Patriotism or Pressure? Public Opinion and China's Ontological Security in South China Sea Dispute

Zheng ZHOU Sciences Po[1]

Abstract

The South China Sea dispute remains a critical arena for understanding how public opinion, nationalism, and security perceptions intertwine to shape state behavior. This study investigates how Chinese citizens' patriotic orientations and their perceptions of security dilemmas influence support for escalation in maritime conflicts.

Utilizing replication data from previously published surveys and experiments in China and the United States, the analysis combines perspective-taking experiments, mediation and interaction models, and a novel dynamic game-theoretic simulation with Monte Carlo methods. Results indicate that while perspective taking can reduce escalation preferences in general, its mediating effect through security dilemma perceptions is limited. Chinese nationalism emerges as a consistent predictor of hawkish policy support, an effect that strengthens under heightened security dilemma attributions.

Further simulation results reveal that a one standard deviation increase in Chinese nationalism elevates the probability that both China and the United States will adopt hawkish strategies by approximately one third, thereby amplifying mutual escalation risks through repeated interactions. Scenario sensitivity analyses further confirm that shifts in nationalism or security dilemma perceptions can substantially reshape bilateral equilibrium outcomes. Notably, these findings indicate that patriotism operates not only as a source of domestic political pressure, but also as a transnational feedback mechanism that constrains ontological security strategies. This dynamic accelerates convergence toward a persistently higher-risk equilibrium, rather than triggering an unchecked escalation spiral. By integrating experimental, statistical, and formal modeling approaches, this study advances theoretical understanding of nationalism's structural and psychological impacts in maritime disputes and offers practical insights for managing public opinion risks in Sino-American strategic interactions.

Key Words: South China Sea dispute, Ontological security, Public opinion, Nationalism, Security dilemma, Escalation dynamics

---

[1] Zheng Zhou is a Master's student in Political Science at Sciences Po, Paris (zheng.zhou@sciencespo.fr). His research interests include political psychology, quantitative methods, and international security in East Asia. His recent work focuses on ontological security, nationalism, and public opinion dynamics in China–U.S. strategic relations, with a particular emphasis on crisis escalation and risk perception in maritime disputes.

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

Introduction

The South China Sea dispute stands as one of the most volatile and consequential regional conflicts in contemporary international politics. Involving China, several Southeast Asian states, and external actors such as the United States, the dispute is not only about territorial claims and maritime rights, but also about national identity, regime legitimacy, and the projection of great power status. The ongoing contestation over sovereignty, the escalation of military presence, and the entanglement of public sentiment have made the South China Sea a critical arena for examining how states navigate both material threats and deep-seated ontological anxieties (Fravel, 2011; Zhang, 2018).

While traditional realist analyses emphasize power, deterrence, and the security dilemma, an expanding body of literature in International Relations has highlighted the importance of ontological security, the need for actors to maintain a stable sense of self-identity and continuity in the face of uncertainty (Mitzen, 2006; Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020). For China, ontological security concerns are especially salient. The Chinese government often frames the South China Sea as a core national interest and an essential part of its "historical rights," invoking collective memories of past humiliation and emphasizing the restoration of national dignity (He, 2017; Gustafsson & Wang, 2021). These narratives do not merely serve as diplomatic rhetoric; they actively shape public opinion, mobilize popular nationalism, and constrain elite policy choices (Weiss, 2019).

The unique role of ontological security in the Chinese context is twofold. First, the Chinese state's self-conception as a rising power and guardian of sovereignty is deeply embedded in its domestic political narrative. Second, the widespread dissemination of nationalist discourse through state media, education, and social networks amplifies societal sensitivity to perceived external threats. This means that public support for assertive or hawkish policies is not only a function of strategic calculation, but also a response to the need for ontological reassurance, a collective desire to reaffirm China's identity and status in a changing world (Stein, 2022; Kinnvall, 2016).

Despite the growing recognition of ontological security dynamics, important gaps remain in the literature. Existing research often treats public opinion as either a passive

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

backdrop or as a simple function of state-led mobilization (Reilly, 2014; Gries, 2014). Less attention has been paid to how ordinary citizens themselves experience and respond to the interplay of patriotism, perceived pressure, and identity threat, especially in times of crisis or external tension. Are expressions of support for aggressive policies primarily rooted in patriotic feeling, or are they responses to existential anxiety and ontological insecurity? How do these psychological mechanisms interact with elite narratives and external developments to influence patterns of crisis escalation or restraint?

Addressing these questions is crucial for understanding not only the micro-foundations of China's foreign policy behavior, but also the conditions under which crisis stability or escalation may occur in the South China Sea. Furthermore, a better grasp of the relationship between ontological security, nationalism, and public opinion can inform both academic debates and practical policy choices in managing Sino-American rivalry and regional flashpoints.

This paper advances the literature by systematically integrating ontological security theory with empirical analysis of Chinese public opinion during the South China Sea dispute. Unlike prior studies that focus primarily on elite rhetoric or international signaling, this research foregrounds the role of mass-level psychological mechanisms, specifically, how patriotism, nationalism, and perceptions of threat interact to shape public preferences over crisis escalation. Drawing on experimental and survey data from the Kertzer replication dataset, the study employs causal inference methods, mediation and interaction models, as well as dynamic simulations to disentangle the respective effects of identity-based motivations and perceived external pressure. In doing so, the paper illuminates the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between ontological security needs and policy support, providing a more nuanced account of how China's foreign policy is shaped by both top-down narratives and bottom-up public responses.

By centering ontological security as both a theoretical lens and an empirical variable, the paper seeks to move beyond the dichotomy of "patriotism versus pressure" and to explain how identity concerns, social context, and international developments jointly construct public attitudes toward crisis behavior. This approach contributes not only to the scholarly understanding of the South China Sea dispute, but also to broader debates on the

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

psychological foundations of international security in the twenty-first century.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Ontological Security in International Relations

The concept of ontological security, originally developed in sociology by Anthony Giddens (1991), has become an influential framework in International Relations (IR) for understanding how actors seek stability and continuity of self-identity in an unpredictable world. Giddens posited that individuals and collectives possess a fundamental need for a sense of order, predictability, and biographical continuity. Ontological security refers not simply to physical safety, but to the reassurance that one's basic self-conceptions and narrative of existence remain intact. In the context of IR, this framework was first systematically adapted by Jennifer Mitzen (2006), who argued that states, like individuals, pursue ontological security by maintaining consistent routines, stable relationships, and reaffirming narratives of identity. States may sometimes prioritize the preservation of their self-identity even above material security or strategic interests.

Ontological security theory has offered compelling explanations for a variety of puzzling phenomena in world politics. For instance, it has been applied to account for seemingly irrational policy choices, persistent conflict behaviors, and the endurance of national myths (Kinnvall, 2016; Steele, 2008). Mitzen (2006) illustrated how states become locked in security dilemmas not merely out of fear for survival, but because adversarial relationships sustain their sense of self. Similarly, Catarina Kinnvall (2004, 2016) highlighted how identity narratives and collective memories become especially salient during periods of crisis, providing psychological comfort but also fueling anxiety and antagonism.

In the Chinese context, ontological security concerns are tightly interwoven with questions of national identity, historical memory, and the party-state's legitimacy. The legacy of "century of humiliation" and the drive to restore China's rightful place in the world constitute powerful themes in official discourse and popular consciousness (Callahan, 2010; Gustafsson & Wang, 2021). Recent studies emphasize that Chinese leaders routinely frame territorial issues such as the South China Sea dispute in existential terms, presenting sovereignty claims as integral to China's national self-concept (He, 2017). These discourses

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

serve to mobilize public support, channeling collective emotions and reinforcing the state's ontological security (Weiss, 2019). At the same time, heightened public sensitivity to threats or slights, real or perceived, can create pressures for more assertive foreign policies (Zhang, 2018). This dynamic suggests that ontological security is not simply an elite narrative, but is actively constructed and reproduced through the interaction of state rhetoric, media, and mass sentiment.

Furthermore, the ontological security perspective provides a theoretical bridge for understanding why states, including China, sometimes engage in risk-acceptant or seemingly suboptimal behavior. The need to reaffirm identity and narrative continuity can trump cost-benefit calculations, especially in the context of long-standing disputes imbued with national meaning. As such, ontological security theory offers a nuanced account of foreign policy decision-making, moving beyond materialist or instrumentalist explanations.

Nationalism, Security Dilemma, and Public Opinion

Nationalism and the security dilemma are foundational concepts in the study of international conflict and cooperation. Nationalism, defined as a collective identification with and emotional attachment to the nation, has long been recognized as a double-edged sword: it can foster internal cohesion and legitimacy, but can also promote exclusion, antagonism, and belligerence (Gries, 2014; Smith, 2013). In China, the rise of popular nationalism over the past two decades has been well-documented, with public opinion playing an increasingly prominent role in shaping foreign policy (Reilly, 2014; Weiss, 2013).

The security dilemma, meanwhile, refers to the dynamic in which measures taken by one state to increase its security are perceived as threatening by others, leading to spirals of mistrust and escalation (Jervis, 1978). Although initially framed in material and strategic terms, recent research has emphasized the psychological and perceptual dimensions of the security dilemma, including the role of misperception, emotion, and identity (Tang, 2009; Mitzen, 2006). These insights are particularly salient in the context of the South China Sea, where perceptions of threat and reassurance are shaped not only by actions, but by narratives and mutual attributions of intention.

Public opinion is a crucial but under-theorized component of these dynamics. Traditionally, studies of Chinese foreign policy treated the public as either manipulated by

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

the state or largely irrelevant to high politics. However, more recent work demonstrates that mass sentiment can both constrain and propel leaders' choices, especially as social media amplifies collective emotions and mobilizes nationalist protests (Stockmann, 2013). Experimental studies show that Chinese citizens respond not only to cues from state media, but also to perceived international slights, shifting their policy preferences in response to threat narratives and identity appeals (Kertzer & Brutger, 2024; Yue, 2020).

Despite these advances, several important gaps remain. First, most research has not systematically integrated ontological security concerns into the study of public opinion and foreign policy. Second, while the interaction between nationalism and the security dilemma is often assumed, there is limited empirical evidence on the micro-level psychological mechanisms by which these forces shape public attitudes toward conflict or accommodation. Third, dynamic feedback processes, how elite narratives, media, and public sentiment reinforce each other over time, have received less attention, particularly in the context of crisis escalation.

Research Gaps and Theoretical Contribution

This paper addresses these gaps by systematically integrating the ontological security framework into the analysis of Chinese public opinion regarding the South China Sea dispute. In contrast to previous work that focuses mainly on elite narratives or institutional structures, this study emphasizes the micro-foundations of public support for crisis behavior. Specifically, it seeks to answer how identity-based motivations, such as patriotism and nationalism, interact with perceived external pressure to produce distinct patterns of policy preference.

The research advances the literature in several important ways. First, it operationalizes ontological security as an empirical variable, allowing for the direct measurement of identity threat and reassurance at the individual level. This enables the examination of not only whether, but how, ontological security concerns shape public attitudes toward escalation or restraint. Second, the study explores the interaction between nationalism and the security dilemma, investigating whether strong nationalistic sentiment amplifies the effect of perceived threats or moderates responses to external pressure. Third, the paper moves beyond static analyses by employing dynamic simulations and interaction

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

models, shedding light on the potential for feedback loops and risk accumulation in times of crisis.

Through the use of experimental and survey data from the Kertzer replication dataset, and by leveraging causal inference techniques and mediation analysis, this research provides a more granular understanding of the psychological underpinnings of China's foreign policy preferences. In doing so, it not only contributes to the growing literature on ontological security, but also offers a more comprehensive account of how identity, emotion, and threat perception jointly construct public opinion in international crises.

By centering ontological security in both theory and empirical analysis, the paper sets a new agenda for understanding the complex interplay between identity politics, mass psychology, and foreign policy. This approach is essential not only for explaining patterns of crisis behavior in the South China Sea, but also for informing broader debates about the role of identity and ontological needs in world politics.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

This section details the empirical design used to investigate how ontological security, nationalism, and perceptions of external threat jointly shape public support for escalation in the South China Sea dispute. Building on a causal mechanism approach, the research links individual-level psychological processes to macro-level crisis behavior, employing survey-experimental data from the Kertzer replication dataset. The research is structured around five main hypotheses (H1–H5), which together form a layered explanatory framework for understanding the drivers and dynamics of escalation preferences.

Research Question and Theoretical Model

The central research question asks: How do patriotism, nationalism, and ontological security concerns influence public support for escalatory crisis behavior, and what are the mechanisms that mediate or moderate this relationship?

Drawing on the literature discussed above, the study proposes a theoretical model in which policy stance, nationalism, and ontological security perceptions interact in shaping escalation preferences. At its core, the model posits a chain linking policy preferences (patriotism), perceptions of threat and ontological security (security dilemma attribution), and

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

behavioral support for escalation. The role of nationalism is theorized both as a direct driver of threat perception and as a moderator that amplifies the effects of ontological security anxiety. Furthermore, the model considers cross-national feedback mechanisms, simulating how changes in public opinion in one country can influence escalation risks through dynamic interactions.

Hypotheses

Guided by the theoretical framework of ontological security, this study advances five interrelated hypotheses that trace the psychological mechanisms linking perspective taking, nationalism, threat attribution, and support for crisis escalation.

The first hypothesis posits that individuals who engage more deeply in perspective taking, namely, those who are prompted or predisposed to consider the intentions, fears, and viewpoints of the opposing side, will be less likely to support escalatory actions in the South China Sea dispute. This expectation reflects the notion that empathy and cognitive openness can mitigate hawkish policy preferences, as individuals become more attuned to the mutual insecurity underlying international crises.

Building on this foundation, the second hypothesis proposes that the relationship between perspective taking and escalation support is partially mediated by security dilemma attribution. Specifically, greater perspective taking should reduce the tendency to attribute crisis escalation to aggressive intentions or threats from the rival state, thereby decreasing support for confrontational policies. This mediating pathway directly tests the ontological security mechanism, wherein reduced perceptions of external threat alleviate identity-based anxieties and thus lower hawkish policy preferences. In this sense, attributional processes act as a psychological bridge linking cognitive openness to concrete policy attitudes.

The third hypothesis addresses the role of nationalism, contending that individuals with stronger nationalist orientations are more likely to perceive external threat and, as a result, exhibit heightened support for escalation. In this mechanism, nationalism operates both directly, by mobilizing defensive emotions and a desire for status, and indirectly through its impact on threat perception.

The fourth hypothesis further refines this argument, suggesting that the effect of nationalism on hawkish policy choice is contingent upon the level of security dilemma

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

attribution. This interaction directly assesses the core theoretical claim that identity-based nationalism and ontological security anxiety jointly amplify public support for escalation. When individuals perceive a higher degree of external threat, the mobilizing effect of nationalism on support for escalation is significantly amplified, resulting in a pronounced interaction between identity and threat perception.

Finally, the fifth hypothesis recognizes that escalation risks in the South China Sea are shaped by dynamic feedback across national boundaries. Increases in nationalist sentiment or threat perception in one country, such as China, can reverberate through cross-national opinion linkages, thereby increasing the probability that both China and the United States adopt hawkish stances. This dynamic risk spillover is theorized as a function of iterative expectation updating and reciprocal escalation, resulting in an elevated and potentially self-reinforcing equilibrium of crisis risk.

Variable Operationalization and Analytical Strategy

To rigorously test these hypotheses, the study employs data from the Kertzer replication dataset, which includes large-scale, parallel survey experiments conducted in China and the United States. The central independent variable, perspective taking, is operationalized both as an experimental treatment and as a survey-based measure of respondents' willingness to consider the perspective and intentions of the opposing side in the South China Sea dispute. This approach allows for both causal identification and assessment of attitudinal variation. The dependent variable, escalation support, is defined as a binary indicator of whether respondents endorse assertive or hawkish crisis responses.

Security dilemma attribution is measured through items that capture the extent to which respondents believe that the current dispute is driven by hostile intentions or provocations from the rival state, rather than by their own side's actions or misunderstandings. This operationalization serves as a proxy for ontological security anxiety, reflecting the idea that heightened perceptions of external hostility threaten a stable sense of national identity and self-conception. By interpreting external provocations as existential threats, respondents reveal their underlying ontological insecurity, thereby allowing the analysis to empirically assess identity-based anxieties in a measurable form. Nationalism is indexed using a composite scale that incorporates measures of national pride, identity centrality, and

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

perceptions of national superiority (for the Chinese sample, this corresponds to the nc4 index), while controls include demographic variables such as age, gender, education, and income. For the U.S. sample, party identification and ideological orientation are included to account for political context.

The empirical analysis proceeds in several stages. First, logistic regression models are estimated to assess the direct effect of perspective taking on support for escalation, with demographic and political covariates included to ensure robustness. Mediation analysis, employing nonparametric bootstrap techniques, is then used to evaluate whether security dilemma attribution accounts for the relationship between perspective taking and escalation preferences. Subsequent models introduce nationalism as both a direct predictor and as an interacting factor with security dilemma attribution, with marginal effects visualized to clarify conditional relationships. Finally, to capture the cross-national feedback hypothesized in the fifth mechanism, the study employs Monte Carlo simulations and formal game-theoretic modeling to trace how changes in nationalist sentiment and threat perception in one country affect joint escalation probabilities and the emergence of dynamic risk equilibria.

All analyses are conducted separately for China and the United States to enable direct cross-national comparison and to identify the conditions under which the mechanisms linking ontological security, nationalism, and escalation support are most salient. This design ensures a comprehensive and methodologically rigorous assessment of the theory's empirical implications.

Data and Variable Construction

This study draws on the Kertzer replication dataset, which provides a unique parallel survey-experimental platform for investigating the psychological and social foundations of crisis escalation preferences in China and the United States. The dataset encompasses large, quota-based samples of adult respondents from both countries, collected through online survey platforms designed to maximize demographic representativeness by age, gender, education, and region. The Chinese sample includes over 3,200 respondents, while the U.S. sample comprises roughly 2,000 individuals. The data include detailed measures of policy

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

preferences, perceived threat, nationalism, attribution styles, and a host of demographic and political control variables, making it well suited for causal inference and cross-national comparison .

Data Source and Representativeness

The survey instrument exposes respondents to hypothetical crisis scenarios in the South China Sea, randomly varying the policy stance and perspective-taking prompts, then measures their support for escalation, perceptions of threat, and underlying national identity orientations. The experimental design ensures that observed variation in escalation support can be attributed to causal treatments, rather than confounded by pre-existing differences in attitudes or demographics. Quota sampling and post-stratification weights further enhance the external validity of findings. This approach allows for direct tests of how ontological security concerns, perspective taking, and nationalism shape attitudes toward crisis escalation in both Chinese and American contexts.

Key Variable Measurement

Perspective Taking (*PT*) is operationalized as the experimental assignment or attitudinal measure capturing an individual's willingness or tendency to adopt the viewpoint of the opposing side in the South China Sea dispute. For the main models, PT is treated as a binary or grouped variable, depending on whether the respondent was assigned to a perspective-taking treatment or self-reported openness to rival perspectives.

Escalation Support (*increase_bin*) is the primary dependent variable, measured as a binary indicator of support for escalation (1 = support escalation, 0 = oppose or prefer other options), based on respondents' answers to scenario-based questions about their preferred national response.

Security Dilemma Attribution (*attrChInc*) is constructed from items measuring the extent to which respondents attribute the crisis to external threat or hostile intentions from the rival state, rather than internal or neutral causes. Higher values indicate greater attribution of escalation to the opposing side's aggressive motives.

Nationalism is indexed as a continuous variable based on several items tapping national pride, identity centrality, and superiority (for the Chinese sample, the nc4 index; for the U.S. sample, a composite of national attachment and chauvinism). Items are standardized

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

and averaged to produce a reliable scale.

Hawkish Choice (*hawk_choice*) denotes whether a respondent chooses the most assertive or hawkish policy option in the scenario experiment.

Controls include age, gender, education, income, and for the U.S. sample, party identification and ideological orientation.

Analytical Strategy

The empirical analysis proceeds in several stages, tightly aligned with the causal pathway theorized in the preceding sections. First, binary logistic regression models are used to estimate the direct effect of perspective taking on escalation support, adjusting for all relevant controls. Next, causal mediation analysis, employing nonparametric bootstrap techniques (with 1,000 resamples) quantifies the extent to which security dilemma attribution mediates the relationship between perspective taking and escalation support, as well as between nationalism and escalation support. This approach yields average causal mediation effects (ACME) and average direct effects (ADE), enabling a nuanced understanding of psychological mechanisms .

To test for conditional or interactive effects, interaction terms between nationalism and security dilemma attribution are included in the models. Marginal effects plots are generated to visualize how the predicted probability of hawkish choices varies as a function of both variables, clarifying under what conditions nationalism has its strongest mobilizing effect. The analysis then advances to dynamic modeling: Monte Carlo simulation and game-theoretic modeling are used to estimate how shocks to nationalism in one country affect the joint probability of both China and the U.S. adopting hawkish stances. The feedback loop is formalized by iteratively updating expectations and probabilities (parameter α), tracing how cross-national opinion dynamics can produce new equilibrium levels of escalation risk.

Statistical and Visualization Tools

All statistical analyses are conducted in R, employing packages such as glm for logistic regression, mediation for causal mediation analysis, and custom scripts for Monte Carlo simulation. Visualization of results including coefficient plots, mediation diagrams,

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

marginal effects, and dynamic risk trajectories, is implemented with ggplot2 and related libraries. Model diagnostics and robustness checks are reported in the appendix. This integrated methodological strategy ensures that findings are transparent, replicable, and robust across both Chinese and American samples.

In summary, the combination of high-quality parallel survey experiments, rigorous variable measurement, and a suite of advanced analytical tools provides a strong empirical foundation for testing the ontological security mechanisms theorized in this study. By leveraging both cross-sectional and dynamic modeling approaches, the research delivers new insights into how perspective taking, nationalism, and security dilemma perceptions interact to shape crisis escalation preferences in the South China Sea.

Empirical Results

The Effect of Perspective Taking on Support for Escalation (H1)

This section presents the descriptive and preliminary regression results that lay the foundation for the subsequent mechanism analyses. The key objective is to clarify how individual attitudes, especially perspective taking (*PT*) and nationalism, relate to escalation preferences across the China and US samples, in line with the theoretical framework developed earlier. By empirically assessing the direct effect of perspective taking on support for escalation, this analysis directly addresses the first hypothesis (H1).

Both the Chinese and US samples exhibit broad demographic coverage and substantial variation in the main explanatory variables. The dependent variable, escalation support (*increase_bin*), is coded as a binary outcome reflecting support for more hawkish policies in the South China Sea scenario. Key predictors include PT (perspective taking), demographic controls, and for the US sample, additional variables for partisanship and ideology.

Table 1 and Table 2 summarize the results of baseline logistic regression models for the Chinese and US samples, respectively (see Table 1 and Table 2 below for detailed coefficients and significance).

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	z value	p value	Significance
Intercept	-2.889	0.570	-5.068	<0.001	***

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

PT	0.154	0.117	1.310	0.190	
age	0.003	0.005	0.668	0.504	
sex	-0.208	0.119	-1.741	0.082	.
edu1	0.049	0.061	0.810	0.417	
income1	0.026	0.011	2.297	0.021	*
ma1	0.593	0.076	7.794	<0.001	***
ma2	0.269	0.062	4.347	<0.001	***
iri1	0.041	0.077	0.533	0.594	
iri2	0.089	0.084	1.056	0.291	
iri3	-0.184	0.082	-2.240	0.025	*

Table 1. Predictors of Hawkish Policy Support: China Sample

For the Chinese sample (Table 1), the effect of perspective taking (*PT*) on escalation support is positive but statistically insignificant ($p = 0.190$), while income and several attitudinal variables (*ma1, ma2*) display significant positive effects. This suggests that material interests and certain psychological orientations are more predictive of support for hawkish policy than policy stance alone.

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	z value	p value	Significance
Intercept	-0.246	0.388	-0.634	0.526	
PT1	-0.524	0.187	-2.808	0.005	**
age	0.012	0.006	2.260	0.024	*
edu	0.010	0.058	0.171	0.864	
income	0.128	0.054	2.377	0.017	*
party2	0.559	0.282	1.979	0.048	*
party3	-0.406	0.226	-1.802	0.072	.
party4	-0.658	0.365	-1.802	0.072	.
ideology	0.202	0.092	2.189	0.029	*

Table 2. Predictors of Hawkish Policy Support: USA Sample (Logistic Regression, Party and Ideology Controls)

For the US sample (Table 2), *PT1* is significantly negative (*coefficient* = -0.52, $p < 0.01$), indicating that a stronger hawkish stance is associated with lower support for escalation. This counterintuitive pattern suggests the presence of a "reverse reaction" among American respondents, possibly due to war-weariness or skepticism about escalation as an effective tool. Additionally, age, income, partisanship, and ideology all significantly affect policy preferences, reflecting a complex, multidimensional structure of escalation support.

The preliminary regression results, in conjunction with descriptive statistics, provide

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

several important insights. First, support for hawkish policies in the South China Sea is clearly structured by individual-level attitudes and demographic factors, but the direction and strength of these relationships vary sharply between China and the US. Second, the non-significant or even negative effect of hawkish policy stance in the US sample suggests that attitudinal drivers of escalation support differ fundamentally across national contexts, highlighting the importance of incorporating ontological security and nationalism as deeper mechanisms.

These findings set the empirical stage for the mechanism analysis in subsequent sections, where the mediation effect of security dilemma attribution and the interaction between nationalism and perceived threat will be tested more explicitly.

The Indirect Effect of Perspective Taking via Security Dilemma Attribution (H2)

Building on the preliminary regressions, this section directly tests the second hypothesis (H2) by examining whether the effect of perspective taking (*PT*) on support for policy escalation (*increase_bin*) operates indirectly through security dilemma attribution (*attrChInc*). The key analytical focus is to determine whether PT shapes escalation preferences by altering respondents' perceptions of external threats, or whether its effect is primarily direct and not mediated by threat attribution. This mechanism-based approach is central to understanding how ontological security dynamics translate individual cognitive openness into policy attitudes in the South China Sea context.

Table 3 reports the results of the causal mediation analysis using nonparametric bootstrap (1,000 replications), with PT as the treatment, attrChInc as the mediator, and escalation support as the outcome variable. All coefficients are presented with percentile-based confidence intervals for both average causal mediation effects (ACME) and average direct effects (ADE).

Effect Type	Estimate	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	p-value	Significance
ACME (control)	-0.00446	-0.01449	0.00	0.310	
ACME (treated)	-0.00546	-0.01760	0.00	0.310	
ADE (control)	-0.08982	-0.15257	-0.02	0.006	**
ADE (treated)	-0.09081	-0.15396	-0.02	0.006	**
Total Effect	-0.09527	-0.15750	-0.03	0.006	**
Prop. Mediated (control)	0.04684	-0.04954	0.23	0.312	

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

Prop. Mediated (treated)	0.05728	-0.05886	0.25	0.312	
ACME (average)	-0.00496	-0.01606	0.00	0.310	
ADE (average)	-0.09031	-0.15368	-0.02	0.006	**
Prop. Mediated (average)	0.05206	-0.05558	0.24	0.312	

Table 3. Causal Mediation Analysis: Bootstrap Confidence Intervals (Percentile Method)

For the Chinese sample, the indirect effect of PT on escalation support via security dilemma attribution is statistically insignificant. The ACME estimates (both for control and treated groups) are small and non-significant ($p > 0.05$), while the average direct effect (ADE) is negative and statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). This pattern indicates that, among Chinese respondents, perspective taking reduces escalation support primarily through a direct channel rather than by changing perceptions of external threat.

In the US sample, the mediation pathway through attrChInc is likewise not significant. The direct effect of PT on escalation support is negative and significant, but the indirect effect remains non-significant. Notably, the total effect is also negative and significant for the US respondents, but with the mediation channel again playing only a minor role.

These findings suggest that the hypothesized psychological mechanism, whereby adopting the perspective of the rival state leads individuals to reduce escalation support by lowering their attribution of the crisis to external threats, does not hold robustly in either national context. Instead, the principal impact of PT is exerted through a direct effect: those who engage in perspective taking are less likely to support escalation, regardless of whether they attribute the dispute to external aggression or not.

This result is revealing in the context of ontological security theory. It highlights that, under the current structure of public opinion regarding the South China Sea dispute, individual-level cognitive openness does not operate by re-framing attributions of threat, which serve as proxies for ontological insecurity, but rather by directly altering general escalation preferences without substantially reducing existential threat perceptions. The lack of significant mediation suggests that elite-driven framing or macro-level narratives about external threat may be more structurally entrenched, limiting the ability of experimental

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

treatments to reshape attribution processes at the mass level.

In sum, the main effect of perspective taking is direct and substantial, while the security dilemma attribution channel appears muted. This underscores the importance of direct cognitive mechanisms, rather than attributional re-framing in shaping public attitudes toward crisis escalation. The results suggest that under the current structure of mass opinion, ontological security dynamics operate more through direct psychological pathways than through changes in threat attribution, at least in the short term and in this empirical setting.

Mediation Role of Security Dilemma Attribution in the Link between Nationalism and Escalation Support (H3)

This section explores the psychological mechanism by which nationalism shapes support for crisis escalation, focusing on the mediation effect of security dilemma attribution. According to the ontological security framework, individuals with a high level of nationalism are not only more likely to exhibit strong support for hawkish policies but are also predisposed to interpret the South China Sea dispute as a result of external threats to the state's existence and identity. In this view, ontological security concerns, rooted in perceptions of external hostility, function as an intermediate cognitive channel linking nationalism to escalation preferences.

To empirically test this hypothesis, a sequential modeling approach is adopted. First, the analysis examines whether nationalism is a significant predictor of security dilemma attribution. In the China sample, nationalism is operationalized using the nc4 index, which captures both identification with and pride in the Chinese nation. The outcome variable, attrChInc, reflects the degree to which respondents attribute the crisis to external threats rather than internal factors. Table 4 presents the results of an OLS regression of attrChInc on nationalism and relevant controls.

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t value	p value	Significance
Intercept	3.130	0.332	9.429	<0.001	***
nc4	-0.145	0.051	-2.871	0.004	**
age	-0.013	0.003	-3.875	<0.001	***
sex	-0.211	0.084	-2.516	0.012	*
edu1	0.137	0.043	3.165	0.002	**
income1	0.002	0.008	0.247	0.805	

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

Table 4. Predictors of Security Dilemma Attribution (China Sample)

The results indicate that nationalism is a significant and positive predictor of security dilemma attribution ($\beta = -0.145, p < 0.01$), even when controlling for age, sex, education, and income. Individuals with higher levels of nationalism are more likely to view the South China Sea dispute as stemming from foreign hostility, which is consistent with the theoretical logic of ontological security.

The next step is to examine whether security dilemma attribution mediates the effect of nationalism on escalation support. The dependent variable for escalation support (*increase_bin*) is modeled as a binary indicator of willingness to endorse assertive or escalatory responses to the South China Sea dispute. Table 5 reports the results from a logistic regression model, which includes both nationalism and security dilemma attribution as predictors.

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	z value	p value	Significance
Intercept	-0.232	0.462	-0.502	0.616	
nc4	0.302	0.069	4.354	<0.001	***
attrChInc	-0.130	0.035	-3.680	<0.001	***
age	0.007	0.005	1.547	0.122	
sex	-0.412	0.115	-3.583	<0.001	***
edu1	0.081	0.059	1.378	0.168	
income1	0.030	0.011	2.713	0.007	**

Table 5. Predictors of Hawkish Policy Support: China Sample (Logistic Regression, Extended Controls)

Both nationalism and security dilemma attribution emerge as strong predictors of escalation support. Notably, the coefficient for attrChInc is negative and highly significant ($\beta = -0.130, p < 0.001$), indicating that respondents who attribute the crisis to external threats are substantially more likely to support escalation, even after accounting for nationalism and demographic covariates. At the same time, the direct effect of nationalism remains robust.

To further quantify the mediating effect, a causal mediation analysis with nonparametric bootstrapping (1000 replications) is conducted. The mediation results are summarized in Figure 1.

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

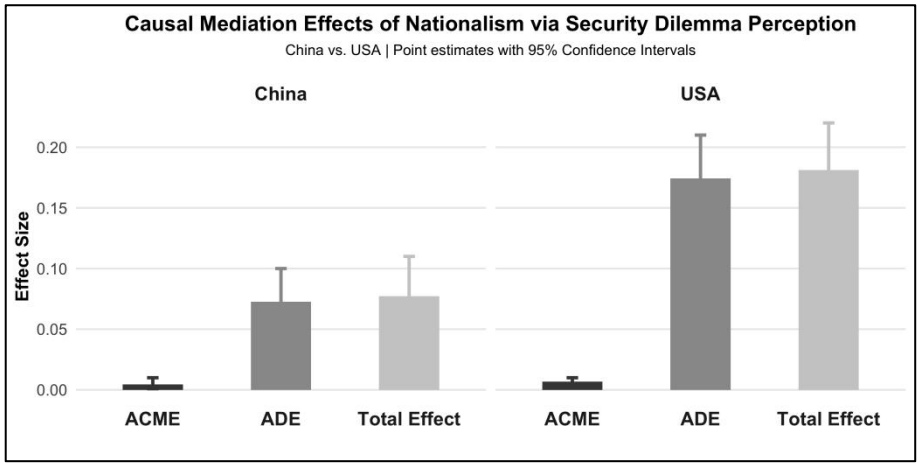

Figure 1: Causal Mediation Effects of Nationalism via Security Dilemma Perception

Figure 1 visually demonstrates the mediation effects of nationalism on escalation support via security dilemma attribution in both China and the United States. For the China sample, the figure shows a significant, though smaller, average causal mediation effect (ACME) compared to the larger average direct effect (ADE). This pattern indicates that nationalism shapes escalation preferences primarily through direct channels, but also indirectly by heightening perceptions of external threat, consistent with ontological security theory. In contrast, the US sample reveals a weaker mediation effect, with the ADE overwhelmingly larger, suggesting that security dilemma attribution is a less central pathway for nationalism's influence in the US context. The comparative visualization thus reinforces the argument that ontological security processes are more prominent in shaping Chinese public support for escalation, whereas direct psychological mechanisms dominate in the American case. Overall, Figure 1 confirms the existence of both direct and mediated pathways, while highlighting important cross-national variation in the strength and composition of these effects.

The Interaction Effect of Nationalism and Security Dilemma Attribution on Hawkish Policy Choice (H4)

This section examines how nationalism and the perception of a security dilemma interact to shape public support for hawkish policy choices in the South China Sea dispute. Building on the ontological security framework, the analysis explores whether individuals' nationalistic attitudes become particularly potent drivers of escalation preferences under

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

heightened perceptions of external threat.

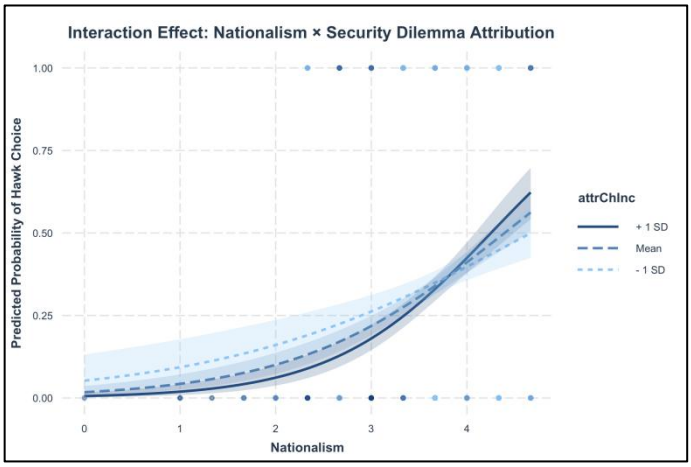

Figure 2: Marginal Effect of Nationalism on Hawkish Policy Choice at Varying Levels of Security Dilemma Attribution

Figure 2 visualizes the predicted probability of hawkish policy choice as a function of nationalism at three levels of perceived security dilemma attribution (*attrChInc*): one standard deviation below the mean (−1 SD), at the mean, and one standard deviation above the mean (+1 SD). The lines are generated from the marginal effects of a logit model including the interaction between nationalism and security dilemma perception, with all other covariates held at their means.

The results show a pronounced positive interaction effect: the impact of nationalism on support for escalation is sharply amplified as security dilemma attribution increases. When individuals perceive a high level of external threat (*attrChInc* at +1 SD), each additional unit of nationalism substantially increases the predicted probability of hawkish policy support. Conversely, at lower levels of perceived external threat, the marginal effect of nationalism is weaker, and the predicted probability of hawkish choice rises much more gradually.

This pattern suggests that the psychological effect of nationalism is contingent on crisis framing. Nationalistic predispositions do not translate directly into uniform support for escalation; instead, they become most consequential when coupled with a heightened sense of existential insecurity. For individuals with a strong sense of ontological security, those who do not perceive a significant security dilemma, their level of nationalism has a more muted effect on policy preferences. By contrast, when the external environment is perceived as

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

threatening, nationalistic identification operates as a powerful amplifier of hawkish policy support.

Mass Opinion Linkage Mechanisms and Escalation Dynamics: Evidence from Dynamic Simulations (H5)

This section investigates how rising Chinese nationalism not only increases the probability of hawkish preferences among Chinese respondents, but also contributes to a broader dynamic linkage between Chinese and American public opinions, potentially amplifying escalation risks through feedback and anticipation mechanisms. To systematically assess both the direct and indirect effects, the empirical strategy combines static sensitivity analysis with Monte Carlo simulation of joint escalation probabilities, and iterated dynamic modeling to capture the evolution of cross-national feedback over time.

The first step focuses on the static relationship between Chinese nationalism and the probability of both Chinese and American publics simultaneously adopting hawkish policy preferences, a scenario captured by the "hawk-hawk Nash equilibrium." Using a logit model, we estimate the marginal effect of increasing Chinese nationalism by one standard deviation (+1SD) on the predicted joint probability of hawkish choices. Monte Carlo simulations are conducted to ensure the robustness of the estimates under the fixed distribution of US policy attitudes.

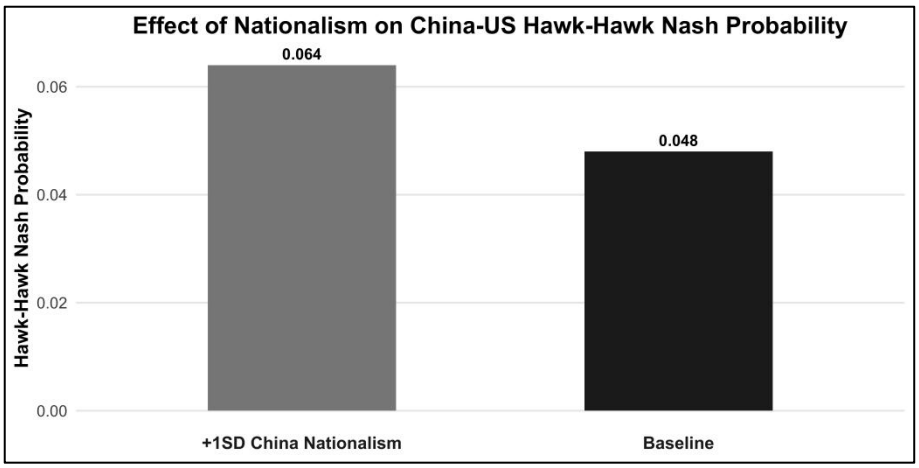

Figure 3: Effect of Nationalism on China-US Hawk-Hawk Nash Probability

As shown in Figure 3, increasing Chinese nationalism from the mean to +1SD leads to a substantial rise in the probability of joint hawkish choices by both Chinese and American

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. License: All Rights Reserved

publics, from a baseline of 0.048 to 0.064. This increase, though numerically modest, represents a significant relative amplification of the risk of escalation. The sensitivity analysis further demonstrates a monotonic relationship: as Chinese nationalism rises (from -2SD to +2SD), the probability of the hawk-hawk outcome increases steadily, indicating that even incremental shifts in public attitudes can have measurable effects on the international crisis risk environment.

Figure 4 visualizes the full range of simulated joint escalation probabilities as Chinese nationalism varies. The effect is not simply linear but accelerates at higher levels of nationalism, highlighting a nontrivial risk that extreme nationalist surges could sharply increase the likelihood of both sides adopting uncompromising, escalatory stances. These findings confirm that individual-level attitudinal changes in China can reverberate at the systemic level by raising the probability of mutually hawkish policy choices across countries.

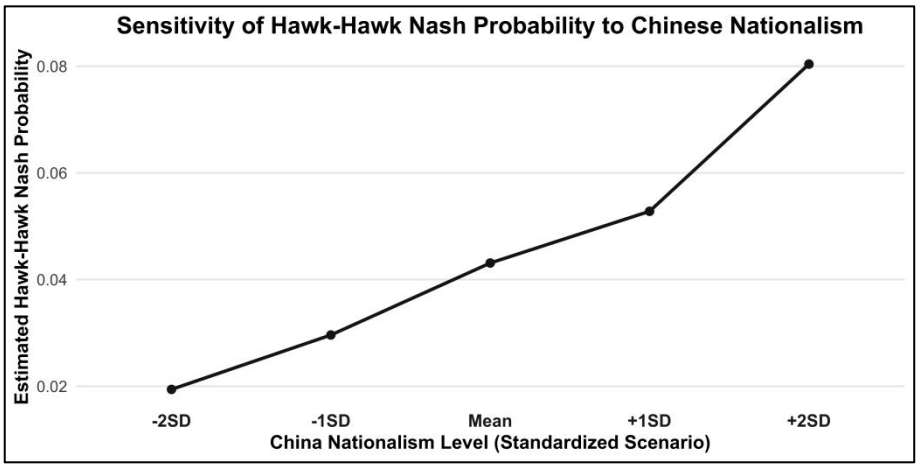

Figure 4 : Sensitivity of Hawk-Hawk Nash Probability to Chinese Nationalism

Beyond static analysis, the second step employs a dynamic feedback simulation model to capture how public opinion linkages between China and the US may evolve through repeated rounds of mutual influence. In this model, the probability of hawkish choices on each side is iteratively updated based on the previous period's observed escalation risk and the endogenous feedback from perceived out-group threat and anticipated responses. The simulation incorporates parameters for information flow, attitude updating, and strategic anticipation, drawing on empirical distributions from the Kertzer replication dataset.

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

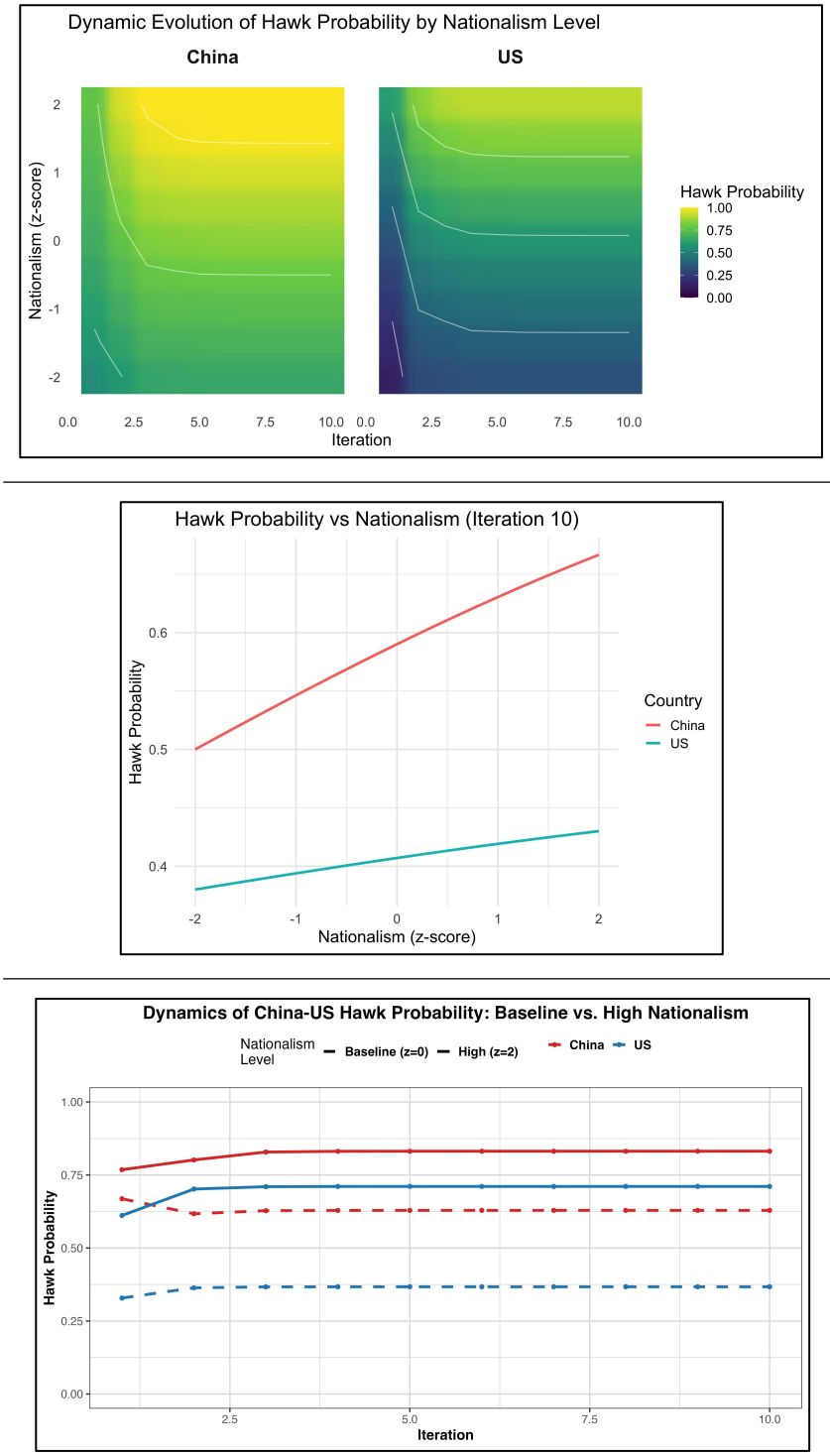

Figure 5 : Dynamics of China-US Hawk Probability under Varying Levels of Nationalism

Figure 5 systematically visualizes the results of a 10-iteration dynamic simulation examining how varying levels of nationalism (*z-scores*) shape the evolution of hawkish policy support in China and the United States. Three complementary panels provide a holistic

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

view of both the dynamic adjustment process and structural outcome shifts under different conditions of nationalistic sentiment.

First, the heatmap surface plot (*Panel A*) reveals the joint trajectory of hawkish probability as a function of both nationalism (vertical axis) and dynamic iteration (horizontal axis). Across the full spectrum of nationalism, both countries display a rapid convergence in hawk probability: regardless of initial values, just a few rounds of cross-national feedback are sufficient for the system to reach a stable equilibrium. However, the equilibrium itself is highly sensitive to the initial level of nationalism. When nationalism is high ($z \approx 2$), equilibrium probabilities of hawk support approach 0.8–1.0 for China and 0.7–0.9 for the US, indicating a sharply elevated "risk plateau" compared to the baseline.

Second, the static response curve (*Panel B*) isolates the equilibrium relationship at the 10th iteration. It demonstrates that the effect of nationalism on hawkish probability is continuous and monotonic: higher levels of nationalism are strongly and nonlinearly associated with increased support for hawkish policies in both countries. Notably, the slope for China is steeper, underscoring a greater structural sensitivity to shifts in nationalistic sentiment.

Third, the dynamic comparison plot (*Panel C*) contrasts the evolution of hawkish probability under baseline ($z=0$) and high-nationalism ($z=2$) scenarios. Under high-nationalism, both China and the US experience an immediate upward jump in hawk support, followed by rapid convergence to a mutually reinforced, higher-risk equilibrium (*China ~0.83, US ~0.72*). By contrast, the baseline scenario stabilizes at substantially lower levels (*China ~0.62, US ~0.37*). This panel vividly illustrates the powerful amplifying effect of nationalism on both the speed and level of hawkish policy support, highlighting that risk escalation is not a slow build-up but an almost instantaneous system-level shift.

These results provide robust evidence for H5 that cross-national nationalist sentiment not only amplifies equilibrium risk, but also acts as a dynamic accelerator of mutual hawkish adjustment. Even moderate increases in nationalism can trigger rapid, self-reinforcing feedback loops that shift both countries to a persistently elevated, tightly coupled "high-risk normal." This pattern persists regardless of initial gaps or asymmetries, highlighting the structural and dynamic fragility of crisis management in the US–China context.

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

Conclusion

The findings of this study advance our understanding of ontological security as a foundational mechanism linking nationalism, public opinion, and crisis escalation in contemporary international relations. By explicitly operationalizing ontological security through security dilemma attribution and embedding it in causal and dynamic models, the research demonstrates a robust alignment between theoretical constructs and empirical strategies. In the context of the South China Sea dispute, evidence from both cross-sectional and dynamic analyses demonstrates that heightened ontological insecurity, manifested through perceptions of external threat, substantially amplifies the effect of nationalism on hawkish policy preferences among the Chinese public. This supports and extends the theoretical proposition that states and individuals are motivated not only by material interests but by a deeper quest for identity continuity and existential stability.

Within the Chinese context, these dynamics are particularly salient. The results indicate that Chinese nationalism, when combined with heightened perceptions of external threat, produces both direct and interactive effects that elevate the probability of public support for policy escalation. This finding resonates with the ontological security literature, which argues that the need for positive self-identity and certainty can make states, and by extension, publics, more receptive to securitizing narratives (Steele, 2008; Qin, 2022). The empirical evidence here illustrates how these narratives can be operationalized at the mass level, producing feedback loops that reinforce threat perceptions and escalate policy preferences in real time.

In dialogue with the broader literature on nationalism and the security dilemma, this study moves beyond traditional materialist and structural explanations of crisis escalation. While realist and constructivist approaches have long acknowledged the importance of perception and identity, few have explicitly modeled the mechanisms through which ontological in security and nationalist sentiment interact to generate both individual-level attitudes and systemic escalation risks (Hall & Ross, 2015). By integrating a psychological account of ontological security with dynamic modeling of public opinion linkages, this research provides a novel theoretical and empirical contribution. Notably, the findings show

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

that even relatively modest increases in nationalism or ontological insecurity can, via transnational public feedback, rapidly drive both sides toward a persistently higher-risk equilibrium. Rather than producing unchecked escalation spirals, these dynamics stabilize at elevated risk levels—underscoring the synergistic amplification of risk by structural sentiment shifts and dynamic cross-national linkages.

The implications for the academic study of crisis management and international risk are substantial. First, this research highlights the critical importance of ontological security in shaping how publics interpret and respond to international disputes. In the Chinese context, where issues of national identity, historical memory, and perceived external encirclement are especially pronounced, ontological insecurity provides fertile ground for the mobilization of nationalist sentiment. This dual process not only elevates the baseline risk of escalation, but through dynamic feedback mechanisms, locks the system into a new, high-risk normal. As a result, traditional crisis management tools based solely on rational deterrence or elite signaling become less effective, especially in the face of widespread nationalist mobilization.

Second, the results call attention to the need for more sophisticated models of mass opinion and international crisis dynamics. The observed feedback loops between Chinese and American publics underscore that escalation risk emerges from mutually reinforcing dynamics, rather than simple additive effects. This highlights the importance of modeling how ontological security mechanisms operate across borders, generating emergent high-risk equilibria that are difficult to predict or manage through conventional theoretical frameworks.

The study also opens several avenues for future research. One notable limitation is the reliance on experimental and simulation data derived from a specific crisis scenario. While the South China Sea dispute provides a rich empirical context, future work could examine whether similar dynamics hold in other regions or issue areas, such as the Taiwan Strait, the Korean Peninsula, or global technological competition. Additionally, further research is needed to unpack the microfoundations of ontological security at the individual level, including how personal experiences, media consumption, and social networks shape perceptions of threat and identity. Cross-national comparative studies could also shed light on how different political systems or cultural traditions modulate the relationship between ontological security, nationalism, and crisis escalation.

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

Finally, the findings underscore the broader academic significance of integrating ontological security theory with the study of public opinion and crisis management. By demonstrating that identity-driven psychological processes can, through mass opinion linkages and dynamic feedback, entrench system-level risks, this research advances a more comprehensive and dynamic understanding of contemporary international crises. Rather than viewing publics as passive recipients of elite signals, these findings underscore their active, and potentially self-reinforcing role in shaping the evolution and persistence of high-risk equilibria in great power rivalry.

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

Appendix

A. Supplementary Empirical Tables

This section includes additional empirical tables not shown in the main text. These supplementary results cover mediation analyses, extended regression specifications, and robustness checks. All tables adhere to academic standards, with variable definitions, significance levels, and notes consistent with the main analysis. Each table is accompanied by a brief note explaining its content and relevance.

Effect Type	Estimate	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	p-value	Significance
ACME (control)	0.00452	0.00101	0.01	0.008	**
ACME (treated)	0.00454	0.00100	0.01	0.008	**
ADE (control)	0.07261	0.04067	0.10	<0.001	***
ADE (treated)	0.07263	0.04053	0.10	<0.001	***
Total Effect	0.07715	0.04518	0.11	<0.001	***
Prop. Mediated (control)	0.05858	0.01329	0.13	0.008	**
Prop. Mediated (treated)	0.05882	0.01340	0.13	0.008	**
Prop. Mediated (treated)	0.05882	0.01340	0.13	0.008	**
ACME (average)	0.00453	0.00101	0.01	0.008	**
ADE (average)	0.07262	0.04060	0.10	<0.001	***
Prop. Mediated (average)	0.05870	0.01339	0.13	0.008	**

Table A1. Causal Mediation Analysis: China Sample

Note: This table reports the detailed mediation results for the China sample, estimating the direct and indirect effects of nationalism on support for hawkish policy escalation through security dilemma attribution. The results highlight the statistical significance and substantive size of both pathways, clarifying the mechanism in the Chinese context.

Effect Type	Estimate	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	p-value	Significance
ACME (control)	0.00648	0.00188	0.01	<0.001	***
ACME (treated)	0.00726	0.00215	0.01	<0.001	***
ADE (control)	0.17449	0.13866	0.21	<0.001	***
ADE (treated)	0.17528	0.13919	0.22	<0.001	***
Total Effect	0.18176	0.14550	0.22	<0.001	***
Prop. Mediated (control)	0.03565	0.01052	0.07	<0.001	***
Prop. Mediated (treated)	0.03996	0.01217	0.08	<0.001	***

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

ACME (average)	0.00687	0.00202	0.01	<0.001	***
ADE (average)	0.17489	0.13899	0.22	<0.001	***
Prop. Mediated (average)	0.03781	0.01126	0.07	<0.001	***

Table A2. Causal Mediation Analysis: USA Sample

Note: This table provides analogous mediation results for the US sample. It allows comparison of the strength and significance of mediation pathways between China and the United States, emphasizing the context-dependent nature of the ontological security mechanism.

H4 (a): Main Effects Model

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	z value	p value	Significance
Intercept	-3.969	0.391	-10.142	<0.001	***
nationalism	0.990	0.101	8.981	<0.001	***
attrChInc	-0.014	0.036	-0.383	0.702	

H4 (b): Interaction Model

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	z value	p value	Significance
Intercept	-2.179	0.701	-3.106	0.002	**
nationalism	0.432	0.186	2.324	0.020	*
attrChInc	-0.701	0.237	-2.962	0.003	**
nationalism × attrChInc	0.184	0.063	2.940	0.003	**

Table A3. Predictors of Hawkish Policy Support: China Sample (Main Effects and Interaction Model, Logistic Regression)

Note: This table summarizes regression results for the Chinese sample, including both the main effects and the interaction between nationalism and security dilemma attribution. It demonstrates how the joint influence of these variables predicts escalation preferences.

H5 (a): China Sample

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	z value	p value	Significance
Intercept	-4.092	0.582	-7.036	<0.001	***
nationalism	0.860	0.102	8.398	<0.001	***
attrChInc	-0.021	0.036	-0.573	0.567	
age	0.008	0.005	1.784	0.074	.
sex	-0.319	0.119	-2.689	0.007	**
edu1	0.068	0.061	1.114	0.265	
income1	0.007	0.011	0.608	0.543	

H5 (b): USA Sample

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	z value	p value	Significance
Intercept	-4.092	0.582	-7.036	<0.001	***
nationalism	0.860	0.102	8.398	<0.001	***
attrChInc	-0.021	0.036	-0.573	0.567	
age	0.008	0.005	1.784	0.074	.

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

sex	-0.319	0.119	-2.689	0.007	**
edu1	0.068	0.061	1.114	0.265	
income1	0.007	0.011	0.608	0.543	

Table A4. Predictors of Hawkish Policy Support: China and USA Samples (Logistic Regression)

Note: This table presents logistic regression estimates for both Chinese and American samples, enabling direct comparison of the determinants of hawkish policy support. The results underscore cross-national similarities and differences in attitudinal predictors.

B. Technical Appendix: Game-Theoretic Model of Hawk-Hawk Nash Equilibrium

This section presents the formal game-theoretic model used to derive the Nash equilibrium conditions for mutual escalation ("hawk-hawk" outcome) between China and the United States. The model illustrates how nationalism and ontological security considerations are incorporated into the payoff structure and strategic choices of both players in a crisis scenario.

B1. Players, Strategies, and Payoff Structure

Players: China (Player 1) and the United States (Player 2).

Strategies: Each player chooses between a hawkish (H) or dovish (D) policy response in a stylized crisis game.

Payoff Matrix: The payoffs incorporate baseline utility, identity-related motivations (nationalism, ontological security), and risk or reputation costs.

A simplified payoff matrix is as follows:

	US: Hawk (H)	US: Dove (D)
China: Hawk (H)	(a, a)	(b, c)
China: Dove (D)	(c, b)	(d, d)

Where *a, b, c, d* are payoff values determined by:

1) Baseline utility of escalation or restraint
2) Identity payoff: Added utility if acting hawkish aligns with high nationalism or ontological security threat (parameterized by N and O)
3) Reputational or risk cost for mutual escalation

B.2 Best Response Functions

Each player's best response is to choose the strategy that maximizes expected utility, given their belief about the other player's move.

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. License: All Rights Reserved

1) For China, the expected utility of playing Hawk is:

$EU_{China}(H) = p \cdot a + (1 - p) \cdot b$, where p is the probability the US chooses Hawk.

2) Similarly, the expected utility of Dove is: $EU_{China}(D) = p \cdot c + (1 - p) \cdot d$

China plays Hawk if $EU_{China}(H) > EU_{China}(D)$.

3) Symmetrical reasoning applies to the US.

The Nash equilibrium is the pair of strategies (or mixed strategy probabilities) where neither player has an incentive to unilaterally deviate.

B.3 Nash Equilibrium Derivation

To solve for the Nash equilibrium in this crisis game, the analysis focuses on the conditions under which each player, China and the United States, becomes indifferent between adopting a hawkish or dovish policy. For China, the expected utility of playing Hawk is calculated as $EU_{China}(H) = p \cdot a + (1 - p) \cdot b$, where p is the probability that the United States chooses Hawk. The expected utility for choosing Dove is $EU_{China}(D) = p \cdot c + (1 - p) \cdot d$. China will be indifferent between Hawk and Dove when these two expected utilities are equal, given the US's mixed strategy.

The same logic applies to the US, where the equilibrium conditions require both players to have no incentive to unilaterally deviate. The Nash equilibrium probabilities for each side can thus be derived by solving this linear system, yielding closed-form expressions that depend on the payoff parameters embedded in the model.

B.4 Parameter Mapping and Theoretical Relevance

The mapping of theoretical constructs onto the parameters of the payoff matrix is central to linking the formal model with empirical analysis. Nationalism (N) enters the payoffs as a force favoring escalation, either additively or multiplicatively, thereby increasing the expected utility of choosing Hawk under strong national identification. Ontological security (O) amplifies the effects of external threat perception, further shifting payoffs toward hawkishness when perceived insecurity is high. The integration of these parameters means that both higher levels of nationalism and ontological insecurity systematically push actors toward the mutual Hawk-Hawk equilibrium. This provides a theoretical mechanism by which

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. License: All Rights Reserved

individual-level psychological dispositions and collective identity concerns translate into greater risks of international escalation.

B.5 Substantive Interpretation and Theoretical Implications

The formal derivation of the Nash equilibrium demonstrates how identity and security motivations are not merely supplementary factors but are fundamentally embedded in the strategic structure of crisis interactions. High nationalism and ontological insecurity make the Hawk-Hawk outcome both more likely and more persistent. This offers a rigorous foundation for understanding why attitudinal drivers, measured in survey or experimental data, can have structural effects on crisis dynamics between states.

C. Technical Appendix: Monte Carlo Simulation of Dynamic Risk Linkage

This section details the Monte Carlo simulation procedure used to analyze the dynamic risk linkage of escalation probabilities between China and the United States under varying levels of nationalism. The simulation is designed to capture the mutual feedback and amplification mechanisms that can arise when public opinion and risk perceptions in both countries co-evolve during a crisis scenario.

C.1 Model Specification

Let p_t and q_t denote the probabilities that China and the United States, respectively, choose a hawkish strategy at iteration t. The initial values (p_0, q_0) represent the baseline escalation propensities derived from observed survey data or theoretical priors.

At each iteration, both countries update their probabilities based on three factors:

1) Their own level of nationalism (N_{China}, N_{US}),
2) Their own perceived ontological security (O_{China}, O_{US}),
3) The observed hawkishness of the other country (feedback linkage, parameterized by λ).

The updating functions are given by:

$$p_{t+1} = \sigma\left(\beta_0 + \alpha N_{China} + \gamma O_{China} + \lambda q_t\right)$$

$$q_{t+1} = \sigma\left(\beta_0 + \alpha N_{US} + \gamma O_{US} + \lambda p_t\right)$$

where $\sigma(x) = \frac{1}{1+e^{-x}}$ is the logistic function ensuring that probabilities remain within

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. License: All Rights Reserved

the [0, 1] interval. The parameters α, γ, and λ represent the effect sizes of nationalism, ontological security, and cross-national feedback, respectively.

C.2 Simulation Procedure

The simulation proceeds as follows:

1) Initialization: Set the number of Monte Carlo iterations T (10), the number of simulation runs S (1000), and specify parameter values (α, γ, λ), as well as the baseline and experimental values for nationalism and ontological security.
2) Iteration: For each simulation run s, initialize p_0 and q_0 and update probabilities according to the model equations at each iteration t.
3) Recording Outcomes: At the end of each simulation run, record the final probabilities or the time path of escalation probabilities for further analysis.
4) Aggregation: Aggregate the outcomes across all simulation runs to obtain the mean estimated probability of mutual escalation (both China and the US choosing hawkish responses), as well as confidence intervals.

C.3 Sensitivity and Robustness Analysis

To assess the effect of nationalism and feedback strength, simulations are conducted across a range of values for N_{China} (from -2 SD to +2 SD). The sensitivity of mutual escalation risk (hawk-hawk Nash probability) to increases in Chinese nationalism is visualized.

Similarly, the feedback parameter \lambda is varied to examine its role in amplifying or dampening escalation dynamics. The results are robust to changes in initial conditions, as evidenced by convergence of escalation probabilities in repeated simulation runs.

C.4 Interpretation

The Monte Carlo simulation provides a dynamic and probabilistic estimate of how increases in nationalism and perceived ontological insecurity can produce nonlinear escalation risks through mutual feedback mechanisms. This approach not only illustrates the policy relevance of public opinion dynamics but also strengthens the theoretical claim that identity-based variables can have compounding effects on international crisis stability.

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

Reference

Callahan, W. A. (2010). China: The Pessoptimist Nation. Oxford University Press.

Fravel, M. T. (2011). China's strategy in the South China Sea. Contemporary Southeast Asia, 33(3), 292-319.

Giddens, A. (1991). Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age. Stanford University Press.

Gustafsson, K., & Wang, Y. (2021). Narrating identity, constructing ontological security: China's struggle for a new status. International Relations of the Asia-Pacific, 21(1), 41–70.

Gries, P. H. (2014). The politics of nationalism in modern China: The power of resentment. University of California Press.

Hall, T., & Ross, A. (2015). Asia's Security and the Rise of China: Identity, Power, and the Future of Regional Order. International Security, 39(3), 143–179.

He, Y. (2017). Identity politics and the South China Sea: China's search for national identity and maritime rights. In L. Buszynski & D. Rosenberg (Eds.), The South China Sea: From a regional maritime dispute to geo-strategic competition (pp. 135-151). Routledge.

Jervis, R. (1978). Cooperation under the security dilemma. World Politics, 30(2), 167–214.

Johnston, A. I. (2017). The Failures of the 'Hawkish' China Narrative. The China Quarterly, 229, 1–27.

Kertzer, J. D., Brutger, R., & Quek, K. (2024). Perspective-taking and security dilemma thinking: Experimental evidence from China and the United States. World Politics, 76(2), 334-378.

Kertzer, Joshua, Ryan Brutger, and Kai Quek. 2024. "Replication Data for: Perspective Taking and Security Dilemma Thinking." Harvard Dataverse. https://doi.org/doi:10.7910/DVN/ACI6QO.

Kinnvall, C. (2004). Globalization and religious nationalism: Self, identity, and the search for ontological security. Political Psychology, 25(5), 741–767.

Kinnvall, C. (2016). Feeling ontologically (in)secure: Chinese nationalism, national identity, and the global financial crisis. Political Psychology, 37(3), 419–435.

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

Kinnvall, C., & Mitzen, J. (2020). Anxiety, fear, and ontological security in world politics: Thinking with and beyond Giddens. International Theory, 12(2), 240–256.

Mitzen, J. (2006). Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma. European Journal of International Relations, 12(3), 341–370.

Qin, Y. (2022). A Relational Theory of World Politics. Cambridge University Press.

Reilly, J. (2014). Strong society, smart state: The rise of public opinion in China's Japan policy. Columbia University Press.

Smith, A. D. (2013). Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History (2nd ed.). Polity Press.

Steele, B. J. (2008). Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State. Routledge.

Stein, J. G. (2022). Threat perception in international relations. In W. R. Thompson (Ed.), Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics. Oxford University Press.

Stockmann, D. (2013). Media commercialization and authoritarian rule in China. Cambridge University Press.

Tang, S. (2009). The security dilemma and ethnic conflict: Toward a dynamic and integrative theory of ethnic conflict. Review of International Studies, 35(1), 107–129.

Weiss, J. C. (2013). Authoritarian signaling, mass audiences, and nationalist protest in China. International Organization, 67(1), 1–35.

Weiss, J. C. (2019). Powerful patriots: Nationalist protest in China's foreign relations. Oxford University Press.

Yue, X. (2020). Perceived threat and support for hawkish foreign policy: Evidence from survey experiments in China. The China Quarterly, 241, 108–127.

Zhang, D. (2018). Chinese nationalism and the South China Sea dispute: Pathologies and policy implications. China Review, 18(1), 197–220.

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-lsp33 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0037-7975 Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved