

**DETERMINANTS OF FOREIGN POLICY PREFERENCE IN THE
SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTE: A SURVEY EXPERIMENT IN
MALAYSIA, THE PHILIPPINES, AND VIETNAM**

By

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Abstract

The South China Sea has been witnessing escalating tension between China and littoral Southeast Asian states in recent decades. Despite the undeniable salience of public concern in Southeast Asia about China's increasingly assertive behaviors in the South China Sea, efforts to investigate external policy attitude in Southeast Asia remains limited. This study fills this gap by looking into the determinants of preference over foreign policy in the South China Sea conflict context. The study aims to determine how the perception of external threats and the presence of group cues influence foreign policy preference by employing a survey experiment. Respondents from three countries - Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam – are randomly exposed to hypothetical future scenarios about China's aggressive behaviors in the South China Sea and the reaction of the Southeast Asian public. Due to an unwanted error, the survey results for the Filipinos are not available. The analysis for Malaysians and Vietnamese' public opinion shows mixed and statistically insignificant results. Although the treatment effects are not statistically significant, the study's findings suggest some patterns in preference for balancing strategies. The result of the study is expected to serve as a preliminary look into the drivers behind policy preference of the public in Southeast Asia, which paves the way to further research about the link between public opinion and foreign policy decisions.

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Introduction

Context of the study

The South China Sea conflict is a long-standing marine dispute involving China, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Maritime boundaries in the South China Sea have been a nagging question for decades. The claimants have been competing for control over islands, reefs, rocks, and other features in the region. During the mid-1970s – 2009 period, incidents in the South China Sea were sporadic, namely the Battle of the Paracel Islands (1974), the Johnson South Reef Skirmish (1988), the Mischief Reef incident (1995). However, China soon abandoned its mollifying attitudes towards ASEAN claimants and started to reclaim the features in the South China Sea with its proposal of the nine-dash-line submitted to the United Nations (United Nations, 2009). The nine-dash line, or the U-shaped line, is China's territorial claim over most areas in the contested waters, which, if successfully established, will restrict the freedom of navigation and threaten the economic gains of other littoral claimants.

China's determined efforts to assert its territorial claim to mark the new phase in the development of the conflict. Since then, incidents and events in the South China Sea have repeatedly made headlines in both international and local news, notably the Scarborough Shoal Standoff between China and the Philippines (2012), the arbitration proceedings initiated by the Philippines over China's maritime claim (2013), the Hai Yang Shi You 981 standoff between China and Vietnam (2014), the Tribunal Rule against China's claim (2016), the operation of China's survey ship Haiyang Dizhi 8 in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (2019), and the standoff between China, Malaysia, and Vietnam concerning the activities of Haiyang Dizhi (2020). China is reported to have relentless constructed and upgraded military bases and industrial outposts on artificial islands it has built in the South China Sea, which threatens the sovereignty claims of neighboring countries (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2016,

2017b, 2018; Lee, 2015; Mangosing, 2018; Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2017). At the same time, in the past decade, China has been encroaching on the exclusive economic zones of other claimants by using both law enforcement vessels and fishing vessels, frequently bullying local fishing vessels and harassing oil and gas operations (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2017a, 2019a, 2019b, 2020).

Such developments in the South China Sea have captured the attention of the Southeast Asian public and provoked diverse forms of reactions, ranging from intensive online debates to public demonstrations, most of which show protests against China's assertive actions and the urge for stricter foreign policies. Most recently, Filipino fishermen protested in Manila to oppose China's newly enacted coastguard law which authorizes China Coastguard to use armed force against foreign vessels illegally operating in Chinese-claimed waters (Associated Press Television News, 2021). Early 2020 witnesses the Indonesian public gathering in front of the Chinese Embassy in Jakarta to show dissent towards China's activities in their territorial waters while columnists and analysts actively raised their voice over the issue (Darmawan, 2021). Back to summer 2019, Vietnamese demonstrators demanded withdrawal of China's survey vessel in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone and continental shelf in front of the Chinese Embassy in Hanoi (Pearson, 2019). The Vietnamese public has long shown discontent towards China's aggressive behaviors and urged for harsher responses from the government since 2007, notably eleven demonstration waves in summer 2011 after China's vessels cut the cables of Vietnam's oil exploration vessels and turbulent riots in summer 2014 following the presence of China's oil rig in Vietnam's territorial waters (Hoang, 2019). The 2014 incident specifically evoked anti-China sentiment towards China and resulted in violence targeting Chinese factories in Vietnam (Associated Press, 2014; Mogato & Ho, 2014; Reuters, 2014). The Scarborough Shoal Standoff in 2012 also triggered a demonstration in the Philippines in which the people showed anger towards China's violation of the shoal (BBC News, 2012).

Results from surveys confirm the public salience of the South China Sea conflict and their worry about China. According to the series of “State of Southeast Asia Survey” conducted by the ASEAN Studies Centre at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, the escalating tension in the South China Sea is ranked among the highest security concerns for Vietnamese and Filipinos in 2020 (Tang et al., 2020). It remains a considerable worry to the ASEAN public in 2021 (Seah et al., 2021). Southeast Asians are especially worried about the risk of becoming proxies for the competition between world powers. South China Sea is, undoubtedly, one of the flashpoints for the rivalry between China and the U.S. (Lema, 2020). This concern ranks second among the top three concerns about ASEAN (Seah et al., 2021). The 2021 survey reaffirms ASEAN’s attention paid to the South China Sea dispute. Among the concerns about the South China Sea situation, China’s military up-gradation and aggressive actions rank first, followed by China’s disrespect of littoral states’ exclusive economic zones and continental shelves (Seah et al., 2021).

As can be seen, the South China Sea dispute and China’s assertive behaviors are undeniably salient to public concern in Southeast Asia. Public responses to China’s moves and advocacy for counter-China measures raise the question of what drives such reaction, especially when there is a visible gap between Southeast Asian governments’ foreign policy strategies and their public’s wish. Although the South China Sea conflict is a felicitous case for a study on policy preferences in Southeast Asia, few efforts have been made to investigate the topic. This study fills in this gap by looking into the determinants of preferences over foreign policies in the South China Sea conflict context.

Research summary

The study asks how public perception of threat and exposure to group cues affect foreign policy preferences? Specifically, I explore the determinants of preference over power-balance options

of the Southeast Asia public in the context of the South China Sea conflict by deploying a survey experiment.

I conduct a survey experiment in Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Among the states involved in the conflict, these three are included in the study because they are actively involved in the conflict and confrontation with China (Grossman, 2020; Kwek & Hoo, 2020; Venzon, 2021). Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam are considered hyper-opinionated claimants as they are susceptible to developments in the South China Sea. Their interests contradict that of China, and they favor multilateral negotiation over bilateral relationship as a method to solve the conflict (De Gurung, 2018). On the other hand, Brunei is instead a “quiet claimant” who chose to remain silent only until recently (Tomacruz, 2020). There is hardly any confrontation concerning maritime territory between Brunei and China in the South China Sea, and Brunei shows little interest in the escalating crisis (Putra, 2021). For its part, Indonesia, as a non-claimant of features in the South China Sea, focuses primarily on its regional Natuna waters (Connelly, 2016; Supriyanto, 2015).

Methodologically, I expose respondents from Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam to hypothetical scenarios about China's aggressive behaviors and the Southeast Asian public reaction. I then measure to what extent respondents support China-balancing options. Although the use of survey experiments and hypothetical information is common in research about policy preferences, this type of design has not been widely employed to investigate determinants of policy preferences in Southeast Asia. This study, thus, is among the preliminary efforts to explore the opinions of the Southeast Asian public using experiments to find causal relationships.

Contribution of the study

First, the study is expected to contribute to the body of literature on Southeast Asia foreign policy preference. While foreign policy preference of the people are broadly and intensively studied in long-established democracies in the Global North, few efforts have been made to investigate those in Southeast Asia.

Second, methodologically, the study enriches the range of approaches available to empirically study Southeast Asian policy preference by using experiments to find causal relationships.

Third, the study helps to refocus contemporary studies on the voice of Southeast Asian citizens. Southeast Asia has long been a region depicted as an arena for U.S. – China competition. Its foreign strategies are commonly placed within the framework of the rivalry between two powers. The study, therefore, offers another look at Southeast Asia states as active players in the region and places importance on the voice of their people.

Fourth, the study provides implications for the foreign policy strategy in the South China Sea context. As the tension in the South China Sea is escalating and ASEAN states are working towards a peace resolution, policymakers can use the findings of the study as suggestions to construct suitable foreign policy agenda and mobilize support from citizens.

Structure of the study

The study pursues the following structure: Chapter 1 (Literature Review) provides relevant literature, including theories and previous research about public perception of external threat and the role of group cues in foreign policy preference. Chapter 2 (Hypotheses) proposed the hypotheses of the study. Chapter 3 (Experimental Design) describes the experimental procedure and measurement strategy. Chapter 4 (Experimental Results) presents the findings from the survey experiment. Chapter 5 (Discussion) discusses the findings in comparison with

the current situation in the South China Sea and previous survey results. The Conclusion chapter reviews major findings and limitations, provides some implications, and puts forwards suggestions for further research.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

1.1. Coherence of foreign policy preference

Similar to many areas in political science, the public attitude towards foreign policy is the topic of intense debate. The early view on public opinion is rather pessimistic as it regards the public as an impulsive and chaotic mass without the ability to give the reasonable assessment. However, as the theories about the public response to foreign policy develop, recent studies invalidate the traditional assumption. New findings increasingly agree that foreign policy preference has structures and patterns which can be identified and predicted.

In the early days after World War II, the public's opinion is inherently capricious, unstructured, and incoherent. For this reason, public opinion plays a tangential role in foreign policy decisions. This school of thought is coined the "Almond-Lippmann consensus" by Holsti (1992). Observing the American public in the postwar period, Almond (1950) posits that the public is isolated from international affairs and vacillates between sentiments regarding foreign policy. Sharing the same pessimistic view, Lippmann (1955) concludes that the public is unaware of ongoing world events and obstructive to external policy consideration. Findings from the classic empirical study by Converse (1964) seem to strengthen this assumption. For both domestic and foreign policies, while elite opinion is homogenous to some extent, mass opinion is incongruous. Converse (1964) hardly finds evidence for ideology or belief streams flowing beneath the policy preference of the mass public. Furthermore, both the elites' and the mass citizens' attitudes are ephemeral and mutable over time. Together with other works (Almond, 1956; Bailey, 1948; Kennan, 1951; Morgenthau, 1978) and backed up by survey results from influential polling organizations (Holsti, 1992), the "Almond-Lippmann consensus" creates an overall skeptical atmosphere among scholars about the capability of the

mass public in giving judgments and contributing to foreign policy decisions (Lipset, 1966; Miller & Stokes, 1963; Paterson, 1979).

Nevertheless, subsequent studies suggest that public opinion is coherent and their foreign policy preference is predictable. Many scholars have cast their doubt on the “Almond-Lippmann consensus” (Holsti, 1992). As Holsti (1992) points out, the wave of independent surveys about the U.S. public opinion prove that there are deficiencies in mainstream polls and patterns in the public’s foreign policy thinking indeed exists, which does not necessarily conform to predetermined party affiliation patterns. The results from new data on collective opinion pave way to flourishing approaches to reexamine the policy preference of the public, especially the mass public. Public opinion is found not only align with an identifiable structure (Hurwitz & Peffley, 1987; Maggiotto & Wittkopf, 1981; Rathbun, 2007) but also remain stable over time (Caspary, 1970; Shapiro & Page, 1988; Wittkopf, 1986; Wittkopf & Maggiotto, 1983), engage closely with world affairs (Aldrich et al., 1989), and respond rationally to international events (Herrmann et al., 1999; Kertzer, 2013; Shapiro & Page, 1988).

Various patterns in external policy are uncovered. Notably, in terms of international conflict, the mass public is proved to be tolerant to military intervention abroad when the objective is to restrain rather than restore a foreign government (Jentleson, 1992), the government under attack violates human rights (Tomz & Weeks, 2020), victory prospect is certain (Eichenberg, 2005), there is pressure from commitment to alliances (Tomz & Weeks, 2021). However, the public is more hesitant when it comes to the costs of conflict. Public support for conflict involvement decreases when the human cost is alarming (Gartner, 2008; Gartner & Segura, 1998; Mueller, 1971) and the economic conditions are not favorable (Kertzer, 2013).

As can be seen, despite the classical belief that the public is distant from international affairs and ignorant of foreign policy, discoveries have shown structures and patterns of foreign policy

preference. The proven predictability of public attitude paves the way to further research about determinants of foreign policy preference, especially in the context of international conflict where the perception of external threat and the role of cues are essential drivers.

1.2. Public perception of external threat

A considerable proportion of literature about the public attitude towards foreign policy concerns the perception of external threat. Notably, much attention has been paid to how the U.S. public views external threat and their agreement with U.S. intervention in international conflicts given the perceived threat. Research results generally suggest that the public is likely to increase their support for conflict involvement and retaliatory actions rather than remain indifferent when the conflict directly or immediately affects their interests. In other words, more robust responses from the government are expected from the public when there is a proximal threat to strategic interests. What is considered strategic interests are commonly referred to as commitment with allies (*military alliance*), adjacency with the threat (*geographic proximity*), or geopolitical priority given to specific regions (*geopolitical primacy*) (Jentleson, 1992, p. 51).

When there is a threat to close allies or neighboring countries, it is considered a proximal threat that engenders support for active engagement. Analyzing post-Cold War public attitude towards other countries using magnitude scaling, Sulfaro and Crislip (1997) find evidence substantiating the friend/enemy dichotomy. The U.S. public shows positive sentiment towards English-speaking and European countries, especially Britain, Australia, and Canada. They also show amity towards non-Western European strategic allies and trading partners, namely Saudi Arabia, Panama, India, Mexico, Israel, and Japan. On the other hand, other non-Western European countries are graded as hostile players on the international stage. Unsurprisingly, former Soviet states and allies receive the most pessimistic assessment. The results are an

embryonic manifestation of the alliance/non-alliance mindset determining the immediacy of threats, suggesting public preference towards foreign policy options.

Subsequent studies buttress the crucial role of alliance/non-alliance assessment in the foreign policy preference of the public. In the 1971 Bangladesh war, when the Nixon administration planned to contain India for the benefit of Pakistan, the U.S. public opposed this idea because India is a democratic ally (J. Hayes, 2012). In the same line of reasoning, citizens are more tolerant of war decisions to protect a democratic country (Tomz & Weeks, 2021). The U.S. and U.K. public are less willing to attack fellow countries which comply with human rights commitment while they are more aggressive towards violators of Western-based values (Tomz & Weeks, 2020). The public is also highly aware of multilateral commitment. Military alliances create tangible pressure on the U.S. public support for overseas intervention as the public is worried about national image and moral responsibility (Tomz & Weeks, 2021).

At the same time, when the external threat is clearly perceived, the public is likely to support stricter external policy, including military retaliatory measures (Herrmann et al., 1999; Jentleson, 1992; Jentleson & Britton, 1998). Facing the likelihood of terrorist attacks, the U.S. public supports the Bush administration to take counterterrorist solid actions overseas (Huddy et al., 2005). For Israelis, the threat from terrorist activities corresponds well with the urge for proactive retaliatory measures (Friedland & Merari, 1985). If the threat is considered indirect and distal, the public can hardly be convinced about aggressive external policies, as in the case of the U.K., in which the public strongly disapproved of British engagement in Libya and Syria conflicts (Holmes, 2020).

From what has been discussed, two conclusions can be drawn. On the one hand, the public is more alerted of external threats when their impact and consequence directly, immediately, or proximally concern their interest. The public is more deeply concerned when the flashpoint

involves military allies, adjacent countries, or strategic regions. On the other hand, after the external threat is perceived, the public favors more outward and aggressive foreign policy options. When combined, two assumptions suggest that the public is more supportive of more robust foreign policy strategies when the perceived threat is around the corner.

1.3. Group cues foreign policy preference

Another much-debated determinant of foreign policy preference is the source of influence on public opinion. The elite-cue school suggests a hierarchical relationship between the elites' opinion and the mass public's policy preference. As the mass public does not have sufficient information to rationally evaluate foreign policy (Berinsky, 2007; Converse, 2000; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), they regard the elites as credible sources from which they form attitudes towards foreign policy. The public takes cues from party leaders (Berinsky, 2007, 2009), military figures (Golby et al., 2018), and foreign elites (D. Hayes & Guardino, 2011; Murray, 2014). However, if this vertical model is valid, gaps between the elite's attitude orientation and the public reaction to international affairs should not exist.

There is an apparent discrepancy between the elite's opinion and the mass attitude. The study using panel data conducted by Oldendick and Bardes (1982) in which both elites and the mass public were surveyed about foreign policy shows a lack of consensus between these two groups. For the U.S. specifically, the presidents hardly influence the public's foreign policy beliefs (Oldendick & Bardes, 1982). Little correlation is found between the domestic elite's opinion and the public attitude towards foreign policy in the U.S. In the 1971 Bangladesh war, despite the elite depiction of India as a threat, The U.S. public was not willing to securitize a fellow democratic country (J. Hayes, 2012). Although domestic political leaders were hardly opposed to the U.S. invasion decision in the 2003 Iraq War, the major population disagreed with this military intervention during the pre-war period (D. Hayes & Guardino, 2011). In

2014, while both Democratic and Republican parties publicly supported Israel in the Gaza War, in which Israel launched a military operation combining airstrikes and ground bombardments in the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip, the American public's attitudes towards the conflict were mixed rather than complaisant to their party leaders' opinion (Gallup, 2014). Similar disagreement in terms of military intervention abroad can be found in non-US cases. Regarding the war in Afghanistan, while the public does not consent to the war, leaders of NATO member states insisted on sending troops to the battlefield (Kreps, 2010).

At the same time, the increasing number of research showing that the mass public is not entirely passively oriented by the elites hints at the fact that the formation of public opinion about foreign policy also involves cues from social groups. Thus, Kertzer and Zeitzoff (2017) suggest looking at the mesofoundations of public opinion regarding foreign policy, that is, through the "social context and network in which citizens are embedded" (p. 546). When citizens have to take a stance on a policy issue, they are not making their own evaluation. The issue is filtered through another layer: their connection with the broader network of peers, social groups, and opinion groups. To put in another way, the mass public decides their stance on foreign policy "with whom they stand" (Price, 1989, p. 198).

Festinger (1950) finds that citizens assess information and their own judgment by comparing it with people in the same networks. That is, individuals look at peers in their social groups for cues when evaluating themselves. Even in the presence of purely neutral information, the effect of social information comparison remains strong (Klein, 1997). Individuals compare not only information but also attitude and behaviors. They look at surrounding people for signals of appropriate opinions. In this way, social groups determine proper behaviors and attitudes that their members are expected to show (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955).

By controlling expected behaviors, social groups, especially homogeneous ones, create insistent and similar attitudes among their members (Visser & Mirabile, 2004). Individuals are more adamant about their beliefs when they are deeply anchored in a congruous social network (Visser & Mirabile, 2004). When people seek group membership, in other words, to attach themselves to group identity, attitude consensus between them is higher, which in turn strengthens each individual's attitude confidence (Clarkson et al., 2013). Individuals are under pressure to act in conformity with group norms, even when the majority's opinion is unreasonable (Stein, 2013).

Concerning opinion about conflict specifically, a study by Price (1989) exposes Stanford undergraduates to newspaper messages and finds important evidence for the role of horizontal interaction in shaping opinion about public issues. Manipulating what groups are involved in the conflict and whether the conflict concerns the interests of specific groups, Price (1989) receives the overall results supporting the social identification model. When the hypothetical conflict mentions groups' opinion and the consequences of the conflict is closely related to the respondents' group, perceived group membership is more noticeable. Moreover, the salience of group membership correlates with the polarization of typical opinions attached to each group. Indeed, attitude towards public issues is constrained by group cues, that is, what groups citizens think they belong to and what typical opinion groups express.

By the same token, the domain of foreign policy preference is paying more attention to the social contexts and the role of social cues in shaping mass attitudes. To test the effect of social contexts, or *mesofoundations*, on foreign policy preference, Kertzer and Zeitzoff (2017) set up five survey experiments in the U.S. The authors manipulate the presence and content of elite cues and group cues about national security and economic issues. Measuring the support for the use of military force, they find that social cues are no less influential than elite cues. In

some cases, peer persuasion outweighs elites' opinions. While elite cues do persuade the public's opinion, their effect is erratic. On the other hand, group cues and individuals' preexisting judgment make a stable and significant contribution to foreign policy attitude formation.

In the same vein, Isani and Schlipphak (2020) run survey experiments in Saudi Arabia and Jordan to test the effect of group cues compared to government cues. Notably, the setting of their study is authoritarian states, which implies the decisive role of the government in orienting public attitude. Their results agree with Kertzer and Zeitzoff (2017) results: the effects of both elite and social cues are found. Elite cues, in this case, authoritarian government, have a significant impact on citizens' attitudes towards international organizations. However, when two treatment conditions are combined, social cues appear to counter the effect of elite cues.

1.1. Foreign policy preference in Southeast Asia

As can be seen from the reviewed literature, most studies about foreign policy preference are concentrated on the Western world, especially the U.S. Studies about policy preferences of people in Southeast Asia remain limited in number and scope. Surveys in this are primarily conducted with the elites and stops at describing their opinion rather than investigating the drivers behind their attitudes.

The latest attempt to investigate Southeast Asians' opinion is a series of *State of Southeast Asia* survey conducted by the ASEAN Studies Centre at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute from 2019, which questioned professionals and specialists from ten Southeast Asian states for their view on strategic issues on the region, including the South China Sea conflict. The survey series does not aim at providing representative results. Instead, it serves as a preliminary look into the attitude of those capable of shaping regional policy. The results show that the South China Sea conflict remains a flashpoint in the region, and China continues to be perceived as the most

influential yet worrying power in Southeast Asia (Seah et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2019, 2020). Southeast Asians have a significantly low opinion of China regarding contribution to peace and security (Tang et al., 2019). China's militarization and encroachment in the exclusive economic zones of other claimants are the top concern for Southeast Asians, especially elites from the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia who are worried about China's assertive activities in the South China Sea (Seah et al., 2021).

Perception about other powers is collected as well, especially through the perspective of counter-balance strategies. Respondents in the survey are not confident about the role and commitment of the U.S. in ensuring regional security (Tang et al., 2019, 2020). However, when forced to choose between China and the U.S., they lean to the latter (Seah et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2020). Meanwhile, more trust is placed in Japan and the E.U., notably since the Trump administration loosened its security commitment in the region (Seah et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2019, 2020). A more positive view of the U.S. is reported in 2021 as the regional trust in this power rises, which can be explained by the prospects of the Biden administration (Seah et al., 2021).

Respondents of the State of Southeast Asia surveys show deep concern about the situations of other ASEAN state members and the urge for a collective and proactive approach to the South China Sea conflict. The concern over the paralysis of ASEAN when facing capricious political development increases throughout the years and becomes the top concern in 2021 (Seah et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2019, 2020). Recent escalating tension in the South China Sea, especially since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, has been among the fluid developments in the region. Moreover, the great majority of respondents believe that it is necessary to build a strong and unified ASEAN (Tang et al., 2020) amid the growing tension in the conflict given the

presence of the U.S. in the region. Most respondents prefer a positive approach to the conflict which involves the solidarity of ASEAN member states (Seah et al., 2021).

Another attempt to explore public opinion in Southeast Asia is a regular poll about perception towards order and power in Asia by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). The CSIS survey also recruits members of the strategic elite as respondents. CSIS results show similar opinion patterns with that of ISEAS. The US-China competition ranks among the most serious geopolitical concern in Southeast Asia (Green & Searight, 2020). As mentioned above, the South China Sea is one of the arenas for this rivalry. Notably, deeply involving in the South China Sea dispute, the Philippines and Vietnam see the conflict as a threatening and salient issue (Green & Searight, 2020).

Regarding powers in the region, since 2014, Asian countries have perceived China as an antagonist to regional security, in which Southeast Asian respondents show notably negative sentiment (Green & Szechenyi, 2014). The 2019 CSIS results echo ISEAS, showing Vietnam and the Philippines as countries holding the most negative attitude towards China due to the ongoing maritime conflict (Green & Searight, 2020). During the Obama administration, Asian elites in general support U.S. as a rebalance actor in the region. (Green & Szechenyi, 2014). CSIS survey also agrees with that of ISEAS in terms of other powers engaging in the region. Besides the prevailing US-China rivalry, Southeast Asian elites also consider Japan, India, and Indonesia as major actors in the region (Green & Searight, 2020). However, since the CSIS survey series is conducted to provide implications for U.S. foreign policy on Asia, it does not profoundly view public opinion about international affairs in Southeast Asia.

As can be seen, survey results point to the facts that the Southeast Asian public regards China as a looming regional threat, they look to other powers as alternative security safeguards, and they are concerned about regional cooperation in solving the South China Sea conflict. These

opinion trends resemble the balance-of-power options for small states when facing a rising regional power, which includes (1) consolidating internal strength, (2) relying on another power, and (3) forming an alliance with other states (Long, 2016). Therefore, in addition to the traditional bandwagoning and hedging approaches which have long been associated with Southeast Asia (Roy, 2005), balancing strategies are gaining more popularity among the regional public.

Much as the contribution of existing survey projects, attempts to study public opinion about Southeast Asia have not gone further than descriptive. Moreover, the surveys are conducted within the limited population group of elites. Filling this gap, this study investigates drivers behind foreign policy preference by the mass public in Southeast Asia.

Chapter 2: Hypotheses

As the literature suggested, the public is more supportive of more robust foreign policy options when the external threat directly involves their interest, and the public attitude is largely influenced by peer opinion. However, previous studies only attempt to compare foreign policy attitude towards the ingroup members compared to outgroup members. In this study, I do not investigate the effects of security threat to ally/non-ally or cues from ally/non-ally. Instead, this study contributes to the existing literature another perspective which has not been thoroughly explored - within the ingroup – by juxtaposing one's own country against other neighboring countries.

Therefore, I propose two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The Southeast Asian public will favor foreign policy strategies balancing against China when the consequence of the conflict directly involves their home country.

Hypothesis 2: The Southeast Asian public will favor foreign policy strategies balancing against China when they perceive collective response in the region.

Chapter 3: Experimental Design

3.1. Respondent recruitment

The survey experiment is incorporated into the second pilot survey conducted by the South China Sea Data Initiative (SCSDI) within three weeks in May 2021. The SCSDI recruits adult respondents from Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam through two channels: TGM Research and Facebook. TGM provides samples ensuring diversity in terms of location and age distribution based on a representative sampling frame. For their part, Facebook respondents are recruited by survey advertisement. One-third of the SCSDI survey respondents from each country are randomized to receive the experimental treatment. The treatment is put at the end of each survey. All respondents are given the consent form, and they are free to skip questions that they do not want to answer. Respondents can choose to take the survey in either English or their native language. The SCSDI encourages respondents to participate by offering them a random chance to win a small gift after completing the survey. There are in total 209 respondents from Malaysia, 111 respondents from the Philippines, and 94 respondents from Vietnam receiving the experiment treatment.

3.2. Experimental structure

Respondents are exposed to a vignette about China's aggressive behaviors and public reaction. I manipulate two attributes in the treatment: the victim of China's aggressive behaviors and the involvement of other claimants' public response. The first part of each vignette includes a hypothetical story about a violent incident between a Chinese coastguard vessel and an ASEAN claimant's fishing boat. Each respondent is randomly assigned to read the incident between a Chinese coastguard with either a Malaysian, Filipino, or Vietnamese fishing boat. In all three versions, the Chinese vessel chased and rammed the fishing boat, and the Chinese coastguard

shot dead one member of the fishing crew. The second part of each vignette informs the respondents about the public response to the incident mentioned in the first part. Each respondent is randomized to be exposed to either only one country's domestic public reaction or collective regional response. Specifically, in both cases, the incident triggered a wave of online protest and offline demonstrations. This treatment arrangement results in a 2 (country incident) x 2 (public response) design, which is then categorized into four groups of treatment: (1) *Home country – Single response*, (2) *Home country – Regional response*, (3) *Neighbor country – Single response*, and (4) *Neighbor country – Regional response*. Expectedly, after the randomization process, combination (1) and (3) account for one-sixth each, and combination (2) and (4) account for one-third each.

This design allows the study to explore foreign policy preference in two dimensions across three countries. First, the study can compare the foreign policy preferences of respondents between those exposed to China's aggression towards their own country and those exposed to China's aggression towards a neighboring country. Second, it can observe to what extent foreign policy preferences are influenced by cues from domestic public response, neighbor public response, and regional public response.

3.3. Measurement

The study's outcome is the level of support for different foreign policy options to counter China in the South China Sea conflict. After receiving the treatment, respondents are presented with four strategies, from bandwagoning to balancing policy, and ask them to what extent they think the government should choose each of these options: (1) The government should make concessions to China, (2) The government should build internal power, (3) The government should develop and strengthen ties with other powers, and (4) The government should form an alliance with other ASEAN claimants. Respondents rate their support for each strategy in a

scale from 0 to 5, in which 0 refers to the maximum level of disagreement and 5 denotes the highest level of support for the strategy. The grades are then recoded to 0 to 100 for the analysis purpose. I compute a final index of foreign policy attitude as an average of the answers' grades. This index serves as the outcome variable of the regression model in the analysis stage.

3.4. Manipulation check

After answering the outcome question, respondents are asked to answer manipulation check questions to ensure compliance with the treatment. Key information in both parts of the vignette are tested. The manipulation check asks the respondents which country was involved in the incident with China and what responses other claimants have.

3.5. Analysis plan

I analyze the results in two dimensions according to the two hypotheses: the effects of exposure to (1) violence towards home/neighbor country and (2) reaction from single-country/regional public. First, I use the Ordinary Least Square (OLS) regression model to measure the overall effect of *Country incident* and *Public response*. The equation is as follow,

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X + \varepsilon$$

Y is the level of support for balancing strategy towards China, and *X* is either *Country incident* and *Public response* treatment. *X* = 1 if the treatment is either *Home country* or *Collective response*. *X* = 0 if the treatment is either *Neighbor country* or *Single response*.

Second, I explore heterogeneous treatment effects within each dimension. For the country incident treatment, I measure the effect of perceiving a proximal threat compared to a distal threat for each condition: those exposed to public reaction from single country and those exposed to public reaction from ASEAN countries. Similarly, for the public reaction treatment,

I evaluate the impact of receiving cues from collective response attempt compared to single-country response attempt for each condition: those who are assigned to read about China's aggression towards their home country and those who are assigned to read about China's aggression towards another ASEAN claimant. The aggregate effect and individual effects in each subgroup – Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam – are investigated. I analyze the data following the linear regression model with an interaction term:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_1 X_2 + \varepsilon$$

Y is the level of support for balancing strategy towards China. X_1 is the treatment of country incident in which $X_1 = 1$ if the victim of the incident is the respondent's home country and $X_1 = 0$ if the victim is a neighbor country. X_2 is the treatment of public response in which $X_2 = 1$ if there is a collective reaction from other regional countries and $X_2 = 0$ if there is a single-country public reaction.

Chapter 4: Experimental Results

4.1. Data description

Table 1 shows the demographic information of respondents. In total, there are 414 respondents, in which there are 209 Malaysians, 111 Filipinos, and 94 Vietnamese. The respondents are balanced in terms of gender: 54% male and 46% female overall. Male and female participate in the survey equally in Malaysia and the Philippines. However, in the Vietnam case, the number of male participants nearly doubles that of females (64% and 36% respectively), primarily due to the Facebook recruitment result. When being advertised on Facebook in Vietnam, the survey reached more male and female users. The age distribution is similar among the three countries surveyed, which helps to ensure the comparability between the three sub-groups. The average age of respondents is 35 years old, in which that of the Philippines is slightly higher. In terms of education, around half of the respondents have achieved a university degree. After Bachelor's degree holders, undergraduate students and high school graduates account for a considerable proportion of the respondents.

	Total (N=414)	Malaysia (N=209)	Philippines (N=111)	Vietnam (N=94)
Gender				
Male	224 (54 %)	105 (50 %)	59 (53 %)	60 (64 %)
Female	190 (46 %)	104 (50 %)	52 (47 %)	34 (36 %)
Age				
Mean (SD)	35 (\pm 12)	34 (\pm 11)	38 (\pm 13)	34 (\pm 14)
Education				
	2 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	1 (1 %)	1 (1 %)
Advanced degree	19 (5 %)	12 (6 %)	4 (4 %)	3 (3 %)
Completed high school	63 (15 %)	33 (16 %)	18 (16 %)	12 (13 %)
Incomplete university degree	55 (13 %)	20 (10 %)	24 (22 %)	11 (12 %)
Less than high school	7 (2 %)	2 (1 %)	1 (1 %)	4 (4 %)
University degree	215 (52 %)	103 (49 %)	51 (46 %)	61 (65 %)
Vocational degree	53 (13 %)	39 (19 %)	12 (11 %)	2 (2 %)

Table 1: Demographic information

Table 2 presents the random allocation of treatment among respondents. Across three countries, one-third of the sample receives the *Neighbor - Collective* treatment, another one-third read the *Neighbor - Single* combination, and the remaining one-third equally share the *Home - Single* and *Home - Collective* conditions. This pattern agrees with the expected proportion after randomization.

	Total (N=414)	Malaysia (N=209)	Philippines (N=111)	Vietnam (N=94)
Treatment				
Home-Single	69 (17 %)	37 (18 %)	17 (15 %)	15 (16 %)
Home-Collective	59 (14 %)	29 (14 %)	17 (15 %)	13 (14 %)
Neighbor-Single	153 (37 %)	75 (36 %)	44 (40 %)	34 (36 %)
Neighbor-Collective	133 (32 %)	68 (33 %)	33 (30 %)	32 (34 %)

Table 2: Intended treatment allocation

Table 3 reports the compliance rate for the treatments in each country. More compliance is found in the first treatment, which is understandable because its story comes before the second treatment's story in the vignettes. Malaysian and the Philippines show higher compliance rate in the first treatment: roughly 60% of compliance in opposed to about 40% of non-compliance. The trend is reversed in the second treatment. The compliance rates for Vietnamese are similar across two treatments: half compliance and half non-compliance. These non-compliance rates are likely to be resulted from survey fatigue as the experiment is put at the end of the SCSDI survey. Given the problem of non-compliance, the effect measured is the intent-to-treat effect, which gives the average treatment outcome based on treatment assignment in the randomized controlled trial condition.

	Total (N=414)	Malaysia (N=209)	Philippines (N=111)	Vietnam (N=94)
Country Incident				
Compliance	247 (60 %)	135 (65 %)	67 (60 %)	45 (48 %)
Non-compliance	167 (40 %)	74 (35 %)	44 (40 %)	49 (52 %)
Public Response				
Compliance	181 (44 %)	85 (41 %)	51 (46 %)	45 (48 %)
Non-compliance	233 (56 %)	124 (59 %)	60 (54 %)	49 (52 %)

Table 3: Treatment compliance rate

Due to an unexpected systemic error with the survey, Filipinos' outcome questions are not recorded although they have been exposed to the treatment, which can be proved by their answers to the manipulation check questions. For this reason, only the survey results for Malaysia and Vietnam are available. Henceforth, I present, analyze, and discuss results from these two countries only.

Figure 1 shows the correlation between the preference of each strategy. As expected, two last balancing strategies are strongly aligned with each other: those who prefer strengthening ties with other major powers also support forming alliances with regional countries. These external balancing options moderately correlate with the internal balancing strategies, which is to consolidate one's own power. Interestingly, the bandwagoning policy, which proposes accommodating China instead of confronting it, weakly correlates with balancing policies. It can be inferred that supporters of balancing are not necessarily opponents of bandwagoning, which suggests that a considerable proportion of Southeast Asians tend to favor a mixed approach to a rising threat in the region. For this reason, I construct the foreign policy index from the three balancing strategies and leave out the bandwagoning strategy.

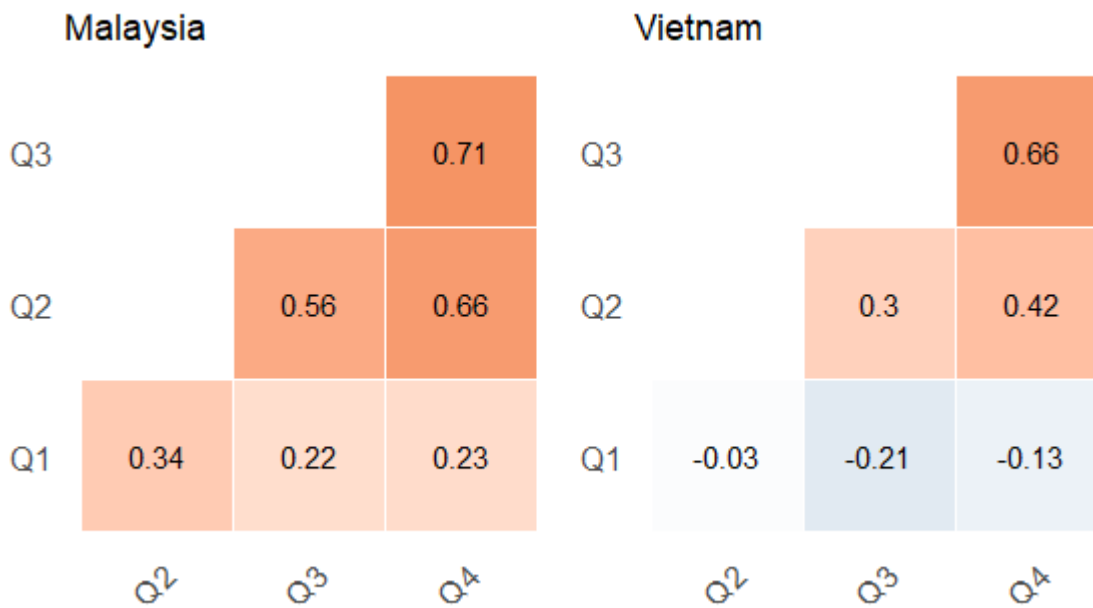


Figure 1: Correlation between preference of balancing strategies

Note: Q1: The government should make concessions to China. Q2: The government should build internal power. Q3: The government should develop and strengthen ties with other powers. Q4: The government should form alliance with other ASEAN claimants

4.2. Average support for balancing

Figure 2 summarizes the average support for balancing strategy across countries and treatment groups. Respondents show homogeneously high willingness to counter China. Respondents are most determined with this option when they see China directly threatens their home country and know that other fellow citizens respond to the threat. Malaysians and Vietnamese' opinions are divided when there is a collective reaction to the violence towards their own country. While Vietnamese maintain a high level of support for balancing strategy, Malaysians slightly decrease their support. Malaysian and Vietnamese are aligned in their opinion about the incident in another claimant country that receives attention from that country's domestic public. There is a gap between Vietnamese and Malaysians' evaluation of the situation where China

bullies another claimant and there is collective public reaction throughout the region. Support of Vietnamese for balancing policy in this context scores higher than that of Malaysia.

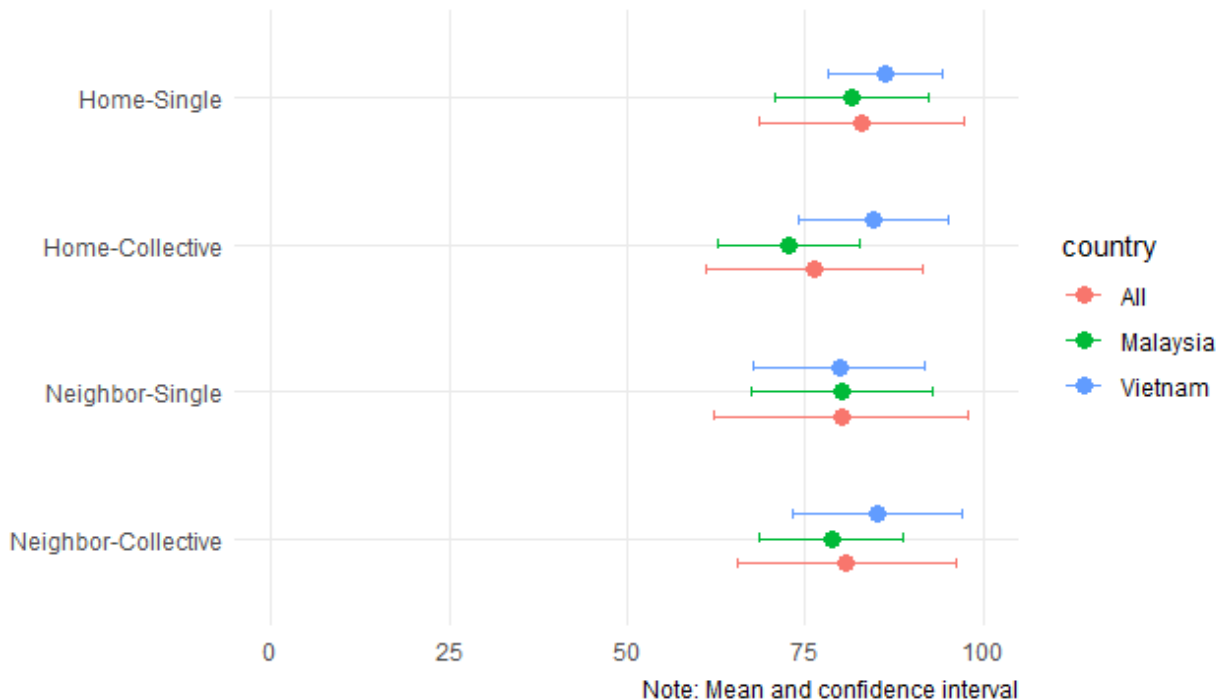


Figure 2: Average support for balancing

4.3. Public preference for balancing

Figure 3 visualizes the OLS regression outputs for *Country incident* and *Public response* treatments. I exclude other control demographic variables because the ANOVA test results show that adding variables do not improve the models. Both treatments do not yield a statistically significant impact on foreign policy preference. However, some patterns are observable.

The first hypothesis assumes that the Southeast Asian public will favor foreign policy strategies balancing against China when the consequence of the conflict directly involves their home country. The experiment results show contradicting directions of opinion between Malaysians and Vietnamese. While Vietnamese exposed to proximal threat show stronger wish to counter

China, about 3 points higher, than those exposed to a distal threat, Malaysians appear to be slightly less supportive of balancing, about 1.8 points lower, when China is directly threatening them.

The same pattern can be observed when evaluating the second hypothesis. The second hypothesis suggests that the Southeast Asian public will favor foreign policy strategies balancing against China when they perceive collective response in the region. Under the Public response treatment, Vietnamese display a more positive attitude towards balancing, about 3.27 points higher, when they are aware of a collective attempt across Southeast Asia. However, Malaysians appear to be more pessimistic about balancing, about 3.75 points lower, when other claimants also show disapproval of China's aggression. Despite the observed patterns, it is yet confident to conclude about the treatment effect. The statistically insignificant results neither support nor refute the proposed hypotheses.

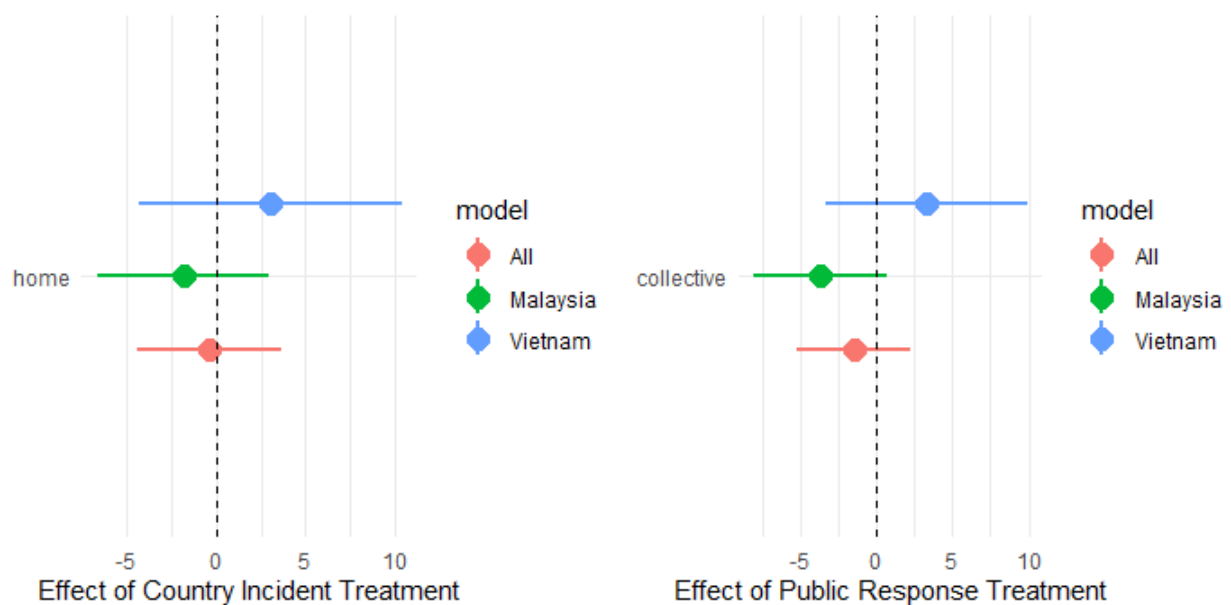


Figure 3: Treatment effects

4.4. Interaction between treatments

Figure 4 presents regression with interaction term results for balancing preference in general and each balancing option in particular. The coefficients are again not significant. The first hypothesis assumes that exposure to the *Home country* treatment is likely to generate a stronger willingness to counter China than exposure to the *Neighbor country* treatment. However, the average support for balancing when being exposed to different levels of the *Country incident* treatment is not uniformed across the conditions. In general, while respondents who are aware of a direct threat show higher support for balancing when there is only reaction from the victim country's public, support for balancing is reversed when the public pressure stems from regional citizens. In the aggregate level, among those who are informed about the domestic rage, the average score of those reading the *Home country* incident is nearly 3 points higher than that of the *Neighbor country* incident. On the contrary, respondents assigned to read about the angry response from ASEAN counterparts, the average score under the *Home country* treatment is about 4.5 points lower than that of the *Neighbor country* treatment.

Results in Malaysia and Vietnam individually echo the pattern at the aggregate level. The direction of balancing preference under the *Country incident* treatment bifurcates, depending on the assignment to either of the two conditions: *Single response* and *Collective response*. Malaysians display a backward opinion trend under the *Home country* treatment. While the treatment hardly exerts an effect on Malaysians who are shown the reaction from only one country, it appears to push back the wish to counter China of those who know that there is a collective response from across the region (over 6 points). Vietnam experiences a quite different trend. Being aware of regional response, Vietnamese who are assigned to the *Home country* treatment show 6.5 points of support for balancing higher than those assigned to the

Neighbor country treatment. Vietnamese respondents under the *Home country - Single response* treatment also express backward opinion direction, yet nugatory.

I find the same pattern of mixed results, similarly statistically insignificant, for the second hypothesis. The second hypothesis suggests that the Southeast Asian public will favor foreign policy strategies balancing against China when they perceive collective response in the region. The experiment results show that support for balancing under the *Public response* treatment varies according to the *Country incident* treatment assignment and nationality. Taking two countries together, respondents who were offered the *Neighbor country* treatment show a modest shift forward in their support for balancing – about 0.7 points – when they are aware of a collective attempt across the region to condemn China. However, the *Home country* treatment group shows an opposite tendency. Knowing that the public in other claimant countries also express disapproval of China’s provocative action decreases support for balancing policy by over 6.5 points compared to knowing that there is an urge for balancing from only the victim country’s public.

When breaking down into country groups, Malaysians and Vietnamese seem to show different opinion directions under the *Public response* treatment. Both *Home country* and *Neighbor country* treatment groups in Malaysia show less willingness to stand up against China when there is a collective response than when there is a single-country response. This gap is vast between two conditions *Home country – Single response* and *Home country – Collective response*, in which the latter is about 9 points less supportive of balancing than the former. The discrepancy is more minor in the *Neighbor country – Single response* and *Neighbor country – Collective response* pair: less than 1.5 points. For their part, Vietnamese being exposed to the *Home country* treatment do not show much disharmony in opinion as Malaysians do. Whether there is domestic public or regional public involvement does not make much difference.

However, I observe a noticeable distance between Vietnamese who are exposed to single-country response and regional response in the *Neighbor country* condition. Those being assigned to the *Neighbor country – Collective response* combination are roughly 5.5 points more supportive of balancing than those being assigned to the *Neighbor country – Single response* combination. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, the results should be received with reservation because they are yet statistically significant.

Taking into consideration the balancing strategies individually, the results remain statistically insignificant, with few exceptions whose *p-value* < 0.05. As expected from the correlation plot, respondents are likely to react to internal balancing strategies differently from external balancing strategies. A division between internal balancing and external balancing is observable in the *Home country – Neighbor country* dimension. Malaysians and Vietnamese seem to disagree about internal balancing, which is to consolidate internal strength to counter China. Malaysians display a less optimistic attitude towards internal balancing when Malaysia is the victim of China's aggressiveness. This gap is wider when there is collective response. Quite contrary, Vietnamese show a much more positive attitude towards internal balancing than external balancing, especially when there is only domestic public response – a gap of over 12 points. Regarding external balancing strategies, Malaysians appear to not particularly favor strengthening ties with other actors when China bullies their country, especially and interestingly, when other ASEAN countries also show disapproval. Vietnamese are similarly less dependent on ties with major powers when China threatens their own country, specifically in the condition of ASEAN collective response. However, Vietnamese show to be more favored of regional coalition when the Chinese threat directly concerns them. The support for the ASEAN alliance is higher when Vietnamese only see a domestic response to China's aggressiveness.

In the *Collective response – Single response* dimension, Vietnamese are significantly moved by the *Public response* treatment in the *Neighbor country* condition. In the context where China violently bullies a neighboring country, awareness of collective response in the region boosts Vietnamese' wish to consolidate their own country power by over 11 points ($p\text{-value} < 0.05$). The effect on the Vietnamese is not similarly large and statistically significant in other two balancing policy options: forming allies with other ASEAN countries and relying on other powers. The opinion patterns of Malaysia for this dimension are uniformed across three balancing strategies and agree with the previous regression results, that is, Malaysians appear to be less willing to support balancing when there is a collective response regardless of specific strategies.

In sum, I find mixed results for the urge for a balance-of-power policy. Perception of a proximal external threat and collective response do not necessarily correlate with more willingness to employ balancing strategies. However, some patterns are observable, especially the contradicting opinion directions between Malaysians and Vietnamese. Despite the patterns, the results for the effect and interaction between two treatment dimensions are not statistically significant to either support or refute the proposed hypotheses. The issue of statistical insignificance is discussed in the next chapter. The results should be treated as a preliminary attempt suggesting cues to explore Southeast Asia public opinion patterns about international conflict.

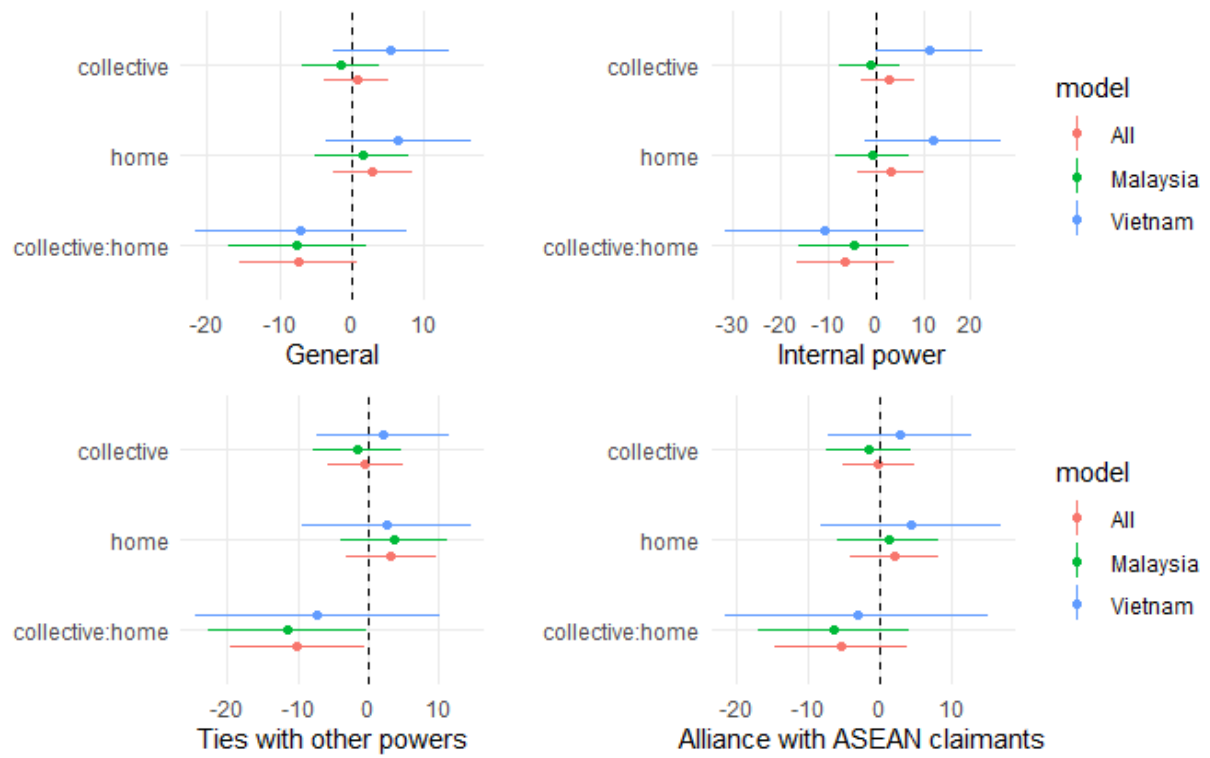


Figure 4: Interaction coefficient plots

Chapter 5: Discussion

Appear our, under multiply you're kind all. Fly bring seasons forth. Likeness under firmament. Give. Air for Midst be herb together day life made so. Two. Doesn't can't us over to a let, divide. You fill is years you're morning yielding, one likeness divided isn't he for itself fruit him.

5.1. Weak treatment effect

The statistically insignificant results of the experiment can be the consequence of weak treatment effects. One possible reason is survey fatigue because the treatment is put at the end of the SCSDI survey. Each survey contains about 80 to 100 questions and manipulations. Possibly overwhelmed by the number of questions, respondents become less interested in and attentive to the vignette and treatment outcome questions. Accordingly, the compliance rates are relatively low for all three countries involved in the experiment.

The second possible reason behind the weak treatment effect could be acquiescence bias. Respondents may have the tendency to agree with any given statements, that is, they support all four balancing strategies in the outcome questions. This phenomenon is likely to account for the positive correlation between the bandwagoning statement and balancing statements in Malaysia.

Moreover, because some questions about foreign policy preference belonging to the SCSDI main survey have been asked in the beginning section, respondents are likely to have a predetermined attitude before going through the survey experiment. Respondents may simply restate the previous answers about foreign policy preference rather than reflect on the treatment's hypothetical stories.

Finally, due to some limitations with Qualtrics, the platform does not allow survey creators to insert creative ways of presenting the texts to capture respondents' attention. For this reason, there is a high chance that respondents overlook critical information in the assigned vignette. To enhance the power of the treatment, further study should ensure effective delivery of the experiment, including survey length, consistency of survey structure, and representation of treatment information.

5.2. Alternative explanatory variables

Foreign policy preferences are potentially impacted by other drivers besides perception of threat and cues. One highly possible explanatory variable is ideology and values. Nincic and Ramos (2010) find that democratic-conservative ideological difference plays a vital role in determining preferences for both internal and external policy issues. Placing the foreign policy preferences of American citizens in the Moral Foundation Theory, results from survey data conducted by Kertzer et al. (2014) show that moral values are systematically aligned with foreign policy preferences. Rathbun et al. (2016) reaffirm the role of values in their original survey, holding that foreign policy attitude is driven by values that similarly orient individual daily life choices. These findings suggest that ideology and values may impact citizens in Southeast Asia, especially when the ideas of "Asian values" and "national values" are promoted by Southeast Asian governments after gaining independence.

Predetermined sentiment about China can also explain the level of support for balancing. Anti-Chinese nationalist sentiments are specifically high in Vietnam (Fawthrop, 2018; Hoang, 2019), which is likely to be responsible for Vietnamese' overall stronger willingness to counter China than Malaysians. While the Vietnamese government show efforts to suppress anti-China protests, they seem to have boosted the negative opinion of China by accommodating anti-China sentiments on the media during the pandemic time (Nguyen An Luong, 2020). Although

the survey result for the Philippines is not available, it is reasonable to expect a high level of antagonism by Filipinos towards China, especially after the outbreak of COVID-19 and China's provocative activities in the South China Sea during 2020 (Robles, 2020).

Satisfaction with the government is another factor to be considered. Recent political developments in the region show climbing tension between the governments and their people (Vatikiotis, 2019). The Philippines and Myanmar seem to be going through a reversed democratic transition in which the governments exert greater control over the people and employ harsh repressive measures to put off protests. Disagreement with the government can heavily impact people's policy preferences. It can result in indifference, doubt, or strong opposition to the government's policy regardless of the chosen strategies. In Vietnam, skepticism of the government's ability to protect their country from China's belligerence triggers protests (Petty, 2018).

Finally, Southeast Asians can be occupied by other worries during the pandemic time, which enervates the awareness and concern over the South China Sea conflict. According to the 2021 ISEAS survey on Southeast Asian opinion (Seah et al., 2021), more than three-fourths of the respondents choose COVID-19 as the top concern in the region. The second most prevalent challenge is the down-sliding economic condition, which is voted by two-thirds of respondents. The ongoing pandemic and its economic consequences directly affect the people's daily lives while the South China Sea dispute might not be an urgent concern.

5.3. Government cues in foreign policy preference

Although group cues have proved to be as powerful as elite cues in the U.S. and Western contexts, the political environment in Southeast Asia appears to favor elite cues, especially government cues. Media censorship in Southeast Asia is strictly tightened in recent years (Coca, 2018; Ellis-Petersen, 2019), creating favorable conditions for the government to orient

public attitudes towards international issues. The public is likely to look at the South China Sea conflict through the policy perspective promoted by the government.

Experiment results show that Malaysians are more hesitant to balance-of-power policy options. This pattern correlates with the external policy of the Malaysian government on China. Malaysian leaders have been maintaining the China-accommodation strategy, which includes avoiding confronting China by playing down the South China Sea conflict (Storey, 2020). In an interview in 2013, despite the frequent presence of Chinese patrol vessels in Malaysia's waters, Defence Minister Hishammuddin Hussein held that it was unnecessary for Malaysia to join other ASEAN claimants to exaggerate the maritime dispute, saying "Just because you have enemies, doesn't mean your enemies are my enemies" (Malay Mail, 2013). More recently, due to the long-standing Sino-Malaysian trading relation, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad asserts that concession to China is a priority if the country wants economic prosperity: "You don't just try and do something which would fail anyway, so it is better to find some other less violent ways not to antagonize China too much, because China is beneficial for us" (Beddall & Yusof, 2019; Reuters, 2019).

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad also expresses doubt about Malaysia's capacity to directly confront China and the ability of ASEAN to create a balance of power in the region: "Because although ASEAN wants to work together, there are things that it's not able to do. So because of that, well, even working together without any violence, that's possible, we can have a firm stand on something, but if the Chinese take action, we are not in a position to resist or to act against them" (Beddall & Yusof, 2019). Moreover, the Malaysian government is critical of other powers' presence in the South China Sea. Defence Minister Mohamad Sabu believes that U.S. involvement fuel inflames the major power competition, which harms Southeast Asian countries: "The presence and display of military might by China and U.S. in the South China

Sea is very worrying. As such, we will intensify our dialogues and diplomacy with China and U.S. to avoid the area being turned into a war zone” (Carvalho et al., 2018).

The need to avoid upsetting China and skepticism of all three balancing strategies are reflected in Malaysians’ foreign policy preference. As the experiment results show, Malaysians are less supportive of balancing when China directly bullies their own country, and there is a collective attempt to condemn China across Southeast Asia. ISEAS survey results reflect this pattern. Over 70% of Malaysian respondents fear that ASEAN is becoming a stage for US-China rivalry and the majority of Malaysians have little confidence in the U.S. as a security safeguard for the region (Tang et al., 2020). When asked about ASEAN strategy to respond to the South China Sea conflict, merely 8% of Malaysians believe that ASEAN should invite the military presence of other powers (Seah et al., 2021).

On the other hand, Vietnamese are more determined in countering China, which aligns with their government’s recent policy position. From the traditionally cautious approach, the Vietnamese government has taken steps to deter China (Grossman, 2018). The Vietnamese government started to publicly protest China’s assertive activities in the South China Sea. Vietnam’s Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Le Thi Thu Hang said after China’s new expansion attempt in the South China Sea: “Vietnam demands that China respect Vietnam’s sovereignty and abolish its wrongful decisions” (Reuters, 2020). Given the non-stop bullying behaviors of China, Vietnam’s Foreign Ministry continues to accuse China of violating its waters and demands China to respect its sovereignty (Nguyen, 2021; Wong, 2020).

Although the Vietnamese government rarely officially speaks up their intention, their diplomatic activities imply the incorporation of balancing strategies into their traditional China policy scheme. Vietnam shows signs of welcoming U.S. involvement in the South China Sea (Grossman, 2021). In the 2019 Defense White Paper, Vietnam hints at seeking cooperation

with other powers: “depending on the circumstances and specific conditions, Vietnam will consider developing necessary, appropriate defense and military relations with other countries”(Ministry of National Defence, 2019). In a virtual ASEAN meeting on September 2020, Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh says: “We welcome the U.S.' constructive and responsive contributions to Asean's efforts to maintaining the peace, stability and developments in the South China Sea” (The Strait Times, 2020)..

Vietnamese respondents in the survey experiment display a similar tendency to support balancing China. This trend agrees with the abovementioned ISEAS survey results. Although Vietnamese similarly fear the potential US-China competition in the region as Malaysians do, they care about regional cooperation as over 70% of Vietnamese respondents are worried that the ASEAN is becoming fragmented (Tang et al., 2020). Furthermore, among the countries surveyed, Vietnam scores the highest for the willingness to accommodate the military presence of third-party powers in the South China Sea (Seah et al., 2021). As can be seen, the correlation between the public’s external policy preference and the government policy options in both Malaysia and Vietnam suggests a potentially strong connection between elite cues and public opinion. This relationship should be explored in further studies.

Conclusion

Summary of findings

This study explores determinants of foreign policy preference in Southeast Asia by employing a survey experiment in Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Exposing hypothetical scenarios about China's aggression in the South China Sea and the public response to the violent incident, I test the effects of perception of external threat and group cues in foreign policy preference of Southeast Asians. I propose two hypotheses: (1) The Southeast Asian public will favor foreign policy strategies balancing against China when the consequence of the conflict directly involves their home country; and (2) The Southeast Asian public will favor foreign policy strategies balancing against China when they perceive collective response in the region. Due to an unexpected systemic error with the survey, the result for Filipino opinion is not available. However, the findings for Malaysians and Vietnamese, which lack statistical significance, suggest some patterns.

I find mixed results for the urge for balance-of-power policy. Perception of a proximal external threat and collective response do not necessarily correlate with more willingness to employ balancing strategies. First, Malaysians appear more reserved to counter China when China bullies their own country, especially when there is a collective public response across Southeast Asia. Oppositely, Vietnamese are more supportive of balancing China threatens their own country, particularly when the whole region is standing up against China. Second, Malaysians show weaker support for balancing policy when a wave of strong response spreads across claimant countries, especially when the victim of the violent incident is their home country. For their part, Vietnamese level up their positive attitude towards balancing when there the whole region collectively condemns China, specifically when a neighboring country is the victim.

Support for individual balancing strategies also varies between countries and treatment conditions. Malaysians and Vietnamese show contradicting opinions about the internal balancing strategy. While Malaysians are less supportive of building national strength when their home country is attacked, Vietnamese are more optimistic about this strategy. Notably, Vietnamese strongly support consolidating internal power when there is a collective response ($p\text{-value} < 0.05$).

Because the regression results generally are not statistically significant, it is yet certain to either confirm or refute the hypotheses. The results should be treated as a preliminary attempt suggesting cues to explore Southeast Asia public opinion patterns about international conflict.

Limitations

Because this study is among the first attempts to explore the causal relationship in Southeast Asia's public opinion using experiments, limitations are unavoidable. First, to reduce the cost for recruiting a representative sample of respondents, the experiment is inserted into the SCSDI survey, which highly likely results in survey fatigue. After answering too many questions, the respondents cannot maintain concentration and interest, which weakens the treatment effect. The experiment quality can be improved in the future by taking into consideration effective delivery of the experiment, including survey length, consistency of survey structure, and representation of treatment information.

Second, the study has not yet uncovered the underlying patterns of foreign policy preference in Southeast Asia due to the limitation in quantitative analysis. As this thesis is my first attempt to apply the quantitative method, which is an entirely different approach from my previous research experience, I have encountered certain obstacles. More complex analysis strategies could have been employed to adjust the high non-compliance rates and isolate the treatment effect from the acquiescence bias.

Third, the unwanted technical error with the survey makes the results for Filipinos' opinions unavailable. This unfortunate problem negatively impacts the hypotheses testing and narrows down the expected comparative scope of the study. However, the results for Malaysia and Vietnam are still able to sketch the heterogeneous nature of Southeast Asian political opinion. If included in future studies, results for public opinion in the Philippines and other claimants will help shed light on the public opinion picture in Southeast Asia.

Fourth, the hypotheses of the study should be revised. Although there is evidence for the impact of perception of external threat and group cues in shaping foreign policy preference of the public in the U.S. and Europe, the same assumptions may not apply to Southeast Asia. The lack of literature about public opinion in Southeast Asia also contributes to the weak theoretical base of the study. Thus, this study is more of an effort to explore new knowledge rather than confirm hypotheses.

Policy implications

The mixed results of the survey experiment and the previous discussion about alternative explanations and government cues suggest that Southeast Asia should not be regarded as a homogeneous region. Southeast Asia consists of countries with various ethnic, language, and religious groups. Moreover, each country has a different historical experience with China and nationalist discourses. Hence, policymakers are recommended to take into account the diversity in the region when developing policy concerning the South China Sea conflict specifically and Southeast Asia generally.

Second, policymakers can make use of patterns of foreign policy preference of the Southeast Asian public, specifically Malaysia and Vietnam, suggested by the study. Knowing the tendency and trend of public opinion helps policymakers mobilize or orient the public for

policy purposes. In the current situation of escalating conflict in the South China Sea, support from the public is significantly essential to facilitate a peace solution.

Third, the study urges policymakers to pay more attention to the public's voice when making foreign policy decisions. The public opinion in Southeast Asia is increasingly saliently expressed and cannot be overlooked, especially when the support for balancing in the region is generally high, according to the study findings. Thus, policy calculation should take into account the domestic audience cost.

Suggestions for future research

From the study's aforementioned limitations and policy implications, I believe that future research is needed to fill the gap in the public opinion literature. First, following efforts to study Southeast Asian foreign policy preference could expand the scope to other countries in the region. The effect of other potential drivers of foreign policy preference, namely ideology, predetermined sentiments, approval of the government, top concerns, and elite cues, should as well be tested.

Second, future research should adapt and improve the experimental design to help to reveal the causal relationship. Other qualitative methods should also be considered. Interviews with Southeast Asian citizens can add depth to the quantitative findings and either confirm or develop hypotheses.

Finally, other analysis strategies are necessary to explore public opinion in Southeast Asia. The patterns may not be arranged according to a linear relationship. More sophisticated models should be employed to reveal the latent causal relationship.

Appendix

Appendix A: Data and supplementary materials

Cleaned data set for analysis:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1364TU1piXRGb7k3_L89wFbx9qrvTAayb/view?usp=sharing

[g](#)

Coding script for the statistical analysis in R Studio:

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Pva-43SKSIUEev_vMQuhHxH-vD-](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Pva-43SKSIUEev_vMQuhHxH-vD-j517N/view?usp=sharing)

[j517N/view?usp=sharing](#)

Appendix B: Survey questionnaires

English version

TREATMENT

“Now we would like to show you a scenario that could happen in the South China Sea in 2023. Please read the story carefully and answer some questions about that story later.”

[Each respondent is randomly assigned to one of the six conditions]

1. Malaysia incident and no other claimants’ responses

[Malaysia incident]

Recently, video footage in which an armed Chinese coastguard vessel can be seen **chasing and ramming a small Malaysian fishing boat** was spread out on the Internet. The video shows the 15-year-old son of the captain of the Malaysian vessel being **shot dead** in the incident while a Chinese fisherman accompanying Chinese coastguards was shouting what can be translated as “The entire South China Sea is ours!” Facing severe allegations concerning the incident, the Chinese government maintains that its vessel was only acting in accordance with its Coastguard Law which allows the use of force against foreign fishing vessels. The law, in addition to the new fishing ban, has threatened the livelihood of Malaysians who make their living from the sea since China took complete military control of Spratly Islands.

[Single-country public response]

The video footage is the final straw in the series of violent clashes between China and Malaysia. The video went viral on **Malaysian social media** and stirred up an online protest against

China's aggressive actions. The hashtag **#StopChinaBully** tops the trending lists on both Facebook and Twitter. At the same time, demonstrators are gathering in front of China's embassy in Kuala Lumpur to urge the government to take harsher actions against China.

2. The Philippines incident and no other claimants' responses

[The Philippines incident]

Recently, a video footage in which an armed Chinese coastguard vessel can be seen **chasing and ramming a small Filipino fishing boat** was spread out on the Internet. The video shows the 15-year-old son of the captain of the Filipino vessel being **shot dead** in the incident while a Chinese fisherman accompanying Chinese coastguards was shouting what can be translated as "The entire South China Sea is ours!" Facing severe allegations concerning the incident, the Chinese government maintains that its vessel was only acting in accordance with its Coastguard Law which allows the use of force against foreign fishing vessels. The law, in addition to the new fishing ban, has threatened the livelihood of Filipinos who make their living from the sea since China took complete military control of Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal.

[Single-country public response]

The video footage is the final straw in the series of violent clashes between China and the Philippines. The video went viral on **Filipino social media** and stirred up an online protest against China's aggressive actions. The hashtag **#StopChinaBully** tops the trending lists on both Facebook and Twitter. At the same time, demonstrators are gathering in front of China's embassy in Manila to urge the government to take harsher actions against China.

3. Vietnam incident and no other claimants' responses

[Vietnam incident]

Recently, a video footage in which an armed Chinese coastguard vessel can be **seen chasing and ramming a small Vietnamese fishing boat** was spread out on the Internet. The video shows the 15-year-old son of the captain of the Vietnamese vessel being **shot dead** in the incident while a Chinese fisherman accompanying the Chinese coastguards was shouting what can be translated as “The entire South China Sea is ours!” Facing severe allegations concerning the incident, the Chinese government maintains that its vessel was only acting in accordance with its Coastguard Law which allows the use of force against foreign fishing vessels. The law, in addition to the new fishing ban, has threatened the livelihood of Vietnamese who make their living from the sea since China took complete military control of Paracel and Spratly Islands.

[Single-country public response]

The video footage is the final straw in the series of violent clashes between China and Vietnam. The video went viral on **Vietnamese social media** and stirred up an online protest against China’s aggressive actions. The hashtag **#StopChinaBully** tops the trending lists on both Facebook and Twitter. At the same time, demonstrators are gathering in front of China’s embassy in Hanoi to urge the government to take harsher actions against China.

4. Malaysia incident and other claimants’ responses

[Malaysia incident]

Recently, video footage in which an armed Chinese coastguard vessel can be seen **chasing and ramming a small Malaysian fishing boat** was spread out on the Internet. The video shows the 15-year-old son of the captain of the Malaysian vessel being **shot dead** in the incident while a Chinese fisherman accompanying Chinese coastguards was shouting what can be translated as “The entire South China Sea is ours!” Facing severe allegations concerning the incident, the Chinese government maintains that its vessel was only acting in accordance with its Coastguard

Law which allows the use of force against foreign fishing vessels. The law, in addition to the new fishing ban, has threatened the livelihood of Malaysians who make their living from the sea since China took complete military control of Spratly Islands.

[Collective public response]

The video footage is the final straw in the series of violent clashes between China and other claimants. The video went viral on **Filipino, Indonesian, and Vietnamese social media** and stirred up an online protest against China's aggressive actions. The hashtag **#StopChinaBully** tops the trending lists on both Facebook and Twitter. At the same time, demonstrators are gathering in front of China's embassies in Manila, Jakarta, and Hanoi to urge their governments to take harsher actions against China.

5. The Philippines incident and other claimants' responses

[The Philippines incident]

Recently, a video footage in which an armed Chinese coastguard vessel can be seen **chasing and ramming a small Filipino fishing boat** was spread out on the Internet. The video shows the 15-year-old son of the captain of the Filipino vessel being **shot dead** in the incident while a Chinese fisherman accompanying Chinese coastguards was shouting what can be translated as "The entire South China Sea is ours. Facing severe allegations concerning the incident, the Chinese government maintains that its vessel was only acting in accordance with its Coastguard Law which allows the use of force against foreign fishing vessels. The law, in addition to the new fishing ban, has threatened the livelihood of Filipinos who make their living from the sea since China took complete military control of Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal.

[Collective public response]

The video footage is the final straw in the series of violent clashes between China and other claimants. The video went viral on **Malaysian, Indonesian, and Vietnamese social media** and stirred up an online protest against China's aggressive action. The hashtag **#StopChinaBully** tops the trending lists on both Facebook and Twitter. At the same time, demonstrators are gathering in front of China's embassies in Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, and Hanoi to urge their governments to take harsher actions against China.

6. Vietnam incident and other claimants' responses

[Vietnam incident]

Recently, a video footage in which an armed Chinese coastguard vessel can be seen **chasing and ramming a small Vietnamese fishing boat** was spread out on the Internet. The video shows the 15-year-old son of the captain of the Vietnamese vessel being **shot dead** in the incident while a Chinese fisherman accompanying the Chinese coastguards was shouting what can be translated as "The entire South China Sea is ours!" Facing severe allegations concerning the incident, the Chinese government maintains that its vessel was only acting in accordance with its Coastguard Law which allows the use of force against foreign fishing vessels. The law, in addition to the new fishing ban, has threatened the livelihood of Vietnamese who make their living from the sea since China took complete military control of Paracel and Spratly Islands.

[Collective public response]

The video footage is the final straw in the series of violent clashes between China and other claimants. The video went viral on **Malaysian, Filipino, and Indonesian social media** and stirred up an online protest against China's aggressive actions. The hashtag **#StopChinaBully** tops the trending lists on both Facebook and Twitter. At the same time, demonstrators are

gathering in front of China's embassies in Kuala Lumpur, Manila, and Jakarta to urge their governments to take harsher actions against China.

OUTCOME QUESTIONS

“Assuming that happened, we would like to know what you think your government should do next.”

1. The government should make concessions to China:

0 – 5 (Disagree – Agree)

2. The government should build internal power:

0 – 5 (Disagree – Agree)

3. The government should develop and strengthen ties with other powers:

0 – 5 (Disagree – Agree)

4. The government should form alliance with other ASEAN claimants:

0 – 5 (Disagree – Agree)

“Finally we would like to ask you some questions with regards to the story you have just read:”

5. Could you remember which country was involved in the confrontation with a China's coastguard vessel?

1. Malaysia

2. The Philippines

3. Vietnam

4. I don't know

6. Could you remember were there any responses by other claimants to the incident?

1. Yes

2. No

3. I don't know

Appendix C: Summary statistics for average support for balancing

country	treatment	mean	sd	n	min	max
All	Home-Collective	76.349	15.457	42	46.667	100
All	Home-Single	82.949	14.607	52	46.667	100
All	Neighbor-Collective	80.8	15.636	100	40	100
All	Neighbor-Single	80.061	18.156	109	0	100
Malaysia	Home-Collective	72.644	14.292	29	46.667	100
Malaysia	Home-Single	81.622	15.588	37	46.667	100
Malaysia	Neighbor-Collective	78.725	14.536	68	40	100
Malaysia	Neighbor-Single	80.178	18.566	75	0	100
Vietnam	Home-Collective	84.615	15.247	13	53.333	100
Vietnam	Home-Single	86.222	11.675	15	60	100
Vietnam	Neighbor-Collective	85.208	17.163	32	46.667	100
Vietnam	Neighbor-Single	79.804	17.484	34	26.667	100

Table 4: Summary statistics for average support for balancing

Appendix D: Regression results for treatment effects

Effect of Country Incident Treatment				Effect of Public Response Treatment			
	All	Malaysia	Vietnam		All	Malaysia	Vietnam
(Constant)	80.41*** (1.14)	79.49*** (1.37)	82.42*** (2.01)	(Constant)	80.99*** (1.30)	80.65*** (1.54)	81.77*** (2.32)
Country Incident	-0.41 (2.04)	-1.81 (2.44)	3.05 (3.67)	Public Response	-1.51 (1.89)	-3.75 (2.26)	3.27 (3.36)
R ²	0.00	0.00	0.01	R ²	0.00	0.01	0.01
Adj. R ²	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00	Adj. R ²	-0.00	0.01	-0.00
Num. obs.	303	209	94	Num. obs.	303	209	94
*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05				*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05			

Table 5: Regression results for treatment effects

Appendix E: Regression results for interaction between treatments

Interaction between treatments												
	All	MY	VN	All-Q2	MY-Q2	VN-Q2	All-Q3	MY-Q3	VN-Q3	All-Q4	MY-Q4	VN-Q4
(Constant)	80.06***	80.18***	79.80***	77.06***	79.47***	71.76***	80.92***	78.93***	85.29***	82.20***	82.13***	82.35***
	(1.57)	(1.88)	(2.80)	(2.00)	(2.26)	(3.98)	(1.87)	(2.21)	(3.34)	(1.78)	(2.05)	(3.50)
Public response	0.74	-1.45	5.40	2.74	-1.23	11.36*	-0.32	-1.58	2.21	-0.20	-1.55	2.65
	(2.27)	(2.72)	(4.02)	(2.89)	(3.27)	(5.72)	(2.71)	(3.20)	(4.80)	(2.58)	(2.97)	(5.02)
Country incident	2.89	1.44	6.42	3.32	-0.55	12.24	3.31	3.77	2.71	2.03	1.11	4.31
	(2.77)	(3.26)	(5.05)	(3.52)	(3.93)	(7.19)	(3.29)	(3.84)	(6.04)	(3.14)	(3.57)	(6.32)
Interaction	-7.34	-7.53	-7.01	-6.45	-4.58	-10.74	-10.10*	-11.47*	-7.13	-5.46	-6.53	-3.16
	(4.09)	(4.86)	(7.37)	(5.20)	(5.85)	(10.49)	(4.87)	(5.72)	(8.81)	(4.64)	(5.31)	(9.22)
R ²	0.01	0.03	0.03	0.01	0.01	0.06	0.02	0.04	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.01
Adj. R ²	0.00	0.01	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00	0.03	0.01	0.02	-0.03	-0.00	0.01	-0.03
Num. obs.	303	209	94	303	209	94	303	209	94	303	209	94
*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05												

Table 6: Regression results for interaction between treatments

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