

# Historical Ownership and Territorial Disputes

## 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 positions 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 and IO arbitration.

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 a long history and the high frequency with which states justify their territorial claims by historical arguments and the longevity of such disputes,<sup>1</sup> 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). 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 (Huth 1996; Shelef 2016; Tir 2010; Roy 1997; Vasquez 1993, 2009; Wiegand 2015).

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

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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 it often hides other motives.

state's territorial designs (Abramson and Carter 2016, 675-678). Historical ownership, which is based on priority or duration,<sup>2</sup> narrows the set of historical precedents that should matter to a claim, strengthening the appearance of legitimacy and limit. 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, including India, Israel, China, and South Korea, 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 (Justwan and Fisher 2017; Manekin et al. forthcoming; Quek and Johnston 2017; Wiegand and Choi 2017). Observations of prominent disputes, such as those mentioned above, 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,

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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" ("Xi Warns Mattis China Won't Surrender 'One Inch' of Territory," *Bloomberg News* June 28, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-06-28/xi-warns-mattis-china-won-t-surrender-one-inch-of-territory>, accessed June 29, 2018).

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, this study explores a domestic mechanism through which historical claims may change the beliefs and 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 the 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; Tir 2010; Roy 1997; 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 and IO arbitration.

Our research contributes to an emerging literature that draws attention to a highly

unique but understudied phenomenon, which is that the vast majority of territorial claims involve historical arguments. In offering a micro-foundation for domestic conditions following a historical territorial claim, our study complements the existing studies focusing on the role of leaders in claim making (Abramson and Carter 2016; Carter and Goemans 2011; Carter 2017). 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 the policy actions following 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 position and policy choices 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 the logic of the argument in more detail.

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>4</sup> This

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<sup>4</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>.

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>5</sup> People may be more or less attached to 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>6</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; and 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>7</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

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<sup>5</sup>For a comprehensive review of the vast literature on identity and an in-depth analysis of the concept, see Fearon (1999).

<sup>6</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>7</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).

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; Johnson and Toft 2013/2014; Toft 2006). International relations scholars have argued that territories with intangible value are more likely to be viewed as indivisible (Gibler et al.; 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 the disputed territory as unjust and 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, emotions may develop into a belief in territorial indivisibility because fully recovering the territory is linked with redressing an injustice. This argument also suggests that the relative importance of national identity matters to an individual; those who more strongly identify with their national identity and interests are more likely to develop such a belief, whereas those who do not define their identities in a similar way may accept alternative arrangements for the territory.

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 by states, 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 territories with greater intangible salience and conflict (Gibler et al. 2012; Hensel and Mitchell 2005, Zellman 2018).

The debate on indivisibility, however, has 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 by some members of the public leads them to have a more hostile policy preference.



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 as well as which ones to support based on the likelihood that a policy may bring them the outcome that they most prefer. Thus, individuals who perceive a disputed territory to be indivisible may oppose policies that are very likely to bring compromise outcomes, such as bilateral negotiation. On the other hand, they may view coercive measures, such as economic sanctions and military actions, offer a chance for their nation to acquire the entirety of the disputed territory by winning the contest. However, such coercive measures do entail high risk and costs. Therefore, not all those who hold the belief may support such policies. Nevertheless, we conjecture that those who view a territory to be indivisible are more likely to support aggressive policy actions—the most extreme of which is military actions, compared with those who do not hold such a belief. Thus, we have the following 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>8</sup>

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>9</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 over possible outcomes

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<sup>8</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 in order 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 can uniquely identify Taiwan as the hypothetical scenario if we used the treatment).

<sup>9</sup>Note that the treatment that the disputed territory "historically belonged to China" is silent on whether the neighboring country also claims such an ownership. Therefore, the treatment captures the case where both countries make the claim. We do not include a fourth scenario as our treatment, however, 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?"

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>10</sup> The four outcomes were:

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 other concessions to the neighboring country.

The first two options are “divisible” outcomes. They are alternative arrangements of joint-ownership of the territory by separating the sovereignty and the right to use and by allowing either or both be shared. Such approaches have been proposed in actual policy toward some of the territorial disputes in which China has been involved, and thus 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

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<sup>10</sup>Our design indirectly gets at the beliefs of the respondents on the divisibility of a disputed territory by asking their preferences over the outcomes of the dispute. We could certainly directly ask if respondents believed a disputed territory was indivisible, however, we strongly suspect that the answer would be overwhelmingly “yes” given the familiarity of the language in Chinese government’s official position. Such one-sided answers would not be problematic if they were reflections of the true underlying beliefs, but more likely than not, they might mask a more diverse beliefs because of the way the questions were posed. Our indirect approach allowed the respondents to reveal their beliefs through their preferences over outcomes.

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, we should see respondents receiving the ownership treatment to be more likely to find the “indivisible” outcomes acceptable and the other outcomes less so.

It is important to note that each respondent could choose more than one acceptable outcome because the design allowed one to choose all that were acceptable to her. Compared with a design in which a respondent chooses only her most preferred outcome, our design has two advantages: it does not bias toward the indivisible outcomes – the more likely candidates for the most preferred outcome, and it provides us with much more information than the alternative. 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, which allows for side-payments, to see whether the existence of an international enforcement mechanism for the arrangement would make a difference in the preference 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 intended to identify 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 or not they found each option (in)appropriate for the hypothetical dispute scenario to which they were (randomly) assigned to, or if they 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. Moreover, those who supported IO arbitration received a follow-up question asking whether or not they thought that China should comply with the IO ruling *regardless* of what the decision was. They can choose either “yes,” or “it depends on whether the decision is consistent with China’s interests.” The additional question allows 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 the fact. Thus, the framing of the question is a hard test for finding the effect of indivisibility, as the respondents are reminded of compromises that the government has made in the past. Within the choices, we included perhaps the most well-known policy of “shelving the dispute” (with respect to the Diaoyu/Senkakus islands). We also included the option of submitting the dispute to an international organization, which has not been adopted by the Chinese government but has been advocated by some of China’s neighbors. If issue indivisibility does lead to war, we expect that respondents who consider the territory to be indivisible are more likely to support policy options that are conflictual.

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 when they were answering the two questions. If the answer was “yes,” then they were asked to specify that country, and they were further asked whether or not they thought the “real” country had allies. If the answer was “yes,” then 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, in order to test our second hypothesis, we needed to have a measure for the degree of patriotism/nationalism of the respondents. Therefore, we asked respondents the extent that they agreed with each of the following statements (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, and "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 self-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. The other non-demographic question was an open-ended question asking what respondents would usually do when they were dissatisfied with a foreign policy of the government.

## **Data and Findings**

Our survey was administered in May 2015 by China Online Marketing Research (COMR), an Internet marketing research firm in China.<sup>11</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

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<sup>11</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.

survey, they answered a battery of sociodemographic and attitudinal questions.<sup>12</sup>

In terms of the (self-reported) demographic characteristics, the average age of the respondents is 37.4; 97.3% are of the Han nationality; the male/female ratio is 62%/38%. Moreover, 84% identify themselves to be urban residents (Rural Hukou), and 70% have college degrees. About 16% of the respondents have an annual income less than 30,000 Yuan and 20% have incomes over 120,000 Yuan. This is generally consistent with the self-identified social status: 21.02% low income, 52.22% middle income, and 26.76% high income. In addition, 42% of the respondents work in the state sector and 22.2% are Communist Party members. It is worth pointing out that a party affiliation does not necessarily reflect a strong political ideology of an individual in today's China; the party membership is often a prerequisite for career advancements and thus individuals may join the Party for instrumental reasons. In terms of the knowledge relevant for our study, 86% answered that they are very or fairly interested in China's foreign affairs.<sup>13</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 et al. 2017). Although they do not reflect the composition of the general public, they are the more politically active and vocal groups in China, and thus is the more likely source 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 is the estimated effect of different historical ownership scenarios on the respondents' preferences over all possible dispute outcomes. Here we omit those people who said that they were "unsure" (about 12-15% of the respondents), but the results are similar when we combine the indecisive

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<sup>12</sup>We designed the survey questionnaire in 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>13</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 for descriptive statistics of the sample and randomization checks/balance tests.

responses with the “unacceptable” ones.<sup>14</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. 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 for means.<sup>15</sup>

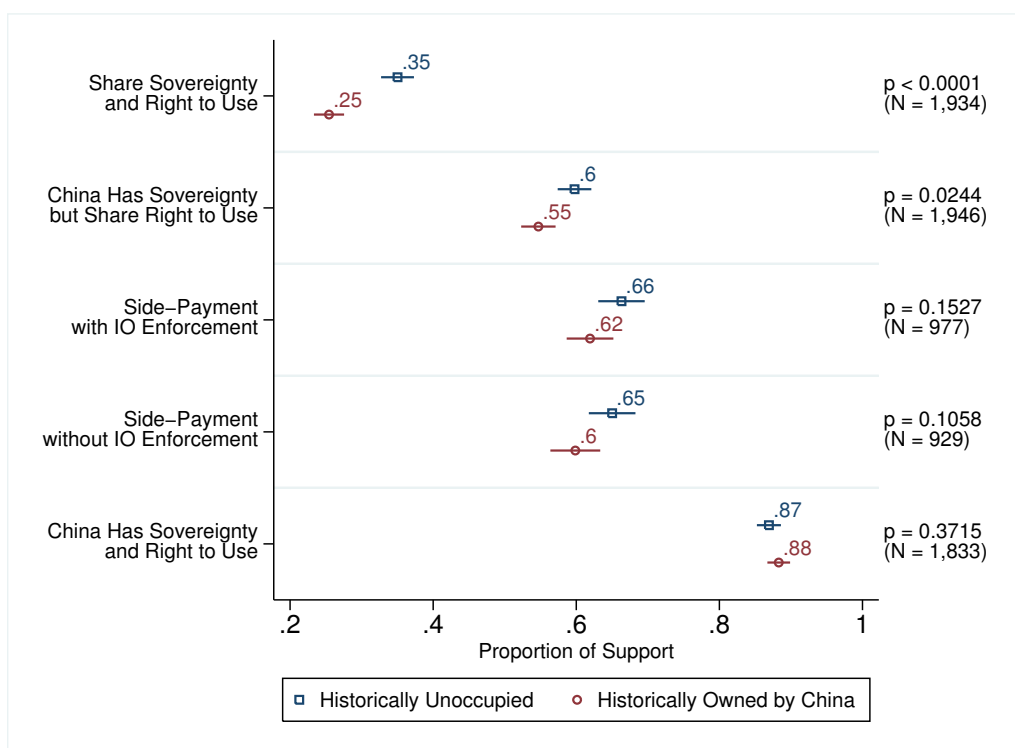


Figure 1: *Average Level of Support for Different Outcomes Varying in Historical Ownership.* This shows the proportion of respondents who supported the various potential outcomes of the dispute, with 95% confidence intervals. The column on the right reports test statistics from two-sample T-test comparing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

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

<sup>14</sup>See Appendix for more details.

<sup>15</sup>The results are almost identical if we use two-sample T-tests for proportions.



territory. The least supported outcome is China sharing both the sovereignty and the right 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 would also find 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 are almost identical, suggesting perhaps that a concern for credible commitment does not play an important role in respondents' assessment of different outcomes.

Second, as we hypothesized, historical ownership makes 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 the 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>16</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>17</sup> In contrast, we find that none of the three contextual variables makes a difference in the respondents'

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<sup>16</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 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 the so-called "by eye" test of significance between the two group means without examining the actual p-values of the difference of means test.

<sup>17</sup>For this comparison we combined the cases with or without IO enforcement because there is essentially no difference in the support for these two cases regardless of historical ownership.

support for the dispute outcomes, except for one case from the variable military strength.<sup>18</sup> In Figure 2, we see that respondents are more likely to choose side payments without IO enforcement when the neighboring country is militarily weak. It suggests that perhaps the Chinese public are worried that IOs may favor the weaker side of a territorial dispute, and thus the respondents were less enthusiastic about involving IOs when China is faced with such an opponent.

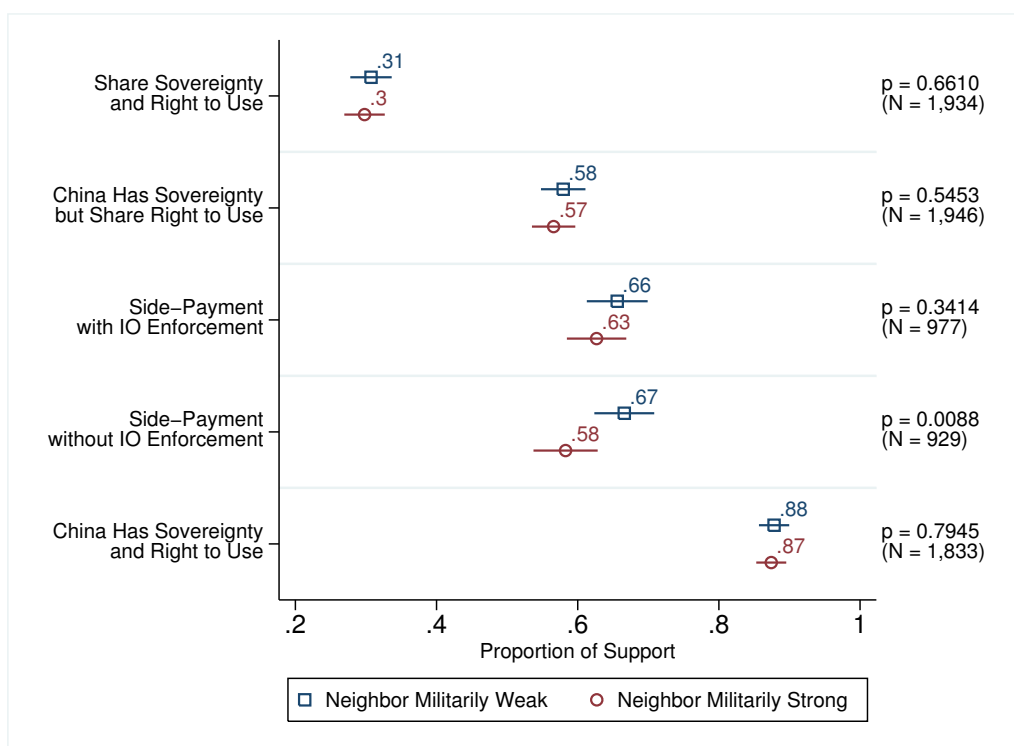


Figure 2: *Average Level of Support for Different Outcomes Varying with Neighbor's Military Strength.* This shows the proportion of respondents who supported various potential outcomes of the dispute, with 95% confidence interval. The column on the right reports test statistics from two-sample T-test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

Overall, the above findings provide a 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 on the indivisible outcomes in Figure 1 be-

<sup>18</sup>The results for the other two contextual variables, economic value and island or land, are presented in Appendix A.

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

To more directly test H1, therefore, we 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 allows us to measure the beliefs indirectly by asking respondents to simply indicate all the outcomes that are acceptable to them. Most respondents found the most demanding indivisible outcome acceptable, along with lesser 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 choose 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 as "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 for resolving the dispute. Out of the 2,160 respondents, 383 are "hardcore indivisible."

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 to measure it, with each item taking two values "acceptable" or "unacceptable" (we treat "unsure" as missing), we estimate a two parameter IRT model that allows items to have different difficulties and different abilities to

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.

discriminate between high and low levels of the latent trait.<sup>19</sup> The predicted latent trait in our sample ranges between -1.09 to 1.17. Respondents that 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 is 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 outcome, 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. The seemingly small difference of 0.036 in the binary measure, for example, translates to 49.6 million additional people who would hold the view of territorial indivisibility under the historical ownership treatment, which is roughly equivalent to the entire population of South Korea in the same year. In the meantime, military power of the neighbor, 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 lead respondents to more likely develop a belief in territorial indivisibility, and thus more likely to accept only the most non-compromising outcome.

<sup>19</sup>Appendix I provides details on the derivation and diagnostics of the IRT model.

## *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>20</sup>

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>21</sup> social status,<sup>22</sup> interest in international affairs,<sup>23</sup> whether or not the respondent is employed in the state sector, is a member of the CCP membership, 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>24</sup>

In both models, the coefficient estimate for historical ownership is positive and statis-

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<sup>20</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 mean from the nationalism index for each individual. For more details on centering, see Aiken and West (1991).

<sup>21</sup>Income is measured on a seven-point scale with 1 indicating less than 10,000 Yuan (approximately \$1,600) annual income.

<sup>22</sup>Social Status is respondent's self-perceived social group on a 10-point scale from poorest to richest.

<sup>23</sup>Interest in International Affairs is measured on a four-point scale from "very interested" to "not interested at all".

<sup>24</sup>We used the binary measure of hardcore indivisible for ease of interpretation Using the IRT measure yields nearly identical results.

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 Sector Employee		0.0382 (0.127)
CCP Member		0.0643 (0.147)
Income		-0.0610 (0.0452)
Social Status		-0.0582 (0.0320)
Interest in International Affairs		-0.0708 (0.0963)
National 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.

tically significant. Substantively, if a disputed territory is said to be historically owned by China, it would increase the probability that a respondent becomes a “hardcore indivisible” type by 3.4%. 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>25</sup>

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 hypothesized direction. A problem that we faced in testing this hypothesis is that the average level of nationalism is quite high in our sample, 0.8 out of 1, and the variance is small. We suspect that it was because the level of nationalism is generally very high for the Chinese public, which led 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>26</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 side-payments to the neighbor) as the only acceptable one. If the coefficients for the variable are statistically significant, then they suggest that indeed there are differences in the policy preferences

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<sup>25</sup>Our finding of the age effect confirms Johnston (2011), which finds that China’s older generations are more nationalistic than younger ones.

<sup>26</sup>Again, we dropped the observations that answered “unsure” to a question about the policy. The results are similar when we combine the “unsure” answers with the “unacceptable” answers. See Appendix for more details.

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 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)
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 Intl.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

*Continued on next page*



Table 3 – Continued from previous page

Variable	Increased Publicity	Sanctions Sanctions	Compromise Negotiation	IO Arbitration Arbitration	Shelve Dispute	Military Actions
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,” the coefficients for the variable are almost all statistically significant. More specifically, the respondents in the “hardcore indivisible” group are more likely to support the conflictual policies, such as economic sanctions and military actions, and less likely to support the other more cooperative solutions, including bilateral negotiation, IO arbitration and shelving the dispute (i.e., leave 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.

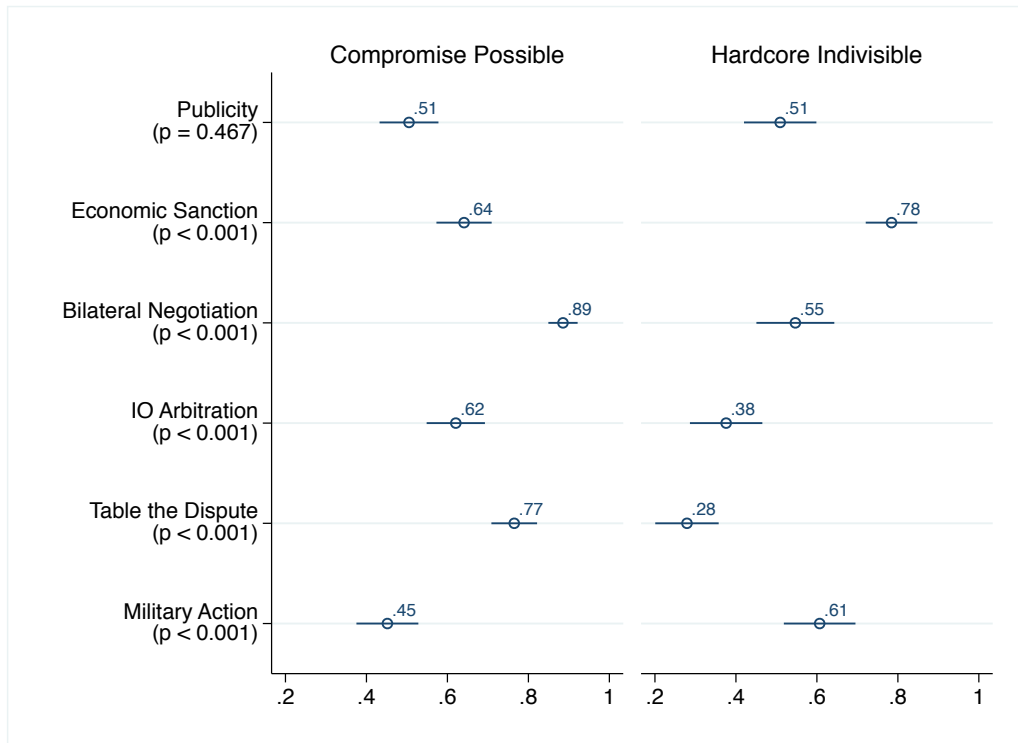


Figure 3: *Two Groups' Predicted Probability of Support for Each Policy Position* Predicted probabilities are calculated with the rest of the variables held at their median. The 95% confidence intervals are calculated using the delta method.

Figure 3 presents two groups' predicted probability of support for each of the policy position 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 was 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 perhaps the most significant world organization; rather, the respondents thought more carefully about the cost and benefit of appealing to an international dispute mechanism relative to a bilateral approach (Fang 2010). Thus the support for IO arbitration may vary across different countries and, potentially, across different disputes. Overall there is a considerable support for negotiation and shelving the dispute among the group, which comprises of the majority of the respondents.

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, the 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 disputes and seek joint-development,” a long-held official position by the Chinese government on the Diaoyu/Senkakus Island. This mismatch between government policy and mass preference should be of particular interest to policy makers.

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 decrease by 33.9% and 48.6%, respectively, while the reduction in support for IO arbitration is 24.5% for the "the hardcore indivisible" group. This shows that the respondents in the group expressed their policy preferences through both supporting more combative options *and* opposing more conciliatory options. Regarding the larger effects on the more conciliatory policy options, 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 risk and costs associated with the policies as we argued earlier.

Table 3 provides more insights into the individual characteristics of those who support each policy position. The most interesting findings are associated with IO arbitration. Moving from the average level to more extreme nationalism increases support for almost all policy options except for IO arbitration – the effect is negative but not statistically significant. Again, it suggests that perhaps the Chinese public is less trusting of international organizations.<sup>27</sup> Looking at other variables, we can see more nuanced patterns for this result. First, we find that older respondents, males, and state sector employees are less likely to support IO arbitration, and the effects are all statistically significant. Second, being more interested in international affairs also decreases the support. We conjecture that this may be associated with the fact that China has received a lot of criticisms in recent years on territorial disputes with neighboring countries. The negative international media coverage may lead the group to be less trusting of international 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/costal 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 a good explanation for the effect of party membership.

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<sup>27</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.

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 well as those who are more interested in international affairs. Finally, historically ownership decreases the support for shelving the dispute, which again is in contrast to the Chinese government’s long-held official position.

### *Further Analysis*

In this section we first provide a mediation analysis, and then present results from additional questions in our survey regarding possibly real disputes 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, 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 outcomes 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>28</sup> We see that indivisibility indeed mediates the effect from historical ownership in four out of six policy outcomes (bilateral compromise, IO arbitration, joint development, and military action) in both the treatment and control groups. The results of the sensitivity analysis, presented in the online appendix, suggest that the estimates of 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, with the top three (real) countries being Japan (58%), the Philippines (13%), and Vietnam (7%). Using the same

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<sup>28</sup>The analysis is conducted with the **mediation** package in R (Tingley et al. 2014). We use the continuous treatment measure due to the limitation in the `medsens` function for sensitivity analysis.

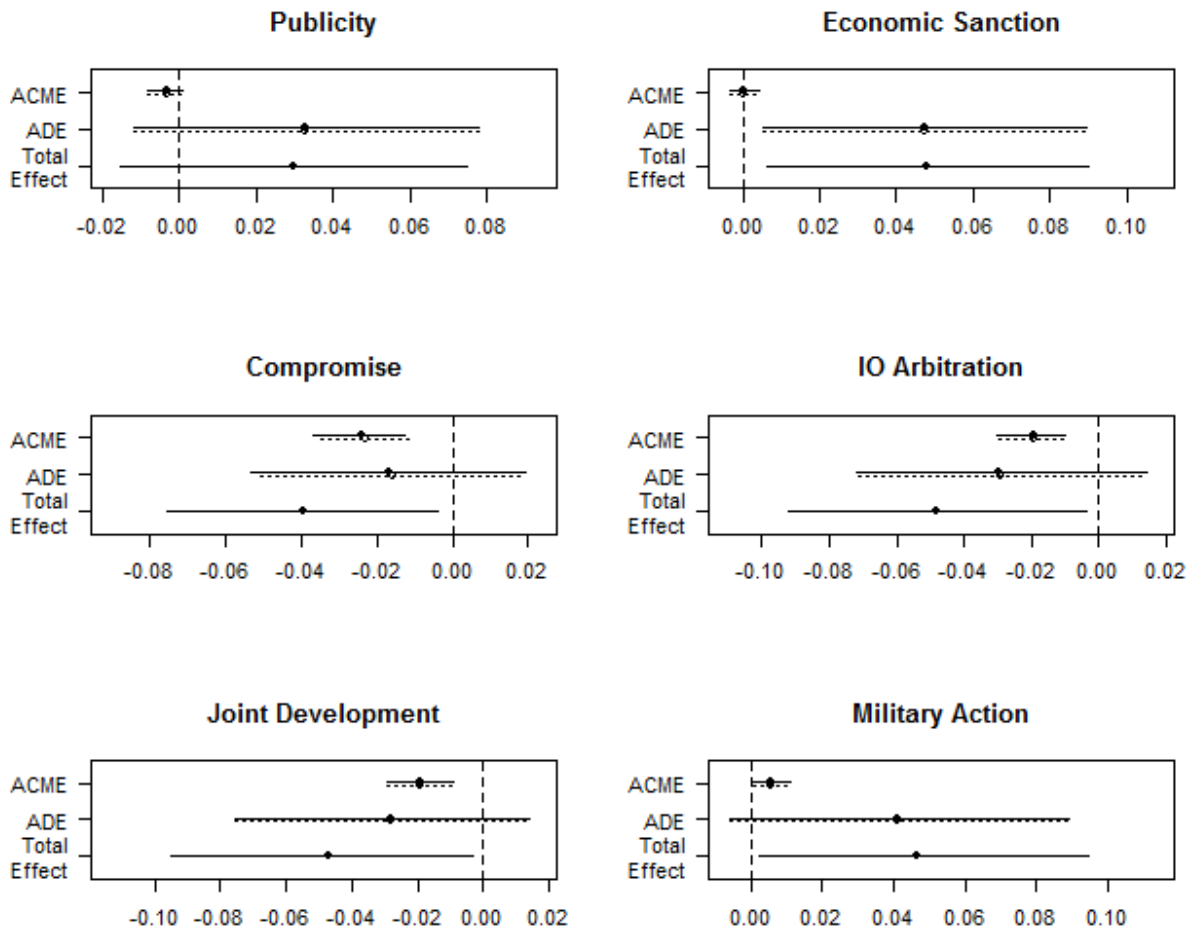


Figure 4: *Graphic display of the causal mediation analysis* The ACME is the mediation effect (of the perception of indivisibility) and direct effect ADE is the direct effect (of historical ownership). The confidence intervals are calculated via the bootstrap with more than 1000 resamples.

specifications in Table 1, 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 1 for all six outcomes. 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 action—the coefficient estimates are larger in both cases than those in Table 1. In the cases of the Philippines and Vietnam, the sam-

ple sizes are substantially smaller for us to make meaningful inferences. Nevertheless, the “hardcore indivisible” group is less likely to opt for 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 1,558 (93.5%) of the respondents said “yes.” When probed further which particular country (or countries) that they had in mind as the allies for the neighboring country, an overwhelming majority of them answered that it was the United States (81.9%). This suggests that even for those that were primed with a “weak” neighbor, they could have in effect 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. In the meantime, such claims often invoke a people’s historical ownership of a disputed territory by a people rather than some physical property of a disputed territory that is not conducive to a bargaining solution. This suggests that if territorial indivisibility does play a role in a particular disputes, it works through individuals’ belief that the historical experience of losing the territory was unjust and humiliating. With this understanding as a starting point, our study examines theoretically and empirically whether historical ownership constitutes a significant source of the public’s 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, the content of national identity can change, and political entrepreneurs have some control over this content. It then follows that the part of a public's personal identity that is relevant for foreign policy may be manipulated by elite propaganda and thus place no real constraint on leaders' policy choices. This line of reasoning has merits and 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>29</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 have inherited an indivisible issue and also shared the prevailing beliefs. For all these reasons, we believe it is important to understand how a public reacts to a historical territorial claim, one made in almost all 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 the findings in this study are unique to China, or shared by other nations in the East Asian region, including Japan and South Korea, which also have ongoing territorial disputes based on historical claims. The findings from the comparative

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<sup>29</sup>For a useful discussion of the limitations to political framing, see Zellman (2015).

study will have wide-ranging implications for the foreign policies of these countries as well as of the United States. Second, we are interested in exploring how various audiences react to a country's claim of historical ownership of a disputed territory. Not all states are in the same position to make a claim of historical ownership in their territorial disputes. 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 international audiences. Investigating these questions will help us better understand the strategic interaction between states in making territorial claims and possible policy options for reducing tensions.



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