

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 it retaliate and risk war, or de-escalate and risk looking weak? 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, 2023a). 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?

The risk of a *fait accompli* by China is particularly severe in the case of the Taiwan Strait. Experts, both in the US and Taiwan, deemed a Chinese takeover of Taiwan's outlying islands as the third likely scenario for conflicts in the near future, behind only quarantines of those islands and of Taiwan's main islands and ahead of full invasion (Lin et al., 2024a). However, it is also the scenario in which experts expected Taiwan least likely to receive support from the US and its allies. Among the outlying islands of Taiwan, the Kinmen Islands stand out as a favorable target (Chubb, 2023b). They are a group of islands in the Taiwan Strait, currently under the administration of the Republic of China (Taiwan), but are geographically closer to Mainland China than to the island of Taiwan. This geographical proximity allows China to make a swift move and deter Taiwanese and American forces from responding. Furthermore, Kinmen, along with the Matsu Islands, were originally excluded from the expired mutual defense treaty between the US and Taiwan, as well as the subsequent Taiwan Relations Act (Keating, 2024). Occupying Kinmen will serve as a way for China to test the response of the US to any crisis in the Taiwan Strait.

The scenario described above calls for a deeper understanding of *fait accompli*. Scholars have focused on the incentives for challengers to use this strategy (Tarar, 2016; Hastey, 2020), or why target states do not retaliate based on strategic interests (Ngo, 2023). However, public sentiment in target states also plays a significant role in territorial crises like *fait accompli*, yet has received little attention from scholars. Much of the existing literature explains state responses to *fait accompli* through strategic calculus (Ngo, 2023). However, the public may impose constraints on leaders at both the point of escalation and de-escalation. This paper explores these microfoundations: when does the public demand forceful retaliation, and when do they punish restraint?

This paper will attempt to investigate the target state public reaction to a *fait accompli* situation in two stages: escalation and de-escalation.¹ Specifically, it tries to measure two

¹The reason for this design is that public reactions in these two stages are often interconnected. If the public is willing to support retaliation in the first stage, they are less willing to support de-escalatory actions in the second stage, and vice versa. For a thorough discussion of how public preference for belligerence influence audience cost, see Kertzer and Brutger (2016).

reactions: first, the support for the use of force in retaliation against fait accompli, and second, the approval for de-escalation after fait accompli. I also examine the factors that can potentially influence these public reactions - assurances from the challenger state in the escalation stage and side-stepping strategies from the target state in the de-escalation phase. By studying these factors, this article sheds light on the potential challenges that the target states might face when they decide on their responses to a fait accompli. Public reactions may follow one of two competing logics. First, anger over territorial loss may drive support for retaliation (Hall, 2017). Alternatively, individuals may weigh the risks of escalation, including casualties (Reifler et al., 2005) and economic consequences (Kohama et al., 2024), and would prefer peace, even at the cost of conceding territory. These tensions shape expectations about both the efficacy of challenger assurances and the political costs of backing down.

Through a survey experiment in Taiwan, I found that while the public might consider assurances from the challenger as mere ‘cheap talk’, they were willing to accept the fait accompli to avoid war. However, the targets might find themselves in a difficult situation because although the public was unwilling to support retaliation using force, they also showed dissatisfaction with the leader not retaliating, regardless of the side-stepping rhetoric. The results of this study aligned with previous public surveys on how the Taiwanese public reacts to signals from China and the overall situation in the Taiwan Strait (Lee et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2025).

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: I introduce fait accompli and the factors potentially impacting public reactions in this type of crisis. I then introduce the experiment’s research design, followed by the results. The paper will conclude with its theoretical contributions and practical implications.

2 Fait accompli and its two stages

2.1 Fait accompli and its place in International Relations

Fait accompli, in essence, is a gamble of the challenger: they bet that if they take a territory, the target will choose not to escalate the situation into a full-blown war because the cost of such a war would be higher than the cost of losing the territory. There are several incentives for states to choose this tactic over other means: fait accompli involves relatively lower costs compared to other forms of territorial acquisition (Tarar, 2016), it is also 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 literature has overwhelmingly focused on the side of the challenger states. However, the results of fait accompli are often determined by the reactions of the target states, which is an understudied aspect of the phenomenon. Ngo (2024) attempted to explain why some fait accomplis led to immediate military retaliation, while some did not. The author argued that two factors, the perceived value of the contested territory and the perceived value of restraint, significantly influence target states’ behaviors. Using the Crimean annexation as the case study, the author concluded that when the perceived value of the territory is low and the perceived value of restraint is high, the target state

would choose not to retaliate. Departing from this state-centric approach, this paper argues that the domestic public also reacts to a potential fait accompli, and this attitude matters to the target state in both the escalation and de-escalation stages of a fait accompli situation. In the escalation stage, if the public strongly demands or is willing to support the use of force to reclaim the contested territory, the target state's government might be incentivized to retaliate immediately. Similarly, in the de-escalation stage of fait accompli, if the public attitude against backing down is strong, the target state government will face more challenges in trying to settle the crisis.

This paper will attempt to investigate public reaction after fait accompli in both the escalation and de-escalation stages. Furthermore, it looks at factors influencing this reaction in both stages. Specifically, in the escalation stage, this paper will study whether assurances from the challenger state will alter the support for the use of force among the public in the target state. In the de-escalation stage, this paper will examine the existence of domestic backlash that the target state might face if they choose to de-escalate, as well as whether or not the target state can mitigate this backlash.

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.

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. Taken together, these previous works highlighted a logic underpinning restraint from retaliation in crises: assurance signals from the challenger state might be able to influence the strategic calculation of the target state, both at the leadership and the public levels. Following this logic, I derive the first hypothesis:

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.

The challenger states might be able to bolster the credibility of their signals by making these actions more costly ([Fearon, 1997](#)). While there is a gap between the sender and the receiver over the credibility of the signal ([Quek, 2016](#)), the challenger state might be

able to convince at least a proportion of the target state’s public that their intention is genuine (Hall and Yarhi-Milo, 2012). In the context of the *fait accompli*, the challenger state can decrease or stop all military activities surrounding the target territory after the *fait accompli* as a costly action to signal that they do not intend to escalate further. This action can be considered costly for two reasons. First, restarting their activities would be costly for the challenger state. Second, any sign of re-mobilization would enable the target state to prepare early for possible escalation. As a result, it would be more challenging for the challenger state if they wished to invade further when they stopped their military activities after a *fait accompli*. Therefore, this action can be seen as a costly signal.

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.

This study builds upon previous research by Fu and Lee (2025), who examined the effect of the timing of signals during crises versus non-crisis situations, but diverges from it in certain ways. While Fu and Lee focused on factors influencing the effectiveness of these signals (timing and individuals’ hawkish-dovish orientations), this research delves into how these signals might or might not influence public willingness to support the use of force in a crisis situation. By integrating reassurance signals into the crisis scenario, this study aims to provide deeper insights into their impact on public attitudes, thereby addressing a critical gap in understanding the dynamics of reassurance amidst conflict.

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

After a *fait accompli*, a target state might decide to bluff - threaten to use force to take back the target territory. This is because the challenger state imposes the *fait accompli* when it believes the target state is unwilling to fight. By bluffing, the target state can signal its resolve to the challenger and attempt to bargain with the challenger state to regain its territory. However, when this bluff does not succeed, they might need to back down from their declared position. The domestic backlash incurred from this process is called audience cost (Fearon, 1994). The public in the target state might perceive backing down as a sign of the leaders’ incompetence, and the inconsistency in the leaders’ actions might hurt the country’s credibility and reputation.

Audience cost is an important factor in *fait accompli* situations because if the target state fails to carry out its threat, the domestic public will punish the leaders for not fulfilling their declared policy and not responding to the challenger state’s provocation. As Cho (2018) pointed out, this provocation effect can tie the hands of the leaders, severely limiting their bargaining options.

However, audience costs can be mitigated. Levendusky and Horowitz (2012) argued that the domestic public can sympathize with the leaders if they are given reasons for the mismatch between words and deeds. The emerging literature investigating audience cost in non-Western settings also yielded robust results regarding effective rhetorical strategies through which the government can reduce the audience costs (Driscoll and Maliniak, 2016; Quek and Johnston, 2018; Kohama et al., 2024). These rhetorics range from emphasizing

casualties (Nguyen Cao, 2025) to economic costs of escalation (Kohama et al., 2024). Taken together, the results of these studies also align with the two logics in this paper: the public might be motivated by anger to punish the decision to back down, but they might also make strategic calculations to form their own reactions. Based on this logic, I derived two hypotheses:

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 also presents an ideal case to test for audience cost after a fait accompli. As mentioned, backing down after a fait accompli might be more challenging for a target state. In the case of Taiwan, it might even be more difficult. Chong et al. (2023) revealed that the Taiwanese public wanted a strong reaction against Chinese aggression. Therefore, Taiwan might be an even more challenging test for the rhetorical strategies used in mitigating audience cost, which has proven to be successful elsewhere. In addition, recent works showed that the Taiwanese public is increasingly willing to fight to defend Taiwan (Yeh and Wu, 2021; Wu et al., 2023). However, the scenario in these studies is often a full-scale invasion from China. It is unclear if the Taiwanese public is equally willing to defend the outlying islands like Kinmen or Matsu and how they would react if the Taiwanese leader decides to back down after such a fait accompli on these islands. Investigating the public reactions to backing down after a fait accompli in this situation will bring more nuances to the literature on the willingness to fight in Taiwan.

3 Research design

The pre-registered experiment was conducted in July 2024.² A 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.³ The details of each stage are explained below. The detailed vignettes are given in Appendix A.1.

3.1 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

²The experiment was preregistered on the Open Science Framework before data collection (https://osf.io/5tmy3/?view_only=8f339b34dd7a4126820634c147a58ff3).

³Due 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.

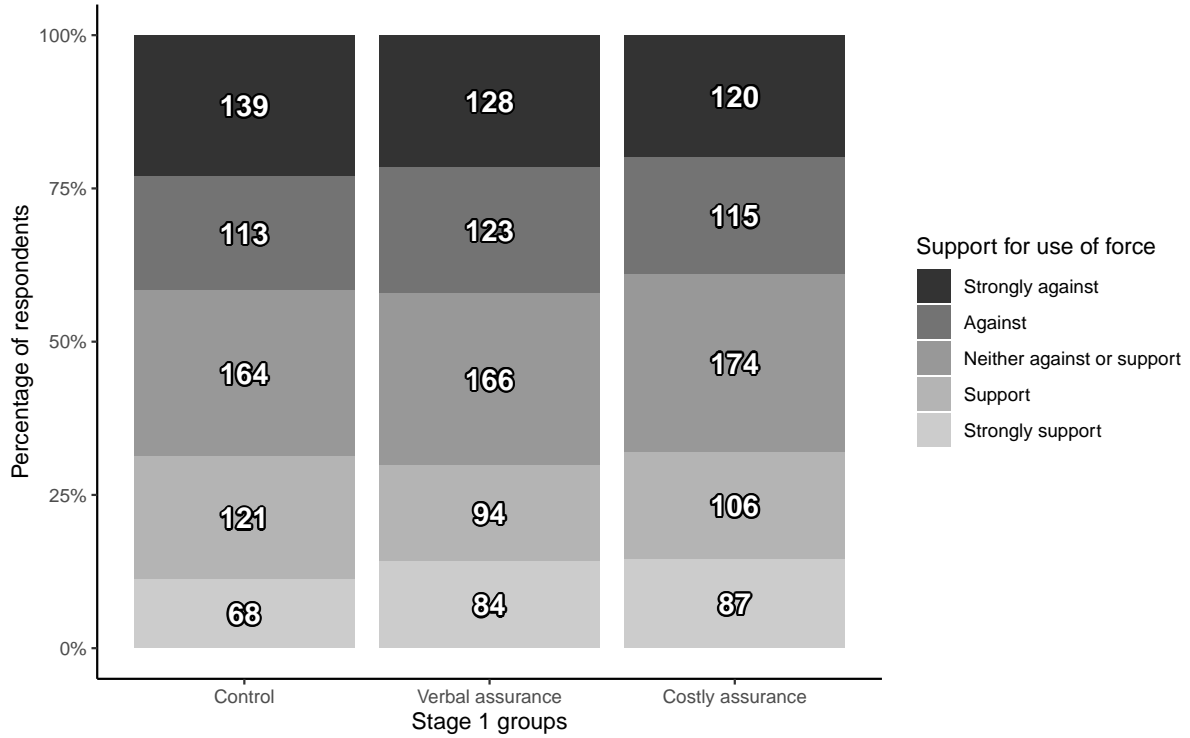
use of force after fait accompli, as well as how the public responds to different assurances by the challenger. All respondents read that China will take over the administration of the Kinmen islands after a referendum showing that the majority of the islands' residents wish to reunite with the mainland.⁴ 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 would accept the result of the referendum if an independent body verified its authenticity.

3.2 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 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.



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

Figure 1: Support for the use of force

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 a ceiling effect among the respondents regarding their support for the use of force. This might be because 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. While this number is not overwhelmingly high, it signals 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

⁴As 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.

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 will be more likely to support the use of force to retake Kinmen islands. This result is in line with previous studies showing that the signals from the US is one of the main factors conditioning Taiwanese public willingness to fight (Wu et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024). However, what could explain the low level of support for the use of force is that the respondents were split in their confidence of US support (51% likely, 49% unlikely).

Another possible explanation is that the respondents perceived an invasion by China as realistic, and therefore, they did not support the use of force. A slight majority (51%) indicated that they think an invasion by China is likely. A likely interpretation of this number is that because the respondents perceived an invasion by China as likely, they were not willing to provoke China over Kinmen, which was taken peacefully. Therefore, they were not willing to support the decision to fight back.

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. (2024b) 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 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.

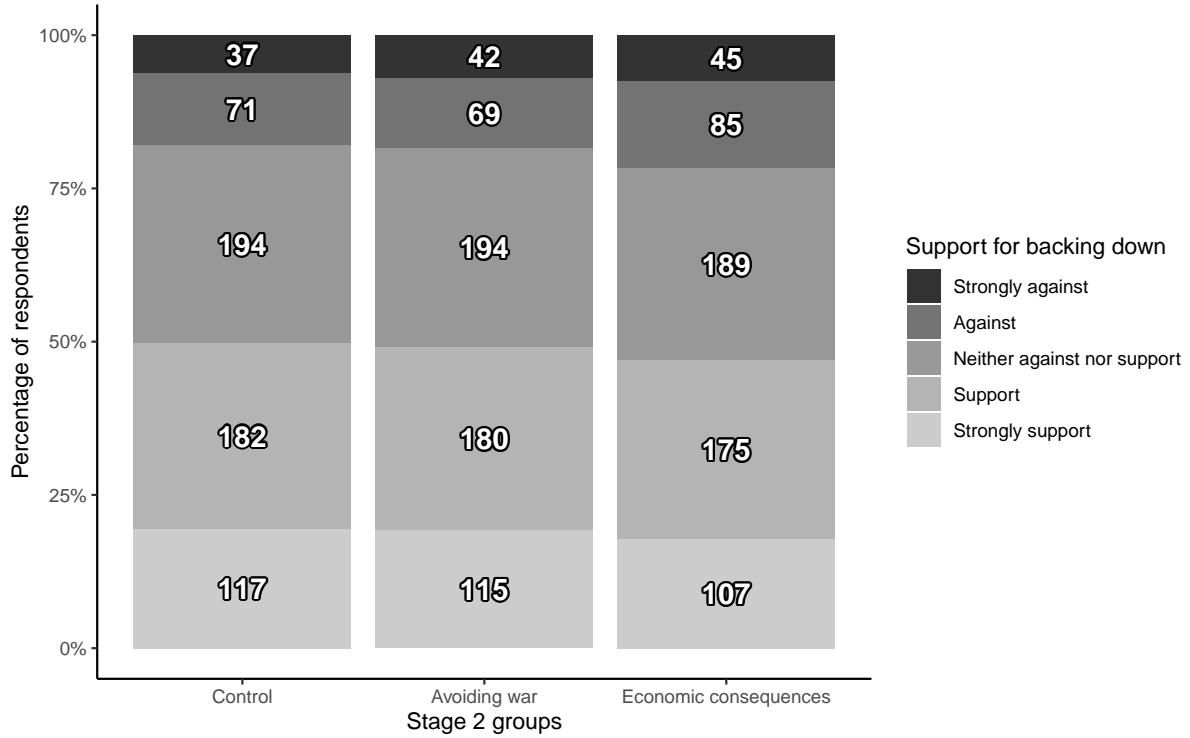
4.2 De-escalation stage

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 2 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.

A potential explanation for this split 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.⁵

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

⁵This explanation is further elaborated in Appendix A.4.4.



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

Figure 2: Support for backing down

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.

Interestingly, the economic consequences justification group showed a slight negative trend in leader approval. While not statistically significant, this pattern could indicate a potential backfire effect: respondents may have reacted more negatively when the government justified restraint on seemingly material or pragmatic grounds, which might have been perceived as insufficient or even inappropriate given the stakes. Future research should examine whether certain types of justifications—especially those seen as less legitimate or misaligned with public values—can increase rather than mitigate backlash.

The Taiwanese leader might also face consequences for backing down. A majority of respondents (66%) considered the President to be an incompetent leader after they backed down. An approximately equal proportion (60%) thought that the act of backing down damaged Taiwan’s reputation on the international stage. Overall, backing down after fait accompli without retaliatory options creates a serious domestic backlash for the Taiwanese leader.⁶

Assurances from China also would not help the Taiwanese leader when they chose to back

⁶However, 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.

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 are not 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, particularly when publics perceive the aggressor as untrustworthy or the issue as non-negotiable.

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: citizens may oppose fighting yet also punish leaders who concede, especially over territory with nationalistic salience. The results might also indicate a deeper desire of the public: preference for peace without appearing weak.

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 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 islands⁷, 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). 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, might lead to different responses from the public and how signals from the challengers would be interpreted under these different circumstances.

⁷The 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.

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

A.3 Robustness check

A.3.1 First stage

Table A4: 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 A5: 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

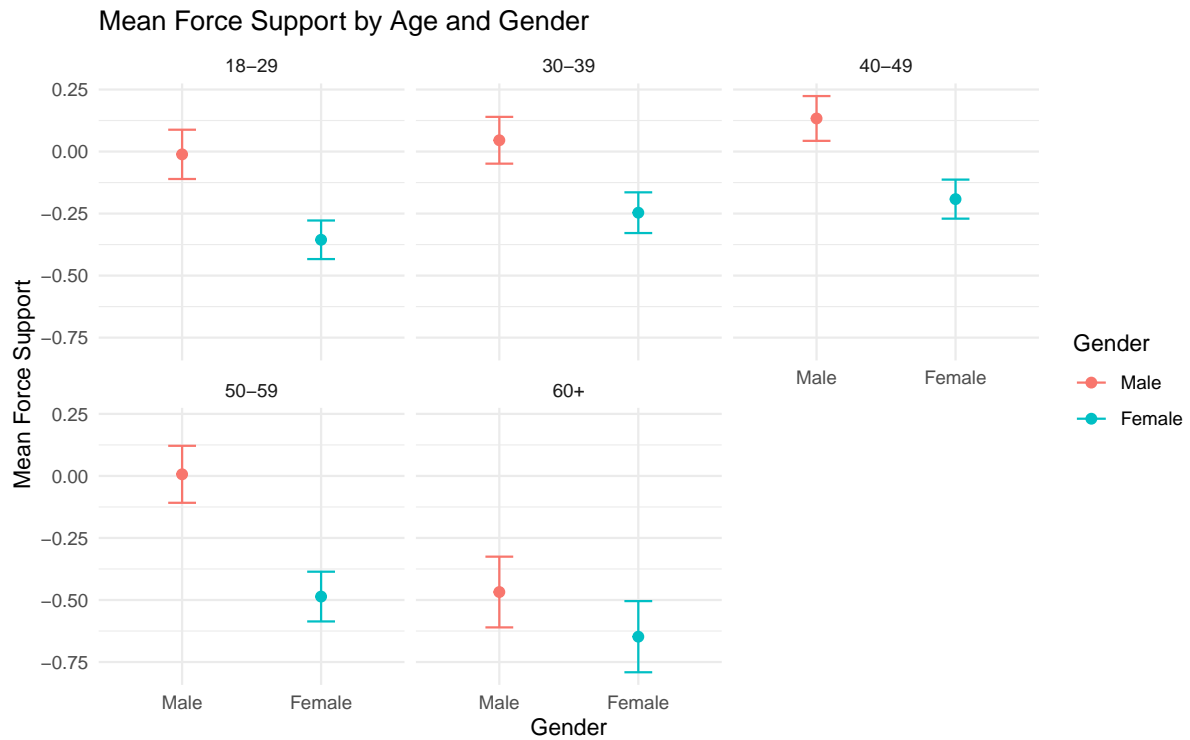


Figure A1: Support for the use of force by age and gender

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

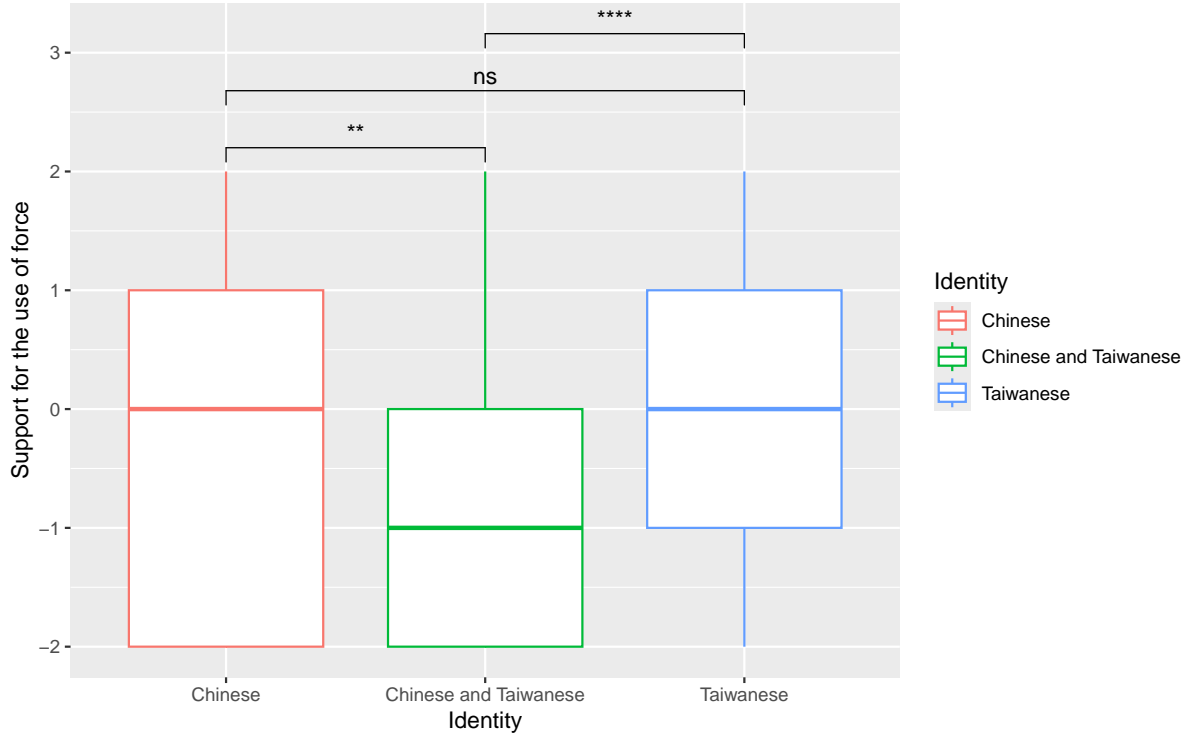


Figure A2: Support for the use of force by identities

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.

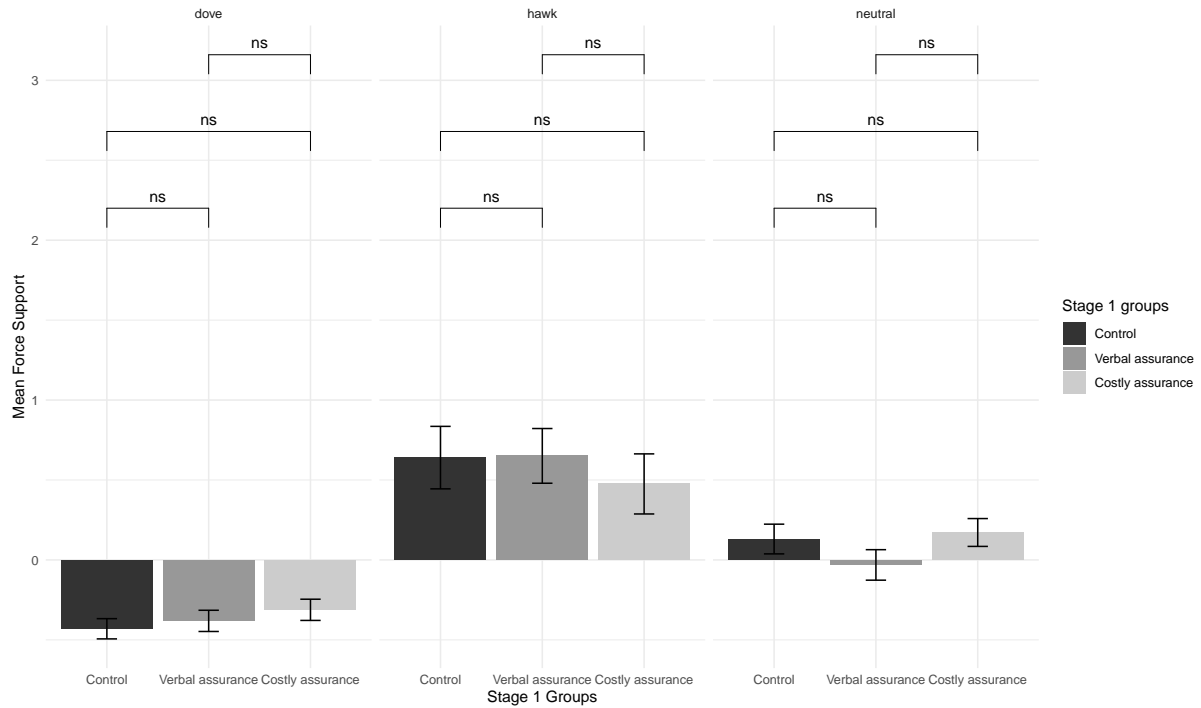


Figure A3: Support for the use of force according to hawkish - dovish orientation

A.4.4 Partisan division

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 mentioned in the Results section and shown in Figure A4 and Figure A5 below, 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 Kuomintang (KMT). On the other hand, on backing down, they adopted a somewhat similar stance to the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

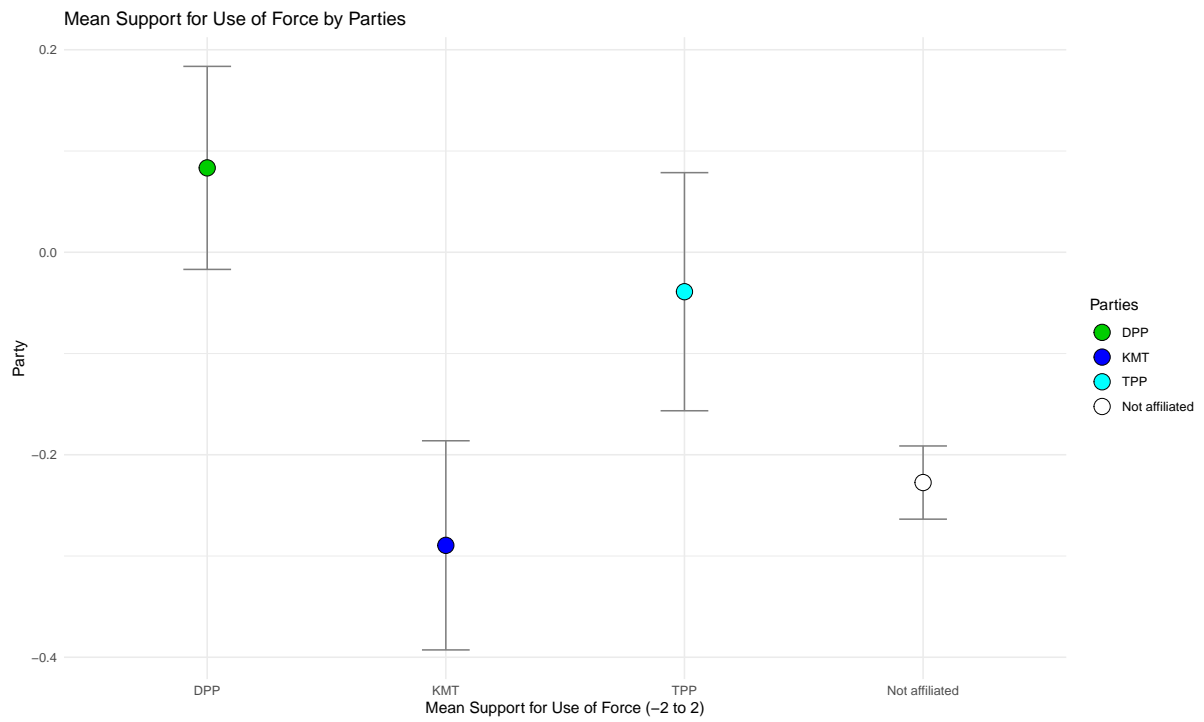


Figure A4: Support for the use of force by parties

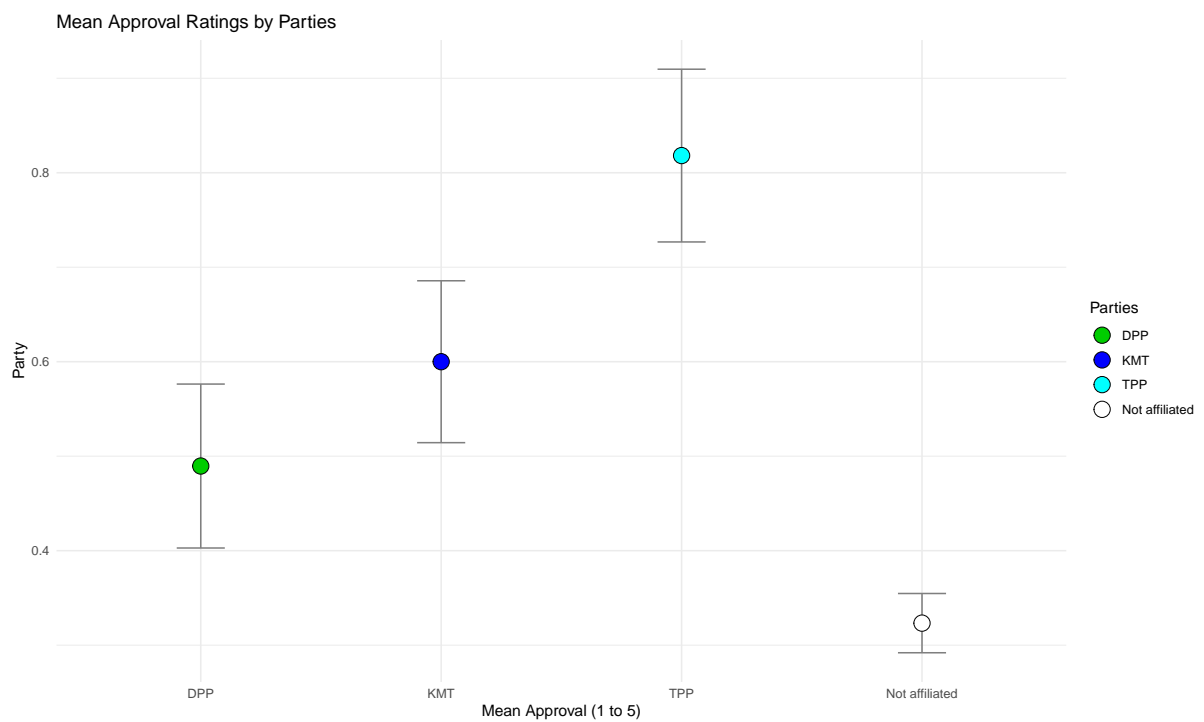


Figure A5: Support for backing down by parties

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.

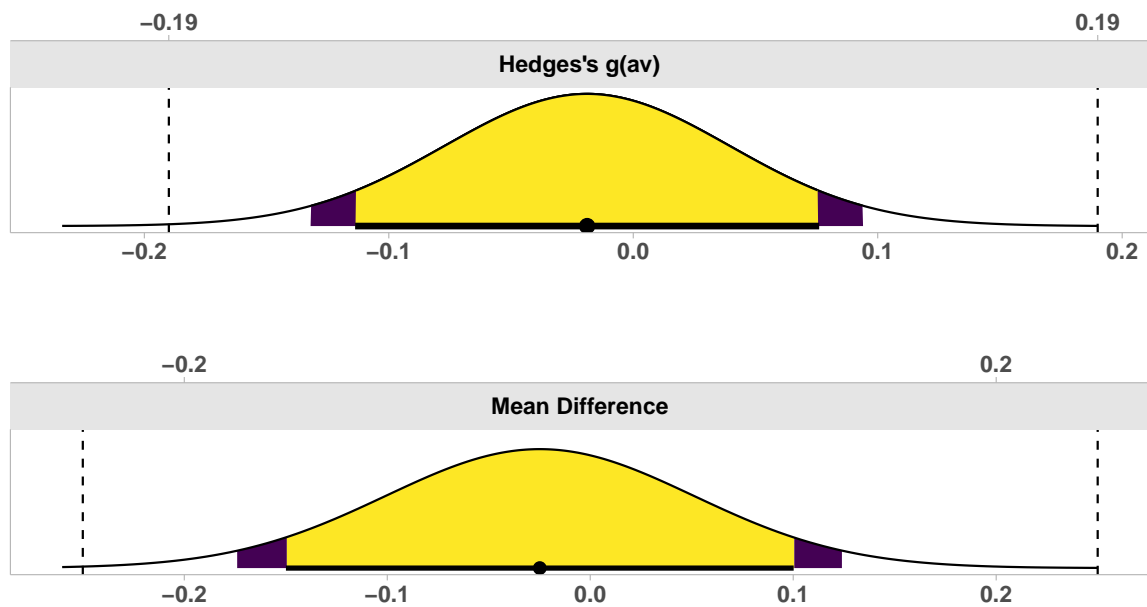


Figure A6: Equivalence test: Verbal assurance and support for use of force

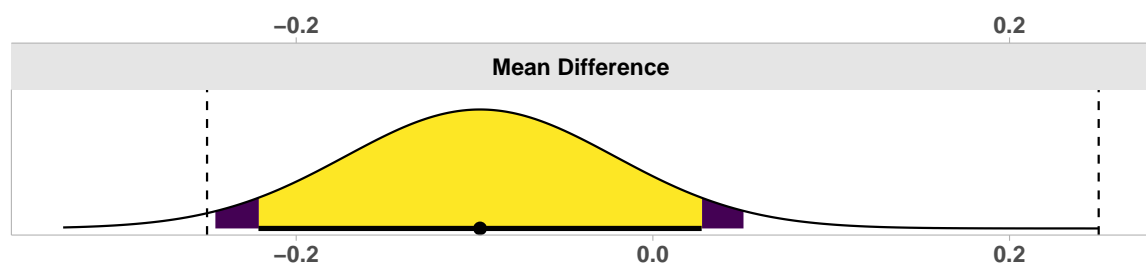
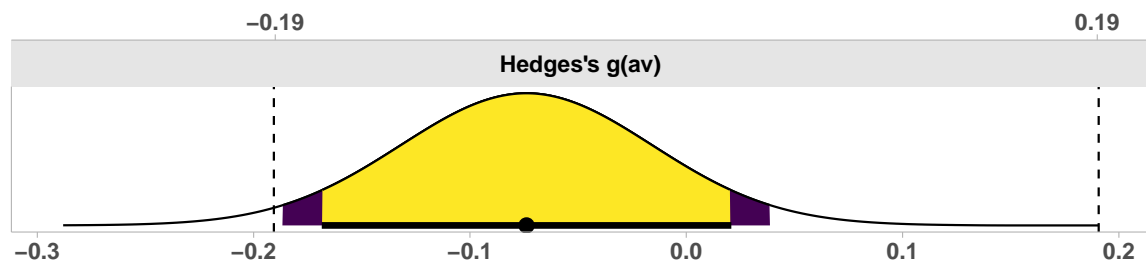


Figure A7: Equivalence test: Costly assurance and support for use of force

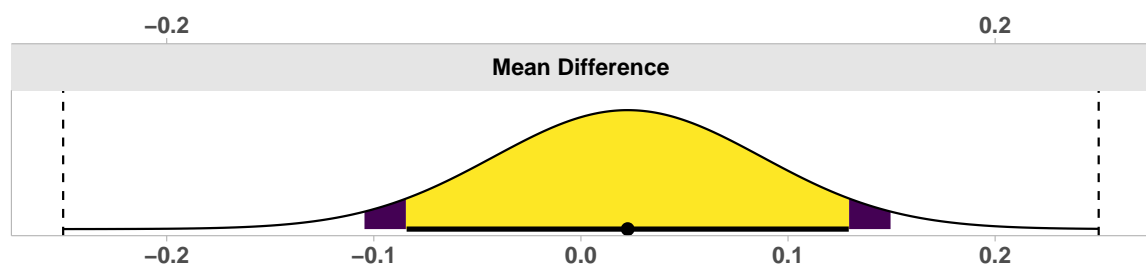
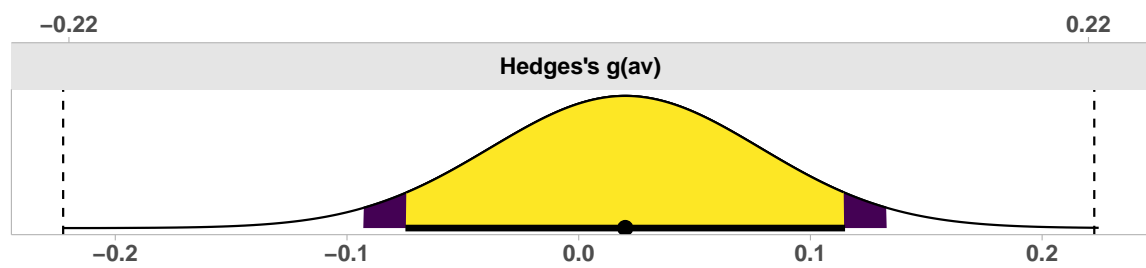


Figure A8: Equivalence test: Casualties and approval for backing down

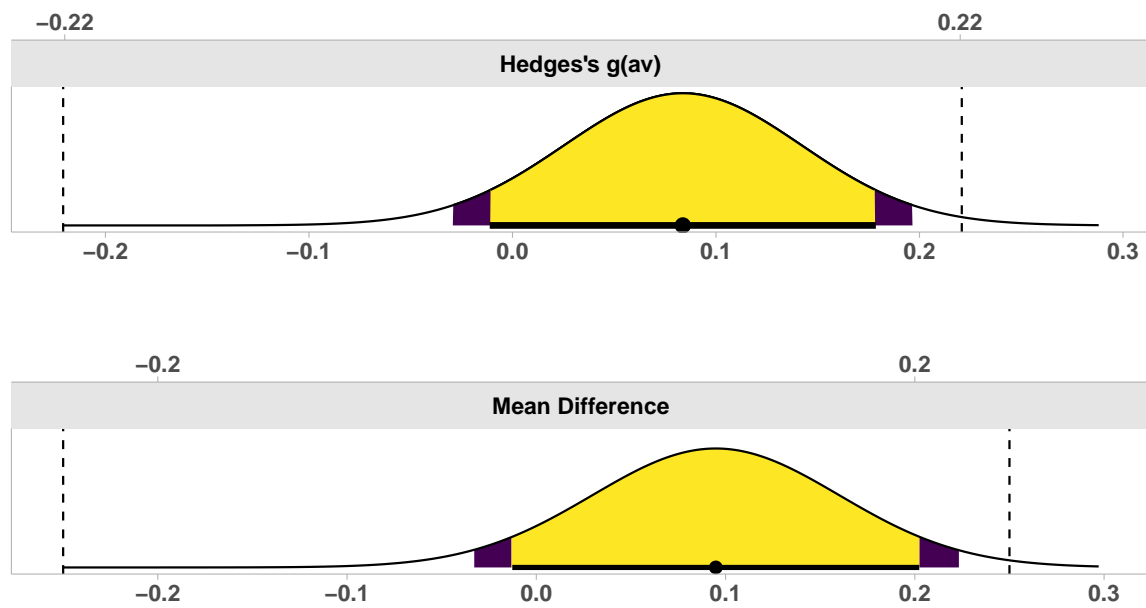


Figure A9: Equivalence test: Economic consequences and approval for backing down