

Today Ukraine, Tomorrow Taiwan? Assessing US Reputation and Deterrence across International Crises

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When does a state's reputation for resolve transfer across separate international crises and deter future challengers? We propose three assumptions underlying "Cross-Crisis Reputational Deterrence" (CCRD). First, a defender's response to a crisis leads a new challenger to reassess the defender's reputation (*reputation formation*). Second, the new challenger draws inferences about how the defender would behave in a different future crisis scenario (*transfer of reputation*). Third, anticipating the defender's response, the challenger changes its preferences (*deterrence by reputation*). We test the CCRD logic by examining whether the initial US response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine impacted Chinese assertiveness toward Taiwan. A framing experiment in China in March 2022 finds that a weak US response to Russian aggression decreases perceptions of US resolve but does not ultimately impact Chinese attitudes toward Taiwan. Our findings illustrate the conditions under which CCRD is more or less likely to occur in international politics.

¿Cuándo se transfiere la reputación a nivel de determinación de un Estado a través de crisis internacionales separadas y cuándo esta disuade a futuros contendientes? Proponemos tres supuestos subyacentes a la "Disuasión Reputacional Transcrisis" (CCRD, por sus siglas en inglés). En primer lugar, la respuesta de un defensor ante una crisis provoca que un nuevo contendiente tenga que reevaluar la reputación del defensor (formación de la reputación). En segundo lugar, el nuevo contendiente deduce cómo se comportaría el defensor en un escenario futuro de crisis diferente (transferencia de reputación). En tercer lugar, al anticipar la respuesta del defensor, el contendiente cambia sus preferencias (disuasión mediante reputación). Ponemos a prueba la lógica de la CCRD analizando si la respuesta inicial de Estados Unidos a la invasión de Ucrania por parte de Rusia influyó sobre la asertividad de China con respecto a Taiwán. Un experimento de contextualización llevado a cabo en China en marzo de 2022 concluye que la respuesta débil por parte de EE. UU. ante la agresión rusa disminuye la percepción de la determinación estadounidense, pero no afecta, en última instancia, sobre las actitudes chinas con respecto a Taiwán. Nuestras conclusiones ilustran las condiciones bajo las cuales es más o menos probable que tenga lugar una CCRD en la política internacional.

Quand la réputation de détermination d'un État se propage-t-elle dans des crises internationales distinctes et dissuade-t-elle de futurs concurrents? Nous proposons trois hypothèses qui sous-tendraient la "dissuasion réputationnelle transversale aux crises" (DRTC). D'abord, la réaction d'un défenseur à une crise conduit un nouveau concurrent à réévaluer la réputation de ce défenseur (formation de réputation). Ensuite, le nouveau concurrent déduit la manière dont le défenseur se comporterait dans un scénario de crise différent à l'avenir (transfert de réputation). Enfin, anticipant la réaction du défenseur, le concurrent modifie ses préférences (dissuasion par réputation). Nous testons la logique de la DRTC en examinant l'incidence de la réponse initiale des États-Unis à l'invasion de l'Ukraine par la Russie sur l'affirmation chinoise à l'égard de Taïwan. Une expérience de cadrage en Chine en mars 2022 conclut qu'une réponse modérée des États-Unis à l'agression russe a un effet négatif sur la détermination états-unienne perçue, mais n'a finalement pas d'incidence sur les comportements chinois à l'égard de Taïwan. Nos conclusions illustrent les conditions auxquelles la DRTC a plus ou moins de chances d'intervenir en politique internationale.

In February 2022, as Russian President Vladimir Putin stationed military troops near Ukraine's eastern border, an-

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alysts projected that world leaders would make inferences about US credibility and resolve based on how the United States responded to the impending invasion. Experts argued that a weak US response to Russia's act of "cold-blooded aggression" (Wright 2022) in Ukraine would have broader geopolitical consequences. In particular, it might lead Chinese officials to doubt the US resolve to defend Taiwan in a future crisis. Then UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson warned that Russia's invasion of Ukraine "will echo around the world, and those echoes will be heard in East Asia" (Milliken 2022). An analyst quoted in *The New York Times* noted, "If the Western powers fail to respond to Russia, they do embolden

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the Chinese thinking regarding action on Taiwan” (Myers and Qin 2022). Other commentators disagreed, explaining that such arguments oversimplify the parallels between these scenarios (Browne 2022; Manning 2022; Templeman 2022).

This policy debate parallels academic discussions about *reputation for resolve*, or perceptions of willingness to stand firm in a crisis (e.g., Baser 2024; Clare and Danilovic 2012; Huth 1997; Kertzer 2016; Lupton 2020; McManus 2017; Yarhi-Milo 2018; Zhang 2019). Research explores whether publics, both domestic and foreign, draw reputational inferences from the behavior of states and their leaders (e.g., Kertzer 2016; Kertzer, Renshon, and Yarhi-Milo 2021; Lupton 2018; Renshon, Dafoe, and Huth 2018; Yarhi-Milo 2018). Central to this literature are questions about the extent to which reputations can transfer across crises and deter new potential challengers. Underlying the Ukraine–Taiwan debate is a theoretical question: When are a *defender’s* past actions in a crisis more or less likely to deter a *challenger* from taking aggressive actions toward another *protégé* of the defender?¹ Similar questions about reputation have been applied to many other contexts. For example, did the Obama administration’s failure to enforce a “red line” in Syria in 2013 impact Vladimir Putin’s calculations about annexing Crimea (Thiessen 2014)? Did, as Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY) implied, a botched US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 precipitate Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine (Garver 2022)? And did, as Senator Bob Menendez (D-NJ) warned, the US response to Russian aggression in 2022 have implications for China’s assertiveness toward Taiwan (Menendez 2022)?

These lines of inquiry reflect a dynamic we refer to as “Cross-Crisis Reputational Deterrence” (CCRD). A CCRD Hypothesis implies that a defender’s weak response to an international crisis involving its protégé will increase doubts about its willingness to stand firm in future crises. In turn, other potential challengers will be more aggressive toward other protégés of the defender. We use the term “cross-crisis” to highlight our emphasis on whether the defender’s reputation transfers to *an entirely new crisis involving both a different challenger and protégé*. Motivated by the policy debate introduced at the outset of this paper, our interest is in the potential deterrent effects of reputation for resolve.² While rhetorically powerful, the CCRD Hypothesis is hard to evaluate. Two crises may be temporally proximate but unrelated. Since policymakers often lack insight into adversarial governments’ decision-making, providing evidence to the contrary is difficult.

We argue that the CCRD logic contains three underlying assumptions and propose a theoretical framework to assess them. The first assumption, *reputation formation*, is that a defender’s response to a crisis causes a new challenger to form or update its beliefs about how resolved the defender is. The second assumption, *transfer of reputation*, is that a defender’s past behavior causes a new challenger to revise their beliefs about how the defender would respond in an unrelated, future crisis. The degree to which reputation transfers across separate crises is informed partly—although not exclusively—by the extent to which the new challenger sees the past crisis as comparable to a future crisis scenario. The final assumption is *deterrence by reputation*:

the new challenger’s policy toward the defender’s protégé is shaped by expectations about the defender’s response. Violations of any of these assumptions decrease the likelihood that a defender’s past behavior will impact the new challenger’s policy preferences and behaviors. We emphasize that none of these assumptions is entirely new to the reputation literature. Rather, our objective is to synthesize existing assumptions into a general framework to assess when and why reputations are more likely to transfer across crises and influence crisis outcomes.

We illustrate how this framework can evaluate the CCRD Hypothesis with application to the US–Russia–Ukraine and US–China–Taiwan relationships. In a public opinion survey of 1,018 adults living in Mainland China fielded in March 2022, we present respondents with information about the initial US response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, randomizing whether this response is framed as “weak” or “strong.” We find support for *reputation formation*: framing the initial US response to Russian aggression as “weak” rather than “strong” makes respondents in China less likely to perceive the United States as resolved to stand firm in crises in general. We also find some support for *transfer of reputation* across crises: weak frames of past US actions decrease Chinese beliefs that the United States would defend Taiwan in a crisis. This effect is largely driven by respondents who perceive the Ukraine and Taiwan cases as somewhat similar. However, we find no evidence for *deterrence by reputation*: the frames ultimately do not impact Chinese attitudes toward Taiwan policy.

Our results show that a large majority (72 percent) of respondents believe that China should be at least somewhat more assertive toward Taiwan in the future. However, these attitudes are not shaped by perceptions of the US response to Russian aggression in Ukraine. Instead, they are better explained by prior beliefs on the Taiwan question, including the conviction that Taiwan is China’s internal affair. As the Russia–Ukraine conflict continues, Chinese officials and the public have learned other lessons from the international response to Putin’s invasion (Feigenbaum and Szubin 2023; Greitens 2022; Norris 2023; Wong 2023). In fact, subsequent public opinion research suggests that as the conflict unfolded, the pro-Russian information environment in China made the Chinese public more hawkish on the Taiwan issue (Aksoy, Enamorado, and Yang 2024). However, concerns early in the crisis that a weak US response to Russian aggression would embolden China are not consistent with our analysis. These findings are important because broad arguments about US reputation for resolve crowd out more nuanced debates about other ways that the United States could deter Chinese assertiveness toward Taiwan. Beyond this case, improper invocations of credibility and reputation could result in unwarranted aggression in international politics.

Given our focus on public opinion, we do not aim to provide insight into Chinese foreign policy decision-making. Rather, we test whether the causal logic of the CCRD Hypothesis is consistent with public attitudes in China. This approach follows other scholarship that examines the microfoundations of reputation, credibility, and deterrence and takes seriously the importance of understanding public opinion in authoritarian contexts like China as a primary research objective (e.g., Bell and Quek 2018; Kertzer, Brutger, and Quek 2024; Weiss and Dafoe 2019).

Our findings bridge two camps in the reputation literature that have been characterized as “reputation proponents” and “reputation critics” (Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo 2015). Reputation proponents argue that a defender’s past actions can deter potential challengers (e.g., Jarvis 1970,

¹We use the term *protégé* expansively to describe any third party that a *defender* could plausibly support, not just a formal alliance partner.

²To be clear, the CCRD Hypothesis does not suggest that reputation for resolve *alone* can deter a challenger, but rather that there should be an independent, detectable effect of a defender’s reputation for resolve on a challenger’s decision-making.

1976; Schelling 1966; Sechser 2018; Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo 2015). Reputation critics believe that situational factors of the current crisis dominate strategic decision-making (e.g., Hopf 1994; Mercer 1996; Press 2004, 2005). As Harvey and Mitton (2016) underscore, the stalemate in this debate over “zero” versus “complete interdependence of commitments” inspires fruitful inquiries into the conditions under which reputation for resolve tends to be more or less salient in shaping decision-making (e.g., Crescenzi 2007; Danilovic 2002; Harvey and Mitton 2016; Lupton 2020). Our results contribute to these efforts by exploring whether and when reputations for resolve are likely to form, transfer across crises, and/or deter other adversaries.

Reputation for Resolve in International Relations

In international relations, *reputation* is defined as an actor’s “persistent characteristics or tendencies based on that actor’s past behavior, which will influence what he or she does in the future” (Jervis, Yarhi-Milo, and Casler 2021, 169). Actors in international politics acquire reputations for many traits.³ We focus on reputation for *resolve*, or willingness to stand firm in international crises. Kertzer’s (2016) foundational work on resolve explains that it is influenced both by dispositional characteristics of the relevant actor (e.g., time preference, honor orientation) and situational factors (e.g., cost of fighting, cost of backing down).

Existing scholarship on reputation for resolve investigates when and how states or leaders invest in reputation-building (e.g., Baser 2024; Sechser 2010; Wang 2023; Wolford 2007) and the extent to which their reputation shapes the preferences and behaviors of other international actors (e.g., Clare and Danilovic 2012; Mercer 1996; Press 2005; Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo 2015). Reputation for resolve is thought to be important because actors seen as highly resolved may be better able to deter new challengers. Yet there remains debate over the conditions under which reputation for resolve transfers across different crises and the extent to which it can impact the beliefs or behaviors of potential challengers.

To clarify scenarios under which a defender’s reputation for resolve could plausibly deter potential challengers, we categorize the set of books, articles, and working papers about reputation for resolve across two dimensions in figure 1⁴: whether the crisis is dyadic (involving only a defender and a challenger) or triadic (also involving a third-party protégé(s) of the defender),⁵ and whether the crises involve the same or different challengers and/or protégés. In each category, figure 1 includes an example of a historical case cited in a work of reputation scholarship. The CCRD dynamic of interest in our study—in which a defender’s reputation for resolve formed in a past crisis has a deterrent effect in an entirely separate crisis scenario with a new challenger and a new protégé—is captured in the bottom right cell of figure 1.

³For example, other research in international relations examines an actor’s reputation for honesty (Sartori 2005), trustworthiness (Kydd 2007), reliability (Crescenzi et al. 2012; Mattes 2012; Tomz 2007b), hostility (Crescenzi 2007), madness (McManus 2021; Schwartz 2023), and hawkishness (Mattes and Weeks 2019, 2022).

⁴We identify literature about how a defender’s behavior in an interstate crisis impacts its reputation for resolve from bibliographies of four reviews on reputation in international relations (Crescenzi and Donahue 2017; Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth 2014; Danilovic, Clare, and Tucker 2020; Jervis, Yarhi-Milo, and Casler 2021). See Online Appendix Section I.

⁵In the deterrence literature, this dimension differentiates between direct (dyadic) and extended (triadic) deterrence (Danilovic 2001; Huth 1988b; Huth and Russett 1988).

Much of the discussion the CCRD logic follows from Thomas Schelling’s well-known arguments about interdependence-of-commitments, which asserts that “Few parts of the world are intrinsically worth the risk of serious war by themselves... but defending them or running risks to protect them may preserve one’s commitments for actions in other parts of the world at later times” (Schelling 1966, 124). Policymakers and analysts often cite this logic when assessing US foreign policy outcomes. Some argued that the US failure to respond forcefully to Bashar al-Assad’s use of chemical weapons shaped Putin’s decision to annex Crimea in 2014 (Thiessen 2014) and Chinese land reclamation efforts in the South China Sea (Zhang 2023). More recently, US Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY) asserted, “[T]he precipitous withdrawal from Afghanistan in August was a signal, to Putin and maybe to Chinese President Xi as well, that America was in retreat... and was an invitation to the autocrats of the world that maybe this was a good time to make a move” (Garver 2022). Others, however, are skeptical of these claims. In fact, some scholars argue that a fixation on credibility and reputation in US foreign policy can be dangerous, leading to a “cult of reputation” (Tang 2005) that fuels interventionism. As Press and Lind (2013) summarize, “the fear of losing credibility helped propel the United States into conflicts in Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, and Libya.”

While a great deal of theoretical discussion and public discourse implicitly or explicitly invokes CCRD, the evidence from this category of reputation scholarship is thin. The main problem is that the CCRD dynamic is hard to empirically evaluate. One approach to assessing CCRD claims is to analyze data on observable state behaviors in wars or crises.⁶ Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo (2015) demonstrate that countries that yield in past militarized interstate disputes are likely to be challenged by others in the future, including by challengers who were previously uninvolved. Such large-*N* studies suggest that reputation for resolve may have a deterrent effect across separate crises. But these studies have difficulty establishing a causal relationship between a defender’s past actions and a challenger’s subsequent behavior. Without insights into the perceptions of the challenger state, we have trouble explaining why reputations do or do not transfer and when they might impact the behavior of a potential challenger. For example, if an observational analysis finds no correlation between a defender’s past actions and the likelihood that it will be subsequently challenged, the result is open to different interpretations. Is the defender unable to form or change its reputation? Did the defender’s reputation not transfer to a new, specific context? Or did the challenger not adjust its behavior in anticipation of the defender’s actions?

This limitation is one reason why many researchers have turned to micro-level studies and survey experiments to investigate individual perceptions of reputation. Many experiments in this vein examine how publics evaluate their own state’s or leader’s reputation (e.g., Brutger and Kertzer 2018; Croco, Hanmer, and McDonald 2021; Kertzer and Brutger 2016; Levendusky and Horowitz 2012; Lin-Greenberg 2019; Schwartz and Blair 2020; Tomz 2007a). The handful of studies that speak to perceptions of adversaries often use hypothetical scenarios or draw from past crises (e.g., Cebul, Dafoe, and Monteiro 2021; Goldfien, Joseph, and McManus 2023; Kertzer, Renshon, and Yarhi-Milo 2021; Renshon, Dafoe, and Huth 2018;

⁶Examples of large-*N* studies of reputation include Clare and Danilovic (2010, 2012), Danilovic (2001), Crescenzi (2007, 2018), Sechser (2018), and Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo (2015).

<u>DYADIC</u>		<u>TRIADIC</u>	
Challenger	Same	Protégé	
	Different	Same	Different
Challenger	Same	Do U.S. treaty commitments to the Philippines deter China from using coercion in the South China Sea? (Zhang 2019)	Did British and French responses to Germany's annexation of Czechoslovakia shape Germany's decision to invade Poland? (Press 2005)
	Different	Do U.S. leader visits to South Korea deter future challenges from North Korea and China? (McManus 2018)	Did the U.S. response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine affect Chinese assertiveness toward Taiwan? (This Study)

Figure 1 Frameworks for examining the deterrent effects of reputation for resolve

Renshon, Yarhi-Milo, and Kertzer 2023). By contrast, we field our experiment during an ongoing crisis to examine how the public in a potential challenger state (China) perceives the crisis response of a defender (the US) in order to assess the micro-level implications of the CCRD dynamic.

A Framework to Assess CCRD

We introduce a theoretical framework for assessing CCRD across two sequential triadic crisis scenarios. In the first scenario, a challenger takes aggressive actions toward a protégé of the defender, and the defender chooses how to respond. In the second scenario, a new challenger observes the defender's behavior in the first scenario and decides what actions to take toward a different protégé of the defender. The key question is: do the defender's actions in the first crisis impact the new challenger's policy toward a protégé in the second scenario? This question parallels the debate about whether and how the US (*defender*) response to Russia's (*challenger*) aggression toward Ukraine (*protégé*) could shape China's (*new challenger*) policy preference in a future hypothetical crisis with Taiwan (*different protégé*). Given our focus on the Chinese public, the CCRD Hypothesis predicts:

CCRD Hypothesis (Theory): *A weaker (stronger) response of the defender to a challenger's aggression toward the defender's protégé will make a new challenger more (less) assertive toward a different protégé of the defender.*

CCRD Hypothesis (Application): *A weaker (stronger) U.S. response to Russian aggression in Ukraine will make the Chinese public believe that China should be more (less) assertive toward Taiwan.*

Our theoretical framework draws on the reputation, credibility, and deterrence literatures to identify three distinct assumptions underlying the CCRD Hypothesis. Our discussion emphasizes the conditions under which we think each assumption will be less likely to hold. We then discuss the application of each assumption to US reputation for resolve across the Ukraine and Taiwan cases. The assumptions themselves, however, can generalize to evaluate the strength of CCRD claims across other contexts. Importantly, we do not view these assumptions as all strictly necessary for CCRD. They influence CCRD probabilistically rather than deterministically. Violations of any of these assumptions decrease

the likelihood that a defender's past behavior in a crisis will affect a new challenger's preferences or actions toward a different protégé in a future crisis.

Assumption 1: Reputation Formation and Updating

The first assumption, which we term *reputation formation*, is that a defender's response to a crisis causes a new potential challenger to either form or update its assessment about the defender's type (i.e., the extent to which it is resolved to stand firm or follow through on its threats). This process of rational updating is foundational to rationalist approaches to reputation and deterrence (e.g., Harvey and Mitton 2016; Huth 1988a; Sechser 2018; Schelling 1966).

Existing research identifies two main ways this assumption is violated. First, a defender's actions in the first crisis may simply not provide enough information about how resolved or unresolved it is to follow through on its threats and promises. Minor, ambiguous, or non-credible actions taken by a defender during a past crisis may not be considered predictive of future crisis behavior (Jervis 1970). Second, a new potential challenger might have perceptual biases that result in a fixed view of the defender, preventing the challenger from rationally updating. In contrast to rationalist approaches, psychological approaches to the study of reputation emphasize the role of cognitive biases in shaping perceptions of an adversary (e.g., Jervis 1976; Levy 1983; Stein 2013; Yarhi-Milo 2014). Mercer (1996), for instance, argues that states see their adversaries as hostile actors. Therefore, if a defender backs down in a crisis, a challenger may not assume it lacks resolve. Similarly, Copeland (1998, 36) explains that reputations for resolve are often fixed "because they are already embedded in the 'ally' and 'adversary' labels states have given each other." In such instances, the defender's reputation might fail to form or update in the eyes of a new challenger, violating Assumption 1.

In our application, the *reputation formation* assumption anticipates that the US response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine impacts Chinese assessments of US resolve. This assumption may not hold if the Chinese public already has a fixed view of the United States as a resolved adversary. Beliefs that the United States is a hostile actor could lead the Chinese public to downplay or ignore a "weak" US

response to Russian aggression. Likewise, perceptual biases could work in the opposite direction. If the Chinese public has a preexisting, fixed image of the United States as a “paper tiger” (e.g., [Mendelsohn and Tierney 2023](#)), they may discount a “strong” US response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, violating Assumption 1.

In sum, Assumption 1 tells us that the US response to Russian aggression in Ukraine likely shapes or updates Chinese beliefs about the general willingness of the United States to stand firm in crisis. This assumption could be violated if strong perceptual biases give the Chinese public a fixed view of the United States. If Assumption 1 is violated, this decreases the likelihood that US reputation for resolve would subsequently transfer from the crisis in Ukraine to a potential crisis in the Taiwan Strait. If, by contrast, Assumption 1 is supported, we should observe the following:

A1 (Assumption): *The defender’s response to the crisis between a challenger and the defender’s protégé changes a new challenger’s general beliefs about the defender’s type.*

A1 (Application): *A weaker (stronger) U.S. response to Russian aggression in Ukraine should make the Chinese public believe that the U.S. is less (more) willing to stand firm in crisis.*

Assumption 2: Transfer of Reputation

It is more likely that the CCRD logic will hold, however, if reputations for resolve not only form, but also transfer across separate crises. Assumption 2 (*transfer of reputation*) states that a defender’s response to a past crisis changes a new potential challenger’s beliefs about how the defender would respond to a future crisis. Following existing scholarship, we argue that a transfer of reputation is most likely when the potential challenger views the past crisis scenario as comparable to a future crisis scenario. In these cases, the challenger will be more likely to see the defender’s past actions as relevant in predicting their future behavior.

The importance of cross-crisis similarity is one reason why reputation scholars emphasize the concept of reputation-building within repeated crises between the same defender and challenger ([Jackson 2016](#); [Lupton 2020](#)). Analyses of recurrent crises show that if a defender concedes to a challenger in the past, it is less likely to deter the same challenger in the future ([Grieco 2001](#); [Huth 1988a](#)). In crises involving new challengers, it follows that reputations are more likely to transfer across crises with strong similarities. Such scenarios might include crises that occur in the same region ([Danilovic 2002](#)), involve states with similar foreign policy preferences or material capabilities ([Crescenzi 2007](#)), address common security issues ([Harvey and Mitton 2016](#)), or feature similar stakes ([Goldfien, Joseph, and McManus 2023](#)).

Logically, in triadic cases involving a new challenger and a different protégé, Assumption 2 is more likely to be violated if a new challenger perceives important differences between the defender–challenger, defender–protégé, or challenger–protégé relationships across the two crisis scenarios. In our application, this means that US reputation for resolve will be more (less) likely to transfer across the Ukraine and Taiwan cases if the Chinese public views the US–Russia–Ukraine relationship as similar to (different from) the US–China–Taiwan relationship. In the Online Appendix,⁷ we discuss important differences, including the mechanics of a

Ukraine versus Taiwan invasion, perceptions of the strategic value of Taiwan versus Ukraine, variation in the perceived sovereignty of Taiwan versus Ukraine, and differing degrees of economic interdependence between the United States and China versus Russia.

On the whole, greater perceived differences between crisis scenarios should increase doubts among the Chinese public that the US response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine would transfer to the Taiwan case. However, we emphasize two important caveats. First, in theory, perceptions of cross-crisis similarity could distort the transfer of reputation in different directions. For example, following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, Beijing and Taipei both disavowed the comparability between Ukraine and Taiwan but emphasized different dimensions of these relationships. Beijing focused on the differences in the challenger–protégé relationships (Russia–Ukraine versus China–Taiwan), stressing that Ukraine is a sovereign state, whereas Taiwan is not ([PRC Foreign Ministry 2022](#)). By contrast, Taipei emphasized differences in the defender–protégé relationships (US–Ukraine versus US–Taiwan), noting Taiwan’s important position in the global high-tech supply chain ([Blanchard 2022](#)). These perceived dissimilarities could impact the transfer of reputation differently. If the Chinese public perceives the stakes to be much higher for the United States in Taiwan relative to Ukraine, a “weak” US response to the Russia–Ukraine crisis might not impact the Chinese public’s assessment of how the United States would respond to a future crisis with Taiwan. In contrast, if the Chinese public sees key differences between the sovereignty of Ukraine and Taiwan, they may not expect a “strong” US response to Ukraine to translate to the Taiwan case.

Second, it is still possible to observe a transfer of reputation across crises even if two crises are not perceived as highly comparable. As Sartori (2002, 2005) formally demonstrates, reputations can transfer across dissimilar situations because observers lack perfect information about an adversary’s true level of stake in the issue, which makes recent behavior informative.⁸ By allowing an actor’s resolve to change while remaining sticky across multiple interactions, [Baser \(2024\)](#) further shows that the degree to which reputation matters depends in part on the observer’s status quo payoff. When the status quo payoff is very high or very low, reputation becomes less relevant because the observer is either too sensitive or too indifferent to the risks of misjudging the opponent’s type. Finally, [Crescenzi \(2018\)](#) demonstrates empirically that reputational learning is a continuous rather than categorical process. This implies that the magnitude of reputational transfer may diminish as contexts diverge but need not disappear altogether. Together, these studies suggest that while perceived similarities between crises increase the probability of a transfer of reputation, they are neither necessary nor sufficient for reputation to transfer.

For this reason, we investigate the cross-crisis transfer of reputation in two ways. Assumption 2A first directly assesses whether perceptions of a defender’s behavior in past crises affect expectations about its behavior in a separate, future crisis. Then, Assumption 2B assesses perceptions of cross-crisis similarity, with the expectation that perceived similarities increase the likelihood that reputation will transfer. If Assumption 2 is supported, we should observe the following:

⁸Sartori focuses on reputations for honesty or bluffing rather than for resolve, however, and emphasizes that these effects may differ ([Sartori 2005](#), 46).

⁷See Online Appendix Section VIII.

A2A (Assumption): *The defender's response to a past crisis changes a new challenger's beliefs about how the defender would respond to an unrelated future crisis.*⁹

A2A (Application): *A weaker (stronger) U.S. response to Russian aggression in Ukraine should make the Chinese public believe that the U.S. would have a weaker (stronger) response to a hypothetical future crisis between China and Taiwan.*

A2B (Assumption): *A new challenger sees the first crisis scenario as relatively comparable to the second crisis scenario.*

A2B (Application): *The Chinese public sees Russia's invasion of Ukraine as relatively comparable to a hypothetical future crisis scenario involving China and Taiwan.*

Assumption 3: Deterrence by Reputation

Assumption 3 (*deterrence by reputation*) is that a challenger's foreign policy position on a given issue is substantively impacted by expectations about how its adversary (the defender) will behave. For Assumption 3 to hold, the challenger must behave in a manner consistent with the logic of rational deterrence (e.g., George and Smoke 1974; Schelling 1960, 1966; Snyder 1961): all else equal, greater demonstrations of resolve from the defender should deter aggression. Importantly, Assumption 3 does not assert that reputation for resolve *alone* can deter an aggressor. Instead, it emphasizes that there should be an independent and detectable causal effect of reputation for resolve on the challenger's decision-making.

It is possible—and perhaps even common—for an actor's reputation for resolve to transfer across contexts but still fail to deter aggression. However, as we emphasize at the outset of this paper, our interest is in the behavioral implications of reputation for resolve. What matters is not the mere fact that reputation may transfer across crises, but whether that transfer of reputation meaningfully impacts the preferences and behaviors of future challengers. This approach follows other studies that emphasize the behavioral implications of reputation for resolve by drawing on observational data (e.g., Danilovic 2001; Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo 2015).

In practice, there are many instances in which Assumption 3 could be violated. Actors with deep attachments to a disputed issue may be difficult to deter. For example, leaders and their publics may act “irrationally” to fight for territory perceived to have symbolic value or that reflects core elements of their ethnic or national identity (Goddard 2006; Toft 2003). This does not mean this type of challenger is not deterrable. Instead, they are more likely to engage in “worst case” thinking, basing their decision-making on calculations of their own readiness. Press (2004, 2005), for example, argues that in crisis decision-making, challengers focus much more on the circumstances around an imminent crisis that may affect its outcome rather than on assessments of a defender's reputation or past behavior.

In the China–Taiwan case, there are some indications that displays of US resolve may not necessarily impact Chinese thinking on Taiwan given deep attachment to the issue. The majority of the Chinese public holds relatively intransigent attitudes toward territorial issues such as the East and South China Sea (Weiss 2019) and Taiwan (Qi 2021). Among elites, in an interview with a Hong Kong journalist in 1985, then-General Secretary Hu Yaobang implic-

itly suggested that China's military planning toward Taiwan was not based on calculations of whether the United States would defend Taiwan, but on whether China was prepared to prevail in the conflict (Lu and Hu 1985). A 2022 expert survey conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies supports this logic. In the survey, experts unanimously agreed that Beijing already assumes the United States would intervene militarily to defend Taiwan in a conflict, indicating that Beijing is restrained not by expectations about the US response but rather by uncertainty about relative capabilities (Lin et al. 2022).

Recent work in political psychology emphasizes that a defender's efforts to demonstrate resolve could also backfire, leading to violation of Assumption 3. A challenger who believes they are being provoked or are subject to “unwelcome coercion” may respond with indignation or hostility rather than acquiescence (Altman and Powers 2022; Powers and Altman 2023). Scholars express concerns that displays of US resolve may inadvertently be perceived by Beijing as provocations (e.g., Fravel and Glaser 2022; Goldstein 2013). Public opinion research in China demonstrates that provocative actions taken by the United States in the South China Sea, for example, increase popular demand for use of force in response (Dafoe et al. 2022). It is possible that a similar dynamic would be present in the Taiwan case.

In sum, even if reputations both *form* and *transfer*, they may not *deter*. That is, they may not result in meaningful changes in a new challenger's preferences and actions toward the protégé. Assumption 3 could be violated if the Chinese public has strong beliefs about its relationship with Taiwan that would not change based on the anticipated US response to a China–Taiwan crisis. It could also be violated if signals of US resolve were interpreted as underwriting moves toward Taiwan's independence, which may provoke more assertive reactions from the Chinese. But if Assumption 3 is supported, we should observe the following:

A3 (Assumption): *A new challenger changes its policy toward a protégé of the defender based on the anticipated response of the defender.*

A3 (Application): *If the U.S. appears less (more) resolved to defend Taiwan, the Chinese public should want China to be more (less) assertive toward Taiwan.*

Research Design

To assess the CCRD Hypothesis with application to the Ukraine and Taiwan cases, we embed a framing experiment (Chong and Druckman 2007) in a survey of a sample of 1,018 Chinese adults.¹⁰ We distributed the survey during March 28–31, 2022, in China via an opt-in online panel maintained by the survey firm Qualtrics. While we match target demographic quotas on age and sex from the 2020 Chinese national census to construct our sample, this is not a nationally representative survey. Our sample is more reflective of Chinese “netizens,” who are wealthier, more educated, and more politically engaged than the average population.¹¹ Online Appendix provides details about our survey and outlines ethical considerations about conducting re-

⁹Per feedback from a reviewer, we add A2A as a direct test of the transfer of reputation. We include a more detailed discussion about how this differs from our pre-analysis plan in the appendix.

¹⁰The project was reviewed by the [ANONYMIZED] Institutional Review Board (IRB), protocol no. 2022-0343. It was preregistered with OSF/EGAP [LINK].

¹¹See Online Appendix Section II for details about our sample. This sample is of particular interest because they are most likely to engage in public debates about Taiwan.

search in this context in line with the 2020 APSA “Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research.”¹²

Why Public Opinion?

Reputation is perceptual: it “must be evaluated through the eye of the beholder” (Jervis, Yarhi-Milo, and Casler 2021, 168). To understand whether reputation for resolve transfers and whether it has a deterrent effect, we need to investigate how a potential challenger perceives a defender’s actions in a past crisis and draws inferences about the future. And to understand *why* reputational deterrence does or does not occur across crises, an experimental design—rather than an analysis of correlations between political attitudes—is useful. For example, Chinese adults who think the United States has been “weak” in its response to Russian aggression might also be more hawkish toward Taiwan. If we analyze the correlation between these two attitudes, we could mistakenly infer support for the CCRD Hypothesis. However, it is more likely that these attitudes are jointly shaped by other omitted variables like nationalism. By contrast, in a framing experiment, we can directly influence respondents’ perceptions of the US response to Russian aggression and understand how that shapes assessments of Chinese policy toward Taiwan.

An ideal survey experiment about reputation for resolve would be conducted on a sample of Chinese foreign policy decision-makers. However, such a sample is virtually impossible for researchers to access. We focus instead on perceptions held by the Chinese public, evaluating how consistent the causal logic is with public attitudes in a challenger state. Our approach mirrors other work that investigates microfoundations of international relations theories (Kertzer 2017). Past research on reputation adopts similar strategies by exploring whether average citizens are “intuitive deterrence theorists” (Kertzer, Renshon, and Yarhi-Milo 2021, 308), whether publics believe reputations adhere to states or leaders (Renshon, Dafoe, and Huth 2018), and whether actions a leader takes domestically contribute to the public perceptions of their reputation in international politics (Goldfien, Joseph, and McManus 2023).

We further emphasize that Chinese public opinion is inherently worthy of study. With over 1.4 billion people, the Chinese public holds varied ideological preferences that sometimes deviate from state propaganda (Jee and Zhang 2025; Nicholson and Huang 2023; Pan and Xu 2018), including on foreign policy issues (Fang, Li, and Liu 2022; Han, Sadler, and Quek 2021; Weiss 2019). To date, survey experiments in international relations focus overwhelmingly on public attitudes in the United States (Bassan-Nygate et al. 2025), which risks exacerbating well-documented American biases in the study of international relations (Colgan 2019). In this vein, a proliferation of recent public opinion research in authoritarian regimes like China examines whether public attitudes are consistent with theories of international politics (e.g., Bell and Quek 2018; Dafoe et al. 2022; Kertzer, Brutger, and Quek 2024; Quek and Johnston 2018; Weiss and Dafoe 2019; Xu 2024).

Experimental Design

In our survey, respondents first answer pre-treatment demographic questions and pass an attention check.¹³ Then, they are randomly assigned to one of two treatment conditions that frame the US response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine as either weak (“Weak Frame”) or strong (“Strong Frame”) based on language drawn from Chinese media sources:

- *Over the last few months, tensions between the United States and Russia have increased as Russian President Vladimir Putin launched an offensive military attack against Ukraine.*
- *The Russian army advanced into the country, but it remains unclear if Russia will fully occupy Ukraine.*

WEAK FRAME:

- *The US response to the crisis has been very weak. US President Joe Biden has condemned Russia’s actions and issued sanctions, but they have not stopped Russian aggression.*
- *President Biden also withdrew US military troops from Ukraine at the beginning of the conflict and made it clear that the United States would not use military force to defend Ukraine.*

STRONG FRAME:

- *The US response to the crisis has been very strong. US President Joe Biden strongly condemned Russia’s actions and issued harsh diplomatic and economic sanctions.*
- *President Biden also has moved US troops into other countries in the region and has been providing extensive military assistance to defend Ukraine.*

Our experimental design mirrors the real-world situation following Russia’s initial invasion of Ukraine. This means that the experimental frames are not perfectly parallel. Instead, we focus on characterizations that were believable when we fielded the survey.¹⁴ During this time, there was still much uncertainty around Putin’s objectives in Ukraine and questions about how the United States might respond. Chinese media presented mixed narratives, including debates about whether the United States would still send troops to Ukraine (see Online Appendix Section III). One could imagine a “stronger” hypothetical treatment that told respondents that the United States would send military troops to Ukraine. We choose not to use this framing for ethical reasons. Given that this is an ongoing conflict, we did not wish to deceive respondents in China. Instead, we select frames that best represent the debate happening in March 2022.

After respondents read the vignette, we insert a manipulation check that gauges whether they update their assessments of the US response (“*In your opinion, has the U.S. response to Russia been strong or weak?*”). Then, to test Assumption 1 (*reputation formation*), we ask respondents about perceptions of US resolve in general (“*In your opinion, how likely is the United States to stand firm in an international crisis?*”).¹⁵ To test Assumption 2 (*transfer of reputation*), we examine whether respondents’ expectations about US response to

¹³See Online Appendix Section IV for the survey questionnaire in Chinese. Respondents who do not pass an attention check are screened out before the experiment.

¹⁴An alternative design we considered would include three conditions: two opposing frames and a pure control group. We focus on two frames to maximize statistical power and create an easier test of the CCRD Hypothesis. We also note that a pure control would be difficult to interpret, since we do not have information about respondents’ ex ante attitudes toward the Ukraine crisis.

¹⁵We also ask about perceptions of US reliability (see Online Appendix Table A4) but focus on resolve in our main analyses.

¹²See Online Appendix Section III. The APSA principles can be accessed at <https://connect.apsanet.org/hst/principles-and-guidance/>.

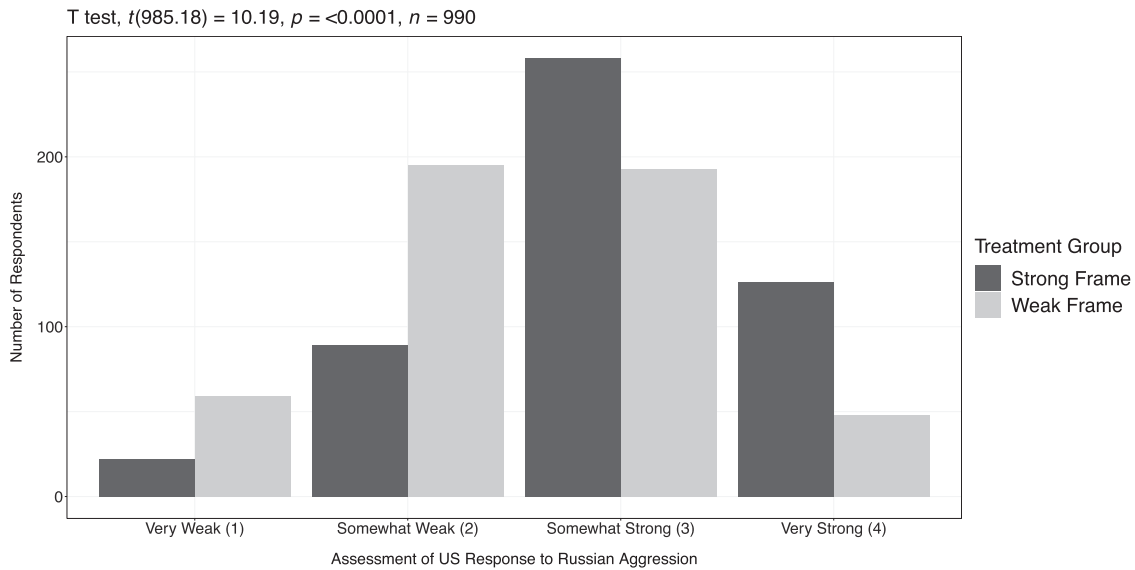


Figure 2 Manipulation check

a hypothetical Taiwan crisis are consistent with their assessments of US resolve formed in the Ukraine crisis.

We ask, “In your opinion, how likely or unlikely do you think it is that the U.S. would defend Taiwan if China decides to unify Taiwan with military force?”¹⁶ and “In your opinion, how likely or unlikely do you think it is that the U.S. would impose harsh punishments against China if China decides to unify Taiwan with military force?” For these three questions, the answer options are *Very unlikely* (1)/*Somewhat unlikely* (2)/*Somewhat likely* (3)/*Very likely* (4)/*I do not know* (NA).

Then, we ask about attitudes toward China’s policy regarding Taiwan—the primary outcome for Assumption 3 (*deterrence by reputation*) and the overarching CCRD Hypothesis (“In your opinion, in its policy toward Taiwan, China should be: *Much less assertive* (-2) / *Somewhat less assertive* (-1) / *About the same* (0) / *Somewhat more assertive* (1) / *Much more assertive* (2)”). As discussed in the Online Appendix, we use this outcome measure to avoid asking respondents directly about their support for the use of military force against Taiwan. We also see this measure as an easier test of the CCRD Hypothesis because social desirability concerns may make some respondents reluctant to express support for military invasion.¹⁷

Finally, in an additional test of Assumption 2 at the end of the survey, we ask respondents if they perceive similarities and differences between these situations, and we request they elaborate in an open-ended response on what they think is similar or dissimilar about the two situations.

Results

We begin by providing evidence that our treatments were delivered to respondents as anticipated. Our manipulation check analyzes whether the frames affect assessments of the US response to Russian aggression in Ukraine. Figure 2 shows that 73 percent of respondents in the “Strong Frame” group perceive the US response as *somewhat* or *very strong* versus 47.2 percent in the “Weak Frame” group. The *t*-test

shows that the difference in mean assessments between the two groups is statistically significant, indicating that the experimental manipulation had a strong, substantive effect. This is a large framing effect in the context of a survey experiment, and it is consistent with the high degree of uncertainty around the initial US response to Russia’s invasion when our survey was fielded.

We report our main findings in the following order: first, we examine whether there is evidence supporting the overarching CCRD Hypothesis. Then, we assess whether each of the three underlying assumptions is supported by our survey results. Following our pre-analysis plan, for each outcome variable, we report three sets of analyses: a *t*-test of the treatment effect and regression-based results from OLS and logit models that include preregistered demographic covariates (age, sex, education, urban location, ethnicity, and region).

Figure 3 evaluates the overarching CCRD Hypothesis. Panel A shows the difference in the mean responses among respondents who received the “Strong Frame” versus “Weak Frame,” with the results of a corresponding *t*-test. In panels B and C, we generate predicted values of the outcome variables estimated from OLS regression models (B) and logit models (C).¹⁸ Our primary outcome question assesses the deterrent effects of reputation for resolve. We ask respondents how assertive they believe China should be toward Taiwan in the future.¹⁹ The CCRD Hypothesis anticipates that relative to respondents in the “Strong Frame,” respondents in the “Weak Frame” should express more assertiveness toward Taiwan. However, the *t*-test in figure 3 shows there is not a statistically significant difference in mean responses across the frames ($P = .36$), giving us no support for the CCRD Hypothesis.

Although the treatment effect is in the expected direction, the effect size is statistically insignificant and small in substantive magnitude, equivalent to roughly 0.05 standard

¹⁶The Chinese translation (“协防”) of the English word “defend” implies direct military intervention.

¹⁷Online Appendix Section XII includes an analysis of how respondents interpret the Chinese translation of this outcome measure.

¹⁸Regression results in Online Appendix Table A3.

¹⁹For the logit model, the outcome is collapsed into a binary indicator of whether respondents prefer greater assertiveness (somewhat more and much more) or not.

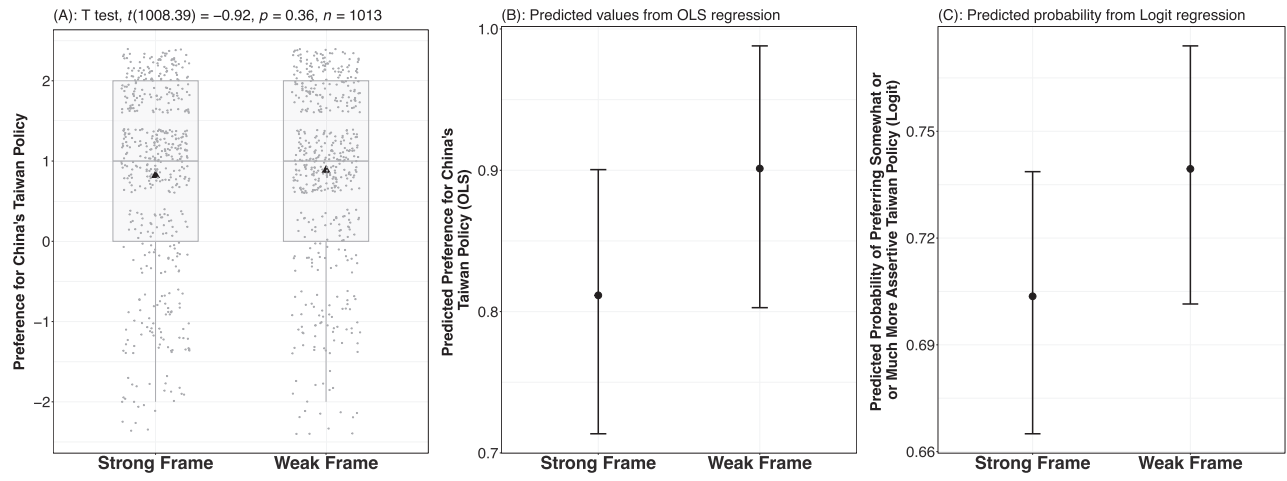


Figure 3 Test of CCRD Hypothesis (assertiveness toward Taiwan)

deviations of the dependent variable.²⁰ Given the small effect size, the use of two treatment conditions to maximize power, and the statistical significance of other survey outcomes, it is unlikely that the null results are due to sample size. The strength of our manipulation check, along with measures to ensure sample quality (see Online Appendix Section VI) and evaluations of attentiveness, also adds confidence that the null results are not attributable to poor sample quality. Online Appendix Section XI further shows that the CCRD effect does not vary meaningfully across relevant subsets of the sample. In short, we find no evidence that a strong US response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine either deters or provokes the Chinese public on the Taiwan issue.

Since we find no support for the overarching CCRD Hypothesis, our next step is to understand why. To test Assumption 1 (*reputation formation*), we examine whether the “Strong Frame” improved perceptions of US reputation for resolve (fig. 4) in general. Relative to respondents in the “Weak Frame” condition, figure 4 shows that, on average, respondents in the “Strong Frame” condition were more likely to believe that the United States would stand firm in an international crisis. A *t*-test shows that the difference in means between these groups is statistically significant at conventional levels. This finding supports Assumption 1: in our survey, the US response to Russian aggression in Ukraine generated reputational impacts by shaping respondents' perceptions of US resolve in general. Panel C in figure 4 shows the substantive interpretation of these results: roughly 60 percent of respondents in the “Strong Frame” group believe that the United States is somewhat or very likely to stand firm, compared with 50 percent in the “Weak Frame” group.²¹

To test Assumption 2 (*transfer of reputation*), we use multiple strategies. First, we consider whether the frames impact assessments of the likelihood that the United States would defend Taiwan (fig. 5) or impose harsh punishments against China (fig. 6) if China were to unify Taiwan with military force.²² Assumption 2A suggests that respondents'

expectations about US response to a hypothetical Taiwan crisis should be consistent with their assessments of US resolve formed in the Ukraine crisis. Namely, respondents in the “Strong Frame” condition will be also more likely to believe that the United States would defend Taiwan and punish China. Figure 5 shows that the “Strong Frame” slightly increases the perception that the United States would defend Taiwan. A *t*-test shows that the difference in mean responses between the frames is marginally statistically significant at the 95 percent confidence level ($P = .047$). Figure 6 shows that the “Strong Frame” also slightly increases perceptions that the United States would *punish* China in the event China unified Taiwan with military force. However, this difference is substantively small and not statistically significant at conventional levels.²³ In part, this is likely due to the fact that close to two-thirds of respondents in the sample believe that the United States would impose punishments in response to China's actions. Taken together, these results support Assumption 2A, although they are mixed.

The second way we assess a transfer of reputation is to ask respondents about the comparability of the Ukraine crisis and a hypothetical Taiwan crisis (Assumption 2B). Our theoretical discussion suggests that a transfer of reputation is more likely across crises that are perceived to be similar. Figure 7 shows that Assumption 2B may not hold: 54 percent of respondents in both treatment conditions view these two situations as different, while around 30 percent view them as similar, and 15 percent do not know. We asked respondents to elaborate in an open-ended response, and we manually categorized the topics in those responses. As Table 1 shows, a disproportionate majority of respondents (73.27 percent) who view these situations as “different” emphasize different perceptions of sovereignty between Ukraine and Taiwan.²⁴ A typical (translated) response reads, “Ukraine is a country, Taiwan is a part of China.” Some respondents explicitly link this perceived difference in sovereignty issue to their assessment of US behavior. For example, one response reads, “Ukraine's situation is fundamentally different Taiwan as Taiwan has always

²⁰The Cohen's *d* measure of the treatment effect sizes is about 0.06, which is considered substantively small by the Cohen's $d \leq 0.2$ threshold (see Kraft 2024; Sawilowsky 2009).

²¹Regression results in Online Appendix Table A4.

²²Regression results in Online Appendix Table A5.

²³The Cohen's *d* measure of treatment effect sizes for assessment of the likelihood of defending Taiwan (panel A in Figure 5) and the likelihood of punishing China (panel A in Figure 6) are 0.13 and 0.09, respectively, which are considered substantively small by conventional thresholds.

²⁴Online Appendix Table A6 describes coding procedures and key findings.

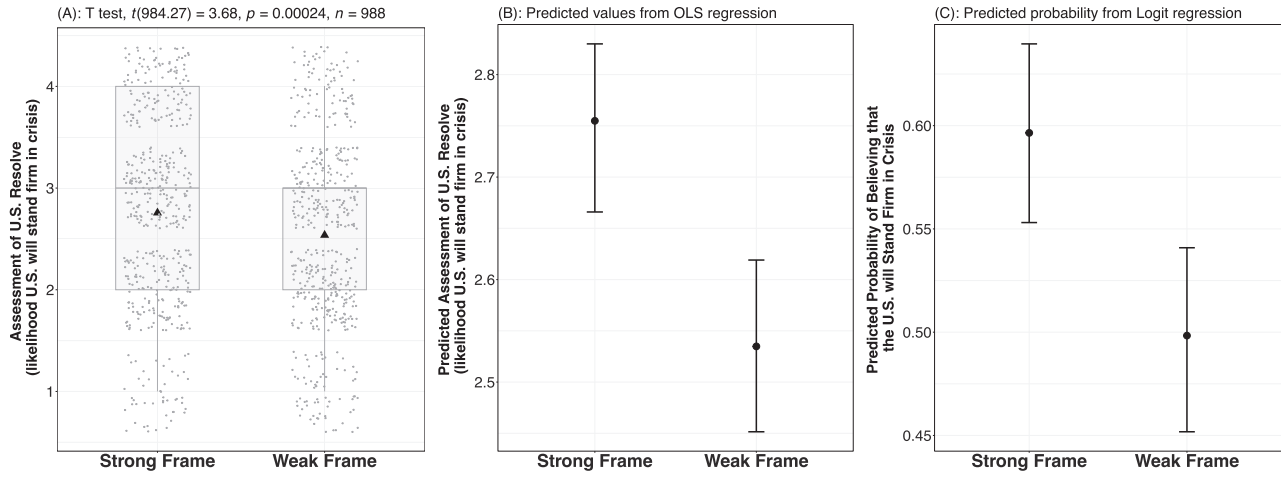


Figure 4 Test of Assumption 1 (US resolve)

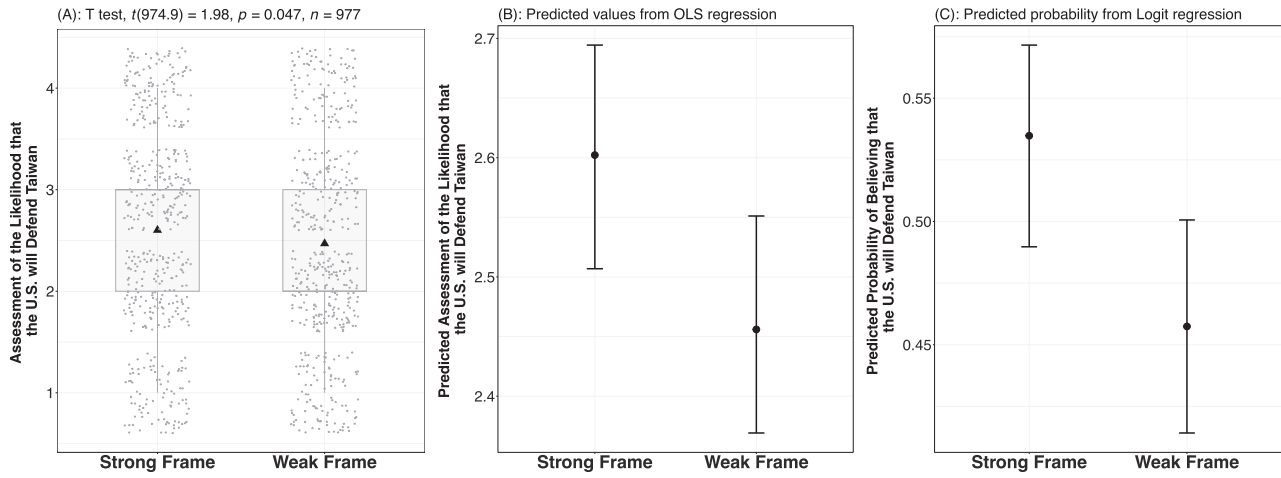


Figure 5 Test of Assumption 2A (US defense of Taiwan)

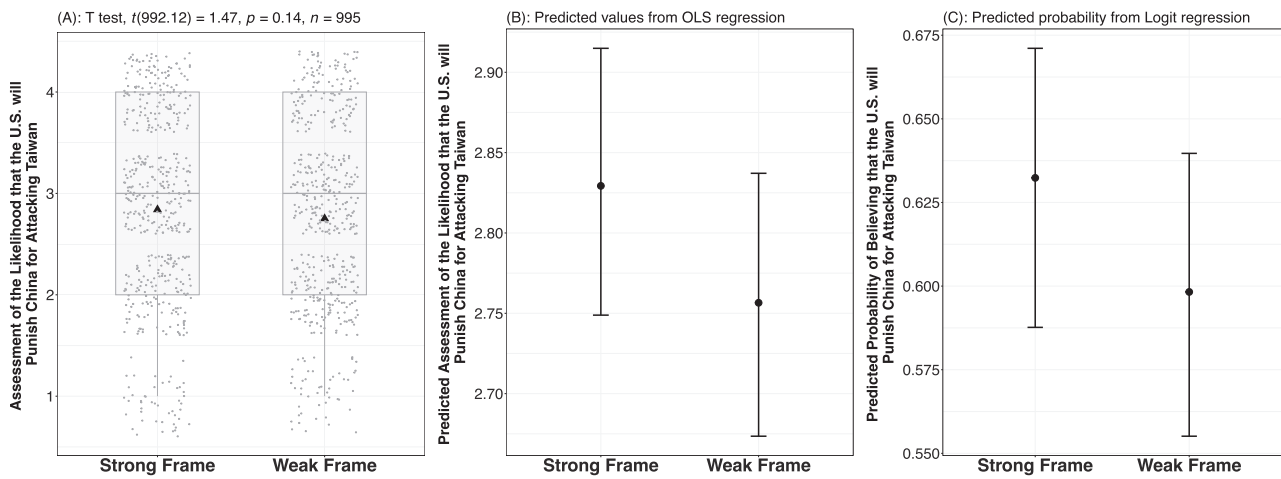


Figure 6 Test of Assumption 2A (US punishing China)

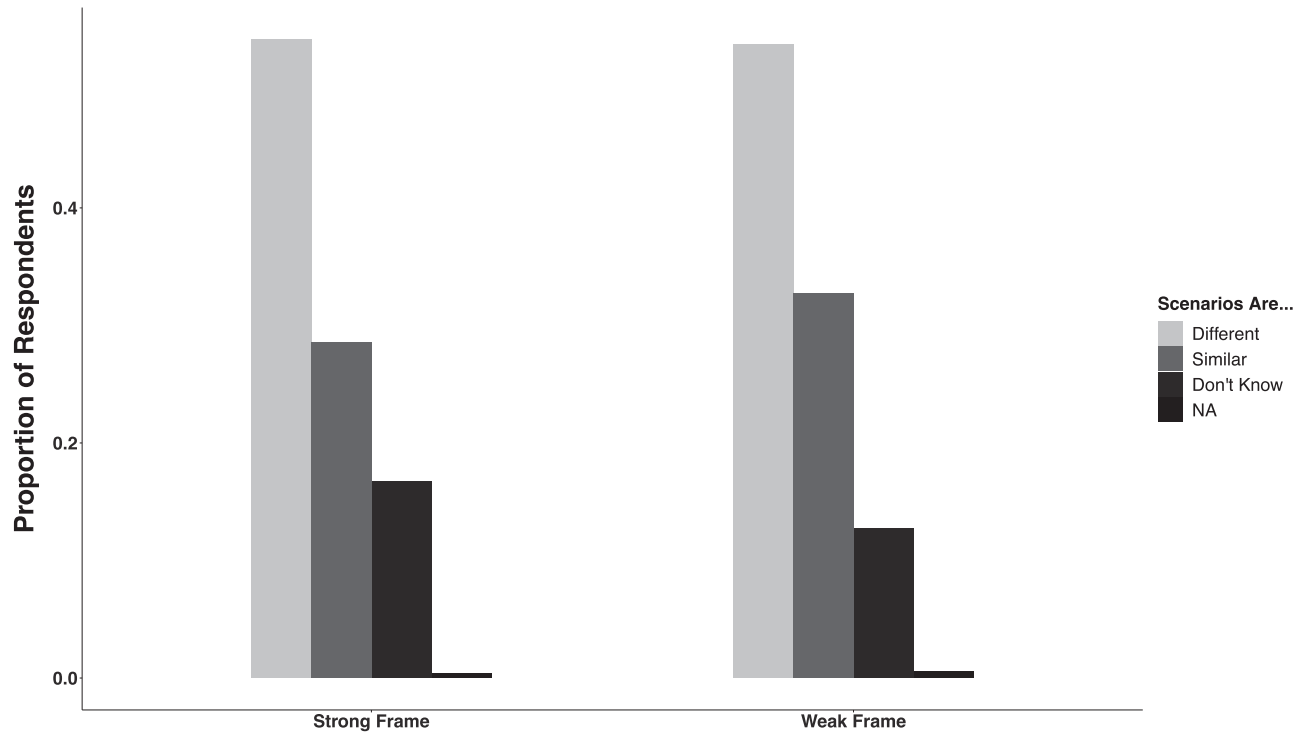


Figure 7 Assessments of the Ukraine-Taiwan comparison (Assumption 2B)

Table 1. Coding of perceived differences and similarities across crisis scenarios.

Topics	Percent of “Different” responses (percent)	Percent of “Similar” responses (percent)
<i>Balance of power</i>	5.69	3.43
<i>Domestic politics of challenger</i>	8.42	0.49
<i>Ethnic identity</i>	0.50	1.96
<i>Geopolitical factors</i>	5.45	7.35
<i>Great power competition</i>	2.48	13.73
<i>History</i>	2.97	2.45
<i>International community</i>	3.47	0.98
<i>Sovereignty/territorial integrity</i>	73.27	31.86
<i>US involvement</i>	4.21	42.16
<i>Others</i>	7.43	15.69

Note. Topic categories are not mutually exclusive.

belonged to China, and the U.S. has no right to intervene in Taiwan affairs.”

In the Online Appendix, we conduct exploratory analyses of the subset of respondents who view the Ukraine and Taiwan situations as “different” versus “similar.” An important finding is that respondents who view the Ukraine and Taiwan crisis scenarios as “similar” are more likely to update their beliefs about how the United States would respond to a future Taiwan crisis (see Table A7 in the Online Appendix). By contrast, among those who view the two crises as “different,” the frames appear to influence assessments of US resolve in general but do not influence assessments of whether the United States would defend Taiwan or punish China. While exploratory, these findings suggest that perceptions of cross-crisis similarity increase the probability that reputation will transfer across crises.

To test Assumption 3 (*deterrence by reputation*), we consider whether respondents updated their assessments of China’s policy toward Taiwan in response to perceptions that the United States would be more resolved to intervene in a Tai-

wan crisis. In our pre-analysis plan, we wrote that we would consider Assumption 3 violated if two criteria were met: (1) respondents who received the “Weak Frame” (vs. “Strong Frame”) viewed the United States as less likely to defend Taiwan in a China-Taiwan crisis, but (2) attitudes about China’s policy toward Taiwan did not differ across the frames.

Based on this criterion, we do not find support for Assumption 3. Three additional pieces of evidence corroborate this conclusion.²⁵ First, among the subset of respondents who view these two crisis scenarios as similar, we find that relative to respondents in the “Weak Frame,” respondents in the “Strong Frame” were consistently more likely to believe that the United States would stand firm in an international crisis (supporting Assumption 1) and that the United States would defend Taiwan (supporting Assumption 2), but there was still no significant difference in their policy preference toward Taiwan (failing to support Assumption 3). Second, an instrumental variable strategy—

²⁵Online Appendix Section IX discusses these strategies and their limitations.

in which assertiveness toward Taiwan is the outcome variable, perceptions that the United States will defend Taiwan is the explanatory variable, and the experimental frame is the instrument—provides suggestive evidence that Assumption 3 is not supported.²⁶ Third, analyses of open-ended responses emphasize that respondents hold fixed preferences toward Taiwan that are not strongly influenced by expectations about a US response to a China–Taiwan crisis.

In sum, our study finds evidence that US actions in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine may have impacted its reputation for resolve. We also find some evidence for a transfer of reputation from the Ukraine case to the Taiwan case. However, our primary finding is that the US response did not substantially shape Chinese public attitudes about assertiveness toward Taiwan. Importantly, these findings do *not* indicate that China is not becoming more assertive toward Taiwan. Most respondents (72 percent) believed that China should be at least somewhat more assertive toward Taiwan in the future. This result parallels observations that the CCP uses increasingly aggressive rhetoric toward Taiwan (Beckley and Brands 2022) and that popular nationalism in China is rising (Neo and Xiang 2022).

Given our lack of access to foreign policy elites in China, the timing of our experiment, and the uniqueness of the Taiwan issue, the findings in this survey come with caveats. As previously discussed, given the nature of our public opinion sample, our objective is not to draw conclusions about foreign policy decision-making. Nevertheless, we see our findings as a useful benchmark in the absence of access to Chinese officials. Table A13 in the Online Appendix shows that the findings hold among subsets of our sample that are more educated, report higher incomes, or self-identify as members of the Communist Party, all of which are correlated with elite status. Moreover, our experiment should be a relatively “easy” test of the CCRD logic relative to real-world decision-making environments. If, as many commentators argued, US reputation for resolve transfers from the Ukraine crisis to a hypothetical Taiwan crisis and has a deterrent effect, we should be *most likely* to observe that effect in a survey that focuses respondents on the US response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine directly before asking them about China's policy toward Taiwan. The fact that highlighting US reputation for resolve does not change Chinese attitudes toward the Taiwan issue in this survey is informative.

Given the timing of our survey, our experiment only speaks to debates about US resolve to initially deter Russian aggression in early 2022. Months later, debates about the US response focused on its willingness to maintain military assistance to Ukraine, as some Republican legislators called for the United States to abandon Ukrainian assistance altogether (Dorn 2023). Abandonment of existing commitments would produce a different—and likely much stronger—signal of lack of resolve than what we explore. We leave investigations of this dynamic and how it might affect perceptions of US reputation for future research.

We also emphasize that other forms of learning are occurring as the Russia–Ukraine conflict progresses. Beijing learned from missteps in Russian military strategy (Glaser 2022), the specter of nuclear weapons (Sacks 2022), and the extensive coalition-building and sanctions efforts against Russia from the West (Feigenbaum and Szubin 2023; Greitens 2022; Wong 2023). Views of the conflict and the actors involved in it have hardened among the Chinese public

since our survey was fielded in an environment of considerable uncertainty in March 2022. Media narratives in China have become increasingly pro-Russian since the early days of the Russia–Ukraine war. Aksoy, Enamorado, and Yang (2024) conducted experiments later in 2022 and 2023 and found that priming respondents in China to think about the Russian invasion of Ukraine increased public support for the use of force against Taiwan. This effect was shaped in part by beliefs that a military invasion of Taiwan was justifiable and likely to be successful.

The complexity of the Taiwan issue further raises questions about the generalizability of our findings. There are many distinct features of the Taiwan case, including its unique political status, limited global recognition, and economic and strategic significance. Yet, the dynamics around the CCRD logic are not specific to China–Taiwan relations. Similar frameworks could be extended to other crisis scenarios, such as the US response to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons in 2013 (Harvey and Mitten 2016) and the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 (Kertzer 2021). In line with this study, recent public opinion research in East Asia found that priming respondents to think about the Afghanistan withdrawal did not substantially impact assessments of US credibility (Kim, Byun and Ko 2023).

The CCRD framework could also be extended to different actors and other forms of reputation. While our experiment focuses on perceptions of a challenger, it would be interesting to investigate the perceptions of a protégé. For example, do perceptions of US reputation for reliability shape Taiwanese public attitudes about a future conflict with China? Existing public opinion research in Taiwan finds that attitudes toward Taiwanese independence are correlated with perceptions of US willingness to defend Taiwan (Benson and Niou 2005; Niou 2004). One recent study also suggests that providing information about US defense of Taiwan increases public support for the use of force (Wu et al. 2024). Russia's invasion of Ukraine appears not to have impacted overall levels of public support for Taiwan's self-defense, but this support has become more polarized across party lines since the invasion (Wang et al. 2024).

Conclusion

When do a defender's past actions in a crisis impact a new challenger's policy preferences and outcomes in an entirely separate crisis? This paper draws on existing reputation literature to identify assumptions underlying a dynamic we refer to as CCRD. For one, a new challenger forms or updates beliefs about a defender's reputation for resolve based on the defender's actions in a past crisis (*reputation formation*). Then, a new challenger draws inferences about how the defender would behave in a future crisis (*transfer of reputation*). This transfer of reputation is more likely when the new challenger sees the past crisis as similar to a future crisis. Finally, the new challenger revises its policy toward another protégé of the defender based on the anticipated response of the defender (*deterrence by reputation*). We argue that a defender's actions in a past crisis are most likely to impact a new challenger's behavior in a future crisis when these three assumptions are supported.

We test these assumptions and the CCRD Hypothesis with application to the ongoing Russia–Ukraine crisis and a hypothetical China–Taiwan crisis. We investigate whether the initial US response to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine influenced how the Chinese public viewed China's policy toward Taiwan. We ultimately did not find evidence to sup-

²⁶We interpret this result with caution because we do not directly randomize perceptions that the United States will defend Taiwan, and the experimental frame could be considered a weak instrument.

port the overarching CCRD Hypothesis. Framing the US response to Russian aggression as “weak” did not increase the Chinese public’s assertiveness toward Taiwan. The US response did shape perceptions of its reputation for resolve in general, supporting Assumption 1. We also found some support for Assumption 2, suggesting a transfer of reputation across crises. In our study, the US response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine impacted perceptions that the United States would defend Taiwan militarily if China were to attempt to unify with military force. This effect was primarily driven by respondents who viewed the Ukraine and Taiwan cases as similar. However, changes in perceptions of US reputation for resolve did not exert an independent effect on Chinese attitudes toward Taiwan policy. In large part, this is because respondents in China had relatively fixed beliefs on the Taiwan issue that were not influenced by expectations about US foreign policy, violating Assumption 3.

Beyond the Taiwan case, we offer a generalizable theoretical framework that emphasizes three conditions for why deterrence based on reputation for resolve may or may not occur across separate international crises. First, a defender’s reputation for resolve may not form in the eyes of a potential challenger if the challenger already has strong beliefs or perceptual biases that result in a fixed view of the defender’s resolve. Second, a defender’s reputation may form but not transfer, especially if a challenger perceives important differences across crisis scenarios. Finally, even if a defender’s reputation forms and transfers, it may not deter a challenger, especially one that has a fixed orientation toward the defender’s protégé. Taken together, our findings highlight the importance of continuing to move beyond broad debates about whether US reputation “matters” in favor of exploring the conditions under which reputations are more or less likely to form, transfer, and deter other adversaries in international politics.

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Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *International Studies Quarterly* online.

Data availability

The data underlying this article are available on the ISQ Dataverse at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/isq>.

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