Don't Say I Have Not Warned You: Chinese Official Rhetoric and Escalations[1]

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Abstract

Does China vary its official rhetoric before escalation? If so, why? China's recent hawkish diplomacy has made many policy analysts believe that China is growing more offensive. Paradoxically, materialists have long dismissed the role of official rhetoric as cheap. In this paper, I introduce a theory of escalation legitimation to contribute to this debate. I argue that before China escalates in foreign disputes, China legitimizes its actions by inflating the levels of issue saliences in its official rhetoric. This rhetorical strategy allows China to increase support and reduce setbacks from different audiences. Employing an original lexicon for measuring the salience levels of foreign disputes, I analyzed more than 10,000 *People's Daily* news articles published during 22 foreign crises and disputes from 1949 to 2020. I find systematic evidence that the more salient China defined a foreign dispute, the more likely that it escalated in both a 30 and 10-day window. I complement this analysis with a comparative case study between the Sino-Vietnamese and Sino-Philippine South China Sea disputes. I find that after China defined the dispute with Vietnam as merely a "friction," diplomatic actions were closely followed. In contrast, after China interpreted the dispute with the Philippines as an "invasion," China immediately conducted costly military drills. My theory challenges the materialist view that talk is cheap, and argues that China's official rhetoric is an early warning signal of escalation. It also has policy implications – western policymakers should pay more attention to Chinese rhetoric in managing various disputes with China to reduce the risks of unintended conflicts.

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"Typical politician, all talk, no action, sounds good, doesn't work, never going to happen."[3]

President Donald Trump

"China would act according to what it said, and deliver its actions with results (中方言必行,行必果)."[4]

President Xi Jinping

Puzzle and Argument in a Nutshell

China's recent hawkish rhetoric in diplomacy has drawn both scholarly and policy attention. Western media have depicted Chinese hawkish diplomats as "Wolf Warrior (战狼)," a phrase derived from the patriotic Chinese film Wolf Warrior 2, to describe the coercive diplomatic style of China.[5] Many policy analysts believe that China's hawkish rhetoric shows that China is becoming more assertive in foreign affairs.[6] As Ian Easton stresses, "[Chairman Xi] and his officials openly proclaim their intention to change the world, subvert democratic norms and instill their own brand of autocratic control."[7]

Paradoxically, in the field of international security, scholars have long dismissed the role of rhetoric. As Mearsheimer asserts, "talk is cheap and leaders have been known to lie to foreign audiences."[8] Rationalists also argue that only costly actions such

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[3]   Aaron Blake, "The First Trump-Clinton Presidential Debate Transcript," *Washington Post*, September 26, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/09/26/the-first-trump-clinton-presidential-debate-transcript-annotated/

[4]   "习近平同法国德国领导人举行视频峰会," Minister of Foreign Affairs, accessed April 21, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/zyxw/t1869471.shtml

[5]   Peter Martin, *China's Civilian Army: the Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy*, (U.S.: Oxford University Press 2021)

[6]   See Aaron Friedberg, *Getting China Wrong*, (U.S.: Polity, 2022); Elizabeth Economy, *The World According to China*, (U.S.: Polity, 2022); Christopher K. Johnson, "Why China Will Play It Safe: Xi Would Prefer Détente—Not War—With America ," *Foreign Affairs*, Nov 14, 2022, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/why-china-will-play-it-safe

[7]   Ian Easton, *Final Struggle: Inside China's Global Strategy*, (US: Eastbridge Books, 2022), Introduction

[8]   John J. Mearsheimer,. "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3(4) (2010): 381-382; See also, Sebastian Rosato, *Intentions in Great Power Politics: Uncertainty and the Roots of Conflict*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 19.

as military deployment and threats associated with audience costs can signal credible intentions.[9] Some recent studies suggest that costless rhetoric does deliver credible signals. However, it is only confined to private diplomatic settings.[10] Some also contend that official rhetoric is mainly for domestic purposes instead of intention signaling in crisis bargaining.[11] This presents a clear puzzle – while many policy analysts deduce the intentions of one state from its rhetoric, a large body of literature *assumes* that talk is cheap.[12] *How credible, then, is China's official rhetoric in signaling its intention?*

To solve this puzzle, I introduce a theory of escalation legitimation from the case of China. I argue that China's official rhetoric is not cheap at all. Before China escalates in foreign disputes, China needs to legitimize its actions by inflating the levels of issue saliences in its official rhetoric. Since escalation is risky, states need to prepare for the potential setbacks from both domestic and international actors. Therefore, states are required to persuade its audiences that its future aggressions are just and necessary. One effective way to legitimize escalation is to inflate the degrees of issue salience in one state's official rhetoric. By issue salience, I refer to the importance of an issue defined by an actor that may threaten his/her core interests and survival that requires most aggressive actions. In line with the realist logic, there are no more important goals than a state to defend its national interests and security. Therefore, invoking the degrees

[9] See, Andrew H. Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations.* Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2005; James D Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes." *The American political science review* 88, no. 3 (1994): 577–592.

[10] See, Katagiri, Azusa, and Eric Min, "The Credibility of Public and Private Signals: A Document-Based Approach," *The American political science review* 113, no. 1 (2019): 156–172; Anne E Sartori, "The Might of the Pen: A Reputational Theory of Communication in International Disputes," I*nternational Organization* 56, no. 1 (2002): 121–49. doi:10.1162/002081802753485151.

[11] Wang, Frances Yaping, and Brantly Womack. "Jawing through Crises: Chinese and Vietnamese Media Strategies in the South China Sea." *The Journal of contemporary China* 28, no. 119 (2019): 712–728.;

[12] For recent analysis on gauging Chinese intentions from its rhetoric, see Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order,* Oxford University Press (July, 2021)

of issue salience provides strong justification for states to justify its subsequent aggression.

To test my theoretical proposition, I created an original dataset that consists of more than 10,000 *People's Daily* news articles covering 22 foreign crises and disputes China faced from 1949 to 2020. I then developed a computational lexicon through both qualitative reading and a word-embedding model to measure the sentiment levels of issue salience in China's official rhetoric. I found that both 30 days and 10 days before China escalated and de-escalated in a foreign dispute, the sentiment levels of the rhetoric are systematically different. Moreover, the escalation levels were associated with the degrees to which China defined the dispute as salient. I then accompanied the statistical results with a comparative case study of the South China Sea disputes with the Philippines and Vietnam in 2016 and 2014 respectively. I found that after China defined the dispute with Vietnam as merely a "friction (骚扰)," China diplomatic actions were promptly followed. On the contrary, after China interpreted the dispute with the Philippines as an "invasion (入侵)," China immediately conducted costly military exercises against the Philippines and the U.S.

So what? First, this study challenges the conventional wisdom – official talk is cheap. My research demonstrates that existing scholarship draws a false dichotomy between "costly actions" and "costless talk." In the case of China, it always sets the tone of a dispute and crisis first before conducting escalation for legitimation. In this regard, a state's rhetoric and actions are not contradictory but complementary to each other. Second, although many existing studies have studied the role of official rhetoric in

understanding China's intention. However, how to systematically tease out the rhetoric component that reflects the intentions of China in foreign affairs is lacking. In fact, different think tank reports have long suggested how specific Chinese diplomatic rhetoric serves as a signaling device for China to convey its intentions of the use of force. Yet, these studies only provide limited list of phrases such as "playing with fire (玩火)," and focus on few military escalations such as 1979 Sino-Vietnamese war.[13] This is the first study, to my knowledge, that systematically measures how China interprets different foreign crises and disputes by creating an original Chinese-language lexicon. Finally, one of the most important theoretical debates in International Relations today is the possibility of hegemonic war between the U.S. and China. Graham Allison, for example, argues that the likelihood of China and the U.S. to fall into the Thucydides' Trap is determined by how the U.S. understands the intentions of China.[14] As asserted by Doshi, "the need for a grounded understanding of China's intentions and strategy has never been more urgent."[15] My project offers theoretical insights on how Chinese official rhetoric can be an informative and credible source of China's intentions in crisis moments.

In addition, this study speaks directly to two policy-related questions: *what* does China narrate if it intends to escalate, and *how early* does China legitimize its escalation?

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[13]   See, Paul H.B. Godwin and Alice L. Miller, "China's Forbearance Has Limits: Chinese Threat and Retaliation Signaling and Its Implications for a Sino-American Military Confrontation," National Defense University: Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, (2013), p.33; See also Beauchamp-Mustafaga et al, *Deciphering Chinese Deterrence Signaling in the New Ear: An Analytic Framework and Seven Case Studies*, RAND Corporation (Australia), (2021)

[14]   See, Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?" *Atlantic*, September 24, 2015; Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017)

[15]   Doshi, *The Long Game*, p.6

Getting these questions right is of critical importance to take appropriate actions, be it negotiation or delaying response, to respond to China's escalations. For example, today, the dominant discussion among Taiwanese and American pundits and policy experts is driven by the possibility of China invading Taiwan and its neighboring states.[16] My theory provides answers by looking into the specific substance of Chinese official rhetoric before escalation is taken. If my theory is correct, there will be no pre-emptive use of force by China in foreign disputes. Furthermore, how China defines a foreign dispute and crisis is an early warning signal of its subsequent costly actions. Western policymakers should pay extra attention in deciphering the rhetoric of China in dispute moments. Getting the intentions right cannot prevent all conflicts. The anarchic nature of international systems, constant conflict of interests among great powers, and different domestic factors can all contribute to conflicts and wars. However, it can at least reduce the risks of *unintended conflicts.* As President Biden states, "the United States will compete vigorously [with China].... while keeping lines of communication open and ensuring competition does not veer into conflict."[17] If policy makers can accurately decipher the rhetoric of China, then we should not be pessimistic about the future of the U.S.-China relations in managing their differences.

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[16]　　See Charles Glaser, "Washington Is Avoiding the Tough Questions on Taiwan and China," *Foreign Affairs,* April 28, 2021, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2021-04-28/washington-avoiding-tough-questions-taiwan-and-china; See also, 王信力 et al, 美中开战与台湾的未来, 台北: 如果出版社, (2019), p.58-59 [Traditional Chinese]

[17]　　"Biden says won't veer into conflict with China, as first summit ends in Asia", *CNBC News*, Nov 13, 2022, https://www.cnbc.com/2022/11/13/biden-says-wont-veer-into-conflict-with-china-as-first-summit-ends-in-asia.html

This paper first discusses the existing literature on rhetoric in international politics; then lays out the theoretical argument and research design; third presents the data, content analysis, and the two case studies; finally concludes with the theoretical implications.

Rhetoric and Intentions

Rhetoric, defined as the art or skill of persuasion,[18] has long been regarded as cheap talk, especially to materialists. As Mearsheimer argues, "talk is cheap and leaders have been known to lie to foreign audiences."[19] In a realist world, leaders have the perfect incentive to misrepresent information to maximize their interests. Therefore, states could never be certain about others' intentions through language and rhetoric. As Rosato writes, "the United States has and will continue to have little trouble acquiring evidence of China's declarations of intent since these are out in the open. Yet such statements are unreliable guides to Beijing's intentions, because China may or may not be telling the truth."[20]

Sharing a similar view, rationalists believe that intentions can only be delivered by costly actions. As argued by Fearon, "the first turns on the fact that states have both private information about capabilities and resolve and the incentive to misrepresent it."[21] Costly actions such as military exercises would be the only way for one actor to

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[18]   I borrowed Aristotle's definition of rhetoric here. As he states, "rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion." See Erik Doxtader, "In the Name of a Becoming Rhetoric: Critical Reflections on the Potential of Aristotle's Rhetoric 1355B," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 46, no. 2 (2013): 231
[19]   Mearsheimer, "Gathering Storm," 381
[20]   Sebastian Rosato, *Intentions in Great Power Politics,* Yale University Press 2022, 248
[21]   James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (1995): 379, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2706903.

deliver a credible signal to the counterpart in light of uncertainty.[22] As Wong

summarizes the perspective of theses two schools on the functions of rhetoric, "if an

expression of resolve is deemed credible, it is not because of what was said or done in

an interaction, but because leaders have the power to back it or because there will be

costly consequences if the proclaimed intention turns out to be untrue."[23]

Some studies do show that rhetoric is essential in signaling the intentions of

states. Min and Katagiri argue that rhetoric is an effective tool for states to communicate

in diplomacy. However, public statements are much noisier than private statements

since rhetoric in private settings is not delivered to the public but elites.[24] Wang also

found that when China's public opinion was misaligned with the state's intents, China

would invoke hawkish rhetoric to pacify domestic demands.[25] Hawkish rhetoric

therefore may have no causal relationship with Chinese hawkish intentions.

Notwithstanding, if rhetoric is immaterial in international politics, why does

China always carefully craft its statements related to foreign affairs, especially in foreign

crises?[26] Moreover, even if the official rhetoric is only targeting domestic audiences,

China should talk differently when it is going to escalate given that domestic audiences

may have strong expectations of Chinese escalations. This paper challenges the

pessimistic view of rhetoric by offering an alternative theory of escalation legitimation.

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[22]   Brian C. Rathbun, "Uncertain about Uncertainty: Understanding the Multiple Meanings of a Crucial Concept in International Relations Theory," *International Studies Quarterly*, Volume 51, Issue 3, (September 2007): 533–557, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2007.00463.x

[23]   Seanon S. Wong. "Who Blinked? Performing Resolve (or Lack Thereof) in Face-to-Face Diplomacy." *Security Studies* 30, no. 3 (2021): 419-420

[24]   Azusa Katagiri, and Eric Min, "The Credibility of Public and Private Signals"

[25]   Wang, "Barking without Biting"

[26]   Daniela Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China,* Cambridge University Press, (US 2011), p.92; See also, Daniela Stockmann, "Who Believes Propaganda? Media Effects during the Anti-Japanese Protests in Beijing." *The China Quarterly* 202 (2010): 269–89. doi:10.1017/S0305741010000238.

Legitimation Strategy and Escalation

While many materialist claims dismiss the importance of rhetoric, recent research in constructivism suggests how a state's rhetoric determines its foreign policies. Krebs and Goddard argue that it is important for states to legitimize their grand strategy, defined by the justification of a state's aims and actions. Failure to clearly identify the source of threat will make any grand strategy illegitimate, and as a result change the course of strategy.[27] How a state interprets an issue through its rhetoric, using Jervis' words, is "index and meaningful."[28] Goddard further argues that a rising power's failure to claim legitimacy of its foreign policy will lead to challenges and setbacks from other great powers.[29] As she states, "legitimation matters for rising powers because these states perhaps more than others – must worry about *collective mobilization* in response to their behavior: a rising power legitimates its behavior because it understand that its audiences, both at home and abroad, will either support or challenge its actions based in part on the reasons behind them."[30]

In fact, even some materialists concede that it is important for states to legitimize their actions to their international and domestic audiences. Walt, for example, argues that realists need to defend the moral high ground of realist foreign agendas for domestic support. As he argues, "offshore balancing is a self-interested strategy, but it is not indifferent to moral considerations. Because the United States remains a deeply

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[27]   Stacie E Goddard, and Ronald R Krebs, "Rhetoric, Legitimation, and Grand Strategy," *Security Studies* 24, no. 1 (2015): 5–36.

[28]   Ibid, 12, See also, Ronald R. Krebs, and Patrick Thaddeus Jackson. "Twisting Tongues and Twisting Arms: The Power of Political Rhetoric." *European Journal of International Relations* 13, no. 1 (2007): 35–66

[29]   Stacie E Goddard, *When Right Makes Might,* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, (2018)

[30]   Ibid., p.21

liberal society, its citizens are unlikely to embrace for long a grand strategy they believe is unethical or indifferent to morality. Accordingly, proponents of offshore balancing must also stress its positive moral qualities and its consistency with core U.S. values."[31] Xuetong Yan, the founder of moral realism, suggests that it is essential for great powers to claim the moral high ground for their foreign policy since appealing to morality can mobilize international support. As he states, "international morality can legitimize a state's action thus increasing a state's capability of international mobilization. Under the condition of equal strength, a moral state is able to make more friends and get more international support than a less moral state."[32] This logic is especially true in the context of dispute escalations given its costly nature. As Fravel argues, "escalations contain many risks [as well], including the uncertainty associated with spirals of hostility or domestic political punishment for military defeat in addition to the human and material costs of war."[33] As a matter of fact, the costly nature of escalations gives perfect incentive for states to first legitimize their actions before the actions take place, as legitimation helps states draw support and reduce potential setbacks after the strategic moves are taken.

In the case of China, the propaganda system holds a clear guideline that the most important function of foreign rhetoric (对外话语) is to "expand the influence of China, and drawing more international friends (扩大本国影响, 争取更多国际朋友)."[34] As writes

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[31]   Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*, U.S.: Farrar, Straus and Giroux (2018), chapter 7

[32]   Xuetong Yan, "From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Volume 7, Issue 2, (Summer 2014), p.167, https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pou027

[33]   Fravel Taylor, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p.13

[34]   See, 刘建明 et al, 宣传舆论学大辞典, (中国：经济日报出版社, 1993), 54

Yao, "In the history of New China, foreign propaganda often cooperates with other means such as military, diplomacy, and economics to promote the overall realization of foreign strategies... Especially through media discourse and communication activities, it can reshape the national identity of the outside world for China (在新中国历史上, 对外宣传往往与军事、外交、经济等其他手段相互配合, 以促使对外战略整体实现... 特别是通过媒介话语与交流活动, 能重塑外部世界对於中国的国家认同)."[35] Hence, in the case of China, it is not different from the legitimation literature. The primary function of Chinese foreign propaganda is to win support and friendship by defending their foreign policies.

Issue Salience as a Legitimation Strategy

One effective strategy to legitimize an escalation to different audiences is to define a political event, crisis outbreak, and dispute that may threaten the core interests of one state and/or trigger its survival concern that demands the most aggressive response, which I refer to **issue salience.** To inflate the salience levels of an event allows states to easily justify their escalatory actions because defending national security and interests are the *most important goal shared by states*. In line with what neoclassical realism argues, all states take security and national interests as their top priority.[36] There is no other more important goal if one state cannot secure its security and national interests. As claimed by Krebs and Goddard, "the rhetoric of 'the national interest' is an enduring feature of mandeer national policy, only a grand strategy that successfully lays claim to

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[35]   姚遥, 新中国对外宣传史: 建构现代忠能的国际话语权, (北京:清华大学出版社, 2014), 15, 27

[36]   See Han J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: the Struggle for Power and Peace*, brief ed, Boston: McGraw Hill (1993 [1948]), 4-12; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics,* Updated Edition, New York, NY: W.W. Norton, (2014), 29-54

serving the national interest can be legitimate."[37] Todd Hall also writes, "what is understood to be at stake is importantly shaped by how actors speak about disputes, the ways they narrate the histories and relationships within which disputes are situated, and how they locate disputes within the larger stories they tell of the world and what matters in it."[38] Rhetorizing the event that is of one state's core national interests and survival concern therefore provides all but indispensable justification about its costly escalation to different audiences. In short, when states subjectively interpret a political event that is of their core interests and life and death, the interpretation itself offers a strong moral ground for escalatory actions.

In China, it is conventional wisdom that how the party-state of China defines a particular issue (定调) justifies its subsequent policies. Chan and Zhong show that the party-state uses *People's Daily* headlines to signal the salience of different issues, which has strong predictability of the change and persistence of a particular policy.[39] This logic also applies to the domain of Chinese international affairs. In mentioning the cross strait relationship, for example, China has clearly defined Taiwan independence movement as a "seperatist movement (国家分裂活动)" in its official documents, and thus the use of force will be legitimate and necessary if Taiwan declares independence.[40] Allen Whiting also found that before China involved in the Korean War, China had sent ascending

[37] Krebs and Goddard, "Rhetoric, Legitimation, and Grand Strategy," p.38

[38] Todd Hall, "Dispute Inflation, " *European journal of international relations*, 27, no. 4 (2021), 1137

[39] Julian Chan and Weifeng Zhong. "Reading China: Predicting Policy Change with Machine Learning (Working Paper)" *PCI-China* (2018), accessed May 21, 2012, https://policychangeindex.org/pdf/Reading_China.pdf;

[40] "王在希谈对台政策：动武底线 大陆军演 统一时限," Minister of Foreign Affairs, 2004, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cgla//chn/zt/twwt1/t58564.htm

verbal signals to the U.S., which were ignored by U.S. diplomats.[41] Likewise, in the Sino-Soviet border conflict, China had been consistently narrating the Soviet Union's moves as a "social imperialist invasion (社会帝国主义入侵)" before taking military escalation.[42] Xijin Hu, the former chief editor of *Global Times*, also stresses that the fundamental goal for China foreign news to achieve is to "underscore and protect the national interests of China, [as they] are in line with the Chinese people's fundamental interests (我觉得最根本的，就是要站稳立场，维护中国国家利益，它和人民的根本利益是一回事)."[43]

Theoretical Framework of Escalation Legitimation

Derived from the literature of legitimation and China studies, I argue that before China conducts an escalation in a foreign dispute, China inflates the salience levels of the dispute in its official rhetoric. This rhetorical strategy serves as a means for China to persuade different actors to accept its costly escalation. The more costly the escalation that China is going to conduct, the more salient the issue that China needs to define.

Table 1A illustrates the general theoretical framework of my argument. If my theory is correct, China should invoke the issue salience frame in its official channels for legitimation before taking escalation (Cell A), and downplay the frame of issue salience before taking de-escalation (Cell D). If my theory is wrong, the empirical results should either fall into the category of cheap talk (Cell B) where no escalation is taken but strong issue salient sentiment in China's rhetoric, or pre-emptive escalation (Cell C) where

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[41]   Allen S Whiting, "China's Use of Force, 1950-96, and Taiwan," *International security* 26, no. 2 (2001): 103–131.
[42]   李颖, 文献中的百年党史, 香港:三联出版社, (2021), chapter: 珍宝岛事件和准备打仗, p.241 (Traditional Chinese)
[43]   高渊, 中国寻路者访谈录, 香港:三联出版社, (2020), chapter: 访谈:我也会退出江湖的,胡锡进, p.322 (Traditional Chinese)

surprising escalations take place before China's official rhetoric invoking the issue

salience frame.

Table 1A. Theoretical Framework of Legitimation of Escalation (and De-escalation)

	Escalation	De-escalation
Invoking Issue Salience	*Legitimation of Escalation (A)*	Cheap Talk (B)
Not Invoking Issue Salience	Pre-emptive strike/ Surprise of escalation (C)	*Legitimation of De-escalation (D)*

Drawing from my theory of escalation legitimation, I come to two main

hypotheses:

H1: The issue salience sentiment in its official rhetoric is significantly higher before escalation compared to de-escalation.

If my theory is right, the issue salience frame should be significantly different

before escalation from de-escalation since China needs to legitimize its action before

conducting it. If there is no difference between escalation and de-escalation in terms of

issue salience sentiment, it means my theory is wrong. Chinese rhetoric is either cheap

(no action followed) or China's strategic culture is more prone to pre-emptive strike

(preceded by no rhetorical legitimation).

H2: The higher the degree that China defines a dispute as salient, the more salient the escalation China conducts.

If my theory is correct, the more costly the subsequent action, the more salient

China needs to define the issue. It is because China needs to persuade its audiences that

the costly actions are just and necessary to reduce potential setbacks. If my theory is

wrong, the salience levels in Chinese rhetoric should have no relationship to its degrees of escalation.

As mentioned earlier, I define issue salience as an actor interpreting the degree of an issue that may threaten his/her core interests and trigger his/her survival concern. However, different from many policy studies, I do not operationalize issue salience as the degree to which an actor is cognitively and behaviorally engaged in that issue reflected by the frequency of key phrases mentioned in a text.[44] On the contrary, I operationalize issue salience as how an actor *actually defines* the salience of an issue. For example, instead of measuring the frequency of the South China Sea mentioned in China's official rhetoric, my project measures the frequency of China defining the South China Sea disputes as "encirclement (包围网)" and an "invasion (入侵)." In fact, measuring the definition of a foreign event itself provides a more accurate and direct measure of the concept instead of merely mentioning the frequency of a particular issue For example, increasing the mention of the South China Sea may not mean that China is going to conduct military escalation but initiate negotiation of the code of conduct.

For escalation, I borrowed Fravel's definition. As he defines, "an escalation strategy involves the threat or use of force to seize land or coerce an opponent in a territorial dispute."[45] Escalation therefore includes the use of force, including military exercise in disputed regions, deploying extra forces to the dispute region, or initiating conflicts. However, recent studies have shown that China has employed more diverse

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[44]   Miller, J. M., Krosnick, J. A., & Fabrigar, L. R. (2017). "The origins of policy issue salience: Personal and national importance impact on behavioral, cognitive, and emotional issue engagement." In J. A. Krosnick, I-C. A. Chiang, & T. H. Stark (Eds.), *Political psychology: New explorations* (pp. 125–171). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.
[45]   Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, p.4

and subtle forms of escalation including legalizing disputed territories, halting existing

exchange and cooperation[46], economic coercion such as mobilizing economic boycotts

and imposing trade barriers[47], and mobilizing nationalist protests.[48] I added these

components into my operationalization of escalations, and classified the degree of

escalation based on the costs of them in a scale of 1-5.

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[46]   Taylor Fravel, "China's Assertiveness in the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands Dispute" (June 1, 2016). *MIT Political Science Department Research Paper* No. 016-19, Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=2788165 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2788165

[47]   Andrew Chubb, "PRC Assertiveness in the South China Sea: Measuring Continuity and Change, 1970–2015," *International security* 45, no. 3 (2021): 79–121; Ketian Zhang, "Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing's Use of Coercion in the South China Sea," *International security* 44, no. 1 (2019): 117–159

[48]   Jessica Chen Weiss, "Authoritarian Signaling, Mass Audiences, and Nationalist Protest in China," *International organization* 67, no. 1 (2013): 1–35

Table 1B. Degrees of Escalation and Examples

Actions	Degrees	Examples	Category
Military Attacks	5	Kinmen Bombing (1958)	Escalation
Military Drills	4	South China Sea Military Drills (2016)	Escalation
Military Deployment	4	Military deployment to Sino-Indian border (2017)	Escalation
Economic Coercion	3	Mobilizing economic boycott against South Korea (2016)	Escalation
Quasi Military Deployment	3	Deploying marine surveillance ships to Senkaku Islands (2012)	Escalation
Halt Cooperation	2	Halting exchange program with the U.S. (1999)	Escalation
Legalization of Disputed Territory	2	Legalizing the South China Sea (2012)	Escalation
National Protest	2	Mobalizing anti-Japan protests (2012)	Escalation
Cease Fire/Truce	1	Cease fire agreement with South Korea and the U.S. (1953)	De-escalation
Negotiation	1	Initiate Negotiation with Vietnam (2014)	De-escalation

As shown in Table 1B, the degrees of escalation are categorized by the levels of costs. For example, conducting military attacks are more costly than military drills. In short, in a scale of 1- 5, 5 refers to the most costly actions such as military attacks, 1 refers to the least costly actions including ceasing fire and conducting negotiation, which are considered as de-escalation.

Data Collection and Research Design

To test my theoretical proposition, I borrowed Wang's China's foreign crisis and dispute dataset, which documents more than 20 foreign crises China has faced since 1949.[49] Based on the crises and disputes that she collected, I added the cases of the three cross strait missile crises in 1954, 1958, and 1996, and two U.S.-China diplomatic disputes

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[49]   Wang, "Barking without Biting"

China faced in 1999 and 2001.[50] I also added the recent 2020 Sino-Indian border conflict into the dataset.

Table 1C. Table of Foreign Disputes and China's Most and Least Salient Actions

Year	Event	Action	Degree	Action Date
1950	1950 Korean War	Military Attacks	5	1950-10-25
1950	1950 Korean War	Cease Fire/ Truce	1	1953-07-27
1954	1954 Cross Strait Crisis	Military Attacks	5	1954-09-03
1958	1958 Cross Strait Crisis	Military Attacks	5	1958-08-24
1959	1959 Sino-Indian Crisis	Initiate Negotiation	1	1959-09-08
1959	1959 Sino-Indian Crisis	Initiate Negotiation	1	1959-11-14
1962	1962 Sino-Indian War	Military Attacks	5	1962-10-20
1962	1962 Sino-Indian War	Initiate Negotiation	1	1962-12-11
1967	1967 Sino-Indian Conflict	Clash	2	1967-10-01
1969	1969 Sino-Soviet War	Military Attacks	5	1969-03-20
1969	1969 Sino-Soviet War	Initiate Negotiation	1	1969-10-20
1974	1974 Sino-Vietnamese War	Military Deployment	4	1974-01-19
1978	1978 Sino-Japanese Island Dispute	Initiate Negotiation	1	1978-08-12
1979	1979 Sino-Vietnamese War	Military Attacks	5	1979-02-18
1986	1986 Sino-Indian Dispute	Clash	2	1986-10-18
1986	1986 Sino-Indian Dispute	Initiate Negotiation	1	1988-12-19
1988	1988 Sino-Vietnamese Islands Dispute	Initiate Negotiation	1	1988-09-02
1988	1988 Sino-Vietnamese Islands Dispute	Clash	2	1988-03-14
1990	1990 Sino-Japanese Islands Dispute	Initiate Negotiation	1	1990-10-30
1996	1996 Cross Strait Crisis	Military Drills	4	1995-07-21
1996	1996 Cross Strait Crisis	Military Drills	4	1996-03-09
1999	1999 Sino-US Dispute	Initiate Negotiation	1	1999-12-06
1999	1999 Sino-US Dispute	Nationalist Protest	2	1999-05-10
1999	1999 Sino-US Dispute	Halt Cooperation	2	1999-05-11
2001	2001 Sino-US Plane Dispute	Initiate Negotiation	1	2001-04-10
2005	2005 Senkaku Island Dispute	Halt Cooperation	2	2005-04-18

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[50]   I added the case of Taiwan and the U.S. because these two states were having multiple conflicts with China from 1949 to 2022. These cases are also hard cases because China is well-known for talking hawkishly to the U.S. and Taiwan. Yet, China had different crisis responses to Taiwan and to the U.S. in those crises. If my theoretical prediction is wrong, there should be no distinguishable features in the *People's Daily* rhetoric before China conducted escalation and de-escalations in those crises.

2005	2005 Senkaku Island Dispute	Nationalist Protest	2	2005-04-09
2005	2005 Senkaku Island Dispute	Initiate Negotiation	1	2005-04-24
2010	2010 Senkaku Island Dispute	Halt Cooperation	2	2010-10-30
2010	2010 Senkaku Island Dispute	Nationalist Protest	2	2010-09-18
2012	2012 Senkaku Island Dispute	Nationalist Protest	2	2012-09-18
2012	2012 Senkaku Island Dispute	Quasi Miltary Deployment	3	2012-10-03
2012	2012 Senkaku Island Dispute	Nationalist Protest	2	2012-08-15
2012	2012 Sino-Viet SCS Dispute	Initiate Negotiation	3	2013-01-14
2012	2012 Sino-Viet SCS Dispute	Legalization	2	2012-06-24
2012	2012 Sino-Phil SCS Dispute	Economic Sanctions	3	2012-06-12
2012	2012 Sino-Phil SCS Dispute	Quasi Miltary Deployment	3	2012-04-18
2013	2013 Sino-Indian Border Conflict	Clash	2	2013-04-15
2013	2013 Sino-Indian Border Conflict	Initiate Negotiation	1	2013-05-05
2014	2014 Sino-Viet SCS Dispute	Economic Sanction	3	2014-05-17
2014	2014 Sino-Viet SCS Dispute	Initiate Negotiation	1	2014-06-18
2016	2016 Sino-Phil SCS Dispute	Military Drills	4	2016-07-12
2016	2016 Sino-Phil SCS Dispute	Initiate Negotiation	1	2016-10-19
2017	2017 Sino-Indian Border Dispute	Initiate Negotiation	1	2017-08-27
2017	2017 Sino-Indian Border Dispute	Clash	2	2017-06-16
2017	2017 Sino-Korean THAAD Dispute	Economic Sanction	3	2017-03-06
2017	2017 Sino-Korean THAAD Dispute	Initiate Negotiation	1	2017-11-22
2020	2020 Sino-Indian Border Dispute	Clash	2	2020-05-05
2020	2020 Sino-Indian Border Dispute	Initiate Negotiation	1	2020-07-08

As shown in Table 1C, for each foreign dispute or crisis, I coded the most salient

and least salient actions taken by China according to the conceptualization of escalation

mentioned earlier.[51] If there are multiple waves of escalation with the same degrees, I

took the initial most and least salient actions because those actions serve as a hard test

to my theory if China was conducting preemptive escalations before the rhetoric came

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[51]   I borrowed the definition of dispute from Taylor Fravel's work on territorial disputes. As he defined, territorial disputes are "conflicting claims by two or more states over the ownership of the same piece of land." I expanded this definition to the wider security arena such as the 2017 Sino-Korean THAAD dispute. See, Taylor Fravel. *Strong Borders, Secure Nation : Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, p.10

in or merely bluffing. To code the action date, I used non-*People's Daily* sources, including foreign press releases, foreign government statements, and China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs statements to increase the validity of the action date.

I then collected 10,658 *People's Daily* articles from 1949 to 2021 from the People's Daily Archive Database (人民日报数据库) (1949 to 1999) and the Wisenews Database (2000 to 2021) that cover all these disputes. I chose *People's Daily* instead of other official newspapers such as *People's Liberation Army Daily* because *People's Daily* is considered as the most authoritative channel to signal the party-state's intentions. As stated by Godwin and Miller, "the only channel for authoritative media commentary on international disputes and crises is *People's Daily*, which speaks in the name of the CCP Central Committee."[52] In addition, *People's Daily* is published throughout the timeframe I examined (1949 to 2021), and it is fully digitized in the two databases, which is essential for computational text analysis. And compared to Xinhua News agency, which is also fully party-owned, *People's Daily* provides more commentaries and editorials, which were mainly used when China decided to resort to the use of force.[53]

People's Daily news articles are collected one year before each event and until the event ends. Table 2 shows the summary statistics of *People's Daily articles* collected in the two databases, and the breakdown of the data that were published 30 and 10 days before China took strategic actions.[54]

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[52]   Godwin and Miller, "China's Forbearance Has Limits," p.31
[53]   Ibid., 32
[54]   Dictionary-based text analysis is idiosyncratic to each corpus. For example, the phrase "counterstrike'' in sport and entertainment news (a Korean drama protagonist conducts a "counterstrike" against his opponent, etc.) carries the same weight as in news about international conflicts. Hence, in this project, I only collect articles that are related to China and only related to international news to reduce noise.

Table 2A Summary Statistics of *People's Daily* Collected

Database	Source	Number	30 days Before	10 Days Before
People's Daily Archive	*People's Daily*	5104	364	191
Wisenews (after 2000)	*People's Daily*	4054	376	122
Wisenews (after 2000)	*People's Daily Overseas*	1532	133	57

Measuring Issue Salience of Foreign Events

Although there are extensive discussions on Chinese rhetoric on foreign affairs, there is surprisingly no systematic measurement of it. Existing measures of Chinese foreign rhetoric either rely on counting particular key phrases, or counting the number of headlines published before and after different crises. As mentioned earlier in the paper, both measures are hardly accurate in capturing Chinese intentions in foreign crises. For counting specific key phrases such as "sovereignty (主权)," the measurement may fail to capture the rest of the features in the contexts.[55] For example, a news article may actually downplay the issue by invoking the "mutual respect (相互尊重)" of "sovereignty." In this case, only summing up the phrase "sovereignty" may not reflect the true sentiment of the article. Calculating the number of headlines is also not an accurate measure to capture the levels of Chinese escalatory intentions. A lot of headlines of *People's Daily*, for example, are about leaders' visits between China and

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[55] See, Kai Quek, "Discontinuities in Signaling Behavior Upon the Decision for War: An Analysis of China's Prewar Signaling Behavior," *International relations of the Asia-Pacific* 15, no. 2 (2015): 299, Alastair Iain Johnston, "How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness" *International Security*, Vol. 37. No.4 (2013):.42.

other states.[56] These articles signal de-escalatory instead of escalatory intentions of China in a dispute.

Dictionary-based text analysis is considered as one of the most objective methods to measure the degrees of sentiment in text analysis.[57] Moreover, given the highly standardized style of Chinese foreign rhetoric, a dictionary-based approach can effectively tease out the rhetorical pattern of texts. However, this approach is also idiosyncratic to each corpus. Therefore, existing Chinese dictionaries for general sentiment analysis cannot fully capture the nuance in Chinese rhetoric on foreign affairs. For example, the existing dictionaries developed by Tsinghua University do not have the special phrases widely used in foreign affairs such as "imperialist U.S. (美帝)" and "hegemonism (霸权主义)."

To construct a dictionary that is comprehensive enough to capture the underlying dimension of issue salience in Chinese official rhetoric, I conducted a word2vec word-embedding model, an unsupervised method that converts words into a vector format by considering the relative positions of words of the input data. I first trained the full corpora with the R word2vec model. Then I inserted words related to how China defines a salient issue, for example, "encirclement (包围网)," into the trained model. The model then generated a list of words that has close proximities to the input words, for example, "critical situation (紧张状态)." Finally, I selected and categorized

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56   See, see, Wang, "Barking without Biting"18; and for example, "人民日报就习近平访越发表评论：铭记兄弟情谊, 开拓友好征程," May 07, 2015, *Sina*, http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2015-11-07/doc-ifxkmrvp5232814.shtml
57   Daniela Stockmann, *Media Commercialization"*

related phrases that score above 0.7 of proximity into the dictionary.[58] This method

provides a systematic collection of phrases in addition to careful reading of news

articles. The dictionary consists of more than 170 phrases.[59] Table 3. provides a sample

of the dictionary.

     To validate the dictionary, I conducted a hand coding exercise of the dictionary

by two graduate research assistants who have strong knowledge in Chinese politics in

Hong Kong. The agreement of the dictionary is close to 93%.

Table 3. A Sample of Dictionary of Issue Salience

Category	Examples of Phrases
Issue Salience (120 Phrases)	Bottom-line (底线), Invasive moves (侵略), Invasion (入侵), Critical situation (紧张局势), Playing with fire (玩火自焚), Political crisis (政治危机), Top pirority (头等大事), Grand unification (统一大业), Creating threat (构成威胁), Expansonism (扩张主义), Defensive War (卫国战争), State collaspe (亡国), Party Collaspe (亡党)
Non-issue Salience (52 Phrases)	Steady transition (平稳过渡), Traditional friendship(传统友谊), Right path (正确轨道), Normalization (正常化), Constructive (建设性)

     In addition to the face validity test, I further validate my lexicon through

performing a discriminant test. I demonstrated that the non-salient and salient terms

that I collected are not equal to positive and negative terms, a similar but a different

construct. I conducted two correlation tests between my lexicon and the two widely

used Chinese-language dictionaries developed by National Taiwan University (NTU)

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[58]   Rekabsaz, Lupu, and Hanbury have conducted different testings and suggested a general bar of 0.7 for the best proximity measurement between two keywords. For details, see Rekabsaz, Navid, Mihai Lupu, and Allan Hanbury, "Exploration of a Threshold for Similarity Based on Uncertainty in Word Embedding," In *Advances in Information Retrieval*, 10193:396–409. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017

[59]   I conducted a face validation exercise of the dictionary by two graduate research assistants who have strong knowledge in Chinese politics in Hong Kong. The agreement of the dictionary is close to 93%.

and Tsinghua University (Tsinghua). As seen from Figure A and B, the correlation

between the three dictionaries are at best moderate when applying them into the

People's Daily corpora [correlation score = 0.5 with Tsinghua Sentiment Dictionary and

0.6 with NTU Sentiment Dictionary].

Figure A. Correlation between Issue Salience Dictionary and Tsinghua University Sentiment Dictionary
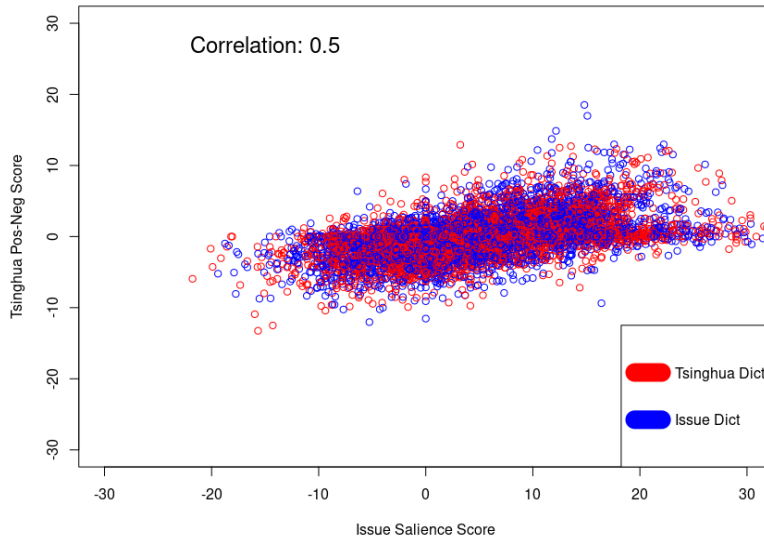
Figure B. Correlation between Issue Salience Dictionary and National Taiwan University Sentiment Dictionary
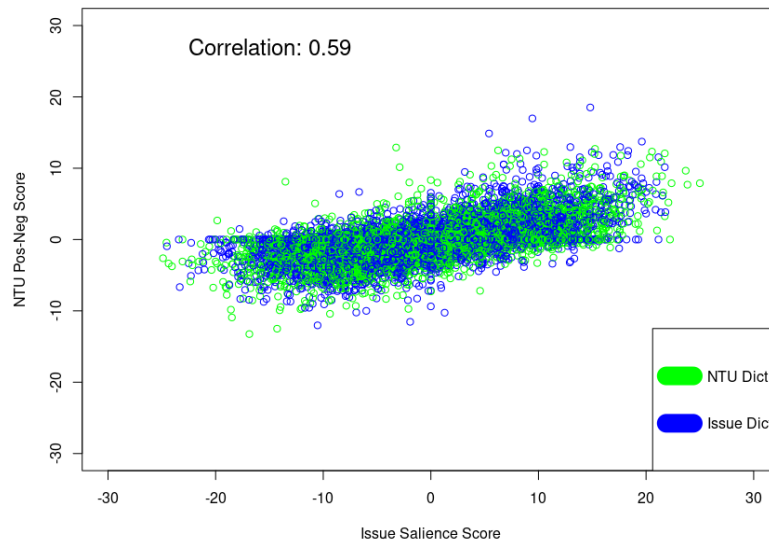
Table 4 shows an example of articles with the highest score published 1 day before China initiated military attacks during the Sino-Soviet border dispute.

Table 4. Excerpt of an Article with the Highest Issue Salience Score

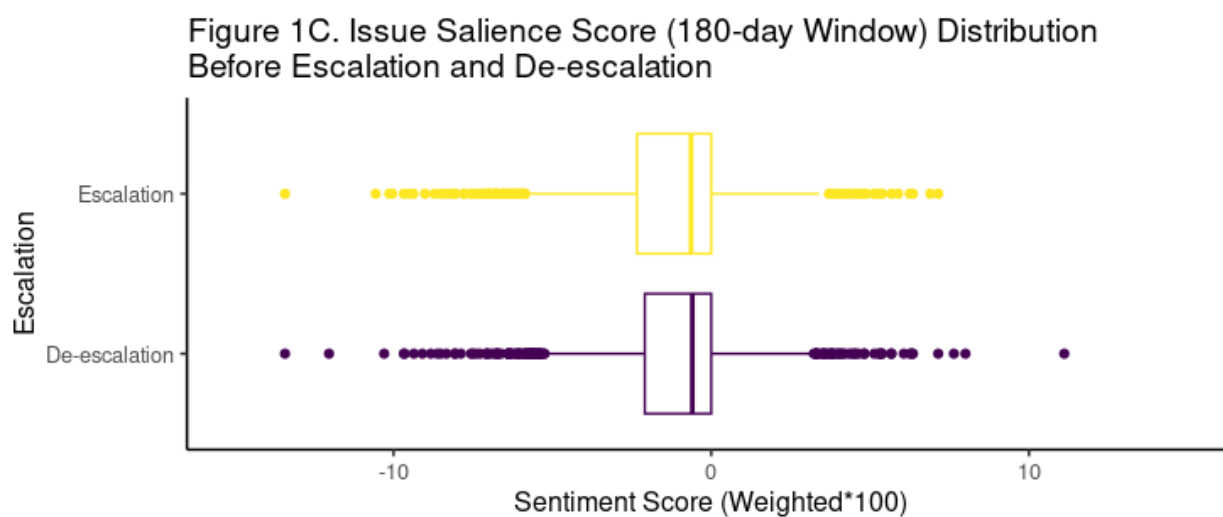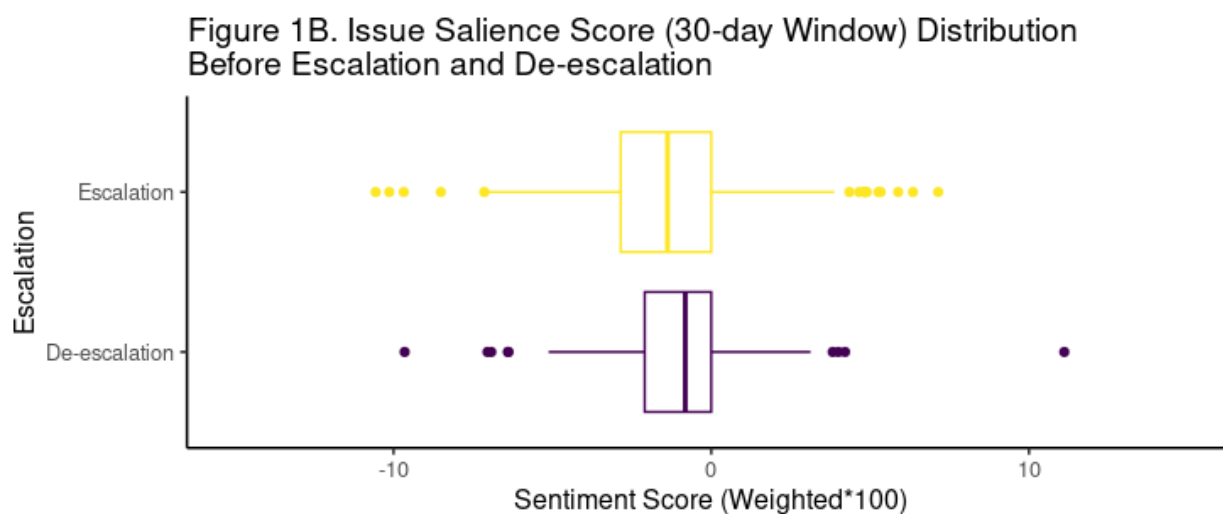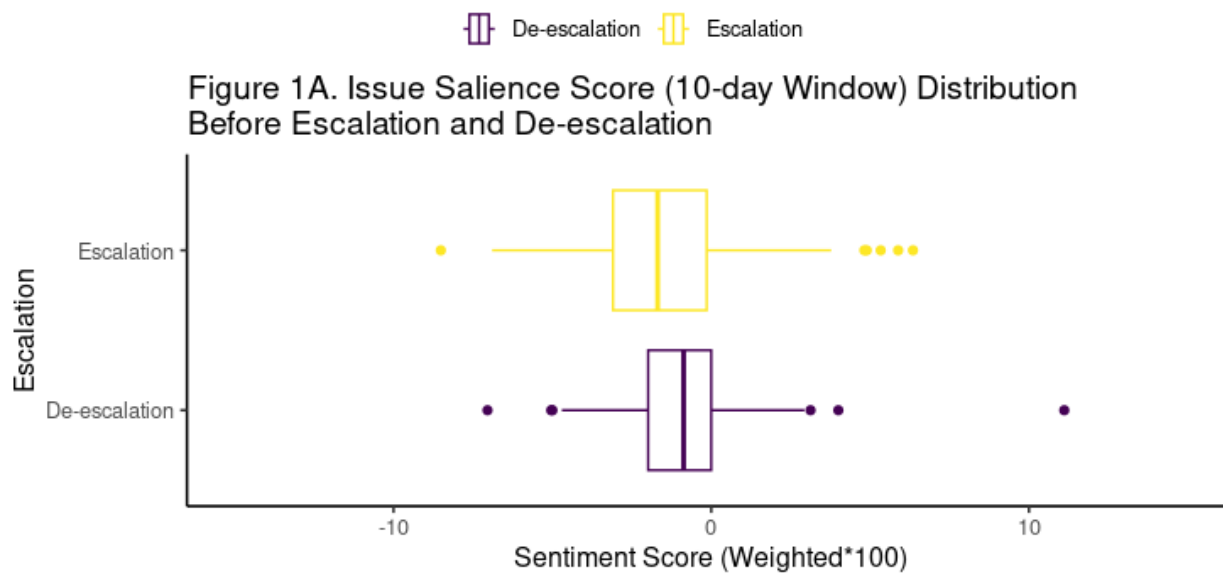| Title	苏修再次侵入我珍宝岛地区制造新的流血事件
Date	1969-03-19
Elapsed Day	1
Excerpt:	...修法西斯匪徒：今天的中国，是伟大领袖毛主席领导的世界上最强大的社会主义国家。七亿中国人民，是用毛泽东思想武装起来的英雄的人民，是无敌于天下的。如果你们继续来犯，只能得到更加悲惨的下场。驻珍宝岛地区的边防部队战士，回顾了他们反击苏修武装挑衅的战斗经历，一致表示要以毛主席的最新指示为武器，总结斗争经验，更加充分地认识苏修的侵略本性，彻底粉碎新沙皇的侵略野心..
Translation:	""...the fascist bandit: Today's China is the most powerful socialist country in the world led by the great leader Chairman Mao. The 700 million Chinese people are heroic people armed with Mao Zedong thought, and they are invincible in the world. If you continue to commit aggression, you will only get a more tragic end. The border guards stationed in the Zhenbao Island area reviewed their combat experience in countering the Soviet revisionist armed provocation, and unanimously expressed that they would use Chairman Mao's latest instructions as a weapon to summarize the struggle. We further understand Soviet revisionist invasive nature through past combat experience, and would completely smash the new Tsar's ambitions of invasion..."

Content Analysis

To process the *People's Daily* corpora, I first tokenized the corpora through the JiebaR package in R. The package is effective in tokenizing simplified Chinese phrases compared to other text processing packages. I then used the R Quanteda package to apply the dictionary into the corpora. Stop words and some most frequent words with little related information such as "report (报道)" are removed from the document frame matrix (dfm). I then trimmed down the dfm by having the threshold of terms at least

appeared for 5 times to reduce noise. To calculate the sentiment score of the issue

salience, I used the following formulas:

*Issue Salience Score = #Non-issue Salience - # Issue Salience * Weighted Scores *100*

The formula implies that the lower the score, the more salient China is defining a

foreign dispute or event. I multiplied the score by 100 for better visual illustration.

To test my theoretical proposition, I subset the data by the condition of 180, 30,

and 5 days before the least and most salient escalations taken by China across the 22

disputes. Figure 1A to C show that the sentiment degrees are significantly different

between the escalation and de-escalation category. In a 180-day window, the difference

in means is only 18% substantively more negative compared between escalation and

de-escalation category [p-value = 0.005, 95% confidence interval: -0.32, -0.06]. In a

30-day window, the difference in means is 52% lower in the escalation category [p-value

= 0.0001, 95% confidence interval: -0.80 -0.31]. And in a 10-day window, the issue

salience score is 98% lower in the escalation category [p-value = 0.0002, 95% confidence

interval: -1.26, -0.51].

Figure 1A. Issue Salience Score (10-day Window) Distribution Before Escalation and De-escalation

Figure 1B. Issue Salience Score (30-day Window) Distribution Before Escalation and De-escalation

Figure 1C. Issue Salience Score (180-day Window) Distribution Before Escalation and De-escalation

I then conducted a set of ordinal and binary logistic regressions to test the hypothesis that before conducting escalation, China inflates the degrees of issue salience. For the regression models, I introduced two control variables that may confound the results: (1) the involvement of the U.S. and Soviet Union (USSR) in the dispute; and (2) the leadership of China. For the involvement of the U.S. and USSR, Fravel has found that China was more likely to resort to escalation when the balance of power is not in favor of its bargaining strategy.[60] The involvement of the U.S. and USSR therefore might shape the escalation decisions of China. I coded the dataset as 1 if there is an involvement by the U.S. and USSR such as the 1950 Korean War, and 0 if these two countries are not involved such as the 2012 Sino-Japanese Senkaku Islands disputes. Chinese top leadership can also confound the results. Mao for example was more willing to resort to the use of forces compared to the leaders assumed after 1978 given the Cold War nature. I therefore added the variable of Chinese leadership into the dataset. The variable consists of 7 categories: (1) Mao; (2) Deng; (3) Jiang; (4) Hu; (5) Xi. Since some disputes including the 2012 Sino-Japanese dispute and 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War endured before and after the Chinese leadership transitions, I added (6) Hua/Deng" and (7) Hu/Xi to deal with the issue. Table 4 shows the statistical results.

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60   Taylor Fravel, "Power Shifts and Escalation: Explaining China's Use of Force in Territorial Disputes," *International security* 32, no. 3 (2007): 44–83.

	10-d M1	10-d M2	10-d M3	10-d M4	30-d M5	30-d M6	30-d M7	30-d M8	180-d M9	180-d M10	180-d M11	180-d M12
issue salience score	−0.25***	−0.27***	−0.13*	−0.02*	−0.19***	−0.22***	−0.12***	−0.02***	−0.14***	−0.14***	−0.03	−0.00
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.01)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.00)
1|2	−0.52***	0.01	17.98***		−0.39***	0.18	18.38***		−0.03	−0.07	17.82***	
	(0.11)	(0.16)	(0.22)		(0.07)	(0.10)	(0.13)		(0.03)	(0.05)	(0.05)	
2|3	−0.13	0.42**	18.61***		0.01	0.61***	19.04***		0.51***	0.47***	18.51***	
	(0.11)	(0.16)	(0.23)		(0.07)	(0.10)	(0.14)		(0.03)	(0.05)	(0.06)	
3|4	0.14	0.72***	19.13***		0.44***	1.08***	19.83***		0.88***	0.83***	18.99***	
	(0.11)	(0.16)	(0.24)		(0.07)	(0.10)	(0.16)		(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.06)	
4|5	0.64***	1.23***	20.15***		1.01***	1.67***	20.88***		1.41***	1.36***	19.74***	
	(0.11)	(0.17)	(0.28)		(0.08)	(0.11)	(0.19)		(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.07)	
US Soviet Involvement		0.90***	3.98***	0.50***		1.03***	3.78***	0.51***		−0.07	1.26***	0.22***
		(0.18)	(0.38)	(0.04)		(0.12)	(0.23)	(0.03)		(0.06)	(0.09)	(0.02)
Deng/ Hua			36.72***	0.96***			36.72***	0.95***			36.95***	1.00***
			(0.00)	(0.10)			(0.00)	(0.07)			(0.00)	(0.04)
Hu			18.67***	0.98***			19.19***	0.97***			18.49***	1.00***
			(0.34)	(0.12)			(0.21)	(0.07)			(0.10)	(0.05)
Hu/ Xi			16.03***	0.63***			15.88***	0.51***			17.49***	0.72***
			(0.46)	(0.14)			(0.22)	(0.08)			(0.10)	(0.05)
Jiang			13.78***	0.03			14.74***	0.10			16.58***	0.37***
			(0.28)	(0.10)			(0.16)	(0.07)			(0.06)	(0.04)
Mao			18.42***	0.41***			18.17***	0.31***			17.39***	0.28***
			(0.21)	(0.09)			(0.12)	(0.06)			(0.06)	(0.04)
Xi			15.30***	0.41***			16.25***	0.42***			16.60***	0.25***
			(0.28)	(0.11)			(0.15)	(0.07)			(0.08)	(0.04)
(Intercept)				−0.00				0.00				0.00
				(0.08)				(0.06)				(0.04)
AIC	1310.63	1286.13	941.17		3163.04	3082.45	2385.68		11395.97	11396.51	9665.87	
BIC	1331.65	1311.36	991.63		3188.08	3112.50	2445.78		11427.57	11434.44	9741.73	
Log Likelihood	−650.31	−637.07	−458.59	−186.34	−1576.52	−1535.22	−1180.84	−450.40	−5692.98	−5692.25	−4820.93	−2367.67
Deviance	1300.63	1274.13	917.17	61.28	3153.04	3070.45	2361.68	145.93	11385.97	11384.51	9641.87	761.20
Num. obs.	495	495	495	495	1105	1105	1105	1105	4112	4112	4112	4112
Pseudo R²				0.39				0.39				0.20

***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$

Table 4. Regression Models in 10, 30, and 180-day Window[61]

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[61]   I also conducted robustness checks on the models by only using the frequency of issue salience phrases as the principal variable. Moreover, instead of using weighted score of issue salience, I run the models through the tf-idf weighted score of issue salience. Both tests do not alter the results.

As shown in Table 4, all the models in a 10-day and 30-day window show that the issue salience score is statistically significant across all models in a 10-day and 30-day window (Model 1 to Model 8). The negative coefficient in the binary logistic models fits my first theoretical expectation that the sentiment of issue salience in *People's Daily* turned negative before China conducted escalations (Model 4 and 8). It also fits my second theoretical expectation that the issue salient score has a positive effect on the degrees of escalation (Model 1, 2, 3 and 5, 6, 7). The more negative China defined the dispute or crisis, the more aggressive the escalation it took. Lastly, the principal issue salience variable is not statistically significant in the two models in the 180-day windows when leadership and U.S-Soviet involvement are being controlled (Model 11 and 12). This demonstrates that the predictive power declines along the increase of eclipse days from the actual date of escalations. Since the logistic regression coefficients are hard to interpret, I plotted the predicted probability of different degrees of escalation associated with the issue salience score in a 30-day window (Figure 2A; Model 7).

Figure 2A shows that the predicted probability of escalations by issue salience scores confirms my theoretical prediction that the more salient China defines the foreign dispute, the more likely China is going to escalate. On the contrary, when the non-issue salience score went down, China was more likely to conduct negotiations and cease fire.

Figure 2A. Predicted Propabilty of China's Different Levels of Escalation (30-day Window)
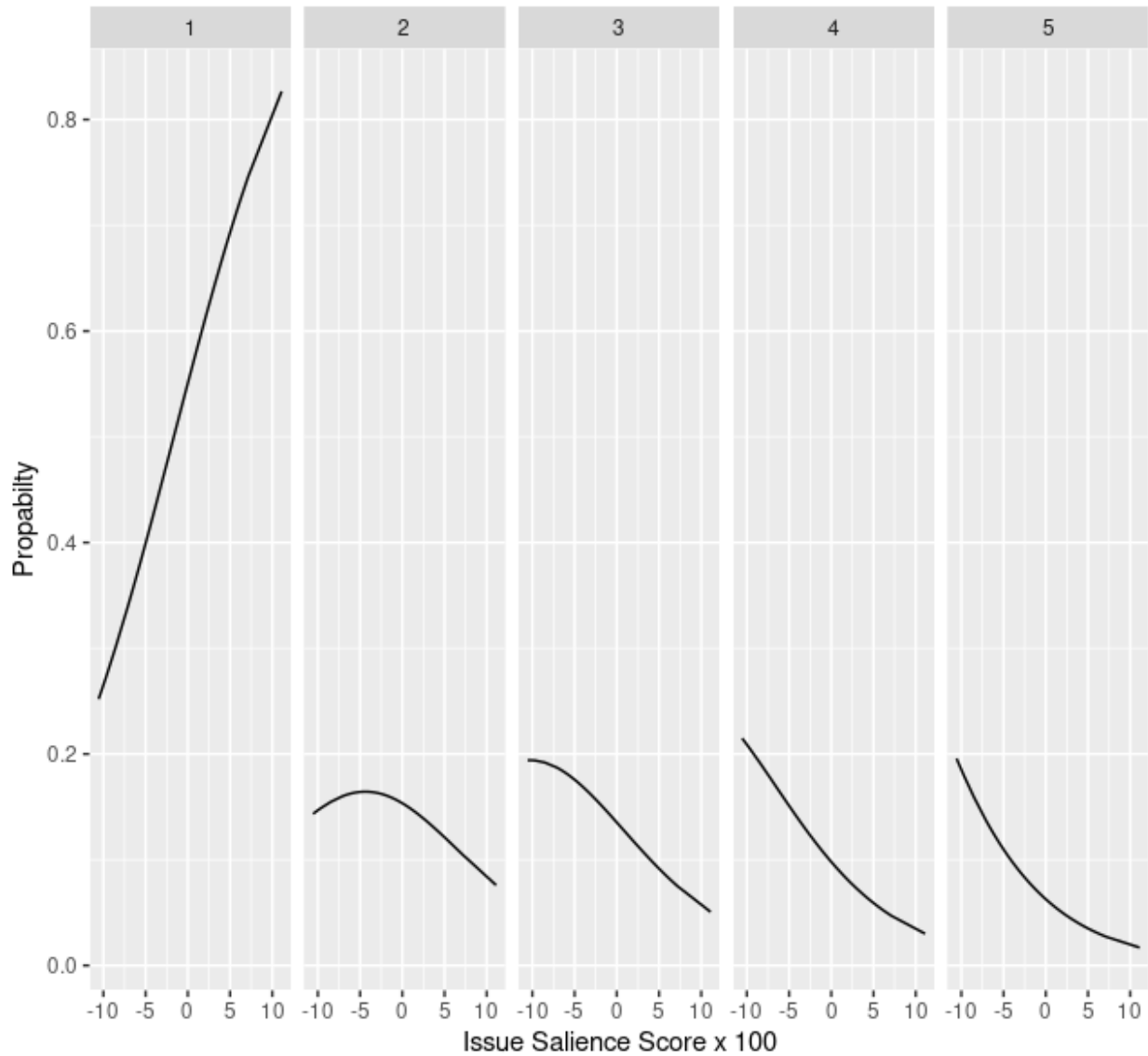
Comparative Case Studies

So far, the content analysis matches my two theoretical predictions that when China decides to escalate, it inflates the issue salience of a crisis. Moreover, the higher the levels of issue salience frame being invoked, the higher the levels of escalations. However, the quantitative analysis at this stage only shows the relationship between the rhetorical pattern and China's initial actions of each crisis and dispute. A detailed

comparative case study can offer more in-depth analysis on the longitudinal relationship between China's official rhetoric and dispute responses. Among the universe of cases, I selected the two South China disputes between China and the Philippines, and China and Vietnam for both theoretical and methodological reasons. Theoretically, territorial disputes are the most sensitive yet enduring issues in international relations, as they are always associated with one state's dignity, status, and identity, which could be easily escalated into arm conflicts.[62] Any actions or policy change to the territory could be considered as a sheer provocation to the three states, as the South China Sea carries both material and symbolic values to the three states. If China's official rhetoric is immaterial in signaling escalation and de-escalation, China **should talk the same** to the Philippines (most likely case) and Vietnam (most unlikely case) and **define the conflict's nature in a similar way.**

Empirically, one of the most serious disagreements between China and the U.S. is the navigation rights in the South China Sea, which is considered as one of the potential sources of U.S.-China hegemonic war.[63] As Goddard states, "China's own rhetoric has pushed the United States towards a new interpretation of its ambitions, especially its shift to the language of 'core interests' to justify its claim in the South China Sea."[64] However, this claim has not been systematically studied. As Kang argues, "[existing

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[62]   See, Paul K Huth, *Standing Your Ground: Territorial Disputes and International Conflict*, University of Michigan Press, 1996. https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.14335.; Ron E. Hassner, *War on Sacred Grounds*. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press. 2009; Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*

[63]   Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?" *Atlantic*, September 24, 2015.

[64]   Goddard, *When Right Makes Mights*, p.190

studies are] largely about how American scholars discuss Chinese rhetoric, not Chinese rhetoric itself."[65] The next section will use the two cases to fill this empirical lacuna.

Sino-Vietnamese SCS Dispute and De-escalation

On 6 May, 2014, China's state-owned company, China National Offshore Oil Corporation, deployed an oil rig in the disputed region of the South China Sea.[66] In response to this incident, Vietnam's MOFA issued a vociferous statement stating that China invaded the sovereignty of Vietnam. U.S Secretary of State John Kerry echoed to the rhetoric of Vietnam by saying China's oil activities were "provocative."[67] The dispute further escalated when Vietnam sent 29 vessels to interfere with the Chinese activities on May 12, 2014, which is known as the Hai Yang Shi You 981 standoff.

The standoff was also accompanied by a new wave of nationalist protests in Vietnam. Different Taiwanese and Chinese factories were burnt while major cities were overflowing with extreme anti-China nationalism. According to the BBC correspondence in Hanoi, "the protesters appeared to have targeted companies that had Chinese characters in their logos or signs."[68]

Nonetheless, the Chinese news media did not have a strong response to the protests. On May 13, *Global Times* published an editorial defining the issue as both a "provocation (挑衅)" and a "friction (摩擦)." However, it also stresses that Vietnam

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[65]   David C. Kang, "Thought Game about China," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 20, no. 2 (2020): 138-139

[66]   "南海升溫 越民反陸示威," *CNA News,* May 11, 2014, https://www.cna.com.tw/news/aopl/201405110089.aspx

[67]   "Kerry: China's Oil Rig in South China Sea 'Provocative'," *VOA News*, May 13, 2014, https://www.voanews.com/a/kerry-chinas-oil-rig-in-south-china-sea-provocative/1913329.html

[68]   "Vietnam Anti-China Protest: Factories Burn," *BBC News*, May 14, 2014, thttps://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-27403851

should treasure the traditional friendship with China.[69] And surprisingly, besides *Global Times*, no major Chinese news media directly covered the anti-China protests. As described by BBC, "An anti-China riot broke out in Vietnam, and local Taiwan-funded enterprises suffered heavy losses. However, the mainland media reported this riot directed at China in an unusually low-key manner."[70]

One month after the protests, *Global Times* published several editorials and op-eds in the first two weeks of June. On the one hand, they define Vietnam's behaviors as merely a "disturbance (骚扰)." On the other hand, they also write that "the communication channel is smooth between China and Vietnam."[71]

On June 19, China sent the then State Councilor Jiechi Yang to reassure that China would not further escalate the issue. On the same day, *People Daily Overseas*, published a headline editorial, "Advising Vietnam to Turn Back Early (奉劝越南早回头)."[72] Again, the editorial defines the conflict as "slightly relieving (稍稍得以缓解)." The editor also hopes that Vietnam can be "a prodigal son (浪子回头)." And "during the sensitive and tense situation in the South China Sea, high-level Chinese officials used this platform to communicate with Vietnam demonstrates China's willingness to resolve the issue in good faith and sincerity."

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[69] "西沙不存在争议, 越南莫自取其辱," *Global Times*, May 13, 2014, http://opinion.china.com.cn/opinion_86_98586.html

[70] "越南反中暴動 陸媒超低調," *CNA News*, May 16, 2014, https://tw.news.yahoo.com/%E8%B6%8A%E5%8D%97%E5%8F%8D%E4%B8%AD%E6%9A%B4%E5%8B%95-%E9%99%B8%E5%AA%92%E8%B6%85%E4%BD%8E%E8%AA%BF-062949679.html

[71] See the statement from Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, "981"钻井平台作业：越南的挑衅和中国的立场," Minister of Foreign Affairs, published, June 08, 2014, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/nanhai/chn/snhwtlcwj/t1163255.htm

[72] 苏晓晖, "望海楼：奉劝越南早回头,"*People's Daily Overseas,* June 19, 2014, http://cpc.people.com.cn/pinglun/n/2014/0619/c78779-25170911.html

The case of Vietnam shows that before de-escalatory actions took place, China had significantly downplayed the salience of the dispute. On the one hand, China's official rhetoric framed the anti-Chinanationalist protests as a series of "friction." On the other hand, no *People's Daily* articles and editorials were published about the protests and disputes. The next section discusses the case of the Philippines and how China defines the conflict with a completely different rhetorical pattern.

Sino-Philippine SCS Dispute and Continuous Escalations

In April 2014, the Philippines and the U.S. renewed a ten-year military pact, which allowed the U.S. to increase its troop presence, engage in more joint training, and have more access rights to bases across the archipelago in the Philippines.[73] China published 10 articles from May to early August, saying that the moves of the Philippines would only "lift a rock and hit one's own foot (搬起石头砸自己的脚)," a famous idiom in Chinese rhetoric to signal escalation. In early September, a Chinese visitor was shot in the Philippines. On September 16, *Global Times* published an editorial titled "Chinese tourists please look at the 'quasi-rogue country' Philippines (中国游客,晾晾准流氓国家菲律宾)." The next day, China issued a travel warning. The *BBC* reports that "a travel advisory issued by Beijing has caused a sharp fall in arrivals from China," and "the Philippines feels the force of China travel warning."[74]

One most aggressive wave of escalation happened when the International Court of Arbitration ruled that it would hear the case and accept the submission of evidence from the Philippines in October 2015. It also allowed and the Philippines started the

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[73]   "China Maritime Dispute," Council on Foreign Relations
[74]   Aurora Almendral, "Philippines Feels Forces of China's Warning," *BBC News,* October 22, 2013, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-29684938

legal defense in late November.[75] On 15 December, *People's Daily* published an editorial

that defines the issue as the ambitions of "territorial expansion (菲方为了扩张领土)."

On December 23, *People's Daily Overseas* published a headline article, stressing that the

Philippines is a troublemaker, and the nature of the issue is purely a "political

provocation." In February, Beijing deployed surface-to-air missiles on Woody Island, a

land mass in the Paracel Island chain in the South China Sea.[76] And in May 2016, one

month before the International Court of Arbitration released the ruling. China

published more than 10 articles in its official outlets, defining the issue as an "invasion

(入侵)."[77] And one month later, China launched one of the most extensive military

exercises with live missiles in the South China Sea.[78] The clear longitudinal relationship

between verbal signal and military escalation in the case of the Philippines showcases

that China's rhetoric of issue salience preceded its costly actions. The rhetorical pattern

is also significantly different between Vietnam and the Philippines over the same

territorial dispute.

To better illustrate the rhetorical difference of *People's Daily* on the Philippines

and Vietnam, I applied the same dictionary and formula introduced earlier in this

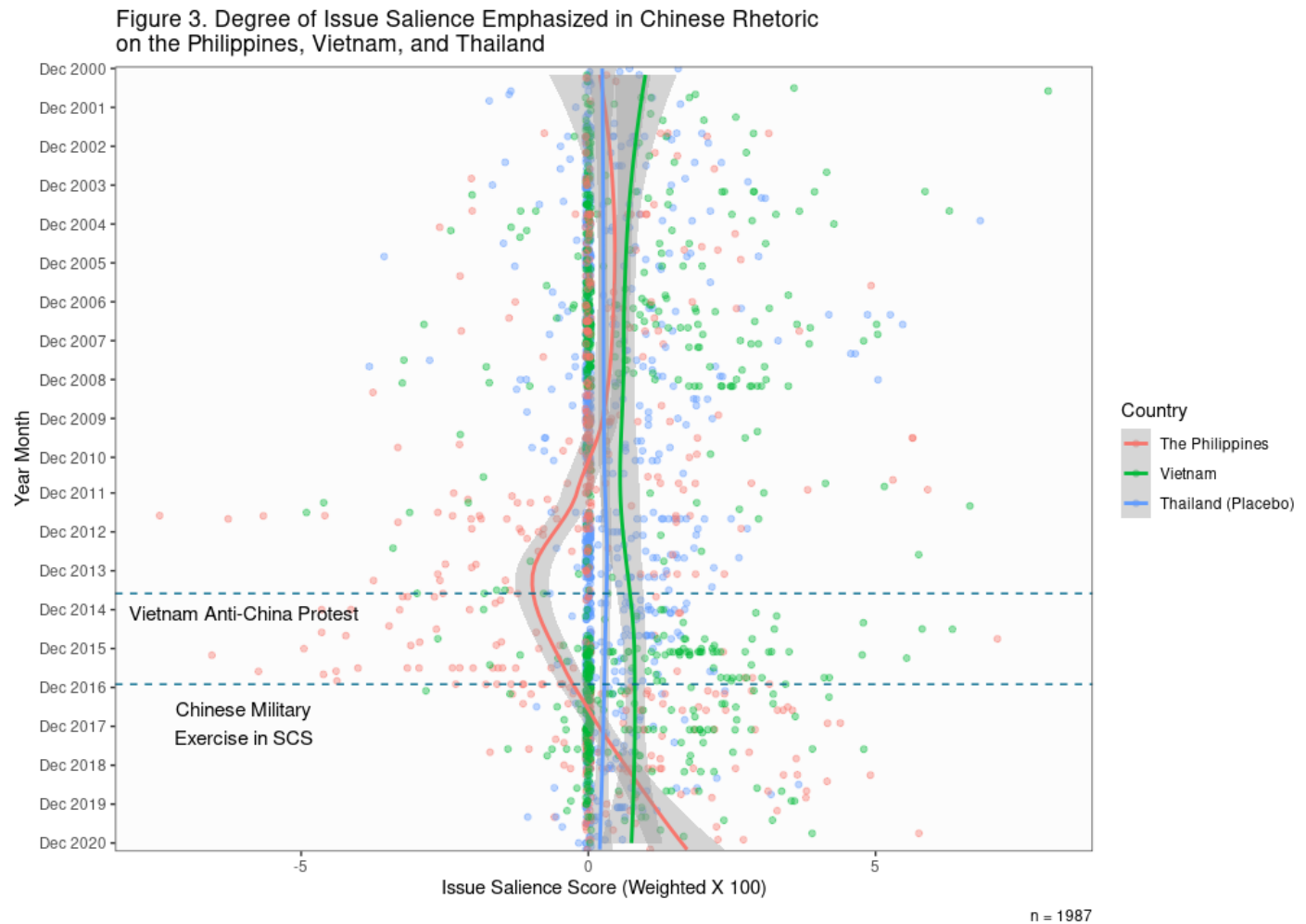paper to detect the issue salience sentiment of *People's Daily* covering the Philippines

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[75]   "World Tribunal to Hear South China Sea Case," *Bangkok Post*, October 30, 2015,https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/748180/world-tribunal-to-hear-south-china-sea-case
[76]   "China Maritime Dispute," Council on Foreign Relations
[77]   "菲侵略南海在先 中國動武也是天經地義," *People's Daily*, May 26, 2016, http://military.people.com.cn/BIG5/n1/2016/0512/c1011-28346029.html
[78]   "2016年7月南海军演：中国海军出动100余艘战舰，4位上将一线督战,今日军事看点官方, Nov 11, 2021, https://www.163.com/dy/article/GOPI83TI0535NL0F.html

and Vietnam from 2000 to 2021.

Figure 3. Degree of Issue Salience Emphasized in Chinese Rhetoric on the Philippines, Vietnam, and Thailand

As shown in Figure 3, *People's Daily* has a much more aggressive tone of issue salience on the Philippines (mean = 0.105) compared to Vietnam (mean = 0.729) throughout the period [difference in means = 0.624; p < 0.001; 95% confidence interval: -0.809, -0.438]. And in line with my theoretical expectation, in the disputed period, compared to Thailand as a placebo case, the difference of issue salience scores distribution in *People's Daily* is much larger in the case of the Philippines [difference in means = -1.11; p < 0.001; 95% confidence interval: 0.792, 1.423] versus Vietnam [difference in means = 0.50; p < 0.001; 95% confidence interval: 0.231, 0.764].

Conclusion and Theoretical Discussion

In this study, I challenge the pessimistic view on the role of official rhetoric in delivering pre-escalatory signals. I argue that not all talk is cheap, at least in the case of China. I tested my argument by looking into the initial actions taken by China over 22 foreign disputes from 1949 to 2020. The content analysis results confirm my theoretical expectation – China systematically inflated the issue salience as a rhetorical way of legitimation before escalating. Moreover, the degrees of salience score is associated with the degrees of escalations. The comparative case studies of the South China Sea disputes between China, the Philippines, and Vietnam lend the same results that China's official rhetoric was systematically different in defining the two incidents, and followed by different strategic actions. While China defined the dispute with the Philippines as critical to its core interests, China immediately conducted costly military actions. While China downplayed the dispute with the Philippines, China sent its top diplomats to Vietnam for diplomatic negotiation.

Theoretically, I provide a new perspective in bridging the canonical dichotomy between *"costless talk"* and *"costly actions."* In the case of China, costless talk as a source of legitimation is an *early warning signal* of future costly escalatory actions. Future studies should examine if the case of China can be applicable to other authoritarian states, for example, North Korea and Russia, which also enjoy highly monopolistic control over the press. In the recent Russia-Ukraine conflict, for example, two weeks before conducting the "special military operation," the Russian official rhetoric had underscored that the Russian-language population was "under genocide"

in Donbass.[79] Future research should investigate how other states define a dispute before conducting escalation. Second, my work offers an original dictionary to measure how China defines different foreign disputes and outbreaks. Although there is a vast body of literature studying Chinese rhetoric, this is the first study that develops a lexicon through both qualitative and computational methods, which allows future research to conduct analysis on Chinese intentions in a more systematic way. Third, my research speaks to the ongoing debate of the possibility of hegemonic war. One of the potential sources of great power conflict is the inscrutable intentions of states. My theory argues that we can understand China's intentions from its rhetoric. And if my theory is right, then we should not be pessimistic about the possibility of unintended conflicts between the U.S. and China if policy makers can correctly decipher the rhetoric of China.

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[79] "Putin Says Conflict in Eastern Ukraine 'Looks Like Genocide'," *The Moscow Times*, December 10, 2021,
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/12/10/putin-says-conflict-in-eastern-ukraine-looks-like-genocide-a75780

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