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Cultural Bias in the Perception of Foreign-Policy Events

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Global Cooperation Research Papers 14

Felix S. Bethke

Cultural Bias **in the Perception of** **Foreign-Policy Events**

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Felix S. Bethke

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Abstract

Cultural bias means individuals judge and interpret a phenomenon according to values that are inherent in their own culture. The same event may be perceived differently by individuals with different cultural backgrounds. This study systematically tests for the presence of cultural differences in the perception of foreign policy events. Using a web survey with a split-sample of Chinese and US foreign policy experts, four domains of foreign policy are explored: sanctions; border violations; foreign aid; and trade agreements. The findings indicate general agreement between Chinese and US experts in the classification of foreign-policy events as cooperative, neutral, or conflictive. In regard to more specific foreign-policy scenarios, the picture is more differentiated. In the case of economic sanctions and border violations, there appears, again, to be general agreement as to the degree of conflictiveness of these events. In addition, perception does not appear to be influenced by collective self-esteem, in the sense that responses remain similar whether the event is described in abstract or country-specific terms. In the case of trade agreements and foreign aid, by contrast, there is a divergence in Chinese and US perceptions in regard to contextual factors such as conditionality and enforcement. Overall, the study suggests that while culture rarely affects the general perception of foreign-policy events, it does play a role in the perception of more complex concepts, such as conditionality and enforcement, that structure the context and meaning of those events.

Keywords

Cultural bias, international cooperation, international conflict, foreign policy, event perception

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Cultural Bias in the Perception of Foreign-Policy Events^{*}

Felix S. Bethke

1 Introduction

On 1 April 2001, a Chinese fighter-plane collided with a US surveillance aircraft in the airspace over the South China Sea. The US plane was forced to land on the Chinese island of Hainan without first seeking permission from the ground. The Chinese pilot died in the incident. The US crew were detained by the Chinese, who demanded an apology from the US authorities. The Americans refused, claiming that the collision was an accident, but in order to resolve the dispute they acknowledged 'regret' at the incident and the resultant harm. Following this, on 11 April 2001, the crew were released. In the aftermath of the incident, Chinese and US government officials put different spins on the story, with the Chinese claiming to have extracted an apology from the United States, and thus to have secured a diplomatic victory, and the Americans denying that their statement of regret amounted to a formal diplomatic note of apology. The Hainan incident marked the start of an ongoing series of clashes between the United States and China in the region of the South China Sea.¹

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¹ Near-collisions between US and Chinese ships in the South China Sea in Mar. 2009 and Dec. 2013 also raised diplomatic tensions (Perlez 2013; Tyson 2009). In 2010, at the ASEAN Regional Forum, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that the US had a national interest in 'freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons, and respect for international law in the South China Sea' (US Department of State 2010). In May 2015, Ashton Carter, US Defense Secretary, warned China to stop its construction of man-made islands in the region (Whitlock 2015). Chinese officials, for their part, have issued repeated protests about US surveillance activity in the area (Blanchard and Stewart 2011; Hennigan 2014). On 21 July 2015, for example, a Chinese military official complained that '[f]or a long time, US military ships and aircraft have carried out frequent, widespread, and up-close surveillance of China, seriously harming bilateral mutual trust and China's security interests, which could easily cause an accident at sea or in the air' (Farley 2015).

The stance taken by most foreign-policy experts, academics, and pundits on the Hainan crisis was to view it as an example of conflict arising from culturally divergent perceptions—both of events in general and of the need for apology in particular (Gries 2009; Gries and Peng 2002; Huang and Bedford 2009; Nisbett 2003: 197–8; Slingerland, Blanchard, and Boyd-Judson 2007; Zhang 2001a).² As Gries and Peng (2002) have shown, whereas the Americans repeatedly stressed the accidental nature of the event, the Chinese were not concerned about the immediate cause. To them, what mattered was the bigger picture, namely 1) that the United States had been spying on China and 2) that harm had been inflicted. In other words, intentionality was of secondary interest to the Chinese but was a major consideration for the Americans, a fact that would seem to indicate the presence of cultural bias in the perception of the event. Cultural bias can be said to occur when individuals form an opinion about a particular phenomenon on the basis of values intrinsic to their own culture. The same phenomenon may thus be perceived differently by individuals with different cultural backgrounds (Douglas 2011[1982]). Culturally based disjunctures in the perception of events or behaviour do not just cause conflict between states; they also hamper global cooperation on the provision of public goods—the global effort to mitigate climate change, for example, or to eradicate disease. If those charged with negotiating on global issues do not have a common understanding of the problems under discussion, global cooperation is doomed to fail.³

The study presented here systematically tests for the presence of cultural difference in the perception of foreign-policy events. Using a web survey with a split sample of Chinese and US foreign-policy experts, it explores four domains of foreign policy: sanctions; border violations; foreign aid; and trade agreements. The findings indicate general agreement between Chinese and US experts in the classification of foreign-policy events as cooperative, neutral, or conflictive. In regard to more specific foreign-policy scenarios, the picture is more differentiated. In the case of economic sanctions and border violations, there appears, again, to be general agreement as to the degree of conflictiveness. In addition, perception does not appear to be influenced by collective self-esteem, in the sense that responses remain similar whether the events were described in abstract or country-specific terms. In the area of foreign aid, by contrast, there is a divergence in Chinese and US perceptions in regard to conditionality: if financial assistance is tied to structural adjustment and the imposition of austerity-measures, the Chinese experts view it as substantially less cooperative in character than when it is offered without these conditions; for the US experts, however, this distinction is of minor importance. Cultural differences are also detectable in the perception of trade agreements: Chinese respondents are less likely to recommend entering into such an agreement if it includes an enforcement mechanism, whereas for US respondents the presence of such an element enhances the appeal of joining.

² A number of opinion pieces in US newspapers (Butterfield 2001; Wright 2001) and a report by the US Library of Congress (Kan et al. 2001: 13) also stressed the important role played by differences in the political cultures of the two countries in escalating the crisis.

³ The nature of cultural diversity as both a challenge to, and an opportunity for, global cooperation is discussed in detail by Scholte and colleagues (2015).

Overall, then, the study suggests that while culture rarely affects the general perception of foreign-policy events, it does play a role in the perception of more complex concepts, such as conditionality and enforcement, that structure the context and meaning of those events.

In the sections that follow, I review the literature on culture and foreign policy (Sect. 2) and propose a theory of culture and event perception (Sect. 3). I then set out the reasons underlying the selection of the United States and China as appropriate cases for the investigation of the role of cultural difference in event perception (Sect. 4). This is followed by a description of the questionnaire used in the study (Sect. 5) and details of the survey design and participating foreign-policy experts (Sect. 6). The results of the empirical analysis are then presented (Sect. 7) and the paper concludes with a discussion of the findings (Sect. 8).

2 Related Literature

The study of culture has a long tradition in international politics. This point is made by, amongst others, Krause, who notes the way in which scholars down the ages have been mindful of ‘the impact of the national differences that negotiators brought to the table’ (Krause: 1999: 1).⁴ Despite this enduring interest, within dominant IR theories, cultural influences on foreign-policy behaviour were long neglected, or regarded as of no more than marginal significance. Within the framework of the prevailing account, which saw international politics as being shaped by the relative material capabilities of states and by the structure of the international system in general and the bipolar Cold-War configuration in particular (Hudson: 1997: 1; Katzenstein: 1996: 2), the cultural specifics of nations appeared irrelevant. Building on the rational-choice paradigm, IR theories adhered to a ‘rational actor’ model of state behaviour (see, for example, Keohane: 1984; Waltz: 1979) in which states were assumed to be monolithic, unitary actors that made rational decisions aimed at maximizing utility to themselves. In this scheme, decision-making in international politics was assumed to involve five steps: 1) the identification and prioritization of goals; 2) the search for alternatives; 3) prediction of the consequences of each alternative; 4) the ranking of each alternative according to utility (in other words, how well it matches up to goals and interests); and 5) selection of the alternative that would maximize utility (Allison and Zelikow 1999: 13–26; Bueno de Mesquita 2009; Kahler 1998). The cultural characteristics of nations, if considered at all, were treated as a residual category: what could not be explained by the model must be a result of, or driven by, the cultural norms of the states involved (Hudson and Sampson III 1999).

Since the end of the Cold War, however, there has been a growth in interest in the cultural drivers of international politics and foreign-policy behaviour across multiple subfields (Hudson 1997; Johnston 1995; Katzenstein 1996; Krause 1999; Lapid and Kratochwil 1996). Scholars have set about analysing the influence of culture in areas such as conflict resolution between states (Avruch 1998; Brigg and

⁴ For a comprehensive account of developments in this area, see Reeves (2004).

Muller 2009), international negotiations (Cohen 2004; Faure and Rubin 1993; Fisher 1997[1988]), and peacekeeping operations (Rubinstein 1993). Most prominently, Samuel Huntington cited cultural difference as the main explanatory variable in what he termed the 'clash of civilizations' (1996; 1993). Huntington essentially argued that, because of geopolitical developments after the end of the Cold War, conflicts would now be triggered not by ideological or economic cleavages between nations but by cultural differences, and most notably religious differences, between whole civilizations (Huntington 1993: 22).

Other culturally based explanations of foreign-policy behaviour were advanced under the analytical category of 'strategic culture', a term which generally encompassed all country-specific characteristics that might influence the strategic behaviour of states in international politics. Early work on this topic, in the 1970s and 1980s, looked at the way in which cultural history had shaped the strategic predispositions of the United States (Lord 1985) and the Soviet Union (Snyder 1977). During the 1990s, scholars such as Johnston (1995) and Legro (1996) developed a systematic analytical framework for the strategic-culture approach, drawing on rational-choice and game-theory models of foreign-policy decision-making. Johnston (1995: 46) defined strategic culture as 'an ideational milieu which limits behavioral choices', the implication of which was that cultural systems shaped the preferences of states in international affairs. Scholars working with the concept of strategic culture thus attempted to incorporate cultural difference into the rational-actor model of foreign-policy behaviour, with culture influencing decision-making in (at least) three ways: firstly by determining the alternatives amongst which decision-makers can choose; secondly by shaping decision-makers' predictions about the expected consequences of each alternative (in situations of strategic interaction this usually means how other states will respond to the alternatives in question); and thirdly by affecting the expected-utility rankings for each alternative. In combination, these three elements of strategic culture create the possibility that two decision-makers will act differently in regard to the same situation because of differences in their cultural backgrounds.⁵ Using the strategic-culture framework, Legro (1996) showed, firstly, how the short-list of aerial-warfare options from which British leaders could choose in the fight against Germany in World War II was determined by the organizational culture of the Royal Air Force and, secondly, how this same culture influenced the British decision to opt for strategic bombing. In similar vein, Johnston (1996), in his analysis of Chinese foreign policy, demonstrated how a historically rooted strategic culture persisted beyond the Maoist period, influencing a whole range of decisions.⁶

Culturally based accounts of foreign policy also feature in constructivist IR theory (Katzenstein 1996; Lapid and Kratochwil 1996). Scholars working within this framework are generally concerned either with the process by which norms⁷ are

⁵ The idea of decision-makers operating in line with differing strategic cultures is at odds with the rational-choice model in general and game theory in particular in that these approaches assume a common understanding of preferences, alternatives, and utility pay-offs.

⁶ For contemporary accounts of US strategic culture, see Harris (2014) and O'Reilly (2013). On China's strategic culture, see Scobell (2014).

⁷ In the generally accepted sense of 'a standard of appropriate behaviour for actors' (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 891), where 'actors' in this case refers to nation states.

constructed by international organizations and disseminated amongst their members (Finnemore 1993) or with the construction and evolution of the culture of the international system of states as a whole (see, for example, Wendt's 'three cultures of anarchy': Wendt 1999: 246–313). What they are seeking to explain, therefore, is the emergence of a global culture of norms.⁸ A number of constructivist scholars, however, have advanced the idea of national security cultures as frameworks through which 'identities and norms influence the ways in which actors define their interests' (Katzenstein 1996: 30). By highlighting the part played by states' identities in shaping foreign-policy behaviour, constructivists also point up the mechanisms by which culture operates in this area. Jepperson and colleagues, for example, define identity as a set of 'mutually constructed and evolving images of self and other' (Jepperson et al. 1996: 59), meaning how states perceive themselves in relation to other states.⁹ Since cultural characteristics are part of that self-perception, it follows that if identity influences foreign-policy behaviour, so too does culture. These constructivists see state identity as generating and shaping foreign-policy interests (Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein 1996: 60), but unlike scholars of strategic culture, they regard that identity as being socially constructed prior to any definition of state interests in terms of preferences and utility (Kahler 1998: 936). Applying the concept of socially constructed state identity, Berger (1996) documents the post-World War II evolution of Germany into a pacified, democratic, internationalized state and the major influence this had in shaping its foreign-policy interests in the realm of national security. Uemura (2015) uses a cultural-constructivist approach in explaining the influence which China's cultural behaviour-patterns had in shaping its identity vis-à-vis Japan, the Soviet Union, and the United States. One major factor here was the tradition of *guanxi*, which lays stress on reciprocity.

Despite their conceptual and analytical differences, most theoretical approaches identify culture as a variable that determines differences in cognition—in other words, differences in the way decision-makers reason about foreign-policy choices or perceive the international system and other states. Drawing on concepts and methods from cognitive psychology, scholars are increasingly turning to empirical analysis to document the ways in which culture influences perception of actors, events, and behaviour in international politics. It was in this connection that Hudson (1999) advanced the idea of culturally based action templates. An action template is essentially a set of expectations as to how the policy-makers of a given country are likely to act in a particular situation. Such templates evolve out of the country's prior experiences in international politics. By means of a survey involving 134 respondents, Hudson assessed the prevalence of foreign-policy action templates in three cultures—US, Japanese, and Russian (38, 37, and 59 respondents respectively). Respondents were asked to suggest how they thought their governments would react in a given scenario (such as the violent break-up of a neighbouring state). Whereas within the US and Japanese contingents, there was

⁸ Lebow (2008) went as far as to develop a 'cultural theory of international relations'. However, as noted by Ling (2010), this theory essentially assumed that international politics was shaped by a single set of norms and values, viz. ancient Greek culture.

⁹ This is reminiscent of Kalevi Holsti's 'national role conceptions' (1970), later honed into a role-theory for foreign-policy analysis by Walker (1987).

broad agreement as to which foreign-policy choice was the likely one for the respective government, the Russian responses varied widely.

How foreign states are viewed by citizens and decision-makers is another area that has attracted scholarly attention (Geva and Hanson 1999; Lacina and Lee 2013; Rousseau and Garcia-Retamero 2007; Wick 2014), notably in relation to threat perception (Jervis 1976; Rousseau 2006; Stein 1988). In his exploration of the reasons why certain foreign states are regarded as a threat by US citizens, Wick (2014) shows that the degree to which the particular state's political culture tallies with that of the United States is a major factor in determining the extent of threat perception. Likewise, a number of experimental studies have highlighted the role of cultural similarity in shaping public perceptions of foreign states (Geva and Hanson 1999; Rousseau and Garcia-Retamero 2007). Most of these studies, however, have focused solely on US perceptions and have not attempted a cross-cultural account. Notable exceptions are the investigations conducted by the US–China Security Perceptions Project, which looked at the attitudes and beliefs of the respective nations in regard to themselves and the other in the matter of security (Johnston and Shen 2015; Swaine et al. 2013).

Relating more closely to cultural difference in the perception of events is the study by Bobrow et al. on international crisis (1977), the findings of which point up fundamental differences in the way such crisis is perceived by US and Chinese nationals. Both groups regard it as a time of great risk, but whereas Americans think of it mainly in terms of danger, Chinese also see it as an opportunity. Experimental evidence on foreign-policy event perceptions is also provided by Gries et al. (2009), whose findings tend to confirm the argument that shared history influences the evaluation and perception of events. Chinese and US respondents were given fictional high-school history textbook accounts of the Korean War. Details relating to the impact of the war, the sources used for the textbook, and the outcome of the conflict (in other words, whether it was described as a triumph or a tragedy for the country in question) were experimentally manipulated. When they had read the text, respondents were questioned on their beliefs about the past, their emotions, their collective self-esteem, and their perception of present-day US–China relations in terms of threat. Significant differences emerged between the two nations both in their perceptions of the past and in their present-day values. The Chinese respondents showed higher levels of collective self-esteem and threat perception than those from the United States, suggesting the presence of cultural bias.

As indicated by this review of the literature, many theoretical models and empirical accounts highlight the influence of culture on foreign-policy behaviour in terms of cognitive difference. None of them, however, has made a systematic attempt to assess the impact of cultural difference on the perception of foreign-policy events—in other words, to determine whether one and the same event is perceived differently across national cultures.

3 Theoretical Approach

Culture is one of the most debated concepts in the social sciences and one for which there is no common definition in the scholarly community.¹⁰ Suggestions from recent studies in cross-cultural and political psychology include: 'a shared way to sample information' (Triandis 2000: 146), 'collective programming of the mind' (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010: 6), and 'a preestablished [collective] set of behavioral competencies' (Hudson 1999: 767). The implication of all these definitions is that national cultures have unique ways of perceiving their environment and evaluating the behaviour of others and that they have standard procedures for determining appropriate behaviour within the respective culture. In conceptualizing the impact of culture on the perception of foreign-policy events, I build on the work of Triandis (1989; 1994; 2000) and his notion that national cultures develop a shared convention for sampling information from the environment. In this scheme, individuals from different cultural backgrounds employ different sampling procedures, creating a cultural bias which may mean that they perceive the same event in different ways. The differences may relate either to which elements from an event are perceived or to the weight attached to the various elements of an event.

For the specification of what constitutes a foreign-policy event, I build on event-data research in international relations. Scholars of international politics conceptualize such events in terms of 'who did what to whom (when and where)' (see, for example, Schrodtt 2012; Yonamine and Schrodtt 2011). These events are seen as presenting information about the actors involved ('source' and 'target'), who are connected through a particular action—specifically, a foreign-policy interaction. By way of example: if a media-report on the Hainan Island incident states that 'on 1 April 2001, a *Chinese* fighter jet *collided with a US surveillance aircraft* in the airspace over the South China Sea', China will be seen as the source, the United States as the target, and the collision as the action that connects the two.¹¹ The rest of the statement is seen as supplying additional context (type of aircraft involved, place and time of event). To evaluate such events, scholars have developed scales for ranking them on a continuum from cooperation to conflict (Azar and Sloan 1975; Bond et al. 2003; Goldstein 1992; Shellman 2004). The scales are based on surveys in which foreign-policy experts were asked to decide whether and to what extent particular events were cooperative or conflictive. In a study by Goldstein, for example, experts rated 61 foreign-policy events on a scale ranging from -10 (most conflictive) to +10 (most cooperative). The events were described in very rudimentary, abstract terms: no context was provided and no real states or persons were mentioned. For example, experts rated the provision of economic aid by one state to another on average at +7.4 and the suspension of diplomatic relations between two states at -7. However, the intensity of perception in such surveys may be affected by the inclusion of additional information on the actors

¹⁰ A survey conducted by Kroeber and Kluckhohn in 1952 already listed over 160 definitions.

¹¹ Note that in this example the distinction between source and target is of no significance because their positions in the sentence could be reversed without altering the meaning of the event.

featured or on the context. In terms of actors, the geographic proximity or distance between the source or target country and the respondent's own country of origin may, for example, make a difference. And contextually, the degree of cooperativeness attributed to a grant of economic aid may be influenced by the amount involved. Moreover, there are a number of ways in which the cultural background of experts can influence perceptions of the degree of conflictiveness or cooperativeness of a foreign-policy event.

First, the event itself may be differently weighted across national cultures. The Goldstein scale rests on the judgement of just eight International Relations scholars active at the University of Southern California in 1991—in other words, on the opinions of a small, highly homogeneous group of people from the same cultural background. Its view of what constitutes a major cooperative or conflictive event in international politics is therefore likely to be US-centric.¹² As we have seen from the Hainan Island incident, however, an event—in this case an air collision—may be seen as more conflictive by one party than the other, and this is true for all sorts of events in international politics. Culturally specific ways of sampling information are a product of the shared history of people living together as a group. Individuals form an opinion about a phenomenon on the basis of values that have become intrinsic to their own culture over time. Jervis (1976: 143) talks of 'the assimilation of information to pre-existing beliefs', in which individuals focus on aspects of a situation that are consonant with the ideas, beliefs, and values of their own culture and disregard those that are not. Culture, he argues, is one of the main drivers of such 'perceptual predisposition' (1976: 151). A shared past—including, most notably, formative historical events—thus influences the way in which national cultures sample information and perceive events.

Second, perception of the actors involved in a foreign-policy event may vary between nations, intensifying or attenuating perception of the event itself. Such variation may arise as a result of the degree of cultural proximity between actor and observer: the conflictive event that occurred at Hainan Island, for example, may be perceived as having greater weight by an observer culturally closer to China. The variation may also be due to cross-cultural differences in collective self-esteem or, more negatively, national narcissism. Collective self-esteem here implies the identification of the individual with the nation-state (as in 'Being Chinese is an important part of who I am') (Gries 2009: 227); national narcissism refers to something rather more extreme, defined by Cai and Gries (2013: 123) as 'an inflated view of the importance and deservedness of one's own nation'. Both these traits may influence the intensity of conflictiveness or cooperativeness ascribed to foreign-policy events, the likelihood being that individuals from national cultures with high collective self-esteem or national narcissism will attribute greater weight to events where their own countries are involved.

Third, national cultures may also differ in their perception of contextual factors. As mentioned previously in relation to Hainan Island, the fact that the US aircraft was a surveillance plane heightened the conflictiveness of the event in the eyes of the Chinese. Cultural differences of this kind are most likely to arise in cases where

¹² Other event-data scales (e.g. Azar and Sloan 1975) likewise rely on the judgement of experts from the same cultural background (i.e. US-American).

the relevant nations' historical experience of the contextual factor in question diverge. Policy-makers' use of historical analogy in assessing contemporary foreign-policy events is well documented (Gries et al. 2009; Houghton 1996; Katzenstein 1997). Hence, where a contextual factor triggers differing historical analogies across national cultures, perception of an event may, likewise, differ according to culture.

My argument, in sum, is that cultural differences in the perception of a foreign-policy event result from cultural differences in the ways that event is sampled. Differences in how the actors and context are perceived intensify or attenuate the observer's view. The main mechanisms through which these differences in perception are produced are collective self-esteem and a perceptual predisposition resulting from the extrapolation of historical analogies.

4 Case Selection

To test for cultural influences on the perception of foreign policy events, this study uses a web-survey design. Experts from China and the United States are presented with fictional, experimentally manipulated foreign-policy scenarios in the form of news-agency reports and are invited to rate the events involved according to conflictiveness or cooperativeness. Three factors motivated the choice of the two countries involved: firstly, China-US relations are amongst the most important of our time politically, economically, and in terms of security; secondly, the national cultures of the two countries are generally held to be highly distinct; and thirdly, China and the United States differ in regard to the two main mechanisms which are here assumed to produce cultural bias in event perception—namely, collective self-esteem and perceptual predisposition resulting from the extrapolation of historical analogies.

Citizens of China and the United States are often described as differing widely in their ideas, beliefs, and value systems—in other words, in the elements that structure social interaction within their respective groups. Studies in cross-cultural psychology frequently cite the two countries as ideal-type antipodes in their explanations of cultural difference (Hofstede 2001[1980]; Nisbett 2003; Trafimow, Triandis, and Goto 1991). Triandis, for instance, names China and the United States as examples of collectivist and individualist cultures respectively (1995: 90) and argues that, faced with a particular event or situation of social interaction, people from individualist cultures mostly sample information about the individual whereas people from collectivist cultures sample information about the collective (Triandis and Suh 2002: 136). Empirical studies suggest that individualism is more prevalent in Western societies with high levels of industrialization and economic development whilst collectivism is more widespread in East Asia and the developing countries (Hofstede 2001[1980]; Kim et al. 1994). Most significantly for this study, research also suggests that Chinese citizens not only display greater collective self-esteem than do citizens of the United States (Gries et al. 2009: 449–

50) but also react more sensitively to foreign-policy scenarios when these involve their own country (Gries, Peng, and Crowson 2012).¹³

In relation to extrapolation from the past, considerable differences in historical memory and national identity have also been identified between China and the United States. The dominant narrative of US foreign-policy is exceptionalism, in other words the notion that the United States is inherently different from other nations, notably in regard to the notions of freedom and liberty (e.g. Lipset 1997). The idea of exceptionalism has its roots in the American Revolution, which freed the country from British control. It is a feature which US presidents are expected to lay stress on at home, in their political agendas and the speeches they address to the general public. From the perspective of foreign policy, it is regarded by the United States as entitling it to a dominant role in world affairs. This entails the adoption of a missionary approach in relation to promoting both democracy (Smith 2012) and market-oriented economic development (Williamson 1990). US foreign policy thus seeks to disseminate democratic norms and values across the world. The Bush Doctrine, as Monten points out (2005: 112), '[assumed] that U.S. political and security interests are advanced by the spread of liberal political institutions and values abroad'.¹⁴ Likewise, President Obama, though initially challenged for his lack of enthusiasm for American exceptionalism, and despite his milder rhetoric, is now recognized by scholars as having maintained the US commitment to the promotion of democracy both as a strategic goal of foreign policy and as a matter of national interest (Bouchet 2013; Carothers 2012).

In relation to China, meanwhile, scholars point to a 'victimization narrative', which, they say, structures the ideational basis of the country's foreign policy. In the words of Gries and Peng (2002: 175), this narrative portrays China as 'suffering at the hands of the West during the "Century of Humiliation" from the mid-nineteenth century Opium Wars to World War II'. Of crucial importance here, historically speaking, was the series of so-called 'unequal treaties' of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which forced China to cede sovereignty and territory to foreign powers such as Britain, Russia, the United States, and Japan (Wang 2005). Because of this historical experience, and the resultant victimization narrative, say the scholars, independence and autonomy became the cardinal principles of Chinese foreign policy after World War II (Chan 2012; Wang 2014) and a correspondingly strong emphasis was placed on the promotion of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference in other states' internal affairs.

Given these differences, China and the United States are likely to constitute indicative comparison-cases as regards the analysis of cultural influences on the perception of foreign-policy events. If there are indeed cultural differences in the perception of such events, they are most likely to be found by comparing the evaluations of US and Chinese individuals. And if no difference is observed

¹³ However, Cai and Gries (2013) argue that the two nations exhibit equally strong narcissistic feelings in regard to themselves.

¹⁴ The then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice launched the 'Transformational Diplomacy' initiative, the declared aim of which was to build and sustain democracy throughout the world (Rice 2006).

between the respective respondents, we may, conversely, take this as strong evidence that perception of foreign-policy events is universal in character.

5 Questionnaire

The questionnaire for the study was written in English and translated into Chinese. To ensure consistency between versions, a process of 'back-translation' was applied (Brislin 1986). This involved getting the questionnaire, along with invitation e-mails and other communications to participants, translated into Chinese by one professional translator and back into English by another. The second English version was then compared with the original and any inconsistencies resolved. The questionnaire is divided into three sections.

The first section covers the demographic and geographic characteristics of the respondents. Questions about age and gender are followed by three geographic queries designed to capture respondents' level of exposure to the relevant cultural values. Specifically, the geographic questions ask for country of birth, country in which highest level of education was completed, and current country of residence, thus making it possible to determine whether respondents have migrated at any stage and have therefore undergone major exposure to cultures other than their own.

The second section is designed to assess the part played by cultural difference in the classification of abstract event-descriptions. The overall aim here is to determine whether understanding of the basic nature of foreign-policy events is universal or whether it varies across cultural groups. Respondents are asked to categorize 16 events as conflictive, neutral, or cooperative. The list of events (see Table 1)¹⁵ is taken from the scale developed by Azar and Sloan (1975) for the Conflict and Peace Data Bank (COPDAB).

As Table 1 shows, the original scale lists events from most cooperative (two states uniting) to most conflictive (nuclear attack). To preclude the possibility of respondents' being influenced by this ranking, the order of the events is randomized across questionnaires. The 'sorting' task involved here also serves the purpose of 'calibrating' the respondents, in the sense of making them aware of the range of foreign-policy events that occur in international politics.

¹⁵ The original ranking was determined by 18 US IR scholars and practitioners, who assigned weights to each event. I use the expanded version of the scale, as developed by Beer et al. (1992). This includes an additional event involving attack with nuclear weapons.

Table 1: Events presented to respondents for classification

-
- Nation A and Nation B unite voluntarily into one nation-state
 - Nations A and B establish an alliance (political, military or economic)
 - Nation A provides military support to Nation B (e.g. military aid, technical assistance, military intervention to support B)
 - Nation A provides economic aid to Nation B
 - Nation A establishes friendship or cultural agreements or exchanges with Nation B
 - Nation A issues a statement of support for Nation B's policies
 - Nations A and B communicate, meet or propose talks regarding problems of mutual interest
 - Nation A demonstrates indifference to Nation B's policies, moves, actions (e.g. makes no comment type statements)
 - Nation A expresses mild disaffection toward Nation B's policies, objectives, goals, behavior
 - Nation A engages in verbal threats, warnings, demands and accusations against Nation B
 - Nation A uses its capabilities to counter Nation B's actions (e.g. economic sanctions, troop mobilization)
 - Nation A breaks up diplomatic relations with Nation B
 - Nation A engages in small scale military acts against Nation B (e.g. border skirmishes, imposing blockades)
 - Nation A engages in limited war acts against Nation B (e.g. bombards military units or hits territory of B)
 - Nation A initiates or engages in extensive war acts against Nation B (many deaths, occupies territory)
 - Nation A uses nuclear weapons against Nation B
-

In the third section of the questionnaire, respondents are asked to react to a series of vignettes describing various foreign-policy events. The protagonists and contexts of the events are manipulated experimentally. There are four vignettes in all, two depicting more conflictive events (economic sanctions and border violations) and two more cooperative ones (the provision of foreign aid and the conclusion of a trade agreement). The assumption here is that the differing historical experiences of the United States and China, and the distinct policies they have pursued, may influence respondents' perceptions of the events in question.

Economic Sanctions

The first of the vignettes deals with the imposition of economic sanctions by one state upon another. Two versions were designed—one abstract (mentioning only ‘Nation A’ and ‘Nation B’) and one in which the target of the sanctions is the respondent’s birth-country (viz. either China or the United States). The texts of the two vignettes read as follows:

Nation A announced sanctions against Nation B, targeting its energy, banking and defence sectors in the strongest action yet over the alleged mistreatment of Nation A’s citizens in Nation B. The measures mark the start of a new phase in the biggest confrontation between Nation A and Nation B in recent history.

[China/USA] announced sanctions against **[China/USA]**, targeting its energy, banking and defense sectors in the strongest action yet over the alleged mistreatment of **[China/USA]**’s citizens in **[China/USA]**. The measures mark the start of a new phase in the biggest confrontation between **[China/USA]** and **[China/USA]** in recent history.

Respondents are randomly exposed to only one version of the sanction vignette and are asked to rank the event in question on an 11-point Likert scale ranging from ‘very cooperative’ (+5) through ‘neutral’ (0) to ‘very conflictive’ (-5).

The abstract version allows one to assess whether Chinese and US respondents evaluate the same event differently. The historical experiences of the two countries in regard to sanctions differ. After World War II, the United States became an active imposer of sanctions on a whole variety of countries. For the duration of the Cold War, these measures, which encompassed a broad range of issues (from human rights to nuclear proliferation), were mostly unilateral in nature. Thereafter, however, the United States became more involved in multilateral sanctions-based efforts to influence other states’ policies. The USA itself, meanwhile, was rarely the target of economic sanctions; and even where it was, the measures had little effect (Hufbauer et al. 2007). This was in contrast to China, whose history in world politics after World War II was profoundly influenced by the experience of hard-hitting economic sanctions. From 1949 to 1970, it was the butt of export, import, and financial restrictions imposed by the United States as part of the latter’s Cold War strategy for containing communism. Similar sanctions were used against it from 1960 to 1970 by the Soviet Union, due to ideological disputes between the two countries. When the Cold War was over, the United States brought into play a new set of sanctions designed to effect change in Chinese human-rights policy, promote nuclear non-proliferation, and protect intellectual property rights. In general, the Chinese government has viewed economic sanctions as an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of communist rule and the political stability of the country (Drury and Li 2004; Zhang 2001b). Given this historical experience, it is likely that sanctions-related foreign-policy events

will be seen in a more conflictive light by Chinese observers than by their US counterparts.

The inclusion of the country-specific version of the vignette is designed to throw light on the issue of collective self-esteem. If collective self-esteem or national narcissism affects event perception, respondents presented with the country-specific vignette should see the event as more conflictive than do participants responding to the abstract scenario. The country-specific vignette also allows one to determine whether Chinese and US observers differ in their responses when their own country is the target of the sanctions.

Border Violations

The second vignette, on border violation, depicts an event involving the encroachment of one state's airspace by another. Here again, two versions are proposed—an abstract one and a country-specific one in which the country suffering the encroachment is the respondent's own country of birth:

Nation A announced that military agencies had discovered a surveillance operation by Nation B over its air territory. Last week a plane owned by Nation B 'accidentally' changed its route and flew over the southern border region of Nation A's territory. Intelligence staff exposed the 'accident' as surveillance operation, which was presumably targeted at gathering highly sensitive information about Nation A's military technology.

[China/USA] announced that military agencies had discovered a surveillance operation by **[China/USA]** over its air territory. Last week a plane owned by **[China/USA]** 'accidentally' changed its route and flew over the southern border region of **[China/USA]**'s territory. Intelligence staff exposed the 'accident' as surveillance operation, which was presumably targeted at gathering highly sensitive information about **[China/USA]**'s military technology.

Participants are randomly exposed to only one version of the vignette and are asked to rank the event on an 11-point scale ranging from 'very cooperative' to 'very conflictive'.

It is likely that US and Chinese perceptions of this scenario will be influenced by the two countries' ongoing dispute about airspace over the South China Sea. Because of China's strong emphasis on sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference, Chinese respondents may prove more sensitive than their US counterparts to border violations and may therefore see the event depicted in the vignette in a more conflictive light than do the US observers. As in the last case, the country-specific version of the vignette serves as an indicator of collective self-esteem, revealing whether respondents react more intensely when their own country of origin is involved.

Foreign Aid

The third vignette concerns the provision of economic aid by one state to another. There are again two versions of the vignette, but in this case both are non-specific as to country, the variation here being the presence or absence of conditionality:

Nation A announced \$220 million in macro-financial assistance to Nation B to support its economic stabilization. The measures are meant to help Nation B to cover urgent balance-of-payments needs.

Nation A announced \$220 million in macro-financial assistance to Nation B to support its economic stabilization. The measures are meant to help Nation B to cover urgent balance-of-payments needs.

The assistance will be conditional on the implementation of austerity measures, structural reforms, and sound public finances.

The same method is used—namely, random exposure to a single version with an 11-point conflict/cooperation scale for responses.

In foreign aid, as in economic sanctions, the historical experiences of China and the United States differ widely. The United States has long been established as a major player in the field of international development aid and has a lengthy record of multilateral and bilateral commitment. By contrast, China's engagement as a provider of aid is a relatively recent phenomenon—though its emergence as one of Africa's key donors over the last decade has been swift. As scholars have pointed out (Bräutigam 2011; Campbell 2008; Carmody and Owusu 2007), there are also substantial differences in the terms of Chinese and US aid, notably in regard to conditionality. Whereas US aid is generally conditional on structural reform, privatization, and the liberalization of the economy and the political system, Chinese assistance is generally given without condition. In line with the principles of state sovereignty and non-interference, the Chinese model of aid eschews the use of conditions relating to governance, democracy, human rights, or financial management.¹⁶ Chinese government officials have explicitly rejected the idea of attaching 'any kind of political conditions to (...) aid and development projects' (Liu Guijin, China's special representative on Darfur cited in Tan-Mullins, Mohan, and Power 2010: 865). Given these differences, it is likely that Chinese and US foreign-policy experts will have different perceptions of events involving foreign aid, particularly with regard to conditionality.

¹⁶ According to some scholars, however, Chinese aid is not without its provisos: Vines et al., for example, argue that China makes its financial assistance conditional on preferential energy-deals (Vines et al. 2009), and Zafar points to China's habit of requiring recipient countries to endorse its 'one China' policy on Taiwan (Zafar 2007: 106).

Trade Agreements

The fourth vignette casts respondents in the role of officials tasked with deciding, on behalf of their governments, whether their country should sign up to a treaty on international trade. Respondents must indicate how likely they would be to recommend joining. Unlike the other vignettes, this one is not original to the study. It is taken from a recent experimental enquiry into treaty ratification carried out by Emilie Hafner-Burton and colleagues (2014). The experimental treatment in this case is the inclusion/exclusion of an enforcement condition: one version of the vignette incorporates a formal enforcement mechanism, the other explicitly excludes it:

You are deciding on behalf of the government whether to join a major new treaty on international trade. The treaty contains obligations that require signatories to lower tariffs and other barriers against trade with other countries that also join the treaty. If you join the treaty, your country's economic output could increase by a few percent in a decade, creating new jobs. Furthermore, in the future, the larger international markets created by the treaty may also create opportunities for local companies to sell profitable new products and services around the world. However, in the immediate term not everyone in your country will benefit if you join the treaty; some existing jobs could be lost, leaving some people unemployed. You will benefit more if many other countries join the treaty than if only a few join the treaty, as long as most countries comply with the agreement. **The treaty does not provide any formal mechanism to punish countries that fail to comply.**

You are deciding on behalf of the government whether to join a major new treaty on international trade. The treaty contains obligations that require signatories to lower tariffs and other barriers against trade with other countries that also join the treaty. If you join the treaty, your country's economic output could increase by a few percent in a decade, creating new jobs. Furthermore, in the future, the larger international markets created by the treaty may also create opportunities for local companies to sell profitable new products and services around the world. However, in the immediate term not everyone in your country will benefit if you join the treaty; some existing jobs could be lost, leaving some people unemployed. You will benefit more if many other countries join the treaty than if only a few join the treaty, as long as most countries comply with the agreement. **An independent enforcement mechanism promptly and credibly punishes any country that does not comply by taking away some of the benefits of the treaty from the country that breaks the rules.**

As in previous vignettes, there is once again random exposure to a single version, but here respondents are asked to indicate how likely they are to recommend

joining the treaty, as measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 0–20% (highly unlikely) through 21–40% (fairly unlikely), 41–60% (could go either way), and 61–80% (fairly likely) to 81–100% (almost certain).

Scholars of international politics generally see the inclusion of enforcement mechanisms in international agreements as helping to foster cooperation between states (Axelrod 1984; Keohane 2005). From their analysis of a convenience sample of US government officials, Hafner-Burton et al. (2014), for example, conclude that the presence of such a mechanism increases the readiness of foreign-policy makers to sign up to a treaty. Interstate cooperation via trade agreements, it is argued, is more credible and more sustainable where the agreement in question includes an independent enforcement mechanism penalizing any state that violates its provisions. However, scholars also point to cultural differences between China and the United States in this area (Hufbauer, Wong, and Sheth 2006; Tung 2014). Most notably, the inclusion of enforcement conditions in trade agreements runs counter to the Chinese foreign-policy goals of sovereignty and non-interference. It is therefore likely that Chinese and US respondents to the questionnaire will react differently when the experimental treatment of enforcement is applied, with US participants more likely to recommend signature if enforcement is included and Chinese participants more likely if it is not.

6 Survey design

The target population for the present study comprises foreign-policy experts employed in think-tanks in China and the United States. As previous studies on foreign-policy decision-making have shown, politicians in these two countries rely heavily on advisers when they have important decisions to make (Abb 2013; Easterly 2014; Jacobs and Page 2005). Think-tank experts are routinely asked to provide assessments of the state of world affairs in general or of situations in specific regions (the security situation in the Middle East, for example). Such experts thus literally shape politicians' perception of the world.

Identification of the target population for the survey was made using the 2013 edition of the 'Global Go To Think Tank Index' (McGann 2014), a worldwide think-tank ranking.¹⁷ Only think-tanks with a significant foreign-policy focus—in other words, those that had a department specializing in foreign policy and/or international politics—were considered. The study population thus comprises not all think-tank staff in China and the United States, but only foreign-policy experts working for the most relevant think-tanks in the two countries.¹⁸ Thirty appropriate bodies were identified for the United States and only 10 for China. The top 10 in the American list were therefore chosen to serve as the comparison group. For each think-tank, the personnel who could be regarded as specializing in foreign policy were identified and a database of their names and e-mail addresses was compiled. This produced a total of 730 US and 270 Chinese experts. Invitations to

¹⁷ Compiled on the basis of an open nomination process and a final grading by an expert panel.

¹⁸ Additional information for the Chinese sample was obtained from the comprehensive review of Chinese foreign-policy think-tanks carried out by Abb (2013).

participate in the survey were then sent out to all 270 Chinese experts and a random sample of 270 US experts.

The questionnaire was administered to both US and Chinese experts in March 2015.¹⁹ Personalized pre-notification letters were sent out at the start of the month, both as a way of alerting the potential respondents to the upcoming survey and in order to establish the credentials of the Centre for Global Cooperation Research as the study's sponsor. The mailing was part of a broader-based marketing campaign by the Centre and included information on the latter's activities, fellowship programme, and publications. The actual e-mail invitations for the web-survey were sent out ten days later and all addressees from whom a completed questionnaire had not been received within the following week were sent an e-mail reminder. As an incentive, a \$10 Amazon gift coupon was offered to every addressee completing the survey.²⁰

A total of 68 US and 54 Chinese respondents completed the questionnaire.²¹ There are a number of geographic and demographic variations between the two groups. The Chinese sample exhibits only a small gender imbalance (57.4% male, 42.6% female) compared with the proportions in the US sample (82.3% male, 17.7% female). There is also a small variation in age, the mean for Chinese and US respondents being 40 years and 48 years respectively. The respondents' migration histories also varies: all the Chinese respondents were born in China and still live there, with only 6 of the 54 having spent time abroad to obtain their highest-level educational qualification. The US sample is more diverse in terms of cultural background, with 19 respondents having been born abroad and 12 having obtained their highest-level educational qualification outside of the United States.

7 Empirical analysis

Classification of Foreign-policy Events

Here, respondents are asked to classify events from the COBDAP list as conflictive, neutral, or cooperative. Overall, there is a high degree of agreement between the US and Chinese categorizations (see Fig. 1), exceeding 90 per cent for most of the events on the list (11 out of 16). The event on which opinions vary most widely is 'Nation A expresses mild disaffection toward Nation B's policies, objectives, goals, behavior': 66 per cent of respondents classify it as neutral, 26 per

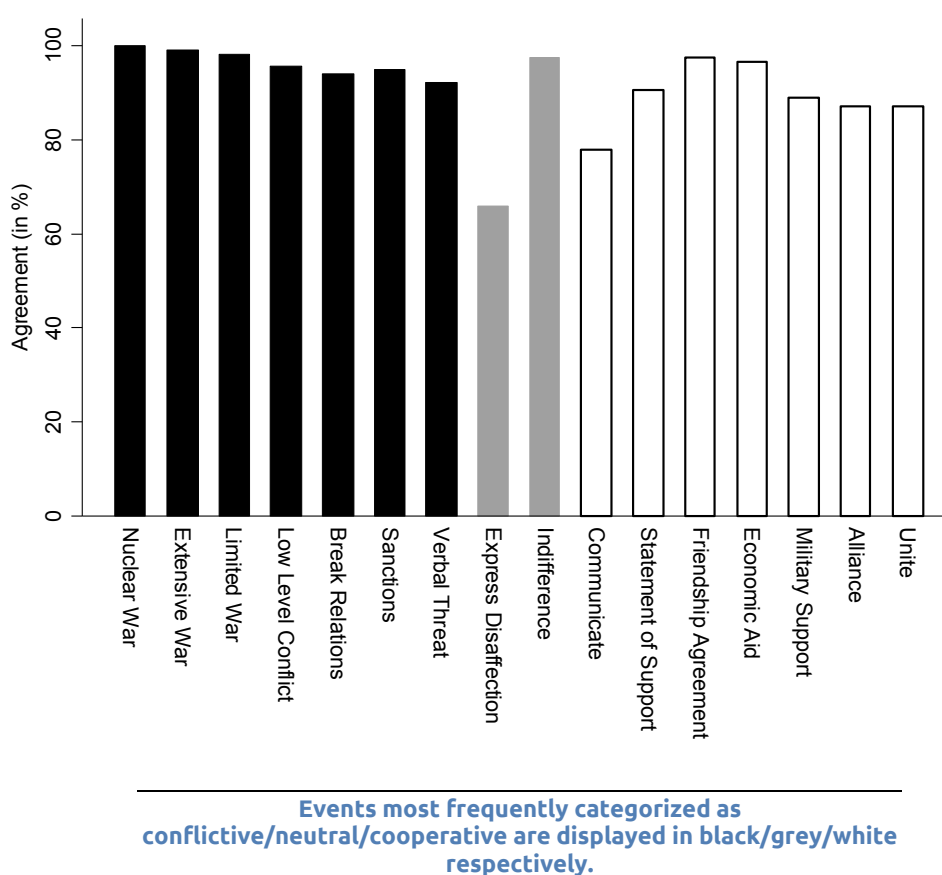
¹⁹ To test the functionality of the questionnaire, a pre-test involving 40 respondents was carried out in September 2014. The respondents were all drawn from the permanent staff and visiting scholars at the Centre for Global Cooperation Research and could therefore be regarded as having expertise in foreign policy.

²⁰ Although provision of an e-mail address was required to receive the coupon, and identification was therefore theoretically possible, the survey was essentially anonymous.

²¹ Two respondents in the original sample gave what were clearly spurious replies and were excluded from the analysis: one claimed to be 100 years old and, amongst many other things, classified a military attack as a cooperative event; the other selected the mid-scale option throughout, for events and vignettes alike.

cent as conflictive, and 8 per cent as cooperative. Agreement is also lower in regard to 'Nations A and B communicate, meet or propose talks regarding problems of mutual interest', which 78 per cent of respondents classify as cooperative and 22 per cent as neutral. In neither of these events, however, is any pattern of cultural differences in categorization detectable. What the classification question therefore indicates overall is that respondents from China and the United States generally agree in their perception of foreign-policy events as conflictive, neutral, or cooperative.

Figure 1: Coincidence in the categorization of foreign-policy events

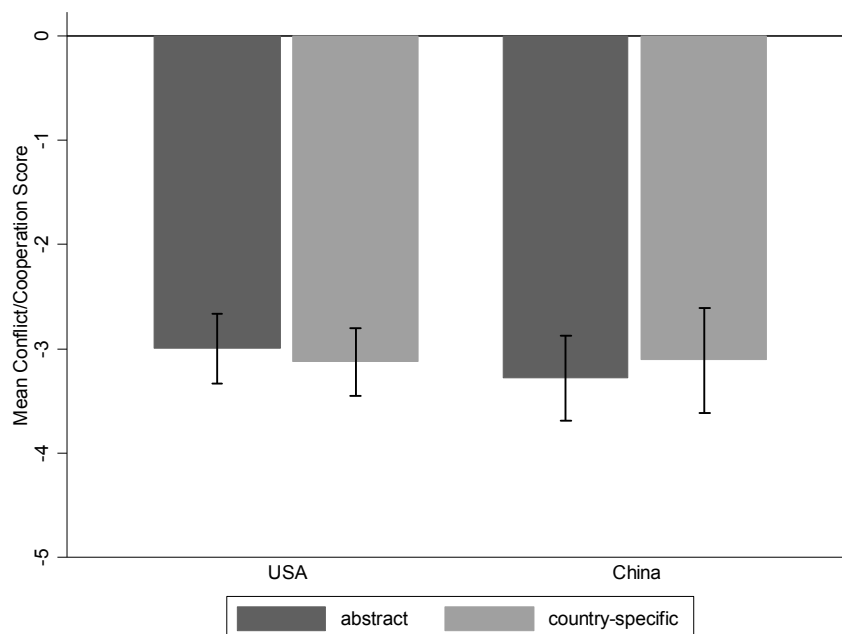


Responses to Vignettes

In attempting to establish whether there are any significant differences between Chinese and US perceptions of the events depicted in the vignettes, the study applies the same method of analysis in all four cases. Average ratings are calculated for four groups of respondents: 1) US treatment; 2) US control; 3) China treatment; 4) China control. This allows one both to identify any Chinese–US differences in event-ratings and to assess the reactions of Chinese and US respondents to the experimental manipulations.

Vignette 1: Economic sanctions

The results for the sanctions vignette are summarized in Fig. 2, which shows the mean conflict/cooperation scores across the different groups of respondents. From these it appears there are no substantial differences between Chinese and US respondents in their perception of the sanctions-related events. The average score across all respondents is -3.1. A comparison of respondents' ratings for the abstract scenario reveals that although on average the Chinese participants perceive the event as more conflictive than do their US counterparts, the difference—a mean of -3.3 for the Chinese sample as compared to -3 for the US sample—is not statistically significant. Cross-cultural comparison of the results for the country-specific scenario is not indicative, since the sender and receiver of the sanctions differ in the versions of the vignette presented, respectively, to US and Chinese respondents. In relation to the effects of the experimental manipulation within groups, meanwhile, Fig. 2 suggests no significant differences: whether respondents are presented with an abstract or a country-specific scenario makes no difference to the perceived degree of conflictiveness of the event either in the US or in the Chinese group. Overall then, the results tend both to suggest that sanctions are perceived in the same way across cultural groups and to contradict the idea that collective self-esteem/narcissism play an important role in the perception of events of this kind.

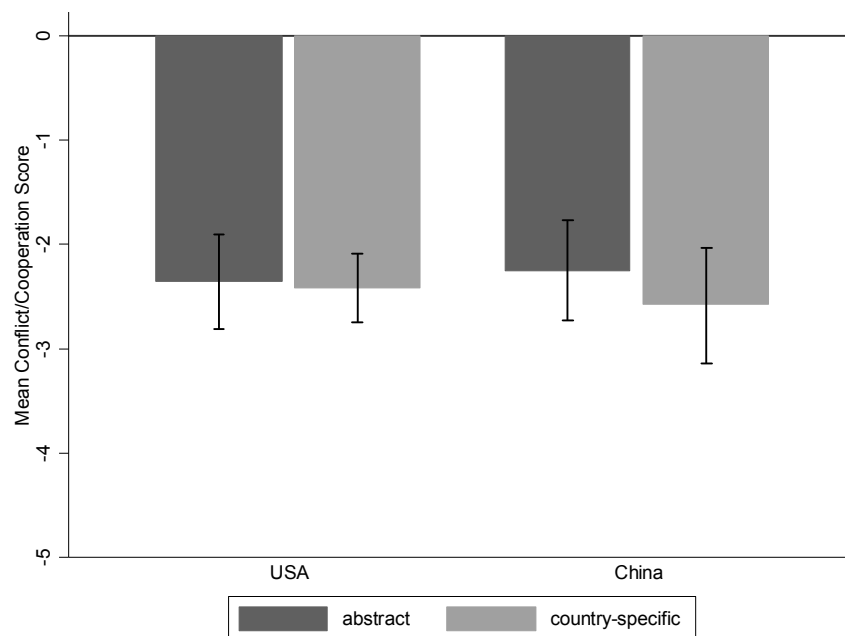
Figure 2: Perception of sanctions

Bars = mean score for different groups of respondents, spikes = associated 95% confidence intervals.

Vignette 2: Border violation

The results for this vignette are summarized in Fig. 3. Here again, there appear to be no substantial differences in the US and Chinese perceptions of the event depicted. On average respondents give a rating of -2.4 for this event. Comparison of the ratings for the abstract scenario show that, on average, the US respondents perceive the event as slightly more conflictive than their Chinese counterparts (-2.4 compared with -2.2). With regard to the country-specific scenario: as in Vignette 1, sources and targets differ in the US and Chinese versions, rendering cross-cultural comparison inappropriate. The experimental treatment has no significant effect on respondent ratings in either of the cultural groups: perception of the conflictiveness of the event is not influenced by the nature—abstract or country-specific—of the framing.

Figure 3: Perception of border violation



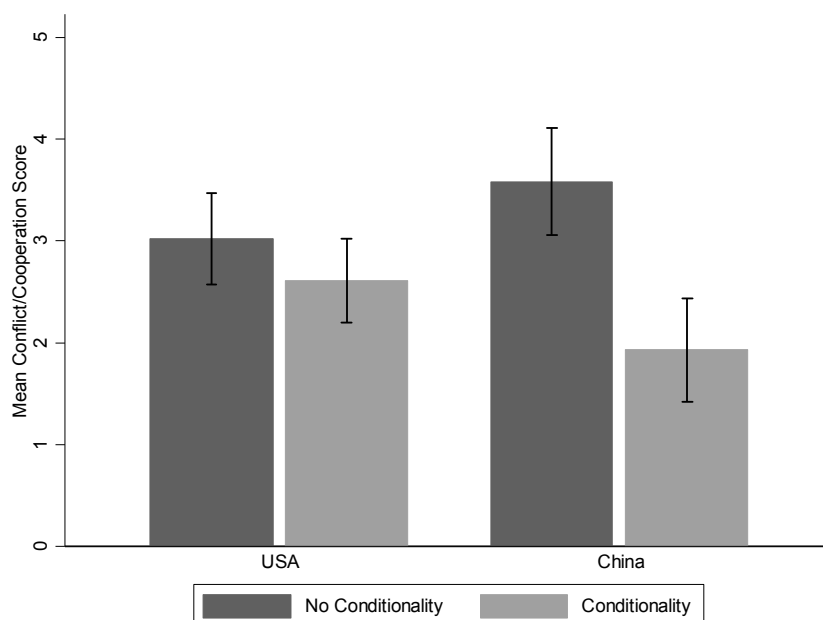
Bars = mean score for different groups of respondents, spikes = associated 95% confidence intervals.

As with the previous vignette, the results point to a common perception, across cultures, of the event in question—in this case border violation. And collective self-esteem/narcissism once again appears to have minimal influence on event perception.

Vignette 3: Foreign aid

The experimental manipulation applied in the foreign-aid vignette involves the inclusion/exclusion of conditionality. The results are summarized in Fig. 4.

Figure 4: Perception of foreign aid



Bars = mean score for different groups of respondents,
spikes = associated 95% confidence intervals

Differences in perception across national cultures appear to be more marked here than in the case of the other vignettes. The overall average conflict/cooperation rating for this event is 2.8. In the version where no conditionality is specified, the average rating for US respondents is 3 and for Chinese respondents 3.6. Although this indicates that Chinese respondents perceive unconditional aid as more cooperative than do their US counterparts, the difference—as evidenced by the significant overlap in confidence-intervals—is not statistically significant.²² Turning to the conditional version, we see the opposite picture: the mean conflict/cooperation rating for the US sample is 2.6 and for the Chinese sample 1.9 and despite a slight overlap in confidence intervals here, the overall difference is statistically significant.²³ This means that, where the provision of foreign aid is conditional, it is perceived as significantly more cooperative by US respondents than by Chinese respondents. Fig. 4 also reveals how each national culture responds to the experimental manipulation. Within each culture, those

²² The t-statistic for difference in means across the two groups is -1.61(df=60) with a p-value of 0.11.

²³ The t-statistic for difference in means across the two groups is 2.1(df=54) with a p-value of 0.04.

respondents who are presented with the conditional scenario rate the event as less cooperative than those presented with the unconditional version. The effect of the manipulation, however, is only statistically significant in the case of the Chinese sample, where it far exceeds the difference in the US group. The average rating for the vignette amongst Chinese respondents is 2.7. The mean values for Chinese ratings of the unconditional and conditional scenarios are, as previously indicated, 3.6 and 1.9 respectively. This difference of 1.7 points on an 11-point scale is considerable. Although both the US and Chinese responses to the experimental treatment point in the same direction, they differ in their magnitude. Thus, the results confirm the notion that cultural difference plays a part in the perception of foreign aid in general and of conditionality in particular.

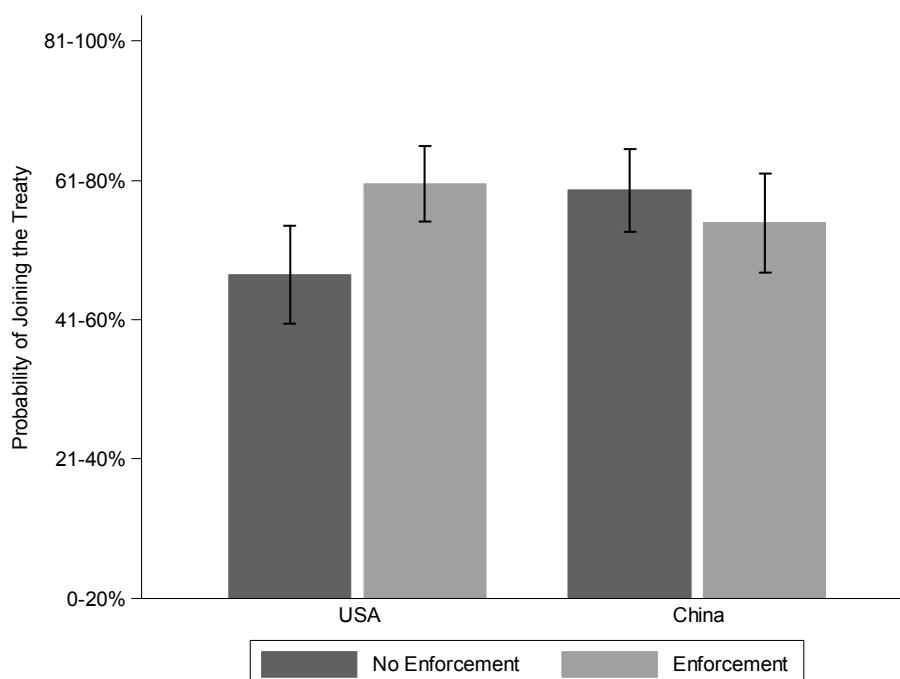
Vignette 4: Trade agreements

The results of the scenario in which respondents are asked to comment on the likelihood of their recommending joining a trade agreement are presented in Fig. 5. It should be remembered, as mentioned previously, that responses are given on a 5-point scale, so that the vertical axis here represents not actual percentages but converted scores ranging from 1 (0–20%, highly unlikely) to 5 (81–100%, almost certain). As the graphic indicates, the average rating for the scenario of a trade agreement without enforcement varies across national cultures. On average, Chinese respondents are more likely than their US counterparts to recommend signing up to such an agreement, with the difference in mean values across the cultural groups being statistically significant.²⁴ The opposite is the case for the scenario with enforcement-mechanism, where US respondents are more likely to recommend joining than Chinese participants—though here the difference in rating is not statistically significant.²⁵ The experimental manipulation thus appears to affect the US and Chinese respondents in different ways, with enforcement enhancing the likelihood of treaty signature amongst US respondents and decreasing it amongst Chinese respondents. Only amongst the US sample, however, is this effect statistically significant.²⁶

²⁴ The t-statistic for difference in means across the two groups is -2.71(df=54) with a p-value of 0.01.

²⁵ The t-statistic for difference in means across the two groups is 1.3(df=59) with a p-value of 0.2.

²⁶ For the Chinese sample, the t-statistic for difference in means across the two treatment conditions is 1.04(df=49) with a p-value of 0.3, and for the US sample -3(df=64) with a p-value of 0.003.

Figure 5: Perception of trade agreements

Bars = mean score for different groups of respondents,
spikes = associated 95% confidence intervals

The results are thus similar to those in the previous vignettes: they tend to confirm the notion that cultural difference influences the perception of foreign-policy events in general and of enforcement in particular.

Robustness of Results

Although, for the sake of clarity, the results are here presented in the form of a simple comparison of average ratings for different groups of respondents, they will in fact readily withstand more sophisticated statistical analysis. They remain substantially the same when, for example, regression models are applied that control for age and gender of respondents, or when a reduced sample of US respondents is used, selected for similarity of cultural exposure (i.e. born and educated in the United States). The Chinese–US differences in response to the experimental manipulations involving conditionality and enforcement are, likewise, reproduced when use is made of two-way analysis of variance or if interaction terms are included in regression models.

8 Discussion

The empirical analysis provides a number of interesting insights into the issue of cultural difference in the perception of foreign-policy events. The results suggest, for example, that Chinese and US foreign-policy experts largely agree on the overall nature of such events—in the sense of whether they are cooperative, neutral, or conflictive. Likewise with regard to sanctions and border violations, the results indicate no cultural difference between the Chinese and US experts in their perception of these events. Even where the expert has some connection to one or other of the countries involved in the event, this appears not to influence their perception: neither Chinese nor US respondents vary in their assessment when the scenario presented to them is country-specific. The idea that collective self-esteem/narcissism significantly influences perception is therefore not supported by these results. One area in which cultural difference does appear to influence perception, however, is foreign aid. Where this is presented as conditional, US experts view it as significantly more cooperative than do their Chinese counterparts. In addition, the influence which the experimental manipulation with conditionality exerts within the two groups differs: amongst the Chinese experts, it is very strong, with aid being seen as markedly less cooperative if it is made conditional on structural adjustment and austerity-measures; amongst the US experts, by contrast, the presence or absence of conditionality makes little difference to perception. Cultural difference also makes itself felt in the perception of trade agreements. Presented with an agreement that does not include an enforcement mechanism, the Chinese experts are, on average, more likely than the US respondents to recommend signing up. At the same time, application of the enforcement manipulation produces opposite effects within the two groups: amongst the Chinese respondents, enforcement decreases the likelihood that they will recommend joining; amongst the US respondents it enhances it.

The results of the study suggest that previous theoretical models of the effects of culture on foreign policy need to be reconsidered. None of the experimental manipulations relating to collective self-esteem had a significant effect on the perception of the scenarios involved—neither the US nor the Chinese assessments, for example, appeared to be influenced by the identity of the actors involved. This suggests, contrary to earlier findings (Cai and Gries 2013; Gries et al. 2009), that collective self-esteem and national narcissism do not, after all, affect the perception of foreign-policy events. What did produce differences of perception, however, was manipulation of the variables of conditionality (in foreign aid) and enforcement (in trade agreements), both of which are tied up with the notions of sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs. The study therefore indicates that although the difference in the historical experiences of the United States and China in regard to foreign-policy issues rarely influences these countries' general perception of events, extrapolation from the past is of significance when it comes to contextual factors. The contextual factors cited may thus have triggered different historical analogies for the Chinese and US respondents.

The findings relating to the vignette on trade agreements also add to previous research on this topic. As already indicated, the study was able to replicate the

results obtained by Hafner-Burton et al. (2014) in their work with US policy-makers. Thus, the US experts surveyed for the present study also responded to the presence of an enforcement mechanism with an increased willingness to join the agreement. This demonstrates the transferability of the findings from policy-makers to experts and thus also bolsters the external validity of the original study's findings. On the other hand, the results for the Chinese experts in the present study do not support the argument that enforcement mechanisms in trade agreements are conducive to interstate cooperation: whether or not such a mechanism was included in a treaty was of little importance to the Chinese cohort and, if anything, made them less likely to sign up to it. This suggests that the effect of enforcement mechanisms is not transferable across national cultures.

The study's findings hold two specific implications for policy. The first relates to the South China Sea: given that the perceptions of relevant US and Chinese experts as to what constitutes a conflictive or cooperative foreign-policy event appear to coincide, and that the two groups also seem to agree as to the degree of conflictiveness/cooperativeness involved in each case, actual conflict between the two nations in this region is, in all likelihood, preventable. Despite the harsh rhetoric on both sides, it would appear that the relevant actors have a common understanding of the situation and are thus in a position not only to avoid the sort of conflict that is prompted by misperception but also to negotiate a compromise on the main points of contention. Second: given the differences in the way US and Chinese experts perceive contextual factors (in this case conditionality and enforcement), achieving global cooperation on public goods is likely to be a challenge. If the key players in international politics do not agree on the mechanisms needed to achieve such cooperation, the task becomes a complicated one.

Finally, two caveats are in order in regard to this study's findings. The first concerns the target population for the survey and the fact that this should, ideally, be drawn from actual policy-makers. Although experts exert considerable influence on politicians, they are not the ones who ultimately take the decisions on foreign policy. Because many of the relevant studies from political psychology and foreign-policy analysis have been conducted under laboratory conditions and have involved students or ordinary citizens, scholars have cast doubt on the validity of their findings—in other words, how well these 'travel' into actual (foreign) politics (Stein 2013: 372). Although the move to a survey-population of foreign-policy experts represents an improvement in terms of external validity, further research is needed in order to determine whether officials, political decision-makers, and ordinary citizens exhibit the same patterns of perception as do the experts surveyed in this study. It may be that foreign-policy experts constitute a distinct epistemic community, in the sense of a transnational network of knowledge-based experts, and that—as argued by Haas—they are therefore related by a shared set of normative and principled beliefs, shared causal beliefs, a common notion of validity (shared criteria for validating knowledge), and a common policy enterprise (Haas 1992). If this is so, the crucial driver of the perception and misperception of foreign-policy events may be not common cultural background but professional circumstance—that is to say, membership of the community of foreign-policy experts. The second caveat relates to scope: the results of the present study offer

insight into patterns in event perception across different groups of respondents; they do not provide any evidence as to how these patterns (for example, the differing US and Chinese perceptions of enforcement) come about. Further research is necessary to throw light on the mechanisms that produce such effects. This could take the form of a follow-up study in which explorative or interpretive interviews are conducted with the survey respondents in order to establish why their perceptions of the events and/or experimentally manipulated scenarios varied as they did.

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