

# Historical Ownership and Territorial Disputes \*

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## Abstract

Some of the most enduring and dangerous territorial disputes often involve claims of historical ownership by at least one side of a dispute. Why does historical ownership lead to more hardened bargaining stances than in other territorial disputes? Do such uncompromising positions lead to more military conflict? We investigate these questions in this study. After developing a theoretical argument for how historical ownership may lead to a perception of territorial indivisibility, we test the hypotheses derived from the theory with a survey experiment implemented in China. We find that a historical ownership treatment increases the number of respondents who view the indivisible outcome of a hypothetical dispute as the only acceptable outcome. Furthermore, those who perceive a territory to be indivisible are more likely to favor economic sanctions and military solutions to the dispute, and much less likely to support bilateral negotiation or arbitration by an international organization.

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Territorial disputes can last decades, potentially a century or more. Some of these disputes do not end even after a decisive war; the losing side in a military defeat may simply refuse to relinquish its claim. Nor are states always willing to accept side payments to settle such disputes, despite significant costs associated with continued tension and the threat of war. Taiwan, Jerusalem, and the Falkland Islands are just a few such territorial disputes that have defied a bargaining solution. Notably, in each of these disputes at least one side has claimed historical ownership and has consistently made an all-or-nothing demand regarding the sovereignty of the disputed territory.

The phenomenon raises some obvious questions: Does historical ownership lead to a more hardline stance toward a territorial dispute? If it does, why? Furthermore, do uncompromising stances resulting from historical ownership lead to more military conflict? Despite the high frequency with which states justify their territorial claims by historical arguments, and the longevity of such disputes, only a few studies have sought to address the motivations for and consequences of such claims (Abramson and Carter 2016; Carter and Goemans 2011; Carter 2017; Huth 1996; Murphy 1990).<sup>1</sup> Much remains to be explored. This study seeks to advance our understanding of the questions by investigating the effect of historical territorial claims on the beliefs and policy preferences of a domestic public, which are central to the dynamics of territorial disputes.

Territorial claims do not arise arbitrarily, nor do their justifications. To make sense of the domestic processes engendered by claims of historical ownership, it is important to ask why leaders invoke such justifications in the first place. In their study of the origin of territorial disputes, Abramson and Carter (2016) demonstrate that historical precedents provide both opportunity and incentives for leaders to make territorial claims. In particular, a territorial claim based on historical precedents is often viewed by other states as more legitimate than a claim based on arguments about ethnic ties or resources, and signals the limit of the state's territorial designs (Abramson and Carter 2016, 675-678). Historical ownership, which

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<sup>1</sup>Murphy (1990) finds that in the post-WWII era, especially with the emergence of international legal principles that prohibit the forceful seizures of other states' territories, historical arguments have become the most frequently invoked justification in territorial claims, even if they often hides other motives.

is based on priority or duration, narrows the set of historical precedents that should matter to a claim, strengthening the appearance of legitimacy and limit.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, rooted in the Western concept of property rights (Murphy 1990), the argument of historical ownership often carries with it grievances toward those who took away a territory from its rightful owner. Such grievances can mobilize domestic support and gain international legitimacy. Thus historical ownership makes a particularly attractive justification for a territorial claim.<sup>3</sup> Making a territorial claim, however, is only the beginning of a long process that involves bargaining in the shadow of war. It is yet to be understood how a claim of historical ownership may reverberate domestically, thereby influencing leaders' bargaining space and the support that they can rally in the event of bargaining failure. While foreign policy decisions are made by leaders, there is abundant empirical evidence—from politically and culturally diverse countries—that once sensitive foreign policy issues, especially territorial disputes, are played out in the public arena, leaders can come under tremendous pressure to meet public expectations.<sup>4</sup> Observations of prominent territorial disputes, such as those mentioned earlier, suggest that a claim of historical ownership may shrink the set of acceptable outcomes, even eliminating compromise altogether. It may also lead to more military conflict. Huth (1996, 60-61, 98), for example, finds that there is a positive relationship between a state's historical loss of territory prior to 1950 and the probability of the state initiating a dispute to recover the territory after 1950. Building on these observations and evidence, our study explores a domestic mechanism through which historical territorial claims may change the beliefs and

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<sup>2</sup>Priority means being the first to discover a territory, and duration means some form of presence in a territory over a long period of time (Burghardt 1973, 230-231). Of course, the determination of priority and duration is not without ambiguity and arbitrariness, and states have often made conflicting claims of historical ownership. For the purpose of this study, we do not need a historical claim be accepted by all disputants; a public accepting its own country's claim is sufficient.

<sup>3</sup>In his recent meeting with U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis, for example, Chinese President Xi Jinping remarked: "Our stance is steadfast and clear-cut when it comes to China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. . . . We cannot lose one inch of territory passed down by our ancestors. Meanwhile, we want nothing from others" (Bloomberg News 2018).

<sup>4</sup>For examples from India, Israel, China, and South Korea, see Justwan and Fisher 2017; Manekin, Grossman, and Mitts, forthcoming; Quek and Johnston 2017; Wiegand and Choi 2017.

policy preferences of the relevant public.

Theoretically, we posit that a claim of historical ownership may lead members of a public to develop a belief in the indivisibility of a disputed territory, which draws them into accepting only the outcome in which their country has total control of the territory and its resources. Given their preference for an extreme outcome, we further posit that individuals with a belief in territorial indivisibility are more likely to support coercive policy options, such as economic sanctions and military actions. Three hypotheses are derived from our theory and tested with an experiment embedded in a public opinion survey conducted in China. China provides an excellent testing ground for the hypotheses, as all of its present territorial disputes are based on historical ownership claims (Dupuy and Dupuy 2013; Upton 1972). Moreover, while China is an authoritarian regime, because of the centrality of the nationalistic agenda for regime legitimacy, the government often finds it difficult to compromise on sensitive foreign policy issues (Christensen 2015; Quek and Johnston 2017; Reilly 2012; Weiss 2014, Yang and Zhao 2015). Territorial disputes are just such issues, known to trigger strong nationalistic reactions from the public (Huth 1996; Roy 1997; Shelef 2016; Tir 2010; Vasquez 1993, 2009; Wiegand 2015).

The findings of the study are broadly consistent with our theoretical expectations. First, historical ownership plays a significant role in the respondents' perceptions of territorial indivisibility compared with the alternative scenario of no such ownership. Moreover, no other contextual variables that we examined have a similar effect, including the opponent's military strength, the economic value of the territory, and whether the disputed territory is an island or a piece of a land mass. Second, those who perceive a territory to be indivisible are more likely to favor economic sanctions and military solutions to the dispute and much less likely to support bilateral negotiation or arbitration by an international organization (IO).

Our research contributes to an emerging literature that draws attention to a highly unique but understudied phenomenon: the vast majority of territorial claims involve historical arguments. In offering a micro-foundation for a domestic public's reactions following a historical territorial claim, our study complements the existing studies focusing on the role of leaders

in claim making. In particular, we show that a claim of historical ownership can change the beliefs and policy preferences of a domestic public, which can influence the bargaining space available to leaders, and their policy options after a bargaining failure. Our study also has important policy implications. While it is clear that leaders are strategic in their claim making, they may not be able to fully anticipate the domestic and international consequences of their claims. The findings of this study can help decision makers better understand the dynamic processes that a historical territorial claim may engender domestically and how their bargaining positions and policy options may be affected as a result.

## Historical Ownership, Identity, and Territorial Indivisibility

A dispute over a territory historically owned by a nation suggests that the nation lost the control of the territory at some point in its history. Further, the fact that the nation tries to recover the territory suggests that the land is seen as wrongly taken away from its rightful owner. We argue that these two factors combined may generate stronger emotional reactions to a disputed territory than those generated by other types of claims. In extreme situations, such emotions can lead some individuals to believe in territorial indivisibility and to adopt an “all-or-nothing” stance toward the resolution of the dispute. Below we explain in more detail the logic of the argument.

It seems paradoxical at first that individuals should care about a foreign policy issue that may not impact their personal interests one way or the other. But they do, all the time. One of the central concepts in world politics, nationalism captures the very phenomenon of individuals identifying with their nation and its interests in international affairs.<sup>5</sup> This is because various social categories to which a person belongs, such as occupation, political party or nationality, constitute a part of the individual’s identity, which in turn forms the basis of the individual’s dignity and self-respect.<sup>6</sup> People may be more or less attached to

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<sup>5</sup>Nationalism is “[i]dentification with one’s own nation and support for its interests, especially to the exclusion or detriment of the interests of other nations”; see <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/nationalism>.

<sup>6</sup>For a comprehensive review of the vast literature on identity and an in-depth analysis of the concept, see Fearon (1999).

their national identity, depending on the importance they place on being a member of the nation relative to their membership in other social categories. In particular, if the individual's occupation and social rank are not significant sources of self-esteem due to the prevailing valuation of such social categories, then the individual may value the national category more in her self-identification (Fearon 1999, 24). Consequently, a significant threat to a national identity may produce emotional reactions from individuals because a part of what makes them proud as individuals is undermined.

Threats to national identity can come from many sources. The experience of losing a territory perceived to be historically owned by a nation—likely through an event or a process that the nation and its people view as unjust and humiliating—can impact a nation's identity in a particularly powerful way. While the full content of national identity, defined as “a sense of a nation as a cohesive whole,”<sup>7</sup> may vary across countries, a nation's unique history and its territorial boundaries are important components of any nation's identity (Goertz and Diehl 1992, 12-19; Herb and Kaplan 1999; Newman 1999). Thus, when a territorial claim connects a nation's painful historical memories with its (real or imagined) territorial boundaries, the claim has the potential to redefine the nation's identity for its people.<sup>8</sup> This in turn may lead individuals to react with different emotional intensity to events that threaten their nation's reclamation of a lost territory.

In the extreme, a claim of historical ownership of a disputed territory may generate in some individuals a belief in the indivisibility of the territory. Brams and Taylor (1996, 51) define indivisible goods as those “whose value is destroyed if they are divided.” Along a similar line, Kydd (2015, 72) suggests that indivisible issues may be better thought of as a situation wherein actors “significantly undervalue intermediate outcomes” in a bargaining framework. Territories are typically physically divisible, and so territorial indivisibility is necessarily socially constructed and exists in actors' beliefs (Goddard 2006, 2009; Toft 2006). International relations scholars have argued that territories with intangible value are more

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<sup>7</sup>National identity is “a sense of a nation as a cohesive whole, as represented by distinctive traditions, culture, and language”; see [https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/national\\_identity](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/national_identity).

<sup>8</sup>For a case study of the South Korean public's reaction to Japan's claim on the Dokdo/Takeshima islets, see Wiegand and Choi (2017).

likely to be viewed as indivisible (Gibler, Hutchinson, and Miller 2012; Hassner 2003; Hensel and Mitchell 2005). Why may historical ownership generate a belief that dividing a disputed territory would mean significantly reducing (if not destroying) its value? We argue that because a nation and its people are likely to view the process of losing a disputed territory as unjust, even humiliating, some individuals feel the territory must be fully recovered to undo the injustice; any compromise would mean that justice was not fully restored because the lost territory was not fully returned to its rightful owner. Thus, the historical experience of losing a territory plays a central role in generating a sense of territorial indivisibility.

In summary, the effect of a territorial claim on a domestic public is likely to be conditional on the significance of the territory in their national identity. Historical ownership of a disputed territory, along with how the territory was lost, may be particularly salient in this regard. Thus, individuals may react with nationalistic emotions when their nation's reclaiming of the territory is threatened; in the extreme, such emotions may lead to a belief in territorial indivisibility because fully recovering the territory is linked with redressing an injustice. The logic of the argument also suggests that the relative importance of national identity matters to the development of such a belief: those who more strongly identify with their national identity and interests are more likely to develop a belief in territorial indivisibility, whereas those who do not define their identities in a similar way may find alternative arrangements for the territory acceptable.

The theoretical argument leads to three observable implications that can be tested using a survey experiment. First, historical ownership of a disputed territory may be an important source of a belief in territorial indivisibility, revealed in a preference for the most uncompromising outcome for the dispute.

**H1: Historical Ownership and Indivisibility.** *Individuals are more likely to prefer the most uncompromising outcome in a territorial dispute if the territory is deemed to be historically owned by their country.*

Second, the development of a belief in territorial indivisibility may be conditional on an individual's attachment to her nation's identity, or her degree of nationalism. The stronger the attachment, the more value an individual may place on possessing the entirety of the

territory. This leads to our second hypothesis:

**H2: The Conditional Effect of Nationalism on Indivisibility.** *More nationalistic individuals are more likely to prefer the most uncompromising outcome in a territorial dispute if the territory is deemed to be historically owned by their country.*

Our third hypothesis tests the link between a belief in territorial indivisibility and ensuing conflict. In an influential study, Fearon (1995) identifies issue indivisibility as a cause of conflict; however, he also argues that side payments or some sort of allocation mechanism can help create a bargaining range for such issues, so issue indivisibility is not a particularly compelling explanation for war. In general, despite various states' frequent claims of issue indivisibility, international relations scholars—particularly those working in the rationalist tradition—have expressed a healthy dose of skepticism toward both such claims and their causal effect on conflict (Henripin 2016; Powell 2006; Wiegand 2011). A lingering sense of the importance of indivisibility in explaining territorial disputes has led to a small literature that delves into the nature and logic of territorial indivisibility (Goddard 2006, 2009; Hassner 2003; Toft 2006) and the relationship between conflict and territories with greater intangible salience (Gibler, Hutchinson, and Miller 2012; Hensel and Mitchell 2005, Zellman 2018).

This debate on indivisibility has almost exclusively focused on the potential for elite manipulation that constructs an issue as indivisible; missing in the literature is specific analysis of how the beliefs held by a public may be translated into their policy preferences. As we argued earlier, such preferences can influence the bargaining space leaders face as well as the support they receive for their policies after bargaining failure. Our survey design allows us to test whether a belief in territorial indivisibility leads to a more hostile policy preference. Note that holding a belief in territorial indivisibility does not mean that such individuals would automatically support using military actions to resolve a dispute. Individuals can weigh available policy options and decide which ones to oppose or support based on the likelihood that a policy will bring them their most preferred outcome. Thus, those who perceive a disputed territory to be indivisible may oppose policies that are very likely to bring compromise outcomes, such as bilateral negotiation and IO arbitration. On the other hand, they may view coercive measures such as economic sanctions and military actions as

opportunities for their nation to acquire the entirety of the disputed territory. Such coercive measures do entail higher risk and costs, so not all those who hold the belief may support such policies. Nevertheless, we expect that individuals who view a disputed territory to be indivisible are more likely to support aggressive policy actions than those who do not hold such a belief. This leads to our third hypothesis:

**H3: Indivisibility and Policy Preference.** *Those who perceive a territory to be indivisible are more likely to support more conflictual policy options such as military actions.*

## Experimental Design

To test the hypotheses, we designed an experiment embedded in a public opinion survey. Through random assignments of different hypothetical dispute scenarios to respondents, our survey experiment allows us to assess the effect of historical ownership on the respondents' belief in territorial indivisibility and their subsequent policy preferences. In this section, we present the experimental design. The next section presents the data and findings.

All participants received an introductory statement: "The following questions are related to potential territorial disputes that China may experience with neighboring countries. We will describe a hypothetical scenario, and then ask your preference over likely outcomes of the dispute and your opinion on the appropriate policy actions toward achieving the outcomes." Respondents then read the following hypothetical scenarios embedded with a randomized treatment that varied regarding the historical ownership of the territory. We also randomly varied three additional contextual features of the dispute, including the military strength of the potential opponent in the dispute, whether it is a land or island dispute, and whether the territory has economic value (a  $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$  factorial design):<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Our main consideration in choosing the treatments was to strike a balance between making the hypothetical scenarios plausible to Chinese respondents and maintaining some generalizability. Such a balance is necessary to elicit serious and reasoned responses that could provide insights beyond a specific existing dispute. Therefore, we did not include some treatments that would make sense in the context of other countries but not China, such as the existence of co-ethnics in a disputed territory. Such a condition does not exist in China's current territorial disputes, with the exception of Taiwan (and respondents thus could

Please consider the following hypothetical scenario carefully and then answer the questions. China is involved in a dispute with a [militarily strong/weak] neighboring country over a piece of territory. This territory is [an island/a piece of land bordering the two countries], [has economic value/the economic value is unknown], and [historically belonged to China/historically did not belong to any country].<sup>10</sup>

With this design, we are interested in whether a disputed territory being historically owned by China makes a difference in a respondent's perception of the (in)divisibility of the territory, and thus her preference for the outcome of the dispute as well as her policy choice. The other contextual variables—military strength of the neighbor and economic value of the territory—tap into competing explanations for respondents' preferences. After reading this scenario, the respondents were asked two questions in sequence. The first question aimed to test our first and second hypotheses by capturing the respondents' preferences about possible outcomes of the dispute. The second question aimed to test our third hypothesis regarding their policy choice.

In the first question, respondents were presented with four possible outcomes of the dispute. They were then asked whether they found each outcome acceptable or unacceptable, or whether they were “unsure.”<sup>11</sup> The four outcomes were:

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uniquely identify Taiwan as the hypothetical scenario if we used that treatment).

<sup>10</sup>Note that the treatment in which the disputed territory “historically belonged to China” is silent on whether the neighboring country also claims such ownership. Therefore, the treatment captures the case where both countries make the claim. We do not, however, include a fourth scenario, in which “the neighboring country historically owns the territory.” The reason is that at least rhetorically, such a scenario does not exist in the real-world disputes that China has been involved in, and in our pretest, respondents given this treatment reacted with confusion, asking, “why are we disputing a territory historically owned by another country and not by us?”

<sup>11</sup>Our design indirectly gets at respondents' beliefs about the divisibility of a disputed territory by asking their preferences regarding the outcomes of the dispute. We certainly could have directly asked whether respondents believed a disputed territory was indivisible; however, we strongly suspect that the answer would have been overwhelmingly “yes,” given the familiarity of the language in the Chinese government's

1. China and the neighboring country share both the sovereignty of and the right to use the territory.
2. China enjoys the sovereignty of the territory, but both countries share the right to use the territory.
3. China enjoys the sovereignty of and the right to use the territory but makes economic or political compensations to the neighboring country. Both countries reach an agreement on the terms of the compensation, [which will be monitored by international organizations (e.g., the UN, the International Court of Justice)/no monitoring mentioned].
4. China enjoys the sovereignty of and the right to use the territory and does not make any concessions to the neighboring country.

The first two options are “divisible” outcomes. They are alternative arrangements of joint-ownership of the territory arrived at by separating the sovereignty and the right to use and by allowing either or both to be shared. Such approaches have been proposed in actual policy on some of the territorial disputes in which China has been involved, so they are sufficiently realistic for the respondents to form their opinions about the options. The third and fourth options represent “indivisible” outcomes where neither the sovereignty nor the right to use is shared. In the third, however, there is a bargaining solution through side payments, while in the fourth, China makes no compromise at all. If historical ownership is a source of a perception of territorial indivisibility, then in general, respondents who receive the ownership treatment should be more likely to find the “indivisible” outcomes acceptable and the other outcomes less so.

It is important to note that each respondent was allowed to choose all outcomes that were acceptable to her. Compared with a design in which a respondent could choose only her most preferred outcome, our design has two advantages: it does not create bias toward official position. Such one-sided answers would not have been problematic if they were reflections of the true underlying beliefs, but it is more likely that how the questions were posed could have masked more diverse beliefs. Our indirect approach allowed the respondents to reveal their beliefs through their preferences about outcomes.

the indivisible outcomes—the more likely candidates for the most preferred outcome—and it provides us with much more information than the alternative design. In particular, our design allows us to learn the *threshold* outcome that is acceptable to a respondent, which forms the lower bound of a bargaining set. The upper bound of the set could naturally be an indivisible outcome that a respondent finds most preferable and thus will also choose as acceptable.

We added a twist to the third option, an indivisible outcome that allows for side-payments, to see whether the existence of an international enforcement mechanism for the arrangement would make a difference in the preferences of those who chose the option. Specifically, for this outcome, half of the respondents were told additionally that the agreement would be monitored by international organizations such as the UN and the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The treatment was to examine whether a credible commitment problem is at the root of bargaining failure for indivisible issues (Powell 2006).

In the second question, respondents were given six policy options with a statement saying that the Chinese government has adopted in the past, and may adopt in the future, these policies and measures to address actual territorial disputes. The respondents were then asked whether they found each option (in)appropriate for the hypothetical dispute scenario to which they were (randomly) assigned or were “unsure.” The six policy options were:

1. Strengthening externally directed propaganda, guiding domestic public opinion, and encouraging the masses to display their dissatisfaction towards the disputing countries;
2. Imposing economic sanctions against relevant countries, canceling official visits, and reducing cooperative projects;
3. Taking military actions;
4. Reaching a compromise through bilateral negotiation;
5. Submitting [the dispute] to international organizations (e.g., the UN, the ICJ) for arbitration;
6. Shelving the dispute and jointly developing the resources.

The order of these options was randomized. Those who supported IO arbitration also received a follow-up question, asking whether they thought that China should comply with

the IO ruling *regardless* of its decision. They could choose either “yes” or “it depends on whether the decision is consistent with China’s interests.” The additional question allowed us to measure the willingness to comply with an IO ruling.

This question gauged the respondents’ support for different policy positions that are realistically available to the Chinese government. Moreover, the policy positions include those cooperative ones that the government has taken in the past, and the respondents were explicitly reminded of this fact. The framing of the question therefore was a hard test for finding the effect of indivisibility, as the respondents were reminded of compromises that the government had made in the past. Within the choices, we included “shelving the dispute,” a very well-known policy toward the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute by the Chinese government. We also included the option of submitting the hypothetical dispute to an international organization, which has not been an approach adopted by the Chinese government but has been advocated by some of China’s neighbors. We expected respondents who considered the territory indivisible to be more likely to support combative policy options.

After completing the two questions, the respondents were asked whether they had envisioned the neighboring country in the hypothetical scenario to be a real country. If the answer was “yes,” we asked them to specify that country and further answer whether they thought the “real” country had allies. If the answer was “yes,” we asked them to specify the allies. We believe that these two follow-up questions can shed additional light on the considerations behind the respondents’ policy choices.

In the remainder of the survey, we asked typical demographic questions, but we also included two questions that were important for our theoretical argument. Specifically, to test our second hypothesis, we needed to have a measure for the respondents’ degree of patriotism/nationalism. Therefore, we asked respondents to what extent they agreed with each of the following statements (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, or “it’s hard to say”):

1. I am very proud to be Chinese.
2. I would rather be a Chinese citizen than a citizen of any other country.
3. China is the greatest country in the world.

4. I am proud of China's long history and culture.
5. China should first take care of its own interests, even if this means having conflict with other countries.

The answers to this question allowed us to test the second hypothesis, which links nationalism with a belief in territorial indivisibility.

## Data and Findings

Our survey was administered in May 2015 by China Online Marketing Research (COMR), an Internet marketing research firm in China.<sup>12</sup> The respondents were randomly drawn from COMR's online subject pool of over 1.6 million panelists, who take surveys in exchange for small cash payments and the opportunity to win larger prizes. A total of 10,000 solicitations were sent to the subject pool, yielding a response rate of 21.60% and thus a random sample of 2,160 Chinese adults. After reading the introduction, each respondent was given the hypothetical scenario and the subsequent questions as described above. At the end of the survey, they answered a battery of sociodemographic and attitudinal questions.<sup>13</sup>

In terms of the (self-reported) demographic characteristics, the average age of the respondents was 37.4; 97.3% were of the Han nationality; the male/female ratio was 62%/38%. Eighty-four percent self-identified as urban residents (Rural Hukou), and 70% had college degrees. About 16% had an annual income less than 30,000 yuan and 20% had incomes over 120,000 yuan. This was generally consistent with their self-identified social status: 21.02% low income, 52.22% middle income, and 26.76% high income. In addition, 42% of the respondents worked in the state sector and 22.2% were Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members.<sup>14</sup> In terms of the knowledge relevant for our study, 86% answered that they were

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<sup>12</sup>The entire survey lasted two weeks, and to the best of our knowledge, there was no major news event that could have influenced the respondents' answers in a particular way during that period.

<sup>13</sup>We designed the survey questionnaire using Qualtrics, and the company gave the link to the survey to the respondents, who were redirected back to the company's server at the end of the survey to claim their points.

<sup>14</sup>It is worth pointing out that a party affiliation does not necessarily reflect a strong political ideology of an individual in today's China; party membership is often a prerequisite for career advancements, so

very or fairly interested in China’s foreign affairs.<sup>15</sup> Overall, our sample represents a younger, richer, better informed, and politically more active portion of the Chinese population, which is representative of China’s online population (Li, Shi, and Zhu 2018). Although they do not reflect the composition of the general public, they are the more politically active and vocal groups in China, and thus are more likely to be sources of domestic pressure on the government’s foreign policy.

### ***Historical Ownership and Indivisibility***

Figure 1 presents the results from the first question in the survey, which examines estimated effect of different historical ownership scenarios on the respondents’ preferences over all possible dispute outcomes. Here we omit those people who said they were “unsure” (about 12-15% of the respondents), but the results are similar when we combine the indecisive responses with the “unacceptable” ones.<sup>16</sup> The horizontal axis is the proportion of support for an outcome, and the vertical axis lists all possible outcomes of the dispute. Note that there are five outcomes (instead of four) in the figure because as we mentioned earlier, for the outcome with side payments, half of the respondents were told that the agreement would be monitored by international organizations, while the other half were not. In each row, the hollow squares or circles are the point estimates for the proportion of respondents who found the outcome acceptable, and the bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The (two-tailed)  $p$ -values are based on two-sample  $T$ -tests.

We note two overall patterns. First, regardless of historical ownership, of the five alternatives provided, the outcome that received the highest support (over 85%) was the most uncompromising one, in which China has both the sovereignty of and the right to use the territory. The least supported outcome was China sharing both the sovereignty and the right

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individuals may join the Party for instrumental reasons.

<sup>15</sup>Mean comparisons of these variables confirm that the covariates are balanced across the treatment and control groups of the four experimental conditions (historical ownership, military strength of the neighbor, economic value, and island/land). See Appendix B for descriptive statistics of the sample and Appendix C for randomization checks/balances tests.

<sup>16</sup>See Appendix D for more details.

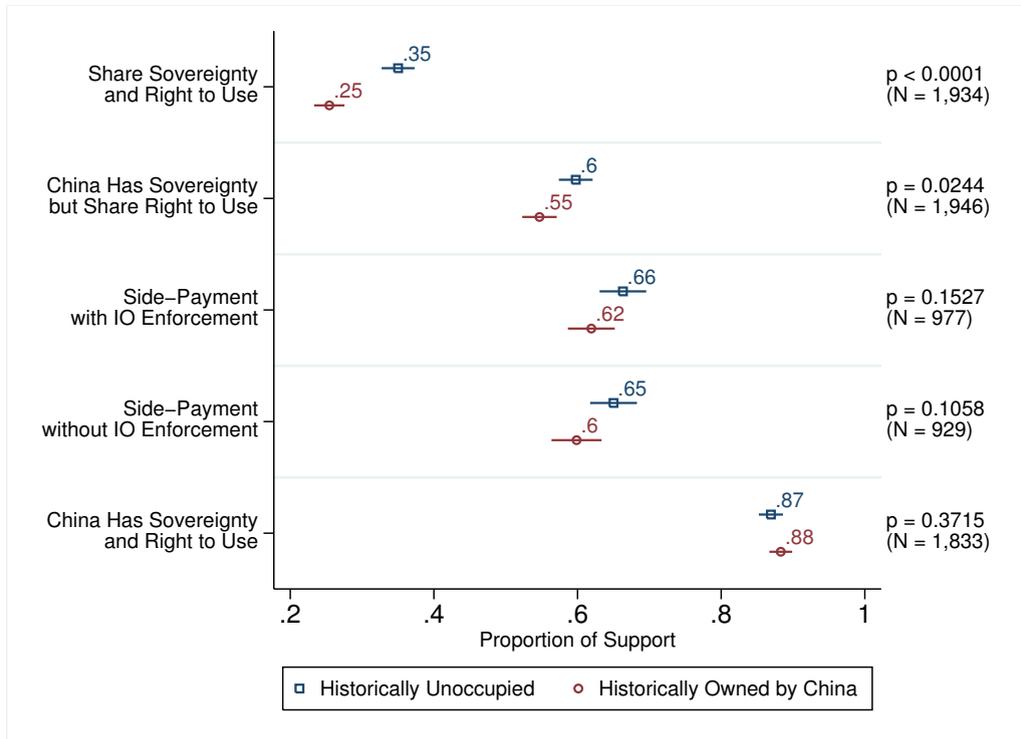


Figure 1: *Average Level of Support for Different Outcomes Varying in Historical Ownership.* This shows the proportion of respondents who supported the various potential outcomes of the dispute, with 95% confidence intervals. The column on the right reports test statistics from two-sample  $T$ -tests comparing respondents with and without the historical ownership treatment.

to use with the neighboring country. The other three alternatives, involving limited sharing or side payments, received similar levels of support (around 60%), which fall between these two extremes. The pattern is explained by the fact that most respondents chose multiple outcomes as acceptable. In particular, those who found compromise outcomes acceptable also found the indivisible outcomes acceptable because naturally they would not reject outcomes that gave China even more share. In addition, the estimates for the outcomes with and without IO enforcement of an agreement were almost identical, suggesting perhaps that a concern for credible commitment did not play an important role in respondents' assessment of different outcomes.

Second, as we hypothesized, historical ownership made a difference in the respondents' preferences regarding the outcomes. Compared with the case of China having no historical ownership, if China was said to have historical ownership, respondents found the outcome in

which China shares the right to use less acceptable, whether or not China retains sovereignty (the first two rows in Figure 1). The differences are statistically significant as reported by the  $t$  statistics from the two-sample  $T$ -tests.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, when China was said to have historical ownership of the disputed territory, respondents were also slightly less likely to find indivisible outcomes with side payments acceptable compared with China having no such ownership, and the difference is statistically significant ( $p = 0.033$ ).<sup>18</sup> In contrast, we found that none of the three contextual variables made a difference in the respondents' support for the dispute outcomes, except for one case of variable military strength.<sup>19</sup> In Figure 2, we see that respondents were more likely to choose side payments without IO enforcement when the neighboring country was militarily weak. This suggests that perhaps the Chinese public are worried that IOs may favor the weaker side in a territorial dispute, and thus the respondents were less enthusiastic about involving IOs if China is faced such an opponent.

Overall, the above findings provide first-cut support for our first hypothesis: the existence of historical ownership (but not the other contextual variables) increases respondents' beliefs in territorial indivisibility and thus reduces their acceptance of shared or compromise outcomes. However, the support is indirect as we cannot see the difference in the responses between the treatment and the control groups for the indivisible outcomes in Figure 1, be-

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<sup>17</sup>We would note that in Figure 1 as well as the subsequent figures, some of the  $t$ -statistics would point to statistically significant differences between the two group means, while visually the two confidence intervals overlap. This is due to the root of the discrepancy—i.e., the standard error of the differences of the means test is smaller than the standard error of the individual means. In other words, when the two confidence intervals of the means do not overlap, the two means are necessarily significantly different; but even if they do overlap, it is not necessarily true that they are not significantly different. See, for instance, Wolfe and Hanley (2002), who caution against the so-called “by eye” test of significance between the two group means without examining the actual  $p$ -values of the differences of the means test.

<sup>18</sup>For this comparison, we combined the cases with or without IO enforcement because there is essentially no difference between the point estimators (0.66 vs. 0.65 and 0.62 vs. 0.6) in the two scenarios—in other words, IO enforcement has no effect.

<sup>19</sup>The results for the other two contextual variables, economic value and island or land, are presented in appendix A .

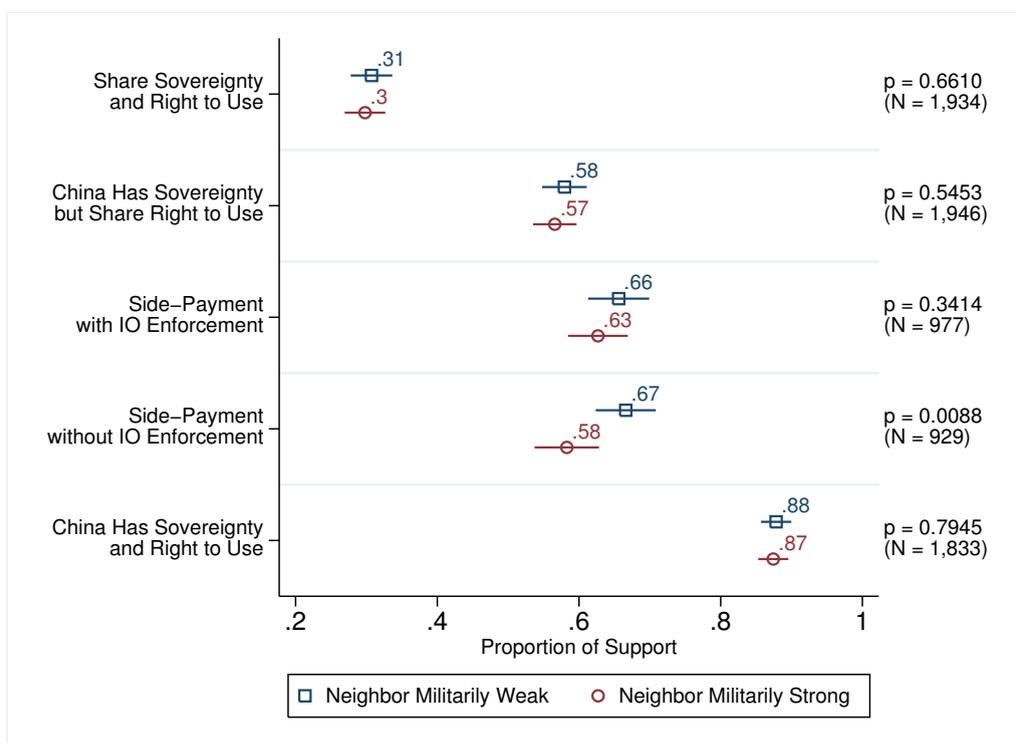


Figure 2: *Average Level of Support for Different Outcomes Varying with Neighbor's Military Strength.* This shows the proportion of respondents who supported various potential outcomes of the dispute, with 95% confidence intervals. The column on the right reports test statistics from two-sample  $T$ -tests comparing respondents with and without the historical ownership treatment.

cause the two groups' preferences do not separate in this range. Only at the other end of the spectrum in Figure 1, where the divisible outcomes lie, do we see a divergence in the two groups' responses.

To more directly test H1, we therefore developed a measure of each individual's sense of territorial indivisibility. As we discussed earlier, we could not ask directly whether respondents believed that the hypothetical disputed territory was divisible or not, because the answers would be overwhelmingly biased toward the socially acceptable one (i.e., indivisible). Our survey design allowed us to measure the beliefs indirectly by asking respondents simply to indicate all the outcomes acceptable to them. Most respondents found the most demanding indivisible outcome acceptable, along with less demanding outcomes; however, a small proportion of respondents indicated that the *only* acceptable outcome was the extreme one, where China has both the sovereignty and the right to use without offering side payments to the neighboring country. Using this information, we can tease out individuals who

believed the disputed territory was indivisible and thus test our second and third hypotheses. Specifically, we break the respondents into two groups. The first group includes those who viewed the indivisible outcome without side payments as the only acceptable outcome (i.e., they chose either “unacceptable” or “unsure” for the rest of the choices). We label this group as “hardcore indivisible.” The rest of the respondents are relegated to the second group, which we label “compromise possible”—these individuals find acceptable either some sort of sharing of the territory or no sharing but paying side payments to the neighboring country to resolve the dispute. Out of the 2,160 respondents, 383 were “hardcore indivisible” (17.7%) .

It is also possible to construct a more fine-grained measure of how “hardcore” each individual is, using an Item Response Theory (IRT) model. IRT models can be used to evaluate the relationships between the latent trait of interest and the items intended to measure the trait. In our case, the latent trait is how “hardcore” a respondent is with respect to her view on indivisibility. Since we have four items (outcomes) to measure it, with each item taking two values, “acceptable” or “unacceptable” (here we treated “unsure” as missing), we estimate a two-parameter IRT model.<sup>20</sup> The predicted latent trait in our sample ranges between -1.09 and 1.17. Respondents who score high on the IRT measure are more hardcore, i.e., less likely to accept various forms of division of the territory. The correlation between the binary and the IRT measures is 0.67.

In Table 1, we compare “hardcore indivisible” with “compromise possible” respondents by each of the contextual treatments using both the binary and the IRT measures. It is apparent that when primed with the treatment that the hypothetical territory under dispute was historically owned by China, a higher proportion of the respondents (0.195 vs. 0.159) chose the indivisible outcome without side payments, i.e., the most uncompromising one, as the only acceptable outcome. They also have a much higher score on the IRT measure (0.067 vs. -0.063). Both differences are statistically and substantively significant. To be more specific, China’s population reached 1.379 billion in 2016, so the seemingly small difference of 0.036 in the binary measure translates to 49.6 million additional people who would hold the

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<sup>20</sup>Appendix I provides details on the derivation and diagnostics of the IRT model.

Table 1: Hardcore Indivisible Respondents by Treatment Group

Treatment groups	Binary			IRT		
	Treatment	Control	T-stat	Treatment	Control	T-stat
Historically owned by China	0.195	0.159	<b>2.193</b>	0.067	-0.063	<b>3.919</b>
Neighbor Powerful	0.186	0.168	1.1015	0.022	-0.019	1.235
Territory Valuable	0.174	0.18	-0.3614	0.014	-0.011	0.741
Territory is island	0.191	0.164	1.6105	0.019	-0.015	1.036

Note: The test statistics are from two-sample T-tests of means. The bold ones indicate that the differences are statistically significant.

view of territorial indivisibility under the historical ownership treatment, which is roughly equivalent to the entire population of South Korea in the same year.<sup>21</sup> In the meantime, the military power of the neighbor, the value of the territory, and whether or not the territory is an island once again do not lead to a change in preference for the most extreme outcome. These results lend strong support to our first hypothesis, that historical ownership would make respondents more likely develop a belief in territorial indivisibility and thus more likely to accept only the most uncompromising outcome.

### *The Conditional Effect of Nationalism*

Our second hypothesis states that those who are more nationalistic are more likely to perceive a territory deemed to be historically owned by their country as indivisible, and thus less likely to accept outcomes that involve compromises. To test the hypothesis, we first transform the five questions tapping into nationalism to binary measures, with 1 indicating agreement with the statements and 0 otherwise. We then take the average of the five binary measures, resulting in a composite index of nationalism that ranges from 0 to 1. Finally, we include historical ownership, nationalism and their interaction in a logistic regression predicting the likelihood of an individual being a hardcore supporter of territorial indivisibility.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup>In fact, with a few exceptions, the size is larger than the populations of most countries.

<sup>22</sup>To reduce multicollinearity among the interaction and constitutive terms and to make the regression coefficient of the main effects more interpretable, nationalism is centered in the model. That is, we subtract the sample mean from the nationalism index for each individual. For more details on centering, see Aiken and West (1991).

We use logistic regression rather than simple mean comparisons here because the nationalistic feelings were self-reported rather than being randomly assigned by the experimental design. Also included in the model as controls are a battery of demographic and attitudinal controls, including age, ethnicity, gender, region, education, income,<sup>23</sup> social status,<sup>24</sup> interest in international affairs,<sup>25</sup> and whether or not the respondent is employed in the state sector, is a member of the CCP, has rural household registration and ranks national defense as the top issue facing China (as opposed to economic development, social stability, democracy, corruption, income inequality, and environmental protection). The results of the baseline model with only contextual variables and the full model with other sociodemographic controls are presented in Table 2.<sup>26</sup>

In both models, the coefficient estimate for historical ownership is positive and statistically significant. Substantively, if a disputed territory is said to be historically owned by China, it increases by 3.2% the probability that a respondent will become a “hardcore indivisible” type, holding other variables in the full model at their median. This is a large change considering that only about 17.7% of the respondents in our sample are the “hardcore indivisible” type. Once again, this is consistent with our first hypothesis and the previous results. Furthermore, in terms of the control variables, respondents are more likely to become “hardcore indivisible” if they are older, living in the eastern/coastal provinces, and are more likely to rank national defense as the top priority for China.<sup>27</sup> Other control variables, including party membership, do not achieve statistical significance.

However, the coefficient estimates of nationalism, both the main effect and its interaction with historical ownership, are not statistically significant, although the coefficients are in the

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<sup>23</sup>Income is measured on a seven-point scale with 1 indicating less than 10,000 yuan (approximately \$1,600) annual income.

<sup>24</sup>Social status is a respondent’s self-perceived social group on an 11-point scale from poorest (0) to richest (10).

<sup>25</sup>Interest in international affairs is measured on a four-point scale from “very interested” (4) to “not interested at all” (1).

<sup>26</sup>We used the binary measure of hardcore indivisible for ease of interpretation. Using the IRT measure yields nearly identical results.

<sup>27</sup>Our finding of the age effect confirms Johnston (2011), who finds that China’s older generations are more nationalistic than younger ones.

Table 2: Effect of Historical Ownership Conditional on Nationalism

VARIABLES	(1) Baseline	(2) Full
Nationalism	0.403 (0.329)	0.429 (0.344)
Historical Ownership	0.229* (0.115)	0.240* (0.118)
Historical Ownership $\times$ Nationalism	0.507 (0.475)	0.342 (0.483)
Age		0.0194** (0.00637)
Han Chinese		-0.272 (0.340)
Male		-0.00512 (0.125)
Eastern		0.588* (0.252)
Central		0.364 (0.288)
Rural Hukou		0.0766 (0.174)
College Degree		-0.00919 (0.140)
State Sec Employee		0.0382 (0.127)
CCP Member		0.0643 (0.147)
Income		-0.0610 (0.0452)
Social Status		-0.0582 (0.0320)
Interest in Int'l Affairs		-0.0708 (0.0963)
Defense Top Issue		0.587** (0.121)
Constant	-1.641** (0.0834)	-2.147** (0.574)
Observations	2,111	2,056
Likelihood Ratio $\chi^2$	14.09	62
Prob $<\chi^2$	0.00278	2.40e-07

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05.

hypothesized direction. A problem that we faced in testing this hypothesis was that the average level of nationalism is quite high in our sample, 0.8 out of 1, and the variance is small. We suspect this is because the Chinese public’s level of nationalism is generally very high, leading to a small variation in nationalism in our sample.

### *Indivisibility and Policy Preference*

Thus far we have demonstrated that historical ownership may lead to a belief in the indivisibility of a disputed territory. We next investigate whether or not such a belief affects respondents’ preferences regarding policies toward the dispute, the focus of our third hypothesis. Table 3 presents the estimated support for each of the policy positions toward the disputed territory using logistic regressions.<sup>28</sup> The key independent variable here is “hardcore indivisible,” an indicator of whether or not a respondent chooses the most extreme indivisible outcome (China has both the sovereignty and right to use without making side payments to the neighbor) as the only acceptable one. If the coefficients for the variable are statistically significant, then they suggest that there are indeed differences in the policy preferences between the hardcore indivisible group and the compromise possible group. We also include a range of controls in the model, including the other three contextual variables and a battery of sociodemographic variables.

Table 3: Support for Policy Positions Regarding the Disputed Territory

Variable	(1) Increased Publicity	(2) Economic Sanctions	(3) Bilateral Negotiation	(4) IO Arbitration	(5) Shelving the Dispute	(6) Military Actions
Hardcore Indivisible	-0.172 (0.130)	0.335* (0.137)	-1.770** (0.135)	-0.809** (0.137)	-2.031** (0.147)	0.558** (0.137)
Historical Ownership	0.133 (0.0991)	0.207* (0.102)	-0.161 (0.117)	-0.193 (0.104)	-0.292** (0.106)	0.182 (0.103)
Nationalism	1.187** (0.203)	1.043** (0.196)	1.161** (0.224)	-0.113 (0.207)	1.047** (0.210)	1.036** (0.208)
Strong Neighbor	0.166 (0.0992)	0.250* (0.102)	-0.0311 (0.116)	0.0365 (0.104)	-0.0879 (0.106)	0.134 (0.103)

*Continued on next page*

<sup>28</sup>Again, we dropped the observations that answered “unsure” to the question about policy. The results are similar when we combine the “unsure” answers with the “unacceptable” answers. See Appendix E for more details.

Table 3 – *Continued from previous page*

Variable	Increased Publicity	Economic Sanctions	Bilateral Negotiation	IO Arbitration	Shelving the Dispute	Military Actions
Valuable	-0.0629 (0.0989)	-0.133 (0.102)	-0.00761 (0.116)	0.124 (0.104)	-0.171 (0.106)	-0.0263 (0.103)
Island	0.0364 (0.0987)	0.00622 (0.102)	0.0364 (0.116)	0.181 (0.104)	0.0319 (0.106)	-0.0656 (0.103)
Age	-0.00263 (0.00572)	0.00979 (0.00597)	0.0145* (0.00676)	-0.0335** (0.00602)	0.00604 (0.00605)	0.00217 (0.00602)
Han Chinese	-0.338 (0.309)	-0.418 (0.340)	0.506 (0.345)	-0.235 (0.308)	0.00502 (0.325)	-0.568 (0.323)
Male	-0.0915 (0.105)	0.0175 (0.108)	-0.230 (0.124)	-0.617** (0.112)	-0.00528 (0.113)	0.288** (0.109)
Eastern	-0.0494 (0.185)	-0.0368 (0.200)	-0.258 (0.236)	0.389* (0.198)	-0.0229 (0.202)	-0.206 (0.196)
Central	0.0302 (0.217)	0.00815 (0.234)	-0.208 (0.274)	0.433 (0.230)	-0.0621 (0.234)	-0.331 (0.229)
Rural Hukou	-0.260 (0.152)	-0.201 (0.152)	0.0374 (0.175)	0.351* (0.163)	-0.151 (0.156)	-0.286 (0.155)
College Degree	0.00366 (0.122)	0.0103 (0.126)	0.396** (0.140)	0.0912 (0.128)	0.146 (0.128)	-0.282* (0.126)
State Sec Employee	0.246* (0.108)	0.115 (0.110)	-0.274* (0.125)	-0.477** (0.112)	0.0536 (0.115)	0.222* (0.111)
CCP Member	0.0173 (0.124)	-0.0721 (0.130)	0.118 (0.148)	0.424** (0.131)	-0.0460 (0.135)	0.154 (0.129)
Income	-0.0144 (0.0376)	-0.0396 (0.0396)	-0.0449 (0.0444)	0.0125 (0.0400)	0.0969* (0.0412)	-0.0235 (0.0392)
Social Status	0.0404 (0.0275)	0.0147 (0.0283)	-0.126** (0.0330)	0.0210 (0.0286)	0.0421 (0.0293)	0.0511 (0.0283)
Interest in Int'l Affairs	0.116 (0.0824)	0.197* (0.0842)	0.0184 (0.0960)	-0.267** (0.0872)	-0.00307 (0.0873)	0.233** (0.0857)
Defense Top Issue	0.369** (0.107)	0.116 (0.110)	-0.283* (0.123)	-0.0899 (0.110)	-0.287* (0.114)	0.484** (0.111)
Constant	-1.231* (0.508)	-1.013 (0.529)	0.739 (0.580)	2.649** (0.527)	-0.557 (0.535)	-1.582** (0.531)
Observations	1,749	1,777	1,896	1,718	1,810	1,681
Pseudo R-squared	0.0386	0.0341	0.112	0.0843	0.125	0.0651
Likelihood Ratio $\chi^2$	93.57	78.93	236.1	198.9	304	151.7
Prob< $\chi^2$	0	2.84e-09	0	0	0	0

Standard errors in parentheses. \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05.

Focusing on the effect of “hardcore indivisible” on different policy choices, the coefficients for the variable are almost all statistically significant. More specifically, the respondents in the “hardcore indivisible” group are more likely to support economic sanctions and military actions, and less likely to support the other more cooperative policies, including bilateral negotiation, IO arbitration and shelving the dispute (i.e., leaving it for future resolution). These results lend substantial support to our third hypothesis that individuals who perceive a territory to be indivisible are more likely to support more conflictual policy options.

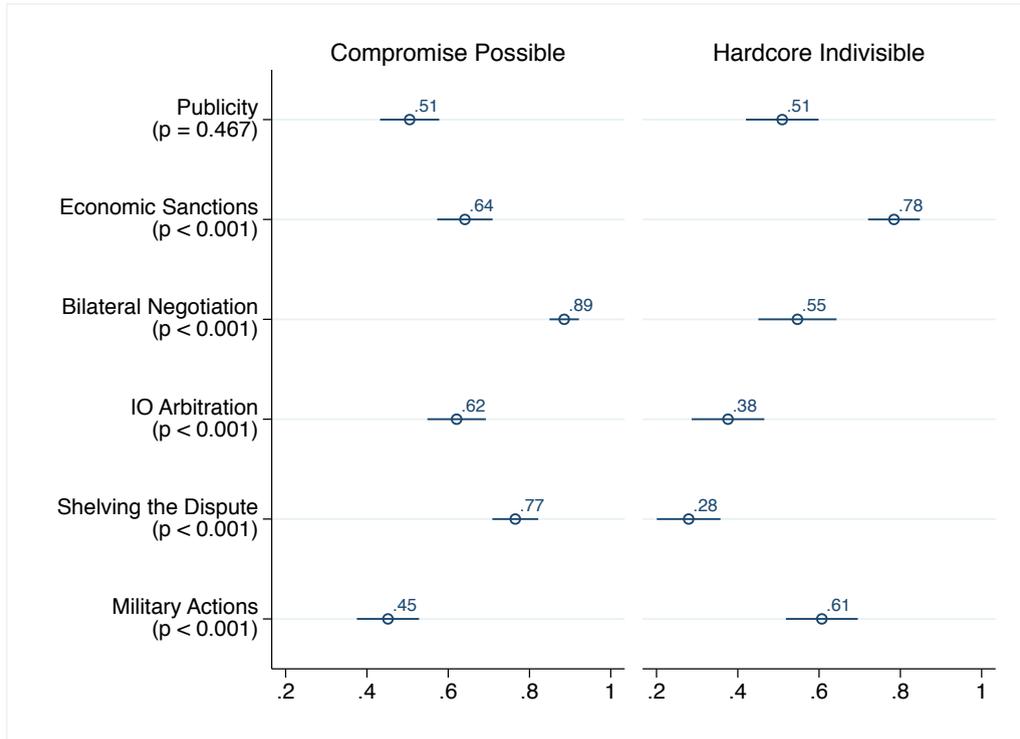


Figure 3: *Two Groups' Predicted Probability of Support for Each Policy Position* Predicted probabilities are calculated with the rest of the variables held at their median. The 95% confidence intervals are calculated using the delta method.

Figure 3 presents two groups' predicted probability of support for each policy regarding the disputed territory. For the "compromise possible" group, five of the six policy positions received majority support (greater than 50%), with bilateral negotiation receiving the most support (89%). The remaining option, military actions, was supported by 45% of the respondents. This suggests that among those who were willing to consider a wide range of policy options, military actions were not only the least attractive but also was supported by a minority. For this group, we also notice that the level of support for IO arbitration falls clearly behind the support for bilateral negotiation. This ordering may reflect a preference for giving China more control of the dispute resolution process, which is likely to decrease from bilateral negotiation to third-party arbitration. This means IO arbitration was not viewed as automatically desirable, even though the UN (the example provided as an illustration of IOs) is generally viewed positively in China; rather, the respondents appeared to have thought about the costs and benefits of appealing to an international dispute mechanism relative to bilateral negotiation (Fang 2010). Thus, the support for IO arbitration may

vary across different countries and, potentially, across different disputes. Overall there is considerable support among the group for negotiation and shelving the dispute.

Turning to the “hardcore indivisible” group, economic sanctions and military actions received the highest levels of support from the group. This is consistent with our third hypothesis that a belief in territorial indivisibility leads to preferences for more conflictual policies. For the other four options, again, bilateral negotiation received more support than IO arbitration, as in the case for the compromise possible group. The most surprising finding is that only 28% of the respondents in this group supported the policy position of “shelving the dispute,” an official position long held by the Chinese government on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute.

Additional patterns emerge when we compare the responses from the two groups. Except for the largely innocuous policy option of strengthening publicity, the differences between the percentages of support for the remaining options are all statistically significant and the substantive differences are large. On the one hand, the “hardcore indivisible” group is 14.3% and 15.5% more likely to support economic sanctions and military actions as a solution for the hypothetical territorial dispute. On the other hand, the predicted probabilities of the group’s support for the other three cooperative choices are much lower than those of the “compromise possible” group. Most dramatically, the predicted probabilities of support for bilateral bargaining and shelving the dispute decreased by 33.9% and 48.6%, respectively, while the reduction in support for IO arbitration was 24.5% for the “hardcore indivisible” group. This shows that the respondents in the group expressed their policy preferences through both supporting more combative policies *and* opposing more conciliatory policies. Regarding the larger effects on the more conciliatory policies, it seems that the “hardcore indivisible” respondents generally felt comfortable rejecting those options, but some did not feel equally comfortable endorsing economic sanctions and military actions—perhaps due to a consideration of the risks and costs associated with the policies, as we argued earlier.

Table 3 provides more insights into the individual characteristics of those who supported each policy position. The most interesting findings are associated with IO arbitration. More nationalistic respondents were more likely to support almost all policy options except for

IO arbitration—the effect is negative but not statistically significant.<sup>29</sup> Older respondents, males, and state-sector employees were less likely to support IO arbitration, and the effects are all statistically significant. Being more interested in international affairs also decreased support. We suspect that this particular result may be associated with the fact that China has received a lot of international criticisms with respect to its territorial disputes with neighboring countries; the group that is aware of these criticisms may thus be less trusting of third-party arbitration on such matters. On the other hand, the support for IO arbitration comes from two factors: living in the Eastern part of China, and being a party member. It has been found that the population in the Eastern/coastal areas of China tend to be more cosmopolitan in their world views, which may result in more favorable views about international bodies. However, we do not have an intuitive explanation for the effect of party membership; it does suggest that party membership may not necessarily lead to more hardcore policy positions.

For the other policy choices, having a college degree increases the support for bilateral negotiation; on the other hand, those who believe national defense is the most important issue facing China today are less supportive of bilateral negotiation. Additionally, those who are more nationalistic and male are more supportive of military actions, as are those more interested in international affairs. Finally, historical ownership decreases the support for shelving the dispute, which is in contrast with the Chinese government’s long-held official position.

### ***Further Analysis***

In this section, we first provide a mediation analysis, and then present results from two additional questions in our survey regarding possible real countries that the respondents had in mind when they read our scenarios. For the mediation analysis, recall that we have shown separately that: (1) historical ownership can lead to a belief in territorial indivisibility and (2) those who hold such a belief, i.e., respondents who are in the “hardcore indivisible” group,

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<sup>29</sup>Aversion to international arbitration may also be traced to the fact that Chinese are generally reluctant to use courts as a means of dispute resolution. See, for example, Diamant (2000).

are more likely to support bellicose policies. We used the framework of causal mediation analysis proposed by Imai et. al. (2011) to examine whether or not the effect of historical ownership treatment on policy choices is mediated by the belief in territorial indivisibility.

Figure 4 reports the results of the causal mediation analysis, using the IRT measure for indivisibility.<sup>30</sup> We see that indivisibility indeed mediates the effect from historical ownership in four out of six policy choices (bilateral negotiation, IO arbitration, shelving the dispute, and military actions) in both the treatment and control groups. The results of the sensitivity analysis, presented in Appendix H, suggest that the estimates of average causal mediation effects (ACME) are moderately robust to unobserved pretreatment confounders.

Now turn to the results for the two follow-up questions included in our survey that we described earlier. First, 1,558 out of the 2,160 respondents said that they had a particular neighboring country in mind when answering the survey questions. Among this group, the top three (real) countries are Japan (56%), the Philippines (13%), and Vietnam (7%).<sup>31</sup> Using the same specifications as in Table 3, we reanalyzed the effect of the indivisibility measure on policy preferences for these three countries. The results, which can be found in Appendix J, are broadly consistent with the main results. For Japan, in particular, the coefficient estimates of the variable “hardcore indivisible” have the same direction and statistical significance as those in Table 3 for all six policy choices. Not surprisingly, given the high saliency of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Island dispute and the long-term rivalry between China and Japan, respondents who believed the hypothetical country to be Japan displayed a higher tendency to support economic sanctions and military actions—the coefficient estimates are

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<sup>30</sup>The analysis is conducted with the **mediation** package in R (Tingley et al. 2014). We use the IRT measure of indivisibility because the `medsens` function for sensitivity analysis is limited to mediators that are continuous.

<sup>31</sup>Note that our survey was not affected by the South China Sea arbitration case brought by the Philippines to the UNCLOS. Our survey was implemented in May 2015, while the arbitration case was not accepted by the arbitral tribunal until October 29, 2015. Only then did the case start to receive some coverage in China. Furthermore, had the arbitration case been influential in the minds of the respondents, we would expect the number of respondents who considered the Philippines to be the hypothetical neighboring country to be much higher.

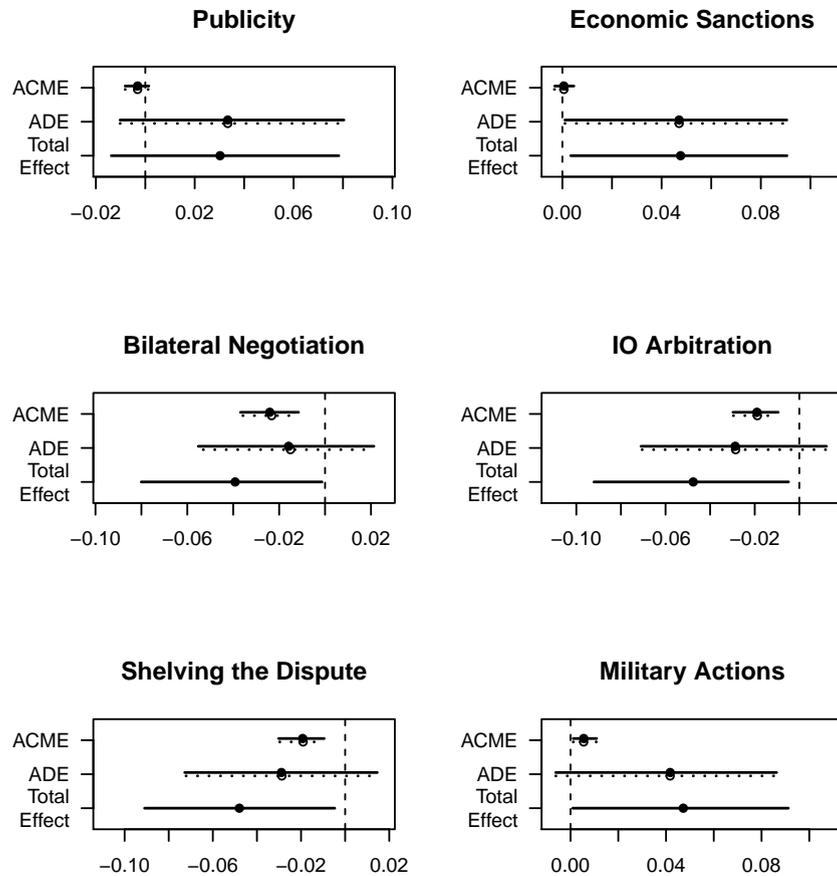


Figure 4: *Graphic Display of the Causal Mediation Analysis.* The ACME is the mediation effect (of a belief in indivisibility), and the direct effect ADE is the direct effect (of historical ownership). The confidence intervals are calculated via the bootstrap with more than 1,000 resamples.

larger in both cases than those in Table 3. In the cases of the Philippines and Vietnam, the sample sizes for us to make meaningful inferences are substantially smaller. Nevertheless, the “hardcore indivisible” group was less likely to support shelving the dispute, regardless of which real country they had in mind.

Second, those respondents who said that they had a real country in mind received a follow-up question about whether that country had any allies. In total, 1,456 out of the 1,558 (93.5%) respondents said “yes.” When probed further about which particular country (or countries) that they had in mind as the allies of the neighboring country, an overwhelming majority answered the United States (81.9%). This suggests that even those primed with a

“weak” neighbor could in effect have been thinking about a militarily strong opponent, and the fact that we found an increase in the size of the “hardcore indivisible” group under the treatment of historical ownership further confirms that the result cannot be attributed to a consideration of the opponent’s military strength.

## **Conclusion**

In many long-running territorial disputes, states adopt an all-or-nothing position and are not willing to settle for any compromise solution. Such claims often invoke historical ownership of the disputed territory by a people rather than some physical property of the territory. The phenomenon suggests that if territorial indivisibility does play a role in territorial disputes, it works through a perception that the loss of the disputed territory was unjust. With this understanding as a starting point, our study examines theoretically and empirically whether historical ownership constitutes a significant source of a belief in territorial indivisibility, and the effect of such a belief on conflict. In doing so, it advances the literature on the relationship between historical precedents and territorial disputes and on issue indivisibility and conflict.

The survey experimental findings from China largely support our hypotheses. The historical ownership treatment did lead to a significant increase in the number of respondents who developed a belief in territory indivisibility. Furthermore, those who held such a belief were more likely to favor economic sanctions and military solutions to the dispute, and much less likely to support bilateral negotiation and IO arbitration. Finally, we find that there appears to be a preference ordering for the three methods of dispute resolution when the issue is perceived to be indivisible. Specifically, unilateral actions received the most support, bilateral negotiation the second most, and IO mediation the least. Existing studies have shown that IO mediation can reduce conflict; our result suggests that perhaps there is a limit to its effect on issues that are deemed to be indivisible.

One may argue that because political elites can manipulate historical narratives to construct a disputed territory as indivisible, they can also reverse the course when it is inconvenient for them. In other words, national identity can be fluid, and political entrepreneurs

have some control over the change. It then follows that the part of individuals' identity that is linked with their foreign policy attitudes may be manipulated by political propaganda and thus place no real constraint on leaders' policy choices. There is merit to this reasoning, and the argument deserves careful consideration. However, as demonstrated by many long-lasting territorial disputes, prevailing beliefs are those that are consistent with nationalistic sentiments; a leader trying to promote a different belief may be vulnerable to domestic criticism, specifically of being weak on protecting national interests. This asymmetry suggests that the public do have agency in their acceptance of a belief, and thus there are limits to elite manipulation of public perceptions.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, it takes a long time for beliefs to change, and leaders are more likely to find themselves constrained by an existing belief on territorial issues rather than being in a position to promote an alternative belief in time to enlarge their bargaining space. Finally, a leader might simply share a prevailing belief in the indivisibility of a territorial issue. For all these reasons, we believe it is important to understand how a public reacts to a historical territorial claim, a claim that has been made in many significant territorial disputes today.

There are two natural extensions of this study that we wish to explore in the future. First, we are interested in whether our findings are unique to China or shared by other nations in the East Asian region, such as Japan and South Korea, which also have ongoing territorial disputes based on historical claims. The findings from comparative studies could have wide-ranging foreign policy implications. Second, we are interested in exploring how various audiences react to a country's claim of historical ownership of a disputed territory. While we have demonstrated in this study that a claim of historical ownership has the effect of hardening the policy position of a domestic public, it is unclear what the effects are of such a claim on the opponent state or on international audiences. Investigating these questions would help us better understand strategic interactions between states in making territorial claims, and possible policy options for reducing tensions.

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<sup>32</sup>For a useful discussion of the limitations of political framing, see Zellman (2015).

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