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Barking without biting: Understanding Chinese media campaigns during foreign policy disputes

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Citation

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Abstract

What motivates Chinese media campaigns during foreign policy disputes and how are they carried out? "Influence campaigns" are often recognized as highly pertinent to international security, yet they remain understudied. This paper develops and tests a theory that explains these media campaigns as strategic actions to align domestic public opinion when it deviates from the state's preferred foreign policy, exploiting the media's mobilization or pacification effect. These divergent media effects correspond to two types of media campaigns respectively – the mobilization campaigns and the pacification campaigns. The pacification campaigns are particularly important because they indicate that hawkish rhetoric may counterintuitively pacify the public, and hence its adoption implies a moderate foreign policy intent. A medium-n congruence test of 21 Chinese diplomatic crises and process-tracing of the 2016 Sino-Philippines arbitration case offer strong support for the theory and demonstrate how a pacification campaign works and how it differs from a mobilization campaign.

Introduction

A crucial dimension of international relations is how states shape domestic public opinion during foreign disputes. Of particular interest is how authoritarian states do this via media campaigns. For instance, a propaganda extravaganza accompanying Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 painted the violent separatists as courageous fighters and justified the intrusion as a matter of rescuing the Russian minority from the "depredations" of the "neo-Nazi" Kiev government.[1] Similarly, before Japan's invasion of Northeast China in 1931, a mendacious propaganda campaign commanded the headlines for months and successfully elicited a jingoistic public response that supported the invasion.[2] Curiously, however, aggressive media campaigns do not always occur in aggressive policy settings. For example, amidst the 2014 South China Sea oil rig crisis with China, Vietnam adopted an overall moderate foreign policy and successfully calmed an enraged public through a

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[1] "How Putin Used Propaganda to Deftly Turn Russians Against Ukrainians," *The Conversation*, 26 July 2017, http://theconversation.com/how-putin-used-propaganda-to-deftly-turn-russians-against-ukrainians-81376.
[2] Louise Young, *Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism*, vol. 8 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

remarkable media campaign that covered the dispute profusely during the crisis.[3] In the two years'

negotiation leading up to the signing of the Iranian nuclear deal, the Iranian media "prepared the

public" through a tireless propaganda push that kept a robust anti-West discourse, rejected the image

of seeking the talks as a retreat, and framed the deal as "heroic flexibility."[4]

These media campaigns present two puzzles. First, in contrast to muting a dispute and

minimizing public attention through information controls such as censorship, why do authoritarian

states sometimes play up international crises and diplomatic incidents in domestic propaganda? To

use a metaphor, when and why does the dog – the state propaganda machine – bark? Second, if the

main utility of media campaigns for the state is to stoke nationalism and rally support for a hardline

policy, then what explains the seemingly similar media campaigns with moderate foreign policy –

barking without biting? This paper seeks to tackle these puzzles. In addressing the first one, I

delineate *why* these campaigns occur, that is, the conditions conductive to their adoption and the

motivations behind. In unraveling the second, I describe *how* these campaigns look and *how* they

work. I present two types of campaigns – the mobilization campaigns and the pacification campaigns

and focus on the less intuitive pacification type – barking without biting.

These media campaigns are common, consequential, and valuable for interpreting policy, yet

our understanding about them is considerably lacking. For China alone, 14 of 21 diplomatic crises

analyzed in this paper experienced media campaigns. There are many more in a total of 139

countries/territories with unfree or partly free media, where "established systems circumscribe news

and information for mass audiences and shape the dominant political narrative."[5] These campaigns

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3 Frances Yaping Wang and Brantly Womack, "Jawing through Crises: Chinese and Vietnamese Media Strategies in the South China Sea," *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, no. 119 (2019): 712–28.
4 "How Iranian Media Prepared the Public for the Nuclear Deal," *The Guardian*, 24 July 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2015/jul/24/how-iran-media-supreme-leader-prepared-the-public-nuclear-deal.
5 Christopher Walker and Robert W. Orttung, "Breaking the News: The Role of State-Run Media," *Journal of Democracy* 25, no. 1 (2014): 71. The total is calculated based on the number of countries or territories whose press is rated by the Freedom House as "not free" (66) or "partly free" (73). See *Freedom of the Press 2017*, Freedom House, April 2017, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FOTP_2017_booklet_FINAL_April28.pdf.

are consequential to international security because "they are low-cost, relatively low-risk, and deniable ways … to shape foreign perceptions, and to influence populations."[6] Several top US security and intelligence agencies have marked them as highly pertinent and "significant threat to US interests."[7] They also provide valuable data that analysts could use to decode foreign policy intentions. Given the lack of transparency in authoritarian states, reading their intentions can be especially challenging, which adds to the danger of misperceptions and miscalculations in the conduct of foreign affairs. Alexander George's classic reconstruction of American analysts' inferences from Nazi German domestic propaganda in World War II found an impressive accuracy rate of higher than 80 percent, based on the assumption of strict top-down elite political control.[8] Yet time has changed. Despite the increasing sophistication of control techniques, media marketization and digitization have rendered total control obsolete in most contemporary authoritarian states. Our understanding of propaganda, however, has stayed behind. Existing literature cannot make sense of the puzzles presented above. Relevant media studies, being largely descriptive, rarely considers these campaigns from a political perspective. While a growing line of Political Science research about the characteristics of contemporary authoritarian media contribute to this study,[9] incentives that motivate media campaigns are not clear. Furthermore, the media campaigns with moderate policy intentions – the barking without biting scenarios that have become increasingly prevalent, have largely escaped our attention.

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[6] Daniel R. Coats, *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 6 March 2018, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Testimonies/Final-2018-ATA---Unclassified---SASC.pdf.

[7] Ibid. Also see White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: White House, December 2017), https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf.

[8] Alexander L. George, *Propaganda Analysis: A Study of Inferences Made from Nazi Propaganda in World War II* (Evanston IL: Row, Peterson & Co., 1959).

[9] Susan L. Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (Oxford University Press, 2007); Andrew Chubb, "Chinese Popular Nationalism and PRC Policy in the South China Sea" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Western Australia, 2016); Daniela Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China* (Cambridge University Press, 2013); Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2008); Maria Repnikova, *Media Politics in China: Improvising Power under Authoritarianism* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Authoritarian states, I argue, use media campaigns to align public opinion with their preferred foreign policy, for purposes of both domestic regime survival and international security. There are two kinds of misalignments that can motivate these campaigns, and which type of campaign will result depends on how the state and the public misalign. When public opinion is more moderate than the state policy, the state adopts a mobilization campaign to mobilize the public. When public opinion is more hawkish than the state policy, the state utilizes a pacification campaign to pacify the public. Both are to gain the public's acquiescence, if not outright support, for the state's desired policy. When the state and the public are aligned, the state mouthpieces stay quiet. Analyzing 21 Chinese diplomatic crises, this paper shows an overwhelming conformity (18 out of 21 cases) to the expectations of the theory. The average state media coverage on the misaligned cases is markedly more prominent and extensive than the average on the aligned ones.

The pacification use of propaganda deserves highlighting because that is *not* how we usually interpret aggressive foreign propaganda. Not only commoners, but also the intelligentsia routinely reads aggressive propaganda as cues for aggressive policy intent. If these pacification campaigns are truly common, our intuitive belief about harsh rhetoric can then be dangerously misleading.

As detailed tracing of the 2016 Sino–Philippines arbitration case will illuminate, hardline rhetoric *can* pacify the public. A pacification campaign mollifies public opinion by controlling the discourse, echoing public sentiment with seemingly harsh rhetoric, keeping up the appearances of a hard stance, positive-framing the dispute, delegitimizing "harmful" emotions, and letting the public vent on social media. Authoritarian states like China know well about this "open secret" and have repeatedly used hardline media campaigns for domestic pacification purpose. In turn, when seeking to decipher foreign policy intentions of these states, we need to keep in mind that authoritarian states may adopt media campaigns not for escalation, but to clear domestic obstacles for de-escalation. Therefore, our task to analyze propaganda correctly, to tell the media campaigns intended for pacification apart from those intended for mobilization, are paramount for world security. This paper

not only highlights the existence of a neglected, yet essential type of propaganda, but also offers the tools to help distinguish it.

This research, therefore, contributes to our understanding of authoritarian propaganda and helps foreign policy decision making in substantial ways. Not only that, the paper also interacts with a number of research agendas and carries significant theoretical implications. The misalignment theory transcends beyond the traditional schemes of "second image" or "second image reversed" International Relations theories. Instead of using domestic factors to explain foreign policy or vice versa, it argues for their *interaction*. The pacification part of the theory also has large implications for the audience costs theory. Pacification offers an innovative alternative, in which a state publicizes a dispute not for a hands-tying, coercion-enhancing purpose, but as a hands-freeing strategy to emancipate itself from public constraint. Additionally, pacification finds strong affinities to the process of desecuritization. It enriches the securitization literature by providing additional causes for and means of desecuritization and substantiates the existing discussion that remains largely theoretical with much-needed empirical evidence. Besides, by drawing on the authoritarian public opinion literature in Comparative Politics and expanding it to the foreign arena, this study moves the literature from a domestic context to an international one. Last but not the least, Chinese foreign policy experts have been discussing about different ways the Chinese government manages domestic public opinion on foreign affairs, but this is the first study that offers a systematic test that covers Chinese diplomatic crises both in breadth and in depth.

The next section delineates the concepts, rationale, logical challenges, scope conditions, and possible generalization of misalignment and pacification. I then present a medium-*n* test of the misalignment theory with the skeletons of 21 Chinese diplomatic crises. Finally, I trace the 2016 Sino–Philippines South China Sea arbitration case and demonstrate the logic of misalignment and how pacification worked.

State-Public (Mis)Alignment

I define media campaigns as government-orchestrated, concerted efforts to attract public attention to a dispute by the use of mass media. They manifest in dramatic increases in the media coverage of the issue in volume and salience that result from intentions of the state leadership, as opposed to knee-jerk reactions of the media to provocative events.

I argue media campaigns are a strategic state action in response to the (mis)alignment of two conditions. One condition, a state's foreign policy intent, is the state's intended foreign policy against a foreign rival in a diplomatic crisis, which can be characterized as hardline or moderate. Drawing on literatures on Militarized Interstate Disputes (MIDs), crisis escalation, and territorial disputes, I define a hardline policy as an unprovoked threat, display, or use of force or economic sanctions, or escalated responses if provoked. A moderate policy involves none of the above, but peaceful negotiations that come with compromises, inactions, or responses of an equal or lesser scale if provoked.

The other condition, existing public opinion, is the public's *existing* policy preference against a foreign rival in a diplomatic crisis *before* a state responds. Existing public opinion can be characterized into one of three categories: strong hardline preference (hawkish), strong moderate preference (dovish), and weak or no preference (either due to little knowledge of or apathy towards an issue). Traditionally, public opinion is a multi-dimensional "thick" concept. Breckler treats public opinion as consisting of beliefs (*cognitive*), feelings (*affective*), and intentions (*behavioral*). All three have an *evaluative* component.[10] Existing public opinion here strips these layers into one single dimension – the public's foreign policy preference, following the same definitions of the state's policy preferences, leaving only the evaluative and the behavioral components of public opinion in whether they support a hardline or moderate foreign policy in attitude and action.

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[10] Steven J. Breckler, "Empirical Validation of Affect, Behavior, and Cognition as Distinct Components of Attitude," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 47, no. 6 (1984): 1191.

Thus, state-society misalignment only occurs in two combinations: 1) dovish or weak public opinion and hardline state policy preference (scenario 1 in Table 1); 2) hawkish public opinion and moderate state policy preference (scenario 2). Two distinct types of media campaigns result from these two scenarios – a mobilization campaign when the state prefers a hardline policy yet if existing public opinion is dovish or weak, and a pacification campaign when the state favors a moderate policy yet existing public opinion is hawkish. These media campaigns work in opposite directions on public opinion, but they both serve to gain public support for, or at least their acquiescence to, the state's desired policy. When state policy intent and public opinion are aligned (scenarios 3 and 4), we should expect no media campaigns, or only the ones that are motivated by other incentives.

Table 1: The State-Public (Mis)Alignment Theory

State Foreign Policy Intent

		Hardline	Moderate
Existing Public Opinion	**Dovish/Weak**	Media Campaigns to Mobilize (1)	No Media Campaigns or other incentives (4)
	Hawkish	No Media Campaigns or other incentives (3)	Media Campaigns to Pacify (2)

The state-public misalignment motivates media campaigns because it creates political tensions. A couple of studies refers to the state- public misalignment as a "public opinion crisis" or "struggle" that needs to be reconciled.[11] This is because exercising a foreign policy unsupported by the public is politically risky/costly for authoritarian regimes. If not managed well, public opinion could challenge the state's domestic regime survival and international security. Domestically, public opinion could debilitate authoritarian regimes in the form of social turmoil that topples regimes or causes gradual atrophy of the regime by undermining social trust and regime legitimacy and strengthening support for the opposition forces. Internationally, if foreign policy is held hostage to domestic public opinion, especially extreme nationalism, this could lead to undesirable foreign policies that jeopardize a

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[11] Daniela Stockmann, "Who Believes Propaganda? Media Effects during the Anti-Japanese Protests in Beijing," *The China Quarterly* 202 (2010): 270–71; Ted Hopf, *Reconstructing the Cold War: The Early Years, 1945-1958* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 27.

state's security environment. Violent public reactions can damage economic ties, tarnish a country's international image, and limit a state's foreign policy to suboptimal options. That is why we should not expect to see states succumb to the pressure of public opinion lightly, especially if the state has the option to align public opinion thorough media campaigns, which can free the state's hands in foreign policy while sustaining its domestic rule. The goal here is not necessarily to reverse opinions or to achieve complete agreement, but to create enough convergence or understanding to allow higher tolerance of and acquiescence to a deviant state policy.

The political incentives for alignment are grounded in the authoritarian public opinion literature that describes a paradoxical and reciprocal state-public opinion relationship common in authoritarian states. On the one hand, there is authentic, independent, instead of completely "state-manufactured" public opinion; public opinion not only exists, but also creates real pressure on states' conduct of foreign policy, providing political incentives for leaders to "cater to" or "manage" public opinion. This is evident in authoritarian responsiveness.[12] On the other hand, the role of public opinion in foreign policy of authoritarian countries remains very limited, and the states still have the dominant agency. Despite the advance of market forces and information technology, the states have also revamped their control.[13] This two-way relationship determines that the state not only needs to, but also is able to take control.

Hawkish Rhetoric That Pacifies

Generally, a mobilization campaign works to raise public awareness and the perceived importance of

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[12] Jidong Chen, Jennifer Pan, and Yiqing Xu, "Sources of Authoritarian Responsiveness: A Field Experiment in China," *American Journal of Political Science* 60, no. 2 (2016): 383–400; Edmund Malesky and Paul Schuler, "Nodding or Needling: Analyzing Delegate Responsiveness in an Authoritarian Parliament," *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 3 (2010): 482–502; Rory Truex, "Consultative Authoritarianism and Its Limits," *Comparative Political Studies* 50, no. 3 (2017): 329–61.

[13] Maria Repnikova and Kecheng Fang, "Authoritarian Participatory Persuasion 2.0: Netizens as Thought Work Collaborators in China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no. 113 (2018): 1–17; Wen-Hsuan Tsai, "How 'Networked Authoritarianism' Was Operationalized in China: Methods and Procedures of Public Opinion Control," *Journal of Contemporary China* 25, no. 101 (2016): 731–44.

an issue, promote negative evaluation of and arouse intense negative emotions towards a target country or people, cultivate a sense of unjust and unfairness and, as a result, moral agreement to the use of force, downplay potential costs of conflict, and encourage actions against the target country or people. A pacification campaign is similar to a mobilization campaign in the way it raises public awareness and issue salience, but it is also very different from, even the opposite of mobilization in every other way. Since the mobilization use of propaganda is more intuitive and the importance of domestic mobilization has already been extensively argued elsewhere,[14] this paper focuses on the pacification campaigns.

Pacification contrasts with existing literature on utilizing domestic publics for foreign policy purposes – notably the audience costs literature and its application to China. The audience costs theory holds that leaders may publicize a foreign dispute – hence in our case launch a media campaign – as a "costly signal" to gain bargaining leverage with a foreign opponent. Leaders' publicly-issued threats would be taken more seriously because engaging the domestic publics elevates the costs of backing down for leaders, a process Fearon termed "hands-tying."[15] Weeks expands the gift of generating audience costs from democracies to most autocracies, and Weiss introduces a new mechanism authoritarian states like China could generate audience costs – by tolerating anti-foreign street protests.[16] Being one of the most prominent and controversial theories in the International Relations field, audience costs theories, however, cannot explain the barking without biting cases – in which states publicize in order to de-escalate. They lack adequate scope

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[14] Randall L. Schweller, "Neoclassical Realism and State Mobilization: Expansionist Ideology in the Age of Mass Politics," in *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*, ed. Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, 2009, 227–50; Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947-1958* (Princeton University Press, 1996).
[15] James D. Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41, no. 1 (1997): 68–90; James D. Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (1994): 577–92.
[16] Jessica L. Weeks, "Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve," *International Organization* 62, no. 1 (2008): 35–64; Jessica C. Weiss, "Authoritarian Signaling, Mass Audiences, and Nationalist Protest in China," *International Organization* 67, no. 1 (2013): 1–35; Jessica C. Weiss, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China's Foreign Relations* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

conditions, and thus overlook an alternative purpose for hawkish rhetoric – to pacify.

At first glance, it seems counterintuitive to launch a media campaign at all when a state has moderate foreign policy intent, because the campaign could further raise public awareness and possibly agitate public opinion, thus potentially counteracting the state's moderate policy goal. Nonetheless, a closer examination of how pacification works explains why it works.

To mollify public opinion, states could choose one of two measures: one is the coercive, repressive, and prohibitive *hard* power – censorship, be it blocking off entire websites, automatic blocking of key words, manual posts removal,[17] fostering self-censorship, or using censorship to signal strength or domination;[18] the other is the persuasive and manipulative *soft* power, be it astroturfing,[19] emotional demobilization,[20] or a series of digital revamping.[21] The old dictatorial propaganda system with complete information control, in which the state can just snuff out all information, has gone. Since the spread of the Internet and Social Media, foreign sources and social media fill every void that the state media leaves out. News transmission is instant and omnipresent, rendering complete cover-up impossible. Huang finds that the crude, heavy-handed, "hard" propaganda is less effective than the subtler, sleeker, "soft" propaganda.[22] While states usually adopt pacification campaigns in conjunction with censorship, pacification as a soft manipulation is becoming a more superior choice than hard censorship alone.

I propose six ways a media campaign can pacify – dictating the discourse, echoing public sentiment, hardline "posturing," positive framing, delegitimizing "unhelpful" emotions, and letting

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[17] Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2 (2013): 326–43.

[18] Haifeng Huang, "Propaganda as Signaling," *Comparative Politics* 47, no. 4 (2015): 419–44.

[19] Astroturfing is to distract the public and to flood the internet with pro-government messages, see for example, Rongbin Han, "Defending the Authoritarian Regime Online: China's 'Voluntary Fifty-Cent Army,'" *The China Quarterly* 224 (December 2015): 1006–25; Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, "How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument," *American Political Science Review* 111, no. 3 (2017): 484–501.

[20] Guobin Yang, "(Un)civil Society in Digital China| Demobilizing the Emotions of Online Activism in China: A Civilizing Process," *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 1945–65.

[21] Repnikova and Fang, "Authoritarian Participatory Persuasion 2.0."

[22] Haifeng Huang, "The Pathology of Hard Propaganda," *The Journal of Politics* 80, no. 3 (2018): 1034–38.

vent. First, pacification campaigns help the state to gain control of the discourse by pushing out authoritative information in large volume, timely and frequently, and by responding to developments proactively and even pre-emptively. Information voids or even just lags would breed suspicion and rumors, and would empower information from unfavorable sources such as foreign media. Pacification campaigns avoid that and gift the state the advantage of the "primacy effect." The primacy effect is a cognitive bias in Psychology that prioritizes the first piece of information people encounter.[23] Making the first voice in crises at every turn of events is thus of paramount importance to shaping public opinion.

The second way, echoing, is reflected in the harsh media content. The state media mirrors what the public feels, so it shows that the government is "connected" to the public. The "echo effect" in Psychology demonstrates that verbal mimicry increases liking and cohesion.[24] This is comparable to the so-called "resonance" in Communication Studies, wherein the propagandist becomes an alter ego of the audience, "giving expression to the recipient's own concerns, tensions" and "denies all distance between the source and the audience."[25] As echoing frames the issues as "us" against "them," instead of the public against the state, sharing the same position and emotions (at least on the surface) helps build the social trust necessary to move opinions. The Social Judgement Theory argues that persuasion is more effective when the message is close to the audience's acceptance.[26] Echoing may also soothe an angry public by expressing public outrage on their behalf and indirectly helps the public vent their anger.

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[23] Bennet B. Murdock, "The Serial Position Effect of Free Recall," *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 64, no. 5 (1962): 482.

[24] William W. Maddux, Elizabeth Mullen, and Adam D. Galinsky, "Chameleons Bake Bigger Pies and Take Bigger Pieces: Strategic Behavioral Mimicry Facilitates Negotiation Outcomes," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 44, no. 2 (2008): 461–68.

[25] Paul Kecskemeti, "Propaganda," in *Handbook of Communication*, ed. Ithiel D. Pool et al. (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1973), 864.

[26] Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda & Persuasion*, sixth edition, (Sage Publications, 2014), 180.

But this echoing differs from the inflammatory rhetoric in a mobilization campaign. In a pacification campaign, a state takes painstaking efforts to avoid further inflaming the public or the opponent. It needs to strike a delicate balance between appearing "relatable" through echoing and not counteracting its policy objective. The state can do this by adopting a "moderately harsh" rhetoric that is down a notch from the public sentiment. Shirk talks about China's "toning down the message."[27] Using existing public opinion as a benchmark, the state rhetoric is harsher in mobilization campaigns yet milder in pacification campaigns. Additionally, the state can also condemn the opponent in third parties' perspectives, or relegate the echoing to nonofficial media.[28]

Third, besides echoing, what the harsh content also does is domestic "posturing." Because nationalists often equate a moderate foreign policy with weakness and failure, keeping up the appearances of a hard stance protects the government from nationalist criticisms, saves face, and maintains social stability.

To prevent unwanted escalations, the hardline posturing stops short of threatening substantive punishments common in mobilization campaigns, or substitutes with ambiguous threats. This is telling of the "posturing" nature. A variation of hardline posturing amplifies the proactive measures taken by the authorities, signaling the state's competence in safeguarding national interests. This also helps deflect criticisms and boost confidence in the government. In the end, pacification campaigns are essentially staged shows to satisfy and to calm down an angry public and a pretense to cover up a restrained policy.

"Posturing" does not necessarily hinder a state's ability to pursue a moderate foreign policy later on. This goes against one of the basic assumptions upon which the audience costs theory rests, that is, the public will punish the leader if the leader were to back down from a publicly-announced

[27] Shirk, *China*.
[28] Wang and Womack, "Jawing through Crises"; Stockmann, "Who Believes Propaganda?"

threat.[29] Critics of the audience costs theory argue that domestic punishment is rare. The public may not necessarily follow up with the actual policy, and when they do, they "care more about the overall substantive consequences of a leader's policy than about consistency between the leader's words and deeds."[30] The public readily "forgives" a state's failure to follow through tough talk with tough action. Weiss and Dafoe even find that citizens approve of government "blustering" – tough but vague talk, not followed through by action.[31]

The public may also "forget" about a foreign dispute that only remotely affects their daily lives. The public's "short attention span" is well researched in Media Studies.[32] The "issue attention cycle" hypothesis describes the public attention cycle during which a problem "suddenly leaps into prominence, remains there for a short time, and then – though still largely unresolved – gradually fades from the center of public attention." 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.[33] Foreign policy issues, usually dubbed "high politics," fit the bill. The public's forgiveness and forgetfulness, therefore, make it possible for the state to use hardline "posturing" to protect itself from nationalist criticisms, while not compromising on its moderate policy objective.

Fourth, positive framing tweaks the message carefully to encourage cooperation and discourage dissent from the public, and to prevent violence or collective action that may threaten the regime. Framing "is based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized in news reports can

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[29] Kenneth A. Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy*, vol. 76 (Cambridge University Press, 2001); Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes."

[30] Jack Snyder and Erica D. Borghard, "The Cost of Empty Threats: A Penny, Not a Pound," *American Political Science Review* 105, no. 3 (2011): 437.

[31] Snyder and Borghard, "The Cost of Empty Threats"; Jessica C. Weiss and Allan Dafoe, "Authoritarian Audiences, Rhetoric, and Propaganda in International Crises: Evidence from China," *International Studies Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (2019): 963–73.

[32] Carol A. Bodensteiner, "Predicting Public and Media Attention Span for Social Issues," *Public Relations Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (1995): 14; Anthony Downs, "Up and Down with Ecology: The 'Issue-Attention Cycle," *The Public*, 1972.

[33] Downs, "Up and down with Ecology."

have an influence on how it is understood by audiences."[34] Social psychologists have demonstrated

the significant effects of frames on opinion.[35] To neutralize the natural tendency of crisis coverage to

find fault and attribute responsibility,[36] the state selects on positive stories, uses positive language,

elicits positive emotions, and promotes pro-government, pro-status quo, and anti-violence messages.

This helps overcome potentially damaging conversations and direct public opinion away from

violence and defiance. The positive coverage works as a critical supplement to the hardline rhetoric

that serves the echoing and the posturing purposes, balances it out, and guides public opinion

towards acquiescence and obedience. Stockmann finds that news media were significantly less

negative under the state propaganda instructions. She illustrates how the Chinese government

utilized the commercial media to guide public opinion "into a more positive direction" and calm

down the angry protesters.[37] Quek and Johnston confirm the effectiveness of a few rhetorical frames

to deescalate public opinion, and one of them is a positive frame of invoking China's peaceful

identity.[38]

Fifth, delegitimizing "unhelpful" emotions works in tandem with positive-framing. As

research shows, emotional underpinning is important for all social movements and activism,

particularly anger for protests and hatred for violence.[39] Recognizing this, media frames are set up to

delegitimize "unhelpful," negative emotions by cultivating a distaste for violence and social turmoil

and claiming the high moral ground of reason, rationality, and patriotism.[40] These emotional

manipulations usually follow a classic utilitarian argument that order, and hence citizens' obedience,

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[34] Dietram A. Scheufele and David Tewksbury, "Framing, Agenda Setting, and Priming: The Evolution of Three Media Effects Models," *Journal of Communication* 57, no. 1 (2007): 9–20.
[35] A. Tversky and D. Kahneman, "The Framing of Decisions and the Psychology of Choice," *Science* 211, no. 4481 (January 30, 1981): 453–58.
[36] Seon-Kyoung An and Karla K. Gower, "How Do the News Media Frame Crises? A Content Analysis of Crisis News Coverage," *Public Relations Review* 35, no. 2 (2009): 107–12.
[37] Stockmann, "Who Believes Propaganda?"
[38] Kai Quek and Alastair Iain Johnston, "Can China Back Down? Crisis De-Escalation in the Shadow of Popular Opposition," *International Security* 42, no. 3 (2018): 7–36.
[39] Helena Flam and Debra King, *Emotions and Social Movements* (Routledge, 2007); Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta, *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements* (University of Chicago Press, 2009).
[40] Yang, "Demobilizing the Emotions of Online Activism in China."

is beneficial, and violence and social turmoil are harmful, to the collective good – the country. Besides, the media works to highlight the merits of a moderate foreign policy and the costs of a hardline policy. The logic then follows that if a person truly loves her country – that she should, then she should support, or at least show understanding of, a moderate foreign policy, even if it deviates from her original preference. These utilitarian and moral arguments are sometimes internalized by the elites and the public, and become a long-lasting feature of the political culture. Nathan and Scobell talk about Chinese leaders promulgating "traditional [Asian] values of obedience … [and] respect for … authority" to justify "prioriti[zing] … social order and stability."[41]

The set of emotions and their level of intensity exploited in a pacification campaign are characteristically different from those in a mobilization campaign. A mobilization campaign arouses intense negative emotions, such as hatred or fear, but a pacification campaign only echoes mildly negative emotions, such as injustice or contempt. Mobilization aims to intensify emotions, whereas pacification dulls them. A pacification campaign also spends a great amount of effort in inducing positive emotions, such as gratitude and satisfaction, and in neutralizing negative emotions by flushing them out with positive ones or encouraging rationality (less or no emotions) as antidotes. Pacification is akin to desecuritization, the opposite process of securitization in which an issue is constructed through a successful speech act to be a matter of security that "poses an existential threat" and "calls for urgent and exceptional measures."[42] To desecuritize, Huysmans proposes the "objectivist strategy," the "constructivist strategy," and the "deconstructivist strategy", which centers around teaching objective facts, facilitating understanding of the securitization process, and transforming social identities.[43] As a result, pacifying rhetoric usually involves investigative

[41] Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China's Search for Security* (Columbia University Press, 2012), 331.
[42] Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 21; Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 491.
[43] Jef Huysmans, "Migrants as a Security Problem: Dangers of 'Securitizing' Societal Issues," in *Migration and European Integration: The Dynamics of Inclusion and Exclusion*, ed. Robert Miles and Dietrich Thränhardt (London:

journalism providing abundance of detailed facts, reasoning with cost-benefit analysis, and claiming knowledge authority by citing expert opinions.

Lastly, venting on social media directly releases public anger. Recent research confirms this function of social media.[44] This is consistent with the empirical finding that the Chinese state only selectively censors action-oriented content, but allows for venting in general.[45] Chinese propagandists understand this function well. An article in *China Youth Daily* argues that "microblogs use fragmented postings to release social pressure… let the people express their views," and avoid social pressure accumulating into a "rupture."[46] Whereas a mobilization campaign calls for public actions, a pacification campaign discourages actions by allowing or even encouraging venting and only censoring action-oriented content. The state generally allows condemnation of the foreign opponent, as long as it stays on paper. To the extent they remain isolated and do not gain momentum, even outright criticisms of the government are sometimes tolerated.

In a nutshell, it is in these six ways that a media campaign pacifies a nationalist public and safely gains the public's tacit acquiesce to or active support for a moderate foreign policy. Except for the first way, dictating the discourse, common in both mobilization and pacification campaigns, the remaining five distinguish the two characteristically. These differences are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Differences between a Pacification and a Mobilization Media Campaign

	Pacification	Mobilization
Echoing	Moderately harsh rhetoric in restrained manner, with painstaking efforts to preempt escalations	Strongly harsh rhetoric without reservations, with escalatory actions

Pinter Publishers, 1995), 65–67; Paul Roe, "Securitization and Minority Rights: Conditions of Desecuritization," *Security Dialogue* 35, no. 3 (2004): 279–94.

[44] Christopher Cairns and Allen Carlson, "Real-World Islands in a Social Media Sea: Nationalism and Censorship on Weibo during the 2012 Diaoyu/Senkaku Crisis," *The China Quarterly* 225 (2016): 23–49; Jonathan Hassid, "Safety Valve or Pressure Cooker? Blogs in Chinese Political Life," *Journal of Communication* 62, no. 2 (2012): 212–30; Rebecca MacKinnon, "Flatter World and Thicker Walls? Blogs, Censorship and Civic Discourse in China," *Public Choice* 134, no. 1–2 (2008): 31–46.

[45] King, Pan, and Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression."

[46] Zhu Xinhua, "How Microblogs Alleviate Social Pressure in 2010," *Zhongguo Qingnian Bao (China Youth Daily) Online*, 28 December 2010, accessed via World News Connection.

	No or ambiguous threats; amplify proactive measures taken by authorities	Threatens substantive punishment
Posturing	No or ambiguous threats; amplify proactive measures taken by authorities	Threatens substantive punishment
Positive Framing	Abundant	Little to non-existent
Emotions	Promotes positive or less emotions	Provokes intense negative emotions
Venting & Actions	Allows or even encourages venting, but bars or prevents actions	Calls for actions

Limitations and Scope Conditions

There are two theoretical simplifications in the misalignment model: the simplification of domestic actors into the state and the public, and the simplification of policy preferences pertaining to these actors to be hardline or moderate. The former assumes unitary actors and leaves out possible internal differentiations within these actors, while the latter assumes homogeneity within public opinion and state policy, overlooking possible gradations between or mixtures of hardline and moderate policy preferences. With these assumptions, the theory is limited in specifying those nuances. Nonetheless, by making these simplifications, the theory amplifies and clarifies the state-public interplay on foreign policy. Thus, it offers a necessary starting point by which to begin considering those nuances.

Just like many motivational theories that focus on the causes of state behaviors, this theory is limited in being largely agnostic about the *outcomes* of these media campaigns. Propaganda is a delicate art of winning hearts and minds, so it could certainly fail. Sometimes the time window of a crisis is too short for a campaign to take hold, sometimes a campaign backfires, due to unintended public pushbacks or external ramifications, and, other times, an exogenous shock might disrupt a campaign and distract the public. But the fact that states still adopt media campaigns against these odds proves their utility.

One challenge to the pacification logic is a possible "ratchet effect" that public opinion, once riled up, might not retrench to the *status quo ante*. Authoritarian states cultivating nationalism to consolidate regime might have trouble culling it down. Downs and Saunders warn that "elites can

become trapped in their own rhetoric."[47] However, as Downs and Saunders themselves argue, states rarely sacrifice foreign policy priorities to satisfy domestic public opinion; they often choose to ride the nationalist tiger without losing control of it. Their confidence is partly due to the public's forgiveness and forgetfulness discussed earlier and partly to their proven ability to move opinions to meet their needs. On the latter point, although ratcheting public opinion down may be more difficult than riling it up and requires more energy, resources, and skill, the Chinese government has proven capable of doing it.[48] Even on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute with Japan commonly perceived to be the most susceptible to strong public emotions, the reversion of the Chinese official rhetoric has successfully hypnotized the Chinese public twice in history, once in the 1970s and once in the 1990s. All in all, the bottom line is that mobilization today does not foreclose the possibility of pacification tomorrow.

Another logical challenge is the unintended external ramifications and their preemptive effect. If a pacification campaign is misinterpreted as hostile by a foreign audience, the campaign could cause unwanted escalations, and defeat the purpose of pacification. Downs and Saunders write that "other states may misinterpret them [the nationalist myths] as a serious threat and respond in kind."[49] The fear for such risks may also keep a state from pursuing a pacification campaign in the first place. This risk certainly exists, but it can be overcome in various ways. Natural barriers, such as language and media choices, exist between a domestic media campaign and an international audience. Only a small fraction of domestic media content permeates through these barriers and reaches an international audience. The literature on secret diplomacy demonstrates that states also have private channels to credibly signal their intentions to a foreign rival to preempt unintended

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[47] Erica S. Downs and Phillip C. Saunders, "Legitimacy and the Limits of Nationalism: China and the Diaoyu Islands," *International Security* 23, no. 3 (1999): 115.

[48] James Reilly, *Strong Society, Smart State: The Rise of Public Opinion in China's Japan Policy* (Columbia University Press, 2011); Quek and Johnston, "Can China Back Down?"

[49] Downs and Saunders, "Legitimacy and the Limits of Nationalism," 115.

escalations.[50] Besides, as mentioned earlier, there are ways the state media can echo and posture without exacerbating the crisis.

Our discussion so far suggests three scope conditions for pacification: 1) the state pays a cost if it exercises unsupported foreign policy, but the state is capable of avoiding that cost by manipulating public opinion; 2) the absence of an effective alternative, with censorship losing its yesterday omnipotence; 3) the rise of the need to pacify – state cultivation of nationalism as a means to strengthen regime legitimacy has led to the rise of nationalism in many authoritarian countries. Despite the focus of the paper on China, these conditions are by no means unique to China, and we should expect the power of the theory to extend beyond China. The essence of an unfree press is consistent across regions. The world's authoritarian states share similar experiences of media commercialization and digitization. They enjoy various degrees of proficiency in propaganda and censorship, and as they all strive to master it, their control strategies have also become more subtle and sophisticated. The specific approaches and techniques may vary, but these states emulate each other even on a tactical level.

Testing the Theory in 21 Chinese Diplomatic Crises

Because association is necessary for establishing causality, I will first gauge the plausibility of the theory in a medium-*n* congruence test in 21 Chinese diplomatic crises,[51] before process-tracing a pacification campaign to confirm temporality and illustrate the pacifying logic. The cases listed in Table 3 include all diplomatic crises that have occurred in the population of China's interstate territorial disputes since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949.[52] China launched media campaigns in 14 of these 21 cases. For each case, I determine the predicted outcomes based on

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[50] Keren Yarhi-Milo, "Tying Hands Behind Closed Doors: The Logic and Practice of Secret Reassurance," *Security Studies* 22, no. 3 (July 2013): 405–35.

[51] Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (MIT University Press, 2005).

[52] I exclude intrastate territorial disputes, for example, the disputes on Taiwan and Tibet.

the values of the conditions. I then check the overall conformity of the predicted outcomes to the actual outcomes. An overall conformity is not sufficient, but necessary for establishing causality. In other words, should the theory be able to correctly predict the majority of the cases, it could still be caused by confounding factors; but should it not, it could then be falsified.

Table 3: Six Disputes, 21 Crises, and 14 Media Campaigns
(MC: Media Campaign. Crises w/ MCs are underlined)

Dispute	# of Diplomatic Crises w/ MCs / Total # of Diplomatic Crises (Respective Year of Occurrence)
India, Border	3/7 (1959, 1962, 1967, 1986, 2013, 2014, 2017)
Soviet, Border	1/1 (1969)
Vietnam, Border	1/1 (1979)
Japan, Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands	5/6 (1978, 1990, 1996, 2005, 2010, 2012)
Vietnam, South China Sea	2/4 (1974, 1988, 2011, 2014)
Philippines, South China Sea	2/2 (2012, 2016)

Three reasons dictated my choice of Chinese cases. First, with its diverse pool of diplomatic crises over a variety of territorial disputes, China offers a rare opportunity. This pool of cases represents the large variety that exist in the population of diplomatic crises that authoritarian countries engage in, which makes generalization possible. Second, choosing one country has the advantage of holding constant the country-specific particularities, such as history, economic development, culture, etc. Third, on matters of media control and foreign policy significance, China is also the elephant in the room. As the world's most populous country with the second largest economy and defense budget, its management of the mass opinion of the world's 1.4 billion people regarding China's foreign affairs is certainly consequential to global security.

However, there is a downside to having observations from one single country, that is, they are dependent of each other, both across time with the same target country and between cases with the same territory but different target countries. This would be problematic if I were to conduct a large-N statistical test because of the assumption of independence. But it should not be a problem for the medium-n test, as I am not claiming for an average effect. 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, and are therefore exogenous to, a state

media strategy that follows in this crisis. But the possible endogeneity of state media policy on a dispute in *this* crisis to the public opinion and state foreign policy intent in the *next* requires detailed process-tracing that sequence these linkages.

Treating official media as a proxy, I measure the dependent variable, the adoption/non-adoption of media campaigns, by counting the number of relevant articles in *People's Daily*, China's most authoritative state newspaper. *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 1946, it offers a relatively time-consistent measurement of state media behavior in China.

For this purpose, I collected all *People's Daily* articles between 1949 and 2017, covering all 21 diplomatic crises that occurred on six of China's territorial disputes. For detailed data collection procedures, see Appendix I.[53] The monthly number of front-page articles and that of all relevant articles are then tallied along six timelines of disputes. Both numbers are important measurements of the scale of media coverage, because when a state launches a media campaign, it attracts public attention by both the salience and the volume of the coverage.

Table 4 presents the summary statistics of media coverage on all 21 cases. I catalog the duration of each campaign,[54] the number of front-page articles and that of all relevant articles, as well as their monthly averages. Criteria used to identify media campaigns based on these numbers are detailed and justified in Appendix II. Table 4 identifies 14 media campaigns (in bold), including two ambiguous ones (with asterisks) with salient publicization efforts yet apparent reservations. Appendix II also examines the ambiguous media campaigns with further qualitative evidence.

Table 4: Summary Statistics of Media Coverage on 21 Chinese Diplomatic Crises
(NG: Negligible.)

#	Case	MC Start	MC End	Duration (Days)	Front-Page Articles	All-Relevant Articles	Average Front-Page Articles	Average All-Relevant Articles
1	**Sino-India 1959**	**9/10/1959**	**11/27/1959**	**77**	**17**	**91**	**6.6**	**35.5**

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[53] Appendices are available at https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.14459172.
[54] Or the duration of the crisis if a campaign is not observed.

2	**Sino-India 1962**	**6/1/1962**	**12/31/1963**	**570**	**346**	**1034**	**18.2**	**54.4**
3	Sino-India 1967	9/13/1967	9/26/1967	13	0	7	0.0	16
4	**Sino-Soviet 1969**	**3/3/1969**	**9/21/1969**	**198**	**56**	**445**	**2.8**	**67.4**
5	**Sino-Vietnam 1974**	**1/12/1974**	**2/18/1974**	**36**	**7**	**12**	**5.8**	**10**
6	Sino-Japanese 1978	4/12/1978	5/11/1978	29	NG	NG	NG	NG
7	**Sino-Vietnam 1979**	**11/5/1978**	**3/31/1990**	**4164**	**579**	**7195**	**4.2**	**51.8**
8	Sino-India 1986	5/1986	8/1987	457	NG	NG	NG	NG
9	**Sino-Vietnam 1988**	**2/23/1988**	**4/28/1988**	**65**	**7**	**10**	**3.2**	**4.6**
10	**Sino-Japan 1990**	**9/29/1990**	**10/30/1990**	**31**	**7**	**18**	**7**	**18**
11	**Sino-Japan 1996**	**7/25/1996**	**10/30/1996**	**97**	**12**	**108**	**3.7**	**33.4**
12	**Sino-Japan 2005**	**4/1/2005**	**6/1/2005**	**61**	**13**	**163**	**6.4**	**80.2**
13	**Sino-Japan 2010***	**9/9/2010**	**11/6/2010**	**57**	**2**	**31**	**1.1**	**16.3**
14	Sino-Vietnam 2011	5/26/2011	6/26/2011	31	NG	NG	NG	NG
15	**Sino-Philippines 2012***	**4/12/2012**	**6/4/2012**	**53**	**1**	**64**	**0.6**	**36.2**
16	**Sino-Japan 2012**	**9/3/2012**	**10/31/2012**	**58**	**25**	**137**	**12.9**	**70.9**
17	Sino-India 2013	4/15/2013	5/5/2013	20	NG	NG	NG	NG
18	Sino-Vietnam 2014	5/2/2014	7/17/2014	74	0	36	0.0	14.6
19	Sino-India 2014	8/18/2014	10/1/2014	44	NG	NG	NG	NG
20	**Sino-Philippines 2016**	**6/1/2016**	**8/1/2016**	**61**	**13**	**208**	**6.4**	**102.3**
21	**Sino-India 2017**	**6/27/2017**	**8/4/2017**	**38**	**2**	**17**	**1.6**	**13.4**

The two independent variables were coded separately by three coders according to the coding rules and the 21 qualitative case descriptions provided to them (Appendix III and IV). The case descriptions, having been checked by a dozen area specialists, provide the factual basis for the coding. I measure the first independent variable – a state's foreign policy intent, by the type of policies deliberated, motivated, or actually pursued. It is coded as hardline if one of the following policies is deliberated, motivated, or pursued: (1) the unprovoked threat, display, or use of force; (2) the unprovoked threat or use of economic sanctions; or (3) responses of larger scale or higher severity, if provoked. It is coded as moderate if none of the above, but the following polices are deliberated, motivated, or pursued: (1) compromises, (2) inaction, or (3) responses of equal or lesser scale or lower severity, if provoked. I measure the other independent variable – existing public opinion – by whether public opinion is perceived, directly measured, or deduced to be hawkish or dovish/weak, following the same definitions of state policy preference.

The endogenous nature of public opinion and the elusiveness of policy intent pose challenges

to their measurement. Public opinion needs to be measured separate of any government media coverage of the issue during a given crisis, so that we can separate out the exogenous part of an inherently endogenous variable. I tease out genuine public opinion by controlling the timing of measurements and data to be "before or at the beginning of a crisis," so that they precede any government-devised media strategies, and by only adopting evidence of genuine public opinion expressed online or on the street based on the accounts of Internet analysts and protest participants who observed or experienced the events firsthand. Public opinion that deviates from or directly challenges the government is also most likely to be genuine. Because "state foreign policy intent" is an intent *ex-ante*, not the actual policy *ex-post*, the state actions pursued only serve as one of the three measurements, which needs to be further corroborated by evidence in the policy deliberation process and motivating factors. This should dissipate concerns for the problem of "revealed preferences," in which the state action does not reveal their true preferences, but rather reflects a concession to other pressures, including those from nationalist domestic forces. Adding to the challenge, data sources are not always available on all measures to be uniform or comparable across cases. Using triangulation as a strategy, I identify multiple measures and various data sources, as specified in the coding rules. Having multiple coders code the same set of cases also enhances measurement reliability and reduces subjectivity and bias. Intercoder reliability was then assessed. Fleiss's kappa was calculated to be 1 on "public opinion" and 0.84 on "state foreign policy intent," indicating perfect or near-perfect agreement among raters above chance.[55] This demonstrates that the results are highly replicable and reliable. Appendix III details the inter-coder reliability assessment process.

Table 5 presents the results of the congruence test. I list the values of independent variables, the predicted outcomes based on the values of the independent variables – whether or not we should

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[55] Joseph L. Fleiss, "Measuring Nominal Scale Agreement among Many Raters," *Psychological Bulletin* 76, no. 5 (1971): 378–82.

observe a media campaign, and the actual outcomes – whether or not a media campaign is actually observe. By comparing the predicted outcomes with the actual ones, I arrive at a summary judgement of whether my theory has the correct prediction on each case.

Table 5: Predicted and Actual Outcomes on 21 Chinese Diplomatic Crises
(Deviant cases are in **bold**; ambiguous MCs are marked with asterisks [*].)

No.	Case	State Foreign Policy Intent	Existing Public Opinion	Predicted Outcome	Actual Outcome	Theory
1	**Sino-India 1959**	**Moderate**	**Dovish/Weak**	**No MC**	**MC**	**False**
2	Sino-India 1962	Hardline	Dovish/Weak	MC	MC	True
3	Sino-India 1967	Moderate	Dovish/Weak	No MC	No MC	True
4	Sino-Soviet 1969	Hardline → Moderate[56]	Dovish/Weak	MC	MC	True
5	Sino-Vietnam 1974	Hardline	Dovish/Weak	MC	MC	True
6	Sino-Japanese 1978	Moderate	Dovish/Weak	No MC	No MC	True
7	Sino-Vietnam 1979	Hardline	Dovish/Weak	MC	MC	True
8	Sino-India 1986	Moderate	Dovish/Weak	No MC	No MC	True
9	**Sino-Vietnam 1988**	**Hardline**	**Hawkish**	**No MC**	**MC**	**False**
10	Sino-Japan 1990	Moderate	Hawkish	MC	MC	True
11	Sino-Japan 1996	Moderate	Hawkish	MC	MC	True
12	Sino-Japan 2005	Moderate	Hawkish	MC	MC	True
13	Sino-Japan 2010*	Moderate → Hardline	Hawkish	MC	MC*	True
14	Sino-Vietnam 2011	Hardline	Hawkish	No MC	No MC	True
15	**Sino-Philippines 2012***	**Hardline**	**Hawkish**	**No MC**	**MC***	**False**
16	Sino-Japan 2012	Moderate → Hardline	Hawkish	MC	MC	True
17	Sino-India 2013	Moderate	Dovish/Weak	No MC	No MC	True
18	Sino-Vietnam 2014	Moderate	Dovish/Weak	No MC	No MC	True
19	Sino-India 2014	Moderate	Dovish/Weak	No MC	No MC	True
20	Sino-Philippines 2016	Moderate	Hawkish	MC	MC	True
21	Sino-India 2017	Moderate	Hawkish	MC	MC	True

Except for three cases (in bold and marked "false"), the test has shown overall consistency (18 out of 21 cases) between the predicted and the actual outcomes, suggesting a historical pattern.

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[56] While in most cases the state stuck to a consistent policy intent throughout each crisis, three cases (cases #4, 13, and 16) experienced policy shifts. In fact, these policy shifts were so prominent that all three coders took notice and coded them so. These policy shifts, however, were not a result of the pressure of public opinion, but of the state's changed security circumstances. Appendix V offers a detailed explanation of these cases.

Table 6 places all 21 cases into the theoretical framework, and from there, evaluates the results of the congruence test by each scenario. As shown, all seven of the pacification cases in the lower right quadrant are predicted correctly. Notably, they all take place in the 21st century, suggesting a contemporary association. All four of the mobilization cases in the upper left quadrant are also predicted correctly. The dovish-moderate scenario in the upper right quadrant has one deviant case out of seven cases. However, the hawkish-hardline scenario in the lower left quadrant has two of three cases predicted wrong. This may be due to the fact that the audience costs theory is more plausible in a scenario with a hawkish public opinion and a hardline state policy, as it is easier to engage audience costs with hawkish publics.[57] It is also easier to generate audience costs when public opinion and state policy intent are aligned, because by logic, a leader will pay higher costs for reneging on a widely supported policy. Therefore, both audience costs and misalignment may be at work in this scenario. This suggests that the conditions proposed on misalignment, while sufficient, are not necessary. However, the fact that one of the two deviant cases has an ambiguous media campaign also lends support to existing challenges to the audience costs theory in that states rarely burn their bridges completely.

Table 6: 21 Cases in the Theoretical Framework
(Deviant cases are in **bold**; ambiguous MCs are marked with asterisks [*].)

State Policy Intent

		Hardline	Moderate
Existing Public	**Dovish /Weak**	Sino-Indian Border 1962 Sino-Soviet Border 1969 Sino-Vietnamese Paracels 1974 Sino-Vietnamese Border 1979-1991	**Sino-Indian Border 1959** Sino-Indian Border 1967 Sino-Japanese Diaoyu/Senkaku 1978 Sino-Indian Border 1986 Sino-Indian Border 2013 Sino-Vietnamese Oil Rig Crisis 2014 Sino-Indian Border 2014

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[57] Scenarios with dovish/weak public opinion, although also possible, is harder for an audience costs logic to operate, because the necessary process to stoke up public opinion would be exposed to the target country and render audience costs not genuine and unconvincing.

Opinion		Sino-Vietnamese Spratlys 1988 Sino-Vietnamese Cable-Cuttings 2011 **Sino-Philippines Scarborough Shoal 2012***	Sino-Japanese Diaoyu/Senkaku 1990 Sino-Japanese Diaoyu/Senkaku 1996 Sino-Japanese Various Dispute 2005 Sino-Japanese Diaoyu/Senkaku 2010* Sino-Japanese Diaoyu/Senkaku 2012 Sino-Philippines Arbitration 2016 Sino-Indian Border 2017
	Hawkish		

Table 7 summarizes the results of the test by averaging the numbers of articles in each scenario. The substantially higher media exposure in both prominence and volume in the misaligned scenarios relative to the aligned ones corroborates the correlation between misalignment and media coverage.

Table 7: Average Monthly Numbers of Front-Page Articles (first numbers in each quadrant) and of All-Relevant Articles (second numbers) in the Theoretical Framework

		State Policy Intent	
		Hardline	**Moderate**
Existing Public Opinion	**Dovish/Weak**	*8.0, 37.7*	1.0, 9.7
	Hawkish	0.5, 18	*6, 52.9*

A Pacification Campaign: The 2016 Sino–Philippines Arbitration Case

Among the seven pacification cases identified in the medium-*n* study, I chose the 2016 Sino-Philippines arbitration crisis because it is recent, highly relevant, and well-documented,[58] with a remarkable modern-day media campaign that cannot be ignored. I trace this case to determine the motivations behind the media spectacle and explain why it was the public-state misalignment, not audience costs, that had driven the campaign. I also provide a close-up of the campaign to illustrate how it looks, and how it works to pacify and align public opinion.

On January 22, 2013, the Philippine government initiated an international arbitration case against China regarding maritime rights in the South China Sea. On February 19, 2013, China rejected the arbitration and announced that it would neither accept, nor participate in it. Despite

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[58] The case is well-documented thanks to its legal nature and the documentations collected and published by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA). For all PCA documentations on the case, see https://pca-cpa.org/en/cases/7/.

Beijing's repeated protests, the case persisted. Three and a half years later, the situation grew acute when a ruling became imminent. On June 29, 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) announced that it would issue the award in two weeks, triggering a diplomatic crisis. On July 12, the award was published, ruling largely in favor of the Philippines and against China.

I. Riding the Nationalist Tiger

Before the 2016 crisis, the 2012 Scarborough Shoal incident had already hardened Chinese public opinion. According to a survey carried out by *Global Times* amidst the 2012 crisis to 1482 randomly selected respondents in seven Chinese cities, 78.5% of respondents supported a military response.[59] China's land reclamation activities and the US's Freedom of Navigation Operations in the South China Sea throughout 2015 and especially in the first half of 2016 also continued to elevate the salience of the dispute among the Chinese public.

No credible public opinion survey taken right before the crisis measured the Chinese public opinion on the South China Sea dispute with the Philippines in particular, but the Beijing Area Study (BAS) survey carried out between April 10 and June 30, 2015 had a country thermometer that ranked the Philippines the second lowest (36 out of 100), only after Japan (30 out of 100). Even though the survey was not specific on the South China Sea dispute, it showed general dislike or even animosity among the Chinese citizens towards the Philippines.

Baidu Search Index (BSI), which tracks the daily search activity of given keywords on China's most dominant search engine *baidu.com*, offers a useful measurement for the level of public attention prior to the crisis. Figure 1 shows an average of about four thousand in the search index for the word "South China Sea" during the one-year period before the start of the crisis, with several surges throughout the period. As a reference, the all-time average of such searches is 2,773.[60]

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[59] "Bacheng minzhong zhichi junshi huiji Nanhai tiaoxin – Zhongguo zhoubian anquan gongzhong taidu diaocha baogao (80% Citizens Support Military Response to South China Sea Provocations – Survey Report on Public Attitudes on China's Peripheral Security)," *Global Times*, 2 May 2012, 3.

[60] The BSI data is available between 1 January 2011 and 15 October 2017. 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

Figure 1: Daily Search Index of the Word "South China Sea" on Baidu.com, 5/31/2015-5/31/2016

The court's announcement sparked an enormous and spontaneous public outcry on the Internet. From July 1–20, the number of relevant microblog posts soared to over five million.[61] Large-scale protests were expected, as shown in the increased security of the Philippine Embassy in Beijing, but were nipped in the bud by the authorities. Zhao observes that, right before the release of the ruling, "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."[62]

However, strong evidence suggests a moderate policy preference by Beijing. Interviews with scholars who have privileged access to policy-making reveal that Beijing "wanted the issue to go away from the very beginning."[63] After carefully weighing the pros and cons, and consulting international law experts, Beijing made a decision to neither participate in nor accept the arbitration. Throughout this process, Beijing gave little consideration to punishing or threatening to punish Manila when it had plenty of opportunities to do so.[64] Instead, it engaged in diplomatic efforts to persuade Manila to drop the case. As Philippine Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario remarked, Beijing had "come to us many times to say that arbitration should not be the answer to this dispute,

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account China's increasing population of internet users, so these data are comparable over time and between different keywords searched.

[61] Yesha Jiang and Jiaojiang Luo, "Hulianwang Meijie Zhiyu Guojia Rentong de Goujian: Yi Nanhai Zhongcai'an Yuqing Chuanbo Wei Li (The Internet Media and the Construction of National Identity – Using the South China Sea Arbitration Case as an Example)," *Xinwenjie (The News World)* 24 (2016).

[62] Jinsong Zhao, "Ying Jiajin Yulun Yingdui 'Feilvbin Nanhai Zhongcai'an' (China Must Strengthen Media Counter-Measures Against the Philippines' South China Sea Arbitration Case)," *Gonggong Waijiao Jikan (Public Diplomacy Quarterly)* 2, no. Summer (2016).

[63] Author interviews, Beijing, China, 29 May 2017.

[64] Author interviews, Beijing, China, 26 May 2017 and 29 May 2017.

this should be [done through] bilateral consultations."[65] After such endeavors had failed, Beijing's behavior became largely "reactive" and "remedial."[66]

The actual policy pursued by Beijing corroborates the moderate intent. As soon as the initial poll on May 10 indicated Rodrigo Duterte had won the election, Beijing was quick to express its hope that the new Philippine government "would work towards the same direction with China."[67] Even at the height of the crisis in late June, Beijing took the opportunity to congratulate Duterte who had just been sworn in as the Philippines' new president. This is a strong indicator that Beijing was seeking new diplomatic channels to resolve the issue, but not escalation or retaliation. Chinese President Xi Jinping expressed his "willing[ness] to work with Duterte to push for improvement of relations," notably leaving out the ongoing arbitration.[68]

The military had stayed largely silent except on the day of the release of the ruling. The Ministry of Defense spokesperson proclaimed that no matter what the ruling was, the PLA would unswervingly defend China's national sovereignty, security and maritime rights. Even then, the spokesperson stressed that the naval exercise in the South China Sea was just an annual routine exercise, reassuring Manila that the exercise was not a signal of preference for use of force.[69]

An official statement and a white paper China released immediately after the award "announces China's readiness to make practical temporary arrangements with the Philippines to reduce tension and seek cooperation."[70] On August 8, Beijing sent delegates to meet Philippines'

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[65] Lally Weymouth, "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/.

[66] Author interviews, Beijing, China, 26 May 2017 and 29 May 2017.

[67] "Xiwang Feilvbin xinyijie zhengfu tong zhongfang xiangxiang'erxing (Hope the New Philippine Government will Work toward the Same Direction with China)," *People's Daily*, 10 May 2016, 21.

[68] "China Congratulates Philippines' New President Duterte," *The Diplomat*, 1 July 2016, https://thediplomat.com/2016/07/china-congratulates-philippines-new-president-duterte/.

[69] "Guofangbu xinwen fayanren: Zhongguo jundui jiang jianding buyi hanwei guojia zhuquan, anquan he haiyang quanyi (Department of Defense Spokesperson: Chinese Military Will Unswervingly Defend National Sovereignty, Security, and Maritime Rights)," *People's Daily*, 13 July 2016, 3.

[70] Feng Zhang et al, "China's Claims in the South China Sea Rejected," *ChinaFile*, 12 July 2016, https://www.chinafile.com/conversation/chinas-claims-south-china-sea-rejected.

former president Fidel Ramos in Hong Kong to "break the ice." Invited by President Xi, President Duterte visited China on October 20. The two met and agreed to resume direct talks on the dispute. After Duterte's visit, China reported that the "China–Philippine relations have been turned around and put on a track of all-around improvement."[71]

Besides initiating diplomatic exchanges, Beijing also made a number of conciliatory gestures. At the China-ASEAN Foreign Ministers' summit a few days after the release of the ruling, Beijing made a concession by promising that it would not carry out land reclamation on the Scarborough Shoal.[72] In August, another China–ASEAN summit in China resulted in a hotline for maritime emergencies, a Joint Statement on the Application of the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea in the South China Sea, and the pledge to finalize a draft for a code of conduct by mid-2017.[73] China also allowed Filipino fishermen to return to the vicinity of the Scarborough Shoal.[74] These compromises would not have been possible if China had a hardline intent.

A wide gap thus existed between public opinion and state preference. On the one hand, the Chinese government was not willing to yield to public opinion because a military escalation would hurt China's foreign policy interests. Nor was there a need for it to, because public opinion was malleable. According to a senior Chinese scholar, the government understood the costs of its previous bullheaded approach, particularly in the Scarborough Shoal standoff and the brawl with the US on the artificial islands – Beijing feared that its actions had alienated countries in the region.[75] Given the legal nature of the case, a hardline policy was not only inappropriate, but could further

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[71] People's Republic of China (PRC) Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on May 19," (Beijing, 14 July 2016), http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1463588.shtml.
[72] 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," (Beijing, 25 July 2016), http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/nanhai/eng/zcfg_1/t1384245.htm.
[73] PRC MoFA, "The 13th Senior Officials' Meeting on the Implementation of the DOC Held in Manzhouli, Inner Mongolia," (Beijing, 16 August 2016), http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/nanhai/eng/wjbxw_1/t1389619.htm.
[74] "Filipino fisherman back in disputed South China Sea shoal after Duterte's Beijing pivot," *South China Morning Post*, 30 October 2016, http://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/2041371/filipino-fisherman-back-disputed-south-china-sea-shoal.
[75] Author interview, Beijing, China, 29 May 2017.

tarnish China's international image and feed right into the accusation of China being an international "outlaw." China needed a conciliatory approach to ameliorate the diplomatic situation with the Philippines and salvage its international reputation. On the other hand, the deviating public opinion remained an obstacle for such a policy that the government could not ignore. China already faced high tides of criticism and resentment for what was considered by many a "diplomatic debacle" – the mere presence of the crisis and the impending unfavourable ruling. If left untethered, the nationalist sentiment could very well turn against the government and weaken the Party's rule. China needed the public to stand behind its policy of choice, in this case a moderate policy, even only tacitly. In the Chinese state media's own words, "the state's attitude and the public's stand…in unison…provides the public opinion basis and conditions for China to deal with the South China Sea dispute."[76]

To align public opinion with its preferred policy, China launched a media campaign in June and July of 2016. In a short period of 61 days, *People's Daily* published a total of 206 articles, with nine in the front pages. These included an eight-part series of commentaries by the *People's Daily* editorial staff. *Xinhua News* also published a ten-part editorial series, one article a day in the ten days leading up to the release of the ruling. In Figure 2, the timeline plot of *People's Daily* coverage between 2010 and 2016 exhibits a massive spike in June and July of 2016.

Figure 2: Monthly Count of *People's Daily* Articles on the Sino–Philippines South China Sea Dispute, 2010–2016

Not only was there a big increase in media coverage, but internal notes circulated among major state media outlets showed that the increase was deliberated by the top leadership. An internal note, dated July 11, called editors to "continue to follow the Party Central Committee's directives… and fight well this public opinion battle ..." Another note dated July 13 instructed "the editorial departments

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[76] "Hanyang lixing baorong de guomin xintai (Cultivate A Rational and Inclusive National Mentality,)" *People's Daily*, 20 July 2016, 5.

and relevant branches to follow the leadership's command and the reporting plan previously prepared."[77]

What about an audience costs explanation? Could it be that Beijing used the media campaign to agitate public opinion for the purpose of coercing Manila to drop the case, or even to score points on its claim towards the South China Sea? The timing and the private nature of the coercion, however, are at odds with such an argument. If the audience costs logic is at work, China would have made its threats public when engaging in coercion. Beijing did engage in coercion before Manila initiated the case and during the early stages of the arbitration. After the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff, Beijing tried to coerce Manila to recognize the fait accompli in the Scarborough Shoal and to deter Manila from internationalizing the issue. During Vice-Foreign Minister Fu Ying's visit to Manila in October 2012, Fu demanded Manila "not to appeal to the UN … not to 'internationalize' the issue … not to coordinate with any other country such as the US." But the coercion went behind closed doors. Fu also demanded Manila "not to issue press releases" and Fu's remarks were not publicized until the following January by *Wall Street Journal*.[78] Beijing issued no public threats whatsoever. After such deterrence failed and Manila announced its plan to intiative the arbitration in January 2013, Beijing tried to coerce Manila to drop the case. In August 2013, China insisted that the Philippine President Benigno Aquino III withdrew the arbitration as a condition for him to attend the annual China-ASEAN Expo. Aquino rejected the request and cancelled the trip.[79] As such, Beijing's second attempt at coercing Manila failed too. But a media campaign was not launched until June 2016, long after both attempts had failed and it became too late to coerce any change. The media campaign thus created a domestic buffer for Beijing to brace for impact after its failed coercion and

[77] These notes were quoted in several author interviews with journalists and editors working in official media outlets, Beijing, China, May 2017.
[78] Manila Takes A Stand," *The Wall Street Journal Asia*, 25 Jan 2013, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323539804578261140985134254.
[79] "Manila: China Set Impossible Conditions for Visit," *Associated Press News*, 2 September 2013, https://apnews.com/article/7c828474c9624391b07315716dac0731.

cleared the obstacle of a deviated public opinion for a moderate policy to remedy the situation.

Besides, the content of the campaign also does not chime with a hands-tying argument. The majority of the campaign being based on evidence, reasoning, and expert views, the echoing of public emotion staying away from indignation, and the consistent emphasis on the positive perspectives, are hard to reconcile with an antagonizing media campaign typical for engaging audience costs.

II. Hawkish Rhetoric That Pacified

This media campaign worked to move the hawkish public opinion to support or acquiesce to a moderate foreign policy, by dictating the discourse, echoing public sentiment, hardline "posturing," positive framing, delegitimizing "unhelpful" emotions, and letting vent.

First, rather than reacting passively, the campaign helped the state control the discourse. If Beijing had stayed silent or passive instead of engaging proactively through a massive campaign, impression of the arbitration as a "diplomatic debacle" would have been far more widely held, which could undermine the Party's legitimacy.

The government made sure its voice was the first heard, and the most resounding one. At every turn of events, for every unfavorable information or argument that surfaced, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) spokesperson responded quickly, sometime even pre-emptively, and *People's Daily* unfailingly published the remarks the following day. For example, on May 6, *People's Daily* published MoFA spokesperson Hong Lei's remarks refuting the accusation that China's non-participation was disrespectful of international law. Hong Lei justified China's position by citing the exclusion clause China had signed and contended that the arbitration was but a legal cloak for a political provocation. Appendix VI is a long but non-exhaustive list of such responses. The pattern of Chinese behavior was loud and clear – to drown out unfavorable arguments before they could gain any traction in the public.

Second, the state echoed the public sentiment with strongly worded statements, and according to an internal note circulated among all state media outlets, required these statements be

featured in salient places and reposted extensively.[80] For example, former Chinese State Councilor Dai Bingguo dismissed the ruling as "nothing but a piece of waste paper."[81] The then State Councilor Yang Jiechi dismissed the arbitration as a "political farce", "staged under the cover of law and driven by a hidden agenda."[82]

Echoing was necessary to soothe the angry public by sharing their voice and expressing their outrage. As a government official puts it:

> Sometimes the politically correct stuff [in the media] is just not enough for the people. Only the language we often find in *Global Times* [a newspaper under *People's Daily* knows for its hawkish content] helps the public vent their spleen. It helps the people let off steam by resonating with their feelings.[83]

People's Daily commentaries also changed their traditional Soviet propaganda-style language to more lively language that better resonates with the public. For example, a *People's Daily* commentary with the title "Flying the Flag of International Law can Hardly Hide the Ridiculous Base Color" writes, "Such faux pas by the US and the Philippines was frivolity, and also self-exposure – the so called 'arbitral court' was but a toy; the ruling in the name of international law was but a piece of paper full of lies."[84]

The echoing took several themes, be it rejecting the Philippines's territorial claim, and denouncing its arbitration move as "politicizing" and "abusing" international law;[85] undermining the neutrality and authority of the tribunal, calling it "makeshift," "a political tool," and "judicial

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[80] Author interview, Beijing, China, 28 May 2017.

[81] "Veteran Chinese Diplomat Warns on South China Sea Ruling," *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 July 2016, https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-CJB-29384.

[82] "Lishi bu rong cuangai, falv bu rong lanyong – Yang Jiechi jiu Nanhai zhongcai'an zhongcaiting zuochu suowei caijue jieshou Renmin Ribao deng Zhongyang meiti caifang (History Brooks No Distortion and Law No Abuse – Yang Jiechi Gives Interview to State Media on the So-called Award by the Arbitral Tribunal on the South China Sea Arbitration," *People's Daily*, 15 July 2016, 3.

[83] Author interview, Beijing, China, 9 June 2017.

[84] *People's Daily*, 10 July 2016, 3.

[85] "Zai Helan xuexi guojifa de Zhongguo liuxuesheng fabiao lianming gongkaixin – guojifa buneng chengwei zhengzhi gongju (Chinese Students Studying International Law in the Netherlands Issue A Joint Open Letter – International Law Cannot Be A Political Tool)," *People's Daily*, 14 July 2016, 12.

hooligans";[86] accusing the US of being the "invisible hand" behind the case, criticizing its

"meddling," its hypocrisy in regard to international law, and its ill intention to contain China;[87] and

arguing for the "harms" of the arbitration, including "dividing" ASEAN and threatening regional

stability.[88]

Notably, in contrast to the public sentiment, the echoing was filled with facts, reasoning, and

expert opinions, so the harshness was relatively mild. It also featured foreign-bashing from non-

Chinese experts for enhanced impartiality and attenuated risk of inadvertent escalation. Appendix

VII enumerates articles that echoed public opinion by citing foreign experts or reprinting articles

from foreign media.

Third, the above harsh rhetoric also had a "posturing" function to keep up the "tough"

appearances demanded by the public, so as to fend off nationalistic criticisms, save face, and

maintain social stability. This logic is reflected in a scholar's writing:

> [A]lthough 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.[89]

A government official also confirmed that the arbitration had "great impact on China's national

image," so Beijing had to "carry out a little playact."[90] The "posturing" appeared strident, yet no real

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[86] "Sikai linshi zhongcaiting 'fali quanwei' de xujia baozhuang (Tearing the False Packaging of 'Legal Authority' of the Temporary Tribunal)," *People's Daily*, 15 July 2016, 3; "Zhaiqu caotai banzi de guanghuan (qidi linshi zhongcaiting) (Taking Off the Halo of the 'Troupe' (The Temporary Tribunal Revealed))," *People's Daily*, 17 July 2016, 3.

[87] "Nanfei zishen guoji wenti pinglunyuan kanwen – quanmian jieshao Nanhai wenti lishi jingwei, shenke jielu Meiguo chashou Nanhai wenti shizhi (South African Senior Commentator on International Issues Publishes Article That Comprehensively Introduces the South China Sea Issue and Uncovers the US' Meddling)," *People's Daily*, 21 May 2016, 3; "Meiguo lumang zhi ju weihai Yazhou anquan (Reckless Move by the US endangers Asian security)," *People's Daily*, 9 July 2016, 2; "Shuangchong biaozhun shi dui guoji fazhi de xiedu – Nanhai zhongcai'an buguo shi chang zhengzhi naoju (Double Standards Are A Desecration of International Rule of Law – the South China Sea Arbitration Was Nothing But A Political Farce)," *People's Daily*, 15 July 2016, 3.

[88] "Zhongcai jieguo wuyi diqu heping (The Arbitration Ruling Is Not Beneficial to Regional Peace)," *People's Daily*, 21 July 2016, 3.

[89] Shuqin Shi, "Feilvbin Tiqi Nanhai Zhengduan Qiangzhi Zhongcai de Yuanyin, Houguo Ji Zhongguo de Yingdui (The Causes and Consequences of the Forced Arbitration Case Brought by the Philippines and How China Should React)," *Yingguo Yanjiu (England Studies)*, no. 7 (2015).

[90] Author interview, Beijing, China, 26 May 2017.

threats were made to the Philippines; the only threat issued to the US was vague. "Washington should recognize that there is a bottom line with every issue and a price will be paid if that line is crossed," – where that "bottom line" lied and what "price" would be paid were unspecified.[91]

The campaign also had ample reports on the proactive actions taken by the government, for instance, the Twelfth ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting to implement the "Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea," the meeting between Dai Bingguo and US former deputy secretary of State John Negroponte, and Foreign Minister Wang Yi's telephone talk with US Secretary of State John Kerry.[92] These reports signaled the authorities' diligence and confidence in handling the crisis and safeguarding China's national interests.

Fourth, the media "positive-framed" the dispute by concentrating on a few positive themes. Contrasting to the echoing themes, which focused on accusation of the Philippines and the US, these positive themes defended and commended China itself. One theme defended China's territorial claim, elaborated China's position on the arbitration, and explained its legal basis. Another theme cited favorable remarks from international legal experts and enumerated countries and organizations supporting China's position. An internal note circulated among state media outlets specifically tasked the editors and journalists to "search for and take advantage of news and information that work in our favor."[93] Articles enumerating supportive countries and organizations added up to 46, accounting for more than a quarter of all the articles published during the crisis. A third theme stressed the peace-loving nature of the Chinese people. "The genes of peace are deeply rooted in the blood of the Chinese people…China will continue to be a participant, a builder, and a contributor to

[91] "Meiguo, xuanyao wuli jiushi gao baquan! (America, Showing Off Muscles Is Practicing Hegemony!)," *People's Daily*, 22 June 2016, 2; "Meiguo bu yao zai Nanhai wenti shang chongzhuang dixian (America Must Not Cross the Bottom Line on the South China Sea Issue)," *People's Daily*, 6 July 2016, 3.

[92] "Luoshi 'Nanhai gefang xingwei xuanyan' di shi'er ci gaoguan hui juxing (The Twelfth Senior Officials Meeting to Implement the 'Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea' Was Held)," *People's Daily*, 11 June 2016, 3; "ZhongMei zhiku Nanhai wenti duihua zai Huashengdun juxing (Dialogue on the South China Sea Issue by Chinese and American Think Tanks Was Held in Washington)," *People's Daily*, 6 July 2016, 1; "Wang Yi tong Meiguo guowuqing Keli tong dianhua (Wang Yi Holds Telephone Talks with US Secretary of State John Kerry)," *People's Daily*, 7 July 2016, 21.

[93] Author interview, Beijing, China, 28 May 2017.

the international order…"[94] A fourth theme focused on technological or infrastructure achievements related to the islands to invoke a sense of pride and assurance in the average citizens. Examples include a briefing on the construction of five lighthouses on China-occupied features and a front-page picture of China's 10,000-meter-class manned submersible arriving in waters of the South China Sea for scientific research.[95] A fifth theme underlined China's cooperation with ASEAN, whose strategic importance was unmistakable given its relevance to the dispute and its multilateral nature useful for China to salvage its international image.

Despite the conflictual nature of the case, positive words such as "peace," "justice," "stability," "win-win cooperation," and "mutual development" filled the pages. Studies find that articles with positive attitudes dominated the media during this time. In June 2016, articles with positive attitudes exceeded those with negative attitudes by 25.5%, and this number rose even higher to 40% in July.[96]

Fifth, given the concern that the hawkish public opinion might turn on the state, the campaign worked to delegitimize "harmful" emotions by encouraging reason and rationality. As attested by an editor:

> Because the ruling was expected to be unfavorable [to China], we need to help the public 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.[97]

Toward this end, the state media indulged in investigative reporting; expert opinions were widely solicited. *People's Daily* interviewed a great number of Chinese and international law professors and maritime law experts. During the arbitration, Chinese scholars were called on by the state and

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[94] "Zhongguo yizhi he nengli de biran xuanze (The Inevitable Choice Due to China's Will and Capability)," *People's Daily*, 27 June 2016, 3.

[95] "Jiaotong yunshu bu jieshao Nanhai daojiao 5 zuo dengta jianshe qingkuang zhi chu wo guo shizhong zhuiqiu weihu Nanhai chuanbo hangxing anquan (The Ministry of Transportation Briefed on the Construction Progress of 5 Lighthouses in the South China Sea Islands and Reefs – Our Country Will Continue to Safeguard Navigation Safety in the South China Sea)," *People's Daily*, 11 July 2016, 6; Picture news on *People's Daily*, 18 July 2016, 1.

[96] *South China Sea Public Opinion Newsletter* (Nanjing: Collaborative Innovation Center of South China Sea Studies, Nanjing University, June 2016), 1; *South China Sea Public Opinion Newsletter* (Nanjing: Collaborative Innovation Center of South China Sea Studies, Nanjing University, July 2016), 1.

[97] Author interview, Beijing, China, 7 June 2017.

published a total of 2,880 academic papers on the subject.[98] All of these suggest the adoption of an evidence- and reasoning-based approach, serving as antidote to negative emotions that might derail social and political stability.

The state media was unequivocal about its distaste for the kind of "patriotism" that took it to the street. A *People's Daily* article called it "confused love" that fell to the whims of "blind impulse and extreme action," "bringing harm to our society and country." Instead, it advocated for the kind of "patriotism" infused with "rationality, pragmatism, and tolerance." The "correct" form of patriotism should aslo incorporate a "great power mentality" that featured "tolerance, inclusiveness, calm and confidence."[99] All of these aimed at inducing a more dovish or tolerant public opinion.

Lastly, social media allows the public to vent their anger within the "safe bounds" defined by the state. Likening her job to flood control, an official media's online forum editor said, "When the tides are too high, the method of barrier blocking gives way to the drainage systems."[100]

The outpour of public emotion in online forums and social media was phenomenal. During July 1–20, over five million online comments were posted on Sina Weibo.[101] 31 hours after the release of the ruling, 3,941,730 Weibo comments and 25,130 WeChat articles were posted. Weibo accounts of *People's Daily*, *Global Times*, and CCTV were all very active. *People's Daily*'s official Weibo account's hashtag "China: not even a bit can be left out" was retweeted over 1.5 million times by the evening of the day it was launched.[102]

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[98] Zhao, "Ying Jiajin Yulun Yingdui 'Feilvbin Nanhai Zhongcai'an' (China Must Strengthen Media Counter-Measures Against the Philippines' South China Sea Arbitration Case)."
[99] "Hanyang lixing baorong de guomin xintai (Cultivate A Rational and Inclusive National Mentality,)" *People's Daily*, 20 July 2016, 5.
[100] Author interview, Beijing, China, 5 June 2017.
[101] Jiang and Luo, "Hulianwang Meijie Zhiyu Guojia Rentong de Goujian: Yi Nanhai Zhongcai'an Yuqing Chuanbo Wei Li (The Internet Media and the Construction of National Identity – Using the South China Sea Arbitration Case as An Example)."
[102] Jingzhong Xie and Jun Zhu, "Nanhai Zhongcai'an Shejiao Meiti de Yulun Fansi (Reflections on Public Opinoin on Social Media on the South China Sea Arbitration)," *Xinwen Yanjiu Daokan (Journal of News Research)* 7, no. 19 (2016): 19–20.

Social media posts were filled with anger, ridicule, and reproach. Their often playful style corroborates their non-serious purpose of mere venting. The Internet teemed with jokes such as "boycotting dried mango," parodies using the Goddess of Mercy, who, according to legends, dwelled in the South China Sea, and the trendy phrase of "Don't be too Philippine." Large-scale public protests were forbidden. The Central Propaganda Department ordered the media "not to hype or disseminate information on the recent illegal gatherings and protests." [103]

CONCLUSION

This paper explains why and how authoritarian states launch media campaigns during foreign disputes. I have developed and tested a misalignment theory, and have described two distinct types of resulting propaganda, especially the pacification type. I argue that states adopt media campaigns to either mobilize a dovish/weak public opinion to support a hardline foreign policy, or to pacify a hawkish public opinion to allow for a moderate foreign policy. The bottom line of the argument is that closing the state–public gap matters for foreign policy execution in authoritarian states, but the state has the dominant agency in achieving that, through the mobilization and the pacification functions of the media. These functions combined provide a fuller picture of how authoritarian leaders employ the media to serve its foreign policy needs. It is a new story of authoritarian resilience, one that combines domestic survival and international security.

This research has not only found evidence for the misalignment theory, but also for the audience costs theory, as well as the conditions under which each operates. The pacification mechanism works best with hawkish public opinion and moderate state policy intent, while audience costs is more common in situations with hawkish public opinion and hardline state policy intent. The

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[103] "(Zhenlibu) Feifa jihui youxing xinxi" ((The Truth Department) Information on Illegal Gatherings and Demonstrations), *China Digital Times*, 18 July 2016, https://goo.gl/VrRV3Z.

reserved nature of the ambiguous media campaign in the audience costs cases also adds nuance to the audience costs theory by revealing the limits states are willing go in incurring audience costs.

The main policy implication of this study is that decision makers need to acknowledge the prevalence of the pacification rhetoric by authoritarian states and understand its rationale and mechanics. Hawkish language should not always be interpreted by outsiders as escalatory. There may be more to the harsh rhetoric than meets the eye. Only by understanding the complex domestic dynamics in these countries, outside leaders could begin to see beyond the façade of the official nationalist rhetoric and read intentions more intelligently.

This is why it is also essential for international observers to distinguish the pacification rhetoric from the mobilization rhetoric. Pacification campaigns adopt seemingly similar harsh rhetoric that raises public awareness and issue salience of the dispute, but they merely serve echoing and posturing purposes, so in contrast to the extreme harshness in mobilization campaigns, they are milder than the public sentiment, and more inward looking – amplifying the government's own diligence and competence in safeguarding national interests than outward looking – condemning others. Pacification usually goes hand in hand with painstaking efforts to preempt external escalations and hollow threats of punishment, whereas states in mobilization mode has no qualms in escalatory actions or issuance of substantive punishment. Pacification also engages in positive framing to balance out the harsh rhetoric for echoing and posturing, delegitimizes destabilizing social emotions conducive to violence or defiance to the authorities, promotes positive emotions such as national pride or less emotions for an "objectivist" approach, allows or even encourages venting on social media but bars and prevents actions.

The theory's three scope conditions and the evidence in this study also suggests a more contemporary setting for the pacification mechanism. As digital authoritarianism develops further with continuous technology advances and state learning, pacification will only become more

prevalent. Future studies should explore the applicability of the theory to other authoritarian

countries, and even democracies.