



# Intuitive deterrence theorists...with feelings? Perceptions of Chinese resolve in a crisis

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## Abstract

Recent experimental research has found citizens to be “intuitive deterrence theorists” who judge the resolve of foreign states based on their capabilities, material stakes, past behavior and costly signals. Yet there are good reasons to expect that subjective feelings toward the specific country in question—variables that are difficult to capture in genericized experimental designs—could also condition such judgements. We test this proposition using original 2022 data from an 11 country survey on China ( $N = 13,051$ ), and a three-pronged measure of resolve that disaggregates its military, economic and general aspects. On the one hand, citizens’ estimations of China’s resolve in a crisis scenario do correlate with their perceptions of its military and economic capabilities, consistent with the expectations of deterrence theory. On the other hand, negative subjective feelings toward China were a similarly powerful predictor of higher estimations of its resolve. The results suggest that where states seek to convey a resolved image to foreign audiences, negatively disposed individuals will be more likely to perceive it, potentially entrenching opposition to compromise.

## Keywords

China, perceptions, predispositions, reputation, resolve

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## Introduction

On 2 August 2022 US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and a congressional delegation boarded a plane in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, bound for Taiwan. For months, China's officials and propaganda outlets had fulminated on the dire consequences if the Speaker's long-touted visit proceeded. One editor of a centrally run tabloid explicitly raised the prospect of the People's Liberation Army shooting down Pelosi's plane. By the time the US Air Force C-40C approached Taipei, its flight path had become the most watched in the history of online flight tracking websites. Once the delegation departed, 20 hours later, China's military launched an unprecedented series of military exercises encircling the island, firing dozens of ballistic missiles into the surrounding sea, simulating a blockade, and sending fighter jets across the median line in the Taiwan Strait. For many foreign observers, China's response indicated its resolve to use force over the issue. Yet for others, the exercises showed instead that Beijing was unwilling to follow through on its threats with real military action.

These divergent interpretations of China's resolve over Taiwan issue illustrate the ongoing problem of assessing resolve in an international environment awash with ambiguous information. Experimental research has suggested citizens respond to this problem as "intuitive deterrence theorists," using heuristics based on an actor's material capabilities, stakes, past behavior and costly signals to assess their resolve (Kertzer et al., 2021). Yet there are good reasons to expect that observers' actor-specific attitudes and feelings could also condition such judgements. Such sentiments are difficult to capture using the genericized experimental survey designs featuring pseudonymous states (e.g. State A, State B) that have been widely deployed in recent research. Based on a crisis scenario focused on China, embedded in surveys of citizens in 11 Indo-Pacific countries neighboring China, this article suggests respondents' pre-existing attitudes toward the specific state in question are a key factor shaping estimations of resolve.

The cultivation and projection of resolve was integral to both theory and practice of deterrence in the twentieth century and remains central the international relations field's search for the causes of war. For the rationalist school of international relations theory, private information about one's own resolve, combined with structural incentives to misrepresent it, constitutes a prime source of bargaining failures that produce wars (Fearon, 1995). From this perspective better information and communication about the balance of resolve in specific disputes should reduce war's incidence. Yet assessing the resolve of specific countries is not straightforward. In the case of China, for example, how do observers judge the resolve of an economic superpower power with a burgeoning defence budget but little recent track record of fighting major wars, and an extensive track record of employing informal, plausibly deniable sanctions (cf. Zhang and Shanks, 2025)? Faced with such ambiguity, do situational factors such as relative capabilities and material stakes dominate observers' estimations of China's resolve? Or do observers fall back on their predispositions, subjective feelings or policy preferences toward the country in question?

This paper sheds light on these questions by analyzing original 2022 survey data from 11 countries ( $N=13,051$ ) in the Indo-Pacific region. We presented respondents in South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, India, Kazakhstan, New Zealand and Australia with a plausible real-world crisis scenario involving their own country and the superpower on their doorstep, China. We then measured their estimations of China's likelihood of using force, imposing economic punishment, and backing down. The results show, on the one hand, that respondents' estimations of China's resolve correlate strongly with their assessments of its capabilities. However, respondents' subjective feelings toward China also strongly conditioned these judgements, with *negative* feelings correlated with higher estimations of China's resolve, and China-friendly sentiments associated with *lower* estimations of its resolve. Indo-Pacific observers

may indeed be “intuitive deterrence theorists” whose estimations of China’s resolve reflect their views of its capabilities, but these results suggest their judgements are also closely related to how they feel toward the country.

The article makes three key contributions to the extensive literatures on resolve and reputations. First, it pushes forward the cutting edge of research on how observers assess resolve, complementing recent experimental studies based on genericized vignettes by measuring resolve estimations toward a specific, high-salience authoritarian state in a realistic scenario. Second, we operationalize a three-prong measure of resolve perceptions—*military resolve*, *economic resolve* and *general resolve*—that produces a disaggregated picture of how a country’s resolve is perceived, and opens up the possibility of exploring multiple dimensions of a state’s image of resolve in future research. Third, by presenting data from a diverse range of countries across East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia and Oceania, the study expands empirical evidence on the dynamics of perception, resolve and crisis management into the Indo-Pacific, a key region in which contemporary geostrategic competition is unfolding.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. We begin by reviewing recent advances in the literature on observers’ assessment of resolve, noting the ongoing gap in understanding the role of actor-specific attitudes and preferences, which may be particularly important in relation to high-salience actors such as neighboring states and global powers such as the United States. We then lay out a range of hypotheses derived from situational, reputational and dispositional theories of resolve perceptions, and specify the patterns of individual and country-level variation we should expect to observe in our cross-national survey data if each is valid. Next, we outline our observational research design, based on a plausible crisis scenario between each country and China, and a three-dimensional measure of resolve perceptions. We then present the empirical results, and conclude by reflecting on the implications for the theory and practice of deterrence, and suggesting several further lines of research.

## Sources of resolve perceptions

Deterrence theorists have long argued that perceptions of resolve in international politics arise from a combination of capabilities, credible commitments, and reputations for resolve formed by demonstrating a general willingness to fight (Huth, 1997; Schelling, 1960, 1966). The latter element has proved contentious, with critics arguing that such reputations either do not form in observers’ minds or do not matter much in their decision making (Mercer, 1996). Subsequent rationalist frameworks have approached both resolve itself, and observers’ perceptions thereof, as derivative of calculations of an actor’s capabilities and interests in the situation at hand (Fearon, 1994; Press, 2005). A more recent wave of scholarship has revived the reputation thesis by exploring the conditions under which leaders form beliefs about others’ resolve from their past behavior (Crescenzi, 2018; Jackson, 2016; Lupton, 2020; Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo, 2015). However, large gaps remain in understanding the psychological and emotional factors that may affect perceptions of others’ resolve (Jervis et al., 2021).

A recent series of experimental studies has investigated the factors that shape observers’ assessments of resolve. Kertzer et al.’s (2021) conjoint experiment measured US citizens’ assessments of a crisis between two generically described states (Country A and Country B) with varying situational and reputational properties, along with tied-hands and sunk-cost signals. The results suggested the respondents were “intuitive deterrence theorists,” assessing the resolve of states primarily on the basis of capabilities, stakes, costly signals and track records in past crises. The study found a conspicuous absence of heterogeneity, with the treatment effects unrelated to

individual-level factors such as education and foreign policy preferences (Kertzer et al., 2021). However, in a related experiment with a sample of Israeli elites, individual heterogeneity was evident, with the effects of costly signals on resolve estimations depending in part on respondents' attitudes to the use of military force (Yarhi-Milo et al., 2018). Renshon et al.'s (2023) experiment, fielded among citizens in the United States, UK, Israel and South Korea, identified regime type as a key factor, with states described as autocracies seen as much more likely to follow through on threats to use force. Most recently, Wayne et al. (2025) found evidence that the social setting in which people make such assessments also matters, with groups tending to make higher estimations of adversaries' resolve than individuals.

Despite these advances, significant gaps remain in understanding observers' assessments of resolve. First, despite extensive debate over the role of reputations, which center on the extent to which resolve estimations hinge on a state or leader's past behavior, there has been little systematic, large-*N* empirical research on how observers assess the resolve of specific countries of interest. China scholars have detailed Beijing's efforts to cultivate a resolved image, including through both military escalation and economic punishment (Christensen, 1996; Whiting, 1975; Wiegand, 2011; Zhang, 2024). This has often failed: from the Sino-Indian border to diplomatic imbroglios over COVID-19 and trade wars with the United States, foreign observers have often miscalculated China's resolve, contributing to escalation of military, economic and political conflicts (Chen, 2022, Ch. 6; Ferguson et al., 2023; Jost, 2023, 2024). China's highly nationalistic, but also increasingly authoritarian, domestic political environment carries a wide range of potential implications for its resolve in crisis situations, further increasing uncertainty (Li and Chen, 2021; Liu and Shao, 2024; Quek and Chan, 2024; Quek and Johnston, 2018). This study is, to our knowledge, the first to investigate how observers assess China's resolve using cross-national survey data.

A second gap concerns the relationship between observers' resolve estimations and their subjective feelings and preferences toward the specific actor in question. While designs deployed in the recent wave of experimental studies, typically featuring generic vignettes with unnamed or fictitious states, have helped boost the generalizability of findings, they also preclude measurement of observers' attitudes toward the country in question. There are reasons to expect that these could matter, although the precise nature of the relationship is both theoretically and empirically underexplored. Friendly observers might be inclined to see a state as highly resolved behind principled and reasonable positions, while those with negative predispositions might see the same state as a bully that is likely to back down if it is met with tough resistance. Yet the opposite relationship is also plausible: a state's friends may well perceive it as flexible and open to compromise, while critics and skeptics might see it as intransigent and prone to escalatory violence. Observers' country-specific predispositions could be particularly influential where the state in question is a significant other, such as a neighbor, rival or regional power, as China is for most countries in the Indo-Pacific.

Third is the need for disaggregated measurements of resolve. International relations scholarship has traditionally addressed resolve in terms of the willingness to use force. Yet as Huth (1997, p. 75) pointed out more than two decades ago, the question of what exactly an actor is resolved to do is crucial. Jervis et al. (2021, p. 192) note that most scholarship in the field "still refers to reputation and credibility as single entities," suggesting that "it would be better to talk about credibility and reputation *for what*" (emphasis added). Few studies have so far taken up this challenge by directly measuring actors' perceived resolve across multiple dimensions, such as resolve to use military force vs. economic sanctions.<sup>1</sup> The commonly assumed dichotomy between willingness to fight vs. unwillingness to back down also warrants scrutiny. In the 2012 crisis over Scarborough Shoal, for example, a disputed atoll in the South China Sea, Beijing was reticent to use military force, conspicuously keeping its burgeoning navy away from the scene, but escalated economic

and political coercion and refused to back down, eventually seizing control of the shoal after outlasting the Philippines in a 3 month standoff (Chubb, 2026; Clemente, 2016; De Castro, 2016). Given that national power is very often exercised unevenly across multiple dimensions, it makes sense to measure observers' assessments of an actor's resolve accordingly.

This study addresses these gaps using a country-specific scenario anchored to real-world disputed geographies to measure views of the resolve of China among citizens in 11 of its neighboring countries. Leveraging both country-level and individual-level variation, it assesses the situational, reputational and dispositional explanations for citizens' perceptions of China's resolve in regional crises in the Indo-Pacific, in the process operationalizing a multi-dimensional measure of resolve across military, economic and general dimensions. The next section distils a range of specific hypotheses to be tested against this unique data, based on factors that the existing literature has suggested would be likely to shape observers' perceptions of the resolve of a state such as China in its contested region.

### **Situational factors: Material capabilities and stakes**

A prominent line of research, from deterrence theory to rationalist bargaining models of war, has treated an actor's resolve as a function of their interests in the situation at hand. As Kertzer (2016, pp. 16–17) suggests, aside from parsimony, a key advantage of this approach is that it renders the concept tractable. Using such an approach, one can estimate an actor's resolve by studying objective particulars of a situation, such as the magnitude of each side's material stakes in the dispute, and the military balance that will likely determine the relative costs of war. Situational views of resolve therefore offer an appealing and potentially useful heuristic for observers in a world saturated with ambiguous and contradictory information (Kertzer et al., 2021). As outlined below, such situational views of resolve generate a relatively clear set of expectations about how observers in China's region should assess its resolve, based on its military and economic capabilities and material stakes in the disputed area.

### **Capabilities**

Both classical deterrence theory and later rationalist theories have emphasized the importance of military capabilities in shaping perceptions of resolve (McManus, 2017; Press, 2005; Schelling, 1966). If citizens' assessment of China's resolve follows the expectations of these theories, they should be tightly linked with estimations of China's relevant capabilities. Respondents who have a higher estimation of China's military power should, all else being equal, give higher estimation of its resolve to use force in a crisis. This argument might also extend into the economic domain, particularly in the case of China in its regional disputes, which looms large as a global economic superpower located in the Indo-Pacific. If so, the higher respondents' estimations of China's economic power are, the higher their estimations should be of its resolve to impose significant economic punishments over the issue at hand.

- **H1a (military capability):** observers with higher estimations of China's military power have higher estimations of China's military resolve in a crisis.
- **H1b (economic capability):** observers with higher estimations of China's economic power have higher estimations of China's economic resolve in a crisis.

In the Indo-Pacific, alliances with the United States might also be expected to shape observers' assessment of China's relative material capabilities. Although the credibility of US deterrence has been challenged in "gray zone" scenarios short of war, in a direct military conflict US involvement could dramatically alter the balance of capabilities away from China. This suggests that where China's adversary in a crisis is a US treaty ally, observers might have lower estimations of Chinese military resolve, given the manifestly higher costs and risks to China of military conflict if the United States was involved.<sup>2</sup>

- **H1c (US alliances):** citizens of US-allied countries have lower estimations of China's military resolve in a crisis with their own country than citizens of non-US allies.

### *Material stakes*

The other key factor in the situational calculus of a state's resolve is the balance of material interests in the object of dispute, primarily territory and resources. The multi-layered nature of the disputes China is involved in around its periphery offer an opportunity to test this proposition via patterns of country-level variation in resolve estimations. China's disputes include concrete conflicts of interests over territory with its landward neighbors (Fravel, 2008), and islands and maritime resources with its seaward neighbors (Chubb, 2022), along with more abstract disputes with the United States and aligned countries over the international maritime order (Kardon, 2022; Strating, 2020). If the logic of situationally derived resolve applies to China, then observers in countries that do not claim territorial or resource rights in the area in question could be expected to recognize higher Chinese resolve in a bilateral crisis set there in view of China's greater objective material stakes.

- **H1d (material stakes):** observers in non-claimant countries have higher estimations of China's resolve in a crisis than respondents in claimant countries.

### **Past behavior**

Recent empirical work has revived the widely critiqued notion that resolved behavior has transferable effects, boosting estimations of the state's resolve in other settings or among other adversaries. As Copeland (1997) points out, at least some leaders, under certain conditions, demonstrably do update their beliefs about their adversary or ally's resolve on the basis of their behavior in other contexts. Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo (2015) presented support for this idea, finding that backing down in a militarized international dispute at one time increases the likelihood of further challenges in the future. The thesis is particularly plausible where observers perceive similarity across contexts (Crescenzi, 2018), and an even tighter scope condition suggests that past use of force toward the observer's own country should be most likely to leave an impression of resolve, particularly in the circumstances of a rivalry (Jackson, 2016; see also Jervis et al., 2021). China's varied historical relations with countries around its periphery offer the opportunity for an indicative test of this country-specific reputation argument.

The PRC's most recent large-scale applications of military force against regional rivals were against Vietnam in 1979 and 1988, and India in 1962. Historical consciousness of China's use of force is believed to be particularly strong in both of these countries, owing to systematic education campaigns, nationalist media and propaganda, and popular historical memory (Chubb, 2018;

Fravel, 2008; Yin and Path, 2021). In recent years, the PRC has also made territorial seizures against the Philippines in the South China Sea and India on the Sino-Indian border.<sup>3</sup> If dyadic or similarity-based reputational mechanisms inform citizens' estimations of military resolve, we might expect respondents in Vietnam, India and the Philippines to have significantly higher estimations of China's military resolve than those in other countries that have not been targets of such PRC aggression.<sup>4</sup>

The absence of large-scale applications of outright military force by the PRC in recent decades makes the general variant of the reputation thesis difficult to test in relation to military options. China does, however, have an extensive global track record of levying economic punishments against countries with which it has disagreements (Ferguson, 2025). Its mostly informal sanctions have affected dozens of industries and hundreds of companies in recent years, with targets ranging from Norway to the Philippines, South Korea, Australia, and Japan (Ferguson, 2025; Ferguson et al., 2023; Lim and Ferguson, 2022; Reilly, 2012; Weiss et al., 2023; Zhang and Shanks, 2025). This contrast between China's military and economic track records sets up an illustrative test for the more general reputational argument that past behavior influences resolve estimations across contexts. If this argument holds, observers around the region should give significantly higher estimations of China's economic resolve than its military resolve.

- **H1e (military track record):** respondents in countries that have recently experienced China's use of force have higher estimations of China's military resolve in a crisis.
- **H1f (economic track record):** respondents estimate China's economic resolve as significantly higher than its military resolve in a crisis.

## **Dispositional factors: General and specific**

An array of research has identified the influence of individual values and predispositions in the formation of key foreign policy attitudes (Brutger and Kertzer, 2018; Herrmann et al., 2009; Kertzer, 2017; Kertzer et al., 2014; Kertzer and Brutger, 2016; Rathbun et al., 2016; Yarhi-Milo et al., 2018). As Kertzer, Renshon and Yarhi-Milo note, the noisy information environment of international politics offers innumerable straw-in-the-wind indicators of resolve: "the problem is not one of connecting the dots, but of too many dots to connect" (Kertzer et al., 2021). While rationalist theories expect observers to respond to this by focusing on the tractable fundamentals of the situation, it is plausible that observers might fall back on pre-existing attitudes, particularly where the state in question is a neighbor or historical adversary, or otherwise highly salient. The range of potentially relevant predispositions is large; below we focus on three with clear potential relevance to crisis situations, and for which measurements are available: attitudes toward military force; subjective feelings toward the country in question; and foreign policy preferences toward that country.

### *Hawkishness*

Theory and empirical evidence suggests individuals' basic beliefs about the nature of international politics, particularly the role of military power, could influence their estimations of an adversary's resolve. Jervis (1976) distinguished the "deterrence model" and the "spiral model" as two contrasting mental models shaping decisionmakers' interpretation of evidence regarding a specific adversary. The deterrence model primed observers to focus on indicators of the adversary's aggressive intent, while observers disposed toward the spiral model looked for signs of misunderstandings

and misperceptions driving conflictual behavior. This suggests individuals with a hawkish, deterrence-model mindset would take adversaries' threats to use force more seriously in a crisis.

Specific attitudes regarding the use of military force have also been found to shape observers' assessments of an adversary's intentions, including their military resolve (Herrmann et al., 2009). Among Yarhi-Milo et al.'s (2018) sample of Israeli elites, military assertiveness—a belief in the efficacy of military force—was a strong predictor of whether observers would regard particular types of signals as a credible indicator of a state's resolve.<sup>5</sup> If such findings hold for China in a crisis involving the mobilization of military assets, respondents with stronger beliefs in the efficacy of military force may offer higher estimations of China's resolve to use military force.

- **H2a (hawkishness):** hawkish respondents with stronger beliefs in the efficacy of military force will give higher estimations of China's military resolve in a crisis.

### *Country-specific feelings*

Many citizens hold strong views regarding neighboring states, particularly those with territorial disputes, and global powers. In Asia, China is clearly one such actor (Goh, 2014; Han, 2024). There are strong reasons to expect that observers' feelings toward such a significant other could influence observers' views of its resolve in a crisis. As Kertzer et al. (2020) have shown, observers with negative predispositions toward an actor are more likely to overlook their signals of cooperative intent. How such country-specific feelings might relate to observers' assessments of a country's *resolve* is less clear. Positively disposed observers might be inclined to see a state as highly resolved, while those with negative predispositions might see a bully likely to back down if met with resistance. Equally, however, a state's friends may perceive it as ultimately reasonable and open to compromise, while skeptics might see it as intransigent and prone to escalatory violence. Thus, both negative and positive predispositions could incline observers toward higher estimations of an actor's resolve.

We therefore posit two contrasting hypotheses regarding the potential role of respondents' feelings toward China in shaping their estimations of its resolve in a crisis. The first suggests that friendlier observers would be inclined to see the state as more highly resolved, while observers with more negative predispositions see it as less resolved. The second suggests observers with a friendly view of a country will see it as reasonable and flexible in a crisis, while skeptics will tend to see it as escalatory and reckless. If so, then observers with warmer, more positive feelings toward China should give lower estimations of its resolve in a crisis scenario, while those with colder, more negative feelings give higher estimations of China's resolve.

- **H2b (positive feelings):** respondents with more positive feelings toward China will give higher estimations of its resolve in a crisis.
- **H2c (negative feelings):** respondents with more negative feelings toward China will give higher estimations of its resolve in a crisis.

### *China policy preferences*

Specific foreign policy preferences toward China offer another potential predictor of individuals' resolve estimations. One theoretical linkage between policy preferences and perceptions of resolve centers on the widely observed psychological phenomenon of motivated reasoning (Beattie and Snider, 2019; Jervis, 1976, pp. lxxiv–lxxxviii; Kertzer et al., 2020). This may incline citizens

who advocate a tougher policy toward China to view it as irresolute, since a tough policy stance is more likely to produce a positive outcome against an irresolute adversary. Conversely, citizens who prefer a more China-friendly foreign policy may be motivated to see China as higher in resolve in a crisis, since this could help justify cooperation or compromise in the situation at hand.

- **H2d (pro-China policy):** citizens who prefer a more China-aligned foreign policy view China as more resolved in a crisis.

Alternative explanations would be important to consider if the results are consistent with this hypothesis, as policy preferences toward a state such as China could be formed to some degree on the basis of judgements about its resolve. Such potential for reverse causality will be difficult to decisively rule out if the hypothesis passes. However, a failed test can strongly disconfirm the hypothesis. The next section details our approach to testing these hypotheses observationally across large-*N* surveys in 11 Indo-Pacific countries.

## Method

A crisis scenario was presented to citizens in Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, Philippines, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, Kazakhstan and India, as part of the Indo-Pacific module of the Sinophone Borderlands survey, a detailed online poll of citizens' views of China across 56 countries (Turcsányi et al., 2022).<sup>6</sup> As detailed below, respondents' estimations of China's resolve were measured across three dimensions: *military resolve* to use force; *economic resolve* to impose significant economic punishment; and *general resolve* not to back down. The surveys generally required around 20 min to complete, with the crisis scenario used in this research appearing toward the end of the questionnaire. The surveys were conducted in local languages (in Malaysia, India and the Philippines a choice of English was also offered), between 5 April and 15 September 2022.

### Scenario and DV measurement

The scenario presented respondents with a description of an accidental clash between their own country and China, in which Beijing issues a demand to detain personnel from the respondent's side, backed up by private threats of military and economic escalation. The India–China and Kazakhstan–China crises began with an accidental clash between patrol units on their disputed land borders with China, while the other nine countries' scenarios all centered on an accidental collision between ships in disputed waters (see Online Appendices A2.2 and A2.3).

Our dependent variable is respondents' estimation of China's resolve, measured across three dimensions: military, economic and general. The first, *military resolve*, follows the traditional concept of resolve in the deterrence literature, and was measured by asking respondents to estimate China's likelihood of using military force to realize its demands, even at the risk of war. The second, *economic resolve* was measured by asking respondents the likelihood that China would inflict serious economic punishment on their country. Our third measure, which we term *general resolve*, corresponds with straightforward ideas of resolve as an actor's propensity to continue a course of action in spite of incentives to the contrary (Kertzer, 2016, p. 3), perceptions of which are operationalized by asking observers to estimate China's likelihood of backing down in the face of resistance. Respondents answered this trio of questions on 100-point scales labelled from "impossible" (0%) to "certain" (100%).

Please imagine the following scenario:

It is one year in the future.

An accidental collision has occurred between [COUNTRY] and Chinese government ships in contested waters of the [DISPUTED AREA].



Several Chinese and [COUNTRY] personnel have unfortunately died in the accident. A Chinese army unit is at the scene, demanding to arrest the [COUNTRY] commander.

The ongoing standoff has been kept secret by both governments, and no news has reached the public. In private negotiations, Chinese officials have threatened economic punishment and if necessary military force if [COUNTRY] does not allow the arrest of the captain.

How likely do you think it is that China...

- will use force to arrest the captain (e.g. opening fire or seizing the [COUNTRY] ship) even if this would risk war?
  - will inflict serious economic punishment on [COUNTRY]?
  - will eventually back down from its demand if [COUNTRY] refuses?
- (0–100% scale, order randomized)

This three-part dependent variable measurement, including one reverse measure, allows the possibility of building a multi-dimensional picture of how China's resolve is viewed by Indo-Pacific audiences.

### *Independent variable operationalization*

We also operationalize measures of four factors—capabilities, stakes, alliances and past behavior—that have been identified as explanatory variables in the existing literature (see Kertzer et al., 2021). Perceived capabilities were measured directly via an item asked earlier in the survey, ensuring several minutes' separation from the scenario, inviting respondents to indicate on a seven-point scale, "How [militarily/economically] powerful or [militarily/economically] weak do you consider the following countries/entities? ... China."

The influence of material stakes, alliances and past behavior are estimated by leveraging cross-national variation.

- Higher material stakes for China are represented by a binary dummy variable with a value of 1 where the adversary was a non-claimant to the area's territory and resources and 0 for China's various rival claimants which have the same material interests in the disputed area as China.
- US alliance status is identified by the presence or absence of a formal mutual defense treaty: Australia, Japan, South Korea and the Philippines were therefore coded as 1, while others were coded as 0.<sup>7</sup>

- To identify PRC's recent use of force, Vietnam, India and the Philippines were coded as 1, while the other eight countries were coded as 0.<sup>8</sup>

These country-level features are summarized in Table 1, together with the scenario setting and the number of responses.

Pre-existing attitudes were measured using three items. The first, general hawkishness, was measured by degree of agreement with the statement, "The best way to ensure peace is through military strength," an item taken from a standard battery of questions measuring attitudes toward military capabilities and military force used in political psychology (Herrmann et al., 2009; Yarhi-Milo et al., 2018). The second, "feeling toward China," measured respondents' attitudes toward specific countries, including China, via a standard feeling thermometer scaled from 0 to 100, where 50 represents neutral feelings, above 50, warm, positive feelings, and below 50, cold and negative feelings toward China. Third, "China policy preference" asked respondents the degree to which they would like their country's foreign policy to be aligned with China's. Measured on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 ("not at all") to 10 ("completely"), those who score higher on this item can be understood as holding more pro-China foreign policy preferences.

We also apply a set of control variables drawing from the broader Sinophone Borderlands survey, including age, gender, tertiary education, nationalism, interest in politics, and frequency of

**Table 1.** Scenario settings and features of countries included in the survey dataset.

Country	Scenario setting	Country's stakes in scenario setting	PRC stakes in scenario setting	Relative material stakes	PRC past use of force	US ally
India		Territory	Territory	Balanced	Yes	No
Kazakhstan	Land border	Territory <sup>a</sup>	Territory	Balanced	No	No
South Korea	Yellow Sea	Resources	Resources	Balanced	No	Yes
Japan	East China Sea	Territory, resources	Territory, resources	Balanced	No	Yes
Taiwan	Taiwan Strait	Territory	Territory	Balanced	No	No <sup>b</sup>
Philippines		Territory, resources, maritime rules	Territory, resources, maritime rules	Balanced	Yes	Yes
Malaysia		Territory, resources, maritime rules	Territory, resources, maritime rules	Balanced	No	No
Vietnam		Territory, resources, maritime rules	Territory, resources, maritime rules	Balanced	Yes	No
Singapore	South China Sea	Maritime rules	Territory, resources, maritime rules	PRC higher	No	No
Australia		Maritime rules	Territory, resources, maritime rules	PRC higher	No	Yes
New Zealand		Maritime rules	Territory, resources, maritime rules	PRC higher	No	No <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Kazakhstan's border with China was demarcated by an agreement in 1994 that gave Kazakhstan 78% of a 2400 km<sup>2</sup> disputed territory. However, there has continued to be periodic friction between troops in the area.

<sup>b</sup>See Online Appendix A6.3 for results with Taiwan recoded as a US ally. The United States's Taiwan Relations Act does not provide any mutual defense assurance to Taiwan, although there is a strong expectation, including among the Taiwanese population, that the United States would in fact defend Taiwan if attacked. Experiments by Fu et al. (2025) indicate that the possibility of the US fighting and incurring casualties on Taiwan's behalf dramatically boosts Taiwanese support for military resistance to Chinese attack.

<sup>c</sup>New Zealand was a party to the 1951 ANZUS treaty, but security obligations between New Zealand and the United States have been suspended from the mid-1980s onwards.

personal interaction with Chinese people. Interest in politics generally correlates with stronger answers to a wide range of survey items, and is thus included as a control. Nationalism is measured by a battery of nine standard items used in international surveys such as the International Social Survey Project. Interaction with Chinese people was measured by presenting respondents with the question “How often do you personally interact with Chinese people (from the People’s Republic of China)?” and answered on an 11-point scale from 0 (never) to 10 (very often).

In the multivariate analysis that follows, we estimate models with each dimension of resolve (military, economic, general) as a separate dependent variable. We use a stepwise block entry process, with the measures of the situational and predispositional factors initially entered separately before being combined with the controls in the main model. The basic exploratory models (Models 1 and 2) are estimated first. We then present a more complex model (Model 3) with full individual-level controls. All models are estimated using a linear multilevel mixed effects (MLME) regression to account for the hierarchical nature of our data, which is nested within 11 countries.

## Results

On average, respondents across the Indo-Pacific region rated China as much more likely to use force and economic punishment than to back down in the scenario presented. As Table 2 summarizes, respondents on average estimated the chance that China would use force if their country resisted Beijing’s demand at 64.2%, serious economic punishment at 64.4%, while the chance of China eventually backing down from its demand was estimated at 47.4% on average. Broadly, then, across these three measures of resolve, citizens generally did tend to see China as relatively resolved in the scenario.

### *Estimates of China’s resolve across the region*

In most countries respondents rated the likelihood of China being willing to use force at between 60 and 70%. As Table 2 indicates, Vietnamese, Australian and New Zealand respondents had the highest estimations of China’s *military resolve*, with respondents in these countries estimating the

**Table 2.** Respondents’ average estimations of China’s military, economic and general resolve in the crisis scenario, by country.

How likely do you think it is that ...	China will use force	China will inflict serious economic punishment	China will eventually back down	N
Australia	68.2	71.1	42.2	1203
Philippines	63.3	63.5	51.6	1296
India	57.9	55.2	58.8	1068
Japan	63.6	62.2	42.0	1187
South Korea	65.7	68.4	43.1	1326
Kazakhstan	58.3	60.8	49.6	1092
Malaysia	61.9	64.9	49.4	1130
New Zealand	69.0	70.8	41.1	1215
Singapore	65.4	65.0	53.4	1197
Taiwan	64.4	63.7	43.4	1325
Vietnam	68.0	62.2	47.8	1012
<i>Eleven-country pooled averages</i>	<i>64.2</i>	<i>64.4</i>	<i>47.4</i>	<i>13051</i>

chances of China using force in the maritime crisis scenario at close to 70%. At the lower end, Malaysian respondents gave an average estimation of 60%, and Indian and Kazakhstani respondents rated China as having a 57–58% chance of using force to realize its demand in their land-based scenarios.

Turning to *economic resolve*, respondents in Australia and New Zealand again gave the highest estimations of the likelihood of China imposing sanctions as a result of the crisis, with both countries' citizens estimating the likelihood as above 70% on average. South Korean respondents were close behind at 68%. Indian respondents estimated China as only 55% likely to inflict large-scale economic punishment in their border crisis scenario, perhaps reflecting a sense of reduced dependence following the Indian government's restrictions on China–India economic ties in various sectors after 2020.

Respondents around the region rated the likelihood of China backing down as significantly lower than that of military escalation or economic punishment. Indian respondents were the most upbeat on the prospects of the Chinese backing down in their land-based crisis scenario, on average rating this as the most likely of the three possibilities at 59%. Southeast Asian countries were the next most likely to believe that China would ultimately back down, especially respondents in Singapore, the Philippines and Malaysia. In contrast, respondents in Australia, New Zealand and the three Northeast Asian countries—Japan, Korea and Taiwan—estimated the probability of China backing down at only 41–43% on average.

### *Correlates of resolve estimations*

This section first tests the relationships between respondents' estimations of China's resolve and the factors typically emphasized by deterrence theory, before proceeding to examine the relationships with general and specific dispositional factors. Tables 3–5 report the results of MLME linear regression analysis on respondents' estimations of China's resolve to use force (military resolve), impose economic punishment (economic resolve) and back down (general resolve).

In each table, Models 1–3 are estimated using a multilevel mixed effects linear regression with fixed effects for individual-level predictors and random effects to capture the variability of differences in responses between the 11 countries included in the survey. Model 1 shows the relationships between our resolve measurements and observers' estimations of China's material capabilities (military power and economic power), higher material stakes for China, US alliance status, and whether China has a track record of using force against the country in question. Model 2 then reports correlations between resolve estimations and predispositions, including general belief in the efficacy of military force (hawkishness), specific feelings toward China, and foreign policy preferences for handling China issues. Model 3 includes the various material and dispositional factors in the same model, and adds a set of controls including age, gender, education, nationalism, interest in politics, and frequency of interaction with Chinese people. Statistically significant level 1 and 2 variances in all models across Tables 3–5 suggest that responses systematically differ across the 11 countries, even when we account for individual differences. This justifies the use of hierarchical models over single-level regression in the analysis (see also Online Appendix A5.1).

Our first expectation derived from the situational model of resolve was that capabilities should matter. Specifically, observers with higher estimations of China's military capabilities should have correspondingly higher estimations of Beijing's military resolve in the crisis (H1a), and those with higher estimations of China's economic power should have higher estimations of the PRC's resolve to impose economic punishment (H1b). The data confirm this was the case for respondents to the

**Table 3.** Hierarchical linear mixed effects regression results for respondents' estimations of China's military resolve.

Dependent variable: PRC military resolve <i>China will use force</i>	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)
China military power	1.747*** (0.453)		1.851*** (0.369)
China economic power	0.348 (0.333)		0.737*** (0.278)
PRC higher stakes	4.346** (1.533)		3.673*** (1.086)
US ally	2.312 (1.508)		1.240 (1.463)
PRC use of force track record	-0.249 (2.736)		-2.227 (2.677)
Hawkishness		0.819* (0.324)	0.347 (0.333)
Feeling toward China (warmer)		-0.117*** (0.034)	-0.135*** (0.030)
China policy (align)		-0.064 (0.182)	-0.387* (0.155)
Constant	50.770*** (2.753)	66.560*** (3.137)	50.22*** (4.210)
Variance (level 1)	0.998*** (0.202)	1.227*** (0.225)	0.905** (0.283)
Variance (level 2)	3.277*** (0.030)	3.272*** (0.032)	3.260*** (0.033)
<i>Individual controls</i>	No	No	Yes
<i>Number of countries at level 2</i>	11	11	11
<i>Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) score</i>	118277	118152	117848
<i>Sample size</i>	13,051	13,051	13,051

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

survey, with Table 3 showing positive and significant correlations between estimations of China's military power and its military resolve the crisis scenario. The same relationship is evident between China's perceived economic power and its economic resolve in the crisis scenario (Table 4). Higher appraisals of Chinese capabilities also correlated with higher estimations of its general resolve, as indicated by the *negative* correlations with respondents' estimations of the likelihood that China would back down in the crisis (Table 5).

The coefficients in the tables indicate that each point increase along the seven-point scale measuring China's perceived power corresponded with on average between  $\sim 1.3$  and  $\sim 1.9$  points increase in corresponding resolve estimations.<sup>9</sup> Note that Table 5 uses a reverse measure of general resolve (*China will back down*), which means that a negative coefficient indicates a positive relationship with China's perceived resolve. Respondents who said they considered China to be militarily strong saw a 65.5% likelihood that China would use force, almost six points higher than other respondents (see Table 6). For economic resolve the difference was similar, with those who saw China as economically strong rating Chinese economic punishment a 66.1% likelihood on average, compared with 59.2% among other respondents. When it came to general resolve, respondents who considered China militarily

**Table 4.** Hierarchical linear mixed effects regression results for respondents' estimations of China's economic resolve.

Dependent variable: PRC economic resolve <i>China will impose economic punishment</i>	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)
China military power	1.906*** (0.332)		1.929*** (0.325)
China economic power	1.074*** (0.293)		1.272*** (0.262)
PRC higher stakes	4.508** (1.725)		4.125** (1.599)
US ally	3.884** (1.368)		3.155* (1.445)
PRC use of force track record	-4.363* (1.772)		-5.668** (1.923)
Hawkishness		0.477 (0.281)	0.187 (0.291)
Feeling toward China (warmer)		-0.079*** (0.030)	-0.0941*** (0.026)
China policy (align)		0.203 (0.228)	-0.163 (0.201)
Constant	46.431*** (1.057)	65.020*** (3.937)	46.63*** (3.722)
Variance (level 1)	0.800*** (0.114)	1.496*** (0.232)	0.757*** (0.157)
Variance (level 2)	3.215*** (0.031)	3.221*** (0.032)	3.205*** (0.035)
<i>Individual controls</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>
<i>Number of countries at Level 2</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>AIC score</i>	<i>116715</i>	<i>116884</i>	<i>116486</i>
<i>Sample size</i>	<i>13,051</i>	<i>13,051</i>	<i>13,051</i>

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

strong gave an average 46.7% likelihood that China would back down, compared with other respondents who considered a Chinese backdown as having a 50.0% likelihood.

The capability-driven story of resolve estimations becomes more complicated once alliances are brought into the picture. The United States's mutual defense treaties with Japan, the Philippines and Australia are widely regarded as an important variable affecting the distribution of military capabilities in China's region. Situational theories of resolve would suggest that these alliances should influence observers' estimations of China's resolve by increasing China's likely costs of war with such countries. If so, we might expect citizens in US-allied states to have lower estimations of China's military resolve against their country than those in non-US-allied states (H1c). Model 3 in Table 3 shows no such pattern, with no significant relationship between US alliance status and respondents' estimations of PRC military resolve. Thus, the idea that the backing of American power imbues observers with confidence that China would refrain from using force in a crisis with their country is not supported by these data.<sup>10</sup>

A further expectation derived from the situational model of resolve was that observers' estimations would reflect the balance of material stakes in the dispute. China and its neighbors lay claim to

**Table 5.** Hierarchical linear mixed effects regression results for respondents' estimations of China's likelihood of backing down.

Dependent variable: PRC general resolve (reverse measure)			
<i>China will back down</i>	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)
China military power	-1.367* (0.541)		-1.879*** (0.388)
China economic power	-0.638 (0.375)		-1.708*** (0.315)
PRC higher stakes	0.248 (3.181)		-1.409 (1.539)
US ally	-4.560* (2.032)		-1.502 (1.183)
PRC use of force track record	7.580* (2.990)		4.564 (2.418)
Hawkishness		1.707*** (0.333)	0.724** (0.280)
Feeling toward China (warmer)		0.179*** (0.025)	0.169*** (0.020)
China policy (align)		0.820*** (0.205)	1.010*** (0.128)
Constant	57.96*** (4.091)	27.970*** (2.517)	36.68*** (4.190)
Variance (level 1)	1.369*** (0.151)	1.410*** (0.358)	0.937*** (0.231)
Variance (level 2)	3.315*** (0.013)	3.383*** (0.014)	3.262*** (0.016)
<i>Individual controls</i>	No	No	Yes
<i>Number of countries at Level 2</i>	11	11	11
<i>AIC score</i>	119257	118412	117933
<i>Sample size</i>	13,051	13,051	13,051

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 6.** Comparison of average resolve estimations grouped by perceptions of China's capabilities. "Strong" includes respondents who estimated China's military or economic strength as 5 (somewhat strong), 6 (strong), or 7 (very strong) on the 1–7 scale.

	China's military strength estimation		China's economic strength estimation	
	Not strong (1–4)	Strong (5–7)	Not strong (1–4)	Strong (5–7)
China will use force	59.8	65.5	60.5	65.4
China will impose economic punishment	58.5	66.1	59.2	66.1
China will back down	50.0	46.7	49.4	46.8

both territorial sovereignty and natural resources in the areas in question, while three "non-claimant" countries—Australia, New Zealand and Singapore—claim neither territorial sovereignty nor resource rights in the area, giving them qualitatively lower material stakes in the area than China. If such an imbalance in the material stakes influences observers' estimations of resolve,

respondents in these non-claimant countries should give higher estimations of China's resolve (H1d). The results are generally consistent with this expectation: respondents in the three non-claimant countries gave resolve estimations that were 3.7 and 4.1 points higher on average for China's military and economic resolve respectively, compared with respondents in China's rival claimant countries, where the balance of material stakes is more even (Tables 3 and 4). Although the difference was not significant when it came to China's general resolve not to back down (Table 5), the results are broadly consistent with the idea that relative material stakes may often factor into how observers assess China's resolve.

Deterrence theorists have long debated the claim that using force builds a reputation for resolve. If such past behavior strongly influences observers' perceptions of China's resolve, then citizens in countries against which China has used force in recent memory might have higher estimations of China's military resolve than those for whom China has no such track record (H1e). The data do not support this hypothesis. As Table 3 shows, observers in countries that have been targeted by China's use of force—India, Vietnam and the Philippines—did not give higher estimations of China's military resolve in the crisis scenarios presented, compared with other countries.<sup>11</sup>

We also suggested that, given China's extensive record of meting out economic punishments in recent years, respondents in all countries should generally rate China's economic resolve higher than its military resolve (H1f). The aggregate level data presented in Table 2 at the beginning of the analysis suggest this too is not the case. Despite China's track record of frequently using economic punishments against foreign targets, citizens across the 11 Indo-Pacific countries viewed the likelihood of China deploying such measures as a result of their crisis situations at on average 64.4%, hardly distinguishable from their estimated likelihood of using force at 64.2%. Thus, the data in aggregate offer no support for either of the reputation hypotheses.<sup>12</sup>

Recapping the results so far, material capabilities and stakes do appear to be important factors in Indo-Pacific observers' estimations of China's resolve in a crisis. Across all three measures of resolve, higher estimations of China's power were strongly associated with higher estimations of China's resolve. Greater material stakes on the Chinese side were also associated with higher estimates of China's military and economic resolve, but were unrelated to its *general resolve* not to back down. Meanwhile, the results contained little sign of US alliances, China's past use of force, or its frequent use of economic sanctions influencing respondents' estimations of China's resolve. The next section turns to the role that individual predispositions and attitudes toward China may have in shaping observers' assessments.

### *Predispositions and China-specific attitudes*

The difficulty of estimating another actor's resolve, coupled with China's high profile in the Indo-Pacific region, gives reason to expect that respondents' resolve estimations might co-vary with their general beliefs and China-specific attitudes. Model 2 in the tables presents the results of regressions on three such variables outlined above: beliefs about the efficacy of military capability; feelings toward China; and degree of preference for a China-aligned foreign policy.

Our hawkishness hypothesis (H2a) proposed that those with a more positive view of military power in general would have higher estimations of China's military resolve in a crisis. Table 3 suggests that this was not the case. While there was a weakly statistically significant positive relationship between hawkishness and estimates of China's military resolve, this relationship disappears in the model that includes all important predictor variables and individual-level controls (Model 3). Although our hypothesis specifically concerned military resolve, it is notable that hawkishness was associated with stronger expectations that China would back down—that is, *lower* estimations

of China's general resolve (Table 5). Although our measure is based on a single item taken from the standard battery of "militant internationalism" questions, the result offers an interesting contrast with several studies based on US and European samples, which have found it to be a key predictor of various foreign policy attitudes (Herrmann et al., 2009; Kertzer and Brutger, 2016; Kertzer et al., 2014; Kertzer et al., 2020). The inconsistent and mostly insignificant coefficients suggest hawkish, militant internationalist dispositions may not be as strong a driver of resolve assessments in the Indo-Pacific as in other regions. This possibility could be taken up in future research.

By far the strongest and most consistent predictor of resolve estimations across all three resolve measures was respondents' subjective feelings toward China. As indicated in Tables 3–5, respondents with more positive feelings toward China thought it *less* likely that Beijing would use military force or economic punishment against their country, and *more* likely that Beijing would back down. Around the region, then, respondents with more positive views of China gave lower all-round estimations of its resolve.<sup>13</sup> The results cut decisively against the positive sentiment hypothesis (H2b), indicating instead that in the context of a bilateral crisis, negatively-disposed observers tend to perceive greater Chinese military, economic and general resolve (H2c). This result suggests that friendly observers of a country may see it as open to compromise and negotiation to avoid a crisis escalating to conflict, while those with a skeptical attitude are more likely to take its threats of escalation, economic coercion and intransigence seriously.<sup>14</sup>

Substantively, these feelings toward China were comparable with perceived military and economic power as a predictor of respondents' resolve estimations. The correlation coefficient of  $-0.13$  in Table 3 indicates that each  $10^\circ$  increase in warmth toward China on the feeling thermometer corresponded to an estimated 1.3 point decrease in average military resolve estimations. For economic resolve (Table 4) the coefficient of  $-0.9$  corresponded to an average of just under a one-point decrease in resolve for every  $10^\circ$  increase on the feeling thermometer. For general resolve, the coefficient in Model 3 indicates that each  $10^\circ$  step up in positivity was associated with a 1.7 point increase in the perceived likelihood that China would back down.

Table 7 shows that across all three measures of resolve, respondents with colder feelings toward China—between  $0$  and  $40^\circ$  on the thermometer—gave much higher estimations of Beijing's resolve in the crisis scenario. As shown below, such China-skeptic respondents rated the likelihood of Beijing using military force in the crisis at 68.1% on average, around seven points higher than more China-friendly and neutral respondents (60–61%). Negative respondents also gave the highest estimations of China's likelihood of imposing economic punishment (66.8% on average). The relationship was even stronger for general resolve, with a 14-point difference between China-skeptic respondents' estimations of China's likelihood of backing down (41.1%) compared with China-friendly respondents (55.1%). These differences suggest that subjective feelings toward China were substantively comparable with capabilities as a predictor of resolve estimations.

Finally, we test China-specific foreign policy leanings as a predictor of resolve estimations. Based on the logic of motivated reasoning, those in favor of a tougher China policy might tend to see Beijing as less resolved, while those favoring accommodation would be inclined to view China as more resolved

**Table 7.** Comparison of average resolve estimations grouped by feeling toward China.

	Cold ( $0-40^\circ$ )	Moderate ( $41-59^\circ$ )	Warm ( $60-100^\circ$ )
China will use force	68.1	60.5	61.3
China will impose economic punishment	66.8	60.9	63.1
China will back down	41.1	46.7	55.1

(H2d). Interestingly, the results not only do not support this hypothesis, they point in the opposite direction. Pro-China policy preferences showed a *negative* relationship to estimations of China's military resolve and a *positive* association with expectations that China will back down.<sup>15</sup> There was no significant relationship between policy alignment preferences and estimations of China's economic resolve. It is worth noting that both feelings toward China and policy preferences were included in Models 2 and 3, meaning the apparent influence of each was not simply derivative of the other. The pro-China policy hypothesis (H2d) is therefore disconfirmed in the case at hand.

These results show the Indo-Pacific citizens' estimations of China's resolve were not simply derived from their understanding of the material circumstances of the situation. While perceptions of China's capabilities did shape respondents' resolve estimations, China-specific sentiments showed a similarly strong and robust relationship. Respondents with positive feelings toward China gave consistently lower all-round estimations of China's resolve across military, economic and general dimensions. The relationship was evident across at least 10 of the 11 individual countries and shone through saliently across all alternative variable constructions and modeling choices (see the Online Appendix). We next reflect on the implications of these findings for theory, policy, and future research.

## Conclusion

Are citizens in the Indo-Pacific intuitive deterrence theorists when assessing the resolve of their powerful neighbor? Our data suggest the influence of feelings alongside calculation. The respondents who assessed China's resolve in the crisis scenario examined here followed some key expectations of deterrence theory in linking China's capabilities and material interests with resolve. However, their judgements were also heavily conditioned by their feelings toward China, with warmer feelings consistently producing lower estimations of Chinese resolve across resolve measurements and national contexts. In short, sentiments appear to have a significant role in shaping resolve estimations.

These results suggest that, where states such as China seek to convey an image of resolve to foreign audiences during crises, it is likely to be individuals with negative feelings who will perceive it. Our observational data cannot adjudicate whether negative attitudes to China drive higher estimations of its resolve, or pre-existing views of China as resolved drive negative attitudes to China.<sup>16</sup> Yet the causal direction may not matter much in this case. Whether the observed correlations result from negatively-disposed observers perceiving greater Chinese resolve, or a resolved image driving negative perceptions of China, or a combination of the two, the theoretical and practical implications appear the same. In the Indo-Pacific, citizens who perceive China as resolved in a crisis tend to be those who hold negative sentiments toward the country, whereas China-friendly citizens see China as lower in resolve. This dynamic suggests that the more successful a state is in conveying an image of resolve, the more it is likely to entrench opposition to compromise within the target state.

These results open up several other avenues for follow-on research. First, studies can investigate whether similar relationships exist in other contexts, generating insights into the conditions under which citizens' perceptions follow the expectations of deterrence theory vs. political psychology. One likely factor is the involvement of the observer's own country in the crisis, which was a feature of our scenario. Where resolve assessments are made by external observers of third countries, their judgements might hew more closely to rationalist expectations, whereas emotion might play a greater role where one's own country is involved. There may also be important cross-regional differences. Previous research based on US observers (Kertzer et al., 2021) might suggest that Americans are particularly inclined to assess resolve in accordance with the expectations of


deterrence theory. If so, would this reflect a distinctive cultural outlook, or a more general tendency of citizens of a major world power and regional hegemon? Paired studies with Chinese and American respondents could shed light on this question; so too could replication among citizens in countries living in the United States's shadow in the Western hemisphere, particularly in Central and South America.


Future surveys could also inquire into the predictors of divergence in respondents' assessments of a country's resolve across different dimensions.<sup>17</sup> In theory, any course of action a state is capable of taking, despite temptations to the contrary (Kertzer, 2016), could be understood as a dimension of its resolve. Besides the military, economic and general dimensions of resolve examined here, other key measures could include diplomatic resolve, encompassing the likelihood of breaking diplomatic relations or some other mutually costly form of diplomatic sanction, and hybrid or "gray zone" resolve, comprising an actor's perceived likelihood of pursuing conflictual policies beneath the threshold of military conflict despite threats or inducements incentivising their cessation. Disaggregating the measures of resolve beyond the three introduced here could identify important differences between different aspects of resolved images and their consequences.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors gratefully acknowledge Richard Turcsanyi's support and facilitation of access to the Sinophone Borderlands dataset.

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### **Ethics**

This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Research Ethics Panel of Palacký University Olomouc under ref. no.: 03/2022 from 6 to 2022.

### **Funding**

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund—Project "Sinophone Borderlands—Interaction at the Edges" CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16\_019/0000791. Additionally, part of this research was supported by NextGenerationEU through the Recovery and Resilience Plan for Slovakia under the project number 09I03-03-V04-00461.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Data availability**

All materials and data for this research are available from the Harvard Dataverse at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/D9M40M>.

### **Supplemental material**

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Notes

1. A partial exception is Lupton's (2018) ordinal scale measurement of resolved behavior in crises, from verbal-only responses, to non-military moves such as economic and diplomatic sanctions, up to military violence.
2. This test rests on two assumptions: first, that citizens are aware of that their country is a US treaty ally; second that they believe the United States would likely intervene if China used force and that China understands this. While the first assumption probably holds, the second is less certain. Thus, the test is a "straw-in-the-wind": failure will not strongly invalidate the situational resolve theory.
3. Key examples include the seizures of Mischief Reef and Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines in 1995 and 2012, and the advancement of Chinese military positions on the Sino-Indian border in 2017 and 2020. Taiwan, meanwhile, has been targeted with large-scale military intimidation, but no application of outright military force or territorial seizure in recent years. See Online Appendices A6.4 and A6.5.
4. Historical memories of the past use of force most directly implicate military resolve. Thus, we expect the effects of a track record of using force against a country should increase its citizens' estimation of *military resolve* but not necessarily *economic* and *general resolve*.
5. In the absence of military mobilizations, we would expect hawks to attach less credibility to a state's private threats of escalation than non-hawks. Our scenario featured military mobilizations, but the conjecture could be tested experimentally in future research by manipulating the presence / absence of the Chinese PLA units in the scenario. See Online Appendix A2.1.
6. Funded by European Regional Development Fund project "Sinophone Borderlands—Interaction at the Edges", CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16\_019/0000791.
7. While no current mutual defense treaty exists between the United States and Taiwan, as a robustness check we generated an alternative specification that codes Taiwan as a US ally. See Online Appendix A6.3.
8. The Online Appendix contains robustness checks that recode Taiwan to be among the countries to have experienced the PRC use of force (A6.4) and exclude the Philippines from the same category (A6.5).
9. These effects remained statistically significant, even when a Bonferroni correction for inflated risk of Type I error was used. See Online Appendix Section A6.2 for full test results.
10. The result is robust whether Taiwan is coded as a US ally or not. See Online Appendix A6.3.
11. Online Appendix A6.4 and A6.5 replicate the result with Taiwan recoded as a target of PRC use of force, and with the Philippines excluded from that category.
12. A paired-samples *t*-test on the two figures shows no statistically significant difference between them (one-sided *p*-value,  $p = 0.21$ ,  $t = -0.808$ ).
13. These results remain statistically significant at  $p < 0.001$  even when a Bonferroni correction is applied—see Online Appendix Section A5.2.
14. The only partial exception was in India. See Online Appendix A7.
15. These results remain statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$  (military resolve) and  $p < 0.001$  (economic resolve) even when a Bonferroni correction is applied—see Online Appendix Section 5.2.
16. The feeling thermometer was framed in broad general terms and appeared towards the middle of the 20 minute survey, while the scenario and resolve questions were concrete and specific, and appeared near the end of the survey (see Online Appendix A8), suggesting that negative general attitudes are more likely to be the driver of specific judgements about resolve than vice versa.
17. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

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