


Authoritarian Propaganda Campaigns on Foreign Affairs: Four Birds, One Stone, and the South China Sea Arbitration

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Why do authoritarian states sometimes play up dangerous international crises and embarrassing diplomatic incidents in domestic propaganda? Is it to mobilize, threaten, divert, or pacify? Recent studies in comparative politics have focused on regime legitimacy and stability as key drivers of authoritarian propaganda practices, leaving aside other possible motivations such as mobilization of the regime's domestic allies or strategic signaling aimed at foreign audiences. Foreign policy analysts, meanwhile, have emphasized international dimensions of the propaganda behavior of China—the contemporary world's most powerful and technologically sophisticated authoritarian state—but have often mistakenly framed complementary theories as competing alternative explanations. This article argues that once the multiple domestic and international audiences for authoritarian propaganda are brought into view, many supposedly competing explanations turn out to be logically compatible and, in many cases, mutually reinforcing. We identify four sets of explanations—mobilization, signaling, diversion, and pacification—first showing how they fit together logically, before illustrating their convergence in the PRC's otherwise puzzling high-intensity propaganda campaign in 2016 over the *Philippines vs. China* arbitration on the South China Sea.

¿Por qué los Estados autoritarios exageran, a veces, las crisis internacionales peligrosas y los incidentes diplomáticos embarazosos en la propaganda interna? ¿Es para movilizar, amenazar, distraer o pacificar? Estudios recientes de política comparada se han centrado en la legitimidad y la estabilidad del régimen como impulsores clave de las prácticas de propaganda autoritaria, pasando por alto otras posibles motivaciones, como la movilización de aliados internos del régimen o la señalización estratégica dirigida al público extranjero. Los analistas de política exterior, por su parte, han destacado las dimensiones internacionales del comportamiento propagandístico de China, el Estado autoritario más poderoso y tecnológicamente sofisticado del mundo contemporáneo, pero, a menudo, han enmarcado erróneamente teorías complementarias como explicaciones alternativas contrapuestas. Teniendo en cuenta las múltiples audiencias nacionales e internacionales de la propaganda autoritaria, este artículo demuestra la compatibilidad lógica y empírica de cuatro explicaciones supuestamente opuestas de las campañas de propaganda sobre cuestiones de política exterior: movilización, señalización, distracción y pacificación. Tras exponer las implicaciones teóricas y observables de estas cuatro explicaciones, el artículo ilustra su funcionamiento simultáneo en el caso único de la campaña de propaganda de alta intensidad de China sobre el arbitraje del Mar de China Meridional de 2016.

Pourquoi les États autoritaires attirent-ils parfois l'attention sur les crises internationales dangereuses et les incidents diplomatiques embarrassants dans leur propagande nationale? Est-ce pour mobiliser, menacer, détourner l'attention ou pacifier? Des études récentes en politique comparative se sont concentrées sur la légitimité et la stabilité du régime comme moteurs clés des pratiques de propagande autoritaires, omettant d'autres motivations possibles, telles que la mobilisation des alliés nationaux du régime ou le signalement stratégique à destination des publics étrangers. Cependant, les analystes en politique étrangère ont insisté sur les dimensions internationales du comportement en matière de propagande de la Chine, État autoritaire contemporain plus puissant et sophistiqué sur le plan technologique du monde, mais ont souvent commis l'erreur de présenter les théories complémentaires telles des explications alternatives concurrentes. En prenant en compte les différents publics nationaux et internationaux de la propagande autoritaire, le présent article démontre la compatibilité logique et empirique de quatre explications, pourtant considérées comme concurrentes, aux campagnes de propagande sur les problématiques de politique étrangère: mobilisation, signalement, diversion et pacification. Après avoir détaillé les implications théoriques et observables de ces quatre explications, l'article illustre comment elles fonctionnent simultanément dans le cas de la campagne de propagande chinoise sur l'arbitrage de la mer de Chine méridionale de 2016, qui a été particulièrement intensive.

Introduction

Why do authoritarian states sometimes play up dangerous international crises and embarrassing diplomatic events in domestic propaganda? Recent studies in comparative politics have focused on regime legitimacy and stability as

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key drivers of authoritarian propaganda practices, but have mostly overlooked other possible motivations such as mobilization of regime allies or strategic signaling aimed at foreign audiences. Specialists in Chinese foreign policy, meanwhile, have explored the international strategic motivations for the propaganda behavior of the contemporary world's most powerful and technologically sophisticated authoritarian state, but have often mistakenly framed complementary theories as competing alternative explanations. This article argues that once the multiple domestic and international audiences for authoritarian propaganda are brought into view, many supposedly competing explanations turn out to be logically compatible and, in many cases, mutually reinforcing. We identify four sets of explanations—mobilization, signaling, diversion, and pacification—first showing how they fit together logically, before illustrating their convergence in the PRC's otherwise puzzling high-intensity propaganda campaign in 2016 over the *Philippines vs. China* arbitration on the South China Sea.

The increasing complexity of authoritarian polities, particularly in the Internet era, has brought a corresponding increase in the difficulty, and importance, of interpreting the outputs of their propaganda systems. Alexander George's classic reconstruction of American analysts' inferences from Nazi German propaganda in World War II found an impressive accuracy rate of more than 80 percent, using assumptions of strict top-down elite political control of both policymaking and propaganda strategy. Sustained campaigns of propaganda were interpreted—largely accurately—as either preparatory to major German actions, anticipatory of expected actions by Germany's adversaries, or indicative of situational changes affecting the Nazi regime. Overall, George found that the Nazi regime's information strategies regarding the war were generally aimed at managing the morale of the German people while maintaining the credibility of the state's propaganda (George 1959). But would contemporary authoritarian states like China necessarily operate on a similar logic, in the absence of outright war? What other potential purposes could lie behind foreign affairs propaganda campaigns in the twenty-first century?

In the Internet era, the authoritarian propagandist's tasks have grown significantly more subtle and demanding as a result of various cross-cutting influences. On the one hand, citizens under all regime types now have new means for accessing and sharing information and expressing political opinions, creating new challenges to information control. On the other hand, authoritarian states can also tap into online discourse and deploy sentiment analysis to better understand, respond to, and where possible capitalize on, trends in public opinion. States like the People's Republic of China (PRC) have also adapted traditional propaganda channels to ensure the state's voice is heard above the cacophony of online chatter. At the same time, as globalization has accelerated social change and expanded international interactions, domestic audiences have become increasingly differentiated, and foreign audiences increasingly numerous. While Nazi Germany's propagandists were fully aware that content directed at the German masses would be overheard by enemy analysts, today's information czars face much broader, more diverse, and more capable audiences at home and abroad.

Research on authoritarian politics has detailed the increasing sophistication of states' techniques for shaping, monitoring, and instrumentalizing public sentiments both online and offline (Geddes and Zaller 1989; Morozov 2011; MacKinnon 2013; Truex 2017; Roberts 2018). While state control is by no means complete, in the Internet era, pro-

paganda remains an important means by which authoritarian leaders and leaderships address horizontal (elite) or vertical (popular) challenges to regime authority (Schedler 2013; Carter and Carter 2021). In the case of China, scholars have tracked the evolution of the party-state's sprawling propaganda system in the post-1978 reform era, from the growth of market forces through partial commercialization of the media sector, to the state's adoption of techniques from Western public relations and marketing, and development of innovative technologies to control the Internet and social media (Y. Zhao 1998; Brady 2008; Stockmann 2013; Creemers 2017; Chen 2022). Yet, as this article shows, the goals of authoritarian propaganda can extend well beyond regime resilience. In the case of foreign policy disputes, a range of motivations—mobilization of regime allies, strategic signaling, diversion, and pacification—not only coexist, but can often interact and reinforce each other to drive major surges in propaganda.

At a time of heightened geopolitical tension centered on China, and diminished opportunities for formal and informal exchanges with PRC interlocutors, the interpretation of Beijing's propaganda outputs is a task of increasing importance to both the international relations field and governments around the world. The salient features of the PRC's Marxist-Leninist party-state relevant to the analysis here—tight control of mass media and institutionalized manipulation of public discussion—are also present in a much broader sweep of the world's states. Currently, 139 countries/territories have unfree or partially free media, where “established systems circumscribe news and information for mass audiences and shape the dominant political narrative” (Walker and Orttung 2014, 71). Authoritarian regimes have various degrees of technical proficiency in propaganda and censorship, and their individual priorities and methods differ, but attempts to use media controls to advance foreign and domestic policy goals is a point of commonality between China and many other states in the Internet era. At least some of the processes examined here have been observed in propaganda campaigns in the most-similar context of Vietnam (Bui 2016; Wang and Womack 2019), in the ongoing Russian campaign to paint Ukraine as a “neo-Nazi” state (Fedor 2015), and in historical examples such as 1930s Imperial Japan (Young 1999). We therefore expect our findings may replicate in other authoritarian contexts with extensive, institutionalized media control, though further cross-national research will be required to test this conjecture.

This article begins by reviewing the literature on China's authoritarian propaganda and the public opinion-foreign policy nexus, highlighting a need for greater attention to the multiple audiences that today's authoritarian states address in their propaganda. Next, we group available theoretical explanations for foreign policy propaganda campaigns into four types and demonstrate their logical compatibility once multiple audiences are brought into view. To illustrate this claim empirically, we examine the high-intensity propaganda campaign China launched over the South China Sea arbitration case brought by the Philippines in 2013, which puzzlingly drew massive public attention to a legal case Beijing was certain to lose. Our case study shows the campaign simultaneously sought to persuade the general public to oppose the ruling while mobilizing regime allies to drown out dissent, amplifying strategic threat signals to international audiences, rallying domestic support in the face of concerns over economic and social troubles, and pacifying nationalist demands for a tough-looking response. A conclusion recaps the paper's findings, considers how preva-

lent the pattern of compound motivations identified in the case study might be, and suggests possible paths for future research.

Multiple Audiences and “Alternative Explanations”

Recent debates in comparative politics have centered on the extent to which PRC propaganda is aimed primarily at persuasion or coercion. One side argues propaganda contributes to China’s regime stability by building the state’s legitimacy via selective manipulation of the information supply, balanced against a desire to maintain maximum credibility (Brady 2008; Jones-Rooy 2012). Consistent with George’s (1959) study of Nazi wartime propaganda, Jones-Rooy (2012) finds PRC propaganda seeks to minimize lying or absurdity wherever possible, and so avoids sensitive political subjects that would require heavy distortion except when public attention to the issue is so high that coverage becomes a necessity. But other scholars argue contemporary PRC propaganda is geared toward coercion rather than persuasion. By this logic, the more preposterous the state’s propaganda, the stronger the signal of the state’s coercive capacity may be (Huang 2015). Carter and Carter (2018) thus argue the PRC’s flagship broadsheet *People’s Daily* “seeks not to persuade readers, but to dominate them.” But both sides of this debate focus on legitimacy and the neutralization of threats to the regime as the key motivation behind propaganda. As we will show, major PRC propaganda campaigns on foreign policy issues may be targeted at other audiences beyond would-be opponents and the general public, such as loyal party supporters, nationalist sub-sections of public opinion, as well as friendly, neutral, and hostile international audiences.

China’s propagandists today pay great attention to the problem of multiple audiences (Pu 2019; Berzina-Cerenkova 2022). General Secretary Xi Jinping told a meeting of party propaganda officials in 2016 that propaganda outlets need to adapt to “the trends of audience segmentation and differentiation,” a concern his predecessor Hu Jintao shared.¹ It is evident also in the ongoing institutional division between domestic- and foreign-directed propaganda, with greatly increased resources directed toward the latter in recent decades. The range of centrally controlled propaganda outlets extends well beyond the *People’s Daily* and its social media channels—which are themselves oriented toward a much broader readership than the party broadsheet—and include the jingoistic mass-circulation foreign affairs tabloid *Global Times*, more than a dozen special-interest channels operated by China Central Television (CCTV), and a proliferation of youth-oriented online media services. Through this array of outlets, CCP propaganda can target multiple audiences with a single campaign. At home, a propaganda campaign can simultaneously attack foreign narratives, mobilize supporters to overwhelm oppositional voices, draw attention away from socio-economic or political problems, and satiate domestic nationalist demands for a tough posture. Abroad, meanwhile, the same campaign can amplify threats or warnings to hostile target audiences, appeal for support from international allies, and seek to persuade neutral observers of the moral legitimacy of the state’s position.

The comparative politics literature on China’s propaganda has remained largely disconnected from a related line of research on the role of domestic public opinion in China’s foreign policy. Works in this literature broadly affirm that, under limited circumstances, domestic public opinion has the potential to constrain or complement foreign policy, thus demanding attention from propaganda authorities. Some argue commercialized media and online connectivity, combined with powerful nationalist sentiments rooted in historical memory and sustained ideological education, can render the public’s responses to foreign policy events beyond the party’s ability to control (He 2007; Shirk 2007; Gries, Steiger, and Wang 2015; Burcu 2021). Others have emphasized how particular elite political players, or sub-state vested interests, have used propaganda to enlist public opinion in internal struggles or policy lobbying campaigns (Fewsmith and Rosen 2001; Reilly 2012; Chubb 2021). A third line of investigation has examined how the PRC’s state-led, but not fully controlled, domestic public opinion can become a resource for its diplomacy as bargaining leverage or in amplifying the state’s voice to international audiences (Weiss 2013, 2014; Chubb 2017). But works in this literature have largely been concerned with testing their hypotheses in specific empirical cases of interest, with bottom-up popular influence, sub-state politics, strategic signaling, and diversionary tactics typically framed as competing alternative explanations. In fact, as this article shows, such motivations for authoritarian propaganda campaigns are logically compatible, and can even be mutually reinforcing.

Following Wang (2021), we define foreign policy propaganda campaigns as government-orchestrated, concerted efforts to attract public attention toward, and shape citizens’ views of, a foreign policy dispute by the use of mass media. As noted above, the PRC’s central propaganda authorities control numerous outlets that can draw the attention of diverse audiences toward given topics when required. An absence of routine censorship on controversial topics, too, can also draw public attention toward an issue (Cairns and Carlson 2016; Chubb 2017, 302–08). To address the observational challenges this diverse toolkit poses to the identification of propaganda intentions, we focus our empirical investigation on two key central state propaganda outlets that can be expected to lead any major propaganda campaign. The *People’s Daily* is the official voice of the CCP Central Committee, and its front-page items and editorial commentaries strongly influence the salience and tone of coverage throughout the PRC’s propaganda ecosystem. *People’s Daily* content is syndicated across all kinds of mass media in China, and the weighty implications of its official status ensure its commentaries on foreign policy are inherently newsworthy within the PRC context. The *People’s Daily*’s widely syndicated foreign affairs commentaries, which are usually penned by the pseudonymous “Zhong Sheng,” representing the paper’s international commentary team (Tsai and Kao 2013), are of particular interest. Second, we pay special attention to the daily 7pm broadcasts of CCTV’s *Network News*. This program’s unique combination of extremely tight political control and a mass audience that ranges between 50 and 100 million makes it a reliable indicator of the state’s preferred agenda and framing of issues for the general public (Chang and Ren 2015). In the sections that follow, we elaborate four theoretical explanations for propaganda campaigns on foreign affairs, assess their logical compatibility, and test them empirically via a detailed case study.

¹ Author translation. Article C1, Xinhua, February 19, 2016; Article C2, Hu Jintao, June 20, 2008. Full bibliographic details of official materials used in this article are available in the online appendix.

Theoretical Explanations for Propaganda Campaigns

Existing international relations scholarship broadly offers four kinds of explanations for authoritarian propaganda campaigns on foreign policy issues: mobilization, signaling, diversion, and pacification. Two concern the state's international goals, and two concern domestic goals. Mobilization explanations hold that propaganda seeks to increase or maintain citizens' willingness to sacrifice for the state's foreign policy goals. Signaling explanations take the communication of strategic messages to foreign audiences as the state's motivation. Diversionary explanations view propaganda campaigns as efforts to divert attention from internal problems and rally domestic regime support. Pacification explanations, meanwhile, take foreign policy propaganda campaigns to be aimed at satiating public demands for a hardline foreign policy posture. These various rationales could also motivate propaganda efforts of democratic states, particularly during wartime, but the following analysis of how they interact in a peacetime campaign is limited to authoritarian regimes that, like the PRC, possess strong, sophisticated and institutionalized media and Internet control mechanisms.

Mobilization

Sociologists consider cohesion a key condition for prevalence or survival in inter-group conflict (Collins 2012). Consistent with this general insight, leaders may launch propaganda campaigns to raise threat perceptions, intensify popular emotions, and harden the resolve and persuade public opinion to sacrifice for the state's foreign policy goals. In his classic work on propaganda analysis, George noted that such campaigns may be either "preparatory propaganda" readying the population for an action the state is planning, or "anticipatory propaganda" designed to pre-empt the effects of expected adverse developments on popular morale (George 1959, chapters 11 and 12). Such processes harness the power of emotions to directly or indirectly influence opinions. Anger, in particular, has been found to elicit confrontational policy preferences (Lerner et al. 2003; Nabi 2003), and thus should be an observable feature of any propaganda campaign with a mobilizational goal.

Despite being largely absent from rationalist international relations theories, the significance of morale and popular mobilization has been commonsense in statecraft and diplomacy in the era of nation-states. Carl von Clausewitz characterized "willpower" as a crucial factor inseparable from warfighting capabilities, and observers of the "total war" of World War I expanded this idea to include the populations upon which a total war effort depends (Churchill 1941; Clausewitz 1976). As Jervis (1970, 38) has noted, "efforts by decision-makers to mobilize their own people to more fully support and even make personal sacrifices for the sake of foreign policies" bear directly on the state's capabilities. For example, Harry Truman and Mao Zedong both resisted the US-China rapprochement and instead continued their ideological crusades to garner support for their respective grand strategies (Christensen 1996). If mobilization is an important motivation, then available propaganda instructions or strategic analyses should show a concern for maintaining or elevating the public's support for the state's foreign policy positions.

The mobilizational incentive for a propaganda campaign is strongest where leaders believe major sacrifices from the population may be necessary to realize important goals or, in extreme cases, ensure the state's survival. An ideal-typical ex-

ample is the World War I and II belligerents' exhortations to their citizens to work harder, volunteer their time, and enlist in the military in order to help the state prevail in an existential conflict. However, leaders with access to institutionalized media controls can also apply this logic in less extreme circumstances. One is limited war, as seen in the PRC's propaganda campaign in the lead-up to the Sino-Vietnamese border war of 1979 (Godwin and Miller 2013; Garver 2015; Wang 2018). Another is when leaders believe the risk of major war is significantly elevated, and seek to ready the public for that possibility, as Beijing did in the wake of the Sino-Indian border clashes of 1959 (Wang 2018, 85–88). Alternatively, the state could launch a pre-emptive campaign out of fear that exogenous developments or enemy psychological warfare that could place popular support for important foreign policies in jeopardy (George 1959, 216–17). But as detailed below, mobilization is only one of many potential benefits leaders might expect to gain from propaganda campaigns on international issues.

Signaling

A second group of international motivations for foreign policy propaganda campaigns is strategic communication. The international relations field's most prominent and controversial explanation for state publicity during an international crisis holds that leaders seek bargaining leverage by increasing the domestic "audience costs" they would face for backing down. According to audience costs theory, a leader who makes a public threat will face significantly greater disapproval if they back down, a process Fearon (1994, 1997) dubbed "hands-tying." To the extent that authoritarian propaganda campaigns place the regime's domestic or international reputation on the line, they may constitute this kind of "costly signal." If such an intention is present, we should, at a minimum, observe the state taking steps to ensure the campaign is "overheard" by foreign audiences, and drawing foreign attention to the public sentiments thereby generated.

Early audience cost models suggested public threats from authoritarian regimes are more likely to be bluffs—and to be seen as such—because the costs of backing down should be minimal for a state with significant control over public opinion (Fearon 1994). However, this intuition has been challenged empirically by Weeks' (2008) analysis of militarized interstate disputes, which found many authoritarian regimes to be equally capable of generating audience costs through public threats as democracies. More recently, Weiss (2013, 2014) has argued authoritarian regimes can credibly signal resolve by tolerating real-world street protests, whose potential to "snowball" and turn against the state if it were to back down in an international dispute constitute a "commitment mechanism." Tracing this logic back a step further, an authoritarian state's foreign policy propaganda campaign could arguably also be regarded as a "costly" if it appreciably increases the chances of such anti-foreign protests occurring.

There are other mechanisms through which propaganda campaigns could serve an authoritarian regime's international communication goals. Rather than establishing credibility through "costly" signaling, propaganda campaigns may instead seek to draw out expressions of support from citizens to amplify the state's voice or suppress dissenting voices. The foreign policy goal could be coercive, as in generating psychological pressure on a foreign target via the performance of official anger (Hall 2015), or attention-seeking, making the state's messages more likely to be no-

ticed by the target (Chubb 2017).² Alternatively, outpourings of popular agreement with the state's position in a dispute could help boost its appeals to international audiences for support or acceptance of its position (Ciorciari and Weiss 2016, 550n14). Thus, regardless of whether propaganda campaigns are regarded as "costly signals" or "cheap talk," they can serve the purpose of strategic signaling to international audiences.

Diversion

Publicizing an international dispute or diplomatic crisis may serve a domestic diversionary purpose (Levy 1989, 259). Such explanations dovetail with the comparativist arguments noted above, which take domestic legitimacy or coercion to be the key underlying of purpose of authoritarian propaganda. According to the diversionary logic, regimes direct public attention away from domestic problems by staging an external spectacle event—escalating international tensions or even engaging in war—and by "scapegoating" adversary states as the source of the regime's own domestic failures. Often-cited examples of diversionary warfare include France during the French Revolutionary Wars and the Crimean War, Russia during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, Germany during the World War I, and Argentina during the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas War (Levy and Vakili 2014). Triggering a conflict may not be necessary to achieve distraction and rallying effects; indeed, even as the PRC has avoided armed conflict since 1979, reference to diversionary use of external conflicts has been commonplace in studies on China's foreign policy propaganda (Gries 2004; Brady 2009, 448).

Diversionary motivations do not necessarily result from any acute crisis; a chronically high level of regime insecurity or an accumulation of negative domestic political developments could equally lead decision-makers to engage in diversionary propaganda. In the absence of democratic electoral processes, authoritarian regimes must deal with the problem of systemic legitimation (Levy and Vakili 2014, 122–23). Many also face ethnic strife, civil wars, poverty, and inequality. And even in the absence of negative internal developments, authoritarian governments can gain auxiliary benefits from diversionary acts, such as weakening domestic opposition. The regime-strengthening function of foreign policy propaganda is theoretically grounded in sociology, anthropology, and psychology's in-group/out-group or conflict-cohesion hypothesis that conflict with an outgroup increases internal cohesion, producing the "rally-around-the-flag phenomenon" (Coser 1998). Like in a mobilization campaign, the state's propaganda will likely deploy framings that fan emotions of indignation and anger (Nabi 2003), but the *sine qua non* for a diversionary campaign is that coverage of the contemporaneous domestic problems ought also to be greatly downplayed, or most likely avoided, within the state's public discourse.

Pacification

Counterintuitively, authoritarian propaganda campaigns on foreign affairs controversies can be aimed at pacifying domestic nationalist sentiments. This group of explanations postulates that when elites believe overheated nationalist emotions among sections of the public could threaten so-

cial stability and regime security, or constrain the pursuit of national interests in foreign policy, they may opt to pacify nationalist sentiments via hardline posturing (Wang 2021). There is some evidence that such tactics are effective. In a survey experiment fielded in China in 2016, "blustering"—that is, tough-sounding but vague threats—increased PRC citizens' approval of the government's response to hypothetical US military deployments in the East China Sea, even when not followed through with any military countermeasures (Weiss and Dafoe 2019). If pacification is an important motivation, then we should find evidence of concern among state officials about overheated public emotions.

Scholars have elaborated authoritarian techniques of pacification through an array of soft manipulations. Propaganda echoing public sentiments and speaking on behalf of the people helps build social trust, promote social cohesion, and calm an angered populace (Wang 2021). Posturing, or maintaining the appearance of a firm stance, helps neutralize nationalist criticism and promotes societal stability (Wang and Womack 2019). Positive framing emphasizes the positive sides of a conflict, uses positive language, elicits positive emotions, and fosters pro-government public responses. It offsets the negative framings utilized in echoing and posturing and counteracts commercial and social media's inherent tendency to find fault during a crisis (Wang 2018). The state can also delegitimize undesired emotions or activism among the most agitated sections of the population on a range of economic, national interest, and moral grounds (Quek and Johnston 2018). In a pacification campaign, state media can try to control undesired negative emotions by overshadowing them with positive emotions and delegitimizing them on the basis of civility, patriotism, or utility. Pacifying campaigns can be expected to exhibit one or more of these observable techniques.

An obvious danger of pacification propaganda is that echoing and posturing in response to hardline sentiments may further inflame nationalist audiences, or send an unintended escalatory signal to the adversary. Pacification campaigns are thus a delicate art that requires balance and control. To mitigate the domestic risks, states must employ tough rhetoric sparingly, in conjunction with censorship, and moderated by positive framing. For the same reason, rhetoric echoing hardline nationalist sentiments is typically calibrated to a notch lower in intensity than the prevailing public sentiment. To preempt unintended external escalation, states may also communicate with an opponent country via private credible channels.

Table 1 summarizes the key observable implications of each of these four groups of explanations. Each is a critical "hoop test" that will falsify the explanation in question if the observation is not present. However, a passed test will not constitute strong verification. In the absence of access records of high-level decision-making processes, or speech evidence from those directly involved, confirmatory evidence will come primarily from composite consideration of a series of "straws-in-the-wind" from available information. Notably, none of the critical observations listed in table 1 would necessarily contradict any of the other three explanations. The key reason for this, we argue, is the compatibility of these supposedly competing explanations, both in theory, as detailed in the following section, and in practise, as we show in the case study.

Logical Compatibility

As reviewed above, the international relations field provides an array of explanations for foreign policy propaganda

²Signal transmission is a major problem in international strategic communication. Snyder and Diesing's classic study of international crisis signaling found that only around 40 percent of messages reached the receiver side.

Table 1. Observable implications of four groups of explanations for foreign policy propaganda campaigns

	<i>Observable implications</i>
Mobilization	Media content deploys inflammatory and emotive language, with themes of victimization, accusations of aggression and injustice. Instructions from central propaganda authorities convey intent to mobilize, or available strategic estimates stress importance of public support on issue at hand.
Signaling	State makes special efforts to ensure the propaganda campaign reaches foreign audiences, such as by producing foreign-language translations of propaganda content. Diplomatic messaging draws foreign interlocutors' attention to domestic nationalist sentiments.
Diversion	Evidence of domestic legitimacy concerns or crises preceding campaign. State media downplay or avoid mention of domestic concerns while emphasizing foreign policy controversy.
Pacification	Evidence of concerns of overheated public opinion threatening social stability, regime security, or foreign policy flexibility preceding campaign. State media adopt soft manipulation techniques such as echoing, posturing, positive framing, or venting.

campaigns. Foreign policy analyses—particularly those focused on the PRC—have typically positioned them as “alternative explanations” or competing hypotheses. Weiss’s (2013, 25–30) study of Chinese nationalist protests, for example, presents “domestic benefits” (including diversion), and “unhelpful constraints” (which cover the pacification explanation), as alternatives to a rationalist signaling model. Examining the relationship between Beijing’s maritime policy and public opinion, Chubb (2017) similarly takes diversionary motivations as an alternative explanation against a signaling hypothesis. Wang and Womack’s (2019) study of Chinese and Vietnamese media strategies in a 2014 bilateral crisis lists signaling as an alternative explanation to pacification, and Wang (2018, 2021) regards mobilization, signaling, and diversionary models as alternatives to pacification. As we demonstrate below, once the multiple domestic and foreign audiences for authoritarian propaganda campaigns are brought into view, none of the four groups of explanations above is necessarily incompatible with any of the others.

The mobilization and signaling motivations are not merely compatible but mutually reinforcing. A state seeking to mobilize or consolidate domestic support for its position in a dispute may well wish to exert pressure on its international adversary too, either by visibly altering the costs of backing down or by drawing on the *vox populi* to amplify its coercive messaging or burnish the moral justification for its position. Just as sunk-cost signals such as military deployments tend to increase the odds of winning a fight (Slantchev 2005), a propaganda campaign that increases the costs of backing down will likely also mobilize the populace on the subject at hand, bolstering the state’s capabilities in the event that conflict occurs. In Quek’s (2021) typology of costly signaling mechanisms, they constitute “recoverable cost” signals. Thus, a state propaganda campaign motivated by strategic signaling incentives could easily also be motivated by the benefits of mobilization, and vice versa.

The mobilization and signaling models of propaganda campaigns, meanwhile, are also fully compatible with a diversionary explanation. For an authoritarian state facing acute or chronic domestic insecurity and serious foreign policy challenges, rallying citizens around the flag could simultaneously divert attention away from social issues, bolster popular and elite cohesion in the event of conflict, and project or amplify a signal of resolve to the outside world. In short, a diversionary motivation could easily coexist with mobilization and signaling objectives, especially for domestically insecure authoritarian states.

On the surface, the pacification model appears the most likely to logically cut against the other three explanations. Mobilization propaganda rouses public opinion and prepares citizens for confrontation, while pacification eases popular demands for confrontation and paves the way for a more restrained foreign policy. Audience cost signals deliberately tie the state’s hands while pacification seeks to free them. However, even this apparent tension is resolved once we consider the multiple audiences modern authoritarian propaganda addresses. Emotive propaganda that helps pacify nationalist desires to see the state strike a tough stance could simultaneously help steel the broader citizenry’s support for state’s claims in the event of conflict, while also channeling mass attention away from domestic issues, and amplifying the state’s deterrent messages to international audiences. As illustrated in the following case study, a single hard “stone” of foreign policy propaganda can potentially strike all four of the “birds” at which such campaigns have been argued to take aim.

The South China Sea Arbitration, 2013–2016

On January 22, 2013, the Philippines requested arbitration proceedings under the dispute resolution provisions of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), alleging an array of PRC breaches of the Convention in pursuit of disputed claims in the South China Sea.³ After 4 weeks of awkward silence, on February 19, 2013, Beijing rejected Manila’s request and stated its position on the case as: (1) no acceptance, (2) no participation, (3) no recognition, and (4) no implementation (Kardon 2018). In the disputed waters, the PRC dialed up its coercive pressure on the Philippines, sending law enforcement ships to maintain a constant presence at Second Thomas Shoal, where a small company of Philippine marines occupied the crumbling hulk of a WWII-era transport ship, and chasing away Filipino fishers who attempted to fish at Scarborough Shoal. Most consequentially, in late 2013, Beijing launched a massive project of infilling the six atolls it was occupying, turning its previously precarious presence there into expansive artificial islands.

Despite China’s refusal to participate, the case went ahead under the provisions of UNCLOS Annex VII. A tribunal of five arbitrators was constituted in The Hague on June 21, 2013, with the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) serving as a registry. China forewent its right to appoint

³Article P2, Republic of the Philippines, January 22, 2013.

one of the arbitrators, leaving the President of the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea to appoint four of the five arbitrators, with the fifth chosen by the Philippines. Manila's formal written case—known as a “Memorial”—was presented to the PCA on March 30, 2014. Manila's submissions challenged China's claims to “historic rights” in the area, harassment of Philippine fishermen, and large land-building operations. The PRC stuck to its official position of non-participation and thus did not attend hearings or formally submit materials. However, it did issue a lengthy position paper in December 2014, just ahead of the deadline for submission of materials, which elaborated Beijing's positions on why the tribunal should not accept jurisdiction over the case.

On October 29, 2015, the Tribunal ruled that it had been properly constituted under the UNCLOS, and that the case would therefore continue to the merits stage. With a vast body of evidence already tabled in the Philippines' Memorial, the tribunal's acceptance of jurisdiction made an adverse result for the PRC highly likely. The final award, published on July 12, 2016, unsurprisingly ruled in favor of the Philippines on fourteen out of the fifteen substantive matters. The Tribunal found China's nine-dash line claim and related “historic rights” had no legal basis; that none of the land features in the Spratlys or Scarborough Shoal were entitled to maritime rights beyond a 12-nautical-mile territorial sea; that China had violated the sovereign rights of the Philippines in interfering with fishing and in risking collisions on the sea; that the Chinese activities in the disputed area, particularly its fishing and land reclamation activities, had caused irreparable environmental damage; and that its artificial islands contravened the international legal dispute resolution proceedings.⁴

The case was, in short, a legal and diplomatic disaster for Beijing—a result largely in line with both Chinese and international expectations. It had been clear from the October 2015 Award on Jurisdiction onwards that the final Award would run largely against the PRC. In such circumstances, it was hardly surprising that PRC propaganda organs would attack and seek to delegitimize the legal process. But why launch a full-scale campaign to channel public attention toward the case, rather than simply condemning and then ignoring it, in line with the stated diplomatic policy? Why did Beijing draw massive additional domestic attention toward a case it evidently expected to lose? The answer, as indicated in the following case study, lies in the multiple audiences that contemporary authoritarian propaganda must address, and the various mutually reinforcing motivations this generates for propaganda campaigns on controversial foreign affairs issues.

China's Arbitration Propaganda Campaign

As the arbitration progressed from jurisdiction to merits in late 2015, the PRC propaganda organs switched into full-scale campaign mode, reaching a deafening crescendo with the release of the ruling. The PRC's public response had begun quietly enough, when in early 2013 the Foreign Ministry spokesperson merely expressed the PRC's position and stated that it “disapproved” of the Philippines' use of such legal methods. In the Ministry's February 19 press conference, the spokesperson announced matter-of-factly that the PRC had rejected the Philippines' request for arbitration, on grounds that it “contravened” existing agreements

such as the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. The spokesperson's statement was not mentioned in the *People's Daily* and CCTV's 7pm *Network News* bulletins. State propaganda authorities continued to refrain from emphasizing the issue throughout the remainder of the year, perhaps in the hope that, in combination with the on-water pressure on the Philippines' outpost at Second Thomas Shoal, Manila could be persuaded not to go ahead with the case.

When the Philippines submitted its memorial on March 30, 2014, thereby confirming that the case would proceed, the CCP propaganda organs sprang into action in coordination with the Foreign Ministry. On March 31, the flagship CCTV nightly television propaganda bulletin announced that the Philippines had submitted its Memorial, before cutting to a clip of Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei stating:

The true nature of the Philippines' pushing of international arbitration is to cover up its attempts at illegal occupation of Chinese territory and its intention to provoke trouble in the SCS. It is an abuse of international legal means for political provocation.⁵

The TV anchor then announced that a full-page commentary would appear in the *People's Daily* the following day, headlined “Scheming to Abuse International Legal Process Will Never Succeed: On the Philippines' Vain South China Sea Case.”⁶ The use of words such as “cover up” (掩盖), “abuse” (滥用), “provocation” (挑衅), and “vain case” (妄诉) indicated a decision had been made to deploy strong vituperative language and invoke the emotive content of sovereignty violation.

This initial outburst in early 2014 set the tone and much of the substance of the campaign. After the arbitral tribunal accepted jurisdiction over the case on October 29, 2015, China protested the decision vehemently, calling it “null and void.” The start of the merits hearings in The Hague 5 weeks later triggered a major intensification in the volume of the PRC's propaganda. The main enforcer of the official invective was “Zhong Sheng,” a collective pseudonym of the *People's Daily's* international commentary team. From December 14 to 17, the pseudonymous commentator launched a series of ferocious broadsides against the Philippines, the United States, and the Arbitrators.

As the ruling approached in mid-2016, the campaign shifted into overdrive. On May 6, Director-General of the MoFA Department of Boundary and Ocean Affairs Ouyang Yujing gave a rare and lengthy interview to Chinese and foreign media, explaining China's position in detail. Six days later, Director-General of the MoFA Department of Treaty and Law Xu Hong also gave a briefing and fielded questions posed by journalists.⁷ At the same time, Beijing also started rallying international support. On May 20, the Foreign Ministry claimed that more than forty countries supported China's position; on June 14, spokesperson Lu Kang cited “nearly 60 countries” as having publicly endorsed China's stance. That number rose to seventy when State Councilor Yang Jiechi gave an interview with state media on July 15.⁸

⁵Author translation. Article C4, CCTV, March 31, 2013.

⁶Author translation, Article C5, *People's Daily*, April 1, 2014.

⁷Article C6, MFA, May 6, 2016; Article C7, MFA, May 12, 2016.

⁸Article C8, Yang Jiechi, July 15, 2016; Article M2, Reuters, May 20, 2016; according to the CSIS arbitration support tracker, there were thirty-one countries who supported China's position prior to the ruling. See <https://anti.csis.org/arbitration-support-tracker>.

⁴Article C3, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, December 7, 2014. On the production of this position paper, see Kardon (2018, 18–27).

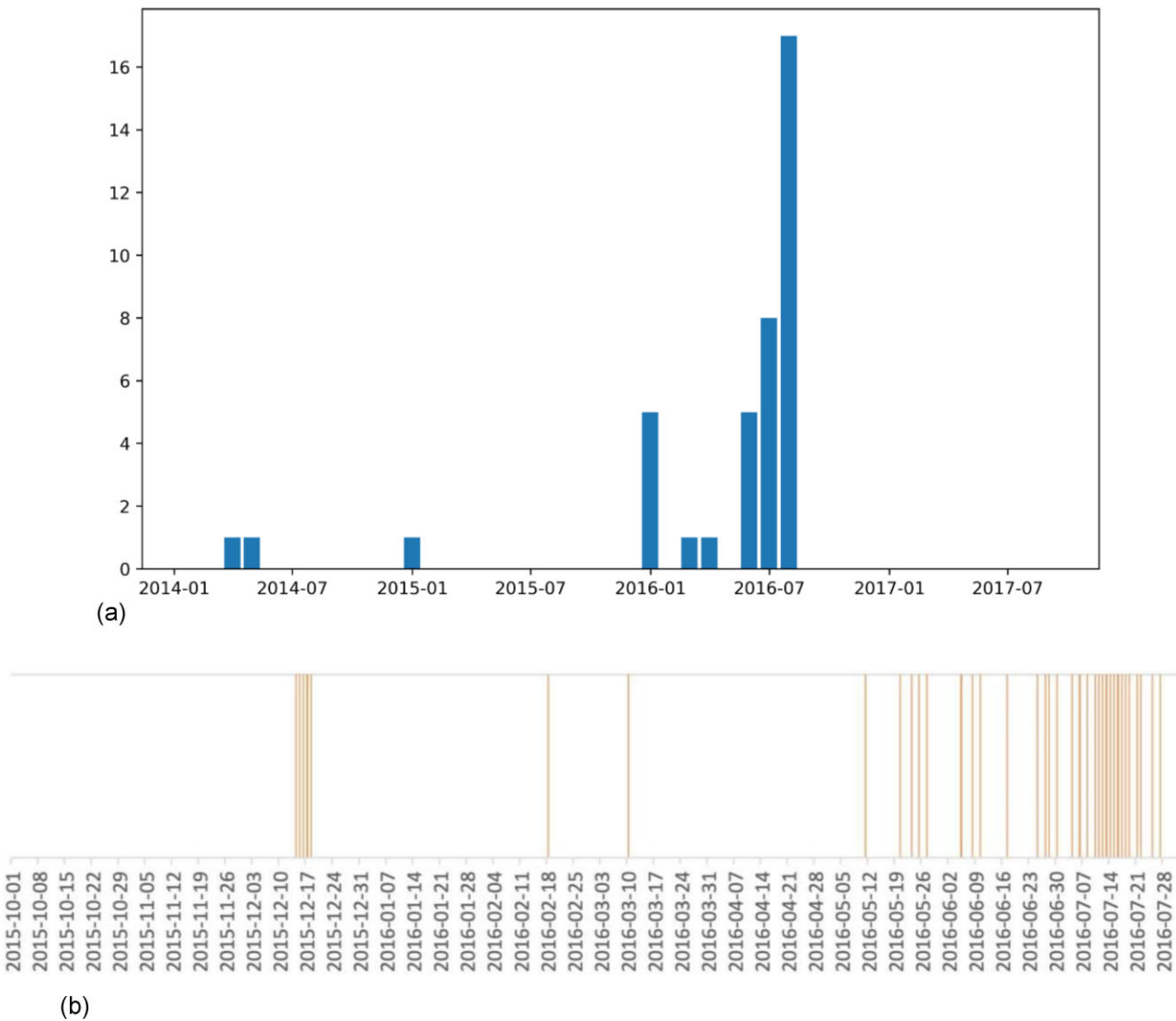


Figure 1. (a) Prominent state media coverage on the SCS arbitration (monthly count). (b) Prominent state media coverage on the SCS arbitration (individual days).

The campaign rose to a crescendo in June and July of 2016. Over that period of 61 days, the *People's Daily* published a total of 206 related articles, nine on the front page. These included a further eight-part series of “Zhong Sheng” commentaries by the *People's Daily* editorial staff. The Xinhua news agency also published a ten-part editorial series, one article a day for ten days leading up to the release of the ruling. The full propaganda effort is summarized in figure 1, indicating days of heavy emphasis in China’s central propaganda organs, as constituted by a *People's Daily* commentary or front page or coverage on CCTV’s 7pm news.

Internal notes distributed to major state media outlets indicated that the party-state’s top leadership deliberated on the campaign. In a July 11 internal memo, editors were urged to “continue to follow the Party Central Committee’s directives” and “fight well this public opinion battle.” Another July 13 message directed “the editing departments and pertinent branches to adhere to the leadership’s direction and the already planned reporting plan.” The note also out-

lined the reporting strategies that editors should employ.⁹ Additionally, an author’s discussion with a government official reveals that the media trends we observed above were indeed “authorized.”¹⁰ What, then, explains the party-state’s decision to draw massive public attention toward a highly adverse and embarrassing international development?

Explaining the Campaign

Beijing’s vituperative, moralistic rhetoric sought first of all to delegitimize the tribunal in order to prevent weakening of the general public’s support for the state’s positions in the South China Sea. The same stirring rhetoric, in turn, also mobilized regime allies to drown out dissent, and patriotic citizens to speak out to amplify the state’s foreign-directed messaging that sought to pressure the arbitral panel, bolster the international moral legitimacy of Beijing’s stance, and perhaps even deter potential US intervention to en-

⁹These notes were quoted in several author interviews with Chinese journalists and editors working in official media outlets, Beijing, China, May 2017.

¹⁰Author interview, May 26, 2017, Beijing, China.

force the ruling. Domestically, meanwhile, the propaganda helped to divert attention away from growing economic and political uncertainties, and satiated popular nationalist demands for a tough-looking response, helping keep nationalist sentiment under control. In sum, as shown below, the sequence and content of China's arbitration propaganda campaign offer evidence consistent with mobilization, signaling, diversion, and pacification, and all four explanations pass the critical tests laid out in [table 1](#).

Mobilization

The content of the campaign suggests two mobilizing goals directed toward different audiences. One, aimed at the general public, was anticipatory, forestalling the potential erosion of Chinese citizens' support for the PRC's claims in the South China Sea—and perhaps the legitimacy of the party-state itself. The other was preparatory, inspiring the party-state's most fervent nationalist supporters to attack and drown out dissenting opinions in the domestic information environment, and inspiring patriotic Chinese citizens, especially those overseas, to speak out against the ruling through online platforms visible to the outside world.

The effort to forestall the negative effects of an adverse tribunal ruling on Chinese citizens' support for the South China Sea claim reflected a belief among party-state thinkers that popular support constitutes an essential basis for the conduct of conflict, including maritime disputes ([Chen 2012](#); [Liu and Zhao Zhang 2012, 2013](#)). In this context, the Philippines' case was regarded as an attack on this basic social element of its national power in an area of important strategic interest ([H. Liu 2016](#); [Zhang and Tian 2018](#)). The party-state's fear that Chinese audiences might accept the arbitration as legitimate was by no means unwarranted. A survey in five major Chinese cities conducted in April 2013 found a solid majority of Chinese citizens approved of the idea of arbitration as a means of handling the South China Sea dispute ([Chubb 2014, 40](#)). The result was likely premised on an assumption that China would win any such case, underscoring the threat that *losing* an international arbitration posed to the party-state's domestic image. The timing of the first major escalation of the campaign, closely following the December 2015 merits hearings, which revealed the strength of the Philippine case, is also consistent with preemption of an expected adverse result as a key motivation for the campaign.

One central feature of the propaganda campaign was heavy deployment of moral-evaluative language in the propaganda rhetoric. Such vituperation and fulmination have been a staple of the CCP's mobilizing propaganda regarding its ideological enemies since well before the founding of the PRC ([Barmé 2012](#)). The *People's Daily's* "Zhong Sheng" column described the case as an "out-and-out political provocation under the cloak of law," and another *People's Daily* commentary lambasted the arbitrators for their "inability to distinguish right from wrong" and "distorted interpretation" of the law. Other pieces smeared the judges as puppets of Japanese militarism due to the Japanese nationality of the President of the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), who had appointed the majority of them—due in part to the PRC's non-participation in the process. Proffered explanations for the Philippines' pursuit of the case ranged from corrupt Filipino elites to covert American conspiracies.¹¹

¹¹This claim was repeated by State Councillor Yang Jiechi in his July 2016 interview (Article C8). The *People's Daily* official Weibo also posted a speech by

Another salient technique was the recasting of the case's complex legal content—PRC activities, maritime entitlements, and the status of specific maritime territorial features under the UNCLOS's regime of islands—as a simple question of sovereignty. This offered multiple advantages for preemptively persuading the general public to reject the proceedings as well as for inspiring nationalist-leaning citizens to raise their voices to the outside world on the state's behalf. On the one hand, it invoked patriotic emotions associated with national territory and historical loss. On the other hand, it recast the focus of the proceedings in terms of territorial sovereignty over islands in the South China Sea rather than maritime entitlements—a question on which the PRC's legal position is much more defensible, and which the tribunal would not in fact be considering. Land territory—as opposed to the maritime entitlements that were actually under consideration in the case—thus became an explicit visual theme in the propaganda organs' social media campaigns ([figure 2](#)).

One audience that the propaganda campaign mobilized with particular success was China's coterie of online nationalist keyboard warriors. Pro-state commentators included an assortment of ideological "Mao fans," nationalistic "voluntary 50-centers," aspiring party members, and youth organizers, among others. These groups, already disposed to strongly support the state in foreign policy conflicts, enthusiastically embraced the propaganda organs' territorial sovereignty social media campaigns, effectively drowning out or chasing away dissenting views ([Ma 2016](#)). Pre-emptive mobilization of more organized party allies was also evident, with a steady stream of statements from professional and societal "united front" associations condemning the arbitration in the weeks and months leading up to the ruling.

The PRC propaganda organs not only stirred the emotions of the general public to reject the ruling, they also called on Chinese citizens, especially young people and those located overseas, to raise their patriotic voices toward the outside world in rejection of the case. This intention is best illustrated by the mixed Chinese/English language slogan of one of the party-state's key social media campaigns: "南海仲裁 [South China Sea arbitration]? Who cares!" Initiated by the Communist Youth League and spread by mainstream propaganda organs, the campaign encouraged patriotic Chinese citizens, particularly young people, to post and share social media videos of themselves proudly expressing disregard for the ruling on foreign platforms. The division of the slogan between its Chinese- and English-language halves indicated how the propaganda goals combined the inoculation of domestic audiences against the ruling's content with the mobilization of patriotic citizens to target foreign audiences, as discussed in further detail below.

Signaling

In its foreign-directed communications, the PRC government repeatedly pointed to the views of "the Chinese people" as both a practical explanation and a moral justification for its non-acceptance of the arbitration. Most straightforwardly, it projected an image of the Chinese government as enjoying the strong support of its citizenry—a sixth of the world's population—in rejecting the ruling. As detailed below, the domestic mobilization openly sought to apply pressure to the arbitral tribunal itself, and deter other

Zhao Qizheng, a former spokesman of the CPPCC, claiming the arbitrators had been paid. Article C9, Zhao Qizheng, July 18, 2016.



Figure 2. Compilation of state propaganda organs' arbitration social media campaigns.

South China Sea claimants such as Vietnam from following the Philippines in resorting to UNCLOS dispute resolution. More speculatively, there is also some evidence to suggest the campaign may also have sought to deter the United States from acting to enforce the ruling.

As should be expected if the campaign had a significant strategic signaling motivation, within the body of English-language foreign-directed propaganda the strong feelings of the Chinese public were a key theme. As one example among many, the state media translation of the second “Zhong Sheng” commentary in the December 2015 blitz declared,

the determination of the Chinese people to safeguard its territorial integrity is as firm as a rock. Only the Chinese people have the final say when it comes to China's territory. Any attempt to negate China's sovereignty, rights and interests through a so-called ‘arbitration award’ will be nothing but wishful thinking.

PRC officials' foreign-directed remarks also frequently referred to the responses of Chinese citizens to the case, an indication that the theme was coordinated at a high level.¹²

One international target for pressure via the propaganda campaign was the arbitrators themselves. As noted above, the PRC's propaganda outputs began harshly—and personally—disparaging the arbitrators after the panel's decision to accept jurisdiction in late 2015. In June 2016, 6 weeks before the announcement of the *Award*, a statement from the Chinese Society of the Law of the Sea (CSLS) layered legal reasoning atop the ongoing vituperation. CSLS's statement argued it was the PRC's rejection of the proceedings that was upholding the authority of the law of the sea, and implicitly threatened that the PRC might withdraw from the regime should the arbitrators find against it. The state-

¹²Article C8; Article C10, Liu Xiaoming, July 7, 2016; in London in June, seasoned diplomat Fu Ying gave at least two speeches emphasizing the Chinese public's sentiments on the issue. One statement that successfully attracted foreign media attention was that because of past humiliations, “the Chinese people and government are very sensitive about territorial integrity and would never allow such recurrence even if it's just an inch of land. . . The people won't tolerate it if we lose territory yet again,” says Fu. “We've lost enough.” Article M5, Newsweek, June 22, 2016; Article C11, Fu Ying, July 6, 2016.

ment accused the panel of having “overstepped its authority ... maliciously got around China’s optional exceptions declaration ... willfully expanded its scope of jurisdiction.” Most ominously, the CSLS statement said the panel’s “reckless and arbitrary” decision to hear the case had “eroded the integrity and authority of UNCLOS,” a line of argument tailored to the particular audience of international maritime jurists for whom the law of the sea represents a lifelong project. These themes appeared in front-page headlines domestically and in a large volume of English-language propaganda internationally.

Another target of the propaganda blitz—and the patriotic outpourings it inspired—was other South China Sea claimant states contemplating similar legal challenges. While the state discouraged and ultimately suppressed nationalist attempts to stage demonstrations, the campaign did inspire patriotic retailers and consumers to take direct action. The withdrawal from sale of Philippine mango products and consumers’ destruction of American products were allowed to remain trending topics on Chinese social media, telegraphing the potential for economic punishment via consumer boycotts for countries who pursue legal redress against the PRC’s policies. Primary among these targets was Vietnam, where officials had in 2014 explicitly raised the possibility of bringing a legal case during a standoff over the PRC’s deployment of a giant oil rig to disputed waters. The logic of punishing one to warn others has been a prominent element of China’s coercive behavior in the South China Sea since the 1990s (K. Zhang 2019). The campaign also served to underscore to friendly or neutral countries the strength of feeling among the Chinese public, making them less inclined to speak in favor of the ruling, and even potentially more inclined to speak on China’s behalf. Such foreign statements were, in turn, used by PRC propagandists to further consolidate and mobilize opposition to the case within China.

PRC diplomats also explicitly drew attention to the sentiments of the Chinese public during the campaign. In an interview published in English on the MFA website in the aftermath of the award, the PRC’s topic diplomat State Councillor Yang Jiechi drew attention to online nationalist keyboard warriors, among various other domestic audiences:

... the central government has the strong support and endorsement from people of various social sectors in China. They have expressed their unequivocal attitude of opposing the illegal arbitration and safeguarding sovereign rights and interests by contributing articles and articulating views through the press, TV and SMS as well as online platforms like WeChat and Weibo.¹³

Yang’s comments illustrate the combination of coercive and moral-political signaling that the propaganda campaign communicated to foreign audiences. On the one hand, Yang asserted that the public’s response showed the fighting resolve of the Chinese population to defend the PRC’s sovereign claims. On the other hand, Yang emphasized that the Chinese people’s support gave moral gravitas to the PRC’s government’s position.

Rather than “hands-tying,” the strategic signaling aspects of the propaganda campaign described above are probably best described as a low-cost combination of psychological pressure and moral argumentation. There is some limited evidence that the PRC may have feared the arbitration could presage a US plan to enforce the ruling, for instance by blockading the PRC’s artificial island outposts. If so, then

the propaganda campaign could also be understood as a “costly signal.” In an interview with US media in early June, Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin stated that “there is no agency entitled to act as the international ‘police’.” In early July, former State Councillor Dai Bingguo, renowned for his usually understated tone, told a Washington, DC gathering that “The Chinese people would not be intimidated by the US actions, not even if the United States sends all its ten aircraft carriers to the South China Sea.” The same day, the *Global Times* released a poll that it said had found “96 percent of respondents have no fear of US pressure on the South China Sea issue.”¹⁴ If deterring US action was a concern, then the propaganda campaign could be regarded as a “recoverable cost” signal (Quek 2021) that visibly raised the PRC’s domestic audience costs of backing down, while also increasing its readiness to fight should the US attempt to enforce the ruling.

Diversion

A diversionary motive for the propaganda surrounding the arbitration also passes the basic tests of plausibility (table 1). Prior to the 2016 arbitration crisis, the Chinese economy faced formidable, and at the time unprecedented, challenges. Turbulence in the stock market began in the summer of 2015 and persisted throughout 2016. Economic growth slowed to a 25-year low of 6.9 percent per year in 2015. China had also accumulated significant debt in the short period following the US Financial Crisis, with numerous large investments failing to perform.¹⁵ As a result of the restructuring of state-owned enterprises, the Minister of Human Resources and Social Security indicated in February 2016 that the country intended to lay off 1.8 million workers.¹⁶ During this time period, worker protests increased significantly (figure 3). Such economic problems may have increased the appeal of a stirring patriotic propaganda campaign centered on a contentious, but low-risk, foreign policy controversy capable of diverting attention and galvanizing national sentiments.

There were, at the same time, indications that Xi Jinping’s potential challengers may have been emboldened at this time. Just prior to the March 2016 National People’s Congress meeting, “loyal party members” published an open letter criticizing Xi Jinping’s policies and demanding his resignation.¹⁷ A series of highly unusual *People’s Daily* interviews with an unidentified “Authoritative Person” on the condition of the PRC economy, suspected to be Xi Jinping ally Liu He, also offered strong hints that Xi was facing macroeconomic policy disagreements or even political machinations.¹⁸ More broadly, Xi Jinping’s insecurities were arguably manifested in the massive crackdown he launched in mid-2015 against “rights defense” lawyers and other social activists.

Compared to the propaganda campaign for the arbitration, these economic and social issues received scant attention in the mass media, as would be expected if diversion was among the motivations of the state’s decision-makers. *People’s Daily* was largely silent on the August 25 stock market nosedive, with no mention on the day and only articles the following day about the Central Bank’s measures and

¹³Article C8.

¹⁴Article C13, Dai Bingguo, July 6, 2016; Article C14, MFA, June 3, 2016; Article M4.

¹⁵Article M6, CNBC, March 31, 2016.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Article M9, Wujie, March 4, 2016.

¹⁸Article M10, *Economist*, May 19, 2016.

Number of cases

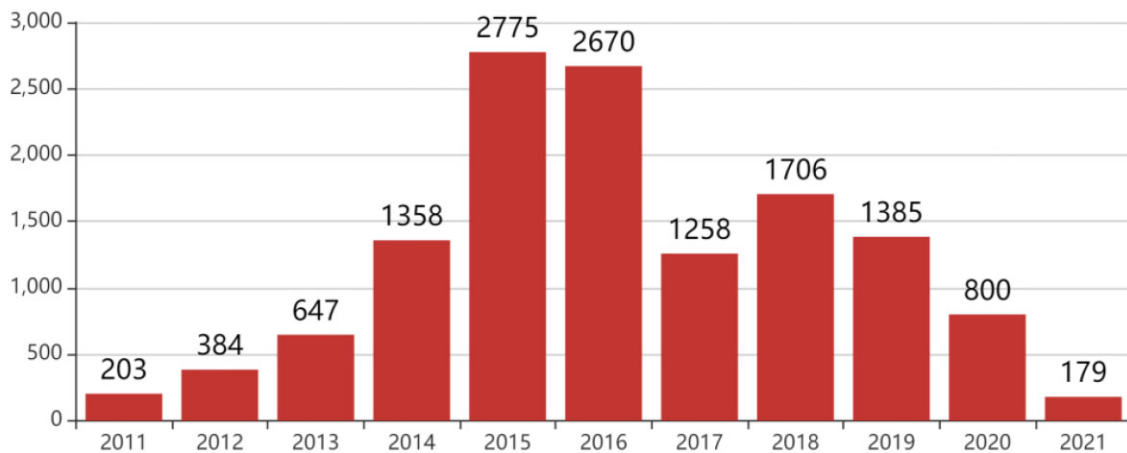


Figure 3. Yearly count of known incidents of worker protests in China, 2011–2021 (China Labor Bulletin).

Premier Li’s reaffirmation of confidence in the economy.¹⁹ According to leaked propaganda directives, radio and television stations were instructed to “significantly reduce their coverage of the stock market”; and newspapers and websites were instructed to delete articles about the stock market’s drop.²⁰

Attacking the arbitration posed little risk of triggering a military escalation, but it had plenty of symbolic significance, making it a potentially attractive area of international tension for CCP propaganda decision-makers to draw public attention toward. PRC analysts have argued that the campaign was effective at enhancing in-group national feelings (Jiang and Luo 2016). To date, no confirmatory evidence has emerged that would directly support the presence of such diversionary motivations. Nonetheless, these observations demonstrate there is no empirical or logical contradiction between a diversionary motivation and any of the previously stated theories for the arbitration propaganda campaign.

Pacification

When public sentiments become agitated enough to threaten social stability and limit foreign policy flexibility, the state has incentives to pacify through propaganda. This was the case in the arbitration campaign. The Baidu Search Index, which tracks daily search activity on China’s most popular search engine, baidu.com, already had an average search index of 4,000 for the keyword “South China Sea” in the year before the crisis, compared to an all-time average of 2,773, indicating relatively high attention levels. Between July 1 and 20, there were more than five million relevant microblog posts (Jiang and Luo 2016). According to a government official, Beijing was required to “put on a little act” because the arbitration had a “significant impact on China’s national image.”²¹ Security at the Philippine Embassy in Beijing was heightened, and scattered protests in a variety of locations were evidently of concern to authorities.²² Ac-

ording to Zhao Jinsong, prior to the announcement of the award’s announcement, “many individuals speculated about a possible war...if the verdict is unfavorable to China, street riots are nearly guaranteed; they may even attack the Philippine and American embassies” (J. Zhao 2016).

To satiate demand for a tough response from nationalistic citizens, Beijing employed a combination of echoing, positing, positive framing, and delegitimizing negative emotions in its propaganda campaign, particularly in its latter stages. The state echoed the hardline public sentiment with strongly worded remarks and, according to an internal note distributed to all state media outlets, demanded that these statements be prominently published and widely distributed.²³ The harsh rhetoric included terms like “political farce,” “hypocrisy,” and “shameless liar,” as well as references to the ruling as “a piece of waste paper” and “brimming with lies,” and the arbitral court as a “toy” and a “cancer cell of international law” comprised of “judicial hooligans.” There were also claims that the United States was, behind the scenes, “trampling on” international law and that the Philippines was “politicizing” and “abusing” legal processes. This harsh tone stood to appeal to public sentiment by reducing the psychological distance between the state and the populace, and providing the populace with a sense of venting their frustrations. As one government official put it, “at times, politically correct material [in the media] is simply insufficient to satisfy the public. Only the language frequently found in *Global Times* enables the population to express its anger. It helps individuals to vent their frustrations by resonating with their emotions.”²⁴

Secondly, Beijing’s abrasive rhetoric enabled it to posture as playing tough on the international stage and thereby deflect nationalist domestic criticism. The state media also “positive-framed” the dispute by defending China’s territorial claim, urging bilateral negotiations over arbitration, and, as noted above, compiling a long list of countries, international and domestic organizations, and prominent individuals who support China’s position. The majority of article headlines in state-controlled media were uplifting, including “Nothing can shake the power of peace and justice,”

¹⁹Article M11, *New York Times*, August 25, 2016.

²⁰Article M12, *China Digital Times*, July 9, 2016; Article M13, *China Digital Times*, August 25, 2015.

²¹Author interview, May 26, 2017, Beijing, China.

²²Article M14, *New York Times*, July 19, 2016.

²³Author interview, May 28, 2017, Beijing, China.

²⁴Author interview, June 9, 2017, Beijing, China.

“China is the true protector of peace and stability in the South China Sea,” and “Adhere to win-win cooperation and promote mutual growth.” Particularly during the last phase of the campaign, publications with a positive tone dominated the media, including commercial and online platforms. In June 2016, positive articles outnumbered negative pieces by a margin of 25.5%, and this margin grew to 40% in July (“[South China Sea Public Opinion Newsletter](#)” 2016). This observation is notable as an indicator of state intention, given the tendency of commercial and online media to “attribute responsibility” in times of crisis.

Finally, official media also attempted to deploy reason to quell negative emotions that could undermine social and political stability. For instance, the media exerted considerable effort in investigative reporting, relying on historical and legal evidence and citing reputable experts. “We must help the public understand it [the arbitral ruling] objectively and intelligently,” claimed one editor, “so that when it is released, they would know how to dispute it rationally, but not recklessly.” In addition, the media defined “patriotism” as the ability to use “rationality” and “jurisprudence” to safeguard national interests through “tolerance, inclusiveness, calm, and confidence.” It derided “blind impulses and extreme behavior” that “endangers our society and country.” In summary, the available evidence suggests that propaganda campaign not only served to stir popular support for China’s claims, mobilize the pro-state *vox populi* to amplify the state’s messages to foreign audiences, and quite possibly also divert attention from social and economic issues—it also served to placate popular demands for the appearance of a resolute response.

Conclusion

Research on and analysis of authoritarian propaganda are likely to grow in importance and complexity in coming years. With the tightening of the political environment in China, opportunities for direct formal and informal exchanges with PRC interlocutors are diminishing, at a time of increasingly fractious relations among great powers. Such developments foreshadow a corresponding increase in reliance on the interpretation of Beijing’s propaganda outputs among government analysts and scholars of international relations.

The findings presented in this article carry three key implications for future research and analysis of authoritarian propaganda, especially that of China. First, the multiple motivations evident in our retracing of the South China Sea arbitration campaign suggest authoritarian propaganda campaigns may have “life cycles.” It is possible, for example, that mobilization may predominate at the beginning, signaling and/or diversion in the interim, and pacification toward the latter stages. Studies of public opinion’s role in democratic contexts have usefully contrasted the short-term rallying effects of conflict as against longer-term casualty aversion (Baum and Potter 2008). Future studies should similarly seek to theorize and test for cyclical patterns in the purposes of authoritarian propaganda campaigns.

Second, fundamentally, our evidence points to the need to examine interactions among different motivations for state behavior. Just as a good chess move usually serves multiple purposes, propaganda analysts and social scientists need to accept the high probability of overlap and interaction among ostensibly distinct explanations. Put simply, the drive for a propaganda campaign on a foreign policy issue may often exceed the sum of its identifiable purposes.

Third, the interaction of multiple motives highlighted here may shed light on other recent PRC foreign policy propaganda campaigns. These include the wave of anti-Korean propaganda over the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system in South Korea in 2017; over the US–China trade war from 2018 onwards; and on the origins and handling of the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020. Each of these state-led campaigns appears, on the surface, to have been highly counterproductive, triggering outrage and intransigence in the target countries. Explaining such cases remains a key piece in the puzzle of the foreign policies of the arguably the most powerful authoritarian state the world has yet seen.

Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available in the *International Studies Quarterly* data archive.

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