The Joint Statement carries the language that the Parties “refrain from action of inhabiting on the presently uninhabited islands, reefs, shoals, cays, and other features.” This commitment precludes the Philippines from upgrading the Second Thomas Shoal, in just the same way as it constrains China from carrying out land reclamation on the Scarborough Shoal.

On August 15-16, 2016, China and ASEAN member states held the 13th Senior Officials’ Meeting (SOM) and the 18th Joint Working Group Meeting on the Implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) in China’s Manzhouli. This meeting ended with some tentative breakthroughs, which were confirmed at the September China-ASEAN summit. The meeting adopted guidelines for a hotline during maritime emergencies, a Joint Statement on the Application of the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea in the South China Sea, and pledged to finalize a draft for a code of conduct for the South China Sea by the middle of 2017.⁴⁷⁵ President Duterte visited China on October 20. President Xi met with Duterte and the two agreed to resume direct talks on the South China Sea dispute. After Duterte’s visit, China reports that the “China-Philippine relations have been turned around and

⁴⁷⁴ PRC MoFA, “Joint Statement of the Foreign Ministers of ASEAN Member States and China on the Full and Effective Implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea,” July 25, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/nanhai/eng/zcfg_1/t1384245.htm, accessed April 20, 2018.

⁴⁷⁵ “The 13th Senior Officials’ Meeting on the Implementation of the DOC Held in Manzhouli, Inner Mongolia,” August 16, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/nanhai/eng/wjbxw_1/t1389619.htm; “Can Manzhouli work its magic on the South China Sea disputes?” South China Morning Post, August 21, 2016, <http://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/2006260/can-manzhouli-work-its-magic-south-china-sea-disputes>, accessed April 20, 2018.

put on a track of all-around improvement.”⁴⁷⁶ As a substantive cooperative gesture, China also allowed Filipino fishermen to return to the vicinity of the Scarborough Shoal.⁴⁷⁷

4. A Pacifying Propaganda Campaign

The existing hardline public opinion and the moderate state policy intent thus created a gap that the state needed to bridge before carrying out its preferred moderate policy. To recall the logic of the misalignment theory delineated in Chapter 2, when a state holding a moderate foreign policy intent is faced with a hardline public opinion, the state launches a pacifying propaganda campaign to counterintuitively calm the public opinion to align it with the intended moderate state policy. A pacifying propaganda campaign works in two ways. One is to appease the public by keeping up the appearances of a hard stand, as a strong rhetoric helps fend off nationalistic criticism, maintain social stability, and to save face. Recent research on public opinion in foreign policy shows evidence that citizens approve of government “bluster” – tough talk not followed up with tough action.⁴⁷⁸ The “issue attention cycle” (the short attention span of the public) characterized in Media Studies also offers support for the rationale behind this function.⁴⁷⁹ The other is to moderate public opinion by echoing their emotions and letting the public vent. Studies in social psychology and on effects of social media support this rationale.

The events that transpired in the arbitration crisis substantiate the observable implications of a pacifying propaganda campaign listed in Chapter 2.

⁴⁷⁶ PRC MoFA, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on May 19,” May 19, 2017, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1463588.shtml, accessed April 20, 2018.

⁴⁷⁷ “Filipino fisherman back in disputed South China Sea shoal after Duterte’s Beijing pivot,” South China Morning Post, October 30, 2016, <http://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/2041371/filipino-fisherman-back-disputed-south-china-sea-shoal>, accessed April 20, 2018.

⁴⁷⁸ Weiss and Dafoe 2017.

⁴⁷⁹ Baumgartner and Jones 2010; Bodensteiner 1995; Downs 1972.

Hb1 (Nationalistic Criticisms): The state is exposed to nationalistic criticisms. A

government under nationalist attacks will be more motivated to align the public to its preferred moderate policy.

The government was indeed vulnerable of criticisms given the difficult situation it was placed in. A senior Chinese scholar disclosed that many people including political elites thought the decision not to participate in the arbitration was erroneous and unwise. Many regarded the arbitration as a major diplomatic debacle and privately blamed the government. Several senior scholars interviewed by the author complained about the impairment of the ruling to China's territorial claim in the South China Sea and the damage of China's non-participation and non-acceptance stance to China's international image of complying to international law.⁴⁸⁰ A senior scholar involved in the decision-making process commented: "The government does not want the public to know that it actually made a mistake. When the issue was discussed internally within the government, we had two different opinions. One opinion is to participate in the arbitration, so that we can influence the result to our advantage. But the government went with the other opinion to not participate. The result turned out to be the most unfavorable to China. Then the government had to adopt a damage control approach."⁴⁸¹

Strong nationalist views expressed online, some of which censored, harshly denounced the government's preference for peaceful negotiations and referenced to the vast amount of land China had ceded to foreign states since 1949.⁴⁸² "China must draw the sword (zhongguo bixu liang jian)," "No dried mango for our national interest (Guojia mianqian wu mangguo gan),"

⁴⁸⁰ Interview 6, May 22, 2017, Beijing; interview 19, May 29, 2016, Beijing.

⁴⁸¹ Interview 19, May 29, 2017, Beijing.

⁴⁸² "The South China Sea Arbitration Ruling: Chinese Netizens Debate Whether to Fight a War (Nanhai zhongcai an panjue: zhongguo wangmin zhengbian yingfou kaizhan)," *BBC Chinese*, July 13, 2016, http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/china/2016/07/160713_south_china_sea_web_reax, accessed April 20, 2018.

“Whoever attacks China will be killed no matter how far the target is (fan wo zhonghua zhe, sui yuan bi zhu),” became popular expressions online. “No dried mango” was calling for boycotting mangos imported from the Philippines. Zhao observed right before the release of the award that “many people swore by war...once the ruling turns out to be unfavorable to China, street protests would almost certainly be expected; people might even attack the Philippine and the American Embassies.”⁴⁸³

Scholarly works and interviews with government officials reveal and confirm the logic of the pacifying propaganda – the leaders were forced to appear strong-handed in front of a nationalistic domestic public, even at the risk of inflaming even stronger nationalism. Shi wrote that “although publicizing the American, the Philippine or the Japanese military activities in the South China Sea might fan too much popular nationalism, the government does not want to suppress coverage too bluntly as too little noise might make the government appear weak and easily cowed.”⁴⁸⁴ In You Ji’s analysis, “if dispute aversion is meant to help domestic stability its softness over sovereignty issues arouses public anger which challenges state legitimacy and thus just betrays the goal of domestic stability.”⁴⁸⁵ Interview to a government official confirmed the state’s concern about the hardline public opinion: “The government was worried that the public might hear about the arbitration from foreign media anyways, and this (the arbitration) has great impact on China’s national image.”⁴⁸⁶ So instead of passively reacting to a public outcry at the whims of foreign media, the state took the reins of its own propaganda machine to effectively shape public opinion to its foreign policy needs.

⁴⁸³ Zhao 2016, 54.

⁴⁸⁴ Shi 2015, 96.

⁴⁸⁵ You 2014, 252.

⁴⁸⁶ Interview 12, May 26, 2017, Beijing.

Hb2 (Bark but No Bite): Official statements are harsh, but without any substantive threats of punishment. To keep up the appearances of a hard stand and to fend off nationalist criticisms, a government needs to adopt a particularly harsh rhetoric, sometimes even in hyperbole and colorful language. But the absence of any substantive threats of punishment belies its real moderate intentions. In the end, it is all bark but no bite.

To protect itself from potential criticisms, the state issued strongly-worded statements, yet none threatening with substantive punishment. For example, Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Yesui stated: “China opposes and will not accept any proposition and action based on the award and will never negotiate with any other country over the South China Sea based on the illegal award.”⁴⁸⁷ The Foreign Minister Spokesperson Lu Kang criticized the U.S. for not being impartial as it had claimed to be and hypocrisy of the U.S. in supporting the ruling: “The US is always selective when it comes to the application of international law: citing international law when it sees fit and discarding international law when it sees otherwise. It keeps urging others to abide by the UNCLOS while refusing to ratify the Convention to this day.”⁴⁸⁸ The PRC ambassador to the U.S. Cui Tiankai impugned the impartiality of the tribunal by saying that Shunji Yanai, the jurist who appointed most of the arbitrators, is “a right-wing Japanese intent on ridding Japan of post-war arrangements.”⁴⁸⁹ Former Chinese state councilor Dai Bingguo

⁴⁸⁷ PRC MoFA, “China’s Sovereignty and Maritime Rights and Interests in the South China Sea Shall Not Be Affected by Arbitration Award,” July 16, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/nanhai/eng/wjbxw_1/t1382766.htm, accessed April 20, 2018.

⁴⁸⁸ PRC MoFA, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang’s Remarks on Statement by Spokesperson of US State Department on South China Sea Arbitration Ruling,” July 13, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1380409.shtml, accessed April 20, 2018.

⁴⁸⁹ PRC MoFA, “Yang Jiechi Gives Interview to State Media on the So-called Award by the Arbitral Tribunal for the South China Sea Arbitration,” July 15, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1381740.shtml, accessed April 20, 2018.

dismissed the ruling as “nothing but a piece of waste paper.”⁴⁹⁰ State Councilor Yang Jiechi asserted on July 14 in an interview to state media that “Certain countries outside the region have attempted to deny China’s sovereign rights and interests in the South China Sea through the arbitration.”⁴⁹¹ “Certain countries outside the region” refers to the U.S., Japan and some European countries.

Notably, all these harsh words came from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, few from the military. The silence on the military side was also a strong indicator that it was all bark but no bite. The public, as it turned out, were greatly satisfied by the strong rhetoric. For example, commenting on Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Lu Kang’s statement that the ruling “will in no way affect China’s territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea,” Weibo posts praised the spokesperson as “domineering” and “cool.”⁴⁹²

Hb3 (Non-Inflammatory Content): Media content is informative and analytical, not inflammatory. Besides echoing the hardline public emotion to release their anger, a significant portion of the media content should be geared towards guiding public opinion towards rational thoughts, so that the public would be less likely to resort to violence or collective actions that would endanger social stability or regime security.

The second way a pacifying propaganda campaign works is to moderate the strong public opinion. Editors and journalists at main official media outlets covering the arbitration explained

⁴⁹⁰ “Veteran Chinese Diplomat Warns on South China Sea Ruling,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 6, 2017, <https://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2016/07/06/veteran-chinese-diplomat-warns-on-south-china-sea-ruling/>, accessed April 20, 2018.

⁴⁹¹ PRC MoFA, “Yang Jiechi Gives Interview to State Media on the So-called Award by the Arbitral Tribunal for the South China Sea Arbitration,” July 15, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1381740.shtml, accessed April 20, 2018.

⁴⁹² PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang’s Remarks on Statement by Spokesperson of US State Department on South China Sea Arbitration Ruling,” July 13, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1380409.shtml, accessed April 20, 2018; Jiang and Luo 2016, 60.

that the main purpose of the media campaign was to “prepare” and “guide” public opinion “before the release of the award.” “Because the ruling was expected to be unfavorable [to China], we need to help the public to understand it objectively and rationally. Thus, after the release [of the award], the public would know how to refute the ruling with reason, but not to vent their anger recklessly. The public does not have a clear understanding of this issue – they are either influenced by the Western media, or have extreme populist opinions. Our role is to clarify a couple of issues – the legal basis [of our position], different stands of different countries, the external and internal causes, and China’s historic rights [in the South China Sea].”⁴⁹³ A government official also admitted that the “domestic part of the public relations campaign” was to “prepare the public to accept and understand the ruling.” “Our main position is that the ruling and the arbitration itself were manipulated.”⁴⁹⁴

The successful “channeling of public anger” was done in ways of echoing public sentiment and offering rational analysis of the issue. During the crisis, the official media echoed public emotion and offered rational analysis. Although some language were harsh for echoing purposes, but they were limited to accusation, excoriation, and ridicule; they were usually not strong enough to incite hatred, and they almost always end with a positive note. For example, one *People’s Daily* editorial by Zhong Sheng criticized the tribunal for setting “a ridiculous standard for the territorial status of islands and reefs,” and characterized the arbitration as “full of lies” and producing a “foul atmosphere.”⁴⁹⁵ Despite the acerbic language, the article ended with a positive note that called the Philippines to drop the case and return to the bilateral negotiation

⁴⁹³ Interview 36, June 7, 2017, Beijing.

⁴⁹⁴ Interview 41, June 9, 2017, Beijing.

⁴⁹⁵ Zhong Sheng, “Tanpan xieshang shi jie jue nanhai wenti de wei yi chulu (Negotiation is the only way to solve the South China Sea Disputes),” *People’s Daily*, July 14, 2016, <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0714/c1003-28553963.html>, accessed April 22, 2018.

approach. The harsh language in the media shows the government's recognition and agreement with the public sentiment, in order to gain the necessary public trust to further influence public opinion towards ways of public expression amenable to the regime interests. As one government official commented: "sometimes the politically correct stuff [in the media] are just not enough for the people. Only the language we often find in *Global Times* [a well-known hawkish newspaper under *People's Daily*] help the public vent their spleen. They help the people let off steam by resonating their feelings."⁴⁹⁶

Meanwhile, the positive tone found in the media campaign helped to further direct public emotions to the regime's likes. According to the *South China Sea Public Opinion Newsletter* published by the Collaborative Innovation Center of South China Sea Studies at Nanjing University, which regularly monitors public opinion on the South China Sea dispute, articles with positive attitudes continued to dominate the media throughout the crisis. In June 2016, articles with positive attitudes exceeded those with negative attitudes by 25.5%.⁴⁹⁷ This number rose even higher in July to 40%.⁴⁹⁸ This shows that the government was trying to spin a positive story out of a difficult situation.

These techniques of echoing of public sentiment by using harsh language, instilling rationality by providing evidence-based analysis, and spinning a positive perspective were manifested in several main themes of media reports during this time. These themes focused on reasoning and analysis, with some accusations of the Philippines and the U.S. to provoke a sense of injustice, but none inciting hatred. One theme was to elaborate the government position and

⁴⁹⁶ Interview 41, June 9, 2017, Beijing.

⁴⁹⁷ Collaborative Innovation Center of South China Sea Studies at Nanjing University, *South China Sea Public Opinion Newsletter*, June 2016 issue, 1.

⁴⁹⁸ Collaborative Innovation Center of South China Sea Studies at Nanjing University, *South China Sea Public Opinion Newsletter*, July 2016 issue, 1. The July issue has more discussion on the positive and negative attitudes on page 7.

explain the legal basis, stressing on China's historic rights and rejecting the Philippine claim. This theme usually copied Chinese MoFA's remarks, statements, and policy papers. Zhong Sheng also penned several editorials, with the title "China's Historic Rights within the Nine-Dash Line Brooks No Distortion,"⁴⁹⁹ "There is Only One Truth,"⁵⁰⁰ "The Territorial Status of South China Sea Islands and Reefs Does Not Depend on False Words that Makes White Black."⁵⁰¹ Other articles cited historical evidence for China's territorial claim and against that of the Philippines;⁵⁰² refuted the Philippine approach of segregating the South China Sea dispute into smaller pieces of entitlement-based disputes to fit into the Tribunal's jurisdiction;⁵⁰³ revealed the inconsistency of the Aquino Administration on the dispute,⁵⁰⁴ etc.

Another theme was to cast doubt on the neutrality and authority of the Tribunal, from the appointment of the judges, the operation of the Tribunal, to the financial details of the arbitration. *People's Daily* had a series of articles on the background of the Tribunal, calling it "temporary," "lacks legitimacy," a "troupe," "a political tool" with money transactions with the Philippines, or even "the cancer cell of the international rule of law."⁵⁰⁵

⁴⁹⁹ Zhong Sheng, "Zhongguo zai nanhai duanxuxian nei de lishixing quanli bu rong wang yi he fouding," *People's Daily*, May 23, 2016, 3.

⁵⁰⁰ Zhong Sheng, "Zhenxiang yongyuan zhiyou yige," *People's Daily*, May 25, 2016, 3.

⁵⁰¹ Zhong Sheng, "Nanhai daojiao de lingtu diwei bu qujueyu diandao heibai de bushi zhi ci," *People's Daily*, May 27, 2016, 2.

⁵⁰² For example, "Zhongguo yongyou nanhai zhudao zhuquan de lishi shishi wu ke zheng bian (Historical Facts Indisputable on China's Ownership of the South China Sea Features)," *People's Daily*, May 24, 2016, 3.

⁵⁰³ For example, "Feilvbin 'qiege' jiliang wufa fouding zhongguo nansha qundao de zhengtixing (The Philippines' 'Fragmentation' Tactics Cannot Deny the Integrity of China's Nansha (Spratly) Islands)," *People's Daily*, May 30, 2016, 3.

⁵⁰⁴ "Ajino zhengfu zai nanhai wenti shang sahuang (The Aquino Government Lied on the Issue of South China Sea)," *People's Daily*, July 1, 2016, 2.

⁵⁰⁵ For example, Zhong Sheng, "'Zhongcaiting' jing shi waibu shili dailiren (How the Tribunal is an agent for external forces)" *People's Daily*, July 13, 2016, 2; "Sikai linshi zhongcaiting 'fali quanwei' de xujia baozhuang (Tearing the False Packaging of 'Legal Authority' of the Temporary Tribunal)," *People's Daily*, July 15, 2016, 3; "Zhaiqu caotai banzi de guanghuan (qidi linshi zhongcaiting) (Taking off the halo of the 'troupe' (the temporary Tribunal revealed))," *People's Daily*, July 17, 2016, 3; "Guoji fazhi de ai xibao (qidi linshi zhongcaiting) (The cancer cell of the international rule of law (the temporary Tribunal revealed))," *People's Daily*, July 22, 2016, 21; "Nanhai zhongcai zhangmu ying xiang shijie gongkai (The balance sheet of the South China Sea arbitration should be made public to the world)," *People's Daily*, August 1, 2016, 3.

A third theme was to point out that the U.S. was the “invisible hand” behind the case – the Philippines were simply a cat’s paw. This theme also showed the U.S.’ hypocrisy in regards to international law and its intention to contain China. Articles argued that the freedom of navigation on the South China Sea issue was a “false proposition” to cover up the “ulterior motives”; the U.S. position on the South China Sea was self-contradictory; the U.S. showing off muscles in the South China Sea was a form of hegemonism; warning the U.S. “not to cross the bottom-line”; the U.S. exercised “double standards” on issues of international law.⁵⁰⁶

A fourth theme argued for the negative regional and international ramifications of the arbitration, such as that the arbitration harmed the regionalization process by dividing ASEAN and damaged international rule of law. Articles accused the Philippines of “abusing international law,” “undermining international order,” and “disrupting regional security order and dialogue.”⁵⁰⁷ Articles also criticized the U.S. for “militarizing the South China Sea” and “endangering regional security.”⁵⁰⁸ After the release of the award, the Chinese ambassador to the Netherlands Wu Ken wrote an article in *People’s Daily* stating that the ruling had “humiliated” international law. But he also said that China and the Philippines were “permanent neighbors,”

⁵⁰⁶ For example, “Nanhai hangxing he feiyue ziyou shi ge weimingti (Freedom of navigation is a false proposition),” *People’s Daily*, June 6, 2016, 3; “Meiguo zai Nanhai wenti shang zixiangmaodun (The U.S. attitude on the South China Sea issue self-contradictory),” *People’s Daily*, June 20, 2016, 21; Zhong Sheng, “Meiguo, xuanyao wuli jiushi gao baquan (The U.S., showing off muscles is hegemonism),” *People’s Daily*, June 22, 2016, 2; Zhong Sheng, “Meiguo bu yao zai Nanhai wenti shang chongzhuang dixian (The U.S. should not cross the bottom-line on the South China Sea issue),” *People’s Daily*, July 6, 2016, 3; Zhong Sheng, “Shuangchong biao zhun shi dui guoji fazhi de xiedu (Double standards is a the desecration of the international rule of law),” *People’s Daily*, July 15, 2016, 3.

⁵⁰⁷ Zhong Sheng, “Lanyong guojifa jiu shi wa guoji zhixu qiangjiao (Abusing international law is undermining international order),” *People’s Daily*, June 28, 2016, 4; “Nanhai zhongcai an pohuai diqu anquan zhixu he duihua jizhi (The South China Sea arbitration damages regional security order and dialogue),” *People’s Daily*, June 30, 2016, 10.

⁵⁰⁸ Zhong Sheng, “Meiguo lumang zhi ju weihai yazhou anquan (The U.S.’ reckless move threatens Asian security),” *People’s Daily*, July 9, 2016, 2.

calling the new Philippine government to return to the bilateral approach and the “regional consensus.”⁵⁰⁹

A fifth theme cited favorable remarks from international legal experts and kept enumerating the countries and organizations supporting China’s position. *People’s Daily*, Xinhua News, CCTV cited and interviewed British international law experts Antonios Tzanakopoulos and Chris Whomersley.⁵¹⁰ Tzanakopoulos is an associate professor of public international law at the University of Oxford; Whomersley is a former deputy legal adviser to the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Both had publications questioning the jurisdiction of the Tribunal over the case. Tzanakopoulos’s paper published in the Social Science Research Network (SSRN) discussed the danger of “shoehorning” disputes into the jurisdiction of the Tribunal.⁵¹¹ Country supports from Niger, Kenya, Russia, Cameroon, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka, Malawi, etc, were all announced in *People’s Daily*, each as a stand-alone article. Supports of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, overseas Chinese, the China Law Society, China Fisheries Association, China Society for The Law of The Sea, etc, also received ample coverage.

A sixth theme criticized Western countries and Western media in “hying” the issue and distorting China’s position. For example, *People’s Daily* reproduced MoFA spokesperson Hua Chunying’s remarks on May 27, 2016 on Japan and G7’s “hying up” of the South China Sea

⁵⁰⁹ Wu Ken, “Feifa caijue ling guojifa mengxiu (Illegal ruling humiliates international law),” *People’s Daily*, July 19, 2016, 21.

⁵¹⁰ “Yingguo guoji Haiyang fa zhuanjia zhiyi zhongcaiting dui Nanhai zhongcaian guanxiaquan (British international maritime law experts question the jurisdiction of the tribunal court over the South China Sea arbitration),” *People’s Daily*, June 22, 2016, 21; “Interview: Arbitral tribunal’s jurisdiction over South China Sea disputes questionable: expert,” CCTV, June 17, 2016, <http://english.cctv.com/2016/06/17/ARTIVkY0mnv6pykrwg832BHV160617.shtml>, accessed April 24, 2018; “Spotlight: Two law experts in Britain question arbitral tribunal’s jurisdiction over South China Sea dispute,” Xinhua News, June 14, 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-06/14/c_135436997.htm, accessed April 24, 2018.

⁵¹¹ Tzanakopoulos 2016.

issue.⁵¹² In another article, *People's Daily* cited David Welch, professor at University of Waterloo, in enumerating how Western media has distorted China's position with biased language.⁵¹³

Besides media reports, Chinese ambassadors throughout the world “were tasked with giving speeches and writing editorials in support of China's position.”⁵¹⁴ In order to instill into the public a rational perspective, academics and legal experts were also enlisted to help. On top of accepting interviews, scholars published 2,880 academic papers on the subject since January 2013.⁵¹⁵ Notably, this scholarly effort included an academic seminar held in The Hague on June 26 from an international legal perspective. This seminar was organized by Leiden University's Grotius Center for International Legal Studies and Wuhan University's Institute for Boundary and Ocean Studies, and was participated by more than thirty international legal experts from around the world. *Xinhua News* and *People's Daily* both reported on the seminar.⁵¹⁶ The consensus of the seminar was that the interpretation of UNCLOS by the Arbitral Tribunal does not represent the mainstream view of the international law community.

⁵¹² “Zhongfang dui riben he G7 chaozuo Nanhai wenti qianglie buman (China strongly dissatisfied with Japan and G7 hyping up the South China Sea issue),” *People's Daily*, May 28, 2016, 3; For MoFA spokesperson Hua Chunying's remarks, see “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on May 27, 2016,” May 27, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1367358.shtml, May 27, 2016, accessed April 24, 2018.

⁵¹³ “Jianada xuezhe pi xifang meiti gei Nanhai wenti luantie biaoqian (Canadian scholar criticizes Western media in their biased wording on China's position on the South China Sea issue),” *People's Daily*, June 6, 2016, 3.

⁵¹⁴ Sutter and Huang 2016, 61.

⁵¹⁵ Zhao 2016, 53.

⁵¹⁶ “Zhe chang zai Haiya juban de yantaohui shang duo guo xuezhe qianglie zhiyi Nanhai zhongcaian (Scholars from many countries strongly question the arbitration case at this academic conference in The Hague),” *Xinhua News*, June 28, 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2016-06/28/c_129095417.htm, accessed April 24, 2018; “Youli wei hu guojifa de quanweixing – ji zai Haiya juban de Nanhai zhongcai an yu guoji fazhi yantao hui (Effectively maintaining the authority of international law – The Conference on the South China Sea Arbitration and international rule of law held in The Hague),” *People's Daily*, June 29, 2016, 3; “Zhe ge yantao hui kai de hen jishi (This conference was held just in time),” *People's Daily*, June 29, 2016, 3.

Hb4 (Hoop Test for Venting Mechanism): Venting venues such as social media and online forums are open, and venting is allowed or even encouraged. This is a necessary condition for the venting function of the media to work.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, since the internet arrived in China in 1995, its spread has been in explosive speed. By 2016, China had had 731 million internet users. That was 53.2 percent of the Chinese population and 20 percent of the internet users worldwide. China also has an active social media community. Although all major U.S.-based social media platforms are blocked – Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Instagram, China has its own version of everything – Sina Weibo, Wechat, Renren, Youku. In 2016, Wechat had about 900 million active accounts.⁵¹⁷ All major official media outlets also established their public accounts on multiple social media platforms.

Online forums and social media offered a platform for the public to vent their anger in a crisis like this. During the crisis, discussions on all major online platforms were not only allowed, but also encouraged. One official media's online forum editor likened her job to flood control: "When the tides are too high, the method of barrier blocking gives way to the drainage systems."⁵¹⁸ Online forums such as "Tiexue" (Iron Blood), "Tianya," and "zhonghua shequ" (China Club)⁵¹⁹ were inundated with the outpour of public emotions.⁵²⁰ Between July 1 and 20, there were over five million online comments, mostly from Sina Weibo.⁵²¹ Thirty-one hours after the release of the award on July 12, there were 3,941,730 comments on Weibo and 25,130

⁵¹⁷ Some people have multiple accounts. This number is from "2017 Weixin yonghu shuju baogao: huoyue yonghu da 8.89 yi (2017 Wechat User Statistics Report: Active Users Reached 889 Million)," Sohu, http://www.sohu.com/a/136382735_184641, accessed April 24, 2018.

⁵¹⁸ Interview 34, June 5, 2017, Beijing.

⁵¹⁹ This was closed on December 31, 2017.

⁵²⁰ Collaborative Innovation Center of South China Sea Studies at Nanjing University, *South China Sea Public Opinion Newsletter*, June 2016 issue, 6 and July 2016 issue, 12.

⁵²¹ Jiang and Luo 2016, 60.

Wechat articles.⁵²² Weibo accounts of *People's Daily*, *Global Times*, and CCTV were all very active. *People's Daily's* threaded comment “The Philippines-initiated arbitral tribunal on the South China Sea released an illegal and null ruling. China declared non-acceptance and non-recognition” was retweeted 444,587 times, with 53,149 comments.⁵²³ At the release of the award, *People's Daily's* official Weibo account set up a special topic discussion on the issue, with the hashtag “China: not even a bit can be left behind (Zhongguo, yidian dou bu neng shao).” The phrase is a pun implying China's nine-dash line, as the Chinese word for “bit” is the same as that for “dash.” The topic discussion was retweeted over 1.5 million times by the evening on the same day.⁵²⁴ Scores of Chinese celebrities also voiced their support for China's position on Weibo, which drew an even more fervent public response.

Regarding the content of the online comments and the types of emotions involved, studies of social media behaviors during the crisis summarize the social media posts to be filled with anger, ridicule, and reproach. Xie and Zhu finds that the public comments were “overly entertaining” with a great number of jokes and spoofs. This corroborates the “venting” purpose of those posts, as calling for actions would be more serious. Examples include slogans like “boycotting dried mango,” parodies using the Goddess of Mercy to embody a peace-intended China, a cartoon of a girl holding a fish in her hand saying “I'd rather throw it away than giving it to you,” quipping at fish in the “sea” (the South China Sea), and using the word “the Philippines” as an adjective in phrases such as “Don't be too Philippine (zuo ren bu yao tai Feilvbin).”

⁵²² Xie and Zhu 2016, 19.

⁵²³ Collaborative Innovation Center of South China Sea Studies at Nanjing University, *South China Sea Public Opinion Newsletter*, July 2016 issue, 12.

⁵²⁴ Xie and Zhu 2016, 19.

Interestingly, like the positive spin that dominated the media to guide public opinion, the state limited public reaction within the form of words as leaders were evidently concerned about social stability. Actions such as public protests were generally not approved.⁵²⁵ As mentioned earlier, the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) ordered the media “not to hype or disseminate information on the recent illegal gatherings and protests.” This explains why large-scale protests were expected – the security of the Philippines Embassy in Beijing was strengthened, but did not occur except for a few scattered small-scale protests outside the capital city.

IV. Evaluating Alternative Explanations

Under the scenario of a hardline public opinion and a moderate state policy intent, the audience cost theory and the diversionary war theory would both predict propaganda efforts but for different reasons. Audience cost theory would argue that the state would use the publicity as a leverage for a defensive coercive purpose, if the state is involved in a coercion around the same time frame. Diversionary war theory would argue that the state would want to use the publicity to divert public attention from a domestic crisis, if there is one concurrent with the territorial crisis. This last section of the chapter assesses the validity of these alternative explanations by looking for empirical support for the testing hypotheses listed in Chapter 2.

1. Audience Cost?

Hc1 (Hoop Test about Scope): The propaganda campaign should be adopted during an ongoing coercion with the foreign rival. The audience cost theory is a theory about coercions. Without ongoing coercions, the audience cost theory becomes irrelevant. Negotiations are signs

⁵²⁵ Several interviews confirmed this.

of an ongoing coercion but are not a necessary condition, as sometimes bringing a target state to the negotiation table itself could be a coercive goal. In most circumstances, I examine whether the state has made demands to the foreign rival.

This case fails the hoop test of the audience cost scope that the state should be engaged in a coercion at the time of the propaganda. If the audience cost logic is at work, the state would have propagandized the arbitration much earlier, perhaps in 2013, when Manila first initiated the case, so that Beijing could use it to back up any substantive threats to compel Manila to drop the case. To be clear, Beijing did engage in coercion before and in the early stages of the arbitration. After the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff but before the Philippines publicly announced the initiation of the case, Beijing tried to coerce Manila to recognize the *fait accompli* around the Scarborough Shoal and to prevent Manila from internationalizing the issue. As mentioned earlier, during Madam Fu Ying's visit to Manila in October 2012, Fu told Manila "not to appeal to the U.N. to resolve the dispute... not to 'internationalize' the issue in forums such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), not to coordinate with any other country such as the U.S., and even not to issue press releases."⁵²⁶ But as Fu herself requested, the coercion went quietly without much noise in the Chinese media at all. Fu's comments above was not reported by Chinese media and was reported only by *Wall Street Journal* in as late as January the following year. Beijing issued no official public threats whatsoever in deterring Manila to take up any action.

After such deterrence had failed and Manila announced its plan to pursue Beijing in an international court in January 2013, Beijing tried to coerce Manila to drop the case and return to the bilateral approach. As recalled by Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Albert del Rosario

⁵²⁶ "Manila takes a stand."

in the interview with *Foreign Policy*, Beijing had “come to us many times to say that arbitration should not be the answer to this dispute, this should be [done through] bilateral consultations.”⁵²⁷ But a propaganda campaign was not launched until long after deterrence to prevent Manila from pursuing the case and compellence to force Manila to drop the case had both failed – the court went ahead with the case despite Beijing’s protest and non-participation; the Philippines officially submitted its petition to the PCA on March 30, 2014; the propaganda campaign was adopted in June 2016, too late in the arbitration process to coerce any change. The campaign, as accurately captured in a phrase uttered by a senior scholar, was mainly a “reactive” and “remedial” measure. While the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff, the prelude to this arbitration case, maybe explained by the audience cost theory, the arbitration campaign itself is a case to remedy a failed coercion. As audience cost usually happens when a state proactively takes advantage of a situation, the nature of this propaganda campaign being “reactive” and “remedial” defies such a “premeditated” feature of the audience cost logic.

Hc2 (Tying Hands): Officials make public threats with substantive punishment. The key of an audience cost logic is that the state makes a clear threat public so that backing down would be costly and less attractive. This, in return, enhances the threat credibility and forces the opponent who fears a collision to back down. This contrasts Hb2 of the (mis)alignment theory in whether the harsh official rhetoric commits the state to a substantive punishment. If the state issues no public threat, or the threat the state issues is vague in terms and hollow in content, then the state is not committed to a domestic cost, and the propaganda is likely for the purpose of pacifying the public, rather than for a foreign coercive purpose.

⁵²⁷ “Interview with Albert del Rosario.”

As argued earlier, China used strongly-worded public statements to keep up the appearances of a hard stance, but none threatening with substantive punishment. China's rhetoric was mostly reasoning, with some accusations. But no clear threat or warning was issued publicly.

Without an ongoing coercion within a proper time window, and without any publicly-issued threats, it is hard to make an audience cost argument of the case. But I will continue to evaluate the rest of the hypotheses to give it a comprehensive consideration.

Hc3 (Bargaining Advantage): On average, given the occurrence of the propaganda campaign, the international outcome should be more favorable to the government. This is borrowed and adapted from Weiss' work on anti-foreign protests. She reasons that "Once the government has tied its hands and demonstrated resolve by allowing anti-foreign protests, the burden of conciliation falls to the foreign government. On average, therefore, anti-foreign protests should lead to a more advantageous bargain for the authoritarian government."⁵²⁸ She also points out that the actual outcome also depends on the strategic interactions with the other parties, so that negotiations may collapse, and crises may escalate. Propaganda campaigns, like anti-foreign protests, could also be a costly signal to show the state's resolve. So once engaged, the international outcome should be more favorable to the initiating state.

Given the occurrence of the propaganda campaign, the international outcome was more favorable to the government. China was able to win over some support to its side of the aisle and thereby arguably lessened the damage to its international reputation regarding respect for international law. But this was essentially due to the international part of the propaganda campaign targeted at foreign people and foreign states. The domestic part of the campaign raised

⁵²⁸ Weiss 2008, 27.

public awareness of the dispute, but the domestic publicity was apparently not used for any notable coercive purposes. Besides, because of the public exposure of the issue resulting from China's land reclamation and the U.S.' FONOPs, public opinion had already become hardline prior to the propaganda campaign. So all that the government needed to do to incur an audience cost was to issue a public threat, which it did not do. Instead, it went through all the trouble to plan and organize a hefty propaganda campaign. These facts fly in the face of an audience cost logic.

The final straw to break the audience cost explanation was the timing that the propaganda campaign ended, about which both theories have their respective predictions.

The Misalignment Theory: Hb5 (*Motivation Disappears*): *Media coverage diminishes as a moderate policy is carried out.* As the goal of the media campaign is to subdue public opinion for a moderate policy, the campaign should come to a stop when that goal is achieved, that is, when the moderate policy is rolled out.

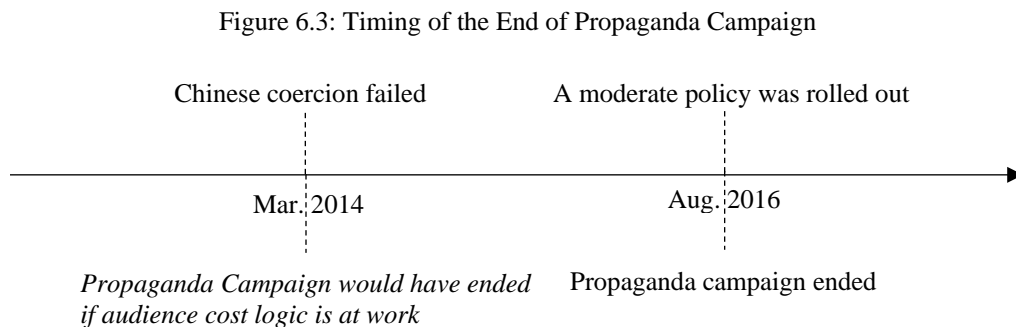
Audience Cost: Hc4 (*Motivation Disappears*): *Media coverage diminishes as the coercion succeeds or fails.* The propaganda campaign should end when the coercion has succeeded or has failed, because that is when the coercive motivation disappears. This directly contradicts Hb5 of the (mis)alignment theory.

As shown in Figure 6.1, media coverage waned soon after the release of the award, with the campaign officially ended around late July or early August. Other observations of media coverage during this time confirm this judgment. According to the *South China Sea Public Opinion Newsletter*, media coverage dwindled immediately after the release of the award on July 12, dropped to the lowest on July 17, backed up a little, but continued as low afterwards.⁵²⁹

⁵²⁹ Collaborative Innovation Center of South China Sea Studies at Nanjing University, *South China Sea Public Opinion Newsletter*, July 2016 issue, 9.

The end of the propaganda campaign coincided with the timing when a moderate policy was rolled out. As mentioned earlier, at the July 24 China-ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ summit, Beijing promised ASEAN not to carry out land reclamation on the Scarborough Shoal. The “ice-breaking” meeting between Philippine former president Ramos and Fu Ying and Wu Shicun occurred on August 8. A number of cooperative initiatives were reached at the China-ASEAN Senior Officials’ Meeting (SOM) in Manzhouli on August 15-16.

In contrast, the end of the propaganda campaign did not coincide with the failure of the coercion as the audience cost theory predicts. Chinese deterrence failed as early as January 22, 2013 when Manila first initiated the case. Chinese compellence for Manila to drop the case failed on March 30, 2014 when Manila officially presented its petitions to the Tribunal. The sequence of events is illustrated in Figure 6.3 below.



As evidence show, the synchronization between the end of the propaganda campaign and the rollout of the moderate policy was by choice, not by chance. An editor observed that the Sino-Philippines relationship had “entered into a new era immediately with the release of the ruling.” “After Ramos’ visit to Hong Kong, media rarely talked about the arbitration any more.”⁵³⁰ In fact, scholars recommended “downplaying the arbitration issue” after the release of the award.

⁵³⁰ Interview 32, June 4, 2017, Beijing.

“China should stop criticizing the arbitration and stop requesting the Philippines to drop the case...both sides...should not touch the arbitration any more if possible and turn a blind eye to the ruling.”⁵³¹

Public opinion seemed to correspond as the (mis)alignment theory predicts. A senior editor at an official media observes that “the public and the state was highly consistent when the ruling came out.”⁵³² This means that the state achieved what it had wanted to do via the propaganda campaign. Another editor attests that after the ruling came out, “the public no longer cared much [about the arbitration].” “Before the result came out, the basic public stance was that the Philippines bullied China in the name of international law. But the public would not necessarily follow up with the actual policy the state pursues subsequently.”⁵³³ As expected by the (mis)alignment theory and affirmed by popular sentiment studies using Chinese social media data, public emotion subsided a few days after the release of the award and stayed low.⁵³⁴

2. Diversionary War?

Hd1 (Hoop Test about Scope): States are more likely to adopt a propaganda campaign on a foreign dispute when they face domestic challenges. Because of the risks involved in inciting public anger, it is likely that states only resort to scapegoating and diversionary logics when they are faced with severe domestic challenges. These domestic challenges should be severe enough to cause legitimacy crisis at home that makes diversionary strategies appealing.

The diversionary war argument is hard to stand on this case because there was no notable concurrent domestic crisis that the public attention needed to be diverted from. The only suspect

⁵³¹ Zhang Mingliang 2016, 46.

⁵³² Interview 11, May 26, 2017, Beijing.

⁵³³ Interview 10, May 26, 2017, Beijing.

⁵³⁴ Kang and Yan 2016, 12; Jiang and Luo 2016, 59.

was the stock market turbulence that started in the summer of 2015 that propelled speculations of a possible economic collapse with global repercussions in early 2016.⁵³⁵ But the turbulence was far from a real crisis and the speculations about a collapse did not gain much traction until they completely died down. The timing of the propaganda campaign was determined by the development of the territorial crisis, with the looming announcement of the Tribunal ruling. It is hard to link it to any other crisis that the Chinese government was facing, if anything at all. Given the absence of a severe domestic crisis, there is no need to evaluate Hd2, which assumes the existence of such a crisis.

3. Duterte's Election and Policy Reversal as an Exogenous Shock

As shown in the narrative of events, Duterte's electoral victory and quick efforts to accommodate China and to ignore the Tribunal ruling, although ad hoc, seemed to have played a large role in promoting the eventual reconciliation of the two sides. So it might appear plausible that Beijing's moderate policy was only a reaction to Duterte's cooperative signals after his election, but not an intended policy Beijing had originally planned. If that is the case, the propaganda campaign Beijing launched might be for preparing the public for hostilities or for tying its hands for a coercive purpose (as in an audience cost logic).

But this alternative story has two problems. First, Beijing had already shown a moderate policy tendency long before Duterte was elected, not only as a reaction to Duterte's expressed good will after his election. After Manila initiated the case to challenge China in front of the

⁵³⁵ "China's stock market crash...in 2 minutes," CNN, August 27, 2015, <http://money.cnn.com/2015/07/09/investing/china-crash-in-two-minutes/>, accessed April 26, 2018; "China Faces 2016 Crisis as Bad as U.S. Mortgage Meltdown," TheStreet, January 3, 2016, <https://www.thestreet.com/story/13407258/1/china-faces-2016-crisis-as-bad-as-u-s-mortgage-meltdown.html>, accessed April 26, 2018.

International Tribunal in January 2013, Beijing had plenty of opportunities to punish or threaten to punish Manila. But Beijing refrained from doing so. Instead, China engaged in diplomatic efforts to make the Philippines change its mind. As Rosario has conveyed: Beijing had “come to us many times to say that arbitration should not be the answer to this dispute, this should be [done through] bilateral consultations.”⁵³⁶ The fact that Beijing “wanted the issue to go away” from the very beginning, the little role the military played throughout the crisis, the fact that Beijing engaged in diplomatic efforts before the May 9 election to minimize the anticipated negative impacts of the ruling, such as Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s tour of three southeast Asian countries in April and other diplomatic efforts to rally international support, and the fact that all these measures being “reactive” and “remedial” to a difficult situation, are all proofs that Beijing had moderate intentions before Duterte’s election. In fact, it was Xi who first offered the olive branch to Duterte instead of the other way around – Xi congratulated Duterte soon after the Philippine Congress proclaimed Duterte’s presidency on May 30.

Second, the content of the propaganda does not support the claim that Beijing was using it to prepare the public for hostilities or to tie its hands. The majority of rational analysis in the campaign, the echoing of public emotion staying away from indignation, the consistent emphasis on the positive perspectives in most publications, are hard to reconcile with a typical antagonizing media campaign used to incite hostilities or to engage audience cost. Besides, the absence of a public threat from Beijing and the preemptively repressed public protests contradict an audience cost logic.

V. Conclusion

⁵³⁶ “Interview with Albert del Rosario.”

Overwhelming evidence supports the logic of a pacifying propaganda campaign in the (mis)alignment theory. An audience cost or a diversionary war argument is hard to make because the case does not satisfactorily fulfill the scope conditions of either theory, be it the concurrence of a foreign coercion or a domestic challenge. An alternative story concerning Duterte's election and policy reversal also does not hold up against the evidence.

Chapter 7: The Sino-Vietnamese Cable Cutting Incidents in 2011 and Oil Rig Crisis in 2014 – Three More Tests⁵³⁷

As the congruence test results in Chapter 4 has demonstrated, the hardline public opinion – hardline state policy intent composition in the (mis)alignment theoretical framework is the cell with the most deviant cases – two out of the three cases in that cell can be better explained by the audience cost theory. It is, therefore, imperative to look at the other case to see whether and how it conforms to the (mis)alignment theory. The congruence test suggests that the hardline-hardline scenario might be a more suitable scenario for the audience cost theory. But the conforming case in this chapter, if established, can show that the alignment logic is still possible under certain circumstances. The goal of this exercise is not to “defeat” the audience cost theory and show that it does not have explanatory power. But rather, the objective is to establish this one causal scenario among many possible others – the alignment and misalignment of public opinion and state policy intent as explanation for state propaganda behavior, as equifinality is after all a common feature of this complex world. The same rationale applies to the moderate – moderate case being tested in this chapter.

This comes down to two diplomatic crises, the cable cutting incidents in 2011 and the oil rig crisis in 2014. Both are on the South China Sea dispute, between China and Vietnam in the 2010s. The cable-cutting incidents, although discrete, reflected a larger dispute regarding oil exploration activities in the South China Sea and caused weekly Vietnamese public protests and live-fire naval exercises from both sides. Hence, they are considered as one crisis. As the background of the South China Sea dispute has already been covered in the previous chapter, this chapter will delve right into the details of these two crises. Also, because these two cases

⁵³⁷ Part of this chapter uses materials from a co-authored paper with Brantly Womack, “Jawing through Crises: Chinese and Vietnamese Media Strategies in the South China Sea.” As of May 31, 2018, the paper has been conditionally accepted by the *Journal of Contemporary China*.

occurred around similar time frame as the 2016 arbitration case, the larger background in terms of the state's decision making and the state-public relations still holds, so I will also skip the step of justifying the applicability of the theoretical assumptions and jump right into the tests.

The Vietnamese side of the story in the oil rig crisis provides a valuable additional test for the hardline – moderate scenario. Although this shifts the analysis from the Chinese context to a Vietnamese one, yet because of the counterintuitive nature of the pacifying propaganda campaign and the weight of that logic in the entire theoretical framework, this additional test is warranted. Given the similarity between the Chinese and the Vietnamese propaganda systems, it also offers an ideal opportunity as a first step to extend the external validity of the theory to other authoritarian states beyond China.

I. The Cable-Cutting Incidents in 2011

On May 26, 2011, three Chinese maritime surveillance vessels confronted a Vietnamese oil exploration ship *Binh Minh 02* around 120 nautical miles off the Vietnamese coast and severed its seismic survey cables.⁵³⁸ The Vietnamese Foreign Ministry (MoFA) handed a diplomatic note to the Chinese embassy in Hanoi protesting the Chinese action that “violate Vietnam’s sovereign right to its exclusive economic zone and continental shelf” and demanding compensation for the damages. The Chinese Foreign Ministry responded on May 28 that Vietnam’s oil exploration activities “undermine China’s rights and interests as well as jurisdiction over the South China Sea.” The Chinese actions were “regular maritime law enforcement and surveillance activities in

⁵³⁸ “VN condemns Chinese intrusion,” VietnamNet, May 28, 2011, <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/en/politics/8839/vn-condemns-chinese-intrusion.html>, accessed May 4, 2018.

the waters under the jurisdiction of China.”⁵³⁹ The Vietnamese MoFA further responded the next day, repeating its earlier protest and rejecting China’s claim that the incident occurred in disputed areas: “It is neither a disputed area nor is it an area ‘managed by China.’ China has deliberately misled the public into thinking that it is a disputed area.”⁵⁴⁰ The Chinese MoFA reiterated on May 31 that Vietnamese oil operations were “illegal,” the Chinese actions were “completely justified,” and Vietnam should “immediately stop infringement activities and refrain from creating new troubles.”⁵⁴¹

On June 9, a similar incident occurred involving a Chinese fishing boat ensnaring the cables of a Vietnamese survey ship *Viking II* in the waters off Vanguard Bank (Wan’an Tan in Chinese and Bãi Tư Chính in Vietnamese). The Chinese fishing boat was reportedly supported by two Chinese fishery administration vessels. The Vietnamese Foreign Ministry lodged a strong protest to the Chinese embassy in Hanoi and claimed that the Chinese action was “totally intentional, thoroughly deliberated and planned.” The Vietnamese MoFA reported that the Chinese fishing boat, equipped with a “specialized cable slashing device,” “headed on and rammed the exploration cables of Viking II,” and “was consequently trapped in Viking II’s cables, jamming Viking II’s operation.”⁵⁴² The Chinese MoFA responded that the Vietnamese remarks “do not tally with the fact.” It blamed the second incident on armed Vietnamese ships chasing away the Chinese fishing boat, causing it to be tangled with the cables of the Vietnamese

⁵³⁹ PRC MoFA, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Jiang Yu’s Remarks on China’s Maritime Law Enforcement and Surveillance on the South China Sea,” May 28, 2011, <http://houston.china-consulate.org/eng/fyrth/t826601.htm>, accessed May 3, 2018.

⁵⁴⁰ Vietnam MoFA, “Press Conference on Chinese maritime surveillance vessel’s cutting exploration cable of PetroViet Nam Seismic Vessel,” May 29, 2011, http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt_baochi/pbnfn/ns110530220030, accessed May 4, 2018.

⁵⁴¹ PRC MoFA, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Jiang Yu’s Regular Press Conference on May 31, 2011,” June 1, 2011, <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/fyrth/t827089.htm>, accessed May 3, 2018.

⁵⁴² Vietnam MoFA, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Nguyen Phuong Nga answers question from the media at the Press Conference on June 9, 2011 concerning the Viking II incident,” June 9, 2011, http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt_baochi/pbnfn/ns110610100618, accessed May 4, 2018.

survey ship. It claimed that “the Vietnamese vessel dragged the Chinese fishing boat for more than one hour, with the latter’s tail facing the front,” forcing the Chinese fishermen “to cut off the fishing net so as to separate the two vessels.” It accused the Vietnamese ships in “illegally” operating in waters under China’s jurisdiction and “endangering” Chinese fishermen’s lives, who had operated in the same waters “for generations.”⁵⁴³

From June 5 on, the Vietnamese public organized weekly protests against the Chinese actions on the streets of Hanoi and in front of the Chinese embassy. The Chinese navy held two military exercises, one on June 6 in unidentified area in the South China Sea, and the other on June 16-19 near China’s Hainan Island. The Vietnamese navy also conducted live-fire drills near its Hon Ong Island on June 13-16. The crisis subsided when Chinese State Councilor Dai Bingguo met with Vietnamese special envoy Ho Xuan Son on June 26 in Beijing. China Central Television (CCTV)’s scripted report depicted the meeting in a highly positive tone, describing the relationship as “good friends, good neighbors, good comrades, and good partners.” The positive tone is consistent with how CCTV usually depicts international issues. But it unusually mentioned about maritime issues and the situation in the South China Sea. It urged the two sides to “strengthen correct guidance of public opinion, avoiding words and actions that would harm the friendship and mutual trust of the two peoples.”⁵⁴⁴

Throughout this short diplomatic crisis between May 26 and June 26 of 2011, China did not launch a propaganda campaign and constrained commercial media coverage. *People’s Daily* coverage of the cable-cutting incidents was negligible. There were only two articles in the thirty-

⁵⁴³ PRC MoFA, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei’s Remarks on Vietnamese Ships Chasing away Chinese Fishing Boats in the Waters off the Nansha Islands,” June 9, 2011, <http://na.china-embassy.org/eng/fyrth/t829427.htm>, accessed May 4, 2018.

⁵⁴⁴ “Dai Bingguo huijian Yuenan lingdaoren teshi Hu Chunshan (Dai Bingguo meets Vietnamese leadership’s special envoy Ho Xuan Son),” CCTV Xinwen Lianbo (Network News), June 26, 2011. <http://tv.cntv.cn/video/C16624/b7fda32c294a45da9b0eb09c82d97a2b>, accessed May 4, 2018.

one days of the crisis – neither was in the front page, and one copied the June 9 MoFA press conference statement. CCTV News, including both Network News and Evening News, had no mention of the incidents at all throughout the crisis. Only the Dai-Ho meeting on June 26 was reported by both CCTV programs, using carefully calibrated language alluding to the incidents, so that only the watchers who had already known about the incidents might link to the special context of the meeting.

Leaked internal notice from the Chinese Foreign Ministry’s Information Department showed that the government demanded media outlets to use the MoFA official language on reporting the June 9 incident.⁵⁴⁵ Indeed, commercial reports on both the May 26 and June 9 incidents were led by Xinhua’s report on the MoFA official response. Commercial media also carried the topic with much restraint. Even *Global Times (Huanqiu Shibao)*, a commercialized official news outlet under *People’s Daily* known to carry hardline and nationalist articles, tuned down its voice from a sensational editorial under the state “guidance.”⁵⁴⁶ A May 30 *Global Times* editorial reads “China’s restraint has limits.”⁵⁴⁷ But an editorial on June 9 has the headline “Anger is not the right way to handle the South China Sea dispute.”⁵⁴⁸ This turn shows the state was working to avoid fanning the nationalist sentiment. Chubb agrees that the Chinese government’s behavior displayed after the incidents showed that it was not trying to draw domestic public attention. These include the content of the MoFA statements and the fact that the initial statement was issued on a Saturday when there was usually less public attention. The bare-

⁵⁴⁵ Zhenlibu (The Truth Department), “Guanyu Yuenan zai Nanhai kaicai youqitian deng wenti (About Vietnam’s oil exploration activities in the South China Sea),” *China Digital Times*, June 10, 2011, <https://goo.gl/qKvMvM>, accessed May 4, 2018.

⁵⁴⁶ Interview 18, May 29, 2017, Beijing.

⁵⁴⁷ “Yuenan Nanhai maoxian niaotou zengjia; Zhongguo kezhi shi you xiandu de (Vietnam’s risky ideas in the South China Sea increase; China’s restraint has limits),” *Huangqiu Shibao (Global Times)*, May 30, 2011.

⁵⁴⁸ “Fennu bu shi chuli Nanhai zhengduan zheng dao (Anger is not the right way to handle the South China Sea dispute),” *Huangqiu Shibao (Global Times)*, June 9, 2011.

bones of Chinese media coverage were merely responding to the growing international media coverage.⁵⁴⁹

I find that this absence of a propaganda campaign was due to the alignment between a hardline public opinion and a hardline state policy intent, so that the state lacked the incentive to use the propaganda's alignment functions. In other words, the state did not need to mobilize an already strongly-agitated public for a hardline policy.

A series of provocative events had already hardened public opinion before the 2011 incidents. These include a heated discussion of the dispute led by the then-U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton at the ASEAN Regional Forum in July 2010 hosted by Vietnam, and China's alleged labeling of the South China Sea as a "core interest." These events contributed to the publicization of the issue and the emotional buildup among the Chinese public. At the ASEAN Regional Forum in 2010, Hilary Clinton declared the South China Sea issue an American "national interest" and supported the resolution of the dispute "without coercion."⁵⁵⁰ China's Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi characterized Clinton's remarks as "an attack on China" and rebutted with seven points including that the South China Sea is generally peaceful, that the South China Sea issue is not an issue between China and ASEAN, and that the freedom of navigation has not been hindered, etc.⁵⁵¹ This debate piqued public interest in the matter. China's alleged labeling the South China Sea issue as a "core interest," although lacking the back up of official sources, further elevated public awareness and agitated public emotions.⁵⁵²

⁵⁴⁹ Chubb 2016, 469.

⁵⁵⁰ Hilary Rodham Clinton, "Remarks at Press Availability," U.S. Department of State, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/07/145095.htm>, accessed May 8, 2018.

⁵⁵¹ PRC MoFA, "Yang Jiechi waizhang bochi Nanhai wenti shang de wailun (Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi refutes fallacies on the South China Sea issue)," July 25, 2010, <http://www.mfa.gov.cn/chn//pds/wjb/wjbz/zyhd/t719371.htm>, accessed May 4, 2018.

⁵⁵² The whole South China Sea as a "core interest" meme was discussed in detail in Swaine 2011.

As a result, Chinese public emotions reached a sensational high at no instigation of the state after hearing the news of the cable-cutting incidents. Despite the absence of state propaganda on the issue, a search of the word “South China Sea” on Baidu Search Index (BSI) during the months of June and July shows that the public attention to the issue swelled to a daily average of above 10,000 and peaked at 29,000 in mid-June, compared to an all-time average of 5,351 between 2011 and 2018.⁵⁵³

War-mongering was a common theme in online discussions. For example, a *People’s Daily* editorial by Zhong Sheng with the title “The Time of Using Non-Peaceful Means to Resolve Territorial Dispute Has Passed” was reposted on ifeng, a popular news portal affiliated with Phoenix TV, providing an opportunity for readers to comment on the article. It ended up with 216 comments 29674 people clicked to agree or disagree. Some of the most-agreed user comments were:

“Or it should be changed to: wake up from the dream of using peaceful means to resolve dispute.”

“‘The time of using non-peaceful means to resolve territorial dispute has passed’ is self-deceiving non-sense. Is *People’s Daily* people’s newspaper? It should rather be changed to ‘World Harmony Daily.’ *People’s Daily* at this very sensitive and critical time expressed such thoughtless, stupid comment. Does it know how serious the consequences and outcomes will be?”

“The so-called ‘restraining principle’ means while you are negotiating with them, they are holding joint military exercise. Who are you restraining? The so-called time of using

⁵⁵³ The BSI data did not become available until after January 1, 2011, so there is not enough data to do a similar one-year pre-crisis average index comparable to those I did on the arbitration case in 2016 in Chapter 6 or the oil rig crisis in 2014 in the text below.

non-peaceful means to resolve conflict has passed! Then why the US, France and UK do not sit and talk to Gaddafi?"

"The Chinese Communist Party must not hand over our country's islands which we inherited from our ancestors to others. That would make it an eternal sinner."

"Negotiation needs to be backed up by strong military strength."⁵⁵⁴

As more examples of the online war-mongering, shortly after the May 26 incident, translations of a Vietnamese report of Chinese warships firing warning shots at Vietnamese fishing boats in the Spratlys made the top commented post on the Tiexue (Iron Blood) forum.⁵⁵⁵ The reported event was flatly denied by the Chinese authorities, but it still provoked waves of jingoist public expressions online.⁵⁵⁶ On June 8, a website under the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry was hacked, showing the Chinese national flag and a slogan in Chinese that read "the Spratlys belong to China."⁵⁵⁷ An article by ambassador Wu Jianmin with moderate views "The South China Sea Dispute: Restraint is A Kind of Confidence" was lambasted on the Tianya forum.⁵⁵⁸

⁵⁵⁴ The original *People's Daily's* article had the title "Meiyou yige hao huanjing jiu bu keneng jiejie Nanhai wenti (It is impossible to solve the South China Sea problem without a good environment)." See Zhong Sheng, *People's Daily*, July 20, 2011, 3. The article was reposted with the title "Tongguo fei heping shouduan jiejie zhengduan de shidai yi guoqu (The time of using non-peaceful means to resolve territorial disputes has passed)" at http://news.ifeng.com/mil/4/detail_2011_07/22/7876049_9.shtml, accessed May 7, 2018.

⁵⁵⁵ For the original Vietnamese report, see "Nội dung cuộc điện đàm với ngư dân (The content of the conversation with fishermen)," *VN Express*, June 1, 2011, <http://vnexpress.net/tin-tuc/thoi-su/tau-quan-su-trung-quoc-no-sung-ban-duoi-tau-viet-nam-2196554-p2.html>, accessed May 8, 2018. For the Chinese translation and reposting on Tiexue Forum, together with the comments, see http://bbs.tiexue.net/post_5113116_1.html, accessed May 8, 2018.

⁵⁵⁶ "Waijiaobu: Zhongguo chuan Xiang Yuenan yumin mingqiang baodao zixuwuyou (Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Chinese ship firing shots at Vietnamese fishermen is fabricated)," *China News*, June 4, 2011, <https://news.qq.com/a/20110604/000002.htm>, accessed May 8, 2018.

⁵⁵⁷ "Yuenan guanfang wangzhan zao heike gongji, wangye shang chuxian Zhongguo guoqi (Vietnamese official website attacked by hackers, the Chinese national flag appears on the website)," *Global Times*, June 9, 2011, <http://world.huanqiu.com/roll/2011-06/1744628.html>, accessed May 8, 2018.

⁵⁵⁸ For the reposting and the thread of comments, see <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-worldlook-360420-1.shtml>, accessed May 8, 2018. Wu was a renown Chinese diplomat who served as the MoFA spokesperson, ambassador to the Netherlands, Geneva, and France, as well as President of China Foreign Affairs University.

Online militarism like these abound both before and throughout the crisis. Granted that the Chinese netizens are not representative of the whole Chinese population, these widespread war-mongering remarks nonetheless suggest that the Chinese government faced a hawkish opinion climate, particularly among the more salient opinions of Chinese netizens. The fact that these remarks were commonplace in online forums and social media also suggests that they had some traction within the public.

Evidence also suggests that these waves of public nationalistic expressions were spontaneous rather than state-instigated. They might have resulted partially from previous state media policy of allowing or even encouraging coverage, but they were not endogenous to the state media policy in this crisis. The fact that the flurry of online criticisms often attacked the Chinese government affirmed the spontaneous and genuine nature of the hardline public opinion.⁵⁵⁹ Common lines accused the Chinese foreign policy being too soft, even traitorous, often likened to the Qing dynasty, which collapsed following territorial encroachment by foreign powers, or reminiscing Mao's era of "defeating America twice" and "teaching India a lesson." Another line of argument also linked to the state corruption: "Corrupt officials running amok, unable to fight, let's just give the South China Sea away."⁵⁶⁰

This hardline public opinion naturally aligned with the hardline policy intent of the government. Both incidents occurred in the marginal areas within China's nine-dash line, but beyond any EEZ China would have hoped to generate under UNCLOS based on its claimed sovereignty over the Paracels or the Spratlys (although whether these land features could

⁵⁵⁹ For examples of these harsh criticisms, see Chubb 2016, 212-13.

⁵⁶⁰ This comment was one of many posted on a short video clip published by Phoenix TV. See "Zhongguo wo san wangpai, ding Nanhai daju (China's three trump cards will determine the outcome on the South China Sea)," ifeng, June 30, 2011, <http://v.ifeng.com/v/sanwangpai/index.shtml#e9253db1-9ecd-4e1c-9af3-abb78271a2d4>, accessed May 8, 2018.

generate EEZ is still debatable). But these locations do fall into Vietnam's EEZ from its coastal baseline. Given the obscure nature of the nine-dash line, the Chinese actions were therefore based on precarious grounds. In Chinese experts' analysis, the Chinese actions were motivated by a mixture of concerns on energy security and a perceived declining claim strength in the disputed areas. You argues that Beijing feared that the erection of oil structures in the disputed areas might eventually lead to Vietnam's de facto control, which could be used against China's claim in the future by international legal bodies, thus increasing the possibility of China's losing these areas permanently.⁵⁶¹ However warranted or paranoid these concerns may sound, they reflect Beijing's outlook of a losing prospect. According to the prospect theory, one would be more risk-acceptant in the realm of losses.

There is contradictory evidence as to whether the June 9 cable cutting was premeditated and deliberate as believed by Hanoi. You's sources indicate that the order was made by "the Navy's Xisha Surveillance District after consulting its superiors," but it was made out of safety concerns of the boat and the crew on board given that the boat was entangled with the Vietnamese cables and was dragged on for "two hours."⁵⁶² This story is consistent with the Chinese official story. But curiously enough, the Vietnamese media had already reported on harassment of Viking II by suspected Chinese vessels days before the incident.⁵⁶³

Even if the June 9 *Viking II* incident were truly an accident as Beijing claimed, the cable-cuttings were part of an aggressive trend in the Chinese maritime behavior around that time. On May 2, just weeks before the first incident, *China Daily* reported that "China marine surveillance

⁵⁶¹ You 2014, 251.

⁵⁶² Ibid.

⁵⁶³ "1 more Vietnam ship harassed by foreign vessels," VietnamNet Bridge, June 1, 2011, <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/society/8634/1-more-vietnam-ship-harassed-by-foreign-vessels.html>, accessed May 8, 2018.

(CMS) forces will expand rapidly to better protect the country's marine security... more than 1,000 people will join the CMS staff by the end of 2011..."⁵⁶⁴ On May 20, just days before the first incident, a mega Chinese oil and gas-drilling platform "Hai Yang Shi You 720" was officially put into operation.⁵⁶⁵ On May 24, CNOOC announced the open tendering of nineteen new blocks in the South China Sea, covering an area of 52,006 square kilometers.⁵⁶⁶

The incidents suggest a change for more aggressiveness in China's handling of oil exploration activities by other littoral states. Although the involvement of the PLA was unclear,⁵⁶⁷ China's interference seemed to be authorized at least on the level of the CMS. Chubb points out that normal Chinese law enforcement activities in similar situations were limited to "hailing announcements"; *ad hoc* coercive operations, such as the severing maneuvers on May 26, needed to be authorized.⁵⁶⁸ Together with the Reed Bank incident earlier in March⁵⁶⁹ and a later incident in 2012, there were at least four unique incidents involving China's interference in foreign oil companies' seismic survey activities.⁵⁷⁰ The repetitive nature of these incidents presented a pattern.⁵⁷¹ If the incidents were against the Chinese intention, the Chinese policy makers would have had a chance after the initial incidents to restrain the operational units, so that subsequent confrontations could have been avoided. Instead, fifty Chinese coast guards were

⁵⁶⁴ *China Daily*, May 2, 2011, 2.

⁵⁶⁵ *People's Daily*, June 13, 2013, 2.

⁵⁶⁶ CNOOC 2011.

⁵⁶⁷ China's Defense Minister Liang Guanglie claimed no involvement of the PLA in the May 26 incident at the Shangri-La Dialogue on June 3-5, 2011 in Singapore.

⁵⁶⁸ Chubb 2016, 468.

⁵⁶⁹ The Reed Bank incident is a brief confrontation between two Chinese patrol boats and a Philippine survey ship on March 2, 2011. This study does not include it as a separate case, because it failed to escalate into a crisis and resembles many other similar episodes that occur frequently in the South China Sea. It is, however, similar to the Sino-Vietnamese cable-cutting incidents that followed within the same year, so in a way it is still covered by this analysis.

⁵⁷⁰ Carlyle Thayer reports that another incident occurred on June 30, in which "Vietnamese escort vessels were able to chase off the Chinese boats." But this incident has been "kept under wraps by Vietnamese authorities." See Thayer 2011a, 1-2.

⁵⁷¹ Thayer 2011.

awarded for the first time on July 23 for their “heroic acts” in defending China’s maritime rights.⁵⁷²

Given the alignment of public opinion and state policy intent, the state stayed quiet and kept a tight rein on public nationalistic expressions. The quiet media behavior would have been difficult to be explained by audience cost theory or diversionary war theory because they would predict that the state should have made big noises to either use it as a leverage in coercions or to divert public attention away from a domestic crisis. But the state did not purposely make noises. If anything, it also constrained the commercial media in doing so.

II. The 2014 Oil Rig Crisis from Beijing’s Perspective: Keeping Quiet

The Sino-Vietnamese oil rig crisis started on May 2, 2014 when the state-owned China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) moved its Haiyang Shiyou 981 oil rig, a semi-submersible drilling platform built in 2012 at a cost of US\$ one billion, to a location of maritime dispute between the two countries without prior consultation with Vietnam. The oil rig location, although changed slightly a couple of times throughout the crisis, is about 17 nautical miles South of the Parcel Islands claimed by both countries but currently occupied by China. The location is 130 nautical miles off the Vietnamese coast and 180 nautical miles off China’s Hainan Island, so if the Parcel claims are ignored, it lies on the Vietnam side of the equidistance line between the coast of Vietnam and Hainan, and within the two countries’ overlapping EEZs.⁵⁷³ China’s placement of the oil rig in this location triggered dangerous actions by both

⁵⁷² “2011 nian Zhongguo haijian da shi ji (2011 China Marine Surveillance Memorabilia),” June 28, 2012, *Xinhua News*, http://guoqing.china.com.cn/2012-06/28/content_25756969.htm, accessed May 8, 2018.

⁵⁷³ PRC MoFA, “The Operation of the HYSY 981 Drilling Rig: Vietnam’s Provocation and China’s Position,” June 8, 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1163264.shtml, accessed May 8, 2018; Vietnam MoFA, “Remarks by FM Spokesman Le Hai Binh on 4th May 2014,” May 4, 2014, http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt_baochi/pbnfn/ns140505232230, accessed May 8.

sides at sea in the vicinity of the rig, such as ramming vessels and firing water cannons and large-scale deadly riots in Vietnam burning down foreign-owned factories.⁵⁷⁴ The crisis ended on July 15 when China declared that Haiyang Shiyou had completed its task one month ahead of schedule and withdrew from the area.⁵⁷⁵

Like the 2011 cable-cutting incidents, the Chinese media in the oil rig crisis stayed remarkably quiet. The government made conscious efforts to control information, discourage coverage, and even censor content on the dispute. I argue that this is due to the overall alignment of a moderate public opinion and a moderate state policy intent.

Beijing's reluctance to publicize the dispute is evident in four media features. First, delay in reporting. Anti-China protests started on May 11 in Hanoi and a few other cities and escalated to violent riots on the 13th and 14th. But Xinhua News did not release any Chinese report of the riots until midnight of the 15th – that is almost two days' delay. Other Chinese media were all cautious in reporting the issue. They did not report on the riots until the Xinhua report came out and Foreign Minister Wang Yi made an official protest.⁵⁷⁶

Second, limited coverage. *People's Daily*, the most authoritative official Chinese newspaper, had little coverage of the dispute– a total of 36 articles and no front-page articles during the 74 days of the crisis between May 2 – July 15. China's limited reportage was only reactive to Vietnam's aggressive propaganda campaign, especially its international campaign. Chinese MoFA Spokesperson Hua Chunying said on June 9th Press Conference: “[Vietnam]

⁵⁷⁴ Kate Hodal and Jonathan Kaiman, “At Least 21 Dead in Vietnam Anti-China Protests over Oil Rig,” *The Guardian*, May 15, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/15/vietnam-anti-china-protests-oil-rig-dead-injured>, accessed May 8, 2018.

⁵⁷⁵ “Vietnam Anti-China Protest: Factories Burnt,” *BBC News*, May 14, 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-27403851>, accessed May 8, 2018.

⁵⁷⁶ “Zhongguo Meiti Jinshen Baodao Yuenan Shitai (Chinese Media Cautious in Reporting the Vietnam Incident),” *BBC Chinese*, May 16, 2014, http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/china/2014/05/140516_china_vietnam_press, accessed May 9, 2018.

spreading rumors around the world to vilify and hurt China unscrupulously and groundlessly. Given that, we must present the facts in front of the international community so as to set the record straight.” Besides these reactive coverage, the Chinese reporting was sparse.

Third, keeping the dispute coverage buried in low-traffic subsections of newspapers. Similar patterns were observed on all official media outlets and major commercial news portals.⁵⁷⁷ Official websites of *People’s Daily* and Xinhua both had “Private cars will be exempted from inspection for the first six years starting from September” as their headlines, while having news on the riots only as the fourth and the fifth item of the day. This technique made the dispute less visible, while still making information available in case if people heard about it from other sources and actively searched for it. In this way the CPC could dampen the issue without losing the opportunity to frame the issue to the Western media.

Fourth, softening the tone in accusing the Vietnamese government. After the riots occurred, Chinese MoFA Spokesperson Hua Chunying blamed the violence on the “Vietnamese government’s indulgence and connivance toward domestic anti-China forces and criminals.”⁵⁷⁸ But the wording in the final released official transcript was changed to “the Vietnamese side has an inescapable responsibility for the beating, smashing, looting and burning targeted at China and other countries.”⁵⁷⁹ After all, “connivance” was a major accusation and changing it to the general wording of “inescapable responsibility” was much softer.

⁵⁷⁷ Andrew Chubb, “China’s Information Management in the Sino-Vietnamese Confrontation: Caution and Sophistication in the Internet Era,” *China Brief*, Vol. 14, Issue 11, June 4, 2014, 15, <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-information-management-in-the-sino-vietnamese-confrontation-caution-and-sophistication-in-the-internet-era/>, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁵⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 16, 17, quoting from Bloomberg, May 15, 2014, http://www.oregonlive.com/playbooks-profits/index.ssf/2014/05/vietnam_factory_protests_resul.html, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁵⁷⁹ PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on May 15, 2014,” May 15, 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1156451.shtml, accessed May 9, 2018.

These media features substantiate the media policy directives leaked by *China Digital Times*. There are four leaked policy directives on the dispute. On May 7, propaganda authorities instructed online media to “continue to find and delete reports on Sino-Vietnamese ship collisions and maritime standoff, and report on work progress in a timely manner.”⁵⁸⁰ On the anti-China riots, an order was issued on May 14th to “not report on the issue, republish foreign coverage, or allow discussion in online forums.”⁵⁸¹ After Xinhua released the news, the order was changed on the 15th to “use only the Xinhua copy or information from the Foreign Ministry’s website.”⁵⁸² On the 18th, the state issued a second warning that the media must “use Xinhua copy only.”⁵⁸³

My interviews with Chinese editors and journalists corroborate these leaked media directives. Editors from a hardline newspaper revealed that after publishing a couple of articles on the dispute, they were asked to “tone down their voice.”⁵⁸⁴

Why did the Chinese authorities not stoke nationalism and use it to coerce Hanoi into accepting the *fait accompli* on the sea? This is due to the state-public alignment on the issue: the state had a moderate policy intent, so it wanted to reserve policy flexibility by restricting public participation; the existing relatively weak public opinion allowed the government to pursue such

⁵⁸⁰ Zhenlibu (The Truth Department), “Gao Yu, Waitao Tanguan, Yuenan Haijun, he Bitebi” (Gao Yu, Fled Corrupt Officials, Vietnamese Navy and Bitcoin), *China Digital Times*, May 7, 2014, <https://goo.gl/mpFi7s>, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁵⁸¹ Zhenlibu (The Truth Department), “Zai Yue Zhongzi Qiye Bei Yuenanren Chongji” (Chinese Companies in Vietnam Were Attacked), *China Digital Times*, May 14, 2014, <https://goo.gl/uTIEvq>, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁵⁸² Zhenlibu (The Truth Department), “Zai Yue Qiye, Wei Pengyuan, Zhuanjiyin Liangyou, he Shenzhen Kuaibo” (Chinese Companies in Vietnam, Wei Pengyuan, Genetically Modified Grain and Oil, and Shenzhen QVOD Player), *China Digital Times*, May 15, 2014, <https://goo.gl/v94Dyn>, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁵⁸³ Zhenlibu (The Truth Department), “Xinjiang Keshi An, Yuenan Qiye he Zhongguo de Aidashi” (Xinjiang Kashgar Incident, Factories in Vietnam, and A Chinese History of Being Bullied), *China Digital Times*, May 18, 2014, <https://goo.gl/4JhQKu>, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁵⁸⁴ Interview 18, May 29, 2017, Beijing; Interview 21, May 31, 2017, Beijing.

a policy without having to resort to the propaganda's pacifying effect. In other words, the state did not need to pacify an already moderate public opinion.

Despite the appearance of Chinese provocation by placing the oil rig in the disputed area and engaging in dangerous confrontation with the Vietnamese ships, strong evidence suggests that Beijing had a moderate policy intent.

Why China moved the oil rig to disputed waters in the first place is still unclear and disputed by analysts. As mentioned earlier, the bilateral relationship was showing a promising upward trend since early 2013 that Beijing should have little incentive to disrupt. Prior to the crisis, the two countries had enjoyed a rather cordial relationship, marked by the exchange of high-level visits by Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang to Beijing in June 2013 and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to Hanoi in October. During these visits, the two sides restated their commitment to peace and stability in the South China Sea. As a concrete result of the visits, the China-Vietnam expert group for low-sensitivity maritime cooperation and consultation was established in December 2013,⁵⁸⁵ just months before the crisis was touched off. China also engaged with ASEAN on the Implementation of the Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) at the tenth joint working group meeting in Singapore on March 18 and was working out a number of confidence building measures under the DOC at the seventh ASEAN-China Senior Officials' Meeting on the Implementation of the DOC in Thailand on April 21. These took place just weeks before the placement of the oil rig.

Therefore, the placement of the oil rig really came as a shock to many observers, as it reversed the previous Chinese behavior and did not appear like an ad hoc decision made by an

⁵⁸⁵ PRC MoFA, "China and Vietnam Held Plenary Meeting of the Governmental Delegation on Border Negotiation," December 7, 2013, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1108277.shtml, accessed May 9, 2018.

unruly CNOOC acting alone. According to the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry, the oil rig was protected by “109 and 125 vessels” formed in “3 rings,” “including 4-6 warships, 2 missile frigates numbered 534 and 572 operating at 20-25 nautical miles from the oil rig, 2 pairs of minesweepers vessels numbered 840, 843 or 839, 842 (rotating daily) at about 15-25 nautical miles from the rig, and 2 pairs of fast attack ships numbered 751, 756 or 753 and an unidentified ship (rotating daily).”⁵⁸⁶ As a Chinese scholar Shi Yinhong pointed out at the time, no agency other than the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) can command navy warships, especially on this scale.⁵⁸⁷ The PLAN was clearly involved.

What then explains this sudden reversal of Chinese behavior towards the Vietnamese? Among the many speculations,⁵⁸⁸ an explanation of irrational decision making combining a lack of inter-organizational coordination, an underestimate of Vietnamese reaction, and path dependency seems to prevail. If this explanation is true, the Chinese initial provocation was then a result of unintended miscalculation. As disclosed in private interviews to policy analysts close to the decision-making process, moving the oil rig to the disputed area was “without the proper consultation with the Foreign Ministry, and likely without direct involvement of the top leadership.”⁵⁸⁹ A retired government official frequently consulted on Vietnamese affairs attests: “our policy (in placing the rig) in 2014 was not very stable...it was not a decision made by the top leadership after careful rumination.”⁵⁹⁰ When asked on June 11 to confirm the Vietnamese

⁵⁸⁶ Vietnam MoFA, “The 6th Regular Press Conference,” June 26, 2014, http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt_baochi/tcbc/ns140628000810, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁵⁸⁷ As quoted in Jane Perlez, “Vietnamese Officials Intolerant of Violence as Standoff with China Continues,” *New York Times*, May 17, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/18/world/asia/vietnamese-officials-intolerant-of-violence-as-standoff-with-china-continues.html>, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁵⁸⁸ For an enumeration of these speculations, see Carl Thayer, “China’s Oil Rig Gambit: South China Sea Game-Changer?” *The Diplomat*, May 12, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/05/chinas-oil-rig-gambit-south-china-sea-game-changer/>, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁵⁸⁹ Interview 22, May 31, 2017, Beijing.

⁵⁹⁰ Interview 25, June 2, 2017, Beijing.

remarks that “China has sent six warships to guard its oil rig,” Chinese MoFA spokesperson Hua Chunying replied “we have sent government vessels to the site for security.”⁵⁹¹ “Government vessels” should mean maritime law enforcement vessels, not navy ships. This happened again on June 13 with MoFA Deputy Director General of the Department of Boundary and Ocean Affairs Yi Xianliang. When asked whether the Vietnamese statement about China sending navy warships was true, Yi said “...we had to send Coast Guard ships...”⁵⁹² It is not clear, however, whether Hua and Yi were skillfully deflecting the question or simply not notified of the navy ships. In late August, Vietnamese special envoy Le Hong Anh visited Beijing in an effort to mend fences. In his talks with Chinese Party seniors, he unusually stressed the need for the two parties to “tighten their instructions.” The words “tighten instructions” were repeated four times in a short two-page report of the meeting.⁵⁹³ This implies that the explanation given privately to Anh involved a lack of coordination on the Chinese side.

A Crisis Group report offers a slightly different story, but also confirms the irrational decision model. Based on an interview with a “security agency-affiliated Chinese analyst,” the report asserts that “The Central Leading Small Group on the Protection of Maritime Interests, created in 2012 and reportedly led, at least initially, directly by Xi, made the decision in the oil rig case. The foreign ministry was said to be represented by the Department of Boundary and Ocean Affairs, whose ‘primary concern is sovereignty’, without Department of Asian Affairs input.” Thus the decision was made without “consultation with experts who understand

⁵⁹¹ PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on June 11, 2014,” June 11, 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1164598.shtml, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁵⁹² PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Deputy Director General of the Department of Boundary and Ocean Affairs Yi Xianliang’s Press Conference on the Zhongjiannan Project [in Chinese],” June 14, 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjb_673085/zzjg_673183/t1165600.shtml, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁵⁹³ “Vietnam, China agree to restore, develop ties,” *Nhan Dan/VNA*, August 27, 2014, <http://en.nhandan.org.vn/politics/external-relations/item/2753802-na-chairman-meets-young-japanese-parliamentarians.html>, accessed May 9, 2018.

Vietnam.”⁵⁹⁴ My own interviews with persons routinely consulted on Vietnamese Affairs by Beijing indirectly confirm this latter point. They said that the placement of the rig “came as a shock,” so it was clear that Vietnam experts generally were not consulted on the matter.⁵⁹⁵ The report also points out that “in internal memos, closed-door conferences, and briefings to senior officials,” the mainstream view among Chinese analysts was that the decision was erroneous and unwise.⁵⁹⁶

If the irrational model is true, then this case deviates from the rational actor assumption of the (mis)alignment theory a bit. There was no reason, however, to believe that subsequent Chinese actions were irrational or uncoordinated. I will continue to analyze the case with the notion that the initiation of the crisis might not be explained by the theory.

There also seems to be an element of path dependency in the decision. In June 2012, in retaliation to Vietnam’s state oil and gas group PetroVietnam’s plan to invite Japanese firms to participate in the joint development of about 20 oil and gas projects⁵⁹⁷ and the “Vietnamese Law of the Sea” passed by the Vietnamese National Assembly, CNOOC announced just a few days later the invitation of international bids for 9 oil and gas blocks.⁵⁹⁸ This explains why Chinese MoFA spokesperson had at various occasions claimed that similar Chinese exploration and

⁵⁹⁴ International Crisis Group, “Stirring up the South China Sea (III): A Fleeting Opportunity for Calm,” Report No.267, May 7, 2015, 10, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/north-east-asia/china/stirring-south-china-sea-iii-fleeting-opportunity-calm>, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁵⁹⁵ Interview 25, June 2, 2017, Beijing; Interview 46, November 20, 2017, Washington DC.

⁵⁹⁶ International Crisis Group, “Stirring up the South China Sea,” 5.

⁵⁹⁷ “Vietnam to propose oil, gas development with Japan,” Thanh Nien News, June 13, 2012, <http://www.thanhniennews.com/business/vietnam-to-propose-oil-gas-development-with-japan-media-6807.html>, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁵⁹⁸ “CNOOC Opens Tender to Foreign Companies for 9 Oil and Gas Blocks [in Chinese],” *Tencent News*, June 26, 2012, <https://news.qq.com/a/20120626/001565.htm>, accessed May 9, 2018.

drilling activities had been going on for “a decade in the same waters,” and the placement of the oil rig in 2014 was only a “natural continuation” of past activities.⁵⁹⁹

Hanoi reacted forcefully to the Chinese placement of the oil rig. According to the deputy commander/chief of staff of the Vietnam Maritime Police Ngo Ngoc Thu, they immediately dispatched six vessels to “examine and prevent the illegal intrusion of China’s oil rig and the escort ships.” Both sides reinforced their presence near the disputed area subsequently. At the peak time, there were over a hundred Chinese vessels and sixty Vietnamese vessels present on the waters, engaging in a massive standoff.⁶⁰⁰ A number of serious collisions ensued.⁶⁰¹ After a phone call between Vietnam Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh and China’s State Councilor Yang Jiechi on May 6 failed to reach an agreement, Hanoi appealed to the UN, the ASEAN, and the U.S. for support.⁶⁰² On May 7, Vietnam circulated a note at the UN to protest the Chinese action. On May 11, Vietnam Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung delivered a speech at the 24th ASEAN Summit, stressing that “the incident constituted a direct threat to peace, stability, maritime safety and security in the East Sea.”⁶⁰³ Dung also threatened to pursue international legal measures against Beijing. On May 6, the U.S. State Department spokesperson singled out

⁵⁹⁹ These wordings have been mentioned at multiple occasions, for an example see PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on June 18, 2014,” June 19, 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1166826.shtml, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁶⁰⁰ Ngo Ngoc Thu, “The Situation on the Area with China’s Illegal Drilling Rig HD981 within Vietnam’s Waters,” Vietnam MoFA press briefing, Hanoi, May 7, 2014; “Video shows ‘Vietnamese boat ramming Chinese ships’ in disputed waters,” *South China Morning Post*, June 14, 2014, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1532371/beijing-accuses-vietnam-ramming-vessels-over-1500-times>, accessed May 9, 2018; Green et al 2017, 208-209.

⁶⁰¹ Both sides released video clips of these collisions, accusing the other side as the aggressor. See “Waijiaobu Bianhaisi fuzizhang Yi Xianliang jiu Zhongjiannan xiangmu juxing chuihenghui (Deputy director general of MoFA Department of Boundary and Oceanic Affairs Yi Xianliang’s press briefing),” PRC MoFA Press Briefing, June 13, 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjb_673085/zzjg_673183/t1165600.shtml, accessed May 9, 2018; Ngo Ngoc Thu, “The Situation on the Area.”

⁶⁰² Vietnam MoFA, “Họp báo quốc tế về việc Trung Quốc hạ đặt giàn khoan trái phép trong vùng biển Việt Nam (International press conference on China’s drilling rig in Vietnam’s waters),” May 7, 2014, http://www.mofa.gov.vn/vi/tt_baochi/pbnfn/ns140509011156, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁶⁰³ Vietnam MoFA, “Regular Press Briefing by MOFA’s Spokesperson Le Hai Binh On May 15, 2014,” May 15, 2014, http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt_baochi/pbnfn/ns140516233943, accessed May 9, 2018.

China's behavior as "provocative and unhelpful."⁶⁰⁴ The U.S. State released a press statement the next day accusing China's "unilateral action" as "part of a broader pattern of Chinese behavior to advance its claims over disputed territory in a manner that undermines peace and stability in the region."⁶⁰⁵ On May 21, Vietnam Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh called U.S. secretary of State John Kerry to discuss the matter.⁶⁰⁶

Caught off-guard by the chain of reactions and realizing the grave risk of tipping the Vietnamese domestic political scale further towards the anti-China faction, Beijing needed a face-saving retreat as a way out of the conundrum. Retreating immediately was certainly not appealing, because that would signal Beijing's weakness to both a domestic and an international audience. State Councilor Yang Jiechi's visit to Hanoi on June 18th is a strong signal that both sides were willing to talk and work out a peaceful solution. The Vietnam-China Joint Steering Committee for Bilateral Cooperation, under whose umbrella State Councilor Yang visited Hanoi, "ha[s] an established practice of meeting annually," but the specific timing of the meeting is decided on short notice.⁶⁰⁷ As is common with Chinese foreign policy practice, using seemingly routine meetings at long-established multilateral or bilateral frameworks is a traditional face-saving way for Beijing to initiate talks on more urgent matters without appearing too eager. In Beijing's perspective, the Vietnamese government tolerated, if not "connived," the rioters in burning down several Chinese-owned factories and caused deaths and damages, so China deserved an apology and should not appear too eager to make up.

⁶⁰⁴ Jen Psaki, "Daily Press Briefing: May 6, 2014," U.S. Department of State, May 6, 2014, Washington DC, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2014/05/225687.htm>, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁶⁰⁵ Jen Psaki, "Vietnam/China: Chinese Oil Rig Operations Near the Parcel Islands," May 7, 2014, Washington DC, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/05/225750.htm>, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁶⁰⁶ Thayer 2014b.

⁶⁰⁷ PRC MoFA, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on June 17, 2014," June 17, 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1166317.shtml.

Beijing also needed to stand its ground on the sea in the confrontations with Vietnamese ships in order to uphold its territorial claims and to protect the valuable and vulnerable oil rig. As for Hanoi's accusation of the Chinese physical aggressiveness on the sea, such as ramming Vietnamese ships and firing water cannons, the Chinese cordon was obviously there to protect the oil rig, not to harass the Vietnamese ships, unless they misunderstood the Vietnamese ships' intentions. Even the Vietnamese MoFA spokesperson used the word "protect" when he was saying that "China used between 109 and 125 vessels to protect Haiyang Shiyou oil rig 981."⁶⁰⁸ But it does not exclude the possibility that the Chinese ships might mistake some of the innocent Vietnamese fishing boats for their intention to obstruct the oil rig operation and caused damage. Besides, incidental collisions in such a crowded space is almost unavoidable.

Some also cite examples of economic sanctions as Chinese aggressive intention towards Vietnam. Malesky and Morris-Jung state that "Retail trade with China dipped noticeably in the second half of 2014,"⁶⁰⁹ but Poh reports that "the trade account between China and Vietnam in 2014 continued to increase."⁶¹⁰ My own examination of data from the World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS) and the General Statistics Office of Vietnam (GSOV) confirms Poh's observation.⁶¹¹ Total retail bilateral trade increased from 50.0 billion (US Dollars) in 2013 to 58.6 billion in 2014, and continued to rise since. The second half of 2014 did not dip either, with the first half of 27.8 billion and the second half of 30.8 billion. The only dip is in tourism, but the travel advisories and cancelled chartered flights were not limited to China.⁶¹² According to Poh's

⁶⁰⁸ Vietnam MoFA, "The 6th Regular Press Conference," June 28, 2014, http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt_baochi/tcbc/ns140628000810, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁶⁰⁹ Malesky and Morris-Jung 2015, 172.

⁶¹⁰ Poh 2017, 153.

⁶¹¹ The WITS incorporates data from the World Bank, the UNSD Commodity Trade (UN Comtrade) (UN Comtrade) database, the WTO's Integrated Data Base (IDB) and others. There is only trivial difference between the WITS data and the GSOV data. No data source is cited with the Malesky and Morris-Jung claim.

⁶¹² Poh 2017, 153.

interviews with Vietnamese diplomats and analysts, although sanctions were expected, they were not employed or threatened. A Vietnamese analyst also told Poh that “it was his understanding that local officials in China – such as those in Yunnan and Guangxi – were ‘specifically instructed’ to ensure that economic interactions along the border between China and Vietnam were not affected by the dispute. These local Chinese officials ... proactively approached their Vietnamese counterparts to ensure that economic interactions were sustained, even as bilateral tensions continued to rise.”⁶¹³

Fortunately, Beijing faced a relatively moderate public opinion, so it did not need to resort to a pacifying propaganda to pursue a moderate policy. Despite the overall strong nationalism in China on the South China Sea dispute in general, the public held a relatively mild opinion towards the specific dispute with Vietnam particularly in 2014. The year 2013 and the first half of 2014 is an uneventful period between China and Vietnam on the South China Sea dispute. The absence of any major disturbance on the sea for an extended period of time, together with the Chinese state refraining from stoking nationalism on the issue with Vietnam, gave the relationship a respite, allowing the nationalist emotions to subside temporarily. Although still having the potential to be rekindled, the Chinese nationalist sentiment on this dispute at this particular time was calm. Several journalists and editors interviewed observed public opinion before and during the crisis to be “calm,” if not “aloof,” and “definitely less feverish than before the Sino-Philippines Scarborough Shoal standoff in 2012 or the arbitration case in 2016.” They generally see “little news value” in the ongoing events, except for the riots.⁶¹⁴

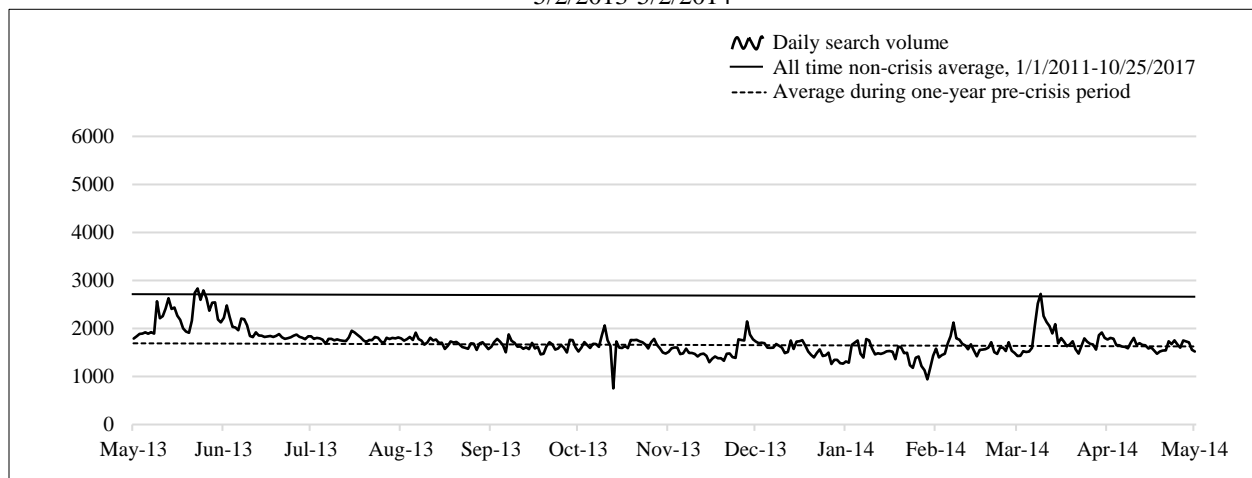
Figure 7.1 shows the daily search index of the word “South China Sea” in the Baidu Search Index (BSI) during the one-year pre-crisis period. This period featured stable and

⁶¹³ Ibid, 154.

⁶¹⁴ Interview 18, May 29, 2017; Interview 20, May 31, 2017; Interview 23, June 1, 2017.

relatively low index compared to other periods, with just a few mild surges and averaged at 1,713. For comparison, as mentioned in Chapter 6, the all-time average of search volume during all-time non-crisis periods between January 1, 2011 and October 15, 2017 is 2,773. The average during the one-year pre-crisis period before the 2016 arbitration crisis is over four thousand, which I interpret as high public attention.

Figure 7.1: Daily Search Volume of “South China Sea” on Baidu.com During One-Year Pre-Crisis Period, 5/2/2013-5/2/2014



According to *South China Sea Public Opinion Newsletter*, the first half of 2014 shows low level of public attention in social media, and almost all online discussions were exclusively about the dispute with the Philippines or the U.S.’ involvement.⁶¹⁵ Reports of very few protesters showing up for a scheduled anti-Vietnam rally in Kunming on May 19th also confirm the nonchalant public opinion.⁶¹⁶

Given the weak public opinion and Beijing’s moderate policy intent, a propaganda campaign to mollify public opinion is not necessary, a propaganda campaign to mobilize the

⁶¹⁵ Collaborative Innovation Center of South China Sea Studies at Nanjing University, *The South China Sea Public Opinion Newsletter*, January, February, March, and April 2014.

⁶¹⁶ Brian Eyler, “The anti-Vietnam protest that didn’t happen,” May 19, 2014, <http://www.eastbysoutheast.com/anti-vietnam-protest-didnt-happen/>, accessed May 9, 2018.

public is certainly not desired. On the contrary, the state chose to keep the dispute out of the public's sight. China's position on the dispute was still clarified and made readily available partly in response to the loud noises on the Vietnamese side and partly in case if people hear about it from foreign media.

Beijing did develop coercive goals in the crisis: to stop the Vietnamese interference in the oil rig's exploration activities and to prevent the Vietnamese ships from ramming the rig; to keep Hanoi from enlarging the matter by resorting to international forums such as the UN or the ASEAN, pursuing legal means, or appealing to the U.S. and other powers; to have Hanoi keep a lid on domestic nationalist expressions and clamp down on the riots. But Beijing chose to forgo the opportunity of incurring audience cost to buttress these coercions. The outcome of China's media behavior would therefore contradict an audience cost prediction. This is due to the concern that a hardline public opinion would constrain flexibility for a moderate policy choice, which is paradoxically also part of the audience cost logic. It is ultimately the public-state alignment that explained the absence of a propaganda campaign.

III. The Vietnamese Pacifying Propaganda Campaign

The Vietnamese media behavior on the oil rig crisis contrasted to the Chinese media behavior. Despite of being involved in the same dispute, Hanoi launched a media campaign instead of keeping quiet like China did. During the seventy-four days of the crisis between May 2 and July 17, 2014, *Nhan Dan (The People)*, the Vietnamese equivalent of China's *People's Daily*, published 224 articles, averaging at three articles a day on the dispute. When a propaganda campaign is present, the most prominent characteristic is that everything seems to be relevant. Even a news article on the beauty pageant reads that contestants "call[ed] for actions to support

Vietnam Government to defend its sovereignty in the East Sea and asking China to immediately withdraw its illegal Haiyang Shiyou-981 oil rig and ships off Vietnam's waters."⁶¹⁷ *Thanh Nien News (Youth News)*, one of the five most influential newspapers in Vietnam, published 570 articles on the subject, averaging at eight articles a day.⁶¹⁸

The Vietnamese media behavior offers another piece of evidence for the pacifying function of a propaganda campaign. The combination of a moderate state policy intent and a hardline public opinion motivated Hanoi to use a pacifying propaganda campaign to achieve its policy goals. Before delving into the Vietnamese side of the oil rig crisis below, a brief overview of the Vietnamese political and propaganda system is warranted since the discussion will shift the context from a Chinese system to a Vietnamese one, although they are quite similar.

1. The Vietnamese and the Chinese Context in Comparison

Both Vietnam and China have party-state systems, in which the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and the Communist Party of China (CPC) have the preponderant power in their respective country's political, economic and social life. All print media are owned by or under effective control of the respective Communist party. Although there are various degrees of commercialization among a diverse range of media outlets, both states maintain effective administrative and legal means to regulate media. The government supervises senior personnel appointments at main media outlets, monitors and censors media content on a day-to-day basis, issues general guidelines and specific directives on what issues to cover and how they should be covered, and sanctions or even jails journalists who go against the state mandate.

⁶¹⁷ "Dang Thu Thao crowned Miss Vietnam Oceans 2014," *Nhan Dan*, May 26, 2014, <http://en.nhandan.com.vn/culture/lifestyle/item/2536502-dang-thu-thao-crowned-miss-vietnam-oceans-2014.html>, accessed May 10, 2018.

⁶¹⁸ Bui 2017.

Having been through a long period of colonialization and several major wars against foreign powers, Vietnam has a relatively shorter time for state building and economic development, so it arguably has weaker central control than China. As a result, civil society is much more active in Vietnam than in China. Internet use is also freer in Vietnam than in China.⁶¹⁹ For example, Google and *New York Times* websites are accessible in Vietnam but are blocked in China. Despite these differentials in the degree of control, the organizational and legal means for the CPV to tighten the rein of media control when they feel the need are still in place and frequently resorted to.⁶²⁰ For example, Google is required to maintain its servers inside Vietnam, so that it is easier for Hanoi to censor content whenever it feels the need to.⁶²¹ Freedom House reports that “In 2013, the [Vietnamese] government increased its repression of print and online journalists, jailing more than twice as many writers and bloggers in 2013 as it did the previous year.”⁶²² “In September [2013], the state introduced Decree 72, which restricted all websites and social media from publishing anything that ‘provides information that is against Vietnam.’”⁶²³ Freedom House rates both countries a score of 4 out of 16 in 2014 on “Freedom of Expression and Belief.”⁶²⁴

Besides the authoritarian rule and tight media control, both countries have witnessed the rise of popular nationalism in recent years. Some scholars argue that this is a direct result of state instigation, in part to divert public attention away from domestic problems such as rampant

⁶¹⁹ These judgements are made based on the author’s personal experiences and discussions with people and analysts who are familiar with both countries’ political systems.

⁶²⁰ Broadcasting Board of Governors, “Media Use in Vietnam 2013,” 2013, <http://www.bbg.gov/wp-content/media/2013/12/Vietnam-research-brief-final1.pdf>, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁶²¹ Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2014, Vietnam,” 2014, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/vietnam>, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁶²² Ibid.

⁶²³ Ibid.

⁶²⁴ Ibid.; Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2014, China,” 2014, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/china>, accessed May 9, 2018.

corruption, growing inequality and sluggish economic performance since the 2008 global financial crisis.⁶²⁵ Others argue that nationalism is promoted to fill the ideological gap to consolidate regime legitimacy after both countries' loosening the Marxist-Leninist ideals to incorporate the capitalist economic instruments.⁶²⁶ Besides the effects of the government media policy, the market-based economic success of both countries and the mushrooming of the internet and social media have increased the opportunities and the capabilities for citizens to voice their opinions.

2. The Oil Rig Crisis from Hanoi's Perspective: Defending the Fatherland

At the beginning of the crisis, the Vietnamese government faced an existing strong and hardline public opinion, yet the state itself preferred an overall moderate policy. Analysts observe a growing rift between a nationalist public and a reserved government during the oil rig crisis in Vietnam. Malesky and Morris-Jung note that "the oil rig crisis highlighted a growing gap between state leadership and the wider Vietnamese society" and "increasing polarization between state and society."⁶²⁷ Bui's examination of 570 *Thanh Nien News* articles during the crisis also shows "some gap between the official news stories and readers' comments," and that "The public's response is arguably more emotional and more demanding of a tougher position."⁶²⁸

The surge in Vietnamese public opinion against China regarding South China Sea sovereignty issues could be traced back to 2007. A senior Vietnam specialist in China revealed

⁶²⁵ Le Hong Hiep, "Performance-based legitimacy: the case of the communist party of Vietnam and Doi Moi," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 34(2), 2012, 145-172.

⁶²⁶ Zhao 2004; Gries 2004.

⁶²⁷ Malesky and Morris-Jung 2015, 169-70.

⁶²⁸ Bui 2017, 183.

that anti-China protests on the South China Sea dispute started in 2007 when internal Chinese consideration of elevating the administrative status of Sansha county to the prefecture level leaked to Hanoi. Hanoi decided to mobilize college students to stage regular protests to pressure the Chinese to drop the plan.⁶²⁹ The staged anti-China protests succeeded in deterring Beijing from pursuing the Sansha City plan until June 2012 when the Vietnamese National Assembly passed the “Vietnamese Law of the Sea” making claims to the Paracels and the Spratlys. Beijing retaliated by following through with the Sansha City plan one month later. The regular weekend protests, however, raised awareness and intensified emotions on the dispute among the Vietnamese public, marking the beginning of a downward spiral in the Vietnamese public opinion against China.

The strong public opinion on the South China Sea dispute against China gained momentum at the encouragement of America’s “Pivot to Asia” policy, with a benchmark event in July 2010 featuring a heated debate at the ASEAN Regional Forum in Hanoi led by the then U.S. State Secretary Hilary Clinton. Vietnam’s nationalist public opinion reached a small climax during the cable-cutting incidents in the summer of 2011. Angry Vietnamese once again took to the street, but this time more bottom-up than top-down and the protests continued for two months. Interviews with observers who experienced the protests confirm the spontaneous nature of these protests.⁶³⁰

The bilateral relationship received a respite from the South China Sea dispute in 2013 and early 2014, featuring a relatively uneventful year on the dispute between the two countries, the exchange of high-level visits by top Vietnamese and Chinese leaders, and the establishment of a new bilateral expert group on maritime cooperation and consultation. But even during this

⁶²⁹ Interview 46, November 20, 2017, Washington DC.

⁶³⁰ Interview 47, February 21, 2017, Hanoi.

relatively calm period, anti-China rallies flared anew in the summer of 2013 and were cracked down by the government, demonstrating the ongoing genuine and strong public emotions on the issue.⁶³¹ A Pew Global Attitudes Survey taken during April 16 – May 8, 2014 in Vietnam right before and at the very beginning of the oil rig crisis shows that 78% of respondents had unfavorable opinion of China and only 16% of respondents had favorable opinion, in sharp contrast to the Vietnamese’ overwhelming favorability towards all other major powers in the region – the United States (76% favorable), Russia (75% favorable), Japan (79% favorable) and India (67% favorable).⁶³²

Yet logical deductions and evidence of the actual policy pursued by Hanoi suggest a moderate state policy intent. First, Hanoi had little incentive to escalate the tension and damage the bilateral relationship with China. The Vietnamese economy was asymmetrically dependent on China. Prior to the crisis, China had become Vietnam’s largest trading partner, reaching about \$50 billion total turnover in 2013.⁶³³ China was also “the sixth-largest investor by the number of projects and fourteenth largest by the total capital (about \$14.7 billion) invested, respectively.”⁶³⁴ Given China’s rapidly growing appetite for overseas investment, there was great potential for further growth in bilateral investment.

Granted, Hanoi’s attitude towards the public protests at the beginning was permissive, at times even encouraging. The Vietnamese police watched as hundreds (which later grew into thousands) of demonstrators marched around the country and protested outside the Chinese

⁶³¹ “Rare Protest in Vietnam Raises a Call to Curb China,” *New York Times*, June 3, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/03/world/asia/rare-protest-in-vietnam-raises-call-to-curb-china.html>, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁶³² Pew Research Center Global Attitudes and Trends Datasets, available at <http://www.pewglobal.org/datasets/>. For more information on the 2014 survey in Vietnam, see <http://www.pewresearch.org/methodology/international-survey-research/international-methodology/global-attitudes-survey/vietnam/2014>, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁶³³ “China remains Vietnam’s biggest trade partner in 2013,” *Xinhua News*, January 29, 2014, accessed at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/chinadata/2014-01/29/content_17264283.htm, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁶³⁴ Malesky and Morris-Jung, “Vietnam in 2014,” 172.

embassy. They even cheered the demonstrators on by “broadcasting complaints about China’s actions” using loudspeakers “atop police vans,” inviting state television to record the event, and handing out banners saying “We entirely trust the party, the government and the people’s army.”⁶³⁵ Nevertheless, Hanoi was well aware of the danger of public protests turning against itself. The violent riots that took place on May 13-14, 2014 gave a sobering alarm to the CPV leaders that the strong public opinion, if left unfettered, could go out of control. Scores of factories were damaged in the rampage, including the ones managed by South Koreans and Taiwanese. One Chinese company reported 4 deaths and 130 casualties.⁶³⁶ The Vietnamese leadership responded quickly, arresting 300 persons involved in the rioting. China evacuated more than 3000 of its citizens and, not surprisingly, Chinese tourism dried up.⁶³⁷ As General Hoang Cong Tu of the Vietnamese Ministry of Public Security put it, “they [the rioters] have seriously undermined the country’s image, and such action has to be punished.”⁶³⁸

No government looks kindly on riots, but the CPV had additional reasons to worry about anti-China disturbances. Hanoi knew well that anti-China sentiment could easily connect to an agenda critical of the regime. An open letter by 61 party members in late July illustrates the linkage: on one hand, the letter called for “liberating ... from dependence upon China” and “promptly sue China at an international tribunal”; on the other, it blamed the regime for the current situation, and demanded “abandoning the erroneous policies of building socialism and

⁶³⁵ “Vietnam Allows Anti- China Protest over Oil Rig,” *Daily Mail*, May 10, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-2625366/Vietnam-allows-anti-China-protest-oil-rig.html>, accessed May 10, 2018.

⁶³⁶ Gerry Mulany, “Chinese Company puts Death Toll in Vietnam Riots at 4,” *New York Times*, May 21, 2014. <https://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/05/21/chinese-company-puts-death-toll-in-vietnam-riots-at-4/>, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁶³⁷ Jane Perlez, “Vietnamese Officials Intolerant of Violence as Standoff with China Continues,” *New York Times*, May 17, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/18/world/asia/vietnamese-officials-intolerant-of-violence-as-standoff-with-china-continues.html>, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁶³⁸ As quoted in *ibid.*

decisively veering towards a national and democratic direction, focusing on a moderate transformation of the political regime from its present totalitarianism to a democratic system.”⁶³⁹ Senior Vietnamese analysts affiliated with a government think tank pointed to the internal debate and the cleavage between the anti-China, more liberal faction led by the then Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and the pro-China, more conservative faction led by the Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, with one constantly checked and balanced by the other.⁶⁴⁰ This is also evident in the CPV Central Committee’s ninth plenary session, which took place during May 8-14, a few days after the Chinese placement of the oil rig and whilst the riots broke out. “A heated debate erupted about how Vietnam should respond to China’s challenge.”⁶⁴¹

As the oil rig crisis continued, Hanoi adopted a three-pronged response – sending law enforcement vessels to the location of the rig to protest and disrupt the Chinese activities; establishing bilateral channels for negotiations; and rallying international pressure to force the Chinese to retreat. There is only some hardline element in the first type of response. China accused Vietnam for ramming Chinese ships “for a total of 1,416 times,” in addition to “send[ing] frogmen and other underwater agents to the area, and dropped large numbers of obstacles, including fishing nets and floating objects, in the waters.”⁶⁴² But it was not clear whether the Vietnamese vessels were there merely to voice protest, or they were aggressively breaking through the Chinese cordon and disrupting the Chinese activities by ramming Chinese

⁶³⁹ “An Open Letter by 61 Party Members to The Central Executive Committee and all members of the Communist Party of Vietnam,” July 28, 2014, https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/sites/default/files/custom_search/Letter%20from%2061%20Vietnamese%20Party%20members.pdf, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁶⁴⁰ Interview 48, February 23, 2014, Hanoi.

⁶⁴¹ Carl Thayer, “4 Reasons China Removed Oil Rig HYSY-981 Sooner Than Planned,” *The Diplomat*, July 22, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/07/4-reasons-china-removed-oil-rig-hysy-981-sooner-than-planned/>, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁶⁴² PRC MoFA, “The Operation of the HYSY 981 Drilling Rig: Vietnam’s Provocation and China’s Position,” June 8, 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1163264.shtml, accessed May 9, 2018.

ships. It is reasonable to believe that there were some ramming on both sides' account and some incidental collisions due to the crowded space. A ship's actions could also be easily misunderstood for aggression given such a situation. While the jury is still out on this point, one thing that is certain is that the Vietnamese presence in the disputed area was required if it were to maintain its claim strength to the Paracels. As Womack points out, "The method of establishing territorial claims in international law has the pernicious effect of maximizing confrontation and hostility... unchallenged occupation is nine-tenths of the law. Thus each has an incentive to increase its presence and to protest or oppose occupation by others, and all parties to the dispute have done both repeatedly over the past forty years."⁶⁴³ Therefore, without immediate and effective protests, the lack of action on the Vietnamese part could potentially be used by China as Hanoi's tacit consent of the *fait accompli*. So even if the Chinese accusation was true, the Vietnamese actions had a defensive nature.

Besides, Hanoi was very proactive in seeking out bilateral channels with their Chinese counterparts. "Immediately after the oil rig crisis broke out, Vietnam's leaders adopted a conciliatory diplomatic posture." Hanoi requested the activation of a hotline between senior leaders, offered to send a special envoy and pressed for a visit by its party secretary general.⁶⁴⁴ On May 6, Vietnamese foreign minister Pham Binh Minh called Chinese state councilor Yang Jiechi. With all things considered, Vietnam's actual policy was reactive and proportionate, providing further proof for a moderate policy intent.

⁶⁴³ Brantly Womack, "The Spratlys: from dangerous ground to apple of discord," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 33, no. 3 (2011): 373-374.

⁶⁴⁴ Thayer 2014b.

The bellicose public opinion required the CPV to align public opinion with its intended moderate policy before carrying it out. As a result, Hanoi utilized a pacifying propaganda campaign to clear the way for a moderate foreign policy.

First, Hanoi used the harsh rhetoric in a propaganda campaign to keep up the appearances of a tough stand towards China to appeal to the public demand, though none threatening any substantive punishment. The challenge of nationalistic public criticism was strong and real. Bui reports that “[readers] posted comments [below the news articles] were critical of the government’s late reporting of the oil rig installation and the relatively mild statements by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson in the first few days.”⁶⁴⁵ To appease the nationalistic public demand, the state issued strongly-worded statements, condemning the Chinese placement of the oil rig as “brazen,” “illegal,” and “void,” and the actions by Chinese maritime patrol ships as “aggressive” and “intimidating.”⁶⁴⁶ At the ASEAN Summit on May 11, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung made a high-profile pitch to other ASEAN leaders and criticized China’s behavior as a “direct threat” to regional peace and stability. Vietnamese media covered these statements extensively.

But none of these statements had real teeth. Bui confirms that “these statements remained vague about Vietnam’s likely response. For example, they stated that ‘China needs to take responsibilities for its actions’, and if China continued with its aggressive behavior, ‘Vietnam has to take defensive measures in response’ or ‘Vietnam will take appropriate measures.’”⁶⁴⁷ When asked whether Vietnam will follow the example of the Philippines to sue China in international court, the Foreign Ministry answered “priority is given to negotiating disputes with

⁶⁴⁵ Bui 2017, 180.

⁶⁴⁶ Vietnam MoFA, “Regular Press Briefing by MOFA’s Spokesperson Le Hai Binh On May 15, 2014,” May 15, 2014, http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt_baochi/pbnfn/ns140516233943, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁶⁴⁷ Bui 2017, 175.

neighboring countries, but does not exclude any other peaceful means.”⁶⁴⁸ Even Prime Minister Dung, the strongest advocate of this legal action, stated that “timing was crucial.”⁶⁴⁹ Defense Minister Phung Quang Thanh’s remark at the Shangri-La Dialogue on May 31 that the legal action was only “a last resort” also confirms the hollow content of the strong rhetoric.⁶⁵⁰

The Vietnamese media also gave broad coverage to confrontations in the conflict zone. But instead of focusing on the Chinese aggressiveness on the sea, the media focused on the heroic actions of the maritime law enforcement officers “defending the fatherland.” In Bui’s content analysis of the *Thanh Nien News* articles, this theme took up the majority of the articles (146 out of 570 articles (25.6%)). This averaged at two such articles a day.⁶⁵¹ This type of framing serves the purpose of showcasing that the government was indeed taking active actions, so as to fend off the nationalistic criticisms against the government. This media approach to “channel popular anger and animosity into a more positive form of pro-government nationalism”⁶⁵² confirms the causal logic of the (mis)alignment theory.

Secondly, the state used the propaganda campaign to subdue the strong public emotions so that a moderate policy could be carried out. On one hand, the state allowed the public to vent on social media and online comment sections. Unless the online posts explicitly targeted at the Vietnamese leadership or called for anti-government actions, public discussions to express outrage and vent frustrations were generally allowed and even encouraged. On the other, the state walked the fine line between criticizing the Chinese actions and avoiding intensifying anti-

⁶⁴⁸ Vietnam MoFA, “International press conference on China’s downed drilling rig in Vietnam’s waters,” May 7, 2014, http://www.mofa.gov.vn/vi/tt_baochi/pbnfn/ns140509011156, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁶⁴⁹ Thayer, “4 Reasons.”

⁶⁵⁰ *Shangri-La Dialogue Report*, 13th Asia Security Summit, Singapore, 30 May – 1 June 2014, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 29, <https://www.iiss.org/-/media/Silos/ShangriLa/2014/Shangri-La-Dialogue-Report-2014.pdf>, accessed May 9, 2018.

⁶⁵¹ Bui, “Managing Anti-China Nationalism in Vietnam,” 178.

⁶⁵² *Ibid.*, 169.

China sentiments. The state achieved this through three approaches: 1) Channeling public anger towards patriotism and national unity, as mentioned earlier. Bui finds the *Thanh Nien News* articles highlighting “the need for national unity, encouragement for maritime enforcement officers, relief for affected fishermen, and above all, confidence in the government’s ability to resolve the situation.”⁶⁵³ 2) Echoing anti-China public emotions in a smart way. Bui finds that “Anti-China rhetoric was not absent from the media coverage, but highly negative assessments of China were actually mostly confined to analyses by foreign observers and scholars.”⁶⁵⁴ Echoing provides a sense of agreement and support; but echoing in moderation and in foreign observers’ assessments prevents the exacerbation of the nationalist emotions and the unintended escalations with the foreign rival. 3) Refraining from referencing to historical disputes. The fact that Bui found very few articles referencing to the historical disputes between the two countries provides strong evidence that the Vietnamese government was not overly enthusiastic about inciting domestic public emotion on the current crisis. Recalling historical grievances is the easiest way to ignite public hatred. But “China’s forceful expulsion of Vietnamese forces from the Crescent Group in the Paracel islands in 1974, the Johnson South Reef skirmish in 1988, or even the border war in 1979 were hardly mentioned in most reports.”⁶⁵⁵

3. Audience Cost?

Could the Vietnamese propaganda campaign be better explained by the audience cost theory? Hanoi had coercive goals during the crisis. Its most important coercive goal was to prevent the Chinese oil rig from drilling in the area and to force it to leave. As argued earlier, Hanoi did

⁶⁵³ Ibid., 169.

⁶⁵⁴ Ibid., 179.

⁶⁵⁵ Ibid.

make public threats but most of its threats were vague such as “Vietnam has to take defensive measures in response” or “Vietnam will take appropriate measures” if China did not comply. Its only concrete threat was to seek international legal action, but even on this, the Vietnamese attitude was far from firm. At various occasions, Hanoi conveyed that the legal action would be “a last resort,” conditional on “timing,” and should cede priority to bilateral negotiations with Beijing.⁶⁵⁶

To further evaluate the strength of an audience cost explanation, three questions remain: 1) Was the nationalist expression organic or state-instigated? In other words, did Hanoi try to tie its own hands by encouraging nationalist expressions and thus incurring an audience cost? 2) Did Hanoi use the strong nationalist sentiment as a leverage in negotiations with Beijing? 3) Did Beijing believe that Hanoi was constrained domestically by its public sentiment?⁶⁵⁷ If Hanoi deliberately tied its hands by instigating nationalism, then used it in coercing Beijing to move the rig, and if Beijing believed that Hanoi was really constrained by its domestic public, then an audience cost explanation would be strongly supported.

The answer to the first question is a limited yes. As mentioned earlier, Hanoi allowed and at times even encouraged the public protests. But genuinely strong public opinion had already existed before the crisis. What Hanoi played in the crisis was a facilitating role that aided the strong expressions of public sentiment but with limits – once it got out of hand on May 13, the government clamped down.

On the second question, the content of the conversations between the two countries’ leaders and diplomatic representatives is not fully available to evaluate whether domestic public

⁶⁵⁶ These wordings were respectively expressed by Defense Minister Phung Quang Thanh, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, and Vietnam MoFA. Refer to earlier discussion for details.

⁶⁵⁷ This is suggested by Weeks 2008 that outsiders should be able “observe the possibility of domestic sanctions for backing down.”

opinion was used as a leverage. But from what was reported, there was generally a lack of evidence to support the utility of the strong public opinion to Hanoi's position. If anything, the public protests, which started on May 11 and soon turned violent just two days later, became more of a liability than a leverage. Beijing put the blame squarely on Hanoi in failing to prevent the riots. Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, and South Korea, whose factories were all targeted, expressed grave concerns for public safety. Investor confidence was also hurt. Vietnamese stocks tumbled. All this took place without a clear, resolute threat being issued by Hanoi. So it was highly unlikely that the strong public opinion was ever used as a leverage in coercing Beijing to retreat.

On the third question, Beijing had good reasons to be skeptical to the constraining power of an audience cost to Hanoi. Sharing the same regime type and from its own experience dealing with public opinion, Beijing understood Hanoi had means to deescalate the rhetoric and calm the public. Frames such as invoking the nation's peaceful identity, the economic costs of war, possible mediation by the UN, and the threat of economic sanctions have proven effect in reducing the public opinion cost from backing down in a Chinese context.⁶⁵⁸ If Hanoi chose to, Beijing believed that Hanoi also had the set of tools available to China. In fact, Beijing ridiculed Hanoi's blunder in fermenting extreme nationalist sentiment and causing it to backfire. A *Global Times* editorial commented that Hanoi "does not know the danger of playing with extreme nationalism and does not have the ability to control violence."⁶⁵⁹ As events turned and as Hanoi took the reins of nationalism, it was able to perform a moderate approach without much domestic constraint.

⁶⁵⁸ Quek and Johnston 2018.

⁶⁵⁹ "Sheping: Yuenan da za qiang shao zai shijie mianqian diurenxianyan (Editorial: The beating, smashing, looting and burning shamed Vietnam in front of the whole world)," *Global Times*, May 16, 2014, <http://opinion.huanqiu.com/editorial/2014-05/4996625.html>, accessed May 11, 2018.

As the above reasoning suggests, although evidence cannot rule out the possibility of an intention by Hanoi to incur a domestic audience cost to enhance its threat credibility against China, the lack of a clear and resolute threat cast doubt on such a possibility. We will not know for certain until documents on the internal Vietnamese deliberations become available in the future. But it is certain that Hanoi was not successful in incurring an audience cost or using it against China. From the last point, it would also be difficult for an audience cost to ever be convincing to a counterpart like China. So the likelihood for an audience cost argument to hold is rather low.

IV. Conclusion

This chapter has presented two negative cases in which a propaganda campaign is absent. In both cases, the public opinion and the state policy intent were aligned so that the state did not have the incentives to either mobilize an already hardline public opinion or pacify an already moderate public opinion. These cases could not be explained by the audience cost theory or the diversionary war theory as both theories would predict the opposite outcome – a propaganda campaign to coerce or to divert. These cases further increase our confidence in the (mis)alignment theory.

The oil rig case from the Vietnamese perspective provides a third case in this chapter that further confirms the pacifying propaganda logic. The state sought to use the strong rhetoric to fend off nationalist criticisms and to calm the strong public opinion by echoing their emotions and letting them vent. The stark contrast between the Chinese and the Vietnamese media behavior was due to the differentials in the existing public opinion and how they were aligned or misaligned with the state policy intent.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This dissertation has sought to explain why authoritarian states launch propaganda campaigns in the context of nineteen Chinese diplomatic crises on territorial disputes. In the process, I have also delineated how authoritarian states manage public opinion on territorial disputes through their control of the media. The project is important because it examines the domestic factors that shape a state's international policy. More often than not, domestic factors matter as much as, if not more than, international factors on issues of conflicts especially for authoritarian states. The use of media on matters of foreign policy is prevalent in both autocracies and democracies, yet their functions, especially in autocracies, are not well understood. This project provides a window into the domestic constraints and motivations and the resulting statecraft in managing its domestic public on foreign policy issues. Studying authoritarian state media behavior also provides an extra tool to decipher the policy intent of these states and deep insights in the pressure and constraints that these autocrats face.

The theoretical argument has the following components: 1) when there is a misalignment between state policy intent and existing public opinion, authoritarian leaders engage in aggressive propaganda campaigns. 2) There are two kinds of misalignments: state intent is more aggressive than public opinion (case A), and state intent is more moderate than public opinion (case B); in case A, the propaganda campaign is to mobilize the public, and in case B the campaign is to pacify the public by keeping up the appearances of a hard stand to appease the nationalist demand on one hand and by echoing the public and letting the public vent to mollify the public sentiment on the other. Social Psychology and Media Studies support this rationale. 3) When state policy intent and public opinion are aligned, the state media would stay quiet.

This theory builds on studies of public opinion in foreign policy in International Relations and authoritarian public opinion in Comparative Politics. The two literatures offer empirical support that public opinion matters in authoritarian states in the sense that it can pressure or restrain a state's foreign policy choices. But these literatures also suggest that this "mattering" is not decisive because the pressures or the constraints public opinion places on the regime are not unremovable – the state is endowed with various means and ways to manipulate public opinion to meet their foreign policy needs. This is not to say that they always succeed in doing so, but just that these tools are available to them and studies have proven that they are capable of doing so. This theory contributes back to these two literatures by illuminating two mechanisms through which states could manipulate public opinion to meet their foreign policy goals – to mobilize and to pacify. The pacifying propaganda campaign is worth special mention because it is not commonly understood, but is commonly practiced by authoritarian states, and increasingly so as a way in dealing with rising nationalist sentiment in many of these countries.

I. Summary of Findings

The empirical test of the theory is done on nineteen Chinese territorial crises and four plus one detailed case studies among the nineteen crises. The medium-*n* study on the nineteen cases codes the values of the independent and the dependent variables based on a transparent set of rubrics and short qualitative justifications. The results show that fifteen of the nineteen cases conform to the predictions of the (mis)alignment theory. The average numbers of *People's Daily* articles in the misalignment cases are also remarkably higher than in the alignment cases. In addition, the medium-*n* study in Chapter 4 offers a more detailed investigation into the four deviant cases. Further investigation concludes that one of the four deviant cases could be explained by a

variation of the theory, one by an ad hoc factor that the crisis occurred amidst a major war between the two countries, and the two other cases could be better explained by the audience cost theory, but they are borderline propaganda campaigns, in which the state showed significant reservations in publicizing the dispute. By suggesting that the state does not go “all the way” in engaging audience cost, the two ambiguous cases thus adds nuances to the audience cost theory and confirms previous challenges to the audience cost theory that the state does leave leeway in tying its own hands. These results do falsify the hardline – hardline quadrant, thus suggesting the alignment incentive being one of many possible causes for the adoption and non-adoption of propaganda campaigns.

The subsequent chapters carried out a controlled comparison study on the four most similar cases with one in each corner of the two-by-two theoretical framework, thus covering all possible scenarios resulting from different values on the independent variables. The first case is the Sino-Vietnamese border war in 1979-1990 with a moderate/weak public opinion and a hardline state policy intent. The state launched a decade-long propaganda campaign to mobilize the public to support the state’s decision for war. Although intuitive, this mobilizing explanation of the propaganda campaign is not uncontroversial in academic studies that stress the explanatory power of the diversionary war or the audience cost theory. Both theories would predict the same outcome – the launch of a propaganda campaign, but for different purposes – to divert or to coerce. The diversionary war theory would argue that the propaganda campaign was to divert public attention away from the Deng-Hua power struggle. But this explanation does not square with the facts that the power struggle was not public that the public attention needed to be diverted away from. The timing was also wrong in that Deng had already gained the upper hand in the struggle by the time the propaganda campaign was launched. The audience cost theory

would argue that the state was mobilizing the public not for their support for the foreign policy, but to use the strong public sentiment as a leverage in coercing Hanoi to comply with Beijing's demands – to cease the encroachment and violence at the border, to withdraw from Cambodia, to stop expelling the ethnic Chinese in Vietnam, to stop realigning with the Soviet Union, to stop the anti-China campaign in the media. But by the time the propaganda campaign was launched in November 1978, most of these coercive goals had already failed, the relationship had broken to a point of no return, and war was already decided. This case lends support to the observation that even in authoritarian states where the state could wield stricter control of the information flow, public opinion matters in foreign policy because of the resources, the morale, and the moralization of the state decision.

The second case is the Sino-Philippines arbitration case in 2016 with a hardline public opinion and a moderate state policy intent. The Chinese state also launched an aggressive media campaign, but this time to pacify a hardline public. Because of its disparate goal from the mobilizing campaign, its content was also distinct from the mobilizing one. There was harsh polemic, but only to fend off nationalist criticism which abounds at the time, to avoid large-scale public protests that would threaten social stability, and to save face for a diplomatic failure. The harsh rhetoric had no real teeth, not even threats of punishment or retaliation. The media content, although voluminous, concentrated on mass persuasion in rejecting the arbitration and justifying China's position, rather than inciting hatred against the foreign rival. The goal of the media campaign was to prepare the public with rational analysis, so the public would be less inclined towards resorting to violence or collective actions that would threaten social stability or regime security. The media campaign sought to help the public vent their anger and frustration by echoing with excoriation and ridicule, but not strong enough to incite hatred and always added

with a positive note, and by allowing the public to let off steam on social media, online forums, and online comment sections.

The third case is the cable cutting incidents between China and Vietnam in 2011. These incidents, although discrete, reflected a larger dispute regarding oil exploration activities in the South China Sea and caused weekly Vietnamese public protests and live-fire naval exercises from both sides. Hence, they are considered as one case. In this case, the hardline public opinion aligned with the hardline state policy intent. Because the state did not have the incentive to mobilize an already agitated public to support its policy, it refrained from a propaganda campaign and disciplined the commercial media to keep quiet. Audience cost or diversionary war theory would be hard to explain the case as both would predict a propaganda campaign, an opposite outcome from the actual outcome of the case.

The fourth case is the oil rig crisis between China and Vietnam in 2014. This case marked the lowest point in Sino-Vietnamese relations since the 1979 border war and led to dangerous encounters on the sea and deadly riots in Vietnam. The case itself is puzzling given that it occurred right after the exchange of high-level bilateral visits in the previous year and both sides were committed to positive steps in managing the South China Sea dispute. Based on interviews with officials and analysts and logical deductions, my basic judgement is that the decision to place the oil rig in the disputed area was not a well-informed one. This is further confirmed by the fact that China never placed the oil rig in the Vietnamese side of the equidistance line again after the incident. In this case, a moderate/weak public opinion aligned with a moderate state policy intent, so that the state lacked the incentive to pacify an already moderate public and a propaganda campaign was therefore not adopted.

The fifth case is the oil rig crisis from the Vietnamese perspective, which offers an opportunity to extend the argument from a Chinese context to another authoritarian state. The Vietnamese public, given the government's previous deliberate instigation and Vietnam's vulnerable status in an asymmetric relationship with China, exhibited a stronger sentiment and a more hardline position towards the dispute than the government. This conforms to the conditions of a pacifying propaganda campaign and thus offers an additional test of the most counterintuitive part of the misalignment theory. In contrast to the Chinese quietness, Hanoi launched an aggressive propaganda campaign. On one hand, the campaign's harsh rhetoric helped the government to fend off nationalist criticism, but it did not come with any substantive threats. The only concrete threat of resorting to international legal means did not come off as clear, which belied significant government reservations about such intentions. On the other, the state used media to guide public opinion by concentrating on the positive – the “heroic” acts of the coast guards in defending the “fatherland,” by letting the public vent – allowing lively social media and online discussions and public protests to a certain extent, and by refraining from invoking the old scores such as the 1979 border war. These are consistent with the pacifying mechanisms of the misalignment theory. In contrast, an audience cost argument, although plausible given the existence of Hanoi's coercive goals and its tacit permission or even limited encouragement of the public protests at least at the beginning, lacks factual support in the case. Public opinion turned to more of a liability than a leverage for Hanoi and Beijing would not believe that Hanoi was really constrained by its public.

Held together, these evidence, including the medium-*n* congruence test and the four plus one cases that followed, strengthens our confidence in the misalignment theory.

II. Implications to International Relations, Comparative Politics, and Policy

The misalignment theory builds on other domestic theories of international relations and contributes to the particular line of work that stresses the role of public opinion, adding the element of media control as a statecraft. But instead of examining how domestic factors affect a state's foreign policy, this dissertation has focused on understanding how states manage their publics *for the sake of* foreign policy. The basic logic is that public opinion wields pressures and constraints to the state in terms of foreign policy choices and implementation. Because of these expected pressures and constraints, the state utilizes its manipulation of the media to align public opinion with its foreign policy intent.

This is similar to the literature on threat inflation but applied in an authoritarian context. Studies on threat inflation investigate how states inflate external threats by manipulating political and media agendas to rally public support for preventive wars such as the 2003 Iraq War.⁶⁶⁰ The mobilizing for war logic is consistent with the mobilizing propaganda campaign of the misalignment theory. But rarely has any study specified or even noted an equally important function of the media – a pacifying function. A pacifying propaganda campaign works to loosen the constraints public opinion places on a state's foreign policy choices and implementation, thus works best in scenarios with strong nationalist sentiment on salient international disputes. A mobilizing function and a pacifying function combined, therefore, provides a fuller picture of how authoritarian states utilize media to serve its foreign policy needs.

This dissertation also contributes to the authoritarian public opinion literature in Comparative Politics it draws on. The four plus one detailed case studies lends further support to the two-way relationship between the state and the public in authoritarian states: the public

⁶⁶⁰ For example, see Mearsheimer 2011 and 2013; Walt 2009, 2010 and 2013.

pressures and constrains the state, but the state can manipulate public opinion through media control to align with its policy. In other words, public opinion matters in authoritarian states, but its influence is not decisive; the state is not omnipotent but is capable of changing public opinion to meet its policy needs. Issues of foreign policy also offers a unique yet important testing field of these arguments having been made in the context of domestic politics. Foreign policy differs from domestic policy in that it is more likely to affect a small fraction of the population (especially territorial disputes). It may also have higher national stakes but lower stakes for the public, because it is less likely to have immediate impact on the everyday lives of the masses. Foreign policy issues may not threaten regime survival as severely and directly as some domestic issues may. These features enable a pacifying campaign more appealing, because it renders the “short attention span” of the public, makes “bluster” more acceptable to the public, and enables echoing and online venting less likely to induce collective actions, so less likely to backfire.

This dissertation also has important practical implications. As mentioned in the introduction chapter, aggressive rhetoric is commonly interpreted as aggressive foreign policy intent, by the masses, the media, the intelligence community, and even state leaders. Although the latter is more cautious in making such inference, it is necessary to make the pacifying campaign more explicit and better understood. With the rise of popular nationalism in many of these authoritarian states, the pacifying campaigns are used more commonly and warrants further studies. Distinguishing the two kinds of campaigns also helps policy makers in reading an autocrat’s foreign policy preferences. Better interpretation of state intentions could reduce miscalculations that are so prevalent in crises and conflict situations. Given the lack of transparency in authoritarian states, reading their intentions could be particularly challenging, thus adding to the danger of misperceptions and miscalculations in the conduct of foreign policy.

Last but not the least, this dissertation is deeply embedded in contemporary issues, such as the South China Sea maritime dispute, the rise of China, media manipulation and censorship by authoritarian regimes and authoritarian resilience. Despite arguments that territoriality is becoming less and less important due to the effects of globalization and trade, territorial disputes in recent years continue to wreak havoc in the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and Ukraine. This study contributes to our understanding of state behaviors in territorial disputes and could help to mitigate this most contentious type of interstate dispute. The studies of contemporary Chinese territorial disputes also speak to the policy debate on China's rise and regional tension in the Asia Pacific that has been pivotal to American foreign policy and national security. Studying how China has been constrained by territorial disputes and how China has used and manipulated these disputes for strategic considerations will sharpen our perspectives on Chinese intentions and approaches, which are much needed at historical moments of power transitions and fluctuations such as ours today.

III. Limitations of the Argument

No theory is perfect, and thus a precaution of its limitations is necessary. First, the misalignment theory cannot explain all the cases, not even all the cases in the nineteen Chinese sample, although a considerable number of them. What stood out in the medium-*n* congruence test was the significant number of cases (two out of three) in the hardline-hardline scenario it could not explain. This seems to confirm the intuition that the handline-hardline composition is the most archetypical scenario for an audience cost argument to work, because it is plausible that a state with a hardline policy intent is more likely to engage in a coercion and is more likely to use domestic public as a leverage in the coercion when existing public opinion is already hardline.

The hardline-hardline scenario is one of the “negative” scenarios in which the alignment incentive is absent. That is to say, the prediction of no propaganda campaign is made based on the absence of the alignment incentive. The two deviant cases in this quadrant of the two-by-two theoretical framework, therefore, suggest that when the alignment incentive is absent, there could be other incentives present, such as an audience cost incentive. This might mean that the state-public misalignment is likely a sufficient but not necessary condition for the adoption of a propaganda campaign. Put it differently, the mis(alignment) theory is only one of many causal pathways that could explain the presence/absence of propaganda campaigns.

Second, the focus of the dissertation is on domestic propaganda campaigns, most easily distinguished by the language the media is in (Chinese versus English), although the international propaganda campaigns certainly deserve a whole new project to look into. But because of the foreign policy context of these domestic campaigns, the international audience is an inescapable aspect of this study.

An international audience comes into the picture in three ways. First, a domestic campaign could have a spillover effect on a foreign audience if the domestic campaign is observed by foreign governments especially the foreign rival, or if the content of the domestic campaign is reported in the international media. Both are possible. These possibilities challenge the pacifying logic in that a foreign rival may interpret an aggressive but pacifying campaign as a hardline position by the government and react with its own hardline position. This dynamic can lead to a conflict that neither side wanted. A pacifying campaign could therefore be self-defeating for a goal of successfully implementing a moderate policy. Second, a state might expect and internalize this risk of inadvertent crisis escalation. The risk in turn might deter the state from pursuing a pacifying campaign in the first place.

To mitigate these threats to the internal validity of the pacifying logic, I argue that although such a risk truly exists, it is not entirely deterministic. This is due to the natural barrier between a domestic campaign and its international portrayal. Especially when there is a language barrier (Chinese versus English), the international media or the foreign rival does not always pick up a domestic campaign. If they did, the details of a pacifying campaign are hard to miss, such as the lack of a concrete threat of punishment amidst the harsh rhetoric, the positive tone that undergirds the voluminous coverage, the rational fact-based media reporting style, the refraining from inciting hatred by invoking the old scores, the avoiding intensifying anti-foreign sentiment and echoing such sentiments only in moderation and in foreign observers' assessments, etc. These distinct characteristics of a pacifying campaign may not catch the attention of a foreign public but are likely to be noticed and analyzed by the state leaders especially of the foreign rival. Even if only caught in a fleeting glimpse, these characteristics could signal an underlying moderate intent. These signals could at least caution the foreign rival from jumping to the conclusion of a hardline position by the government. Besides, a state has myriads of back channels to convey their real intentions to their foreign rival. Although some of these back channels are less credible than others, foreign states have become more sophisticated to look underneath the surface, especially the surface of a rhetoric campaign, to make independent judgements.

A third possibility for an international audience to become relevant is when a state not only considers the possible reaction of a foreign rival, but also aims at influencing the international public opinion. This would be an international propaganda campaign beyond the scope of the current study. This dissertation is hence limited when an international campaign concurs with a domestic one, which is the case in both pacifying campaigns being studied here.

In the Sino-Philippines arbitration case in 2016, besides the domestic pacifying campaign, Beijing also launched an aggressive international campaign to justify and defend its own position, to reject Manila's claims, and to delegitimize the Arbitral Tribunal and its rulings. In the Sino-Vietnamese oil rig crisis in 2014, besides the domestic pacifying campaign, Hanoi also launched an aggressive international campaign to rally international support for its position and to call for international pressure on Beijing to retreat from the area. These campaigns were carried out in English either in the English sections of their own media outlets or in the international media. The misalignment theory does not seek to explain the international campaigns and does not assess any possible interactive effects between the international and the domestic campaigns. These questions deserve further investigation.

A third limitation with the argument is that it does not consider the outcomes of the propaganda campaigns. Like any other state programs, these campaigns certainly run the risk of failure. Propaganda is an art about winning the hearts and minds, so it takes time to be effective. But sometimes the time window of a crisis does not allow enough time for a propaganda campaign to be successfully implemented. Sometimes an exogenous shock might disrupt a propaganda campaign and divert the public attention. Other times, a propaganda campaign aimed to mobilize or to pacify may elicit pushback and cause it to backfire. This latter point has been addressed partially as a threat to internal validity in the theory chapter, but as a theory about motivations, the misalignment theory does not concern much about the outcomes of these campaigns. As much as states learn from their past experiences and a possible feedback loop that affects a state's current policy preferences might exist, this limitation deserves further deliberation.

A fourth limitation is on the empirical test. One of the biggest challenges in testing the hypotheses is how to make objective, transparent, and replicable judgements on the state policy “intent” and the public opinion before the era of opinion surveys. I have sought to overcome this challenge by accessing internal documents that reflect the decision-making deliberations and by interviewing people in the “inner circles.” But political sensitivity puts constraints on the kind of documents and interviewees I could possibly access to. The archival research and the interviews took place in the first half of 2017. With President Xi Jinping’s sweeping anti-corruption campaign and the upcoming 19th Party Congress in October 2017, the tense political climate made many sources unavailable. I benefited especially from the personal network as a graduate from one of the top elite universities in China. Many alumni, who held various key positions in the foreign policy and media organs, helped immensely. But most of these elites could be considered as liberals in the Chinese political system and could therefore have biased views. The different perspectives of these documents and the hidden agendas held by the interviewees unknown to me are also something I could not overcome. As more documents become available in the future, these tests need to be reevaluated for accuracy.

The hardline/moderate division of a state’s policy intent, despite its clear definition, is merely a simplification of the reality. In reality, a state’s foreign policy might have the element of both or reflect a point on a spectrum rather than one of two categories. The misalignment theory is also not a dynamic theory adept at coping with varied state policy intent over time. Although the theory has successfully explained the Sino-Soviet border conflict in 1969 and the Diaoyu/Senkaku nationalization crisis in 2012, in which Beijing reversed its previous policy intent due to the rise of new situations (the Soviet’s threat of a nuclear war or Japan’s

nationalization of the disputed islands), the theory is not designed to cope with changes beyond these simple and clear-cut reversals.

IV. Extending the Argument and Future Research

The argument could possibly be extended to three areas. First, extension to other authoritarian states need to be further tested. The oil rig crisis from the Vietnamese perspective in Chapter Seven extends the pacifying argument to Vietnam, a country with a propaganda system very similar to that of China's. But extending to other authoritarian states with varied degrees of media control and the application of the other parts of the misalignment theory to these other countries need to be further tested. In Chapter Three, I have shown that the Chinese propaganda system is of no difference in substance but only varies in degree. The Chinese internet censorship, for example, is being emulated by other authoritarian (and sometimes non-authoritarian) states. This should give us confidence in the extension of the argument to other authoritarian states.

As pointed out in the introduction chapter, the wide variation in state media behaviors abound in territorial disputes that these authoritarian states frequently engage in. For example, when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014, the state-controlled media first shied away from reporting the issue. "Treading carefully, many mainstream Russian newspapers are giving prominence to stories other than Ukraine, including President Vladimir Putin attending the opening ceremony of a new football stadium in Moscow."⁶⁶¹ But once the invasion was out in the open, Putin launched an aggressive propaganda campaign painting the violent separatists as "supporters of federalization" and justifying the incursion as "rescuing Russians and Russian-speakers from the

⁶⁶¹ "Russian media report 'invasion of Ukraine,'" *BBC News*, August 28, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28965597>, accessed May 21, 2018.

depredations of Fascists.”⁶⁶² On the territorial dispute between Ethiopia and Eritrea which led to a nasty two-year war, Eritrea played ballads on state television about Badme, a disputed piece of land with no strategic importance or valuable resources.⁶⁶³ In contrast, alleged border clashes between Saudi Arabia and Yemen in the 1980s were never confirmed by the Saudi authorities and were kept from the public sight.⁶⁶⁴ Applying the misalignment theory to these interesting cases would help us better understand the politics of these authoritarian states.

Second, a natural area to extend the argument is non-territorial foreign policy issues. A question that came up often in the case selection process of the study is the scope of territorial disputes. The study is confined within territorial disputes because territorial disputes are believed to be the most salient cases to study authoritarian public opinion control. When studying a very little explored subject like this, the best strategy is to examine the cases in which patterns are the most salient so are easily detectable. As argued in the introduction chapter, the control and manipulation of publicity is particularly salient in territorial disputes. Territorial disputes could therefore provide the best environment for theory development.

Because of the territorial scope, I debated about whether to include the 2005 Sino-Japan crisis, in which the territorial dispute is only a small part of the dispute. To a lesser extent, the inclusion of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border war might also face a similar challenge that the territorial dispute is only partly the cause for the war. Beyond these cases that ended up being included, there are other cases that were excluded because of their non-territorial nature, such as the three crises on the Taiwan issue and recent China-U.S. close encounters in the South China

⁶⁶² “In Ukraine, Russia Plays a Weighted Word Game,” *New York Times*, April 17, 2014, A9; Dougherty 2014.

⁶⁶³ “Badme Journal; Torn Town Changes Countries, but Not Conviction,” *New York Times*, April 16, 2002, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/04/16/world/badme-journal-torn-town-changes-countries-but-not-conviction.html>, accessed May 21, 2018.

⁶⁶⁴ Allcock et al 1992, 398.

Sea arising from Chinese building of artificial islands and the U.S. freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea. The Taiwan issue is essentially a dispute about regime, not about the territory per se. The Sino-American offshore encounters are also excluded because there is no territorial dispute between the two countries. But seen from these borderline cases that could possibly have been part of the study, a natural next step seems to be extending the argument to these cases. Other non-territorial cases also deserve investigation, such as the major contemporary Sino-American diplomatic crises including the 1999 Belgrade Embassy bombing, the 2003 EP3 incident, and the 2009 Impeccable incident. I intend to explore these cases as part of the dissertation book project.

Third, another interesting area to extend the argument to is democracies. The selection of the authoritarian state scope followed the same logic above of having cases with salient media control. But this is not to say that there is no media control in democracies – the means and ways might be more subtle. The threat inflation literature provides strong evidence that this is often the case. But besides inflating a threat and mobilizing the public for an aggressive foreign policy such as preventive wars, can a democracy pacify the public like autocracies do? Are there existing cases that democracies have successfully quelled a nationalist public for a moderate foreign policy purpose? If there are, how did the democracies achieve that? These are some riveting questions for future investigation.

Finally, as indicated earlier, there are many other different types of propaganda than the two studied in this dissertation. By focusing on the single dimension of volume and salience of coverage, this research is limited in detailing out the variety of propaganda states might adopt but serves as a necessary first step.

Held together, these projects should further advance our knowledge in understanding the triangular relationship between the public, the media, and the state in the context of foreign policy and international relations.

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APPENDIX I

Nineteen Chinese Diplomatic Crises on Territorial Disputes: Coding Justifications of the Independent Variables and Explanations of the Deviant Cases¹

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

(Deviant cases are in *italic*; ambiguous cases are marked with asterisks *; cases for process tracing are in bold.)

		State Policy Intent	
		Hardline	Moderate
Existing Public Opinion	Moderate /Weak	Sino-Indian Border 1962 Sino-Soviet Border 1969 Sino-Vietnamese Paracels 1974 Sino-Vietnamese Border 1979-1991 <i>Sino-Vietnamese Spratlys 1988</i>	<i>Sino-Indian Border 1959, 1967,</i> <i>1986, 2013 and 2014</i> Sino-Japanese Diaoyu/Senkaku 1978 Sino-Vietnamese Oil Rig Crisis 2014
	Hardline	<i>Sino-Japanese Diaoyu/Senkaku 2010*</i> Sino-Vietnamese Cable-Cuttings 2011 <i>Sino-Philippines Scarborough Shoal 2012*</i>	Sino-Japanese Various Dispute 2005 Sino-Japanese Diaoyu/Senkaku 2012 Sino-Philippines Arbitration 2016 Sino-Indian Border 2017

1. 1959 Sino-Indian Border Clashes at Longju and Kongka Pass

See Chapter 4.

2. 1962 Sino-Indian Border War

In response to the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's "Forward Policy," the People's Liberation Army (PLA) launched a major strike at the Eastern and the Western sections of the Sino-Indian border on October 20, 1962. One month later, after a landslide victory, China declared a ceasefire and withdrew from the Eastern section.

Public Opinion: Moderate/Weak

Public knowledge and public emotion about the border dispute remained limited despite the propaganda campaign in 1959. This was due to the restrained nature of the 1959 campaign and the fact that these border areas being sparsely populated and remotely located.

State Policy Intent: Hardline

Despite the fact that China's attack was provoked, and that the Chinese military withdrew to the Line of Actual Control (LAC) shortly after its victory, the nature of the attack was preemptive and the scale of the attack unprecedented. The hardening of China's policy did, however, took a

¹ These justifications are based on the coding rules and observables listed in Table 3.3. In cases where original sources are limited, I base my judgement on logical deductions and consultations with area specialists.

long process, including several failed diplomatic attempts and numerous strong verbal warnings.²

Predicted Outcome: Propaganda Campaign to Mobilize

Actual Outcome: Propaganda Campaign to Mobilize

3. 1967 Sino-Indian Border Clashes at Nathu La and Cho La

In September and October 1967, the Sino-Indian border broke out into a series of military clashes alongside the border of Sikkim, including the Nathu La clash on September 11-14 and the Cho La clash on October 1.

Public Opinion: Moderate/Weak

Located in a remote frontier area, the Sino-Indian border was fought and easily forgotten, at least by the Chinese ordinary people. The war made the dispute widely known, but few people cared about the dispute strongly. Besides, dispute on the central section of the Sino-Indian border in Sikkim specific to this crisis was barely known. On top of these factors, 1967 marked a year when the Chinese people were preoccupied by the Cultural Revolution. As Chinese domestic politics spun out of control over the summer of 1967, a public preoccupied with domestic politics barely paid any attention to the border dispute.

State Policy Intent: Moderate

These incidents were low-level militarized encounters that were unlikely authorized by the Chinese Central Military Commission (CMC).³ Fravel infers this observation from General Wang Chenghan's memoir, a participant in the exchange of fire at Nathu La in 1967.⁴ Wang states that a frontline headquarter was not established until after September 11. According to Fravel, "For the PLA, the establishment of a frontline headquarter ... usually precedes the initiation of any authorized operation."⁵ Besides, after these incidents, Zhou Enlai issued instructions to the Chinese forces to return fire only fired upon. The lack of top authorization of the military engagement and the defensive nature of the instruction after the incidents indicate a moderate state policy intent.

Predicted Outcome: No Propaganda Campaign

Actual Outcome: No Propaganda Campaign

4. 1969 Sino-Soviet Border Conflict

The Sino-Soviet split that emerged in the late 1950s culminated in an intense border conflict in 1969 and brought the two countries to the edge of a nuclear war.

² For detailed account of the hardening process of China's policy, see Maxwell 1970; Garver 2006, 107-11.

³ Fravel 2008, 199.

⁴ Wang 2004, 482.

⁵ Fravel 2008, 199.

Public Opinion: Moderate/Weak

Before the conflict broke in March 1979, despite all the publicity the deepening Sino-Soviet split had received, the Chinese public was not well aware of the border dispute. Between October 1964 and February 1969, border incidents totaled 4,180,⁶ but there were hardly any media exposure. Before March 1969, *People's Daily* coverage of the border dispute was close to none. With official media dominating information flow at the time, the Chinese people had little other source to learn about the dispute, let alone supporting the use of force against a much stronger former ally.

State Policy Intent: Initially Hardline, But Moderate Later

In response to the Soviet Union's territorial transgressions, China initially adopted a hardline policy – an escalated response of a planned ambush on March 2, 1979. But when Soviet's reaction exceeded the Chinese leaders' expectations and when the risk of a Soviet nuclear strike became real and imminent, the Chinese leaders grabbed the opportunity to lower the tension. The timing of the policy change and the timing of the propaganda campaign confirms the logic of the theory. It is almost a consensus among historians that “it was the Chinese who initiated the March 1969 border conflict...”⁷ As early as January 1968 when the Qiliqin incident occurred, the CPC Central Military Commission (CMC) had considered launching military counterattacks against the Soviets.⁸ Archives show that the March 2 incident was a Chinese ambush in retaliation to earlier Soviet transgressions to the Zhenbao Island; and the March 15 incident was a prepared Chinese counterattack when the Soviet soldiers retaliated. China's cutting off direct communication between the top leaders of the two countries lends further credence to the initial hardline policy China pursued.⁹ As a result, China launched an aggressive propaganda campaign in March. But it was never their intention to escalate the conflict to a total war.¹⁰ That was why the propaganda campaign came to a sudden stop in September of 1969 after the Soviet leaders threatened a nuclear strike and the Chinese leaders evacuated out of Beijing.

Predicted Outcome: Propaganda Campaign to Mobilize

Actual Outcome: Propaganda Campaign to Mobilize

5. 1974 Sino-Vietnamese Clash in the Paracels

On January 19, 1974, the Chinese and the South Vietnamese navies fought a brief battle near the disputed Parcel Islands. The Chinese won and have kept control of the Islands till today.

Public Opinion: Moderate/Weak

The Chinese public had little knowledge of the offshore dispute in the Paracels before the clash, so public opinion was weak.

⁶ Yang Guihua, “1969 nian Zhenbaodao Ziwei Fanjizhan (Zhenbao Island Self-Defense Counterattack in 1969),” *people.com.cn*, <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/junshi/192/8559/8564/20020704/768476.html>, accessed June 1, 2018.

⁷ Yang 2000, 21.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 22; Interview 40, June 8, 2017, Beijing.

State Policy Intent: Hardline

China had strong incentives to pursue a hardline policy. January 1974 was a time when the U.S. had already withdrawn from Vietnam, and North Vietnam had not won the war yet. So on one hand, a battle like this would have little chance of escalation in the sense of causing a U.S. intervention. On the other, North Vietnam could not have publicly objected to it, since the Chinese and the Vietnamese were still fighting the same enemy.

Despite the short duration of the battle, the decision was made directly from China's top leaders. The directive was originally defensive in nature – “not to fire the first shot; fight back when attacked.”¹¹ But as the battle developed, China quickly expanded its victory to seize three islands, and the initial defensive posture proved to be nothing but a tactic to win the moral high ground. After the battle, China drew in its missile-armed frigates in preparation for the possible retaliation of the Saigon regime. After the dust had settled, the Chinese leaders took steps to consolidate its presence on the Paracels, which all corroborate a hardline policy China had intended.¹²

Predicted Outcome: Propaganda Campaign to Mobilize

Actual Outcome: Propaganda Campaign to Mobilize

6. 1978 Sino-Japanese Fishing Boat Incident near Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands

On April 12, 1978, just months before the conclusion of a monumental peace treaty between China and Japan, over 80 Chinese fishing boats appeared in the waters around the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and persisted for about a week.¹³

Public Opinion: Moderate/Weak

There is no direct data on the Chinese public opinion on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute prior to the 1978 crisis, but three things led to the conclusion that the existing public opinion was moderate/weak. First, although the issue had already become publicized, Beijing had stayed silent on the dispute for six years since the two countries normalized relationship in 1972.¹⁴ *People's Daily* had not mentioned the word “Diaoyudao” (Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands) since July 1972. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that the public emotion on the issue had calmed. Second, seen from today's Sino-Japanese relations, two issues have plagued the relationship and poisoned the popular feelings towards each other: the different interpretation of World War II history and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands territorial dispute. Yet the history issue did not arise until 1982.¹⁵ Lastly, like the timing of the Sino-Vietnamese Border War, China was at a critical juncture when the ten years' turmoil of the Cultural Revolution was still fresh in people's memory and when the country was headed towards fast economic growth under the reform and

¹¹ Li 2013, 23. Li was a cryptographer working in the intelligence section of the South Sea Fleet headquarters.

¹² Liu 2007, 338-43. Liu was PLA Navy's deputy chief of staff, appointed to take charge of garrisoning the Paracels after the 1974 battle.

¹³ For details of the incident, see Tretiak1978.

¹⁴ The dispute received much media exposure when the U.S. turned over the administrative rights of the Islands to Japan in May 1972.

¹⁵ He 2006.

open-up policy. It was a time when people would be particularly resistant against any hardline policy that might disrupt the reform.

State Policy Intent: Moderate

Due to a lack of information, historians do not agree on why the incident happened. But inferring from China's subsequent behaviors, it is clear that China did not intend for the incident to interfere with the signing of the peace treaty. On the territorial dispute, China insisted on a "shelving" policy, to delay settlement and to even avoid discussion of it. Three days after the incident, Vice Premier Geng Biao tried to calm the Japanese protests by claiming the incident was "neither intentional nor deliberate." He added that "we should not argue the island problem and we should resolve that problem in the future."¹⁶ The crisis was successfully sidestepped when Japanese Ambassador Sato Shoji and Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Han Nianlong agreed not to discuss the issue again before concluding the peace treaty.¹⁷

Predicted Outcome: No Propaganda Campaign

Actual Outcome: No Propaganda Campaign

7. 1979 Sino-Vietnamese Border

See Chapter 5.

8. 1986 Sino-Indian Border Standoff at Sumdorong Chu

After remaining peaceful for almost twenty years, the Sino-Indian border erupted again in 1986. It started from Indian discovery of Chinese soldiers' occupying a seasonal Indian patrol point in the Sumdorong Chu valley. Tensions escalated when both sides deployed large number of troops and conducted military exercises around the area.

Public Opinion: Moderate/Weak

Eight years into Reform and Open, the Chinese public cared more about their economic well-being than a remote border such as the Sino-Indian border. Although most people knew about the dispute from the 1962 border war, very few cared strongly about it to support a hardline policy.

State Policy Intent: Moderate

There are four reasons why China's policy intention in 1986-87 should be interpreted as moderate.

First, although large-scale forces were mobilized – "By May [1987], troop levels around Sumdorong Chu exceeded those at the start of the 1962 war, reaching as high as 50,000," the Chinese deployment of forces remained proportional to that of India.¹⁸ China's deployment of troops was also "limited to one small area" and "under the pretext of military exercises."¹⁹ This

¹⁶ Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Daily Report: China*, April 17, 1978, A6-8.

¹⁷ Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Daily Report: PRC*, May 11, 1978, A17-18.

¹⁸ Fravel 2008, 200-201.

¹⁹ Ibid.

restraint signals China's intention to keep the situation under control and desire to leave leeway to stand down if such conditions arose.

Second, the PLA's occupation of an Indian patrol point in Sumdorong Chu in May 1986 is considered by many to be the initial provocation that had touched off the crisis. But from China's perspective, the establishment of the Indian patrol point, which China occupied only seasonally, was in itself an earlier breach of the status quo by the Indian soldiers.²⁰ The patrol post established by the Indian soldiers in 1984 is located in the neutral zone between the McMahon Line and high ridge line, which had been unoccupied by either side. By building the post there, it was the Indian side who first shattered the long-held status quo since 1967.

Third, western media claimed the strong state rhetoric from Beijing resembled much that of the 1962 war. For example, in October 1986, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping warned India, via the U.S. Defense Secretary, that China would have to "teach India a lesson."²¹ But it should be the policy China actually pursued that counts. When Indian Prime Minister N.D. Tiwari visited Beijing in May 1987 and brought with him a message from Indian leaders that they had no intention to "aggravate the situation," Beijing immediately agreed to withdraw troops and resume the border talks.

Last but not the least, China was at the time still fighting a war with Vietnam (1979-1990). The Chinese army would be spread too thin if fighting two wars at the same time. So from a strategic stand point, it should not have preferred a hardline policy with India.

Predicted Outcome: No Propaganda Campaign

Actual Outcome: No Propaganda Campaign

9. 1988 Sino-Vietnamese Clash in the Spratlys

See Chapter 4.

10. 2005 Japanese History Textbook, Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands Dispute, and Japan's Bid for the U.N. Security Council

In April 2005, nationwide anti-Japanese protests broke out in China and lasted for over three weeks, some of which even turned violent. These protests were spurred by a series of issues ranging from Japan's bid for the United Nations Security Council permanent membership, its glossing over World War II atrocities in history textbooks, and the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands territorial dispute.

Public Opinion: Hardline

²⁰ Bhattacharjea 1988, 152, 156.

²¹ "The Story of the Sumdorong Chu Standoff – When India Avoided War with China Through Sheer Diplomacy," *India Times*, August 20, 2016, <http://www.indiatimes.com/news/the-story-of-the-sumdorong-chu-standoff-when-india-avoided-war-with-china-through-sheer-diplomacy-260266.html>, accessed June 1, 2018.

Existing public opinion on this case was hardline. As previously mentioned, the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute had already become publicized even before China and Japan normalized relationship in 1972. Although the Chinese state was able to keep public emotion at bay for most of the 1970s, the rise of the history issue from 1982 onward rekindled the public sentiment. The strong public emotion was demonstrated in the unprecedented scale of the protests. The online signature campaign amassed 22 million signatures against Japan's U.N. bid.²² The protest on April 16 outside the Japanese Consulate in Shanghai alone was participated by more than 10,000 protestors.²³ Studies of the protests show that the public emotion was genuine, and the protests were not engineered by the government.²⁴

State Policy Intent: Moderate

In February 2005, Japan announced it had placed a Japanese right-wingers' lighthouse on the Islands under the state control. In April 2005, Tokyo officially allowed Japanese companies to begin drilling oil and gas in the disputed waters near the Islands. Despite these provocations, the Chinese government only issued verbal protests and did not respond by any substantive punishment.

Predicted Outcome: Propaganda Campaign to Pacify

Actual Outcome: Propaganda Campaign to Pacify

11. 2010 Sino-Japanese Boat Incident Near Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands

See Chapter 4.

12. 2011 Sino-Vietnamese Cable-Cutting Incidents

See Chapter 7.

13. 2012 Sino-Philippines Scarborough Shoal Standoff

See Chapter 4.

14. 2012 Japanese Nationalization of Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands

The year of 2012 marks the fortieth anniversary of the normalization of the China-Japan relationship and perhaps the lowest point of the relationship in history since the normalization. With the intention to prevent the right-wing Tokyo major Shintaro Ishihara to purchase the disputed Islands and to use them for further provocations, the Japanese government nationalized

²² "22 Million Chinese Seek to Block Japan's Bid to Join U.N. Council," *New York Times*, March 31, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/31/international/asia/22-million-chinese-seek-to-block-japans-bid-to-join-un.html?mcubz=0>, accessed June 1, 2018.

²³ "New Anti-Japanese Protests Erupt in China," *Washington Post*, April 16, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A58567-2005Apr16.html>, accessed June 1, 2018.

²⁴ See, for example, Weiss 2014; Tam 2007.

the islands on September 11, 2012, defying repeated Chinese warnings. The Japanese action drove the largest anti-Japanese protests in China and a serious face-off between the two countries.

Public Opinion: Hardline

See justification in case #11.

State Policy Intent: Moderate First, Hardline Later

The Sino-Japanese crisis in 2012 presents a complex situation where the state policy intent was moderate going into the crisis, but it turned into an escalated response later. Yet the political timing of the crisis – occurring two months before the 18th Party Congress, which officially announced the next new Chinese leadership – belied the largely moderate intentions of the Chinese state, thus calling for a propaganda campaign to bridge the gap between a militant public and a moderate state. The escalations later on might be due to the dramatic fashion the Chinese deterrence had failed – Japan went ahead with the purchase just one day after the Chinese president Hu Jintao issued warning in a high profile.

First, the Chinese government had moderate intentions before and at the beginning of the crisis. With the once-in-a-decade leadership transition on the horizon, the least China desired would be a severe diplomatic crisis spurring the largest protests risking social stability two months before the leadership reshuffle. Setting the stage for the fortieth anniversary, a flurry of cooperative exchanges took place in 2011.²⁵ Besides, China had moderate responses in the beginning when it first learned about Japan's plan to purchase the Islands up until Japan's official announcement of the deal, so moderate that Japan mistook it as China's willingness to accept it. Despite repeated strong representations, Chinese officials also continued to emphasize the "larger interest" of the bilateral relationship.²⁶

Chinese behavior, however, took a turn on September 11 when Japanese Prime Minister Noda went ahead with the deal. Besides the unprecedentedly tough rhetoric and the cancellation of fortieth-anniversary celebrations and high-level exchanges, the most substantive countermeasures China undertook was declaring baselines around the Islands, and increasing maritime patrols to essentially undermine Japan's de facto control over the Islands. At the same

²⁵ See, for example, "Japanese PM Noda Vows Not to Visit Yasukuni Shrine during Tenure," *Xinhua News*, September 2, 2011, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2011-09/02/content_13609646.htm; PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Hu Jintao Meets with Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda," November 11, 2011, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/hjtAPEC_665728/t877239.shtml; "Noda Calls for Early Resumption of Gas Treaty Talks with China," *Japan Times*, November 14, 2011, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2011/11/14/national/noda-calls-for-early-resumption-of-gas-treaty-talks-with-china/#.WbqeK8iGNPZ>; "Japan PM Visit, Military Exchanges Show Warming Ties," *China Daily*, December 15, 2011, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2011-12/15/content_14268242.htm; Li Xiaokun and Zhang Yunbi, "China, Japan Keen to Improve Ties," *China Daily*, December 27, 2011, http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2011-12/27/content_14331920.htm, accessed June 1, 2018.

²⁶ Tang Jiakuan, "Uphold Larger Interest and Manage Crisis for Sound and Steady Development of China-Japan Relations," Speech at the International Seminar on the 40th Anniversary of Normalization of China-Japan Relations Organized by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), August 29, 2012, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t980262.shtml, accessed June 1, 2018.

time, the PLA Navy and Air Force conducted joint drills near the disputed area.²⁷ Notably, China refrained from resorting to economic measures like it did with rare earth mineral exports in 2010, though tourism was inadvertently dampened. While the baseline move and the display of force could be considered proportionate responses to Japan's nationalization and to the earlier U.S.-Japan joint exercises in the area, the increased maritime patrols that challenged Japan's de facto control and that persisted beyond the duration of the crisis was an escalated action.

However, senior analysts argue that the hardline moves were more of a "show" than of substance.²⁸ The deterrence failed in such a dramatic fashion – Japan went ahead with the purchase just one day after President Hu's highly-publicized warning, that Beijing was forced to show some muscle to save face. The timing of Chinese leadership change also required China not to show any sign of weakness.

Predicted Outcome: Propaganda Campaign to Pacify

Actual Outcome: Propaganda Campaign to Pacify

15. 2013 Sino-Indian Border Standoff at Ladakh

On April 15, 2013, Chinese soldiers pitched tents in Ladakh near the LAC triggering a three-week standoff between the Indian and the Chinese troops.

Public Opinion: Moderate/Weak

Public opinion on the border dispute remained weak – many people knew about it from the 1962 war but very few felt strongly. After the 1986 incident, the two sides signed a series of crisis management and confidence building agreements. These further reduced the chance of a hostile confrontation. When the crisis occurred, the dispute had stayed dormant for twenty-seven years.

State Policy Intent: Moderate

China preferred a peaceful resolution. Although some quote China's tent pitching in the disputed area as provocative, in the Chinese perspective however, it was reacting to India's increasing infrastructure buildup near the border.²⁹ The fact that the two armies resorted to flag meetings to negotiate a resolution proved both side's peaceful intention.

Some also speculate that the timing of the incident just ahead of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to India and Indian Foreign Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid's visit to Beijing was intentional on the Chinese side. There is no evidence supporting this speculation, but if it were

²⁷ "China and Japan face off: Tiny islands, big dispute," *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 2, 2012, <https://m.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2012/1002/China-and-Japan-face-off-Tiny-islands-big-dispute>, accessed June 1, 2018.

²⁸ Interview 6, May 22, 2017, Washington DC; Interview 19, May 29, 2017, Beijing.

²⁹ Since the LAC has never been clearly demarcated, China and India have different perceptions of where the Line actually is. The Chinese tents were pitched in-between the Chinese perceived LAC and the Indian perceived LAC. "China Sore with India Bid to Build Infrastructure along LAC," *The Economic Times*, April 25, 2013, <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics/and/nation/China-sore-with-Indian-bid-to-build-infrastructure-along-LAC/articleshow/19719917.cms>, accessed June 1, 2018.

true, the timing would make it convenient for leaders to take control if the situation on the ground escalated inadvertently.

Predicted Outcome: No Propaganda Campaign

Actual Outcome: No Propaganda Campaign

16. 2014 Sino-Vietnamese Oil Rig Standoff

See Chapter 7.

17. 2014 Sino-Indian Border Standoff at Ladakh

In September 2014, a similar standoff between Chinese and Indian soldiers took place again in Ladakh.³⁰ The chain of events that escalated to the standoff began with the Indian construction of an irrigation canal near the LAC, which was protested by the Chinese and was subsequently halted. The tension continued as Indian troops built an observation hut along the LAC, which was responded by Chinese troops crossing into the area with cranes and bulldozers for road building. The standoff between hundreds of Chinese and Indian soldiers caused India's army chief to cancel a foreign trip to monitor the situation and overshadowed the Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to New Delhi.³¹

Public Opinion: Moderate/Weak

Public opinion on the border dispute remained weak. Despite the militarization of the dispute in the previous year, the dispute only maintained limited attention within a small circle of experts and keen observers. Baidu Search Index shows mild surges to as high as the 600s that were followed by a few news reports only near the end of the crisis.

State Policy Intent: Moderate

China's public response to the standoff was remarkably measured. China's Ministry of Defense spokesperson Geng Yansheng said "The Sino-Indian border has not been fully demarcated. The rise of individual circumstances is thus unavoidable, but will not affect the overall friendly cooperation between the two countries."³² The fact that the confrontations at the border impaired the effectiveness of Xi's visit and left him embarrassed revealed that it should not be his intention to escalate the tensions in the first place.

Predicted Outcome: No Propaganda Campaign

³⁰ A similar flareup occurred at Ladakh in 2015. Since it followed the same pattern and is much smaller in scale, I am not including it here in the congruence test.

³¹ "India: Standoff with China Eases," *New York Times*, September 27, 2014, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/27/world/asia/india-china-ladakh-dispute.html>; "Insight - With canal and hut, India stands up to China on disputed frontier," *Reuters*, September 24, 2014, <https://in.reuters.com/article/india-china-modi-chumar-army-ladakh/insight-with-canal-and-hut-india-stands-up-to-china-on-disputed-frontier-idINKCN0HJ2FU20140924>, accessed June 1, 2018.

³² PRC Ministry of Defense, "Zhongyin Shuangfang Youxiao Guankong Bianjing Diqu Jushi (Effective Control of the Sino-Indian Border)," September 25, 2014, http://news.mod.gov.cn/headlines/2014-09/25/content_4539874.htm, accessed June 1, 2018.

Actual Outcome: No Propaganda Campaign

18. 2016 International Tribunal Ruling of Sino-Philippines Arbitration

See Chapter 6.

19. 2017 Sino-Indian Border Standoff near Doklam

On June 16, 2017, Chinese military road crews began to extend a road in Doklam, an area near the China-India-Bhutan trijunction and disputed between China and Bhutan. Two days later, Indian troops entered the area and physically impeded the construction. This confrontation set off a two-month standoff between the two armies, separated only by a few hundred feet. On August 28, the two troops disengaged, and China suspended the construction.

Public Opinion: Hardline

By 2017, the Sino-Indian border issue had been repeatedly militarized. A few days after the Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed the issue, it caught the attention of the public on the internet. An online public opinion study reports that by July 1, the online discussion about the dispute had reached the “red” level of warning, the highest level in their routine monitoring of online activities.³³ A search of the term “Sino-India” on Baidu Index confirms this trend.

The timing of the propaganda campaign also confirms that the surge in public attention is not endogenous to the state propaganda, but genuine and spontaneous. Before the surge of public opinion near the end of June, there was no noticeable propaganda efforts by the state media. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a short blurb on its website confirming the confrontation.³⁴ *People’s Daily* reprinted the blurb the next day, in a small corner on page 21. And that was it; CCTV news did not mention it. But the public immediately picked up on the news and public emotion surged. In fact, official coverage did not pick up until early July, days *after* the hardline public opinion has manifested itself online. Official media reports did not peak until after August 2 when the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a document clarifying China’s position.³⁵ Within twenty-four hours, the *People’s Daily*, *Xinhua News*, *Guangming Daily*, *PLA Daily*, and *Jiefang Daily* all reprinted the document in the most visible sections if not the front pages, and several published strongly-worded editorials.³⁶ Interviews with Chinese journalists confirm that

³³ Qingbo Yuqing (Qingbo Public Opinion), “The Sino-Indian Standoff for Nearly 30 Days – A Most Comprehensive Public Opinion Analysis,” July 7, 2017, <http://home.gsdata.cn/news-report/articles/1881.html>.

³⁴ PRC MoFA, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang’s Remarks on Indian Border Troops Overstepping China-India Boundary at Sikkim Section,” June 26 2017, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1473280.shtml, accessed June 1, 2018.

³⁵ PRC MoFA, “The Facts and China’s Position Concerning the Indian Border Troops’ Crossing of the China-India Boundary in the Sikkim Sector into the Chinese Territory,” August 2 2017, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-08/02/c_136494625.htm, accessed June 1, 2018.

³⁶ For the editorials, see Zhong Sheng, “Jielu Yinjun Feifa Yuejie Zhenxiang (Exposing the Truth of the Illegal Border Transgression by the Indian Army),” *People’s Daily*, August 4, 2017, 3; Wu Liming, “Gei Yindu de Sandian ‘Zhonggao’ (Three Pieces of Advice to India),” *Xinhua News*, http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2017-08/03/c_1121427634.htm, accessed June 1, 2018; Jun Sheng, “Zhongguo Lingtu Zhuquan Jueburong Qinfan (China’s Territorial Sovereignty Inviolable),” *PLA Daily*, August 3, 2017, 4; “Yin Ying Liji Wutiaojian Chehui

the Indian reporting of the issue had already gained traction online in China before the Chinese media reported on it.³⁷

State Policy Intent: Moderate

Even though the crisis first started on June 18, the Chinese side did not publicize it until June 26 when the PRC MoFA and the Ministry of Defense confirmed the issue and voiced protests. Besides, the timing of this occurring right before important political events dictated the Chinese interest in not letting this to go out of hand. The BRICS summit was about to take place early September and India was a participant. The 19th Party Congress, which announced the comes and goes of the next Chinese leadership, was also scheduled in the fall. As a result, China suspended its road construction in the disputed area which had provoked the Indian intervention in the first place.

Predicted Outcome: Propaganda Campaign to Pacify

Actual Outcome: Propaganda Campaign to Pacify

Yuejie Budui (India Should Withdraw Its Transgressive Troops Immediately and Unconditionally),” *Jiefang Daily*, August 3, 2017, 3.

³⁷ Interview 44 and 45, January 18, 2018, Beijing.

APPENDIX II

Interview Questions

Note: These questions are intended for semi-structured interviews, so they are intended to be open questions that serve as prompts for me to engage the interviewees in in-depth discussions that aim at the recollection of their experiences, as accurate as possible. Some questions are meant to be repetitive to ensure the validity of the answers.

Standard Interview Procedure:

- At the beginning of each interview, I will read to the interviewee the consent script for the IRB.
- With their consent, I then ask the set of questions below.
- At the end of each interview, I will ask the interviewee 1) the extent of clarity to which I can reference him/her and 2) whether he/she would like to see the transcript before I use it. I will also ask the interviewee 3) whether he/she knows anyone who might be useful for me to interview and whether he/she could inform the other person about my research and see if the other person is interested to be contacted. I then 4) thank the interviewee and 5) ask him/her whether it is okay for me to contact him/her for further clarifications or follow-up questions if any.

Interview Questions:

I. To government officials at or previously at various state propaganda branches:

1. Name:
2. [Former] Affiliation:
3. What's your role at your organization? What are your responsibilities?
4. How do the various state propaganda branches work together on a foreign issue? What is the workflow like? Who responds to who?
5. On issues of international disputes, territorial disputes in particular, what are the general guidelines on what to report, what not to report, and how to report them? Who decides on these guidelines? How do you understand and execute them? Could you explicate your answers using an example?
6. The state sometimes launches a propaganda campaign on a certain territorial dispute (a period of time with concentrated and deliberate efforts to publicize a dispute). Were you involved with any of them? Could you talk about your experience in managing propaganda on these disputes?
- 7) In particular, were you managing propaganda on the following cases?
 - 1) Sino-Vietnamese border war in 1979-1991;
 - 2) Sino-Vietnamese cable-cutting incidents in 2011;
 - 3) Sino-Vietnamese oil rig crisis 2014; or
 - 4) Sino-Philippines arbitration in 2016.

8. Now let's talk about the case(s) you worked on one by one. On case #,

1) How did you get involved in managing propaganda on the case?

2) *Before* the propaganda campaign, what was happening on it? What were the Chinese and the Vietnamese (or the Philippines) government doing? Was the bilateral relationship already problematic?

3) *Before* the propaganda campaign, did you feel the public care about the dispute? How did you get such an impression that they cared or did not care? Did the public or average people you know favor a hardline or a moderate position on the issue?

4) *Before* the propaganda campaign, what was the Chinese government's intended policy on the issue? Was the government ready to use force, make necessary compromises to maintain peace, or keep the status quo?

5) Was the decision to use force already made before or after the decision to launch a propaganda campaign was made? In other words, was the propaganda campaign serving the purpose, at least partially, of war preparation?

6) *Before* the propaganda campaign, were there already news reports on the case? If yes, by which media outlet?

7) Was the government satisfied with the scale and the content of publicity the issue had received prior to the propaganda campaign? If not, what were they trying to change?

8) Did you receive or make the decision to increase media coverage of the dispute? How was the decision made? What were the motivations for such a propaganda campaign? What goals were the government trying to achieve through that propaganda campaign? Was there any concerns in launching such a campaign?

9) How did you decide on the timing of launching a propaganda campaign? In other words, why was the campaign initiated when it was (instead of earlier or later)?

10) If there was no propaganda campaign on the dispute, why did your organization refrain from launching one? Did the government have to censor content from commercial media or the Internet (if applicable)?

11) Who was the main target of the propaganda campaign?

12) If the main target of the propaganda campaign was the domestic public, was the propaganda campaign used to divert the public attention away from a domestic issue?

13) How did you implement such a campaign? What was your role in it? Were there any difficulties in implementing such a campaign?

14) When did the campaign start and end?

15) Were the original goals achieved?

16) Did the government use the high publicity achieved through the campaign to coerce the target country? For example, to issue a public threat and say “our hands are tied by our domestic public”?

17) As events on the issue developed, were there any changes to the original decision on the propaganda campaign? Why were the changes necessary if any?

II. To editors/journalists at or previously at state media outlets responsible for international news:

1. Name:

2. [Former] Affiliation:

3. What’s your role at your organization [media outlet]? What is your daily work schedule like?

4. How decisions are made at your organization in regard to what issues/topics to cover and what not to cover?

5. On issues of territorial disputes, what are the general guidelines you receive/exercise on what to report, what not to report, and how to report them? Who decides on these guidelines? How do you understand and execute them? Could you explicate your answers using an example?

6. Did you work on one or more of the following cases?

- 1) Sino-Vietnamese border war in 1979-1991;
- 2) Sino-Vietnamese cable-cutting incidents in 2011;
- 3) Sino-Vietnamese oil rig crisis 2014; or
- 4) Sino-Philippines arbitration in 2016.

7. Now let’s talk about the case(s) you worked on one by one. On case #,

1) How did you get involved in reporting/editing on the case?

2) *Before* you worked on the case, what was happening on it? What were the Chinese and the Vietnamese (or the Philippines) government doing? Where did most of your information come from *before* you worked on it?

3) *Before* you worked on the case, did you feel the public care about the dispute? How did you get such an impression that they cared or did not care? Did the public or average people you know favor a hardline or a moderate position on the issue?

- 4) *Before* you worked on the case, were there already news reports on the case? If yes, by which media outlet? What was their focus?
- 5) How were you selected to work on the case? Did you receive any instructions before you worked on it? If yes, from whom and what were they?
- 6) How did you start working on the case? Were you sent to the field?
- 7) If you were, what did you see and do there? Who did you talk to while you were there? What did you learn?
- 8) If you received instructions prior to your trip, how did you understand and execute them?
- 9) Were you given a quota on the number of the articles the newspaper had to reach during a certain period (the period of the propaganda campaign)? If yes, how many?
- 10) Did you receive any further instructions as the case developed? If yes, from whom and what were they? how did you understand and execute them?
- 11) The report(s) you wrote, were it a piece of news or an op-ed? What was the goal you were trying to achieve in writing the report? Did you have or were you given a point to get across to the Chinese public?
- 12) Were you aware of any international report on the dispute at the time? How did your report differ from those international reports?
- 13) [To journalists] Were you under any pressure to add or censor things you write? If yes, pressure from whom?
- 14) [To journalists] In your writing of the report, did you deliberately select certain aspects to emphasize and certain aspects to avoid? Why?
- 15) [To editors] Did you ask your reporter to select certain aspects to emphasize and certain aspects to avoid? Why?
- 16) [To journalists] After you submitted your initial report, were you asked to make any major changes? If yes, why?
- 17) [To editors] Did you have to change or delete any part of the report sent from your reporter(s)? If yes, why?
- 18) Were there aspects or events you did not cover or were not encouraged/allowed to cover? Why?
- 19) Did you receive any feedback to the article you wrote/edited? If yes, what were they?