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Allies and partners: US public opinion and relationships in the Indo-Pacific

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ABSTRACT
Competition between China and the United States spurs renewed emphasis on security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. However, this development in security collaboration unfolds differently from the past. While Washington's Cold War alliances endure, these are supplemented by less formal arrangements with new regional partners. This reflects a shift from the codified obligations of treaty alliances in favor of flexible forms of security partnerships. While the distinctions between allies and partners may blur during peacetime, they can become acute amid a crisis. To test how differences in security arrangements may manifest in a crisis, we conducted a survey experiment on a representative sample of 2,021 US citizens, exploring their response to Chinese aggression against a regional state. We find that variations in bilateral relationships influence public support for the target of China's aggression. However, an aversion to retaliatory measures towards China exists, regardless of the target's relationship with the United States.

Like Newton's third law of motion, growing great power competition between the United States and China has witnessed an equal and opposite re-emphasis on cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (Izumikawa, 2020; Lanoszka, 2022; Xinbo, 2016). While increased engagement has centered on historical allies, the United States has also invested in building relationships with non-

allied regional partners, such as Vietnam and Singapore (US Government, 2022).

Security cooperation in this new era of geopolitical competition has evolved distinctively from prior contests. Cold War competition sparked the creation of new alliances, with NATO and the Warsaw Pact taking root in Europe and organizations like Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and Australia, New Zealand, and United States Security Treaty (ANZUS) emerging in the Indo-Pacific. However, in the era of US–China rivalry, Beijing and Washington have supplemented their legacy institutions not with new alliances but with partnership networks based on less formalized arrangements. For China, the Belt and Road Initiative mingles regional security and economic partnerships. The United States has solidified its bilateral alliances but has also implemented new bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral initiatives to link regional partners (Cha, 2011). While the United States and China emphasize partnerships as foreign policy priorities (Strüver, 2017; Rapp-Hooper, 2020; Jung et al., 2021), both powers have purposefully eschewed creating new treaty alliances in favor of less rigid forms of security relationships (Butcher, 2024; Nadkarni, 2010; Wilkins, 2012).

As a new security architecture for the Indo-Pacific emerges that blends alliances and partnerships, it will be increasingly important to understand the implications of these different types of relationships. For example, Ukraine's partner status and security assurances from the United States— but lack of a formal alliance—have yielded benefits but also limited direct interference by NATO in the Russo-Ukrainian War. In the Indo-Pacific, Taiwan's status as a US partner—but not formally an ally—has raised concerns about the robustness of US commitments (Roy, 2022). Although Taiwan is a prominent example of this quandary, Taipei is not alone in facing this conundrum.

This article examines how different security relationship types could mediate crisis behavior between the United States and its security partners in the Indo-Pacific by influencing the degree to which the US public might hold Washington accountable for acting in support of allies or partners. To do so, we designed and implemented an original conjoint survey experiment on a representative sample of 2,021 US citizens, testing how security relationship types inform popular perceptions and guide US behavior. We found significant variation in the willingness of US citizens to aid targets of Chinese aggression based on the formality of the target's relationship with Washington. Respondents were much more willing to aid treaty allies than other types of partners, with support for US involvement closely tracking with the formality of America's pre-crisis commitments. However, we observe a general wariness towards direct retaliation against China, regardless of the target's relationship with the United States.

The distinctions between different security relationship types and the divide between willingness to offer support versus engage in retaliation highlight the importance of understanding where the boundaries between allies and partners lie. These results indicate a potentially problematic trajectory for US policy as it expands and relies on its non-ally partners. Specifically, our findings suggest US partnerships with governments like Taiwan and Vietnam imply geopolitical commitments the American people may not fully support (and, as a result, that may not be upheld.) Moreover, our findings bear on the larger pattern of cooperation through partnerships rather than alliances, providing a lens into partnerships' limitations. We offer new insights into how alliance politics operates in informal arrangements.

The spectrum of security partnerships

The emergent security architecture of the Indo-Pacific (Loke, 2021; Yeo, 2020) layers different forms of security relationships. Security cooperation is a cornerstone of international relations (Jervis, 1985; Walt, 1990), and shared interests, identities, or adversaries provide the underpinnings. However, security relationships vary from ad hoc ventures to formal institutions with binding commitments (Snyder, 2007; Wilkins, 2012). The diversity of collaborative arrangements reflects the manifold challenges of world affairs and the need to tailor commitments accordingly (Chiba et al., 2015). Collaborators can be liabilities and assets, with unreliable or ineffectual partners becoming millstones around the neck of any venture (Byman, 2006; Krebs & Spindel, 2018; Moller, 2016; Snyder, 1984). Thus, understanding how security relationships are defined and the expectations they carry offers a critical window into how partners may perform when tested in crises or conflicts.

Among security relationships, alliances are distinct, as the nature of the arrangement and its obligations are made explicit through the treaty process. While no treaty is inviolable, negotiating and signing a treaty requires parties to publicly commit themselves to future actions (Morrow, 2000). The codified nature of alliances serves as a costly signal, underscoring the importance of the relationship. This can deter adversaries by indicating defense commitments will be honored with a more robust joint force (Smith, 1998; Leeds 2003). Credibility is based on the reputation costs of abandoning allies, which act as an enforcement mechanism (Fearon, 1997). Defections are possible, but alliances have proven robust and reliable (Leeds, 2003; Leeds et al., 2000). While the literature views these factors as structural, credibility is fundamentally a belief that states will live up to their commitments. A growing literature explores how individuals—whether leaders or the public—perceive alliance commitments.[1]

In the Indo-Pacific, legacy alliances forged during the early Cold War provide the foundation of the emergent security architecture (Rapp-Hooper, 2020). With the onset of the Korean War, Washington built a strong alliance system with clear commitments designed to contain and deter Communist aggression (Ngoei, 2019). Treaty alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines anchored US engagement and established a defensive line along the first and second island chains. (Henry 2022; Cha, 2010, 2016; Christensen, 2011). The hub-and-spoke model (Hemmer & Katzenstein, 2002) has proven resilient and adaptable. Rather than fade into obsolescence after the Cold War, these alliances have endured and now form the bedrock of Washington's revitalized regional engagement strategy (Campbell 2016).

Despite their utility, the strong tethers of alliances are neither appropriate nor desirable for all situations. Even when treaties are written to insulate members from unwanted outcomes, the binding nature of alliances risks entrapment or untoward entanglements (Justwan & Berejikian, 2023; Kim, 2011). Concerned by these risks, some pairs of states pursue security cooperation without the stringent requirements a treaty alliance entails.

Strategic partnerships have emerged as an alternative to treaty alliances, and their burgeoning popularity underscores a shift away from formal security commitments (Wilkins, 2012). As a classification, security partnerships are a range of cooperative arrangements where two or more states engage in regularized defense collaboration. However, while partners may issue joint statements and declarations of mutual fidelity, they expressly lack formal treaties that codify obligations (Butcher, 2024; Nadkarni, 2010).[2] This à la carte approach to security cooperation has been said to offer the benefits of alliances without the obligations. Joint statements, military coordination, arms transfers, exercises, and defense diplomacy do not require a treaty, and states can aid partners in the event of conflict without being official allies (Stein, 1990).

Public opinion often plays a critical role in whether or not such aid occurs. The US interventions in WWI and WWII were dependent upon changes in public support due to the sinking of the Lusitania and the strikes on Pearl Harbor. In the modern era, galvanized public support for Ukraine throughout Europe and North America has fundamentally shaped US and NATO decision-making. As Thomson et al. (2023) explain: "*perceptions* of public resolve may be just as important as actual resolve" (p. 2486) in determining the course of the Russo-Ukrainian War.[3]

Less formal forms of security arrangements, like strategic partnerships or special relationships, offer functionality without the rigidity of alliances (Vabulas & Snidal, 2013, 2021). Less stringent connections between patrons and partners spill over into public sentiment. Studies of Euro-Atlantic defense show public support for collective defense is shaped by an affinity

for other alliance members (Flynn & Rattinger, 2021) as well as by shared interests and values that may be weaker in partnerships (Chu et al., 2021). Indeed, partnerships allow trust-building and security cooperation even among highly diverse states with substantial disagreements in their interests while also minimizing entrapment risks (Benson & Smith, 2023). While fewer new relationships have followed the archetype of treaty alliances, the proliferation of less formal arrangements reflects the potential for close alignments without the fixed obligations of alliances (Vabulas & Snidal, 2021; Wilkins, 2012).

This tendency has become especially apparent in the Indo-Pacific, where the elasticity of partnerships allowed Washington to expand regional engagement efforts beyond the rigidity of hub-and-spoke alliances towards a networked regional framework (Cha, 2011; Satoru, 2021). Initiatives like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) are emblematic (Cannon & Rossiter, 2022). The forum enables security dialogues between Australia, Japan, India, and the United States—bridging distinct US alliances and a critical partnership. While initiatives like the Quad have security overtones, they lack formal commitments or binding obligations (Cannon & Rossiter, 2022; Wirth & Jenne, 2022). Nor is the Quad alone among US regional engagement initiatives (Grieco & Kavanagh, 2024). Prominently, burgeoning US ties with India, Vietnam, and Indonesia have grown outside treaty frameworks and are defined as Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships rather than alliances (Capie, 2020; Parameswaran, 2014). This preference for non-binding security arrangements allows for new undertakings between prospective partners while preserving autonomy and maneuverability (Anwar, 2023;; Jones & Jenne, 2022 Loke, 2021).

Although significant literature focuses on alliances, few scholars have explicitly studied other forms of security relationships, with even fewer examining the foundations of public sentiments towards non-allied partners. Notably, while researchers have explored when and how informal partnerships emerge (e.g., Envall & Hall, 2016; Michalski, 2019; Nadkarni, 2010), less is known about their performance or underlying mechanics. In part, the lack of focus on partnerships has been caused by the structural differences between allies and partners not being readily apparent during peacetime (Morrow, 1994). Allies and partners conduct similar cooperative activities, with many defense partners holding joint military exercises or hosting foreign forces and equipment on their territory. Scholarship on partnerships has often taken the view that informal partnerships are essentially "alliances lite," such that similar strategic dynamics apply—albeit in a watered-down way (Ward, 1982; Wilkins, 2012).

However, while this conception might work in peacetime, differences between allies and partners become pronounced amid conflict (French & French, 2024). Even the most stringent of alliance treaties can be abandoned

by a perfidious partner. However, the formal obligations written into a treaty raise the political and reputational costs of defecting (Crescenzi et al., 2012; Jervis et al., 2021; LeVeck & Narang, 2017). Both leaders and the public are attentive to reputation (Gomez & Winger, 2024; Jervis et al., 2021). As such, while the abandonment of allies occasionally occurs (Leeds 2003; Berkemeier & Fuhrmann, 2018; Lee, 2023), alliances have generally proven reliable features of world affairs (Leeds et al., 2000).

The same behavior cannot be presumed about informal relationships. Arrangements like the "comprehensive strategic partnership" between the United States and Vietnam may signal an emergent alignment. However, the lack of formalized obligations affords both parties flexibility and provides a means for avoiding unwanted entanglement or entrapment (Tung, 2022). Security cooperation provides discrete benefits and may act as a deterrent to adversaries. However, in the event of a severe security threat to Vietnam, the United States is not under any obligation to provide support—and vice versa. The elasticity of the relationship lacks many of the hand-tying properties of an alliance and affords both sides the political leeway to demur.

Conversely, even without formal commitments, security cooperation may make it more likely informal commitments are upheld. When states engage in defense diplomacy and leadership dialogue, these activities strengthen interconnectedness and interoperability (Frazier & Hutto, 2017 Kinne, 2018; Winger, 2014; 2021). In this view, a partnership might enable expanded cooperation, such that the wartime differences between partnerships and alliances are more negligible than previous scholarship has thought.

To better understand the diversity of security relationship types and how these distinctions may color behavior during a crisis, as well as how established beliefs and preferences shape support or opposition for strategic commitments, our study investigates defense arrangements beyond the formal/informal binary. Figure 1 identifies four distinct categories: alliances, security assurances, regional partnerships, and non-partnerships. Compared to treaty allies, who are legally obligated to aid each other in a conflict, states with
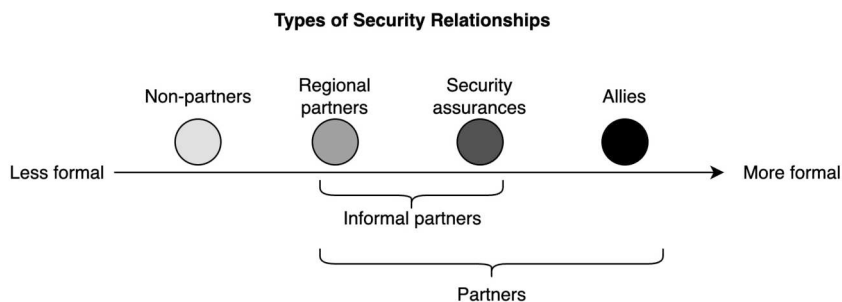

Figure 1. Typology of security relationships.

security assurances lack formal defense commitments but receive substantial, informal promises of assistance. These may be accompanied by material support, such as arms sales, military exchanges, and joint exercises. For example, the United States and Saudi Arabia lack a mutual defense agreement but are substantial security partners, and Saudi Arabia has received security assurances from the United States. Regional partners may see significant security cooperation with the United States but lack such defense assurances. For example, the United States and India are strategic partners cooperating on defense initiatives, including the Quad. Nevertheless, there is a clear understanding that neither country has committed to the other's defense. Finally, the United States engages in limited security cooperation with states with whom it lacks formal or informal relationships. For example, the United States and China have conducted joint exercises on disaster rescue. Although this typology is a stylization of the complex security environment,[4] it highlights four major relationship types that signal security cooperation of various kinds. This typology highlights how existing scholarship has simplified a diverse landscape by failing to distinguish between allies and partners and between different types of informal partnerships. We theorize the public will perceive different linkages with allies and partners, which may inform public receptivity to aid provision.

Partnerships and public responses

While distinctions between allies and partners may blur in peacetime, they can become acute amid a crisis (French & French, 2024). Rather than purely abstract commitments, governments must weigh the risks and rewards of aiding a partner targeted by a foreign adversary. Several factors, including public opinion, may affect a state's strategic decision when intervening (Tomz et al., 2023). Although a major militarized confrontation with China has not yet occurred in the Indo-Pacific, several tense incidents have transpired, from a collision between Chinese and Japanese vessels to the Chinese harassing Philippine vessels (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). These incidents and their salience in the media highlight the potential for contestation between the United States and its partners to spark a larger conflict (Beckley & Brands, 2022; Fravel & Glaser, 2022). Given this, it is worth proactively examining how the US public might respond to Chinese aggression against a regional state.

This section outlines our expectations about how the US public might respond to regional security contingencies. We test these expectations using a survey experiment among US citizens. Although the public is not the ultimate decider on foreign policy, public preferences constitute a critical enabling or limiting factor (Kertzer & Zeitzoff, 2017; Knecht & Weatherford, 2006; Tomz et al., 2020). Significant public pressure helped mobilize

Washington and European governments to support Ukraine. However, where public affinity for Ukraine cooled—such as among Republicans—barriers emerged to continuing support. Public opinion is instrumental in buttressing sustained defense support, even during hot-button geopolitical conflicts involving major adversaries and longstanding partners.

All about the adversary

Although this article focuses on variations in security relationships, such considerations may ultimately be irrelevant amid the demands of geopolitical competition. Just as Sparta went to war out of fear of Athens rather than love of Corinth, the desire to intervene may be premised more on animosity towards a rival than affinity for a partner (Levy & Thompson, 2005). Similar dynamics may underpin the Indo-Pacific and drive public sentiment (Allison, 2017). Specifically, while a bevy of regional actors risk a confrontation with China, Beijing's involvement alone may be sufficient to give Americans a rationale to intervene. This consideration can potentially cut in either direction. While Americans may be more inclined to respond forcefully against China out of rivalry, it is also plausible that fears of a great power war will temper reactions and instead engender a reluctance to intervene, even if doing so would protect a tight alliance (Crocker et al., 2007; Huth et al., 1993). We therefore expect either of the two following hypotheses:

> **H1A (Rivalry):** The US public will support more direct measures in response to any aggression from China.

> **H1B (Conflict aversion):** The US public will oppose more direct measures in response to any aggression from China.

Allies vs. partners

Rivalry with China may be a constant, but US relationships in the Indo-Pacific region vary. Differences in bilateral dynamics and commitments may be vital in shaping American views. For allies, treaty commitments signal the importance of the overall relationship, and aggression targeting an ally challenges US interests and credibility (French & French, 2024; Morrow, 2000). In contrast, it is less certain how American obligations would manifest amid Washington's array of informal partnerships. The lack of an alliance treaty is not inherently a barrier to significant assistance or intervention. Kuwait, Israel, and Ukraine lack alliance treaties with the United States but have benefited from significant US assistance. However, this behavior cannot be presumed. The amount of US assistance and its character might vary between allies and partners if the public is attuned to these distinctions. Moreover, it is unclear how variations in bilateral arrangements occurring below the level of alliance commitments might affect US preferences. Existing

literature has largely minimized the role of "partners," but French and French (2024) find public pledges to defend a country meaningfully influence public preferences even without treaty obligations. Thus, "partnerships" or "security assurances" might carry distinct value in the public eye despite both being informal commitments. We test several arguments laying out the possible effects of partnerships on defense commitments:

> **H2A (Alliance primacy):** Attacks on US treaty allies will elicit support among the US public for a more direct response from the United States than attacks on countries without formal security commitments.

> **H2B (Allies and partners):** Attacks on US allies or partners will elicit support among the US public for a similar response from the United States regardless of the formality of the US security relationship.

> **H2C (Partner gradations):** Attacks on US allies or partners will elicit support among the US public for different responses from the United States, with the strength of the response based on the formality of the US security relationship.

The moderating role of relationship quality

Finally, we suggest a critical moderating factor: the quality of the relationship between the United States and its ally or partner. Although we suggest formality will be a first-order concern, we also predict heterogeneity in how the US public views different allies and different partners. Relationships with significant economic cooperation, deep cultural or historical ties, or longstanding affinity and familiarity might be tighter and resonate more strongly with the public (Gartzke & Weisiger, 2013). For example, special relationships such as those between the United States and the United Kingdom or the United States and Israel are more profound than defense ties. This is often due to strong public support and powerful lobbies advocating for the importance of these special relationships. Thus, a hierarchy of allies or partners may consider the unique dynamics of each bilateral relationship above and beyond the formality of the security arrangements (Cox & O'Connor, 2020). Conversely, ignorance, uncertainty, or antipathy may dull the effects of relationship and result in a reluctance to offer aid even where formal commitments exist. Importantly, relationship formality and quality are likely to be linked because of a selection effect, whereby treaty alliances are more likely to occur between states with similar interests, and because a formal alliance can bring states closer together over time. For example, the US-Japan and US-Germany relationships have transformed from enemies to close friends in no small part due to their formal, post-war security arrangements. Thus, we advance the following hypothesis.

H3 (Special relations): The US public will support more direct responses to aggression by China against states with whom the United States has a stronger affinity.

Although we draw these hypotheses from the existing literature on alliances and partnerships, much of this literature does not adequately consider the degree to which the dynamics of US relationships will be understood and valued by the public. Our study lends insight into the degree to which public support or opposition to aiding allies and partners will reflect the material and legal realities of these relationships. This understanding is critical, given the public's role in shaping the provision of aid and use of force. For example, hawkish publics can pressure politicians to adopt aggressive stances, such as through rally effects, while dovish interests can instead constrain, such as through audience costs (Lee, 1977; Tomz, 2007; Weeks, 2008; and Chu & Recchia, 2022.). Moreover, public attitudes about foreign policy shape media coverage, generate lobbying, protests, and activism, and play a significant role in party politics, which then influence the executive branch (Kertzer, 2022; Risse-Kappen, 1991; Tomz et al., 2020; and Lin-Greenberg, 2021).

Methodology

Surveys have become an increasingly popular technique for studying the quality and effects of relations between states. Public attitudes are often seen as an indicator of the health of such relationships. Studies have explored how anti-American attitudes have eroded US alliances (Herrmann & Kertzer, 2015), examined public attitudes towards NATO as an indicator of alliance cohesiveness (Tomz et al., 2023), and assessed how publics evaluate the reputation and credibility of their allies (Sukin & Lanoszka, 2024). Public opinion studies provide critical insight into intra-alliance dynamics, such as the roles of reputation, uncertainty, and threat perception in shaping assurance and deterrence (Reiter & Greenhill, 2024; Sukin & Lanoszka, 2024; Tomz & Weeks, 2021). Some scholars have used US public support for allies to gain insight into the viability of US defense commitments in the event of a conflict (Haworth et al., 2019; Sukin, 2020b). However, the existing literature focuses on allies,[5] leaving security partnerships under-examined.

Our article makes three main contributions. First, we address this gap by comparing US public opinion toward the defense of allies and partners. Second, in doing so, we investigate US attitudes about partners where there is limited scholarship. To our knowledge, we offer the only post-Cold War academic study assessing the US public's willingness to come to the defense of Thailand, Brunei, Laos, Indonesia, and the Philippines.[6]

Third, we add to the growing study of micro-foundations in international politics by examining individual perceptions about alliance dynamics (Kertzer, 2017). This approach is beneficial for measuring subjective or individualized assessments, such as alliance "closeness" and anticipations about reliability. As Jervis et al. (2021, p. 183) explain, in the study of alliance commitments "survey experiments that draw on non-elite samples are a welcome tool for establishing behavioral baselines" in part because "recent work shows broad similarities in how elites and publics think about foreign policy questions."

However, there are also limitations to this approach; for example, surveys represent only a snapshot in time and cannot reproduce the complex, information-rich environment in which decisions are made. Nonetheless, the timing of our survey provides some leverage on the standard challenges for survey work. Due to the prominence of the Russo-Ukrainian War, the high salience of alliance commitments means we can expect respondents to be unusually informed about and attentive to reputational concerns and the dynamics of support to allies and partners. Indeed, studies show greater accuracy in survey results for studies of high-salience issues (Bradburn, 1978; Lohr, 2021). In addition, although our survey represents only a single moment in time, we argue that this is a critical moment to understand, due to the tense geopolitical dynamics occurring.

In this study, we expose a representative sample of the US population to a conjoint survey experiment depicting a fictitious incident involving aggression by China in the Indo-Pacific region.[7] Respondents are asked whether they would aid the target of China's aggression and support the United States retaliating against China. These questions provide insight into how the public might pressure the US government to respond in an Indo-Pacific security crisis. We now outline our experimental design.

Experimental scenario

Using Cint's Lucid platform, we recruited a representative sample of the US public from October to November 2023.[8] Our 2,021 respondents are stratified using block quotas on age, gender, ethnicity, and region of the United States.[9] Our samples reflect the United States' gender balance, age, ethnicity, and regional population distributions.[10] Quota-based samples collected by Cint and Lucid are well-established as credible data sources for academic studies, comparing well to alternatives (Coppock & McClellan, 2019; Peyton et al., 2022). We collect additional demographic data, including respondents' education level, political ideology, and political party. These factors are theorized to correlate with foreign policy attitudes.

Our respondents read three scenarios describing Chinese aggression against a country in the Indo-Pacific. Each scenario varies in three

treatments: the *identity* of the target, its *relationship* with the United States, and the type of *incident*. Our design includes ten *identities*: South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Australia, Taiwan, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Brunei, and Laos. These represent four levels of security relationship. South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, and Australia are US treaty allies. Taiwan and Thailand have security assurances.[11] Indonesia and Vietnam are regional partners. Brunei and Laos do not have any significant security cooperation with the United States. These countries represent the gamut of bilateral relationships and present plausible targets for Chinese aggression.

Respondents read about two types of *incidents*: a conventional attack or a cyberattack. Our design yields twenty possible scenarios; each respondent reads three. We collect 6,063 individual observations and evaluate variation within and across respondents. Balance checks reveal successful randomization, such that the observed effects are attributable to differences between the scenarios rather than within the respondent pool.[12] Each scenario began with the following:[13]

> China launched **[an attack / a cyber attack]** against a water treatment plant located in **[South Korea / Japan / the Philippines / Australia / Taiwan / Thailand / Indonesia / Vietnam / Brunei / Laos]**. Seven individuals died as a result of the attack.

The inclusion of information about casualties raises the stakes. This allows us to assess preferences in a significant crisis that could escalate. Here, the costs and benefits of supporting allies and partners are sharper; thus, we anticipate peacetime similarities between alliances and partnerships may not persist. Including an incident where a cyber operation produces deaths may seem spurious since cyberattacks have not directly caused casualties. However, we believe this is a plausible scenario that offers a window into the potential future of international conflict. While no known cyber incidents have directly led to human deaths, complications from cyberattacks like ransomware attacks on health facilities have created disruptions to critical services that have delayed care and indirectly led to the loss of life (Shandler & Gomez, 2023). Cyber casualties may not always be accidental. A 2017 attack on a Saudi Arabian refinery was purposefully designed to disable the safety systems intended to prevent catastrophic failures (Sobczak 2019), and a 2021 cyberincident involving a water treatment plan in Florida highlighted the risk of mass poisoning (Greenberg, 2021). These episodes show the lethal potential of cyberattacks on critical infrastructure. Our study is particularly relevant given the prepositioning of Chinese malware on critical infrastructure systems in the United States and elsewhere (House Select Committee on the CCP, 2024).

We operationalize security relationships into four types: alliances, security assurances, partners, and non-partners. While these measures simplify the

wide diversity in security relationships, they represent four major, common, and theoretically important types of security relationships.

Respondents read the corresponding sentence from the four options below:

The United States and [**South Korea / Japan / Australia / the Philippines**] are treaty allies and are required to come to each other's aid if one country is attacked.

The United States has previously given [**Taiwan / Thailand**] security assurances suggesting that it would come to its assistance if it were attacked.

The United States and [**Indonesia / Vietnam**] are regional security partners and regularly conduct joint military exercises.

The United States and [**Brunei / Laos**] conduct diplomatic relations, but there is little or no defense cooperation between the two countries.

Finally, all respondents are told Washington has been asked for assistance:

[**South Korea / Japan / the Philippines / Australia / Taiwan / Thailand / Indonesia / Vietnam / Brunei / Laos**] has requested assistance from the United States.

Our design uses real-world country names. We expect pre-existing attitudes about each country to inform public preferences. While this may cloud our ability to identify the effects of different relationship types precisely, we believe this strategy is appropriate. First, this increases the realism of the scenario, which may make respondents consider the implications of their preferences more seriously.[14] Second, by using actual countries, we preserve external validity. Third, we argue in H3 that the effect of each relationship type will be moderated by the specific quality of each bilateral relationship. This design allows us to test variation both within and across relationship types.

However, the extent to which the US public is aware of the nuances of these different strategic relationships and can accurately perceive the international environment remains in dispute (Baum & Potter, 2008; Druckman & Nelson, 2003).[15] Although the public is more informed on foreign policy preferences than previous scholarship suggested, this remains an active area of research (Kertzer & Zeitzoff, 2017). Our study sheds light on the public's level of understanding of the nuances of security relationships.

Outcome variables

Following each scenario, respondents are asked whether the United States should support the targeted country and where the United States should retaliate against China. Respondents' willingness to *support* the ally or partner is recorded using a five-point scale, which measures the extent to which they agree or disagree with the following statement:

The United States should support [**South Korea / Japan / the Philippines / Australia / Taiwan / Thailand / Indonesia / Vietnam / Brunei / Laos**] following the [**attack / cyber attack**].

After measuring general willingness to support the embattled country, respondents are asked to select from a fixed set of choices about which means of support they prefer most. These include minimally provocative options, such as issuing a statement of support, and highly provocative options, such as deploying US forces to defend the targeted country. While some types of support are stronger than others, actions short of the use of force, such as the provision of military aid, the issuing of diplomatic statements, or the use of sanctions, have been found to have important reassurance and deterrence roles (Blankenship & Lin-Greenberg, 2022; Sukin & Lanoszka, 2024). Options are randomized to avoid order effects. Respondents then justify why the United States should (not) offer support by selecting their reason(s) from a randomized, pre-defined list.

While the *support* variable asks about actions directed towards the target of China's aggression, respondents are also asked about their preferences regarding whether and how the United States should *retaliate* against China. Respondents are given a five-point scale measuring the extent to which they agree or disagree with the following:

The United States should act against China in response to the [**attack / cyber attack**].

Again, respondents select the mode of retaliation they most prefer. In random order, respondents evaluate the following: (1) issuing a statement of condemnation, (2) indicting Chinese officials, (3) imposing economic sanctions, (4) conducting a military exercise off China's coast as a display of force, (5) conducting cyber-attacks against a Chinese water treatment plant, (6) using air or drone strikes against a Chinese water treatment plant, and (7) deploying US military forces to fight against China. These options reflect a range of choices from a mild response to a highly escalatory one. In addition, we measure several covariates, including beliefs about the international system, threat perceptions of China, and political ideology, that scholarship suggests may shape attitudes about security policy.[16]

Results

On the side of caution

Our results show the US public is relatively conflict-averse, even in the face of significant great power rivalry. Although the public is willing to offer some types of support to targets, this stops short of actions that risk a greater conflagration with China. Thus, we find evidence for H1B, the conflict aversion hypothesis, over H1A, the rivalry hypothesis.
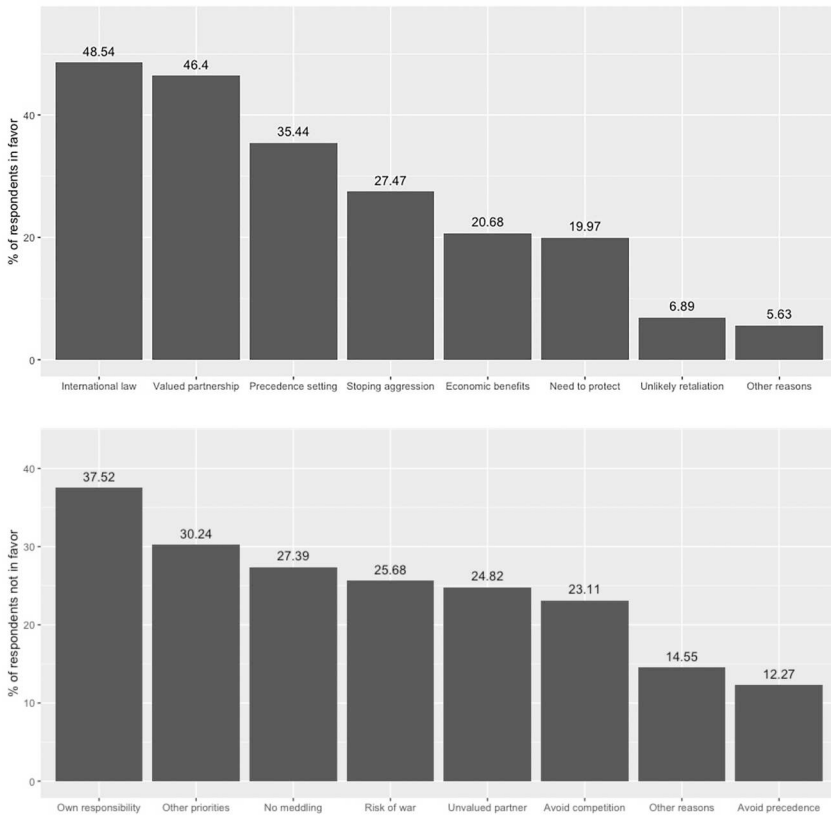
Figure 2. (A) Rationale for providing support; (B) Rationale for providing and withholding support.

Respondents approved of offering support 66.8% of the time.[17] This suggests the United States could face pressure to support states targeted by China. In Figure 2A, respondents explain the importance of offering support by pointing to the rule of law (48.54%) and the need to uphold existing partnerships (46.4%). This indicates offers of support are based on a logic of appropriateness, grounded on a positive valuation of partnerships. In contrast, respondents wishing to withhold support (Figure 2B) primarily did so because they believed the target country should be responsible for ensuring its own security (37.52%) and cited the need to prioritize other issues (30.24%).

Although respondents were generally confident about offering support, the favored means of doing so were minimally escalatory (see Figure 3). Most participants preferred the deployment of emergency resources and personnel (29.71%) or diplomatic statements of support[18] (22.85%) over provocative actions, such as conducting military exercises (5.53%) or deploying US forces (6.93%). This suggests a preference for cautious approaches to ally
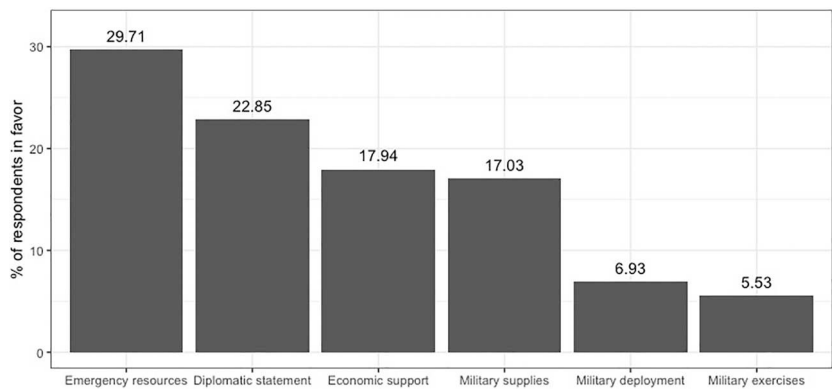
Figure 3. Favored modes of support among respondents.

(and partner) reassurance. While such policies are often said to problematically show weak resolve, our findings align with recent scholarship suggesting vulnerable allies prefer non-escalatory forms of support (Sukin & Lanoszka, 2024).

The US public's willingness to retaliate against China on behalf of an attacked ally or partner is substantially less than its willingness to offer support. Only 41.88% advocate retaliating against China. Even respondents who do support retaliation choose less escalatory options (Figure 4), such as economic sanctions (40.02%) or statements condemning Chinese actions (22.17%), compared to more inflammatory choices like offensive cyber operations (7.25%), drone strikes (3.78%), or deploying troops (8.66%). Reluctance to retaliate could be for strategic reasons; even among respondents who preferred retaliation, the perceived likelihood that inaction would lead to severe consequences—such as future aggression by China—was low.[19]
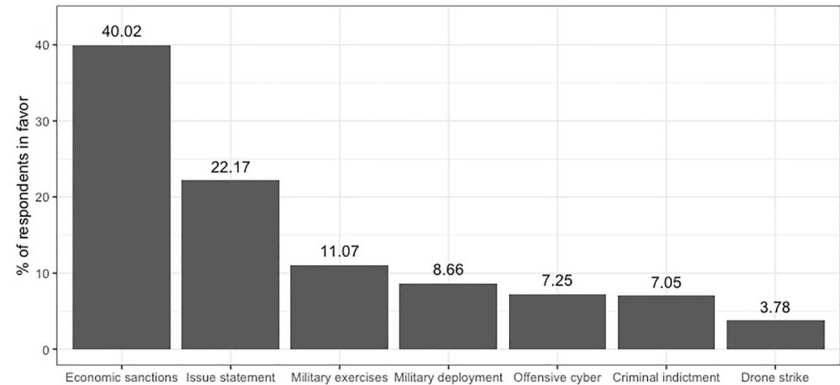

Figure 4. Favored modes of retaliation among respondents.

These trends suggest the US public might pressure Washington to offer diplomatic or material support to vulnerable allies and partners but may not hold leaders to account to take military action. We find that the US public is somewhat conflict-averse and privileges stability over rivalry with China.

Keeping friends close

Public preferences vary depending on the identity of the country attacked by China and its relationship with the United States. The US public is more likely to endorse support to and retaliation on behalf of treaty allies than states with whom the United States has no or only informal partnerships. Indeed, 65.1% of respondents say the identity of the targeted country was a significant factor in their decision about whether to endorse aid or retaliation.[20]

Figure 5 shows the percentage of respondents who endorsed supporting or retaliating on behalf of different states. While respondents show
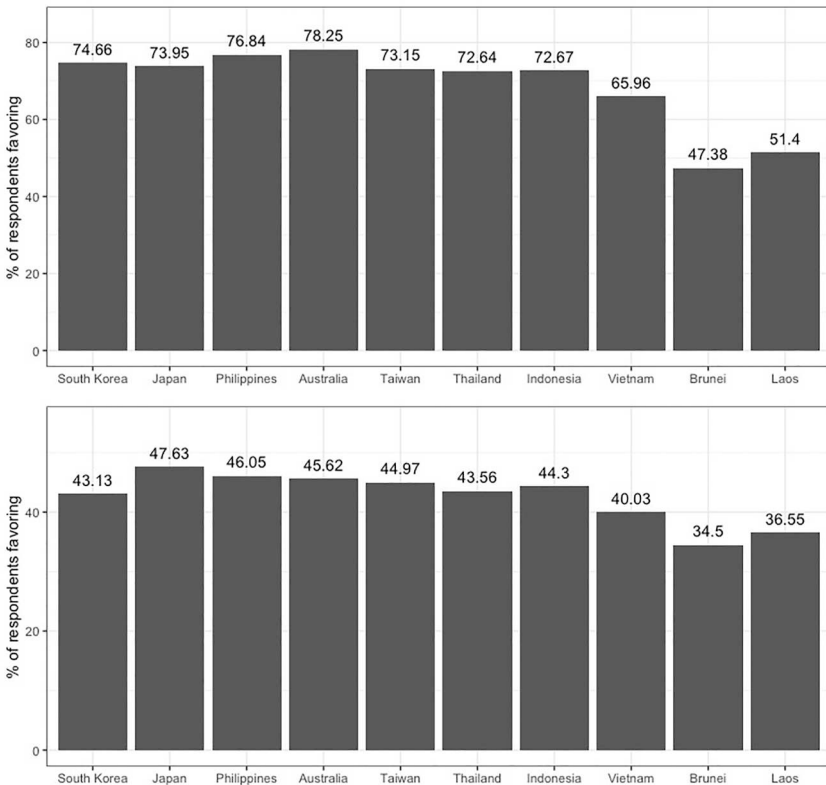

Figure 5. (A) Percentage supportive action by target country. (B) Percentage retaliative action by target country.

preferences between partners and non-partners, variations in types of part-
nerships is less pronounced. The levels of support for allies (75.93%), part-
ners with security assurances (77.90%), and regional partners (69.36%) are
distinct but comparable, in contrast to the much lower level of support for
regional states without formal US partnerships (49.45%). Differences
among types of partnerships are significant (Table 2), but substantively
small. In contrast, there is a significant and substantively large gap
between support for allies or partners compared to non-partners. A
similar pattern emerges when considering the quality of distinct bilateral
relationships. Figure 5A shows robust preferences for supporting allies,
states with security assurances, and regional partners. However, we
observe a noticeable drop for scenarios involving the non-partners, Brunei
and Laos. Figure 5B shows non-partners are again at a distinct disadvantage
when it comes to retaliation.[21]

This failure to distinguish between the nuances of different types of
partner relationships is further emphasized when respondents weigh
whether to retaliate against China. Figure 6 shows 45.62% of respondents
endorse retaliation on behalf of an ally, compared to 44.26% for states
with security assurances, 42.19% for regional partners, and 35.55% for
non-partners. The differences between partnership types are insignificant
(see Table 2), although non-partners have a distinct disadvantage. Reluc-
tance to retaliate against China persists regardless of the formality of the
relationship between the target and the United States.

These findings support H2B, the allies and partners hypothesis, and show
limited support for H2A, the alliance primacy hypothesis. Although respon-
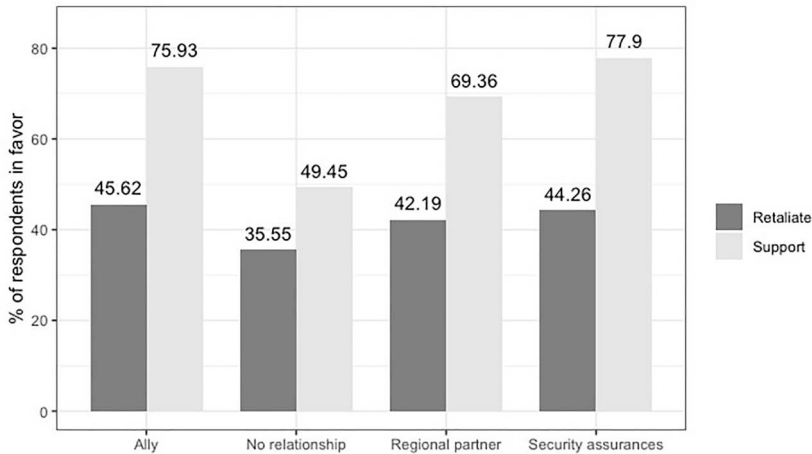dents provide marginally greater support for allied countries, the difference

Figure 6. Percentage supportive and retaliative action by relationship.

between allies, states with security assurances, and regional partners is not especially pronounced.[22] Respondents only marginally recognize variations in the formality of strategic partnerships, thus weakening H2C. Nevertheless, all partner types see greater US responsiveness than non-partners.

We validate these findings using mixed-effect ordinal logistic regression models, with random effects grouped by respondent. This accounts for our ordinal dependent variables and the fact that each respondent viewed three scenarios.[23] Using this approach, we examine the treatment effects on our two main dependent variables: whether respondents offered *support* and whether they wished to *retaliate* against China. Each is an ordinal variable, ranging from "strongly agree" (5) to "strongly disagree" (1).

The perceived threat from China consistently plays a positive and significant role in motivating the public's desire for action, as expected by H1A. However, we do not find that the type of attack substantially influences these preferences.[24] This aligns with scholarship that has suggested cyberattacks are not viewed as substantively different from other military operations (Hedgecock & Sukin, 2023) and challenges the belief that cyberattacks would be de-escalatory compared to similar kinetic strikes (Jensen et al., 2024).

Table 1 shows non-partners are less likely to trigger support or retaliation.[25] Degrees of formality significantly influence respondents' willingness to support the target country. For instance, the likelihood a respondent prefers extending support to an ally as opposed to a state with security assurances is larger by almost a factor of four. Pairwise post-hoc tests (see Table 2) reveal statistically significant differences between allies and other strategic relationships in the level of support. Indeed, respondents are more likely to indicate an allied state is "an important partner for the United States" (37.04%) than they are to say the same for states with security assurances

Table 1. Support and retaliate regression models.

	Dependent variable	
	Support	Retaliate
Ally	0.833 (0.055)***	0.229 (0.052)***
Security assurance	0.284 (0.053)***	0.198 (0.051)***
Regional partner	0.051 (0.052)	0.061 (0.051)
Cyber incident	0.016 (0.030)	0.121 (0.030)***
Cooperative internationalism	1.085 (0.075)***	0.609 (0.087)***
Policy knowledge	0.428 (0.064)***	0.428 (0.076)***
Threat perception	0.234 (0.060)***	0.237 (0.071)***
Liberal	0.064 (0.034)	−0.118 (0.040)**
Democrat	0.057 (0.079)	0.263 (0.093)**
Republican	0.053 (0.083)	−0.010 (0.097)
Willingness to assist	0.316 (0.066)***	0.093 (0.077)
Risk tolerance	−0.062 (0.045)	−0.077 (0.053)
Age	0.004 (0.003)	−0.010 (0.004)**
Male	0.251 (0.053)***	0.457 (0.063)***
College educated	0.227 (0.052)***	0.053 (0.061)

Note: *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

Table 2. Pairwise comparisons for support and retaliate.

	Support	Retaliate
Ally—Security assurance	0.549 (0.088)***	0.031 (0.084)
Ally—Regional partner	0.782 (0.087)***	0.168 (0.084)
Ally—None	2.000 (0.091)***	0.716 (0.085)***
Security assurance—Regional partner	0.233 (0.085)*	0.137 (0.084)
Security assurance—None	1.451 (0.087)***	0.685 (0.084)***
Regional partner—None	1.218 (0.085)***	0.548 (0.084)***

(24.40%), regional partnerships (28.70%), or no partnerships (9.86%). Respondents are also more likely to believe it is crucial to "protect the sovereignty of" allies (28.50%) than other types of states.[26] This emphasizes H2A, owing to the pronounced effect of an alliance relationship, while supporting H2C, given the graduated differences as a function of the strategic relationship's formality.

However, when it comes to retaliation, differences between types of partners are less clear, although allies, states with security assurances, and informal partners all have an advantage over non-partners. Table 2 identifies statistically significant advantages for allies, states with security assurances, and regional partners over non-partners, but no meaningful differences are seen between the first three categories. This supports H2B, as the presence of any partnership, not its formality, drives public attitudes.

These findings suggest the differences between partnerships and treaty alliances matter differently for different actions. Partnerships may not offer the same benefits as treaty alliances when states need, for example, economic or diplomatic support. However, the formality of a security relationship may not matter as much when the question of retaliation comes to the fore.

Identity effects

Thus far, our analysis has focused on the formality of strategic relationships. However, other characteristics of relationships may further shape public preferences. H3 argues countries with closer relationships with the United States will elicit more favorable reactions from the US public.[27] To test this, we ask respondents to rate each target country in terms of (1) its importance to the US economy, (2) its importance to the US military, and (3) how much the United States should care about its citizens.[28] In Table 3, we re-specify our models, using the *economy, military,* and *citizens* measures as our independent variables. We also create an ordinal *strategic relationship* variable, scoring relationship formality.[29] Thus, accounting for formality, we can assess the effect of a country's closeness with the United States.

All three closeness measures are correlated with greater approval for retaliation and the extension of support. Relationship formality remains significant for whether respondents offer support, even accounting for closeness.

Table 3. Identity-based support and retaliate regression models.

	Dependent variable	
	Support	Retaliate
Strategic relationship	0.385 (0.029)***	0.052 (0.028)
Economy	0.491 (0.051)***	0.343 (0.053)***
Military	0.336 (0.049)***	0.356 (0.051)***
Citizens	0.774 (0.049)***	0.194 (0.053)***
Cyber incident	−0.002 (0.030)	0.114 (0.030)***
Cooperative internationalism	0.695 (0.069)***	0.385 (0.084)***
Policy knowledge	0.265 (0.059)***	0.319 (0.072)***
Threat perception	0.271 (0.055)***	0.263 (0.068)***
Liberal	0.090 (0.032)**	−0.099 (0.039)**
Democrat	0.048 (0.072)	0.249 (0.089)**
Republican	0.013 (0.075)	−0.026 (0.093)
Willingness to assist	0.060 (0.060)	−0.047 (0.074)
Risk tolerance	−0.076 (0.042)	−0.082 (0.051)
Age	0.006 (0.003)	−0.008 (0.004)*
Male	0.208 (0.049)***	0.427 (0.060)***
College educated	0.180 (0.048)***	0.028 (0.058)

Note: *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

However, when deciding whether retaliate, closeness appears to be a primary motivating factor rather than formality per se.[30] Overall, this analysis further supports H3, as the US public is more likely to favor countries with whom they perceive closer relationships. These findings highlight a potential motivator for strategic partnerships. They enable military, economic, and other types of cooperation, creating the framework for strengthened commitments and sustained engagement.

Conclusion: Lending a hand, not a sword

This article explores how the different types of US security relationships in the Indo-Pacific might fare in the face of aggression from China. We find that while there is robust public support for US allies and partners in the region, critical distinctions exist. The US public is more willing to offer support to and intervene on behalf of US allies and partners relative to non-partners. This is evidence against the argument that US behavior in the Indo-Pacific region will be driven primarily by an adversarial relationship with Beijing (H1A) and in favor of our H2B hypothesis that US allies and partners will elicit benefits from their security arrangements. Furthermore, our findings suggest the existing focus in the literature on allies over partners represents an incomplete picture.

However, even though partnerships have benefits, treaty allies enjoy special status. This is especially evident in the degree and form of economic, diplomatic, and military assistance the US public is willing to extend to allies targetted by Chinese aggression (Table 2). The extent of this post-incident solidarity is distinct from that offered to partners (Table 3) and is an

indication in favor of the primacy of alliances among relationship classes (H2A). While all forms of partnerships, includes alliances, increased the American people's responsiveness during crises, partnerships are not quite alliances, with allies enjoying stouter support from the US public. Further scholarship, however, may wish to investigate the degree to which these distinctions persist today, as the new Trump administration will likely influence the composition of US partnerships and the sincerity of US commitments.

Interestingly, the scholarship on partnerships has primarily argued there are downsides of partnership arrangements relative to treaty alliances and has pointed to a decrease in the probability the patron fulfills its defense commitments. We do not find evidence for this hypothesis. Instead, the US public is similarly reluctant to retaliate against aggression towards allies and partners. Even when retaliation is supported, the preferred means of retaliation are fairly minimal. This undercuts the argument that partnerships reduce the likelihood of wartime security cooperation. Instead, this likelihood may be low for allies and partners alike. These results suggest partnerships are not simply "alliances lite." There are few differences between allies and partners regarding willingness to intervene militarily, suggesting "alliance primacy" may operate differently than previously assumed; it may be more influential in shaping the dynamics of support than those of intervention or retaliation.

Specifically, the US public shows notable reluctance to retaliate against China even when allies are targetted. We observe an apparent tension between the desire of the American people to aid an attacked ally or partner state and wariness towards striking back against Beijing. Although there is some evidence of public willingness to retaliate on behalf of allies and partners, this sentiment is largely confined to cautious types of retaliation like economic sanctions. It is also principally tied to the target's identity rather than the formality of the security relationship (Table 3). The public's reticence towards taking forceful action against China supports our conflict aversion hypothesis (H1B). Moreover, the importance of the target's identity as a trigger for retaliation supports our identity hypothesis (H3), reinforcing the notion that some policy preferences are substantively shaped by relationship affinity rather than formality. These dynamics echo American behavior towards Ukraine, with the US assisting Kyiv while being reluctant to take direct action against Russia beyond sanctions. Understanding the dynamics of US commitments to allies and partners is critical when many US relationships are being tested by revisionist powers abroad.

The dual distinctions in our findings between allies and partners and between support and retaliation highlight a potential disconnect in US policy in the Indo-Pacific. Whereas recent administrations have championed regional security cooperation, partners should know the advantages as well

as the potential limits of this policy. The US public will support backing closer friends with greater assistance, but the American public hesitates to support direct action against China on behalf of partners or allies. This dynamic may be most significant for Taiwan and Vietnam, who face significant hostility from Beijing, and where the reality of American commitments, or at least public support for them, may not match Washington's posturing.

Beyond the confines of the Indo-Pacific, our findings track with recent events in Europe and help explain broader international conduct. Notably, during NATO's Bucharest Summit in 2008, Georgia and Ukraine were promised eventual NATO membership but pointedly not invited to join the alliance. The formulation heralded a budding partnership that could eventually mature into an alliance. Nevertheless, when these countries were subjected to Russian aggression in 2008 and 2014 respectively, their foreign backers were willing to provide assistance but not take direct military actions against Russia. Our study shows that this behavior was not anomalous but instead indicative of the political gulf that separates support for a victim from support for retaliation when states weigh their responses to crises abroad.

As informal partnerships gain popularity in world affairs, a better understanding of their distinctiveness and ability to shape policy preferences warrants further research. While this study leveraged a nationally representative sample of US citizens to explore this issue, political elites may have a different strategic calculus. Moreover, the pivot away from formal alliances is a global phenomenon that underpins modern security cooperation and is evident from Central Asia to Oceania and Africa. Gauging how other countries perceive these relationships as security patrons, partners, and consumers will help us better understand distinctions in relationship status and their consequences. While treaty alliances are not anachronistic, they are out of fashion. The security partnerships that have filled the need for institutionalized security cooperation represent distinct security dynamics whose underpinnings will be central to the evolution of international security.

Notes

1. On adversaries' perceptions of alliance commitments, see Lupton, 2018; Yarhi-Milo et al., 2018; and Cebul et al., 2021. On allies' perceptions of alliance commitments, see Allison et al. 2022; Blankenship & Lin-Greenberg, 2022; Ko, 2019; Sukin, 2020a; and Sukin & Lanoszka, 2024.
2. In this article, the term "ally" will only be used for states with a formal defense treaty like NATO. Conversely the term "partner" can be used for all cooperative arrangements regardless of whether a treaty exists, i.e. all allies are partners, but not all partners are allies.
3. Emphasis original.
4. Notably, there are various kinds of non-partners, including unaligned or neutral states that are distinct from "adversaries".

5. An exception is found in Sukin and Seo (2024), which evaluates public opinion about the US alliance in partner states Indonesia and Taiwan as well as US allies South Korea, Japan, and Australia.
6. Some of these states are addressed in Russett and Nincic (1976).
7. See Online Supplementary Material B for the survey instrument.
8. See Online Supplementary Material A for IRB approval.
9. Standard quality controls result in dropping 99 respondents who, for example, took the survey at unrealistic speeds or who were flagged by the survey platform as illegitimate respondents.
10. See Online Supplementary Material D for a breakdown of respondent attributes.
11. Thailand has security assurances under the legacy Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty (Manila Pact) that was never abrogated despite the dissolution of SEATO. The United States did have a mutual defense treaty with Taiwan, but this agreement was abrogated in 1979 following the recognition of the People's Republic of China. Washington has offered defense assurances to Taipei, but the nature of this commitment is ambiguous.
12. See Online Supplementary Material C.
13. The randomized text appears in bold.
14. Huddleston (2019) demonstrates that respondents tend to discount the consequences of their actions when policy choices involve fictitious states.
15. Additional analysis regarding the effect of foreign policy knowledge is available in the Online Supplementary Material.
16. See Online Supplementary Material B.
17. See Online Supplementary Material E for more granular measures of preferences for support and retaliation.
18. While statements of support and condemnation (in the case of retaliation) could be construed as not particularly costly and therefore imply the abandonment of allies, the literature (Tingley and Walter 2011; DiGiuseppe & Shea, 2021; Sukin & Lanoszka, 2024) illustrates public reassurances are of value. However, combining multiple means of support (and retaliation) into a single variable can obscure their potential differences. To address this concern, we have included additional robustness checks with different measures of support and retaliation, which are available in Online Supplementary Material I. These checks show the results persist if we subset support and retaliation to include only militarized actions.
19. See Online Supplementary Material F for information on the perceived consequences of inaction.
20. See Online Supplementary Material G for more information on which attributes of the scenario respondents considered most important for their decision-making.
21. See Online Supplementary Material F for more information about *identity*.
22. Respondents only marginally recognize variations in the formality of strategic partnerships, thus weakening H2C. Except for Indonesia and Vietnam, there are statistically significant *within*-band variations observed. This may be due to the American experience in Vietnam and the biases that this may elicit from the respondents.
23. Unless otherwise stated, sum contrasts are used for the *identity*, *relationship*, and *incident* treatments to interpret term coefficients against the grand mean. Lastly, numeric variables are mean centered prior to analysis.

24. There is no significant difference in respondents' willingness to offer support in the event of cyberattacks as compared to non-cyber attacks. However, respondents are slightly more willing to defend the attacked country in the face of cyberattacks than non-cyber ones (22.38% compared to 19.5%, $p = 0.03$).

25. Respondents' foreign policy views—such as their threat perceptions and belief in cooperative internationalism—as well as their foreign policy knowledge moderate their willingness to provide aid or retaliate. For more information on the effects of knowledge, see Online Supplementary Appendix J. Age and ideology are associated with respondents' willingness to retaliate. Men are more likely to approve of support and retaliation. Willingness to assist (i.e., respondents' views on whether "people in need deserve to be helped") is associated with increased willingness to support.

26. 26.94% indicate that it is important to protect the sovereignty of states with security assurances, compared to 24.47% for regional partners and 20.09% for non-partners.

27. Online Supplementary Material K shows this is not a regime type effect.

28. A breakdown is provided in Online Supplementary Material H.

29. The variable is coded such that allies score 3, states with security assurances score 2, states with regional partnerships score 1, and non-partners score 0.

30. However, there is a high correlation between formality and the closeness measures, so this insignificance is difficult to interpret.

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