

# Kinmen, kinsmen?

An experiment of fait accompli in Taiwan

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## Abstract

Fait accompli is a strategy in which challenger states seek to revise the territorial status quo incrementally. States that wish to use this strategy face the difficult task of assuring the target states that their territorial goals are indeed limited. This paper attempts to investigate the extent to which the public in the target state reacts to assurance signals from the challenger state after a fait accompli, as well as how the public reacts to their government conceding the territory without retaliation. I conducted a two-stage survey experiment in Taiwan to investigate how the public evaluates reassurance signals from a challenger state and a target government's decision to back down after a fait accompli. The findings reveal a reluctance to use force even in the absence of credible reassurance, and a backlash against de-escalation regardless of justification. The results contribute to the literature on assurance by testing for the effectiveness of assurance in crises, and challenge existing works on mitigating audience costs.

**Keywords:** fait accompli, Taiwan, survey experiment

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# 1 Introduction

What should a government do when a stronger rival seizes part of its territory, but promises to go no further? Should citizens support military retaliation despite unfavorable odds, or accept concession despite territorial loss? These are important questions, especially when there are increasing concerns globally regarding the rise of China, especially considering its growing assertiveness in Asia. Having observed the reactions to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, starting with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, analysts argued that China might be on the trajectory to impose the same strategy of *fait accompli* in their disputes with their neighbors, among which are American allies and partners in Asia (Colby, 2021; Chubb, 2023). The risk for these allies and partners resembles the situation described by Thucydides in the Melian Dialogue: weaker states, believing they are backed by a powerful patron, are faced with a rising ambitious power. The power asymmetry between the potential perpetrator and the potential target might influence the calculation of the target after a *fait accompli*. While scholars have focused on state responses, this paper shifts the lens to the domestic public: How do citizens respond to assurances from the aggressor and restraint from their own government?

Existing research on *fait accompli* has focused primarily on challenger state strategies and incentives (Tarar, 2016; Altman, 2017, 2020). Less understood is how publics in target states respond to territorial loss and what constraints this places on government responses. I address this gap through a survey experiment in Taiwan examining public reactions to a hypothetical Chinese takeover of Kinmen Islands. Taiwan represents a critical case: a weaker state facing a stronger challenger in a dispute with high symbolic stakes and significant power asymmetry.

I find a strategic dilemma for target state leaders. First, the Taiwanese public overwhelmingly opposes using force to retake Kinmen (68% oppose), regardless of assurance signals from China. This suggests that in extreme power-asymmetric scenarios, publics recognize the futility of military retaliation. Second, despite this reluctance to fight, citizens also disapprove when their government backs down (51% disapprove), and justifications emphasizing casualties or economic costs fail to mitigate this backlash. Leaders thus face a no-win situation: publics oppose both escalation and concession.

These findings make three contributions. Empirically, this paper provides the first experimental evidence on Taiwanese public reactions specifically to *fait accompli* scenarios involving outlying islands. Theoretically, the null results reveal boundary conditions for reassurance signaling (Kydd and McManus, 2017; Cebul et al., 2021) and audience cost mitigation theories (Levendusky and Horowitz, 2012). These theories do not hold true in scenarios where the power asymmetry is high, and where the public is heavily influenced by partisan division. Substantively, the study documents the strategic constraints facing target states in power-asymmetric disputes, with implications relevant beyond the Taiwan Strait.

## 2 *Fait accompli* and its two stages

### 2.1 *Fait accompli* and its place in International Relations

Altman (2017) defines *fait accompli* as distinct from brute force and coercion: rather

than using military power to overwhelm an adversary or compel concession, challengers use limited force to seize territory and then deter retaliation. States choose fait accompli because it offers lower immediate costs (Tarar, 2016), useful in testing the reactions of a declining power (Hastey, 2020), or to gain a strategic advantage (Reiter and Poast, 2021). Because of these incentives, states frequently used this tactic as a means of territorial acquisition (Altman, 2020; Hastey, 2023), to varying degrees of success.

Existing research overwhelmingly examines challenger motivations; this paper shifts the focus on target state public opinion. If citizens demand retaliation, governments face pressure to escalate; if citizens accept territorial loss, de-escalation becomes feasible. Understanding these public attitudes reveals the domestic constraints target states face after fait accompli.

## 2.2 The challenger dilemma in the escalation stage

Credible assurance plays a key role in fait accompli situations. Tarar (2016) pointed out that fait accompli would lead to war if the challenger state takes more than what is acceptable to the target state. The target state might interpret the invasion and occupation of a part of its territory as the first step from the challenger state toward a full-scale invasion. Therefore, if they want to avoid war, the challenger state must be able to credibly assure the target state that the fait accompli is not a premise for full-scale invasion.

Testing whether or not assurance signals from the challenger would work on the public in the target state is crucial after a fait accompli, because the public might pressure their government to retaliate. This is because territories often have intangible values, such as the symbolic connection to homeland or ethnic ties with the public (Dzurek, 2005). These intangible values conditioned the public to think of the territory as indivisible (Fang and Li, 2020), and therefore would be more likely to support more confrontational stances in territorial crises (Fang et al., 2022). From a prospect theory perspective, a fait accompli resulted in the loss of territory for the target country, which can increase risk acceptance behaviours among the public (Zhou et al., 2025). Taken together, it can be expected that the public might adopt a tit-for-tat reaction toward a fait accompli, and would likely support their government using force to take back the lost territory. If the challenger state fails to assure the public, the target states, under public pressure, might choose to retaliate with forces.

Previous works have established that credible assurances might work (Kydd, 2000). Kydd and McManus (2017) examined crises in the past and found that assurances from the challenger state might lead to target states refraining from retaliation by influencing the leadership’s calculation over strategic interests. Yoder and Haynes (2020) argued that in these crises, due to mutual uncertainty, the leaders can often correctly deduce the intentions of assurance from the other side. This effect persisted irrespective of the initial trust level. Cebul et al. (2021) showed that the public can also be influenced by assurance signals. However, the extent to which these signals are effective is conditioned on two factors: the perceived power asymmetry between the two sides, and the challenger state’s reputation for restraint. The challenger state might also send assurance signals to put the ball in the opponent’s court: after the assurance, if the target state chooses to ignore and escalate, they might face audience costs at home and abroad (Berenji, 2023).

For those reasons, states have tried to send assurance signals in previous fait accompli. For instance, after the 2014 seizure of Crimea, Russia publicly claimed limited aims (Kofman et al., 2017). Speeches from other Russian officials indicated that their operation were solely to defend the Russian-speaking community in Ukraine against persecution. These narratives might have helped creating a degree of uncertainty among the public, therefore reducing the risk of escalation (Bloch and McManus, 2024). The results of a survey, conducted among citizens in the Southeastern region of Ukraine in April 2014, by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology also showed that these narratives worked, to a certain extent (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2014). Only 46% of the respondents believed that Russian troops will invade the territory of Ukraine, while 21% expressed their uncertainty and 30% believed that they will not. Approximate 45% of the respondents also considered Ukraine and Russia to not be at war, comparing to almost 40% who think that they were. These sentiments might have contributed to 45% of respondents choosing to stay out of conflicts and not taking up arms, comparing to only 23% choosing arms resistance.

These previous literature and results, taken together, show that in fait accompli situations, while the public in the target state might demand retaliations against what they perceive as a territorial loss, this reaction can be mitigated by assurance signals from the challenger state.

### **Hypothesis 1:**

The support rate of the public in the target state for the government’s aggressive action to take back the target territory will be **lower** when the challenger state announces that they will not attack further, compared to when there is no assurance.

Testing the effectiveness of assurance signals in Taiwan constitutes a hard test for assurance effectiveness. In power-asymmetric rivalries where a strong challenger faces a weak target, credible reassurance faces inherent challenges. Sechser (2010) identifies “Goliath’s Curse”: strong states cannot credibly reassure weak ones because the weak anticipate that the strong, having established a pattern of aggression, will continue exploiting their advantage regardless of commitments. In the China-Taiwan context, extreme power asymmetry, historically low trust, and symbolic territorial stakes create unfavorable conditions for reassurance. If assurance signals work even in this hard case, their effectiveness is likely robust; if they fail, the results can identify boundary conditions for reassurance theories.

The challenger states might be able to bolster the credibility of their signals by making these actions more costly (Fearon, 1997). A costly signal can raise the public’s beliefs in the sincerity of the assurance signals from the challenger state. While verbal cues of not invading the rest of the country might be interpreted solely as cheap talks, withdrawing troops or stopping military activities might be interpreted as sincere signs of limited ambitions. In the context of the fait accompli, the decrease or suspension of all military activities surrounding the target territory after the fait accompli can be seen as a costly action to signal that the challenger’s limited ambition because restarting the activities would be costly for the challenger state, and any sign of re-mobilization would enable the target state to prepare early for possible escalation.

I acknowledge that determining which option is truly “more costly” involves ambiguity.

On one hand, withdrawing troops or stopping military activities is costly for a challenger because it increases the risk that the target will regain territory. On the other hand, maintaining troops or military mobilizations also incurs significant material and human costs. Assurance strategies serve as costly signals most effectively when they impose costs or risks that do not make strategic sense otherwise, because they showed boldness on the side of the sender (Berenji, 2023). The experimental design in this paper tests whether visible reduction in military activities is perceived as more credible than verbal assurance alone, but I recognize these signals may not be sufficiently bold to overcome deep skepticism in the China-Taiwan context.

### **Hypothesis 2:**

The support rate of the public in the target state for the government’s aggressive action to take back the target territory will be **lower** when the challenger state announces that they will not attack further, as well as decreasing their military activities surrounding the territory, compared to when there is only verbal assurance.

## **2.3 The target’s hurdle in the de-escalation stage**

After a *fait accompli*, a target state might threaten to use force in response. This initial threat serves to signal resolve to both the challenger and domestic audiences. However, when the challenger does not yield, the target state may find itself needing to back down. In such cases, domestic political backlash may occur, as the public perceives the leader’s actions as inconsistent or weak. This phenomenon is known as audience cost (Fearon, 1994). Audience cost is particularly salient in crises involving territorial disputes, where national identity, credibility, and public expectations are tightly linked. As (Cho, 2018) pointed out, in these cases, both the cost of appearing inconsistent and the cost of belligerence constrain the leader’s options, making backing down politically difficult.

However, audience costs are not always inevitable. (Levendusky and Horowitz, 2012) showed that public approval can be preserved if leaders explain their inconsistency using credible justifications. The emerging literature on audience costs in non-Western settings has also identified effective rhetorical strategies for mitigating backlash (Driscoll and Maliniak, 2016; Quek and Johnston, 2018). These include references to casualties (Nguyen Cao, 2025) and to economic consequences (Kohama et al., 2024). These frames work by shifting public interpretation of the decision to back down, from one based on perceived weakness to one based on prudence and responsibility.

In previous studies, with the exception of Nguyen Cao (2025), the territorial crises depicted in experimental scenarios involved provocation without the actual loss of contested territory. Since the territory remains under control, public demand for retaliatory force is likely lower compared to scenarios where the territory is lost. Consequently, the justifying rhetorics may effectively alleviate audience costs. Conversely, a *fait accompli* results in the target losing control over the territory. This tit-for-tat mentality can lead to strong public calls for retaliation, resulting in significant audience costs if the government opts to de-escalate. Therefore, employing a *fait accompli* scenario serves as a more rigorous test for the efficacy of rhetorics aimed at mitigating audience costs. This study examines whether rhetorical justification can reduce public disapproval under such circumstances.

An important theoretical consideration is that audience cost theory was developed pri-

marily for challenger states that issue threats. Since [Fearon \(1994\)](#), the theory posits that leaders of challenging states face domestic punishment if they issue threats but fail to follow through. Survey experiments on audience costs (e.g. [Tomz, 2007](#)) also focused on public opinion in the threatening country. In this context, it is understandable why [Levendusky and Horowitz \(2012\)](#) examine side-stepping strategies to mitigate a challenger’s audience costs, as it is the challenger who initiates the crisis. However, past research rarely discusses target-side domestic audience costs, despite targets potentially employing side-stepping strategies. If a country is the victim of aggression, it is theoretically unclear why its leader would expect severe domestic backlash for backing down or feel the need to employ side-stepping strategies. The proposed hypotheses in this paper therefore represent an empirical test of whether target state publics punish their leaders for backing down after a fait accompli, and whether justifications mitigate such punishment if it exists.

### Hypothesis 3:

The approval rating of the target state government will be **higher** when they justify backing down emphasizing the heavy casualties of a direct conflict with the challenger state, compared to when there is no justification.

### Hypothesis 4:

The approval rating of the target state government will be **higher** when they justify backing down with economic consequences of a direct conflict with the challenger state, compared to when there is no justification.

Taiwan presents a demanding test for audience cost mitigation after a fait accompli. [Chong et al. \(2023\)](#) revealed that the Taiwanese public desires strong reactions against Chinese aggression. Therefore, Taiwan represents an even more challenging test for rhetorical strategies that have proven successful elsewhere. If these strategies are effective in Taiwan, the case for their use in actual crises is strengthened. Conversely, if they are ineffective, testing them in Taiwan reveals conditions under which these strategies fail. Recent work shows the Taiwanese public is increasingly willing to fight to defend Taiwan ([Yeh and Wu, 2021](#); [Wu et al., 2023](#)), though these studies typically examine full-scale invasion scenarios. It remains unclear whether the Taiwanese public is equally willing to defend outlying islands like Kinmen or Matsu, and how they would react if their leader decides to back down after a fait accompli on these islands.

## 3 Research design

### 3.1 Case selection

Taiwan-China disputes provide a strategic research site for testing assurance and audience cost theories in fait accompli scenarios. First, Kinmen Islands’ geographic vulnerability (located 10km from mainland China versus 180km from Taiwan proper) makes fait accompli scenarios realistic and salient to respondents. The islands have been flashpoints in past crises (1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis) and remain symbolically important despite their small size and peripheral location. Second, cross-Strait relations involve extreme power asymmetry, historically low trust, and high symbolic stakes, all conditions setting up hard tests for reassurance signaling. If assurances work here, they likely work in less difficult



contexts; if they fail, the results are helpful in identifying boundary conditions. Third, Taiwanese public opinion on defense and cross-Strait relations has evolved significantly in recent years (Lee et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2025), making current data essential for understanding likely responses.

There are important limitations to the scope of this paper. The scenario depicts a referendum-based takeover, a “least likely” case for military support since Taiwan would face unfavorable odds in any conflict over Kinmen, US support would be uncertain, moral justification for reversing democratic expression is limited, and the strategic value of retaking Kinmen is modest. Moreover, attempting to retake Kinmen would likely trigger full Chinese military response endangering Taiwan proper. This conservative scenario was chosen because if publics support force even here, support would be stronger in more ambiguous cases; conversely, if backing down generates backlash even in this extreme scenario, the political costs of concession are robust. This design provides a lower-bound estimate for the strategic dilemma phenomenon.

The pre-registered experiment was conducted in July 2024.<sup>1</sup> A nationally representative sample of 1,802 respondents was recruited through PureSpectrum, an online survey company. To investigate public opinions in both the escalation and de-escalation stages, I designed a two-stage survey experiment. At each stage, the respondents were randomized into three groups: one control and two treatment groups. After the first stage, respondents were re-randomized for the second stage.<sup>2</sup> The details of each stage are explained below. The detailed vignettes are given in Appendix A.1.

### 3.2 Escalation stage

To retaliate using force after a *fait accompli*, the target must ensure they have public support behind this response. In the first stage, I chose to investigate the support for the use of force after *fait accompli*, as well as how the public responds to different assurances by the challenger. All respondents read that China will take over the administration of the Kinmen islands after a referendum showing that the majority of the islands’ residents wish to reunite with the mainland.<sup>3</sup> Respondents in the control group did not receive further explanation. Respondents in the first treatment group were given verbal assurance from the Chinese leader that after taking Kinmen, they would not advance further. Respondents in the second group were given the same verbal assurance, along with the decision to stop all military activities around the Taiwan Strait, which can be considered a costly action of assurance. All respondents were informed that the Taiwanese government refuted the results of the referendum and promised they would use force to take back Kinmen. They were then asked to indicate their level of support for this course of action. Their responses were recorded on a Likert-5 scale, from “Strongly support” to “Strongly against.” Respondents were also asked to express their level of belief in the US coming to assist Taiwan, the likelihood of an invasion from China, as well as whether they

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<sup>1</sup>The experiment was preregistered on the Open Science Framework before data collection ([https://osf.io/5tmy3/?view\\_only=8f339b34dd7a4126820634c147a58ff3](https://osf.io/5tmy3/?view_only=8f339b34dd7a4126820634c147a58ff3)).

<sup>2</sup>Due to this re-randomization, for the second stage, the design turned into a 3+3 design. The number of respondents in each group can be found in Table A2 in Appendix A.2.

<sup>3</sup>As explained above, there are conditions favorable for a peaceful referendum and subsequent take over by China. This strategy has been used by Russia in Crimea. The author acknowledges that China might impose *fait accompli* in Kinmen Islands through other means. However, a peaceful annexation might make assurance signals from China more convincing for the Taiwanese public.

would accept the result of the referendum if an independent body verified its authenticity.

### 3.3 De-escalation stage

As mentioned before, the target states might choose to bluff to test the resolve of the challenger: they might threaten to use force, only to back down from this position and not carry out the threat when the challenger does not yield. In the second stage of the design, I investigated the case when the target decides not to carry out the threat of using force, as well as how they can manage the domestic backlash from this decision. All respondents read that the Taiwanese government decided not to use force to take back Kinmen. Respondents in the control group received no further information. Respondents in the first treatment group were given the justification that the Taiwanese government backed down to avoid a direct conflict with the Mainland. Respondents in the second treatment group were given the justification that the Taiwanese government backed down due to concern over the economic consequences of a conflict with the Mainland. All respondents were asked to indicate to what extent they approve or disapprove of the action of the Taiwanese leader. To determine the causal mechanisms of audience cost, if any, respondents were also asked to evaluate the impact of this de-escalation action on Taiwan’s credibility and reputation, as well as their own judgment over the competency of the leader shown through this action. The answers were recorded on a Likert-5 scale, from “Strongly approve” to “Strongly disapprove.”

## 4 Results

I used the Bonferroni post-hoc method to determine the average treatment effects. Results were also checked for robustness using regression analyses, which are included in Appendix A.3, and were confirmed with equivalence tests in Appendix A.5.

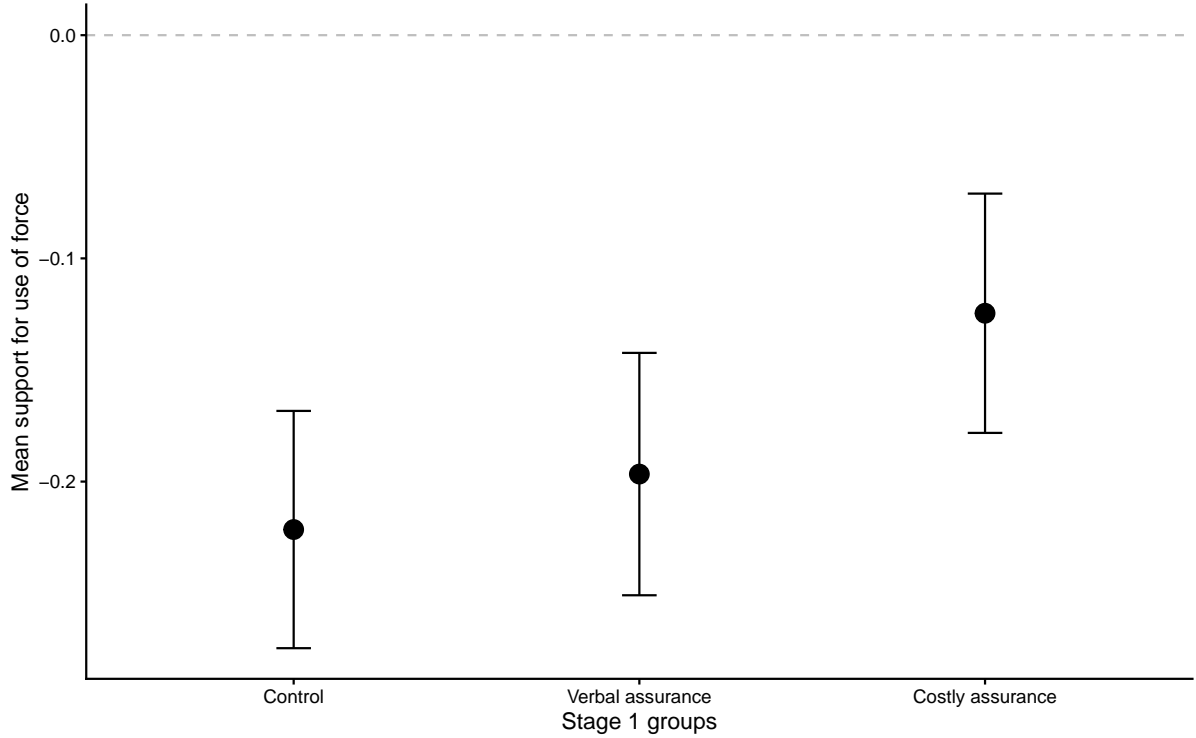
### 4.1 Escalation stage

The first stage of the experiment asked the respondents whether or not they supported the use of force to take back the Kinmen islands after the islands had been annexed by China through a referendum. Figure 1 shows the support rate for respondents in the experimental groups of stage 1. There is an overwhelming opposition from the respondents against the use of force to take back Kinmen. The two types of assurances from China also do not influence the respondents’ attitudes toward the use of force. Neither Hypothesis 1 nor Hypothesis 2 was supported. Both verbal assurance ( $p = 0.7437$ ) and costly assurance ( $p = 0.3452$ ) did not reduce or increase the respondents’ support for the use of force.

The null results might indicate that the respondents view the loss of the Kinmen islands in a bloodless scenario as acceptable. A slight majority of respondents (52%) accepted the referendum results after being informed that an independent panel verified them, suggesting a certain willingness among respondents to concede territories rather than risk the current status quo by fighting to take them back.

The results of the survey also indicated a statistically significant positive correlation between the support for the use of force and the beliefs in the likelihood of US intervention ( $p < 0.001$ ). If the respondent believes that the US will intervene to support Taiwan, they





(a) Percentages of respondents shown on the left, actual numbers of respondents shown in each box

Figure 1: Support for the use of force

will be more likely to support the use of force to retake Kinmen islands. However, respondents were split in their confidence of US support (51% likely, 49% unlikely). Because of the uncertainty over support from the US in a fait accompli situation, respondents might be more reluctant to support escalating the situation.

Another possible explanation is that similar to the aforementioned Russia's actions, the assurances from China, while not necessarily seen as trustworthy to the public, created enough uncertainty among the public to dampen the call for the use of force. Respondents were split almost equally on perceived likelihood of invasion from China following the fait accompli: 51% believed an invasion is likely, while 49% believed the opposite. Figure 2 shows that respondents who perceived an invasion is unlikely would also be less likely to support the use of force. This pattern suggests that assurance signals from China, while not necessarily seen as fully trustworthy, created enough uncertainty among the public to dampen calls for military retaliation. For some respondents, China's assurances generated sufficient doubt about further aggression to make the costs and risks of using force seem unjustified.

One possible explanation for the null results of China's assurances is that the stance of the Taiwanese public on China has hardened in recent years. Lin et al. (2024) categorized Taiwanese voters into two groups: symbolic voters, who will vote for/against Taiwanese independence regardless of China's actions due to ideology or identity; and pragmatic voters, who will only vote for/against Taiwanese independence if certain conditions are met. Using data from the Taiwan National Security Survey from 2002-2022, they identified a trend: the proportion of symbolic voters has been steadily increasing, while the

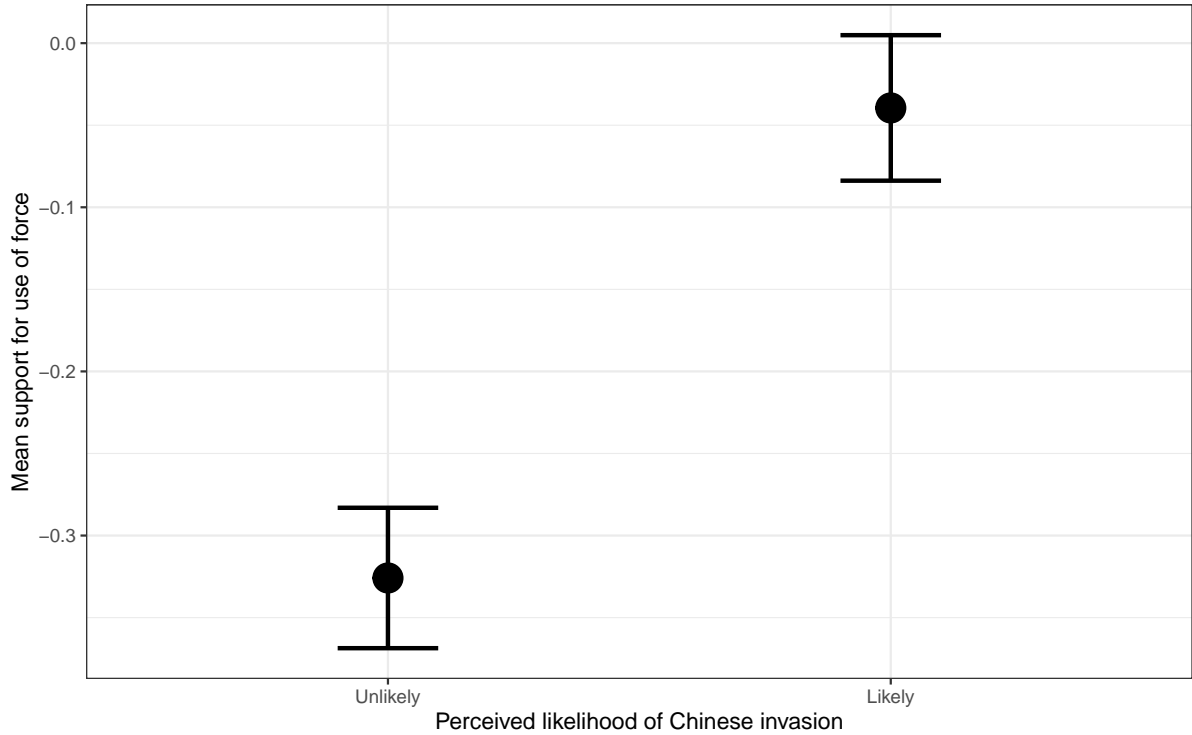


Figure 2: Support for the use of force, based on perceived likelihood of invasion

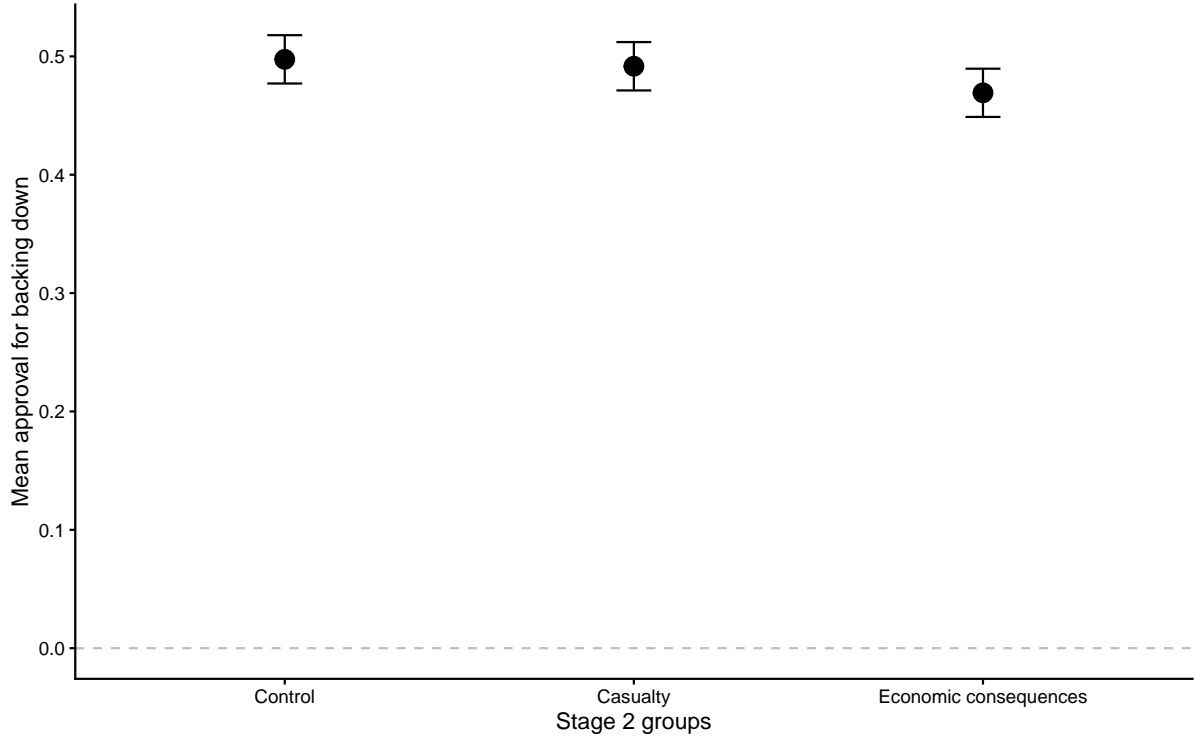
proportion of pragmatic voters has largely stayed the same. This result shows that more and more people are adopting a firm stance regarding China, and their view is not easy to be swayed by temporal actions.

## 4.2 De-escalation stage

In the second stage, respondents were informed that the Taiwanese President decided not to follow through with the threat of using force. They were then asked to evaluate this decision, including whether they approved of the action. Figure 3 shows the respondents' support for backing down in this situation. Overall, backing down is a divisive action: respondents were split almost evenly (49% support, 51% not support). This result reflects a certain level of conflicting sentiment among the Taiwanese public: a proportion of the public was unwilling to support using force to take back Kinmen, yet they also opposed the government's concession to China without retaliating.

However, one point worth noting is that while the respondents were split in their support for backing down, the proportion of respondents who strongly supported the government's action is higher than the proportion of respondents who strongly opposed it. The majority of the respondents who were not supportive of backing down had a neutral response: they were neither against nor support the action. Therefore, a more nuanced interpretation of the results would be that although backing down is seen as somewhat an unpopular course of action, the government would at least have a sizable, loyal proportion of the population supporting it.

However, it does not mean that there is no political backlash for the Taiwanese politicians in charge. A majority of respondents (66%) considered the President to be an incompetent leader after they backed down. An approximately equal proportion (60%) thought that



(a) Percentages of respondents shown on the left, actual numbers of respondents shown in each box

Figure 3: Support for backing down

the act of backing down damaged Taiwan’s reputation on the international stage. Overall, backing down after fait accompli without retaliatory options creates a certain level of domestic backlash for the Taiwanese leader.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>However, respondents were split approximately even on the question of credibility. Around 43% answered that the action might make the future threats or promises of the President less credible, while around 57% thought that there would be no change or even more credible. This result called into question the causal mechanisms of audience cost, highlighted in recent literature (e.g. [Takei and Paolino, 2023](#)), that the domestic audience judges a leader action substantively, and less on the consistency of the action. They also do not take a single action as a sign of the leader being not credible.

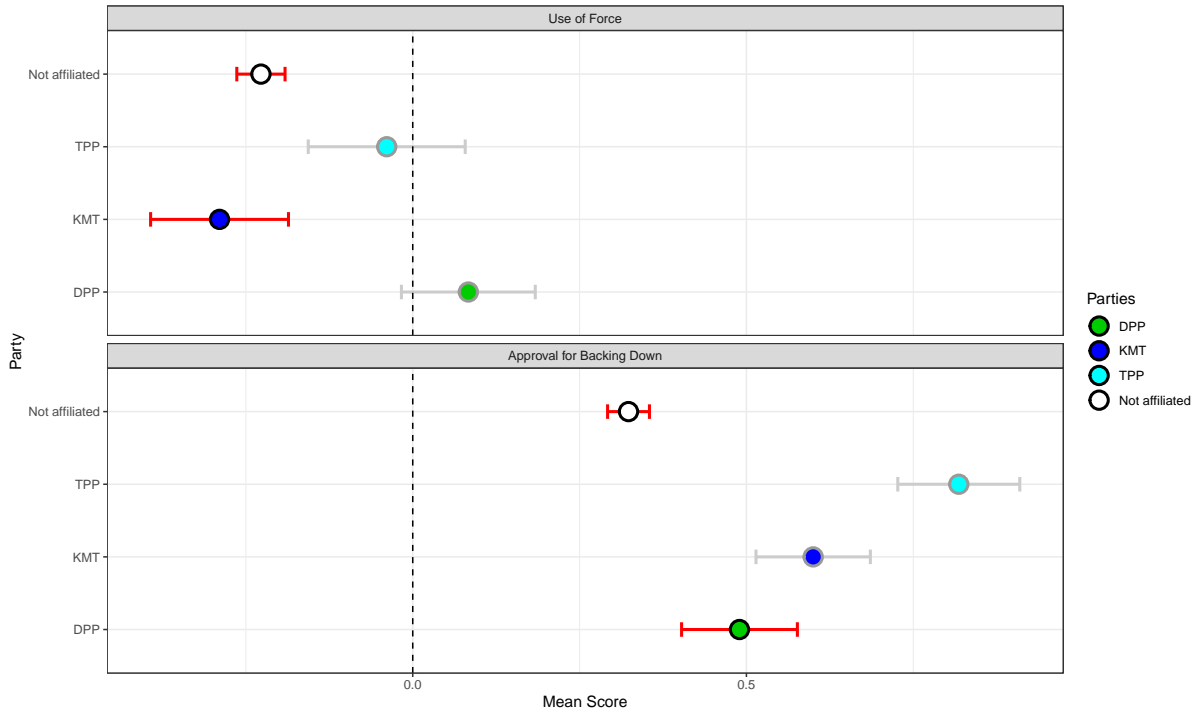


Figure 4: Support for the use of force and backing down by parties

A potential explanation for this result can perhaps be linked to the increasingly partisan political environment in Taiwan. The public mainly adopt stances on foreign policy from the cues by political elites (Berinsky, 2007; Kreps, 2010). Previous studies have shown that if the political elites are divided in their narratives regarding foreign policy, the public will also be divided (Alley, 2023). Since the political elites in Taiwan are divided on how to respond to China, the public is equally torn in their reactions to Chinese actions. The results of the study presented a seemingly self-contradicting attitude of the Taiwanese public, in that they opposed the use of force to retake Kinmen, but at the same time were unsatisfied with the government backing down. However, as can be observed in Figure 4, this contradiction can be explained by the partisan division among the Taiwanese political elites. On the use of force, the non-affiliated respondents, the biggest group in the survey, align closer with the pro-unification Kuomintang (KMT). On the other hand, on backing down, they adopted a somewhat similar stance to the ruling, pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

Regarding the effectiveness of the side-stepping strategies, the results do not support Hypothesis 3 or Hypothesis 4. Neither the casualty avoidance frame ( $p = 0.7277$ ) nor the economic consequences frame ( $p = 0.1468$ ) significantly increased support for the government after backing down. These null results suggest that rhetorical justifications, while effective in some other contexts, may fail to reduce audience costs in high-salience disputes involving symbolic or identity-based issues. In this case, conceding territory and attempting to explain it away did not appear to satisfy the public.

Assurances from China also would not help the Taiwanese leader when they chose to back down after a fait accompli. Neither verbal assurance ( $p = 0.5789$ ) nor costly assurance ( $p = 0.5912$ ) influences the respondents' support for backing down. This is further evidence supporting the interpretation that the respondents considered the assurance signals from

China to be cheap talks.

## 5 Conclusion

Why do some states choose not to retaliate against a *fait accompli* imposed on them? The results in this paper showed that retaliating with force might not be a well-supported course of action. The public might prefer conceding the territory to avoid going to war. However, not retaliating at all generates significant backlash for the target state's government, as the side-stepping strategies tested in this paper were also ineffective in reducing the potential audience costs.

These findings contribute directly to the growing literature on *fait accompli*. Specifically, they shed light on public support, or the lack thereof, for the use of force by a target state after a *fait accompli*. Importantly, they also show that in crises such as *fait accompli*, assurance signals from the challenger may not be persuasive. Neither verbal nor costly assurances reduced support for retaliation. This is consistent with studies highlighting the gap between sender and receiver (Quek, 2016), and how specific contexts influence the perception of assurance signals (Fu and Lee, 2025).

Rather than interpreting these null results as a lack of findings, perhaps a useful interpretation is that they reveal the limits of existing signaling theories. In rivalries involving symbolic stakes with low trust levels, even strong signals of restraint may fail to influence public opinion. This challenges optimistic expectations in the signaling literature that costly signals will overcome skepticism (Fearon, 1997; Yoder and Haynes, 2020). The failure of both assurance treatments in this study suggests that reassurance may be ineffective under certain conditions, including strong prior beliefs in power asymmetry between the target and the challenger, as well as polarizing partisan public opinions.

Similarly, the ineffectiveness of side-stepping justifications contradicted previous findings on mitigating audience costs. While such excuses have worked in other crisis types (Quek and Johnston, 2018; Kohama et al., 2024), they did not reduce backlash in the Taiwanese context. One possible explanation is that public expectations in Taiwan are fixed, due to strong partisan division: citizens may oppose fighting, aligning with pro-unification parties, yet also punish leaders who concede, especially over territory, due to influence of pro-independence parties. The results might also hint at a deeper desire of the public: preference for peace without appearing weak. Another potential explanation might be that the justifications used in this study are already implicitly inferred by the Taiwanese public as the reasons for backing down. Since the cross-Strait relations are so entrenched in Taiwanese politics, the public might have been conditioned to already think of these reasons beforehand. Compared to the public of China or Japan in previous experiments, the Taiwanese public is more informed, and more aware of the crisis. Therefore, their opinions might already be fixed, and resort to these strong priors when reading the scenarios proposed.

Taken together, these results illustrate a strategic dilemma. Target state leaders may find themselves trapped between an unwilling public and an unforgiving one: citizens may not want war, but also reject backing down. Theoretically, the null results also point to the conditions in which the assurance and audience cost mitigation theories failed to explain public attitudes. The study also supports the recent argument by Pauly (2024) that

challengers face a coercive assurance dilemma: to deter retaliation, they must signal that escalation is conditional, not inevitable. However, if the target public believes escalation is guaranteed or unavoidable, reassurance fails.

The findings of this study indicate that public backing for using force in response to territorial loss is relatively low. However, this should not be seen as a signal for aggressive territorial expansion or proof that target states are politically passive in the face of *faits accomplis*. Instead, it might be because the scenario, focused on a referendum and not involving direct military conflict, likely moderated public anger and influenced a preference for restraint. Unlike traditional military invasions, which often lead to intense nationalistic reactions and calls for retaliation, a non-military *fait accompli* may present a more complex challenge to sovereignty. Consequently, the limited support for escalation observed in this study likely stems from the nature of the *fait accompli* itself rather than its outcomes. These results imply that how territorial changes are framed is significant: challengers who present their actions in democratic or non-military terms may find it easier to lessen both international and domestic opposition, at least temporarily. Nonetheless, the long-term political implications of these strategies remain unclear and require further exploration.

The results also left open a few questions. If verbal and costly assuring signals from the challenger did not work, what signal could make the public believe the *fait accompli* is not the first step toward invasion? What are the mechanisms behind the acceptance among the respondents for the *fait accompli*, and their overwhelmingly high dislike for the use of force? Two mechanisms might be at play: either respondents have low attachment to the contested territory, in this case, Kinmen islands<sup>5</sup>, or they believe that even with the use of force, taking back the lost territory is not feasible due to the power asymmetry between the challenger (China) and the target (Taiwan). Further tests are needed to verify these mechanisms, as well as the interaction between them. Another avenue for research is more specific to Taiwan. If the public is unwilling to support the use of force, yet also dissatisfied with the government not retaliating at all, what type of response would they support? Considering the economic dependency of Taiwan on the Mainland, the lack of recognition from international organizations and international legal options, as well as the gradually contracting diplomatic partners, retaliatory options for Taiwan are limited in the case of a *fait accompli*.

Future studies can benefit from tackling some of the limitations in this paper. While the wording of the signals used in the experiment might be close to reality, it might not be strong enough to persuade the public. At the same time, signals from the challenger in a crisis are not always assuring. Threats can also be as effective in de-escalation (Choi et al., 2023).<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the paper only explored public reaction to a particular form of *fait accompli*, which is a bloodless, peaceful referendum. More investigation is needed to investigate whether different kinds of *fait accompli*, including ones with heavy casualties,

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<sup>5</sup>The results of this study is somewhat comparable to that of Fu et al. (2024). In their study, China attacked Penghu Island. The respondents in their study were supportive of war action, with the lowest group stood at 60%. In our study, China took over Kinmen Islands, and the highest support rate for war action stands at only 32%. It can be argued here that the Taiwanese public holds more sentimental attachment with Penghu, or value Penghu higher than Kinmen. Another way to explain the difference would be that their experimental scenario involves a military attack, while this study used a referendum.

<sup>6</sup>The Russian President Vladimir Putin also threatened to further escalate tensions if Ukrainian leaders decide to retaliate in the Crimea crisis. See Kofman et al. (2017).



might lead to different responses from the public and how signals from the challengers would be interpreted under these different circumstances. Another avenue concerns the mechanisms through which the citizens evaluate a signal from the challenger. While the experimental design included both verbal and costly signals, it did not directly measure perceived credibility or intent. The null findings may reflect the public's skepticism toward reassurance messages, especially when issued by a highly distrusted adversary. Future studies should incorporate perception checks to assess how different subgroups interpret challenger intent, credibility, and risk.

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# A Appendix

## A.1 Experimental vignettes

### A.1.1 Stage 1

#### *Control 1*

Pro-unification forces on Kinmen Island organized a referendum on uniting Kinmen and the mainland. The result of the referendum indicates that a majority of Kinmen citizens want to reunite. Based on this result, Beijing announces that they will take over the administration of Kinmen Island.

中國大陸近期表示支持金門島上的統派力量，組織了一場關於金門與大陸統一的公投。公投結果顯示，大多數金門居民希望回歸。基於這一結果，北京宣布將接管金門島。

#### *Treatment 1-1: Verbal assurance*

Pro-unification forces on Kinmen Island organized a referendum on uniting Kinmen and the mainland. The result of the referendum indicates that a majority of Kinmen citizens want to reunite. Based on this result, Beijing announces that they will take over the administration of Kinmen Island. In a public statement, President Xi Jinping said: “I have partially fulfilled my promise to the people that is to reunite Taiwan back to the motherland. I hope future generations will complete my works”.

中國大陸近期表示支持金門島上的統派力量，組織了一場關於金門與大陸統一的公投。公投結果顯示，大多數金門居民希望回歸。基於這一結果，北京宣布將接管金門島。基於這一結果，北京宣布將接管金門島的行政管理權。在一份公開聲明中，習近平主席表示：「我已經部分履行了對人民的承諾，即統一台灣。我希望未來的世代能繼續完成我的偉業。」

#### *Treatment 1-2: Costly assurance*

Pro-unification forces on Kinmen Island organized a referendum on uniting Kinmen and the mainland. The result of the referendum indicates that a majority of Kinmen citizens want to reunite. Based on this result, Beijing announces that they will take over the administration of Kinmen Island. In a public statement, President Xi Jinping said: “I have partially fulfilled my promise to the people that is to reunite Taiwan back to the motherland. I hope future generations will complete my works”. He also publicly ordered the PLA to reduce its activities around the Taiwan Strait.

中國大陸近期表示支持金門島上的統派力量，組織了一場關於金門與大陸統一的公投。公投結果顯示，大多數金門居民希望回歸。基於這一結果，北京宣布將接管金門島。基於這一結果，北京宣布將接管金門島的行政管理權。在一份公開聲明中，習近平主席表示：「我已經部分履行了對人民的承諾，即統一台灣。我希望未來的世代能繼續完成我的偉業。」並且還公開表明會減少解放軍在台灣海峽周圍的活動。

#### *Decision to use retaliate with the use of force (Assigned to all respondents)*

The Taiwanese President denounced that the referendum is a sham, and that they will deploy forces to retake Kinmen Island.

台灣總統譴責這次公投是一場騙局，並宣布將部署軍隊奪回金門群島。



### A.1.2 Stage 2

#### *Control 2*

After deliberation, the Taiwanese President decided not to use force to take back Kinmen.  
台灣總統經過深思熟慮，決定不使用武力收復金門。

#### *Treatment 2-1: Casualties*

After deliberation, the Taiwanese President decided not to use force to take back Kinmen. They explain that a direct conflict with China would result in heavy casualties.

台灣總統經過深思熟慮，決定不使用武力收復金門。並解釋說他們避免希望與中國發生戰爭。

#### *Treatment 2-2: Economic consequences*

After deliberation, the Taiwanese President decided not to use force to take back Kinmen. They explain that a direct conflict with China would have devastating economic consequences.

台灣總統經過深思熟慮，決定不使用武力收復金門。並解釋說與中國發生衝突將帶來毀滅性的經濟後果。

## A.2 Summary data of experimental groups

Table A1: Number of respondents per group in Stage 1

Group 1	n
Control	605
Verbal assurance	595
Costly assurance	602

Table A2: Number of respondents per group in Stage 2

Group 1	Group 2	n
Control	Control	193
Control	Avoding war	206
Control	Economic consequences	206
Verbal assurance	Control	190
Verbal assurance	Avoding war	199
Verbal assurance	Economic consequences	206
Costly assurance	Control	218
Costly assurance	Avoding war	195
Costly assurance	Economic consequences	189

Table A3: Descriptive Statistics of the respondents

Characteristic	N = 1,802
<b>Age Groups</b>	
18-29	378 (21%)
30-39	419 (23%)
40-49	490 (27%)
50-59	334 (19%)
60+	181 (10%)
<b>Gender Identity</b>	
Male	874 (49%)
Female	906 (50%)
Others	22 (1.2%)
<b>Education Level</b>	
Primary School	12 (0.7%)
Secondary School	47 (2.6%)
High School	294 (16%)
College	1,145 (64%)
Postgraduate	304 (17%)
<b>Party Identification</b>	
DPP	192 (11%)
KMT	190 (11%)
TPP	154 (8.5%)
Others	35 (1.9%)
Not affiliated	1,231 (68%)
<b>Feeling toward China</b>	47.9 (30.6) Median: 50.0 Min: 0.0, Max: 100.0
<b>Nationalistic Sentiment</b>	4.2 (0.8) Median: 4.3 Min: 1.0, Max: 6.0

### A.2.1 Balance check

Table A4: Covariate Balance by Treatment Condition

Characteristic	c1, N = 605	t1-1, N = 595	t1-2, N = 602	P-value
<b>Age Groups</b>				0.943
18-29	123 (20%)	124 (21%)	131 (22%)	
30-39	133 (22%)	141 (24%)	145 (24%)	
40-49	168 (28%)	162 (27%)	160 (27%)	
50-59	112 (19%)	111 (19%)	111 (18%)	
60+	69 (11%)	57 (9.6%)	55 (9.1%)	
<b>Gender Identity</b>				0.531
Male	302 (50%)	283 (48%)	289 (48%)	
Female	299 (49%)	302 (51%)	305 (51%)	
Others	4 (0.7%)	10 (1.7%)	8 (1.3%)	
<b>Education Level</b>				0.714
Primary School	6 (1.0%)	4 (0.7%)	2 (0.3%)	
Secondary School	17 (2.8%)	15 (2.5%)	15 (2.5%)	
High School	97 (16%)	108 (18%)	89 (15%)	
College	386 (64%)	364 (61%)	395 (66%)	
Postgraduate	99 (16%)	104 (17%)	101 (17%)	
<b>Party Identification</b>				0.394
DPP	63 (10%)	69 (12%)	60 (10.0%)	
KMT	78 (13%)	57 (9.6%)	55 (9.1%)	
TPP	51 (8.4%)	47 (7.9%)	56 (9.3%)	
Others	8 (1.3%)	13 (2.2%)	14 (2.3%)	
Not affiliated	405 (67%)	409 (69%)	417 (69%)	
<b>Feeling toward China</b>	48.1 (30.6) Median: 50.0 Min: 0.0, Max: 100.0	47.4 (30.3) Median: 50.0 Min: 0.0, Max: 100.0	48.0 (30.8) Median: 50.0 Min: 0.0, Max: 100.0	
<b>Nationalistic Sentiment</b>	4.2 (0.8) Median: 4.3 Min: 1.0, Max: 6.0	4.3 (0.8) Median: 4.3 Min: 1.0, Max: 6.0	4.2 (0.8) Median: 4.3 Min: 1.0, Max: 6.0	

## A.3 Robustness check

### A.3.1 First stage

Table A5: OLS and Logit models stage 1

	OLS	OLS	Logit	Logit
Verbal assurance	0.025 (0.076)	-0.012 (0.069)	-0.062 (0.125)	-0.135 (0.138)
Costly assurance	0.097 (0.076)	0.066 (0.069)	0.038 (0.124)	0.016 (0.136)
Identity: Taiwanese + Chinese		-0.290* (0.120)		-0.788*** (0.229)
Identity: Chinese		-0.262* (0.121)		-0.832*** (0.231)
Confident in US support		0.525*** (0.060)		0.732*** (0.119)
Invasion likely		0.193*** (0.057)		0.459*** (0.113)
Nationalistic sentiment		0.172*** (0.038)		0.334*** (0.076)
Age		-0.011 (0.023)		0.063 (0.047)
Gender (female = 1)		-0.288*** (0.054)		-0.604*** (0.110)
SDO		-0.014 (0.040)		-0.090 (0.078)
Manipulation check		-0.385*** (0.090)		-0.672*** (0.169)
KMT supporter (DPP = 1)		-0.178 (0.123)		-0.276 (0.235)
TPP supporter (DPP = 1)		-0.004 (0.130)		0.197 (0.239)
Other parties		0.068 (0.220)		-0.537 (0.454)
Not affiliated		-0.085 (0.099)		-0.306+ (0.186)
Hawkish (Dove = 1)		0.769*** (0.098)		1.378*** (0.184)
Neutral (Dove = 1)		0.402*** (0.071)		0.195 (0.139)
Feeling toward Mainland China		-0.008*** (0.001)		-0.011*** (0.002)
Num.Obs.	1802	1802	1802	1802
• p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001				

### A.3.2 Second stage

Table A6: OLS and Logit models stage 2

	OLS	OLS	Logit	Logit
Verbal assurance	0.039 (0.116)	0.079 (0.112)	0.387+ (0.205)	0.518* (0.217)
Costly assurance	-0.033 (0.112)	0.017 (0.108)	0.295 (0.198)	0.441* (0.211)
Avoiding war	0.015 (0.113)	0.021 (0.110)	0.298 (0.201)	0.361+ (0.213)
Economic consequences	-0.189+ (0.113)	-0.128 (0.110)	0.005 (0.202)	0.152 (0.215)
Identity: Taiwanese + Chinese		-0.184+ (0.110)		-0.125 (0.219)
Identity: Chinese		-0.133 (0.111)		-0.054 (0.222)
Confident in US support		0.144** (0.055)		0.266* (0.106)
Invasion likely		-0.031 (0.052)		-0.013 (0.101)
Nationalistic sentiment		0.049 (0.035)		0.138* (0.067)
Age		-0.051* (0.021)		-0.100* (0.041)
Gender (female = 1)		0.043 (0.050)		-0.011 (0.097)
SDO		-0.153*** (0.036)		-0.257*** (0.072)
KMT supporter (DPP = 1)		0.131 (0.113)		0.137 (0.218)
TPP supporter (DPP = 1)		0.274* (0.119)		0.685** (0.240)
Other parties		-0.136 (0.202)		-0.718+ (0.408)
Not affiliated		-0.074 (0.090)		-0.222 (0.172)
Hawkish (Dove = 1)		-0.484*** (0.090)		-0.533** (0.172)
Neutral (Dove = 1)		-0.383*** (0.065)		-1.119*** (0.132)
Feeling toward Mainland China		0.003** (0.001)		0.007*** (0.002)
Verbal assurance x Avoiding war	-0.083 (0.161)	-0.095 (0.156)	-0.516+ (0.286)	-0.610* (0.303)
Costly assurance x Avoiding war	-0.038 (0.159)	-0.077 (0.154)	-0.445 (0.282)	-0.579+ (0.298)
Verbal assurance x Economic consequences	0.054 (0.161)	-0.031 (0.155)	-0.309 (0.285)	-0.538+ (0.303)
Costly assurance x Economic consequences	0.232 (0.160)	0.142 (0.155)	-0.029 (0.283)	-0.248 (0.301)
Num.Obs.	1802	1802	1802	1802

•  $p < 0.1$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$



## A.4 Sub-group analyses

### A.4.1 Age and Gender

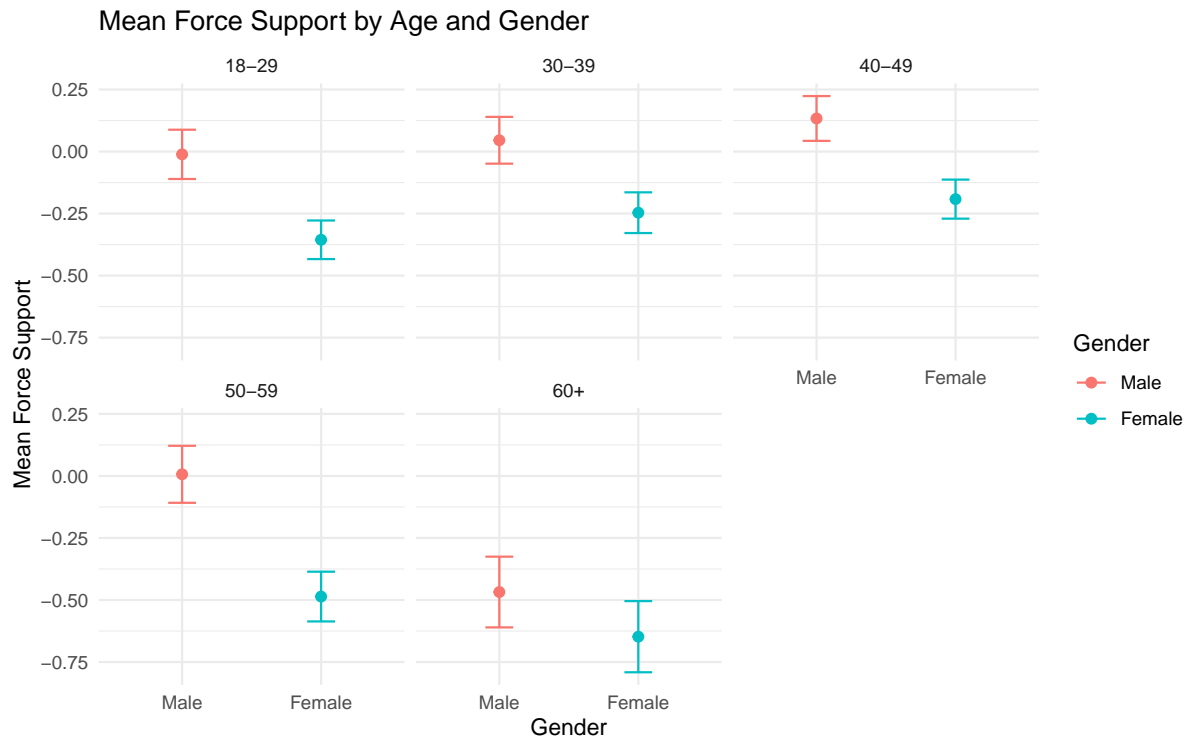


Figure A1: Support for the use of force by age and gender

Figure A1 showed the results of the survey that male respondents across age groups are on average more supportive of the use of force to retake Kinmen Islands, compared to female respondents. Support for the use of force is particularly strong among respondents in the 40s. A possible explanation for this difference is that male respondents were more likely to have military experience due to the mandatory military conscription policy, and therefore were more willing to fight for Kinmen, compared to female respondents. These results resonated with those found in Wang et al. (2024) regarding the effects of age and gender on the willingness to fight in Taiwan.

#### A.4.2 Identity and support for the use of force

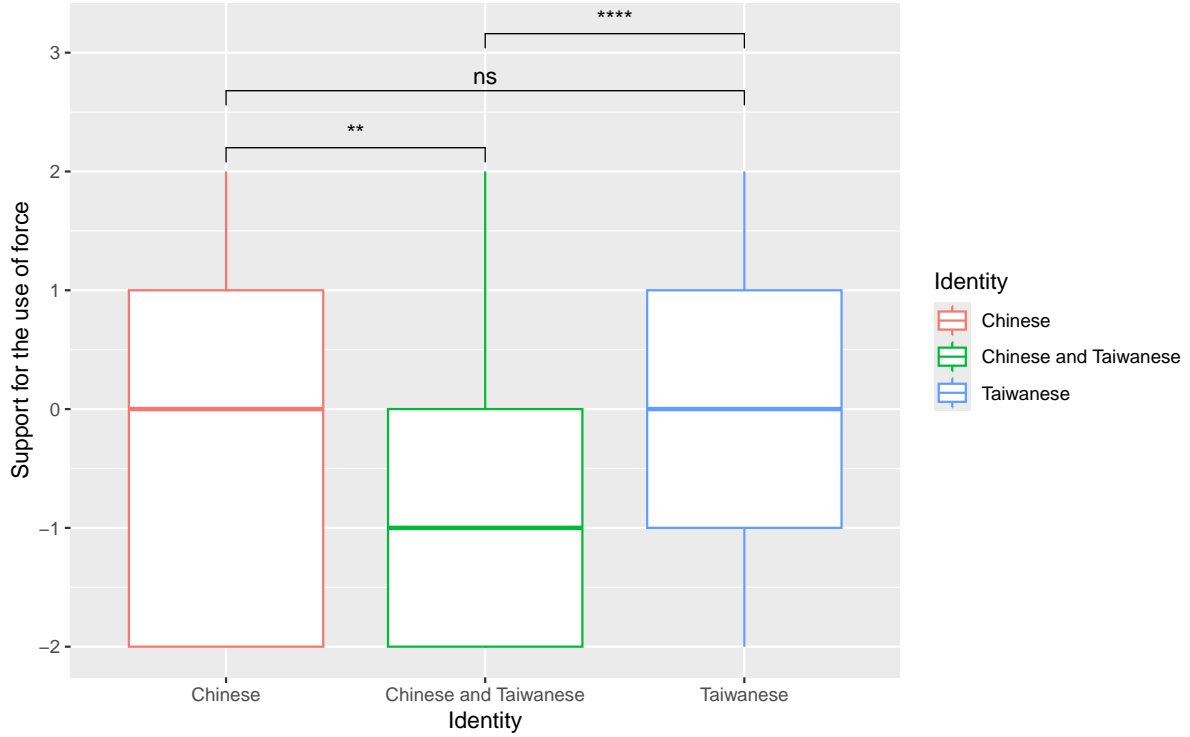


Figure A2: Support for the use of force by identities

As can be seen from the results in Appendix A.3, the self-reported identities of the respondents can influence their support for the use of force to retake Kinmen. Figure A2 reports the difference in support for the use of force among respondents according to their identities. Overall, while there is no difference among those who strongly identify as “Chinese” and those who strongly identify as “Taiwanese”, the differences between both of these groups and those who identify as “Both Chinese and Taiwanese” are statistically significant. In general, those who identify as both Chinese and Taiwanese have lower support for the use of force. This result added to the findings of Wang and Elde-merdash (2023), who found that those with weak identities are most prone to increase their willingness to fight for Taiwan in conflicts.

#### A.4.3 Hawk - dove orientation

Figure A3 showed the support for the use of force across groups, faceted by respondents’ hawkish-dovish orientation in foreign policy. In line with Kertzer and Brutger (2016) and Fu and Lee (2025), the respondents’ hawkish-dovish orientation significantly influence their support for the use of force to retake Kinmen islands. Hawkish respondents are more supportive of the use of force, while dovish respondents are mainly against it. Similar to Fu and Lee (2025), I also do not found influence of Chinese assurance signals on either type of respondents.

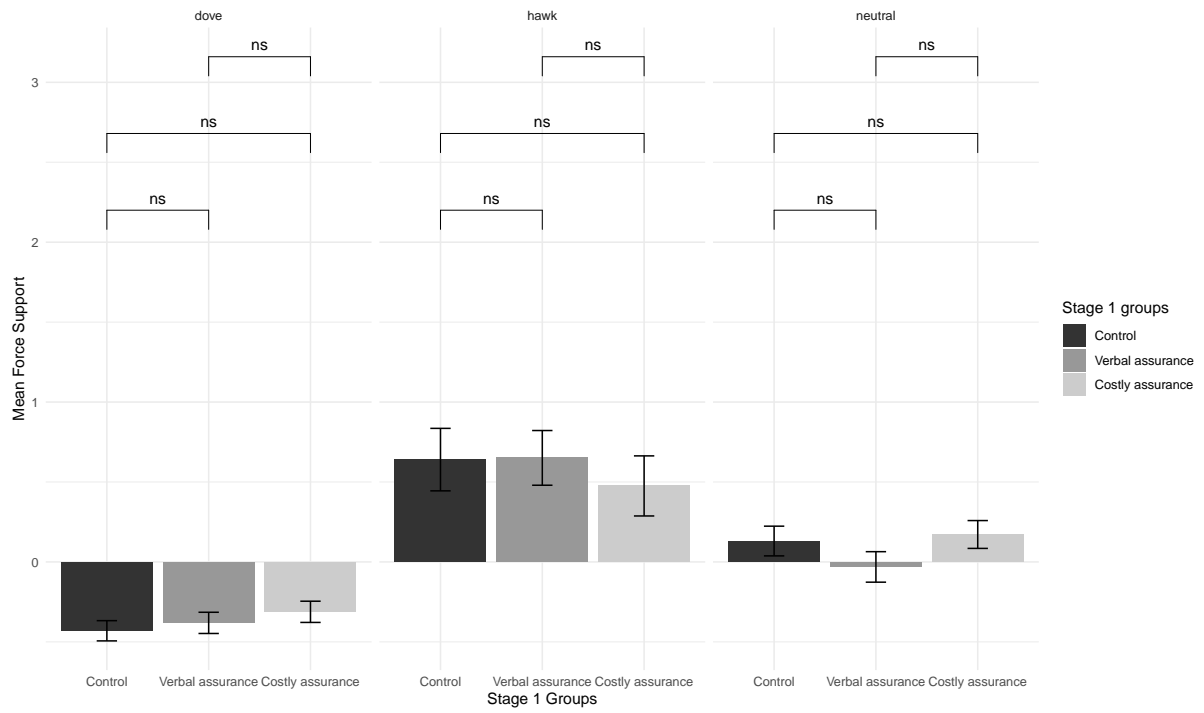


Figure A3: Support for the use of force according to hawkish - dovish orientation

## A.5 Equivalence tests

The results presented in the main text are statistically insignificant. However, the absence of effect is not a definitive proof that the treatments have no effect on the outcome. Following recommendation by [Lakens \(2017\)](#), I conducted equivalence tests to determine the true null effects. Any effects smaller than Cohen's  $d = 0.25$  can be considered negligible for practical purposes.

The results of the equivalence tests showed that the effects in both stages are unlikely to be larger than 0.25. Therefore, the effects can be considered to be practically equivalent to 0.

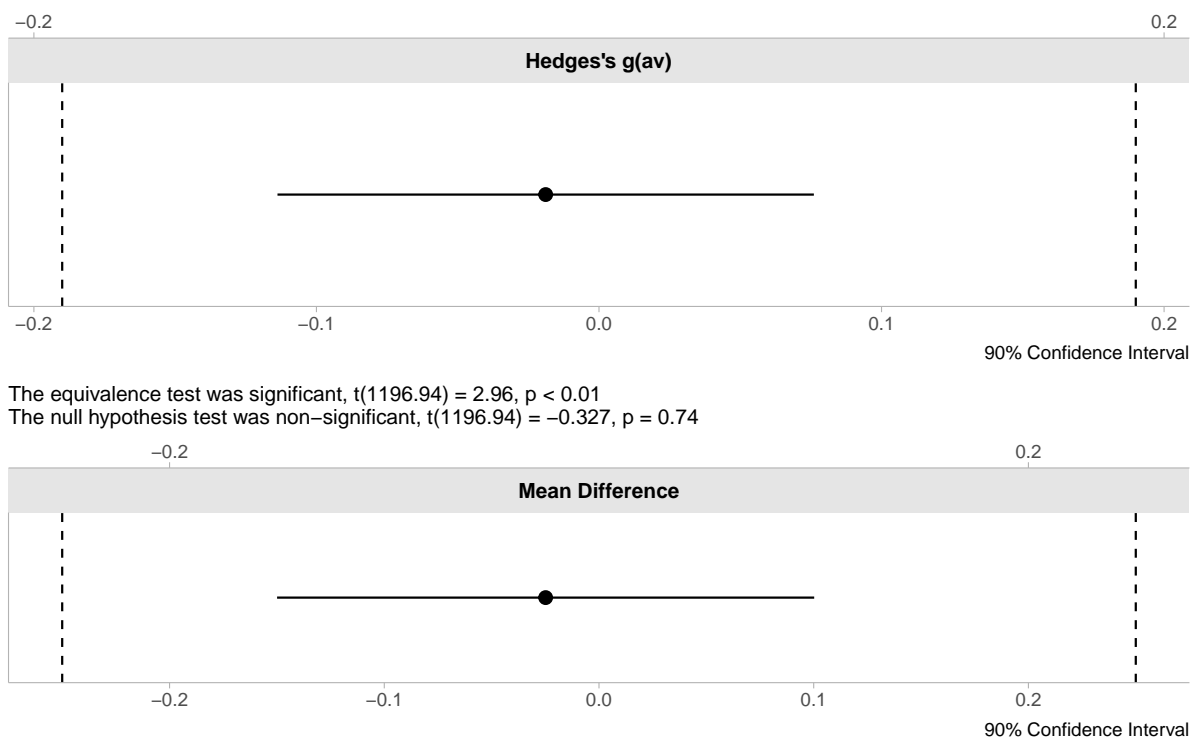


Figure A4: Equivalence test: Verbal assurance and support for use of force

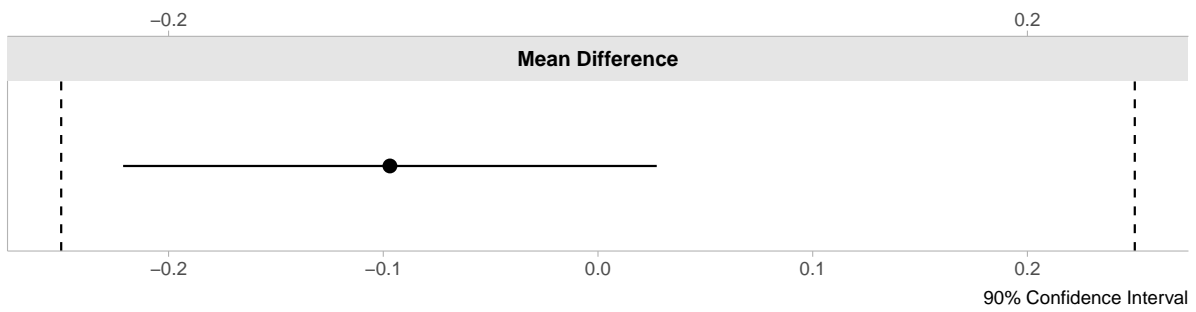


Figure A5: Equivalence test: Costly assurance and support for use of force

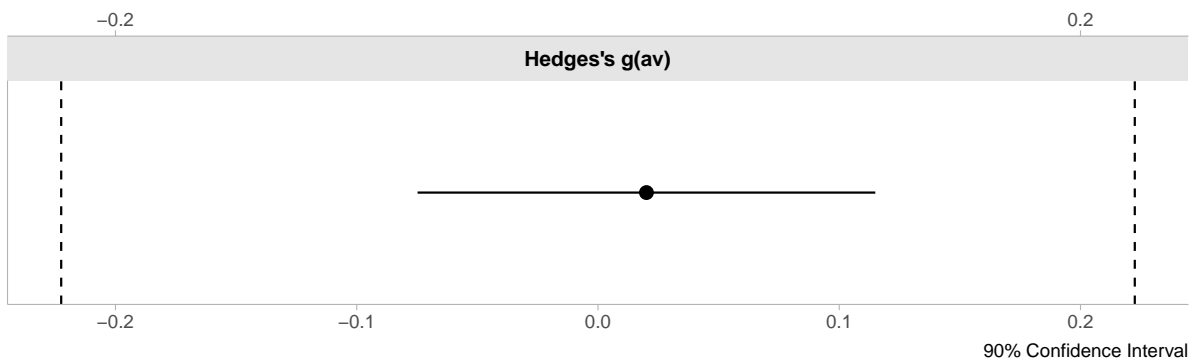


Figure A6: Equivalence test: Casualties and approval for backing down

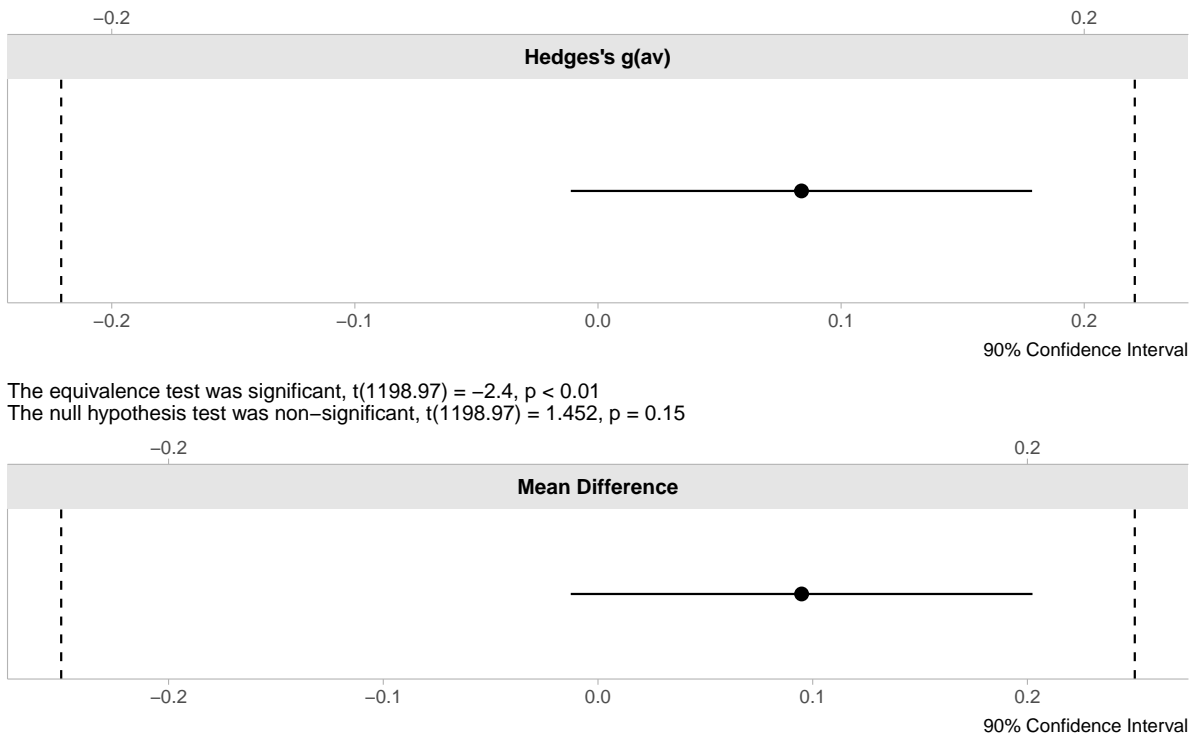


Figure A7: Equivalence test: Economic consequences and approval for backing down