Popular Nationalism and International Conflict

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Abstract

Does popular nationalism breed international conflict? International relations scholars have either dismissed nationalism as epiphenomenal or have assumed that it increases the likelihood of interstate violence. Contrary to these conventional views, this paper claims that popular nationalism can have a stabilizing effect, which facilitates the status quo, and that its conflict-inducing effect appears only when a country’s chance of total victory in conflict is fairly high. Popular nationalism can have diverse effects, as it induces two distinct foreign policy preferences at the individual level: nationalistic sentiments make individuals prefer not only a hawkish foreign policy means but also complete success as a foreign policy outcome. A nationalistic public’s demand for complete success prevents leaders from hastily jumping into international conflict due to high domestic costs of a failed conflict and a greater chance to pay such costs. A survey experiment and a case study on the territorial dispute between China, Taiwan, and Japan provide empirical evidence supporting this argument.

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1 Introduction

Popular nationalism is seemingly on the rise yet again in world politics. Across the globe, nationalistic individuals fill the streets and polling places. In Britain, under the slogan of “we want our country back,” many British citizens voted for Brexit in the summer of 2016, which heralded the resurgence of English nationalism (O’Toole 2016). In Poland, tens of thousands of citizens joined the demonstration on their Independence Day in 2015, displaying their deep nationalistic emotions with Polish flags and slogans like “Poland for the Polish” and “Yesterday it was Moscow, today it is Brussels that takes away our freedom” (AFP 2015). Asia is no exception to this trend. In Asia, nationalism has been most notably expressed through regional territorial disputes. In September 2012, massive nationalist protests erupted across China after the Japanese government announced its nationalization of disputed islands. Raising banners with slogans such as “I’m a Chinese” and “for the respect of the motherland, we must go to war with Japan,” Chinese demonstrators expressed their love of the motherland and hostility toward the enemy of the nation (Bradsher, Fackler and Jacobs 2012; Moore 2012).

In international relations, nationalism has long been viewed as a driving force for international aggression. Previous studies on war and peace have continuously listed nationalism as a cause of interstate violence (Blainey 1988; Posen 1993a; Snyder 2000; Mansfield and Snyder 2004; Woodwell 2007; Schrock-Jacobson 2012; Wimmer 2012; Bertoli 2016; Ciorciari and Weiss 2016; Gruffydd-Jones 2017) and a stumbling block to peace (Rosato 2003). Nationalism has been blamed for the two World Wars and many of the tragic conflicts after the end of the Cold War. In recent years, scholars have suspected that the rise of popular nationalism in China could be a potent source of conflict between the United States and China in years to come (Shirk 2008; Mearsheimer 2014). As these conventional views suggest, does popular nationalism inevitably breed international conflict? Will the seemingly rising nationalism across the world today end up in another destructive interstate violence?

This paper advances a new state-level theory of popular nationalism and international conflict.
In doing so, I bring "nationalistic individuals" back into the theoretical framework by incorporating a nationalistic public’s foreign policy preferences. Building upon previous studies, I first specify foreign policy preferences that individuals have when their nationalistic sentiments are activated. Based on this microfoundation, I build a theory of how a nationalistic public’s foreign policy preferences shape state behavior, laying out a strategic logic behind leaders’ foreign policy decision when they confront popular nationalism.

Specifically, I claim that whether popular nationalism increases the likelihood of conflict is conditional on the chance of total victory in conflict. A nationalistic public has two distinct foreign policy preferences—it prefers a military option to resolve a dispute (preference for means), and wants to see its country’s complete success in conflict (preference for outcomes). I show that these two foreign policy preferences can generate two countervailing incentives for leaders with regard to the use of force. It can push leaders to resort to military means, but at the same time it can motivate leaders to avoid taking risky military action. The net effect of popular nationalism on the initiation of international conflict thus hinges on the relative weight of these two different effects, which, I claim, is determined by a country’s chance of total victory in conflict. In short, the relationship between popular nationalism and international conflict is not linear.

I first test the logic of this theory using a survey experiment. The experiment results strongly support the theoretical expectation that the effect of popular nationalism on the initiation of international conflict is conditional—the respondents who received information on the rise of popular nationalism recommended a military intervention only when their chance of total victory in conflict was high. To further illustrate the conditional nature of the effect of popular nationalism and how popular nationalism can facilitate the status quo, I conducted a case study on China’s and Taiwan’s responses to a territorial crisis with Japan in 2012. The case study shows that the Chinese government’s reaction to the crisis was more restrained than that of the Taiwanese government despite the rise of intense popular nationalism in China.

This new theory of popular nationalism and conflict makes several meaningful contributions to the literature. First, it provides a coherent theoretical framework to understand the link between
popular nationalism and international conflict from the ground up by connecting the microfounda-
tion to state behavior. Second, the new theoretical framework provides a bridge to connect nation-
alism to existing international relations theories. Despite its importance, nationalism does not play
much of a role in major international relations theories. While acknowledging that nationalism
can be a source of war, ironically, most theories of war and conflict do not consider or incorporate
nationalism as a variable. Furthermore, existing studies on nationalism and conflict mostly remain
silent on how nationalism fits into or speaks to other conflict theories in international relations.
The theory proposed here integrates popular nationalism into the existing theories of conflict by
exploring how popular nationalism shapes leaders’ strategies calculations and claiming that the
effect of popular nationalism is dependent on a country’s chance of total victory, which is shaped
by variables that international relations scholars have long studied, such as the balance of power.

The paper also makes an empirical contribution by adopting a multi-method research design
that helps address common challenges in identifying the causal effect of popular nationalism. Dif-
ferent methods have different strengths, often complementary. Experimental methods have a clear
advantage in teasing out the effect of popular nationalism in foreign policy decision making, but
they typically have a weakness in external validity. A case study complements such weakness by
locating the theory and experimental findings in the real-world contexts. If these two different
methods produce results that point toward one direction, this will greatly enhance our confidence
in the validity of causal inference.

2 Existing Insights on Nationalism and International Conflict

Previous studies have generally shared the insight that nationalism sparks interstate violence.
One set of studies has focused on the relationship between nationalism and conflict in a nation-
building context, claiming that when nations do not have a state or when states pursue the recovery
of national diaspora, there is a greater risk of interstate war (Van Evera 1994; Woodwell 2007;
Mearsheimer 2011; Wimmer 2012). These studies help us understand nation building efforts of the
past two centuries and the causes of the international wars that broke out throughout this process,
but they provide little insights on how popular nationalism affects international conflict after nation building is completed, which is the focus of this paper.

In a non-nation building context, several studies have explored the link between nationalism and international conflict. Among qualitative studies, Snyder (2000) and Snyder and Mansfield (2004) claim that leaders in democratizing countries are likely to promote nationalism in order to build popular support without bearing the full costs of democratic accountability and this nationalist myth-making makes democratizing countries most war-prone. Similarly, Ciorciari and Weiss (2016) claim that weakly institutionalized democracies are most likely to allow nationalist protests to take place and adopt a more aggressive foreign policy. Focusing on ethnic nationalism, Gagnon (1994) argues that leaders in an ethnically heterogeneous society tend to fend off domestic challenges by exploiting nationalist myth-making that excludes certain ethnic groups and this strategy increases the chance of conflict with other ethnic groups outside of the country.

A few quantitative studies indeed found a positive correlation between nationalism and international conflict. Schrock-Jacobson (2012) provides first large-N evidence on nationalism and the onset of interstate war. She found that countries that had laws "limiting the rights, freedoms, and activities of groups not considered part of the nation” or had any politically salient nationality party in a given year were more likely to go to war in the following years. Using national holidays as an indicator for nationalism, Gruffydd-Jones (2017) also found that conflict is more likely in the two months following national days than the rest of the year.

Although these previous studies have provided invaluable insights, our understanding of whether and how popular nationalism leads to international conflict remains incomplete for at least two reasons. First, while nationalism is inherently public in nature—every case of conflict that is argued to have a nationalistic element features nationalists (i.e., nationalistic individuals)—previous studies on nationalism and international conflict unwittingly downplay the importance of understanding the microfoundation of nationalism as a source of conflict, predominantly assuming that nationalistic individuals are aggressive for their nation and that such aggression is their only characteristic. These individual-level assumptions have led scholars to “take the war-causing character of nation-
alism for granted,” and eschew the possibility that nationalism has diverse effects on international conflict (Van Evera 1994, 5).

Second, observational studies that strive to establish a causal link between nationalism and conflict are plagued by endogeneity problems. The ebb and flow of popular nationalism often co-varies with other factors influencing the conflict behavior of states. For instance, economic downturns can fan popular nationalism while increasing the likelihood of international conflict for other reasons, such as competition for resources. Even worse, nationalism can at times be manipulated by a leader for the sake of conflict, which makes it exceedingly difficult to disentangle the causal effect of nationalism in observational research. As a consequence, while one side of the international relations scholarship believes that nationalism causes interstate violence, many others simply dismiss it as epiphenomenal. Most of previous works on nationalism and conflict failed to adequately address this critique, except Bertoli (2016).

This paper attempts to address these two issues by revisiting the microfoundation of nationalism as a source of conflict and adopting a multi-method research design. Before further elaborating the new theoretical framework and presenting empirical evidence, in the next section, I first clarify what I mean by nationalism in this paper and the scope condition of the theory.

3 Defining Nationalism and the Scope Condition

Scholars have understood nationalism in many different ways. Smith (2010) suggests that there are at least five different usages of the concept: nationalism as 1) a process of formation of nations, 2) a sentiment or consciousness of belonging to the nation, 3) a language and symbolism of the nation, 4) a social and political movement on behalf of the nation, and 5) a doctrine and/or ideology of the nation, both general and particular (Smith 2010, 5). Among these different usages,

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1 One exception is Mearsheimer (2011), which suggests that nationalism can facilitate both peace and war.
2 Adopting a regression discontinuity design, Bertoli found that the World Cup qualifiers, which are assumed to have higher level of nationalism, took military actions more often than non-qualifiers and they were more violent in conflict. This study provides a major step forward in identifying the causal effect of nationalism on international conflict.
previous studies on nationalism and conflict have tended to focus on macro aspects of nationalism, understanding it as a principle of self-determination or social and political movement for nation building (Posen 1993; Van Evera 1994; Woodwell 2007; Wimmer 2012). In this paper, building upon studies in social psychology, I define nationalism as nationalistic sentiments, which refer to collective emotions individuals have as members of a nation state. In this sense, nationalism has popular characteristics.

Nationalistic sentiments are a close reflection of national identity. National identity refers to “the member’s perception of difference and distinctiveness vis-à-vis other national communities and their members” (Smith 2010, 20). Just like other social identities, the essence of national identity lies in a distinction between “us” and “them” (Abdelal et al. 2006; Larson 2011). In other words, a birth of nationalists requires “a contact with the other” (Prizel 1998, 17). German nationalism, for instance, stemmed primarily from the rejection of French cultural hegemony and rationalism (Greenfeld 1992). Chinese nationalism was born and has grown in the country’s relationship vis-à-vis Japan (Zhao 2004). This means that, although nationalistic sentiments are comprised of multiple layers of feelings and nuances of emotions, they have two fundamental dimensions: feelings about one’s own nation and feelings involving the others. Nationalistic sentiments thus include feelings of attachment and love of one’s own country (without referencing to other nations) as well as feelings of superiority, dominance, hostility toward other countries (Kosterman and Feshbach 1989; Schatz, Staub and Lavine 1999; Mummendey, Klink and Brown 2001; Blank and Schmidt 2003).

Popular nationalism arises when the vast majority of citizens primarily identifies themselves

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4 This emotional aspect of nationalism has long been acknowledged by scholars of nationalism. In addition to Smith, for instance, Gellner also mentions sentiment as one of three aspects of nationalism, defining it as “the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the political principle [that the political and the national unit should be congruent] or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfillment” (Gellner 1983, 1).

5 In this sense, it is not a mere coincidence that international rivalry facilitates state building efforts. See Thies (2005).

6 This distinction is not entirely new. In political science, the former has often been called patriotism, while the latter has carried many different names, including ethnocentrism, national chauvinism, and hypernationalism. These two dimensions may seem very closely associated with each other. In fact, political scientists tend to presume that these two sentiments are dependent on one another in nature—one requires the other (Mercer 1995). According to studies in social psychology, however, these are “psychologically distinguishable dimensions” (Kosterman and Feshbach 1989, 272).
with their nation state (among different social identities available to them) and shares intense nationalistic sentiments. Importantly, popular nationalism can emerge through multiple pathways. As widely believed, it can emerge from above (Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983; Greenfeld 1992). That is, leaders can stimulate popular nationalism via intentional manipulation of nationalistic sentiments.\(^7\) It is important, however, to distinguish manipulation with the goal to initiate conflict from manipulation for other purposes. Leaders may want to stoke nationalistic sentiments when they decide to enter into a militarized dispute to rally the public behind them, but they can also exploit nationalistic sentiments as a means to their own domestic ends, such as consolidating power or pursuing national political and economic projects. In this latter case, when making foreign policy decisions, leaders will confront nationalistic audiences as an unintended consequence. Egyptian president Nasser found himself in this quandary in 1967. To buttress his popularity, Nasser decided to harness Arab nationalism, though he did not necessarily have an intention for external strife with Israel. When this tactic unexpectedly created momentum toward a confrontation with Israel, Egypt was not militarily prepared, resulting in a humiliating defeat in 1967 (Prizel 1998).

Popular nationalism can emerge from below, too, as part of grassroots social movements or in response to internal and external social and political events without political elites’ nationalist appeals (Kedourie 1993; Billig 1995; Smith 2010; Hobsbawm 2012). In this case, leaders confront a nationalistic public, despite the lack of intention or willingness for future violence. The First World War is a good example. Neither the Kaiser nor German generals intended to stir nationalistic feelings to start conflict, but an external event unexpectedly stimulated nationalistic sentiments and they confronted a nationalistic mass when making the decision to take military action.

Among these three different cases in which leaders have a nationalistic public as domestic audiences when making their foreign policy decisions, the theoretical framework laid out below focuses on the latter two cases—the situations in which leaders do not intend to stir nationalistic

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\(^7\) On the role of political elites versus the population in producing nationalism, see Smith (2010) and Whitmeyer (2002). Interestingly, this manipulation does not always succeed. Especially, regarding war, without common “truth” to share, elite manipulation to kindle nationalism does not resonate with the public. As Clausewitz points out, “the passions that are to be kindled in war must already be inherent in the people” (Clausewitz 1976, 89). See Whitmeyer (2002) and Mansfield and Snyder (2004) for the examples.
sentiments to initiate international conflict but happen to confront the rise of popular nationalism. If leaders flare up nationalistic sentiments to start a conflict, it would be difficult to claim that popular nationalism per se causes state behavior. In this instance, a nationalistic public becomes a part of a causal chain that connects a leader’s intention to a conflict, rather than it having an independent causal effect on state aggression. I exclude this case of intentional manipulation from the scope of my theoretical framework, as the primary focus of the paper is on identifying the causal effect of popular nationalism on conflict.8

4 Explaining the Effect of Popular Nationalism on the Initiation of International Conflict

A typical story of belligerent nationalism tells us that popular nationalism inevitably results in leaders’ sliding toward international aggression. On the verge of the First World War, for instance, large crowds began to fill the streets of Berlin and other major cities in Germany, displaying a massive outpouring of nationalistic sentiments. Many historians believed that this rising tide of popular nationalism contributed to the outbreak of the war. Eksteins, for instance, pointed out that it was inconceivable for the Kaiser to “turn back,” and the order for German mobilization was made against this backdrop of “popular pressures for decisive action” (Eksteins 1989, 60-62). In this section, I lay out a new theoretical framework that elucidates the effect of popular nationalism on international conflict, revisiting this conventional view that the presence of a nationalistic public inescapably pushes leaders into a more hostile direction.9

Understanding Popular Nationalism: A Nationalistic Public and Its Foreign Policy Preference

To explore the effect of popular nationalism on the initiation of international conflict, we first need to understand the characteristics of popular nationalism that are relevant to leaders’ foreign

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8 Yet, the theoretical framework below offers some observable implications for this case of leaders’ intentional manipulation of popular nationalism. I will briefly discuss them in the Conclusion section.

9 It should be noted that the state-level theory I present here is monadic. It focuses on leaders in a challenger state, black-boxing a target state. Extending this theoretical framework into a dyadic theory would be fruitful future work.
policy decisions. When almost all citizens within a nation state have strong nationalistic sentiments and their national identity becomes salient, what foreign policy attitudes would these citizens display? In other words, when nationalistic sentiments are activated, how do they affect individuals’ foreign policy preference?

Previous research shows that nationalistic sentiments induce two distinct types of foreign policy preferences at the individual level. First, strong nationalistic sentiments make individuals prefer military aggression as a foreign policy means (Feshbach 1990; Bliss, Oh and Williams 2007; Powers 2016; Ko 2017). It is indeed not difficult to find an example of a nationalistic public calling for war. In April 1982, the frenzied Argentinian masses filled the Plaza de Mayo, chanting the name of President Galtieri and their desire to join a war against Great Britain over the Falkland Islands (Cardoso, Kirschbaum and Kooy 1987,102). Recent experimental studies show that this relationship between nationalistic sentiments and the preference for military action is not merely correlational. Using a survey experiment on the American public, for instance, Powers (2016) found that individuals who have feelings of attachment to a nation based on community-based national identity are more likely to display militaristic foreign policy attitudes. Ko (2017) also found from a survey experiment conducted in China that nationalistic sentiments induced through a visual stimuli led individuals to prefer a hawkish foreign policy option, and that this preference for military aggression partly arises due to positive illusion bias—an overestimation of one’s own country’s likely success in conflict (Ko 2017).

Second, nationalistic sentiments induce a strong aversion to compromise and generate a preference for complete success in conflict. With strong nationalistic sentiments, individuals strictly prefer total victory and perceive any outcome that is short of complete success equivalent to fail-

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10 Ko (2017) found that only nationalistic sentiments defined in relations with other nations had such an effect, not the ones that focus on the Self. This is in line with Chung (2015), which found that self-affirming national identity does not necessarily lead to a preference for conflict.

11 A state’s foreign policy action yields various outcomes. These outcomes can be situated on a continuum from complete failure to complete success. If an initial foreign policy objective set out by a state is achieved without making any concession to another party involved, the policy will be considered as complete success. If a state makes full concessions to another party, thereby failing to fulfil its original foreign policy goal, the policy will be considered as complete failure. Compromise means that countries that have conflicting interest in a given foreign policy issue make some concessions to one another, which implies that neither side may fully accomplish their original goals.
ure, though it can be in fact a reasonable gain. As Hans J. Morgenthau puts it, “The crusading mind knows nothing of persuasion and compromise. It knows only of victory and of defeat” (Morgenthau 1978, 552). Ko (2017) found that when nationalistic sentiments were activated, Chinese individuals were indeed more likely to be dissatisfied with a conflict outcome that fell short of complete success, which was China obtained more than 90 percent of the islands disputed between China and Japan. Positive illusion bias partly explains why individuals have this particular preference for outcomes when nationalistic sentiments are stimulated. If individuals overestimate their country’s chance of victory in conflict and firmly believe that their country is going to prevail, they would be also likely to take it for granted that their country takes all and does not make any concession.

These two foreign policy preferences that nationalistic sentiments induce suggest that we can characterize a nationalistic public as a special type of domestic audiences. In the literature, domestic audiences are often thought to be a mixture of “hawks” and “doves.” A nationalistic public can be distinguished from these non-nationalistic audiences, as it uniformly supports a hawkish foreign policy option. In addition, a nationalistic public strongly disfavors compromise and expects complete victory in conflict, whereas a non-nationalistic populace would consider compromise or partial victory as a reasonable gain. In short, when popular nationalism emerges on the horizon, leaders confront this unique type of public at home.  

This suggests that nationalistic sentiments can be a source of issue indivisibility. In other words, intensive nationalistic sentiments can make individuals perceive a given foreign policy issue as “indivisible.” Issue indivisibility has been claimed as a rationalist explanation for war (Fearon 1995). Several studies have explored the source and consequence of indivisibility other than nationalism especially in the context of territorial disputes. See Hensel and Mitchell (2005); Wiegand (2005); Goddard (2006); Hassner (2007); Fang and Li (2016).

In this regard, a nationalistic public is not equivalent to hawks. The hawks generally prefer the use of force to achieve a nation’s foreign policy goals and may pressure leaders to adopt more hard-line policies. Yet, the hawks do not necessarily prefer or demand complete victory, which means that leaders can satisfy them without gaining a complete, prestigious outcome in international conflict.

There are a couple of ways that that leaders can detect popular nationalism. One is through nationalist mobilization. It was impossible for Moroccan leaders, for instance, not to notice their public’s intense nationalistic sentiments when over 1,000 citizens staged a nationalist protest on the day Spanish King Juan Carlos visited the Spanish-held enclave that the two countries have been in dispute for five hundred years (BBC 2007). Yet, leaders can also get a sense of popular nationalism even when it is at a “latent” or “quiet” stage (Beissinger 2002). Notably, they can learn from the past. After watching a rise in nationalist protests and the collapse of the previous government in the late 1990s, Armenian leaders knew that they would confront pressures from the nationalistic public if the Karabakh issue between Armenia and Azerbaijan is raised once again (De Waal 2003 260-262). Leaders can also keep track of the public...
Popular Nationalism and Leaders’ Strategic Calculations

Before initiating a conflict, leaders weigh the anticipated benefits of using military force, the costs of fighting, the likelihood of winning, and the costs of a failed conflict. Popular nationalism complicates leaders’ strategic calculations of these elements. I claim that a nationalistic public’s two foreign policy preferences have contrasting implications for leaders’ decisions to use violent means to attain a foreign policy objective.

On the one hand, leaders would be more tempted to resort to military means when they have a nationalistic public clamoring for a hawkish position as opposed to a non-nationalistic public. Leaders can anticipate substantial political gains by following a nationalistic public’s preference for military aggression. Feeding a mass nationalistic fervor will greatly boost leaders’ popularity at home and mute political opposition, helping them to retain political power. International crises in general tend to elicit approval for leaders and their policies because of a rally-around-the-flag effect (Downs and Saunders 1999; Baker and Oneal 2001). With popular nationalism, this effect would be especially strong. If leaders choose to use force and such an endeavor ends with a prestigious success, it will greatly bolster their nationalist credentials and guarantee lasting fame as a great leader in national history. In this regard, appeasing popular nationalism by initiating international conflict can be an attractive strategy for ambitious political leaders.

Moreover, when a nationalistic public displays an exceptional degree of confidence in its nation and of hostility toward the enemy of the nation, leaders can anticipate the potential costs of fighting to be relatively low. A nationalistic public is willing to sacrifice its own interests for the nation and fight against an adversary (Posen 1993a). On the eve of the First World War, the nationalistic masses across Europe indeed “flock[ed] to the recruiting booths” and “threw their lives away without words of complaint” (Howard 1976, 111). Leaders thus can expect higher cost tolerance for fighting when they have a nationalistic public, which can make the use of force a more attractive atmosphere using news media and their own surveillance and intelligence apparatus. The Chinese government, for instance, collects information on the Chinese public’s basic attitudes towards the country and its opinion on various domestic and foreign policy issues through the Party Affairs Department (Reilly 2013, 35-37).
On the other hand, leaders also have reason to be more wary of seeking a military solution when they face a nationalistic public. Popular nationalism increases the potential costs of a failed conflict as well as the risks to pay such costs. A failed conflict is generally costly, but when conflict occurs amid a wave of popular nationalism, the cost of losing is likely to be particularly high. As Dolan notes, a nationalist conflict engages national honor and prestige to a greater extent (Dolan 2015). Losing this type of conflict will not only question the competence of leaders but also greatly undermine their political legitimacy, posing a fundamental challenge to their survival in power. To make matters worse, a failed conflict is defined in a much broader way in the eyes of a nationalistic public. Due to its particular preference for complete success, any conflict outcome that fails to achieve total victory would be considered as failure by the nationalistic public. This means partial victory, which can be considered as a fair outcome in the absence of popular nationalism, could still inflame domestic dissatisfaction, weakening the incumbent leaders’ domestic position. In other words, when popular nationalism arises, leaders only have a narrow set of conflict outcomes with which they can satisfy their domestic audiences and they cannot seek partial gains, which is an objective that can be readily pursued in conflict in the absence of popular nationalism.

A nationalistic public’s preference for complete victory and the consequent possibility of severe ex-post punishment imply that we can expect a strong selection effect when leaders have a nationalistic public at home. That is, when leaders confront popular nationalism, they have incentives to select and enter into a “winning” conflict. Some may question whether leaders can afford the luxury of maintaining the status quo and selecting a conflict when they have a nationalistic public. True, leaders may have to bear the domestic costs of not taking military action if they decide not to pursue a belligerent policy, given that their nationalistic audiences call for such

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15 Previous studies on audience costs have shown that leaders are sensitive to these kinds of ex-post domestic political costs when they make their foreign policy decisions. Audience costs refer to domestic political costs leaders pay when they make threats and back down in international crises (Fearon 1994). If leaders make a threat and fail to follow through, the public would be willing to punish them because backing down signals incompetence of leaders and tarnishes national honor (Fearon 1994). One of the implications of the audience cost theory is that leaders are more selective about making threats and entering into international conflict if they expect severe ex-post audience costs (Schultz 2001). Empirical studies have borne out this selection effect (Kurizaki and Whang 2015).
a policy. Nevertheless, ceteris paribus, the costs of inaction are likely to be smaller than those of taking military action and losing a conflict or compromising.\textsuperscript{16} Once a militarized conflict takes place and the conflict ends with failure or compromise, leaders cannot guarantee their control over the domestic political situation and post-conflict leadership (Debs and Goemans 2010). Moreover, the public generally attributes a greater blame to "culpable" leaders who are responsible for the initiation of conflict (Croco 2011). Public anger will thus be greater in the event of its own initiating a conflict and losing or compromising at the end. Leaders also generally have tools to reduce the cost of not taking military action, such as political rhetoric, media manipulation, censorship, and repression, but these tools may not be readily available after a failed conflict. Of course, these tools can be costly—especially in the case of hard repression, but they are far less costlier than loss of power after a failed conflict. In short, the costs of not taking military action in front of a nationalistic public are generally smaller than those of a failed conflict, which allows leaders to play a nationalist gamble selectively.

\textit{The Conditional Effect of Popular Nationalism on the Initiation of International Conflict}

Previous studies tend to assume that there is a monotonic, positive relationship between popular nationalism and international conflict: as nationalism increases, the likelihood of conflict also goes up. The discussion in the previous section, however, suggests that the effect of nationalism on the initiation of international conflict is more complex than this simple relationship: the effect of popular nationalism on conflict depends on which one between the two opposing incentives discussed above prevails in leaders’ strategic calculations, which, I claim, is determined by a country’s chance of total victory in conflict.

If there is a very clear chance of achieving total victory in conflict, there is no reason for leaders to hold themselves back from taking military action when they observe popular nationalism at home. As previous discussion suggests, leaders can enjoy substantial political gains by appeasing

\textsuperscript{16} This is for challenger countries, which have both maintaining the status quo and initiating a conflict as viable options. Defender countries facing a nationalistic public are in a completely different position, as they do not have an option of maintaining the status quo when they are challenged and must choose between backing down and escalation.
a nationalistic public. So in this case, as previous studies have claimed, we will observe popular nationalism has a hostile effect, increasing the likelihood of conflict. If, however, there is a fair chance of failing to win total victory, leaders would prefer maintaining the status quo, being selective about initiating a militarized conflict due to the severe domestic costs they will bear should the conflict end in a dishonorable outcome. When leaders are not optimistic about their chance of total victory in conflict, we will thus observe that popular nationalism has a restraining effect—it will make conflict no more likely or even reduce the likelihood of conflict, depending on the baseline of the likelihood of conflict when popular nationalism is absent.

There are several observable implications that we can draw from this theoretical framework. First, unless there is a clearly favorable balance of power or misperception of it, leaders are unlikely to initiate international conflict even if they face a wave of popular nationalism at home. Previous studies on conflict and war have suggested that there are two major factors that determine the likelihood of success in conflict: the balance of power between states (Jervis 1978; Morgen-thau 1978; Waltz 1979; Schweller 1994; Van Evera 1999; Mearsheimer 2001; Glaser 2010) and the balance of willingness to fight (resolve) (Rosen 1972; Maoz 1983; George and Simons 1994; Kertzer 2016). Between these two factors, the balance of power between states is more likely to be a primary factor that shapes the probability of total victory in conflict. If there is a big gap in military capabilities, even if a county is more resolved to fight, the conflict will be more likely to end in draw or compromise than total victory. Yet, if one country is clearly superior to the other in terms of military capabilities, there is a higher chance that it will dominate the other and win a conflict with a decisive outcome. The primary observable implication is thus popular nationalism is likely to increase the likelihood of international conflict only when there is a very favorable balance of power.

In reality, however, gauging the relative balance of power and one’s own country’s chance of total victory may not always be straightforward. In some cases, a real peril of popular nationalism

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17 This suggests that having a nationalistic public is likely to have a only marginal effect in the chance of total victory.
that leads to interstate conflict may pertain to the misperception of leaders.\textsuperscript{18} False hope for total victory will make leaders deviate from their optimal behavior, leading them to “want” a conflict in the face of popular nationalism.\textsuperscript{19} World War I is often claimed as a prime example of false optimism intertwined with the public’s intense nationalistic sentiments. During the July crisis, influenced by the “cult of offensive” sweeping the European countries at that time,\textsuperscript{20} German leaders and military officials displayed “supreme confidence” about the upcoming war, believing in a “spectacular and decisive victory” (Van Evera 1984; Fisher 1975, 501-503). Against this backdrop, rising popular nationalism could easily contribute to moving leaders into a decision of war.

Second, when leaders choose not to follow a nationalistic public’s call for military aggression due to the low probability of total victory in conflict, they are likely to engage in behavior reducing their costs of not taking military action. If popular nationalism is at its quiet stage, meaning that nationalist mobilization does not take place yet, leaders may seek to mute a given foreign policy issue by putting them off from their political agenda. If it is at its noisy stage, leaders may attempt to justify their inaction using various means. One strategy is adopting a certain type of rhetoric that can persuade the nationalistic public. Importantly, if the probability of total victory in conflict indeed matters for leaders in dealing with popular nationalism, among various types of rhetoric, leaders are likely to adopt the rhetoric of delay to persuade the nationalistic public, emphasizing future chances of glorious victory after their nation gains further military power. If any sort of repressive means or media manipulation is available to leaders, we should also be able to observe leaders’ using these tools alongside rhetoric to reduce their costs of not pursuing a military option.

Third, if leaders believe their chance of total victory is high so that they decide to appease popular nationalism by entering into a conflict, they would further stimulate existing nationalistic

\textsuperscript{18} Misperception of states’ military capabilities has been widely identified as a source of war in international politics. See Jervis (1976), Blainey (1988), and Van Evera (1999).

\textsuperscript{19} Various factors can bias leaders’ military estimates, from psychological and cognitive biases to organizational malfunction. See Snyder (1989) and Brooks (2008).

\textsuperscript{20} The cult of offensive refers to the European countries’ offensive military postures before the World War I (Snyder 1984; Van Evera 1984). While some scholars saw this offensive-dominance as a root cause of the World War I, others questioned the importance of it. See Sagan (1986) for the latter view.
sentiments before initiating a conflict in order to rally the public and maximize their political benefits rather than dampen them. Hence, in this case, we should be able to observe intentional flaring up of popular nationalism that is already heightened.

5 Hypotheses

The discussion so far yields the following hypothesis about the effect of popular nationalism on international conflict:

Hypothesis 1 (The Conditional Effect of Nationalism): Popular nationalism is likely to increase the likelihood of international conflict only when there is a high probability of total victory in conflict. When the probability of total victory in conflict is low, popular nationalism is likely to facilitate the status quo.

Since the focus of this paper is on identifying the effects of causes, not the causes of effects, I assess Hypothesis 1 against the following null and alternative hypotheses, which are based on the conventional wisdom on the effect of nationalism. First, I assess a null hypothesis that reflects a skeptical view on the independent causal effect of nationalism on state behavior.

Hypothesis 2 (No Effect of Nationalism) popular nationalism does not have any effect on the likelihood of international conflict.

Second, previous studies on nationalism and conflict have claimed that nationalism breeds and spawns conflict among nations. This view suggests the following alternative hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3 (Unconditional Effect of Nationalism) popular nationalism is likely to increase the chance of international conflict, regardless of the probability of total victory in conflict.

6 Experimental Evidence

6.1 Experimental Design

I first test the logic of the proposed theory with a survey experiment, using this experiment as a plausibility probe. It is very difficult to tease out the effect of popular nationalism in observational
studies due to endogeneity issues. The allure of experiments is that we can hold constant a set of factors that may otherwise affect a decision to initiate conflict and create a decision-making environment in which a nationalistic public is “given” to decision makers. This allows us to disentangle the effect of popular nationalism from other possible causal factors and to test the plausibility of the theory.

Of course, experiments have their own limitations. The basic assumption underlying experiments is that the insights obtained through the experiments can travel beyond the experimental settings to explain real-world phenomena. This assumption is arguably contestable (Levitt and List 2007). Generalizability could be of particularly concern for studies that focus on foreign policy decision-making, as in many cases, participants in experiments do not necessarily share typical characteristics that elite decision makers have. Yet, recent studies that investigated whether elite decision makers differ from the mass public generally found no massive difference between elites and the public (e.g., Hafner-Burton et al. 2014; Linde and Vis 2016; Renshon, Yarhi-Milo and Kertzer 2016). I thus primarily conducted an experiment on the American public through Amazon M-turk. However, to address this concern of elite-public perception gap, I identified a group of respondents who shared elite-characteristics and implemented a sub-group analysis to explore a potential difference between those who have elite-characteristics and those who do not.

The experiment was conducted in December 2016 and January 2017. A total of 801 adults over 20 years old participated in the survey. The average age of the respondents was 32.5 years and 57 percent of them were female. The respondents had, on average, 2 years of college education.\(^\text{21}\)

I used a hypothetical scenario to experimentally manipulate information on popular nationalism and the chance of total victory. At the beginning of the scenario, the respondents were told that they will be asked their opinion on a policy option as a national security advisor to a hypothetical country, Eriador. In the scenario, Eriador’s fishing boats collided with its neighboring country Rohan’s coast guard vessels near one of the 10 islands that the two countries are disputing. The crew members of the fishing boats were detained in one of the disputed islands, and the Rohan

\(^{21}\) The basic demographic characteristics of the respondents can be found in Appendix A.
government had refused to release the crew members. The scenario continues: the Eriadorian government is seeking to resolve this crisis and a military intervention is one option. The respondents were also told that there is a chance that the military intervention could escalate into a full military clash between the two countries.\textsuperscript{22}

I chose this territorial dispute scenario, as territorial disputes are most likely cases in which nationalistic sentiments are evoked, among different foreign policy issues. Territory is “a space where people share the same culture, language, and life, so it constitutes tangible evidence that a nation exists” (Herb 1999, 13). In this sense, nationalism is fundamentally a territorial concept (Smith 1992; Thies 2001). In addition, territorial disputes are one of the most violent, frequent, and persistent type of international conflict (Huth 1996; Hensel 1999; Vasquez and Heneman 2001). It is thus worth investigating the effect of popular nationalism on conflict in the context of territorial disputes. The scenario is based on a real incident that happened between China and Japan in 2011.\textsuperscript{23}

The survey adopted a 2x2 factorial design, fully crossing the two variables of interest, namely the rise of popular nationalism (or the lack thereof) and the chance of total victory (high/low). Specifically, the respondents who were randomly assigned to the rise of popular nationalism condition (the \textit{Nationalism} Condition hereafter) read the following paragraph:

\begin{quote}
In Eriador, nationalist protests have occurred across major cities against Rohan’s unilateral decision of detention. Angry citizens took to the streets, holding banners such as “Return our islands! Rohan devils get out!” “We hate Rohan! We’ve always hated Rohan!” “What Rohan seized was not the fishing boat’s crews, but the dignity of our nation!” “Declare War! Declare War!” “Send our heroic Eriadorian Army! They will erase Rohan on the map in a week and regain all of our islands!” According to the Eriador’s news media, these have been the largest protests in the nation’s history.
\end{quote}

The respondents who were assigned to the lack of popular nationalism condition (the \textit{Control}

\textsuperscript{22} The full crisis scenario is available in Appendix B.

\textsuperscript{23} This type of incident frequently occurs between states that have a territorial dispute over islands. For instance, in 2014, a Vietnamese fishing boat sank after colliding with a Chinese vessel in disputed water in the South China Sea, causing tensions between China and Vietnam (Armstrong 2014). The hypothetical scenario thus reflects a general crisis situation that leaders can face in territorial disputes.
Condition hereafter) did not receive any further information on public reaction.

The chance of total victory in conflict was manipulated through providing information on the two countries’ military spending. Military expenditure is a basic indicator of the balance of power between countries, which decision makers would take into consideration when calculating their chance of success in conflict. Specifically, the respondents were randomly assigned to read one of the following conditions:

“Eriador’s military spending is seven times [bigger (High Condition) /smaller (Low Condition)] than that of Rohan.”

After reading the scenario, the respondents were first asked how likely it is that Eriador would retake all islands if a military intervention escalates into a military clash, with a 0-100 percent scale. This question checks whether manipulation was successful and records the respondents’ perceived chance of total victory in conflict induced by the manipulation. The respondents were then asked how likely they would recommend a military intervention in the given crisis situation with a 7-point Likert scale (extremely likely to extremely unlikely). This is a main dependent variable of this study.

6.2 Results

Table 1 reports the proportion of respondents who recommended a military intervention across the experimental conditions. To calculate the proportion, I created a dummy variable that takes the value of 1 if the respondents were extremely likely, slightly likely or likely to recommend a military intervention and 0 otherwise.

In the Low condition, confronting popular nationalism led to a small and statistically insignificant increase in the recommendation of a military intervention. In the High condition, nationalism significantly increased the chance of a military intervention: popular nationalism increased the recommendation of a military intervention by 10 percentage points, compared to the 41 percent of the recommendation in the Control condition. This difference is statistically significant at the 95
Table 1: The Average Level of Recommendation of a Military Intervention (Full Sample)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Popular Nationalism</th>
<th>The Chance of Total Victory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control Condition</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalism Condition</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(p-value) (0.734) (0.040)

The table reports the difference-in-means analysis results. P-value is reported in parenthesis. N=801.

The public may have different views on foreign policy issues from decision-making elites. One of the most pronounced differences between decision-making elites and the public is the average level of education: decision-making elites tend to hold advanced degrees (professional, master, or PhD degree). To explore whether this different level of education makes any difference in how popular nationalism affects foreign policy decision-making, I estimated the treatment effect on those respondents who hold advanced degrees in the Mturk survey. The results are reported in Table 2.

The results show that when there was little chance of total victory in conflict, none of the respondents recommended a military option even when they confronted popular nationalism. Rather, they chose to maintain the status quo. When the chance of total victory was high, however, all respondents in the Nationalism condition chose to use force. Compared to the Control condition, this was a 66 percent point increase in the recommendation of a military intervention. In short, among those who had advanced degrees, the conditional effect of popular nationalism on the initiation of conflict was even more apparent.

I further assessed the robustness of these findings in several different ways. First, instead of estimating the treatment effect by experimental conditions, I calculated the treatment effect based
Table 2: The Average Level of Recommendation of a Military Intervention (Sample with an Advanced Degree)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Popular Nationalism</th>
<th>The Chance of Total Victory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control Condition</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalism Condition</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Difference (p-value) | 0 | 66 (0.01) |

The table reports the difference-in-means analysis results. P-value is reported in parenthesis. N=21.

on the respondents’ perceived probability of total victory. Second, the respondents were asked five foreign policy knowledge questions in the survey and I conducted a sub-group analysis on those respondents who answered all five questions correctly. The results remain largely the same.24

These findings lend strong support Hypothesis 1 and refute Hypothesis 2 and 3, proving the plausibility of the theory. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the results show that the effect of popular nationalism on the initiation of international conflict can be conditional on the chance of total victory in conflict. When it is high, popular nationalism increases the likelihood of international conflict. Yet, when it is low, popular nationalism does not necessarily lead to conflict. Rather it can have a restraining effect, facilitating maintaining the status quo.

7 Japan’s Nationalization of the Disputed Islands in 2012: Comparing China’s and Taiwan’s Responses

In this section, I adopt a case study approach and provide qualitative evidence on the conditional effect of popular nationalism on the initiation of international conflict. Case studies seeking to identify the effects of causes (as opposed to the causes of effects) primarily trace “whether the individual factor of interest contributed to or added weight in favor of a specific outcome in a

24 Further information on these analyses can be found in Appendix C.
particular case” (Goertz and Mahoney 2010, 28). They do not aim to pinpoint a single cause of a particular outcome or to rule out the impact of other independent variables. In the case study that follows, I do not claim that popular nationalism is the foremost cause of a specific state behavior. I also do not deny the impact of other causal factors that produce a certain outcome. The primary focus of the case study is instead to uncover whether popular nationalism adds weight to the outcome as predicted by the theoretical framework.

Specifically, in this case study, I show that popular nationalism does not contribute to international conflict when the chance of total victory is low by comparing China’s and Taiwan’s responses to Japan’s nationalization of disputed islands in 2012. China, Taiwan, and Japan have disputed over islands called Senkaku in Japanese and Diaoyu in Chinese in the East China Sea. In September 2012, the Japanese government announced that it had nationalized some of the disputed islands (Ashai shimbun 2012). As it will be described below, this decision triggered a high wave of popular nationalism in China, whereas it did not activate strong nationalistic sentiments in Taiwan. The comparison between China and Taiwan thus provides a rare opportunity to observe the effect of popular nationalism on state behavior while holding several factors that affect a country’s decision to take military action in territorial disputes, including the strategic value of disputed territory and a defender’s (in this case, Japan’s) territorial behavior.25

The comparison also helps us test the restraining effect of popular nationalism, as the theoretical framework proposed in this paper offers a unique prediction in this case. According to the conventional views on nationalism and conflict, we should be able to observe that popular nationalism pushes China towards a more hostile direction, compared to Taiwan.26 Yet, the theoretical framework proposed in this paper suggests whether popular nationalism contributes to international conflict or not depends on a country’s chance of total victory in conflict. As it will be discussed

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25 In addition, since both China and Taiwan’s territorial claims are based on the same historical titles, by making this cross-country comparison, we can control for the strength of the territorial claims and the prospect for legal settlements.

26 Some other factors that affect the initiation of international conflict also yield the same prediction, including military power and the alliance relationship. For instance, China is a great power in the region, whereas Taiwan is a middle power with a relatively modest military capability. In addition, Taiwan and Japan have a common alliance tie with the United States. If we take these two factors into consideration, it should be China that takes a more hawkish approach in the crisis.
below, the likelihood of total victory in the East China Sea is not high for China (as well as for Taiwan). Thus, if the theoretical framework is correct, we should see that popular nationalism contributes to moving China towards taking a more non-escalatory approach, compared to Taiwan. As it will be illustrated below, consistent with this prediction, roaring popular nationalism in China did not lead to hawkish behavior. Rather, China’s response was much more restrained than that of Taiwan.

7.1 China’s Responses

Immediately upon Japan’s announcement of the nationalization, Chinese social media and online forums were swamped with strong nationalistic sentiments. Many Chinese netizens advocated military actions and some even favored an outright war with Japan. One Weibo posting puts it, “China should seize back the islands by going to war” (Feng and Yuan 2014, 126). Another posting in an online forum stated, “I hope that the Chinese government sends troops to little Japan... Our heroic People’s Liberation Army can make little Japan disappear from the world within three months” (Strong Nation Forum 2012). Intense nationalistic sentiments burst into action as well. On September 13, Chinese citizens gathered at the Japanese embassy in Beijing, shouting slogans such as “Get the hell out of the Diaoyu islands! Boycott Japanese goods! Declare war on Japan!” (Blanchard and Shao 2012). By the end of September, more than 300 anti-Japanese demonstrations took place across the country (Wallace and Weiss 2015).²⁷

This intense popular nationalism did not lead the Chinese government to take a hawkish approach, however. Since the end of the Cold War, China has been growing in its economic and military power. Despite its rapid growth, however, securing total victory over the Diaoyu/Senaku Islands is still beyond its reach. China’s catching up notwithstanding, Japan has maintained robust

²⁷It is important to note that this mobilization emerged spontaneously. Bao Diao (Protecting Diao) activists, who often play a crucial role in organizing public events regarding this territorial dispute, confirmed that there was no “government manufacturing” of nationalistic sentiments and protests at that time. One activist said, “it is true that the Chinese government sometimes allows public demonstrations and other times not, so we prefer going to Hong Kong to take more active action, but the protests in 2012 were not manipulated by the government at all. Chinese people were genuinely angry about the nationalization” (Interview, Beijing, December 2014). This suggests that the sudden surge of popular nationalism was due neither to the Chinese government’s intentional manipulation of nationalistic sentiments nor to its intention to gain advantages in international bargaining.
naval presence in the East China Sea (Yoshihara 2015; Beckley 2017). More importantly, many analysts and scholars predict that if the U.S. were to intervene in support of Japan in a militarized conflict in the East China Sea, based on the U.S-Japan alliance treaty, China’s winning a decisive victory in air and naval warfare remains a vague and distant possibility at best (Heginbotham 2015; Biddle and Oelrich 2016). This view is shared by Chinese elites and the Chinese military. In a book published by the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Academy of Military Science, which is used as a core text for the PLA education, a PLA senior colonel acknowledged “serious deficiencies in PLA capabilities” vis-à-vis a hegemonic advanced military power [the U.S.] and called for China to develop capabilities to engage the enemy at far distances from the mainland (Wortzel 2016). Similarly, in a PLA web blog, commentators complained of the PLA Air Forces’ shortcomings in “advanced fighter jets, bombers, large aircrafts, missiles and precision guided bombs” required for air combat in and beyond the Diaoyu Islands or in the South China Sea (Wortzel 2016).

With the slim chance of total victory in conflict in the East China Sea, the Chinese government did not appease popular nationalism by taking military action that could culminate into international conflict. Its behavior during the crisis can be summarized as “speaking loudly but acting carefully”: its rhetoric was hostile, but China did not take any provocative military action.

On the day of the nationalization, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement calling Japan’s act “illegal and invalid” while declaring that “The era of the Chinese people’s humiliation has passed, not to return again. The Chinese government will not sit back as its territorial sovereignty is violated” (Xinhua News 2012). Starting with this statement, the Chinese government issued an unusual array of strong statements mentioning how Japan’s nationalization “hurts the feelings of the Chinese people (shanghai zhongguo renmin gangqing)” and criticizing the Japanese government’s decision to purchase the islands (Xinhua News 2012).

Instead of considering military options, however, the Chinese government mainly exerted pressure on Japan on the diplomatic front and took legal measures to strengthen its sovereignty claim. The Chinese government immediately summoned the Japanese ambassador to China in protest. In

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28 On China’s general dispute strategies in the East China Sea, see Wiegand (2009) and Fravel (2010).
late September, it also cancelled events which would have commemorated 40 years of its diplomatic relations with Japan (Associated Press 2012a). In addition, in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, China declared the exact geographic boundary of its territory, laying a legal foundation to enforce its territorial claim (Renmin Ribao 2012a). It also routinized maritime patrols in the disputed territorial waters. On September 11, China sent two maritime surveillance vessels to the territorial waters (Hille 2012). On September 14, six Chinese surveillance ships entered the territorial waters. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed in a statement that “these law enforcement and patrol activities are aimed to demonstrate China’s jurisdiction over the Diaoyu Islands and its affiliated islets and ensure the country’s maritime interests” (Associated Press 2012b). Notably, these measures were far from show of force or aggressive military incursions.

While pressuring Japan on the diplomatic front the Chinese government attempted to reduce its costs of not taking military action via various channels. An editorial in the Global Times, which is owned by the People’s Daily, a mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, tried to placate popular nationalism by emphasizing the possibility of future military action when the country becomes more powerful.

“China is accumulating strength with its fast development. It can fully show this strength to Japan in a future conflict to reverse Japan’s attitude toward China. Until that time, it is possible to restart friendly ties between China and Japan. It may take 30 years if it goes smoothly. In a word, most young and middle-aged people will be able to see Japan treat China differently” (Global Times 2012).

On September 18, the People’s Daily called for “patriotism with reason” and justified the government’ not taking military action by listing countermeasures that it took in response to Japan’s nationalization, including its statements, the declaration of the baseline, and sending surveillance ships. The editorial in the People’s Daily claimed that:

“The series of measures not only indicate the mature rationality of a great power, but also demonstrate the [government’s] absolute and strong determination to defend its
These measures greatly damage Japan’s intention of consolidating its occupation of the Diaoyu Islands, and have won the respect and recognition of international society” (Renmin Ribao 2012b).

In addition, the Chinese government started to reduce the coverage of the issue in the state media, such as China Central TV (CCTV), Xinhua News agency, and the People’s Daily. On September 10, 80 news items in the major Chinese television news media outlets covered the dispute, but this number plummeted to 20 by September 18 (Tang 2013, 11). The Chinese government also started to censor online comments and photographs of the protests as well as arrest protesters who attached Japanese cars and shops (Huang 2012).

To summarize, despite intense nationalistic sentiments among the public, none of the Chinese government’s actions was close to military aggression. While its public statements were harsh, its response to the crisis was mostly diplomatic and non-escalatory. It dispatched surveillance vessels, but this measure was not a serious display of force. This sharply contrasts with Taiwan’s behavior during the crisis, which will be described below.

7.2 Taiwan’s Responses

While the Chinese public overflowed with hostile nationalistic sentiments against Japan in the face of Japan’s nationalization of the islands, such strong nationalistic feelings never emerged among the Taiwanese public. In an editorial titled “why there is no anti-Japanese frenzy in Taiwan,” Apple Daily, which has the largest circulation of print newspapers in Taiwan, aptly summarized Taiwanese people’s attitudes toward the issue: very “calm (danding)” and “indifferent (lengmo)” (Apple Daily 2012).

These calm and indifferent attitudes were readily expressed in opinion polls. Even after Japan’s nationalization of the islands, Taiwanese people’s favorable feelings toward Japan did not sharply deteriorate. In an opinion poll conducted by TVBS on September 27, 65 percent of the respondents expressed their favorable impression toward Japanese people, and this was the highest among the impressions toward American, South Korean, and Chinese people (TVBS 2012). The Taiwanese public’s weak nationalistic sentiments also translated into the lack of massive nationalist mobi-
lization. On September 23, demonstrations in front of the Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association in Taipei attracted only hundreds of people (Associated Press 2012a).²⁹

Without being constrained by popular nationalism at home, the Taiwanese government had more freedom of action and greater strategic flexibility in responding to the crisis. Its behavior during the crisis can be summarized as “speaking carefully but acting decisively”: the Taiwanese government did not initiate a militarized conflict either, but it was much more assertive in dealing with the crisis, actively employing non-conflict level show-of-force options in addition to its diplomatic measures.

After Japan announced its decision to nationalize the islands, the Taiwanese government issued a series of statements of protest (Taipei Times 2012). In a statement issued on September 10, the Taiwanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs disapproved of Japan’s decision, stating that the purchase “has violated the territorial sovereignty of the Republic of China and is therefore illegal” and the decision “not only harms the longtime cooperation between Taiwan and Japan but will also aggravate regional tensions in East Asia” (The Taiwanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2012). The Taiwanese government also summoned its representative to Tokyo (Taipei Times 2012).

Taiwanese military spokesman Luo Shou-he announced on September 14 that “various contingency plans [are] in place” and the military "fully grasp" the situation in the disputed waters (Tzeng and Wu 2012). He added “the Navy is maintaining regular patrols in the area” (Tzeng and Wu 2012). On September 19, President Ma Yingjeou visited military units and was briefed on the recent development of the issue. Ma told to the press, “We have a full grasp of the situation... the Air Force, the Navy and the Coast Guard Administration are keeping a close eye on the waters around the Diaoyutais and other nearby islets in the region” (Hou 2012a). On the same day, the Air Force sent F-16 reconnaissance aircrafts to the disputed waters to monitor Japanese and Chinese patrols; a number of F-16s also conducted “live-fire drills” near the Penghu islands (Hou 2012b). The Coast Guard Agency sent several coast guard patrol ships near the disputed waters

²⁹ The number of the participants was in fact very small, compared to other demonstrations that took place in Taiwan. For instance, in 2014, more than 100,000 Taiwanese citizens took to the street to protest a trade deal with China (Lee and Culpan 2014). It is thus hard to say that this issue kindled widespread nationalistic sentiments among the public.
as well (Associated Press 2012b). On September 24, Taiwanese Defense Minister Kao Hua-chu declared that Taiwan will “temporarily suspend military exchanges” with Japan (Chen and Chen 2012).

On September 25, about 75 fishing boats headed to the islands to protest Japan’s nationalization. When the boats approached the islands, a small skirmish broke out between the Taiwanese Coast Guard and the Japanese Coast Guard vessels. About 10 Japanese Coast Guard vessels fired water cannons at the Taiwanese fishing boats to disperse them; the Taiwanese Coast Guard ships, which escorted the fishing boats, retaliated by firing water cannons back (Ryall 2012). Japanese Coast Guard Official Hideaki Takase said that Japanese patrol boats only fired at fishing vessels, as “shooting water cannon at an official vessel is like waging a war against its country” (Associated Press 2012c). After this “water cannon dual,” the Taiwanese Coast Guard Agency Director Wang Jinwang stated that if Japan were to arrest any Taiwanese fisherman, Taiwan would not rule out the possibility of “opening fire” (Fauna 2012; Si and Zhao 2012). After the incident was reported in mainland China, Chinese Internet users praised Taiwan’s bold move, complaining about their government’s timid attitudes. One user posted, “Haven’t the 1,000 Chinese boats arrived [at the islands] yet after so many days?” (Chiu, Cheng and Lin 2012). On the next day, the Taiwanese Ministry of National Defense announced that the Navy dispatched “one Cheng Kung and two Chi Yang class frigates in waters off the coast of northeastern Taiwan in support of the Taiwanese fishing boats” (Shen and Wu 2012).

The Taiwanese government’s responses demonstrate how moderate and restrained the Chinese government was in dealing with the crisis. In the absence of strong nationalistic sentiments among its citizens, the Taiwanese government took a more assertive approach that could increase the chance of a military clash.

In summary, the comparison between China and Taiwan in responding to Japan’s nationalization decision offers evidence in favor of the theory proposed in the paper: popular nationalism did not lead China to take a more aggressive approach in the crisis, compared to Taiwan. China’s intense popular nationalism instead co-varied with its restrained behavior.
8 Conclusion

What is the effect of popular nationalism on the initiation of international conflict? Contrary to the conventional wisdom that nationalism triggers interstate violence, building upon the microfoundation of nationalistic sentiments and foreign policy preferences, I claim that whether popular nationalism increases the likelihood of international conflict or not hinges on a country’s chance of total victory in conflict. A nationalistic public displays a strong aversion to compromise and prefers complete success in foreign policy, which increases the costs of failed conflict and a chance to pay such costs. As such, if total victory in conflict is a distant possibility, leaders are unlikely to initiate military ventures in front of a nationalistic public, and popular nationalism is more likely to open the door for the status quo. A survey experiment and a case study on China’s and Taiwan’s responses to a territorial crisis show that the effect of popular nationalism is indeed conditional on the chance of total victory.

The theory and findings in this paper have several important implications for the study of conflict. First, while previous studies on domestic politics and conflict tend to characterize domestic audiences as either hawks or doves, this paper suggests that there is another type of domestic audiences: a nationalistic public. With two distinct foreign policy preferences, the nationalistic public can shape a state’s foreign policy behavior in a unique way.

Second, the monadic theoretical framework discussed in the paper has some implications for the bargaining theory. A nationalistic public’s preference for complete success generates an ex-ante expectation of bargaining failure, as it drastically shrinks the bargaining range of acceptable agreements. As such, unless leaders are very confident that they can achieve total victory in conflict ensued by bargaining failure, they are unlikely to enter into bargaining in the first place. In other words, the theory proposed here offers an explanation for why states may want to avoid bargaining in the first place when leaders have a nationalistic public at home. It also suggests that, contrary to the conventional wisdom, when both states have a nationalistic public at home, there could be a greater chance of the continuation of the status quo and peace.
Third, the theoretical framework offers one obvious answer to the question of under what conditions leaders would be more likely to stoke nationalistic sentiments for the sake of conflict: they are more likely to do so when they anticipate total victory in conflict. Once nationalistic sentiments are intentionally stirred, leaders have to face the consequences, such as paying high domestic political costs of failed conflict. Knowing this ex-ante, leaders may attempt to imbue nationalistic sentiments and manufacture popular nationalism only when they believe that they can win a conflict that they are going to launch with a decisive victory. Future studies can endogenize leaders’ manipulation of nationalism and empirically test this proposition.

This paper has more than academic implications. The theory and findings in this paper offer important insights regarding rising China and the direction of U.S. foreign policy in Asia. They suggest that as long as Chinese leaders believe that they cannot achieve total victory in conflict, popular nationalism in China is unlikely to descend into a militarized conflict. This is particularly so, as the Chinese government can easily reduce its costs of inaction through its media censorship and hard repression. To prevent popular nationalism in China from creating a momentum for military aggression, the United States should send a clear signal to China that total victory is unattainable if conflict arises over Taiwan or in the East and South China Seas. In addition, the theory and findings in this paper suggest that popular nationalism can be most dangerous if it becomes intense or suddenly on the rise in the United States. With the country’s military supremacy, American leaders are much more likely to be optimistic about their chance of total victory in conflict, which is likely to embolden them in front of a nationalistic public.

There are several directions for future research. First, the theoretical framework is based on the assumption that leaders are rational actors calculating the benefits and costs of a militarized conflict. That is, even if leaders themselves have strong nationalistic feelings, they would ultimately make their foreign policy decisions based on their prospect for political survival than their personal emotions. Of course, this does not mean that leaders’ personal characteristics and beliefs are unimportant in their foreign policy decisions. Rather, I emphasize that retaining political power is of leaders’ primary interest, and leaders do weigh the benefits and costs of the use of
force to remain in office even when they themselves are nationalistic. Future studies could release this assumption and explore how leaders’ different nationalistic orientations may interact with a nationalistic public and affect their foreign policy decisions. Second, the theory briefly mentioned that leaders can reduce their costs of not taking military action via various means. Future studies could systematically address how leaders can manage popular nationalism when they decide not to appease it with the use of force. In addition, although it is generally true that the costs of inaction are smaller than the costs of failed conflict, it is plausible that in some cases, these two costs can converge to the extent that there is no difference between the two. In those cases, leaders may choose to initiate conflict in front of a nationalistic public even when the chance of total victory is not high. Future studies could further explore this possibility of gambling for resurrection.
References


Fang, Songying and Xiaojun Li. 2016. “Historical Ownership and Territorial Indivisibility.”


### Appendix

#### A Descriptive Statistics

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics–Amazon Mturk

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
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</table>
The Crisis Scenario

The two countries of Eriador and Rohan have been disputing over 10 uninhabited islands. While Rohan is currently exercising control over these islands, Eriador has historical records showing their fishermen had discovered those islands decades earlier. Recently, fishing boats of the two countries collided near one of the disputed islands, and Rohan’s Coast Guard arrested Eriadorian crew members and detained them on the disputed island. The Rohan government rejected the initial request made by the Eriadorian government to release the crew members.

[Either Nationalism or Control Condition inserted]

To provide full protection to its detained citizens, Eriador is considering all options, including a military intervention. Best estimates suggest that there is a chance that this military intervention would escalate into a military clash between the two countries.[Either Low/High Condition Added]
C  Robustness Checks
C.1  The Effect of Nationalism on Conflict by the Perceived Probability of Total Victory

Figure 1 displays the distribution of the respondents’ perceived probability of total victory in the High and Low conditions. The average perceived probability of total victory was 24.8 percent in the Low condition and was 72.6 percent in the High condition. The difference in the perceived probability between the two conditions was statistically significant at the 99 percent level (p<0.000). A non-parametric Mann-Whitney test also yielded the same result (z=-21.17, p<0.00).

Figure 1: The Perceived Probability of Total Victory in the Low and High Conditions in the Mturk Survey

The yellow line indicates the distribution of the perceived probability of total victory among the respondents in the Low condition, and the dotted blue line indicates that of the High condition.

Figure 2 presents the average level of recommendation of a military intervention across the respondents’ perceived probability of total victory. When the respondents believed that their chance of total victory was less than 60 percent, the respondents in the Nationalism condition generally recommended a military intervention less than the respondents in the Control condition.
Figure 2: The Average Level of Recommendation of a Military Intervention by the Perceived Probability of Total Victory in the Mturk Survey
When the respondents believed that they had 60 percent or higher chance of total victory, the respondents in the Nationalism condition recommended a military intervention more than the respondents in the Control condition, except at the probability of 70 percent. At the probability of 70 percent, a similar proportion of the respondents recommended a military intervention in the two conditions. A non-parametric Kolmogorov–Smirnov test confirms that the two distributions in the Nationalism and Control conditions are different from one another (p<0.000).

Using the probability of 60 percent as a baseline, I formally tested whether popular nationalism had a statistically significant effect, depending on the probability of total victory. Table 2 presents the difference-in-means analysis results.

Table 2: The Average Level of Recommendation of Military Intervention in the Mturk Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Popular Nationalism</th>
<th>Probability of Total Victory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&lt;60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Control Condition</strong></td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nationalism Condition</strong></td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>-3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(p-value)</td>
<td>(0.175)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table reports the difference-in-means analysis results. P-value is reported in parenthesis. N=801.

When the respondents believed that their probability of total victory was less than 60 percent, about 7 percent of the respondents in the Nationalism condition recommended a military intervention. Compared to the respondents in the Control condition, this was a statistically insignificant 3.8 percentage point decrease in the recommendation of a military intervention. When the respondents believed that they had a more than 60 percent chance to secure complete victory, popular nationalism increased the recommendation of a military action by 15 percentage points. This effect was statistically significant at the 95 percent level. Consistent with the previous findings, these results show that popular nationalism increases the likelihood of conflict only when the probability of total
victory is high.

C.2 A Sub-group Analysis On Those Who Answered All Foreign Policy Knowledge Questions Correctly

In the Mturk survey, the respondents were asked five foreign-policy-related questions to measure their foreign policy knowledge. I estimated the treatment effect on those respondents who answered all five foreign-policy knowledge questions correctly. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: The Average Level of Recommendation of a Military Intervention Among the Respondents who Answered All Foreign Policy Knowledge Questions Correctly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Popular Nationalism</th>
<th>Probability of Total Victory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control Condition</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalism Condition</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference (p-value)</td>
<td>-21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table reports the difference-in-means analysis results. P-value is reported in parenthesis. N=35.

Again, the results were very similar to the one reported in the Result section. In the Low condition, none of the respondents in the Nationalism condition recommended a military intervention. This was a 21-percentage-point decrease in the recommendation of a military option, compared to the Control condition. In the High condition, the respondents in the Nationalism recommended a military intervention more than the respondents in the Control condition by 23 percentage points, though this difference lacks statistical significance due to the small sample size.

1 These questions are reported on the next page.
C.2.1 Foreign Policy Knowledge Questions

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. Many people have trouble with these kinds of questions, so you shouldn’t worry if you do not know all, or many, of the answers.

- Q1. Who is the current Secretary of State?
  - 1) Hillary Clinton 2) Ashton Carter 3) John Kerry 4) Ed Royce 5) Don’t know

- Q2. What does the U.S. spend on Defense every year?
  - 1) $4 trillion 2) $2 trillion 3) $800 billion 4) $600 billion 5) Don’t know

- Q3. Who is the current Chinese Prime Minister?
  - 1) Li Keqiang 2) Xi Jinping 3) Ma Yingjeou 4) Hu Jintao 5) Don’t know

- Q4. When did the Syrian Civil War Start?
  - 1) 2011 2) 2012 3) 2013 4) 2014 5) Don’t know

- Q5. In June 2016, one of the European Union member countries decided to leave the European Union. Which country is this?
  - 1) United Kingdom 2) Germany 3) France 4) Greece 5) Don’t know

*The order of choice items was randomized in each question
Table 4: The Percentage of the Respondents Who Answered Each Foreign Policy Knowledge Question Correctly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q1</th>
<th>Q2</th>
<th>Q3</th>
<th>Q4</th>
<th>Q5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>64.2%</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
<td>36.5%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3: The Distribution of the Respondents by the Number of Correctly Answered Foreign Policy Knowledge Questions