Us and Them: Foreign Threat and Domestic Polarization[*]

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Abstract

Can foreign threats reduce domestic polarization, and if so, under what conditions? This is an important question for the United States given the severity of internal division and the emergence of China as a potentially unifying external peril. We offer a novel theoretical argument about when external danger will rally Americans based on the nexus between the vividness of foreign danger and bipartisan elite agreement about the threat. We test our theory through a series of pre-registered survey experiments. We find that vivid foreign threats, in isolation, do not reduce domestic polarization and therefore the danger from China alone may not be sufficient to spur domestic unity. However, vivid foreign threats in combination with policymaker agreement about the threat does significantly reduce domestic polarization. This reduction in polarization comes at a cost: increased public willingness to violate use of force norms against China. Overall, our study establishes that foreign peril can reduce domestic polarization under certain circumstances, and demonstrates that elite reactions to foreign threats are highly important in shaping wider domestic effects.

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In 1754, Benjamin Franklin published the first political cartoon in a newspaper in North America and depicted the colonies as a snake, with its head as New England and its tail as South Carolina. The snake was cut into pieces and needed to meld itself back together in the face of threats from the French and Indians: "Join, or Die." Franklin's cartoon captures a long-standing idea in political theory that external danger can forge internal unity and, by implication, the absence of danger may spur disunity.

The role of outside peril in rallying the public together is highly relevant for contemporary U.S. politics because the United States faces extreme levels of domestic affective polarization, or greater favorability toward the in-party and greater distrust toward the out-party. Since the 1970s, and particularly after the end of the Cold War, partisan conflict has significantly deepened in the United States.[1] Studies suggest that Republicans and Democrats have never been more polarized ideologically.[2] Indeed, among 12 countries from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (O.E.C.D.), "the United States experienced the most rapid growth in affective polarization."[3] Heightened partisanship may decrease Congress's capacity to legislate on pressing social issues, erode democratic norms, and even increase the risk of political violence.[4] In the realm of foreign policy, polarization may impede a consistent U.S. national security strategy, make it more difficult to pass treaties through Congress or generate broad public backing for the use of force, and create opportunities for foreign actors to destabilize U.S. politics.[5]

Several factors have been hypothesized to drive polarization, including the number of "sorted partisans" (i.e., liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans); the changing media landscape;

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[1] Iyengar et al., 2019.
[2] Webster and Abramowitz, 2017.
[3] Boxell et al., 2024.
[4] Binder, 2015; Lee 2015; Piazza, 2023.
[5] Schultz, 2017; Saunders, 2022; Tomz and Weeks, 2020.

income inequality; the transformation of the southern states into a "Solid South" for the Republican Party; Congressional reforms that favored party unity; and the spread of broadband internet.[6]

Could the absence of foreign threat be another source of disunity in the United States—and the emergence of external peril a potential solution to polarization? Evolutionary psychologists, biologists, and political scientists have all proposed a fundamental connection between threat and cooperation.[7] The threat-unity thesis is an example of international politics shaping domestic politics or the "second image reversed."[8] However, recent scholarship has questioned the notion that external danger reliably unites domestic actors.[9]

We advance this debate by identifying sources of variation that predict *when* external danger is likely to reduce polarization in the United States—with implications for other political contexts.[10] In particular, we argue that two factors in combination significantly increase the likelihood that external threats will unify American society: vividness and elite agreement. Vivid foreign threats that are concrete and imaginable are more likely to spur people to shift their in-group identity from a partisan identity to a national identity. In polarized societies like the United States, out-groups may be seen as a major threat to the nation's economy, security, and social cohesion. Therefore, the external danger must be emotionally resonant to trump the perceived peril from the enemy within. In addition, there must be elite bipartisan agreement about the nature of the threat for people to set aside partisan beliefs. If elites disagree about the menace, then a danger—even a vivid danger—could reinforce polarization because out-partisans may be viewed as undermining efforts to counter the external hazard.[11]

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[6] Nivola and Brady (eds.), 2006; Iyengar et al., 2019.
[7] Bafumi and Parent, 2012.
[8] Gourevitch, 1978.
[9] Myrick, 2021.
[10] For an example of another study that makes a similarly nuanced argument, see: Carothers, 2023.
[11] John and Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Harel et al., 2020; Carothers, 2023.

We test our argument with two pre-registered survey experiments that prime representative samples of the U.S. public with a realistic and contemporary foreign threat: China. We manipulated whether the Chinese threat was presented in a vivid or abstract manner, and varied information about the degree of political consensus among both Democratic and Republican policy elites concerning the danger from Beijing.

We find strong evidence for our core argument. When external threats are presented in a vivid manner *and* there is bipartisan agreement about the nature of the threat, affective polarization decreases by up to 9.5 points on a 100-point scale compared to respondents in a control condition that are given no information. On the other hand, there is no similar decrease in affective polarization for respondents that receive an abstract China threat treatment, a vivid China threat treatment with no information about elite opinion, or a vivid China threat treatment where political elites disagree about the nature of the threat. These findings suggest that both vivid information and bipartisan agreement about the threat must be present for a reduction in polarization to occur.

Our project makes several contributions. First, it adds to the political science literature on the factors that can reduce affective polarization. Contrary to more skeptical perspectives, foreign danger can indeed coalesce the public. Moreover, given that our experiment focuses on contemporary China, the results indicate that the outbreak of war or a direct attack like Pearl Harbor or 9/11 is not a necessary condition for an external threat to reduce domestic polarization.[12] However, we also qualify the threat-unity thesis because foreign danger does not automatically reduce domestic polarization; this effect is much more likely if the threat is vivid and there is elite consensus. By identifying the importance of the nexus between vividness and elite consensus, the project also contributes to the

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[12] China's status as a peer competitor that can legitimately threaten the United States' position as the "dominant global power" increases the odds that the China threat will enhance U.S. internal unity, compared to other rivals (e.g., Iran or North Korea) that do not meet these criteria (Carothers and Sun, 2023).

psychological literature on vividness, as well as the political science literatures on the effect of vivid versus abstract experimental treatments and the role of elite cues.[13]

Our findings suggest a potential pathway to ameliorate U.S. domestic division: elites can coalesce around a resonant narrative of the peril from China. But this is a dangerous approach that could incentivize escalating tensions or even the diversionary use of force. Supplementary analyses from our experiments also reveal that the same conditions that reduce domestic polarization—vivid information and elite consensus—consistently increase the public's willingness to violate use of force norms against China by, for example, employing nuclear and chemical weapons against Beijing or targeting Chinese civilians. Playing the China card to boost domestic unity may thus come at a price in terms of both U.S. security and American values.

US AND THEM

Threat in international relations refers to an actor or thing that is likely to cause harm. Threat is a function of material capabilities (the ability to do harm) and aggressive intentions (the desire to do harm). Threats can vary significantly based on the scale of potential danger, whether violence has broken out (e.g., a direct attack or ongoing war versus a rivalry or cold war), and the type of adversary (e.g., states, non-state actors, or impersonal dangers like climate change).[14]

Philosophers since Plato have contended that external threat can spur internal cohesion by coalescing people into an "in-group" (us) versus an "out-group" (them) and creating a "one-for-all" mind-set. The Roman historian Sallust claimed that the emergence of Carthage as an enemy unified Romans, whereas the defeat of Carthage caused dissension, civil war, and the collapse of the Roman Republic: "There was no strife among the citizens...fear of the enemy abroad kept the state within the

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[13] Nisbett and Ross, 1980; Baum and Potter, 2015; Brutger et al., 2022.
[14] Myrick, 2021, p. 926-928.

bounds of good morals. But when that dread [of Carthage] departed from the minds of the people, there are, of course, those vices which tend to be fostered by prosperity."[15] Machiavelli also claimed: "The cause of the disunion of republics is usually idleness and peace; the cause of union is fear and war."[16]

Building on this tradition, scholars have contended that external threat causes internal unity in the United States. For example, Stein wondered "whether partisanship decreases when the entire nation is threatened."[17] Mueller argued that foreign crises can trigger a "rally-round-the-flag" effect and boost a president's approval ratings.[18] For instance, World War II and the early Cold War was an era of both heightened threat and exceptional bipartisan cooperation. Public support for World War II was resilient throughout the struggle, and during the "Cold War consensus" of the 1950s, Republicans and Democrats largely agreed to fight a global struggle against communism.[19] The 9/11 terrorist attacks also caused a swift and dramatic rally effect, as George W. Bush's approval ratings rose to 90 percent and support among Democrats surged from 27 percent to 84 percent (and did not fall below 50 percent until June 2002).[20] A survey of young American adults found that the 9/11 attacks significantly boosted trust in government.[21]

By contrast, eras of relative threatlessness for the United States, such as the 1850s, 1920s, and the post-Cold War period (excepting the immediate post-9/11 period), may be associated with greater domestic division. Desch highlighted how the gradual reduction in external threat following the American Revolution increased internal tensions in the U.S. by the 1850s.[22] Goldberg titled his history

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[15] Sallust, 2013, p. 261.
[16] Machiavelli, 1996, p. 190.
[17] Stein, 1976, p. 164.
[18] Mueller, 1973.
[19] Kupchan and Trubowitz, 2007, p. 15.
[20] Malhotra and Popp, 2021; https://news.gallup.com/poll/116500/presidential-approval-ratings-george-bush.aspx.
[21] Gadarian, 2014; Perrin and Smolek, 2019.
[22] Desch, 1996.

of the United States in the 1920s, *Discontented America*.[23] Bafumi and Parent found that polarization increased significantly after the end of the Cold War: "Without large dragons to contend with overseas, Americans will find domestic foes to demonize instead."[24] Porter predicted that "in the absence of foreign threats to unify a diverse American polity, the post-Cold War era is likely to be…an era of political turmoil and divisiveness rivaling the 1850s."[25]

Why might foreign peril unite Americans—or, indeed, people more generally? First of all, external threats can shift people's in-group identity from a non-national (e.g., partisan) identity to a national identity.[26] The human brain can quickly alter in-group/out-group beliefs based on changing threat perceptions. The brain evolved to fixate on potential danger, which psychologists call the "negativity bias."[27] All mammals have rapid vigilance systems or "preconscious danger detectors that size up their environment very quickly."[28] The brain's focus on threat can dramatically change attitudes to friends and foes. The compound oxytocin, for example, causes feelings of trust toward in-group members, and feelings of enmity and distrust toward outsiders.[29] In times of high foreign threat, national identity may be heightened, and members of different domestic political parties are incentivized to unite against the common enemy. Realist theory predicts that states balance against shared threats through rearmament and alliance-building, and similar dynamics may rally domestic groups together.[30] Levendusky found that when subjects were primed to think about U.S. national identity by considering national holidays, they became less polarized and tended to see members of the out-party as fellow Americans.[31]

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[23] Goldberg, 1999.
[24] Bafumi and Parent, 2012, p. 16, 27.
[25] Porter 1994, p. 295.
[26] Gaertner, et al., 1994; Huntington, 1997.
[27] Johnson and Tierney, 2018/2019.
[28] Wilson, 2004, p. 63.
[29] Sapolsky, 2019.
[30] Walt, 1990; Bafumi and Parent, 2012.
[31] Levendusky, 2018.

In addition, people coalesce around, and defer to, the president when the nation is threatened because the president has an informational advantage due to intelligence and other resources.[32] Furthermore, external threats may boost domestic cohesion by triggering national mobilization and facilitating the centralization of state power (e.g., the recruitment and training of soldiers).[33] External threat may also spur unity—and threatlessness may create disunity—by shaping media coverage. In the decade after the end of the Cold War, the amount of coverage of international news on the major television networks fell by around two-thirds, potentially removing a source of national cohesion.[34]

Critical Perspectives

Scholars have raised important critiques of the threat-unity thesis. Based on a series of studies, Myrick concluded: "it is unlikely that partisan polarization over US foreign policy or affective polarization among the American public has been substantially shaped by America's threat environment."[35] In an experimental study, she found that giving U.S. citizens information about the danger from China did not reduce affective polarization (although when information was framed as being from non-partisan experts it did create some convergence in beliefs about China).[36] Myrick also found little evidence that acute crises (e.g., during the Cold War) reduced polarization. Looking beyond the U.S. context, another study contended that long-term strategic rivalry (rather than wars or short-term crises) can worsen domestic unrest and spur antiregime challenges because state mobilization eventually heightens political competition and causes dissent among elites.[37] Several studies have questioned the rally 'round the flag hypothesis. For instance, Seo and Horiuchi compared approval ratings for political

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[32] Brody, 1991.
[33] Tilly, 1975; Gibler, 2020.
[34] Kupchan and Trubowitz, 2007.
[35] Myrick, 2021, p. 33.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Bak et al., 2020.

leaders in 27 countries before and after a militarized interstate dispute (MID) and found that MIDs decrease public support for political leaders.[38] Maxey found that negative partisanship can undermine popular backing for a president's military operations (although less so with humanitarian interventions).[39] The empirical evidence on the relationship between interstate conflict and domestic conflict remains mixed, but some studies suggest that interstate war can cause civil war because it "may be an opportunity for dissenting groups to rebel." [40]

SOURCES OF VARIATION: WHEN DO THREATS UNIFY?

How can we reconcile the longstanding thesis that external threat unifies domestic societies—including U.S. society—with the more critical and cautionary studies? One source of variation identified in the existing literature is the scale of threat. Small-scale crises may not be severe or shocking enough to increase public support for the out-party and reduce polarization. For a global power, such as the contemporary United States, a regional threat like North Korea or Iran may be insufficient to capture media or public attention.[41] Groeling and Baum find little evidence that the use of force, in general, will reliably produce a rally effect because the political environment is polarized, the media is strongly negative in its coverage, and it is difficult for the president's message to reach the other side of the aisle.[42]

Extreme threats, such as a direct attack on U.S. soil like Pearl Harbor and 9/11, are more likely to trigger a shift from partisan identity to national identity, produce a sustained state mobilization, and cause a powerful and persistent rally effect. Bak, Chávez, and Rider are skeptical that foreign rivalry can spur domestic unity, but they see an exception with major peril: "in-group cohesion can be

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[38] Seo and Horiuchi, 2024.
[39] Maxey, 2021.
[40] Hegre, et al., 2001, p. 41; Piazza, 2023.
[41] Some scholars have posited that relatively minor MIDs can still produce a rally effect. See: Mueller, 1973.
[42] Groeling and Baum, 2008, p. 1082.

achieved only when an external threat is likely to endanger a state as a whole."[43] Myrick notes that whereas most security crises have little impact on affective polarization, "there is some evidence that 'high-threat' crises may have more persistent effects" (though she does not find consistent empirical evidence for these effects).[44] Groeling and Baum contend that large-scale U.S. military operations sharply increase praise, and significantly reduce criticism, in media and elite coverage of the president: "substantial rallies are mostly limited to major wars."[45]

The claim that extreme threats tend to unify the public more than modest threats is plausible but under-specified and leaves many unanswered questions about when and why danger can overcome polarization. First, there is no scholarly consensus about the scope conditions of extreme threat. For example, is a war necessary to unify the public, or can a rivalry against a peer competitor (e.g., the Soviet Union in the Cold War) also overcome polarization? Second, it is unclear whether an objective threat is enough to move the dial of domestic opinion, or whether elites must collectively endorse a particular narrative of the danger. Third, we do not know if the danger must be presented in an emotionally resonant way to shape opinion, or whether abstract information is sufficient to spur a rally effect.

Here, we identify two additional sources of variation—the vividness of the threat and elite consensus—and then explore the nexus between them.

Vividness of Threat

Vivid perils tend to be more salient, more attention-grabbing, and more easily recalled compared to non-vivid threats, and are, therefore, more likely to shift political beliefs. We utilize Nisbett and Ross's definition of vividness, which is multi-dimensional and has been adopted by political scientists (e.g.,

[43] Bak et al., 2020.
[44] Myrick, 2021, p. 20.
[45] Groeling and Baum, 2008.

Yarhi-Milo): "Information may be described as vivid…to the extent that it is (a) emotionally interesting, (b) concrete and imagery-provoking, and (c) proximate in a sensory, temporal, or spatial way."[46]

Threats are more emotionally interesting when they could impact us personally, or people we know, versus perils that will only impact strangers. Threats with a human face (e.g., terrorism) also tend to be more vivid than environmental threats (e.g., climate change) because of the emotional interest of purposeful violence compared to non-intentional violence produced by nature.[47] Threats that spur resonant narratives (e.g., an evil "sneak attack" or the heroic defense of a base) may also be more vivid. For example, Mueller claimed that the rally effect tended to occur when foreign crises are "specific, dramatic, and sharply focused."[48]

Another element of vividness is whether information is concrete and imagery-provoking, or the "degree of detail and specificity about actors, actions, and situational context...the 'imaginability' of information."[49] A greater volume of information enables actors to better imagine a scenario and to paint a picture of it in their head. In experiments, concrete and vivid vignettes with additional detail and specificity may be more effective than abstract or colorless vignettes in capturing the "real" experience of facing foreign policy threats and evoking a greater emotional response. For example, Koch and Wells find that additional, vivid information about the destructive power of a nuclear attack reduces approval for the use of nuclear weapons versus more abstract and concise descriptions.[50]

An additional constituent of vividness is the temporal, spatial, and sensory proximity of information. An event is more vivid when it takes place in closer temporal proximity (e.g., yesterday rather than last year), as well as closer spatial proximity (e.g., in my neighborhood rather than in a

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[46] Nisbett and Ross, 1980, p. 45; Yarhi-Milo, 2013; Koch and Wells, 2021.
[47] Johnson and Tierney, 2018/2019.
[48] Mueller, 1973, p. 203.
[49] Nisbett, and Ross, 1980, p. 45-47.
[50] Koch and Wells, 2021.

different country). Here, the presentation of information can be critical in shaping its perceived sensory proximity. For example, images are generally more vivid and more likely to be remembered than text.[51] Information received firsthand is also especially impactful. Several studies find that information received in face-to-face meetings has a greater impact on policymakers than similar information received from written briefings or other sources.[52]

To summarize, vividness refers to the volume of information, the emotional interest of information, and the medium by which the information is conveyed. Although these elements can be considered in isolation, in many cases they are mutually reinforcing. For instance, adding emotionally resonant information can also have an impact by increasing the volume of information.

Vivid information has the potential to shift political beliefs to a greater extent than abstract information. In Myrick's experimental study, the null effect of priming external threat on polarization may be explained by the abstract prose used in the treatments. Myrick's experimental vignettes that describe the danger posed by China to the United States include language drawn from the U.S. Director of National Intelligence's Worldwide Threat Assessment, which is written in a fairly dry and abstract manner:

> China is aggressively expanding its economic and military influence, as well as its nuclear capabilities. China is using intelligence services to steal information and spy on US citizens. China has the ability to launch cyber attacks that can disrupt critical infrastructure— such as electric grids or natural gas pipelines—in the United States.

This treatment has a relatively small volume of information, contains some (but not much) emotional interest, and is conveyed solely through text. Framing similar information in a more vivid way may increase the perceived severity of the China threat and dampen polarization—which suggests the following pre-registered hypothesis:

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[51] Ibid.
[52] Kaufmann, 1994; Yarhi-Milo, 2013.

H₁: Vivid experimental treatments about the threat posed by China to the United States will reduce polarization relative to abstract threat treatments.

Whether this hypothesis holds is an open empirical question, as Brutger and colleagues argue that greater contextual detail and volume of information can actually *reduce* an experimental effect relative to more abstract treatments because respondents are less likely to remember the treatment due to the increase in information.[53] For example, rerunning a prominent experiment on U.S. public willingness to use nuclear weapons with a richer experimental vignette actually led to smaller treatment effects.[54] However, this study focused on increasing the volume of *contextual* information, whereas increasing the volume of information *directly related* to the treatment itself may yield a stronger effect.

Elite Consensus

A second source of variation that shapes the impact of threat on unity is the degree of bipartisan elite consensus about the nature of the peril. Hafner-Burton et al. define elites as "the small number of decision makers who occupy the top positions in social and political structures."[55] A large literature shows that the public relies on elite cues, especially in regard to foreign policy issues where the public is often ill-informed.[56] For example, in the Trump era, Republican voters followed elite cues and shifted significantly in an isolationist direction.[57]

Therefore, the rally effect varies depending on how elites respond to a crisis. The public may "index" its views to the elite debate and, in particular, whether out-party elites back the president.[58] For example, when the Iran-Contra scandal broke, rapid elite criticism of Ronald Reagan meant there

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[53] Brutger et al., 2022.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Hafner-Burton et al., 2013, p. 369.
[56] Baum and Potter, 2015.
[57] https://goodauthority.org/news/the-remarkable-rise-of-isolationist-republicans/
[58] Brody and Shapiro, 1989; Brody, 1991.

was no rally, and Reagan's approval ratings quickly fell.[59] Another study found that when elites concur that the objectives of a military operation are worth the cost, the public gets on board; "when leaders are divided along partisan or ideological lines, however, members of the public tend also to divide along similar lines."[60] Myrick did not examine how elite reactions to a threat impact polarization, but she did find that if a threat is communicated by a nonpartisan expert there is greater convergence among Democrats and Republicans in their views about China.[61]

There are several mechanisms by which elite consensus may enhance the impact of threat on unity. The first is informational: agreement among leaders of both parties that a peril is severe may signal to public audiences that the nation must coalesce against the menace. The second mechanism is social identity: if elites from across the aisle sing from the same hymn sheet, audiences may come to see in-party and out-party members as part of the same national in-group.

Scholars, however, have offered significant qualifiers. Groeling and Baum suggest that the impact of elites on a rally is conditioned by the media debate, including the media's tendency to highlight criticism of the president from within their own party.[62] In addition, on some issues, there is a disconnect between elite and public views, and the public may take cues from social peers rather than elites.[63]

Another qualifier is the causes of elite consensus. If elite agreement is driven primarily by domestic factors (rather than external threat), then foreign peril may be unable to overcome polarization, and the skeptical perspective on the threat-unity thesis may be correct. However, there is compelling evidence that foreign danger can independently shape elite attitudes. For example, the rise of China over the last two decades, as well as Beijing's assertive "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy, caused

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[59] Brody and Shapiro, 1989.
[60] Larson, 1996, p. xv-xix; Zaller, 1992; Guisinger and Saunders, 2017.
[61] Myrick, 2021.
[62] Groeling and Baum, 2008.
[63] Kertzer and Zeitzoff, 2017.

a broad consensus to emerge among elites in both parties that China is a strategic competitor. Indeed, Carothers and Sun find empirical evidence that growing elite consensus about China is not primarily the result of domestic factors, but rather the threat posed by China.[64]

In summary, elite consensus about a foreign threat may diminish domestic polarization, which suggests the following pre-registered hypothesis:

> H_2: Elite bipartisan agreement about the threat posed by China to the United States will reduce polarization relative to elite disagreement about the threat posed by China or no information about elite views towards the threat posed by China.

However, it is not obvious that reductions in *ideological/issue* polarization among elites (i.e., differences in policy positions towards China among elites), which is what our hypothesis is focused on, will reduce *affective* polarization among the public (i.e., differences in general favorability between one's in and out-party). Research on the American public demonstrates that policy compromise among elites does *not* necessarily reduce affective polarization among the public.[65] Finding support for this hypothesis would thus be noteworthy.

The Nexus Between Vividness and Elite Consensus

It may take *both* vivid information about a threat *and* bipartisan elite agreement to reduce polarization. In the absence of elite agreement, even a vivid threat may have little or no effect on partisan attitudes. After all, unless it is truly existential, the meaning of a threat may remain contested and debated. People may downplay the danger or understand the peril within their existing partisan narratives. If there is elite disagreement, a threat could even worsen polarization, as people blame the out-party for failing to take the danger seriously.[66] For example, in the context of the 2014 Israel-Gaza conflict, about 16%

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[64] Carothers and Sun, 2023.
[65] Huddy and Yair, 2021.
[66] Harel et al., 2020; Carothers, 2023.

of Israeli Facebook users unfriended fellow Israelis because they disagreed with their stance on the conflict.[67] Carothers also argued that external threats are unlikely to lead to internal unity "when a 'formative rift' in the country's history divides citizens over national identity issues and causes different political camps to perceive the threat differently."[68] For instance, there is a formative rift in Taiwan, where the Kuomintang (KMT) has a greater attachment to mainland China than the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), making it more difficult for the Taiwanese to unify in response to the external threat of China.[69] Similarly, many Democratic and Republican elites disagreed sharply about U.S. support for Ukraine in the wake of Russia's invasion in 2022, and the conflict has thus done little to reduce affective polarization.[70]

Meanwhile, in the absence of vivid information about a threat, elite agreement alone may be insufficient to overcome polarization. Many Americans distrust elites from both parties and may be wary that the "establishment" or "uniparty" has closed ranks and determined that an event represents a grave peril. Without vivid and emotionally laden information, elites may not be able to create a narrative of national unity even if they concur about the danger. Page and Bouton described a "foreign policy disconnect" between elites and the public on many issues.[71] Through a series of survey experiments conducted on the American public, Kertzer and Zeitzoff find that average citizens do not passively accept elite cues about foreign policy and instead maintain their own substantively meaningful views about international affairs.[72] The same dynamic is also evident outside the United States. Elites in foreign countries aligned with the United States often backed troop contributions to the war in Afghanistan, but these deployments were extremely unpopular with the respective publics.[73]

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[67] John and Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015.
[68] Carothers, 2023, p. 3.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Dunn, 2023.
[71] Page and Bouton, 2007.
[72] Kertzer and Zeitzoff, 2017.
[73] Kreps, 2010.

In combination, elite agreement and vividness may spur a rally effect. Vivid information creates a concrete and emotionally resonant set of events that captures public attention. Elites then provide a script to understand these actions and signal that the appropriate response is a shift in in-group identification to the national level. We therefore posit the following hypothesis (which is a logical corollary of our pre-registered hypotheses):

> H_3: Vivid experimental treatments about the threat posed by China to the United States in combination with elite bipartisan agreement about the threat will reduce polarization relative to a no information control condition.

DATA AND METHODS

Experimental Design

To test our hypotheses, we designed two between-subject survey experiments. Like Myrick's study, some respondents are assigned to a control condition where they are given no information, while others are assigned to treatment conditions where we prime the external threat posed by China. The major innovation of our design is that, in addition, we manipulate the vividness of the Chinese danger and whether U.S. political elites agree about the threat. The U.S.-China relationship is an example of a rivalry like the U.S.-Soviet Cold War, and future work can test the external validity of our results to a situation of war.

Specifically, there are five key treatment conditions in Study 1. The first treatment is a pure control where respondents receive no information and are immediately directed to our outcome measures. The second treatment replicates Myrick's relatively abstract threat description that we described above. Respondents are told they will read statements based on real government reports from non-partisan officials and are then presented with three one-sentence bullet points that briefly describe how China is expanding its economic and military power, launching cyber-attacks, and using its intelligence services to steal information from U.S. citizens.

The third treatment, which we label the "vivid" external threat treatment, presents respondents with a significantly more detailed, concrete, emotionally-engaging, and dramatic threat condition that also involves images as well as text.[74] For example, while the abstract external threat treatment simply says that "China is aggressively expanding its economic and military influence, as well as its nuclear capabilities," the vivid external threat treatment is more specific about the actors, actions, and situational context:[75]

> *China seeks to become a global military power.*
> - <u>China is Rapidly Expanding Its Nuclear Arsenal</u>. In the next decade, Beijing intends to at least double its number of nuclear weapons. Beijing is not interested in arms control agreements that restrict its plans.
> - <u>China Now Has the Largest Navy and Army in the World.</u> China has approximately 350 ships and submarines, versus the U.S. Navy's 293 ships. China also has the biggest armed forces in the world with over 600,000 more military personnel than the United States (around 2 million to 1.4 million).
> - <u>China Opens Its First Overseas Military Base in Djibouti.</u> China has built its first overseas military facility in Djibouti in Africa and is looking to construct more bases and facilities in Africa, Europe, and Asia.
> - <u>China Built Replicas of US Aircraft Carriers for Target Practice.</u> In order to test and further develop their anti-ship missile capabilities, China has built replicas of a Nimitz-class American aircraft carrier and two guided missile destroyers for target practice.

In other words, this treatment increases the volume and detail of information relative to the abstract condition. This information is not just "filler content," pure contextual detail, or noise unrelated to the nature of the Chinese threat, but actually boosts the dosage of the treatment itself.[76] We also enhance vividness by including emotionally interesting information that conveys more clearly how China's actions could impact respondents personally or people they know. For example, we discuss how China's cyber activities "impact American citizens around the world" via "hacking

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[74] We primarily draw from Worldwide Threat Assessments (which Myrick also utilized) and State Department Human Rights Reports to craft the content and phrasing of this treatment. Drawing from real U.S. government reports enhances the realism of the treatment.

[75] Nisbett and Ross, 1980, p. 47.

[76] Brutger et al., 2022.

journalists, stealing personal information, or attacking tools that allow free speech online." Lastly, we enhance the vividness of information by manipulating the medium by which information is conveyed and including images. For instance, we provide an image of a Chinese nuclear weapon, and when discussing China's maritime claims in the South China Sea, we present respondents with a map showing the proximity of China's claims to other countries' borders. It is important to note that this treatment deliberately *bundles* different elements of vividness in order to create a relatively strong vividness treatment.[77] This design choice does mean we will be unable to disentangle which element(s) of vividness are most impactful—a task for future research.

The fourth treatment combines the vivid external threat prime with information that there is consensus among both Democratic and Republican policy elites about the severity of the Chinese threat. To enhance the realism of this treatment, we draw on actual polling data from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, which surveys foreign policy opinion leaders from Congress, the executive branch, academia, think tanks, and other institutions.[78] After informing respondents we will present them with information from a recent poll conducted on policymakers, we say, "a majority of Republican and Democratic leaders believe China is a critical threat to the United States...[and] the U.S. should not adopt a policy of friendly cooperation and engagement with China."

The fifth treatment combines the vivid external threat prime with information that there is elite political disagreement about the severity of the China threat. This also draws on real-world polling data from the Chicago Council, but frames the results from this poll in a different way to emphasize the gap in beliefs between Democratic and Republican elites about the severity of the China threat.[79]

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[77] We argue that increasing vividness is one way to increase the strength of an experimental treatment, but it is certainly not the only way.

[78] Karfura et al., 2021.

[79] There is also a sixth treatment in Study 1, which combines the vivid external threat prime and information that there is elite agreement about the severity of the China threat with information about real bipartisan actions that have been taken to combat China. For more details about this treatment and our findings related to it, see the appendix.

Study 2 replicates two of the key treatment conditions from Study 1 in order to test their robustness: the pure control and the vivid external threat prime combined with information about elite political agreement regarding the severity of the China threat.[80]

To reinforce the threat prime, and to be consistent with Myrick's study, we asked respondents to write about China's actions and relationship with the U.S. in an open-ended question before answering the study's dependent variable questions.[81] Our key dependent variable in both studies is affective polarization among the U.S. public. Following Myrick and many other scholars, our measure asks respondents to use a feeling thermometer to separately rate Democrats and Republicans on a 100-point scale.[82] A rating above 50 means respondents feel favorably towards the group, and a rating below 50 indicates they feel unfavorably towards the group. The greater the difference in score between a respondent's in-group and out-group party, the higher that individual's level of polarization. Druckman and Levendusky showed that public attitudes towards out-partisan elites tend to be more negative than attitudes toward out-partisan voters, and so we ask separate questions about favorability towards Democratic/Republican "elected officials" and Democratic/Republican "voters"—enabling us to test whether external threats have different impacts on affective polarization toward these actors.[83] We also ask a series of additional questions about threat perceptions (e.g., agreement that "China poses a threat to the United States"), policy preferences (e.g., support for imposing economic sanctions on China), and use of force norms (e.g., the acceptability of employing weapons of mass destruction against China or targeting Chinese civilians), as well as other questions detailed in the appendix.

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[80] It also includes two additional treatments that prime different types of bipartisan elite actions. In addition to serving as a robustness test for the key results from Study 1, our goal in Study 2 was to analyze how bipartisan elite actions impact polarization. See the appendix for the full survey instrument and for our expectations and results with respect to bipartisan elite actions.
[81] Levendusky, 2018.
[82] Iyengar et al., 2021.
[83] Druckman and Levendusky, 2019.

Although our experimental primes are stronger than Myrick's, the study still constitutes a relatively hard test of our hypotheses for four reasons. First, polarization in the United States is currently so extreme that it may be simply too great to overcome even with strong external threat primes.[84] In recent years, "sorted partisanship" (where party and ideology align) has increased significantly in the United States. Levendusky found that shifting respondents from a partisan identity to a national identity is more difficult for sorted partisans because they exhibit greater hostility toward the out-party and see them more negatively, and therefore have more distance to travel to embrace a national rather than a partisan identity.[85]

Second, the perceived salience of the China threat—even in the vivid threat treatment—may not rise to a sufficient level to reduce internal polarization. After all, China has not directly struck the United States in a Pearl Harbor or 9/11-style attack, or, indeed, engaged in sustained warfare with any state since its conflict with Vietnam in 1979. If the threat from China is able to diminish polarization, then this suggests that a wider range of perils—beyond on-going war—can coalesce Americans.

Third, China is a unique case because there is a broad bipartisan elite consensus that it poses a threat to the United States. On the one hand, this makes our elite consensus treatment more credible, perhaps making this an easier test of our hypotheses. On the other hand, from a Bayesian updating perspective, our elite consensus treatment may provide relatively little *new* information to the public, making this a harder test of our hypotheses.

Fourth, although we enhance the vividness of our China threat treatment relative to Myrick, our treatment is far from maximally vivid. For example, our study is anonymous and conducted online, and thus the information we provide is not as vivid as it would be if received face-to-face.[86]

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[84] On the other hand, it may be more difficult to reduce polarization from a very low base given floor effects.
[85] Mason 2015; Levendusky, 2018.
[86] Nisbett and Ross, 1980, p. 45-46.

Survey Samples

We carried out our survey experiments on representative samples of American citizens via the survey firm Lucid between November 2021 and January 2022. Lucid uses quota sampling to match census benchmarks on age, gender, race/ethnicity, and region. Research demonstrates that experiments fielded on Lucid are high-quality and replicate the findings of previous studies, even during the COVID-19 pandemic.[87] We also included a pre-treatment attention screener to weed out inattentive respondents.[88] In total, we had nearly 1,400 subjects in Study 1 and over 800 respondents in Study 2.

RESULTS

Affective Polarization

We find evidence for all three of our hypotheses, suggesting that external threats can reduce affective polarization *under certain conditions*. An overview of our results is displayed in Table 1, and key differences are calculated in Figure 1. The x-axis measures the change in affective polarization on a 100-point scale (for this analysis we create an index measure that averages polarization in opinion towards Democratic/Republican "elected officials" and "voters").

Table 1: Summary of Study 1 Results

Treatment	Affective Polarization (100-Point Scale)
No Information Control	44.7
Abstract China Threat	52.1
Vivid China Threat	44.8
Vivid China Threat / Elite Disagreement	48.9
Vivid China Threat / Elite Agreement	35.1

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[87] Coppock and McClellan, 2019; Peyton et al., 2022.
[88] Prior research demonstrates that a *pre*-treatment attention screener does not bias results, though excluding respondents based on *post*-treatment attention or manipulation checks can lead to bias. Aronow et al., 2019.

Figure 1: Testing Study 1 Hypotheses
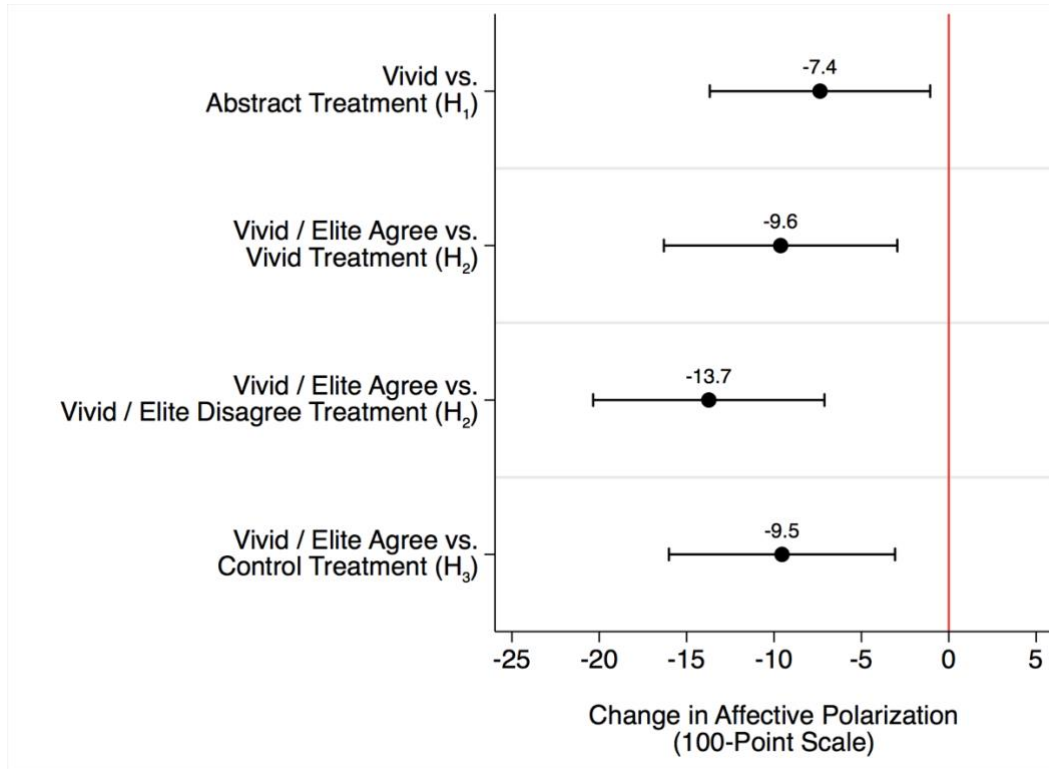
Note: Error bars display 95% confidence intervals.

Beginning with H_1, we find that a vivid experimental treatment about the threat posed by China reduces affective polarization among U.S. citizens by 7.4 points on a 100-point scale ($p \approx 0.02$) compared to Myrick's more abstract threat treatment. One school of thought holds that more detailed experimental vignettes may reduce treatment effects by making it less likely that respondents will recall the treatment,[89] but we find evidence for an alternative view in the literature, which is that more detailed treatments increase the imaginability of information and thus have a greater impact on inference.[90] One potential explanation for the ostensible divergence in findings between our project versus Brutger et al. is that the two studies include different types of additional information. While their study provides respondents with an increased volume of *contextual* detail and noise, our study

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[89] Brutger et al., 2022.
[90] Nisbett and Ross, 1980; Kauffman, 1994; Yarhi-Milo, 2012; Koch and Wells, 2021.

actually increases the strength of the treatment (the China threat). Therefore, our two studies may be complimentary and indicate that various types of additional information (i.e., increased context versus treatment dosage) have differential impacts on treatment effects.

Overall, the evidence in support of H_1 indicates that external threats are more likely to spur internal unity when they are more vivid. This result should nevertheless be interpreted with caution because, per our theoretical logic, we find that a vivid external threat alone is not sufficient to reduce polarization relative to our no information control condition. Respondents who received vivid information may be unsure whether out-partisans agree about the nature of the threat, or even hold out-partisans responsible for the peril, reducing their warmth towards the other party.

Here, Republicans may be especially likely to punish Democrats when primed with vivid information about an external threat. Scholars have found that the public is especially likely to penalize actors seen as being too dovish rather than too hawkish in regard to external danger. For example, in an analysis of U.S. public opinion during the Cold War, Nincic noted that "the penalties facing the leader found guilty of mistakenly underreacting to a Soviet threat are far more severe than those inflicted on one whose error consists of wrongly overreacting to that threat."[91] Since Democrats tend to have a reputation for supporting relatively dovish foreign policies (compared to Republicans), providing vivid information about the Chinese threat to GOP voters may strengthen the perception that Democrats are not taking the China threat seriously and thus worsen Republican views of Democrats.[92] This is exactly what we find. Among Democratic respondents, affective polarization is 5.1 points lower ($p \approx 0.27$) in the vivid external threat treatment compared to the control condition, but among Republicans it is 6.8 points *higher* ($p \approx 0.13$). This difference in the impact of vivid threat

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[91] Nincic, 1990, p. 374.
[92] Saunders, 2018; Kertzer et al., 2021.

on polarization between Democrats and Republicans is statistically significant (p ≈ 0.07) in a regression controlling for other factors.[93]

Surprisingly, polarization is actually *higher* in the abstract threat treatment compared to the control condition. Again, the explanation may lie with Democrat versus Republican respondents. Priming the threat posed by China in abstract terms may remind Republicans about perceived Democratic "weakness" in regard to foreign threats, without providing the vivid information about the Chinese threat that can cue a countervailing emotional response and, for some Republicans at least, overcome partisan divides. Consistent with this logic, higher polarization in the abstract threat treatment compared to the control condition is driven primarily by Republican respondents.

This finding (higher polarization in the abstract threat treatment compared to the control) differs from Myrick's study. One potential explanation is that the perceived danger from China increased between 2019 (when Myrick's experiment was fielded) and late 2021 (when this study was fielded). Indeed, comparing results for an identical question about threat perception towards China illustrates that China was viewed as a greater peril among respondents in the control condition in 2021 (5.0 on a 7-point scale) than in 2019 (4.4 on a 7-point scale). Consequently, Republican respondents in the abstract threat treatment may have been more concerned about assumed Democratic inaction towards the China threat in this study compared to Myrick's study, driving the increase in polarization relative to the control condition.[94]

We also find strong evidence for H₂. A vivid experimental treatment about the threat posed by China *combined* with a prime about elite bipartisan agreement regarding the nature of the China

[93] See appendix Table 6. We estimate this using an interaction effect.
[94] There are also slight discrepancies in research design. For example, Myrick included a visual image of the cover of the Worldwide Threat Assessment report, language about how "the risk of conflict between the United States and China is higher than any time since the end of the Cold War," and (in one treatment) prose about a coming ideological battle between the U.S. and China. These elements may have made the abstract treatment somewhat stronger in Myrick's study compared to our study. Still, the null result for Myrick's strongest threat treatment compared to the control condition is consistent with our null result when comparing the vivid threat treatment to the control condition, indicating this is a robust finding.

threat reduces affective polarization by 9.6 points (p < 0.01) compared to a vivid threat treatment alone and 13.7 points (p < 0.01) compared to when elite bipartisan *disagreement* about the threat is primed.[95] These results suggest that elite cues can significantly impact public attitudes, including those related to affective polarization. They also indicate that polarization is not an entirely structural process and elites have some agency to impact partisan divides. As discussed in more depth in the appendix, there is evidence for both the social identity and informational mechanisms outlined above, but evidence for the latter is restricted to Democratic respondents.[96]

Perhaps most importantly, we find robust support for H₃. A vivid experimental treatment about the threat posed by China *combined* with a prime about elite bipartisan agreement regarding the nature of the China threat reduces affective polarization by 9.5 points (p < 0.01) compared to the no information control. This result is depicted visually in Figure 2 by plotting the densities for each of the two treatments. Affective polarization scores cluster at the lower end of the x-axis for the vivid threat/bipartisan elite agreement treatment and the higher end for the control condition. There are also no statistically significant interaction effects based on salient factors (e.g., respondent political identification, hawkishness, or education) for the impact of this treatment on polarization, which suggests this is a relatively broad effect rather than one that is specific to particular subgroups.[97]

Given that this is the only treatment condition where affective polarization is lower than the control, our findings suggest that external threats can unify the public, but only under certain conditions. Both vividness and bipartisan elite agreement about the threat must be present for a reduction in polarization to occur, which lends important nuance to the threat-unity thesis.

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[95] Since all of these conditions include the vivid threat prime, that factor is held constant and we can isolate the causal impact of elite cues.

[96] See appendix Tables 2 and 3.

[97] See Table 8 in the appendix.

Figure 2: The Nexus of External Threat and Elite Bipartisan Agreement
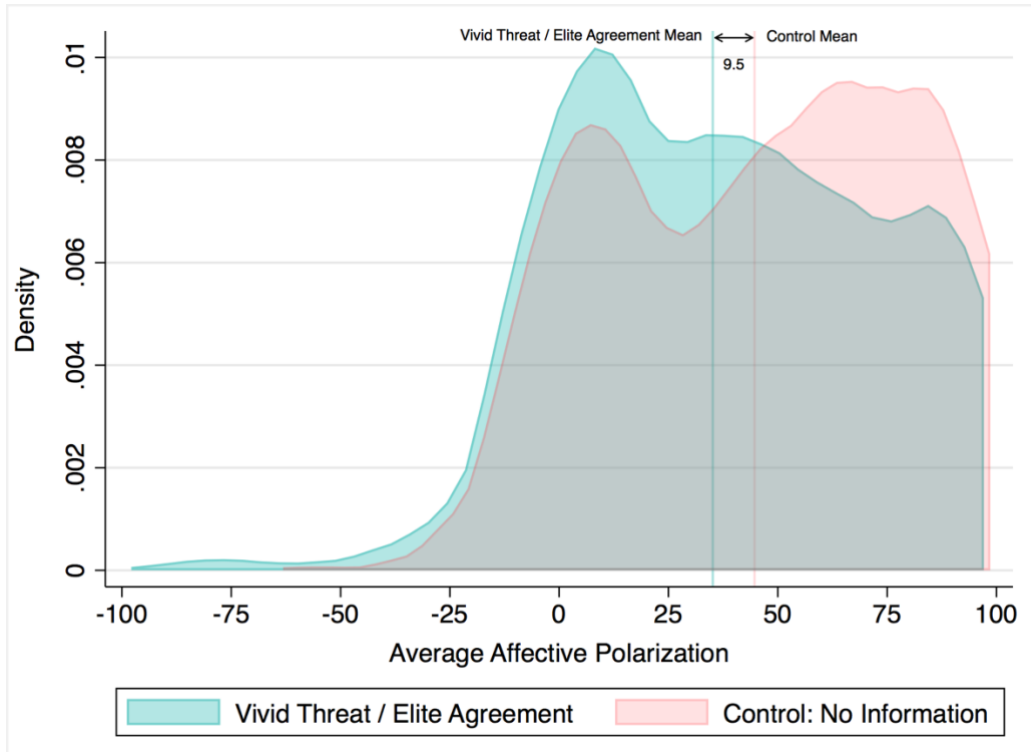
One difference in context that should be taken into account when comparing our results to Myrick's experiment is that the latter took place in 2019 when Donald Trump was president and overall concern about the China threat was lower. Given the highly contentious nature of the Trump presidency, baseline levels of polarization may have been somewhat higher in 2019 than in 2021 when Joe Biden was president. The empirical results back up this contention, as baseline levels of affective polarization in the control condition of Myrick's study were 53.1 on a 100-point scale and 46.8 in our study. On the one hand, this could make our study a somewhat easier test of the threat-unity thesis because it was more difficult for threat to reduce polarization (especially among Democrats) during the Trump era (when Myrick's studies were fielded).[98] On the other hand, in 2021, with a Democrat in the White House, information about China may have reminded Republicans of Biden's perceived

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[98] Floor effects are unlikely to make our study a harder test of the threat-unity hypothesis since baseline polarization was still quite high in 2021.

"soft on China" foreign policy, making it more difficult for our study to reduce polarization among Republicans. Additionally, given that overall concern about China as a threat increased from 2019 to 2021, our study may have been a harder test of the threat-unity hypothesis due to ceiling effects. Since concern about the China threat was higher when we fielded our study, priming it (even in a more vivid manner) may have had a lower marginal impact on people's views compared to when Myrick's studies were fielded.

Robustness

We conduct a number of tests to verify the robustness of our core results.[99] First, our findings hold when controlling for additional factors, such as political identification, hawkishness, education, income, and gender. Second, the results are robust to utilizing separate measures of polarization based on views towards Democratic/Republican "elected officials" and "voters" rather than combining these two questions in a single index measure of polarization. We also asked survey subjects to rate President Biden specifically, and our results hold when using results from this question, rather than the question asking subjects to rate "Democratic Party elected officials" more generally. Third, we establish that the relevant treatments increase out-group favorability specifically, in addition to reducing affective polarization more generally (affective polarization is calculated by subtracting out-group favorability from in-group favorability). Fourth, the findings are substantively identical in Study 2. In particular, polarization in Study 2 is lower for respondents in the vivid threat/elite bipartisan agreement treatment than in the control condition. The consistency of the results across these tests builds confidence in the findings.

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[99] See appendix tables 1-4 and Figure 1 for the full results.

Other Types of Polarization

Although not the main focus of this study, there are other types of polarization that divide societies besides affective polarization. Issue, ideological, or preference-based polarization refers to when members of groups (e.g., political parties) hold different views about particular issue areas. For example, Myrick finds evidence that an external threat prime can reduce partisan differences in perceptions that China is a threat.[100] Our experiment yields similar results.

Figure 3: Perceptions That China Poses a Threat to the United States
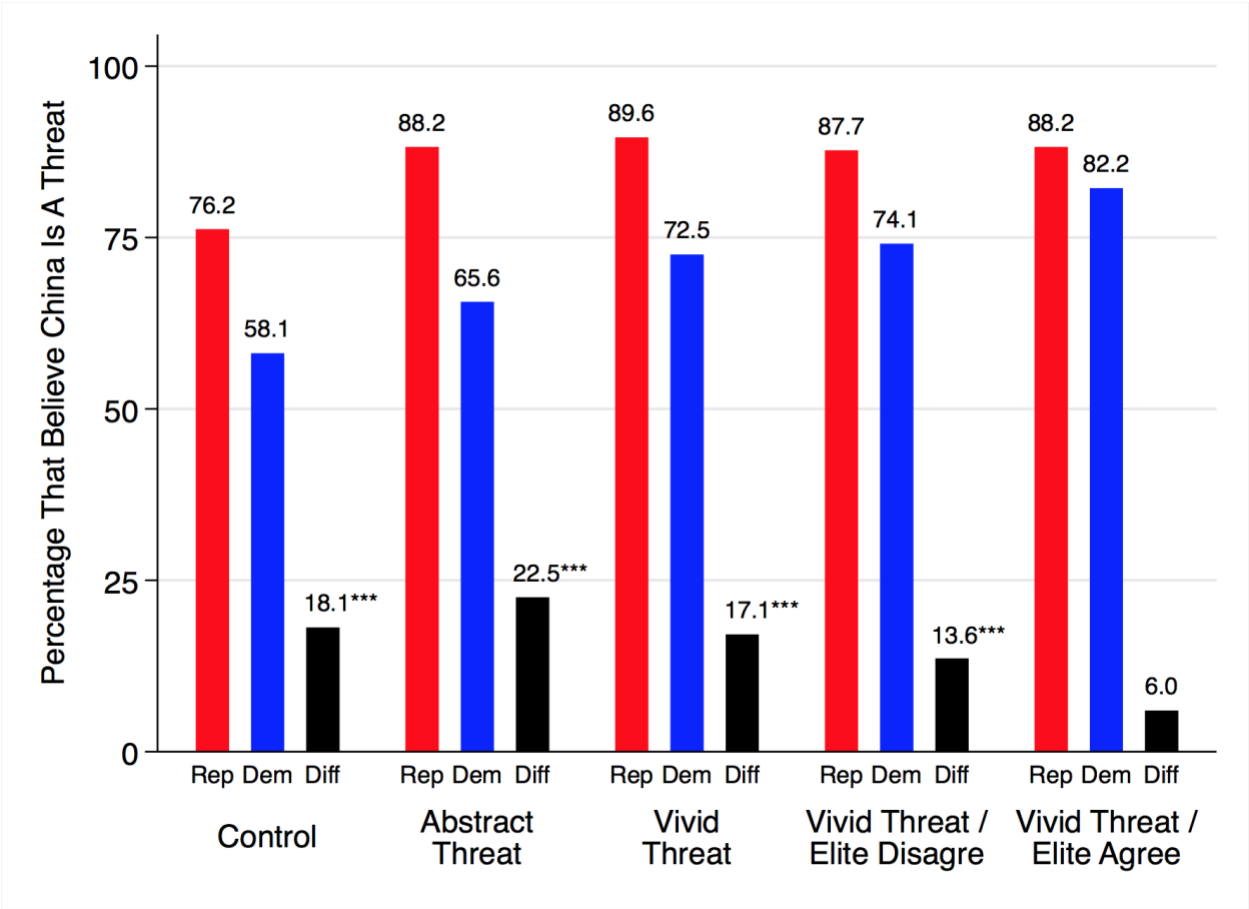
Note: * = p < 0.10, ** = p < 0.05, and *** = p < 0.01 for the "Difference" column

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[100] At least when information about the China threat is communicated by non-partisan experts, which is how we frame it in our experimental study.

Figure 3 graphs the percentage of respondents that believe China is a threat to the United States and illustrates two central findings. First, as expected, the China threat primes increased perceptions that China poses a danger to the United States compared to the control condition. Consistent with the logic of our argument, this increase was particularly high for subjects in the vivid threat/elite agreement condition. Here, respondents were significantly more likely—over 16 percentage points on average ($p < 0.01$)—to believe that China poses a threat to the United States than respondents in the control condition, the largest increase among our four threat treatments.

Second, our strongest treatment not only reduces affective polarization, but also reduces issue polarization. The gap in belief between Democrats and Republicans that China is a threat is a statistically significant 18 percentage points in the control condition ($p < 0.01$), but a statistically insignificant 6 percentage points ($p \approx 0.23$) in the vivid threat/elite agreement condition. In other words, the partisan difference in threat perceptions is about three times larger in the control condition than in the treatment group. Of particular note is that the reduction in issue polarization is much larger for the vivid threat/elite agreement condition than it is for the vivid threat condition alone, the abstract threat condition, or the vivid threat/elite disagreement condition. Just as vivid external threats in combination with elite agreement about the threat reduces *affective* polarization (compared to vivid external threats alone or abstract external threats), we find the same dynamic holds for *issue* polarization. Thus, our core finding holds across multiple categories of polarization.

Use of Force Norms

Up to this point, we have focused on whether external threats can reduce internal polarization, which might reasonably be considered a positive dynamic for a country. Unfortunately, external threats can also have a darker side by eroding use of force norms. Some scholars argue that norms can significantly shape preferences about military action. For example, the nuclear and chemical weapons "taboo"

refs to the strong and deeply internalized prohibition on, at least, the first use of these weapons.[101] However, other scholars posit that such norms are weaker than optimists believe and are less likely to be followed when these weapons or tactics are perceived to offer significant strategic benefits.[102]

Figure 4: External Threats and Support for Violating Use of Force Norms
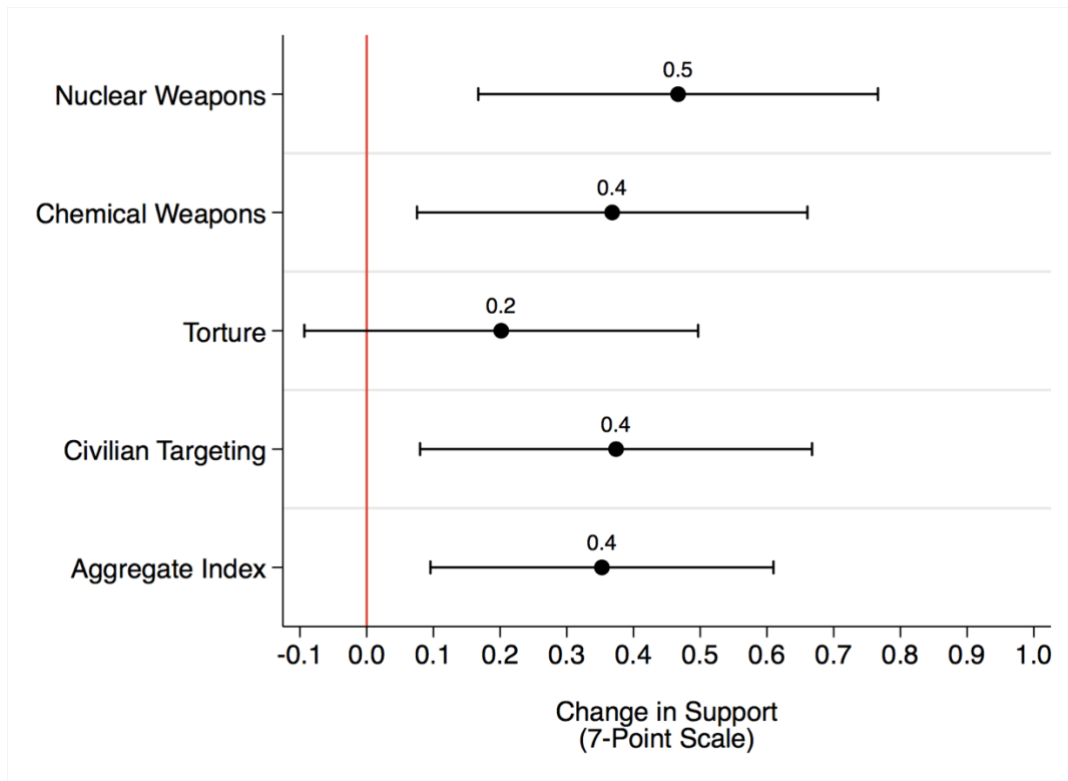
Note: Error bars display 95% confidence intervals.

We pre-registered a hypothesis that support for violating use of force norms would be greater when the China threat is presented in a vivid manner and there is elite agreement about the nature of the threat. We tested a number of norms, such as whether it is acceptable to employ nuclear or chemical weapons against China, torture Chinese military personnel, and intentionally target Chinese civilians with military force. As expected, respondents in the vivid threat/elite agreement condition

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[101] Price, 1997; Tannenwald, 1999, p. 436.
[102] Press et al., 2013; Dill et al., 2022.

saw these actions as more acceptable. Figure 4 illustrates that the perceived acceptability of using nuclear weapons, chemical weapons, and targeting civilians is statistically greater in the vivid threat/elite agreement condition compared to the control condition. We also find identical results in Study 2.[103] On the other hand, the absolute percentage of respondents that believe it is acceptable to violate these norms remains relatively low (e.g., under 25% of respondents favor the use of weapons of mass destruction). Still, these results suggest that while external threats can increase internal unity, they may also boost public willingness to "take the gloves off" to counter the peril in ways that violate international law and ethical norms.

CONCLUSION

Can foreign threats reduce domestic polarization and, if so, under what conditions? This question is critical to adjudicating theoretical debates about the impact of international politics on domestic politics.[104] It is also highly relevant for contemporary U.S. politics given the severity of affective polarization between Democrats and Republicans, as well as the emergence of a potentially unifying foreign threat in the form of China. Our project adds nuance to the debate over this question. Foreign threats do not automatically reduce domestic polarization, but vivid foreign threats *in combination* with elite bipartisan agreement about the nature of the threat can significantly reduce polarization. We provide empirical evidence for our theory in two pre-registered experiments conducted on the U.S. public.

The project contributes to a number of academic debates over the impact of foreign threats, the role of vivid information, and the framing of experimental treatments. The key insight is the nexus between vivid information and elite cues. Vividness on its own is insufficient to overcome divisions:

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[103] See Figure 2 in the appendix.
[104] Gourevitch, 1978.

It may even strengthen polarization, particularly among some Republicans. Elite opinion on its own may also be insufficient: Americans do not trust elites enough to automatically adopt a proposed frame, absent an emotionally resonant set of events. Together, however, these factors may interact to create a salient narrative of external danger that can overcome polarization and spur a stronger national in-group identity.

U.S. policymakers can potentially exploit the China threat to unify Americans and even pass important domestic legislation, such as the 2022 CHIPS and Science Act, by framing policy initiatives as a means of competing with Beijing. However, bipartisan agreement about the China threat could increase the risk of dangerous escalation, lead to the "othering" of Chinese people, and create incentives to violate use of force norms. Consequently, the dangers of underreacting *and* overreacting to the China threat should be carefully weighed.

Future research could disentangle how the constituent elements of vividness shape beliefs. For example, are images, or a greater volume of written information, more impactful? Scholars could also test whether our results hold in other countries, given variations in factors like culture, polarization, and foreign threat. Here, there are reasons to expect similar results. First, our studies constitute a relatively hard test of our hypotheses. Second, new research finds that the results from international relations experiments conducted on the U.S. public generally hold in other countries.[105] In addition, scholars might explore whether the identity of the threatening actor (e.g., whether it is a state or non-state entity), and its actions, rhetoric, and material capabilities impact the relationship between foreign danger and domestic division, including the role of racial prejudice towards a foreign country.[106] Additionally, to what extent can elites manufacture external threats to reduce domestic division? Scholars might also analyze the causes of elite consensus and explore whether vivid

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[105] Bassan-Nygate et al., 2023.
[106] Búzás, 2013.

information presented to elites increases the likelihood of agreement among political leaders. The varying impact of vivid information about threat on Republicans versus Democrats also suggests a potentially valuable area of future research.

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