Can Rising Powers Reassure? Shifting Power, Foreign Economic Policy, and Perceptions of Revisionist Intent

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Abstract

How do observers abroad assess the intentions of rising powers? In this article, we study whether and to what extent variation in behavioral and rhetorical foreign economic policies of a rising power moderate threat perceptions among observers in a declining power. We use scenario-based survey experiments administered to an elite sample of foreign policy think tank staff and members of the public in the United States. In the experiment, we systematically vary a hypothetical rising power's foreign aid and investment behavior and rhetoric such that it is represented as either revisionist or status quo oriented. We find that status quo-reinforcing behavior by the rising power generally lowers perceptions of threatening intentions more than status quo-reinforcing statements. However, there is also evidence that when rising powers adopt aid and investment behaviors that are consistent with prevailing norms, rhetorical assurances of satisfaction can substantially reduce threat perceptions further.

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International relations research on crisis bargaining (Fearon, 1995), power transitions (e.g., Organski & Kugler, 1981; Powell, 1999; Debs & Monteiro, 2014), and rising powers (e.g., Johnston, 2003) outline different, but sometimes overlapping, logics of how power shifts can undermine cooperation and generate conflict between states. Across this literature, the probability of conflict depends—at least, in part—on how foreign policy outputs of the weaker power affect threat perceptions of observers in the stronger but declining power. But how do observers form such beliefs? Existing research points to two primary forms of evidence: rising power behavior and rhetoric.

At important junctures, states have ostensibly put heavy weight on the foreign policy *behavior* of rising powers. For example, Robert Zoellick, Deputy Secretary of State under George W. Bush, called on the People's Republic of China in 2005 to "become a responsible stakeholder" in the multilateral liberal order (Zoellick, 2005). Zoellick's speech emphasized the central role that behavior would play in reassuring the international community that China's intentions for international order are benign. As Zoellick remarked, "The world will look to the evidence of actions." Two decades later, the US foreign policy establishment has grown dissatisfied with China's foreign policy actions. Major points of contention include China's state-led approach toward modernizing key technological industries, its posture in the South China Sea and other territorial disputes, and its ambitious, state-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which both the Trump and Biden administrations have construed as efforts to undermine parts of the existing order. But what if China had chosen a different, more status quo-oriented portfolio of foreign policy behaviors over the past decade? While this would potentially reassure other powerful states (Johnston, 2003; Mukherjee, 2022), other scholars emphasize how power shifts exacerbate incentives to misrepresent information and intent (Jervis, 1978; Fearon, 1995), suggesting that such efforts might be more likely to be dismissed by observers as not credible (Powell, 1999).

Observers may alternatively focus on rising power *rhetoric*. Staying with the above example, in recent decades China's government has attempted to rhetorically reassure the United States and other countries that it is satisfied with much of the prevailing international system (e.g., Goldstein, 2001, 2020). President Xi Jinping, after an in-person meeting with President Biden in November

2022, issued a statement characteristic of these efforts. He stated, "China does not seek to change the existing international order. . . and has no intention to challenge or displace the United States." But relative to behavior, it is arguably even less clear how such rhetorical efforts are perceived by observers in the United States and other countries, and whether rhetorical reassurance is viewed differently in the context of more or less aggressive foreign policy behavior.

US-China dynamics reflect a broader puzzle in international relations. Despite important advances in our understanding of the underlying logics of power transitions and their potential dangers, we know much less about how combinations of behavioral and rhetorical reassurances—or lack thereof—from rising powers are received by their intended audiences *in media res*.

Relatedly, though there is abundant theoretical literature about signals sent by rising powers, there is little causally identified empirical work about their effectiveness. Scholars have provided compelling theoretical and case study evidence on related questions (Kydd, 2007; Haynes & K. Yoder, 2020), but the body of microlevel, causally identified evidence in this area is still quite small (Quek, 2017; Tingley, 2017; Yoder & Haynes, 2021; Kertzer, Brutger & Quek, 2024), does not yet speak to how observers might adjudicate between behavioral versus rhetorical signals, and generally asks that we generalize from convenience samples of individuals that differ from the population of interest—foreign policy elites—in important ways.[1]

This is not surprising given the difficulties inherent in studying power transitions and elite perceptions. First, power transitions are rare events and the stock of available evidence is sparse. Second, policy choices and statements of leaders are subject to significant strategic selection pressures, complicating efforts to generate unbiased estimates of the effect of foreign policies on observer perceptions. Third, rhetoric and behavior are often bundled in observational data making it difficult to specify and observe relevant counterfactual scenarios. Finally, elites are, by definition, in short supply and are generally seen as a hard-to-study population (Kertzer & Renshon, 2022).

This article joins the burgeoning "behavioral revolution" in international relations research (Hafner-Burton et al., 2017). We study how perceptions of observers in a declining state change in response to different foreign policy behavior and rhetoric of a rising state. We use scenario-based

[1]Similar to Kertzer (2022), we show below that findings from experiments on the public mirror those of elites quite well.

survey experiments fielded on a unique sample of US policy elites and members of the general public. The experiment focuses on the domain of development finance and varies rhetoric and behavior independently in ways that suggest revisionist or status quo preferences. We then study how observers respond, paying particular attention to perceptions of threat and revisionist intentions. In addition, we test whether observers are willing to support costly policy actions that would be consistent with moderated threat perceptions.

Our findings are similar across the elite and public samples, showing that status quo-reinforcing behavior by the rising power generally lowers threat perceptions more than status quo-reinforcing rhetoric. This finding is consistent with the now canonical reassurance model (Kydd, 2007) and with work on revisionism (Johnston, 2003). But we also find evidence that the combination of status quo-reinforcing behavior and rhetoric is particularly effective at moderating threat perceptions. In other words, behavior and rhetoric can work in tandem, and cheap talk can be informative when accompanied by costly signals of common interests (Sartori, 2002).

Shifting power, threat perceptions, and reassurance

How do observers in declining powers draw inferences about the intentions of rising powers? In asking this question, we focus on how rising power behavior and rhetoric are received by foreign policy elites in declining states.

Multiple prominent streams of international relations research argue that power transition-induced conflicts hinge on the beliefs of foreign policy leaders in the declining state about the preferences and intentions of the rising power. For example, an older, macrohistorical literature on power transition theory contends that shifts in power significantly increase the risk of war. This work emphasizes the destabilizing role that "dissatisfaction" among rising powers toward the status quo international order built by declining powers plays in increasing the probability of war (Organski, 1958).[2] Work in the realist tradition suggests that power transitions are dangerous because leaders

[2]See also Organski & Kugler (1981) and Gilpin (1981). For critical reviews of this literature see DiCicco & Levy (1999) and Lebow & Valentino (2009). More recent work has focused on what one might term "varieties of revisionism" (Ward, 2013; Goddard, 2018a; Cooley, Nexon & Ward, 2019).

of states that are not in an insurmountably dominant position assume all comers to be "revisionist at their core" (Mearsheimer, 2001). The rationalist explanations for war literature suggests that power shifts make preventive war tempting for declining powers because their leaders are less able to trust the rising power to honor pre-power transition commitments not to exploit the declining power after the fact of the power transition (Fearon, 1995; Powell, 1999). Additional sources of instability from power transitions can arise from declining states' limited ability to accurately observe shifts in power (Debs & Monteiro, 2014), as well as the ability of powerful states to unilaterally affect the growth trajectories of weaker states (Monteiro & Debs, 2020).

While these literatures differ in the specific assumptions they make about international politics, they all suggest that power transitions add urgency to the perennial inferential tasks that confront policymakers in powerful states. These tasks involve, in part, accurately assessing the intentions of weaker powers. Failure to do so can be costly and the costs of miscalculation increase in the presence of a potential or ongoing power shift. For example, an incumbent powerful state may mistake a revisionist rising power for a satisfied one, leading the powerful state to delay a confrontation. Confrontations are costly and those costs increase as the power of the rising state increases. Concern about mistakes of this kind have consistently limited interstate cooperation in world politics (e.g., Jervis, 1978). These concerns are so all-consuming in some conceptions of realist theory that they simplify the inferential task completely: rising powers anywhere and everywhere ought to be considered threatening (Mearsheimer, 2001).

However, as Zoellick's above example and international relations research on reassurance suggest (e.g., Kydd, 2007), policymakers appear to appreciate that such a Hobbesian approach entails significant opportunity costs. A powerful state that treats a satisfied rising power as revisionist may generate needless conflict in an effort to forestall the rise of a potential challenger who could have been a cooperative partner. This "mistaken mistrust" leads to lower aggregate welfare for both states because the gains of cooperation are not realized (Kydd, 2007). Foreign policymakers in powerful states thus have strong incentives to separate would-be cooperative partners from would-be adversaries when confronted with shifts in power.

Appreciating this, rising powers—revisionist and satisfied alike—have incentives to represent

themselves as benign and satisfied. Given the well known effects of incomplete information and incentives to misrepresent (Fearon, 1995), the task of a satisfied state is to select foreign policy outputs that distinguish them from revisionist states. However, seminal works on power transition theory or reassurance do not quite clarify what these foreign policy outputs might be (Kydd, 2007; Haynes & K. Yoder, 2020). This research often characterizes the behavior of satisfied states by contrasting it with that of archetypal revisionist states. While researchers have worked to identify indicators of rising power preferences (for example, Kim, 1992; Kugler & Lemke, 1996), Johnston (2003) notes generally that "international relations theory has tended to assume that we should recognize a revisionist state when we see one."[3]

A second-generation power transition literature has made important progress on this front by focusing on how the structure of the status quo order interacts with state preferences to shape revisionist state strategies. For example, Cooley, Nexon & Ward (2019) divide revisionists based on two dimensions: their preferences for redistributing power within the current system and their desire to create a new system altogether. Similarly, Ward (2013) categorizes revisionist types based on satisfaction with existing material resource levels and satisfaction with system-wide rules, norms, and institutions. Goddard (2018a) outlines how the position of a revisionist state in the network of institutions that comprise the international order conditions the revisionist's strategies for achieving its goals.

In parallel, the rise of China has generated significant interest in operationalizing measures of revisionist behavior to gauge the extent to which China is revisionist. Johnston (2003), for example, identifies indicators of rising power satisfaction then uses them as a yardstick against which to measure the satisfaction of China with the liberal international order. Kastner & Saunders (2012) use patterns of travel by Chinese government officials to address similar questions, while Naim (2007) focuses on aid and investment behavior. A through line in much of this work is that the density and frequency of foreign economic relations, in particular, make foreign economic policy an important, and perhaps leading, indicator of a state's level of satisfaction with the status quo order.

[3]As one example, this literature has often tried to define satisfaction in negative terms by pointing to the "paradigmatic example" of Nazi Germany as a revisionist state (Morrow, 2000). Still, Debs & Monteiro (2014) summarize the state of play in this older power transition literature, there has been "no agreement on how to operationalize dissatisfaction to make it empirically testable."

While helpful starting points, these efforts often assume that foreign policy elites will be "good Bayesians," updating their beliefs and perceptions in coherent ways in response to the behavior and rhetoric of the declining power. Note, however, that while the mechanisms that can undermine cooperation (and potentially generate war) in the theories reviewed above differ, the effect of those mechanisms nearly always flows through the beliefs and perceptions of policy makers in powerful states. In focusing on the perceptions of foreign policy elites in declining states, we shift attention away from attempting, as analysts, to categorize one foreign policy output or another as revisionist or status quo oriented. Instead, we are primarily interested in whether variation in what one might call satisfaction-relevant foreign policy behavior and rhetoric actually produces variation in beliefs and perceptions of foreign policy elites in major powers.[4] In short, can rising powers reassure policy makers in declining states?

The portfolio of reassurance: foreign policy rhetoric and behavior

As the above discussion makes clear, research on power transitions, revisionism, and reassurance suggest that a rising power's foreign economic policies are an important component of its reassurance portfolio. These outputs may be broadly categorized as either behavioral—actual foreign policy actions taken by the government—or rhetorical—statements and speeches from a leader or senior government officials. In our schema, a speech to the United Nations General Assembly about multilateral economic governance would be rhetorical, while a set of international development investments would be behavioral. Foreign economic policy outputs vary not just in form, of course, but also in their political content. Political content likely varies along many dimensions, but here we are most interested in whether a foreign economic policy output is meant to reinforce or undermine the status quo international order.

How might observers in a declining state interpret these various outputs? It may be that those in the declining power look only to the foreign economic policy behavior of the rising power while

[4]Our efforts here are focused on testing predictions from rationalist accounts of threat perceptions in the context of shifting power but we acknowledge that these perceptions are also likely affected by social identity (e.g., Powers & Renshon, 2024) and/or psychological/cognitive dispositions, biases, and heuristics (e.g., Herrmann & Fischerkeller, 1995; Kertzer & Tingley, 2018).

discounting rhetoric as uninformative. Because states' true preferences are not directly observable (Frieden, 1999) and states have strong incentives to misrepresent them (Fearon, 1995), commitment problems introduced by power transitions may make efforts to rhetorically reassure "inherently incredible" absent costly investments in changing one's foreign policy behavior (Powell, 1999). This might especially be the case if observers view the state as having a limited ability to generate domestic or international audience costs via public statements alone (Fearon, 1994). In this case, foreign policy behavior, or as Zoellick put it when discussing the rise of China, the "evidence of actions," is required for observers to update their beliefs about an actor's intentions.

Alternatively, it might be the case that rhetorical and behavioral outputs both matter and potentially complement one another, making room for rising powers to draw on a broader reassurance portfolio to communicate their order-specific preferences. Rhetorical statements may have reassurance value because they generate direct or indirect costs of some kind. For example, a large literature has argued that rhetoric delivered through public diplomatic exchanges and other government statements can sometimes effectively and uniquely reveal valuable information between states through reputational and other channels (Sartori, 2002; Trager, 2010; Ramsay, 2011; Tingley & Walter, 2011; Holmes, 2013; McManus, 2017). Other work suggests that careful, reassuring rhetoric has been a crucial legitimation strategy for rising powers throughout history, including the United States, Prussia, Germany, and Japan. It also argues that negative shifts in American perceptions toward China's ambitions are as much due to changes in China's foreign policy rhetoric than to actual changes in its behavior (Goddard, 2018b).

Other evidence complements these claims by showing that rising powers make significant investments in calibrating foreign policy rhetoric. For example, in recent decades China's government has invested heavily in rhetorical reassurance, framing its behavior in ways that conform to the status quo in different areas of international relations (Goldstein, 2001; Pu, 2019). Another recent study finds that China's public diplomacy elicits different reactions in other countries depending on whether China adopts cooperative versus antagonistic rhetoric (Mattingly & Sundquist, 2023). The use of public diplomacy and other rhetorical foreign policy tools for reassurance is of course not unique to China, and has also been an important tactic for Japan, India, and other rising powers in

the recent past (Lam, 2007; Mazumdar, 2020).

Particularly skeptical observers might instead discount rhetoric *and* behavior, believing that power transition dynamics make any rising power threatening since commitments by the rising power not to exploit their future dominant position are difficult to make credible. Observers in the declining state in this case view all comers as perpetuating a kind of "long con" in which a rising power emulates a benign type until they become the dominant power. An offensive realist logic suggests that a revisionist state might actively participate in the existing order in a conscious effort to hide its true intentions until conditions permit the state to demand radical adjustments. The declining state, in this case, would be facing a "clever rather than a clumsy challenger" (Kastner & Saunders, 2012). As Goddard & Krebs (2015) argue, there is significant potential for distrust of rising powers among foreign leaders "because revisionist states can gain strategic advantage from pretending to be satisfied" and so "leaders often do not trust other states' assurances."

In short, existing research is divided on whether and how declining state observers perceive rising state foreign policy behavior and rhetoric in relation to its intentions for the international order. The above discussion yields several possibilities outlined in the following hypotheses:

> *H1a (Evidence of actions)*: A rising power a) adopting a foreign economic policy consistent with the rules and expectations of the status quo international economic order and b) voicing dissatisfaction with the international economic order will be perceived as more benign than a rising power that has adopted a revisionist foreign economic policy and has voiced dissatisfaction with the international economic order.

> *H1b (Rhetorical reassurance)*: A rising power a) offering rhetorical assurances of satisfaction with the status quo international economic order and b) adopting a revisionist foreign economic policy will be perceived as more benign than a rising power adopting a revisionist foreign economic policy and voicing dissatisfaction with the international economic order.

> *H1c (Reinforcing signals)*: A rising power a) adopting a foreign economic policy consistent with the rules and expectations of the status quo international economic order and a)

offering rhetorical assurances of satisfaction with the status quo international economic order will be perceived as more benign than a state who adopts status quo behavior or status quo rhetoric alone.

Which of these are likely to hold in practice? There is little direct, causally-identified evidence of how observers in a declining power assess the intentions of rising powers.[5] Moreover, there is no past work of which we are aware that focuses directly on the kinds of foreign economic policy outputs that are salient to foreign economic policymakers in the United States today: orientation towards the multilateral liberal order. We focus here on foreign economic policy, but we believe the argument to be general. Indeed, others have tested similar arguments in other domains and shown that costly signals in those domains may be just as, or even more, effective than those sent in the realm of foreign economic policy (Sartori, 2002; Kydd, 2007). Our interest in foreign economic policy stems, in part, from the apparent interest of world leaders and those that advise them in such policies as a key signal of a state's preferences. More fundamentally, however, foreign aid and investment policy has long been a key pillar of the "measures short of war" foreign policy tool kit (Finney, 1983; Harlow & Maerz, 1991).

Research design

To test whether and to what extent rising power behavior and rhetoric shape perceptions of intentions among observers in a declining state, we designed and fielded two original surveys with embedded experiments.[6] Our study context, the field of international development, offers a useful setting to examine competing claims about the role of behavior and rhetoric in observer assessments of rising powers for multiple reasons. First, international development has been a competitive space between major donors and lenders since the Cold War (e.g., Westad, 2005; Lorenzini, 2019) and has recently re-emerged as a contested arena among "traditional" and "emerging" donors (e.g., Woods, 2008; Dreher, Sturm & Vreeland, 2009; Blair, Marty & Roessler, 2022). We thus expect observers,

[5] For an exception see Kertzer, Brutger & Quek (2024).

[6] These studies were approved by our respective universities institutional review boards. They were not pre-registered but we have described all fielded manipulations.

though perhaps mostly foreign policy elite observers, to be sensitive to shifting power dynamics in this area. Second, the international development regime represents a relatively established and coherent "order" in which there is a clear status quo set of rules and principles shared among major power donors (Johnston, 2019). We thus expect observers to broadly comprehend what constitutes status quo-reinforcing versus status quo-challenging behavior and rhetoric. For example, in terms of behavior, full cooperation or participation in the liberal order might mean coordinating with other bilateral and multilateral donors, adopting rigorous program evaluation tools (RCTs and cost-benefit analyses), offering below-market interest rates or generous default terms on loans, using local labor, and offering transparency to citizens in recipient countries.

We use experiments for three reasons. First, power transitions are rare and so the body of observational evidence is quite thin. Scenario-based survey experiments allow us to learn from novel and controlled cases. As such, they offer an opportunity to establish the convergent validity of existing observational work. Second, many background features of states (regime type, alliance status, etc.) are correlated with both revisionist preferences and threat perceptions among observers. This makes is hard to separate the effect of regime type or alliance status from the state's foreign policy outputs. Indeed, in many cases the relevant counterfactual scenarios simply do not exist in the historical record. We do not, for example, have cases in which a power like China adopted an aid and investment program that was consistent with that of the prevailing norms of the international development order. And third, power transitions are strategic interactions and, as such, the foreign policy outputs of states are subject to strategic selection bias. Such biases are hard to overcome in observational settings.[7] The experiments we employ here allow us to fix background features, generate data across all relevant counterfactual states of the world, and avoid the inference problems associated with strategic selection.

The first survey experiment was conducted using an elite sample provided by the Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) Project at William & Mary's Global Research Institute, who allowed us to include our experiment on their larger survey of policy practitioners. TRIP sent invitations to several thousand individuals working at foreign policy think tanks and non-

[7]See Schultz (2001) for a discussion of these issues in the context of audience cost theory.

governmental advocacy groups in the United States. Our elite experiment was in the field from from early June 2021 to early September 2021, yielding 813 respondents. Data from this sample is particularly important because it was drawn directly from the population we wish to generalize our inferences to: elite foreign policy observers in a declining state. More information about the elite sample is provided in the Appendix.

A parallel survey experiment identical in structure and similar in content was administered to members of the general public. For the public opinion survey, we relied on an online sample of individuals residing in the US provided by the Harvard Digital Lab for the Social Sciences (DLABSS). DLABSS is an online social science lab composed of volunteer respondents and has been used to conduct over 100 social science survey experiments. Its sample properties, as with most online panels, are not representative of the US population, but response quality is comparable to that of other popular online survey platforms such as Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) (Strange et al., 2019). Our public survey was in the field in February and March of 2021 and yielded 551 subjects. By fielding our experiment on both elites and the public, we gain some insight into whether the public considers power transition dynamics in ways that are similar to foreign policy elites. This is important since past experiments on related questions were fielded primarily on members of the public and not foreign policy elites (Quek, 2017; Tingley, 2017).[8]

Vignette and manipulations

The experiment vignette describes the behavior and rhetoric of a rising power while outlining an ambitious aid and investment program on which the state has embarked. We chose this design—in which a respondent always receives information about a rising powers behavior as well as its rhetoric–

[8]Our sample of elites offers unique insights into the how policy elites—the individuals making and executing foreign policy—condition their perceptions of other actors in world affairs. This is important since the public—a low-cost population to survey—may not respond to stimuli in a manner consistent with that of the relevant decision-making population. While this gets us closer to the actors of interest in our theory (world leaders and their advisers), it does not resolve questions of aggregation. It is possible, for example, that even if individuals revise their beliefs that those revisions are moderated or erased entirely by hawkish biases in group decision making processes. While our design does not let us speak to such effects, recent work suggest that group dynamics do not exacerbate hawkish biases (Kertzer et al., 2022). Still, as Schub (2022) shows, actual outcomes may depend not just on the views of elites but also on the bureaucratic structure of a given state. As such, any full accounting of how the beliefs of policy advisers translate into policy outcomes would need to account for the institutional structure of the state. Such an accounting is beyond the scope of our argument.

because it broadly reflects a real-world information environment facing a policymaker. Rising powers are large countries with major foreign policy and diplomatic portfolios that are constantly scrutinized by observers in the declining power. Just as they have ongoing foreign policy activities at any given time, they also regularly express themselves through leader speeches, press conferences, official publications, and other mediums. All respondents learn that the state is a quickly growing, non-democratic state that is likely to be much more powerful 25 years from now. The introduction to the vignette read:

> Below we will describe a country and give you some information about its foreign policy choices. Please consider how you might feel about the county's motives and its ability to sway the future foreign policy choices of countries outside the United States.
>
> The country in question is not a democracy, has had a quickly growing economy for many years, and is on track to be much more powerful 25 years from now. Despite this growth, the country still has relatively little power to influence decisions in two important international organizations—the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank—which help maintain and develop the international economy. Using its growing economic power, the country has embarked on a large international development and investment program.

In the vignette, we varied the state's foreign economic policy profile in two ways. First, we varied whether the state's aid and investment program was carried out in a manner that violated the prevailing norms of the international aid and investment order. We refer to this throughout our results discussion below as the *behavior* treatment. Second, we varied whether the state had expressed dissatisfaction with its influence in the major multilateral aid and investment institutions that help maintain and develop the international economy. We refer to this throughout our results discussion below as the *rhetoric* treatment. To avoid results dependent on any particular manifestation of the international order, the vignette deliberately covered both bilateral and multilateral aspects of rising powers' engagement in international development.

We manipulate the rising power's *behavior* by varying its foreign economic strategy. Half of the sample learns that the is acting like a "good" multilateral citizen who is allocating and evaluating international aid and investment in accord with other major economies and in ways that ensure that citizens abroad and not just political elites in the recipient country or firms in the donor country benefit from the economic exchange. The other half of the sample learns that the state has a long

history of acting as a "bad" multilateral citizen by not allocating aid according to international best practices, preventing citizens in recipient countries from benefiting from aid projects equitably, and so on. Respondents then learn that the country has "embarked on a large and growing" aid and investment program. The treatment, with manipulated features in brackets, read:

> Its approach generally [adheres to/violates] international "best practices." The country's investments generally help [citizens in need of assistance/wealthy and politically connected elites rather than the broader public in developing countries]. The country [coordinates/does not coordinate] with aid agencies like the World Bank or United Nations Development Program, [rigorously checks/does not rigorously check] whether its investments benefit average citizens, [actively/rarely] hires local laborers, and provides [detailed/little] public information about how the money is being spent.
>
> As one example, the country made significant investments in [Haiti/Dominican Republic] that have helped [provide a wide range of goods and services to the general population/just a handful of powerful government elites]. As you may know, [Haiti/Dominican Republic] is a country located on an island in the Caribbean that is only about two hours away from Miami, FL by air.

There is a tension in our decision to not name the country in question. On the one hand, we refrain from naming particular countries in order to ensure that we can actually vary the independent variable of interest (the foreign economic policy behavior of the country in question). As noted above, if we had named China, we would risk "fixing" perceptions of the foreign economic policy across conditions. Respondents may, for example, fall back on their pre-existing beliefs about China's foreign economic policy rather than paying attention to the foreign economic policy behavior we supply in each treatment condition. Nonetheless, our vignette may have raised the image of China as a model or example case in respondents' minds. To the extent that this is true, we believe it to be the result not of our manipulations of interest but of the introduction to the vignette—provided to all respondents—where we describe a quickly rising power that is not a democracy, implying a balance in China as reference point across conditions with one half of the sample getting a foreign economic policy that is consistent with the implicit China model and the other half getting a foreign economic policy that is inconsistent with the implicit China model. Recent work on hypothetical vs. real examples in survey experiment vignettes suggests that the main effect of hypotheticals is to increase the magnitude of the recovered treatment effects (Brutger et al., 2023). Here then we might anticipate that an analogous experiment that named China specifically would return results

in the same direction but of diminished magnitude.

We identify particular recipient countries (Haiti or Dominican Republic) to ensure balance on background beliefs about the aid and investment strategy across treatment conditions, ensuring that our results are not driven by expectations that the coalition of recipients is different across the revealed and/or expressed preferences of the rising power.

We manipulate the rising state's rhetoric by explaining that the state's leadership made speeches declaring that it is satisfied or dissatisfied with the governing arrangements at the international institutions responsible for the maintenance and further growth of the international economy, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The vignette, with manipulated condition in brackets, reads:

> In recent years, the country has [felt little need to ask for/firmly demanded] more power in those institutions because it believes its interests are [already well-represented/often overlooked] by other powerful countries. Speeches by the country's leadership consistently reflect this sentiment and suggest that the country is [satisfied/dissatisfied] with how those institutions and the powerful states that back them make the rules of the game.

In order to fit our experiment on the TRIP survey, we had to shorten the vignette somewhat. We assumed some working knowledge of the international system and world affairs generally among our elite respondents and so omitted the references to example international organizations (the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and United Nations Development Program) and did not remind respondents of the location of the recipient country.

Dependent variables

Following treatment, we asked respondents several questions designed to elicit perceptions of threat and revisionist intentions. First, to measure threat perceptions, we asked whether the respondent agreed or disagreed that the rising power is a "threat to the national security of the United States." To measure perceptions of revisionist intent, we asked whether respondents agreed or disagreed that the rising power would seek "to change international rules, norms, and institutions in ways that would hurt the US in the future." If observers view rising powers as inherently suspicious, regardless of their behavior, the treatments we make use of here should have no impact on perceptions of threat

or revisionist intentions. If, on the other hand, observers view today's revealed and/or expressed preferences as informative about the actor's underlying type, then behavior and/or rhetoric that is consistent with prevailing rules and norms ought to be viewed as less threatening and less revisionist.

If variation in perception threat and revisionist intentions does not lead to variation in the anticipated foreign policy behavior of observers abroad, then it would be of little political consequence. As such, we asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement that the rising power "should be allowed more influence in the major economic and financial institutions." This measures how willing observers are to undertake costly action that would benefit the rising power and so gets at the international political implications of relative changes in how threatening and/or revisionist rising powers are perceived to be.

Finally, we were interested in two key implications of foreign aid spending: 1) its impact on the foreign policy choices of the recipient state and 2) its impact on the views of the public towards the donor. To that end, we asked both elites and the public if they agree or disagree that the rising power will be able to "influence the foreign policy decisions of the countries to which it gives money." On the elite survey, we asked about the aid program's ability to sway the views of the public in the recipient country.

Results

We estimate marginal means and average treatment effects (ATEs) using ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions. To simplify exposition, we have dichotomized our dependent variables, assigning those that expressed any agreement the value of 100 and all others 0. This allows us to more easily communicate the substantive implications of our results by expressing treatment effects in percentage point changes in agreement. Results based on the original scale are qualitatively similar. We summarize our results here but present full results tables in the Appendix.

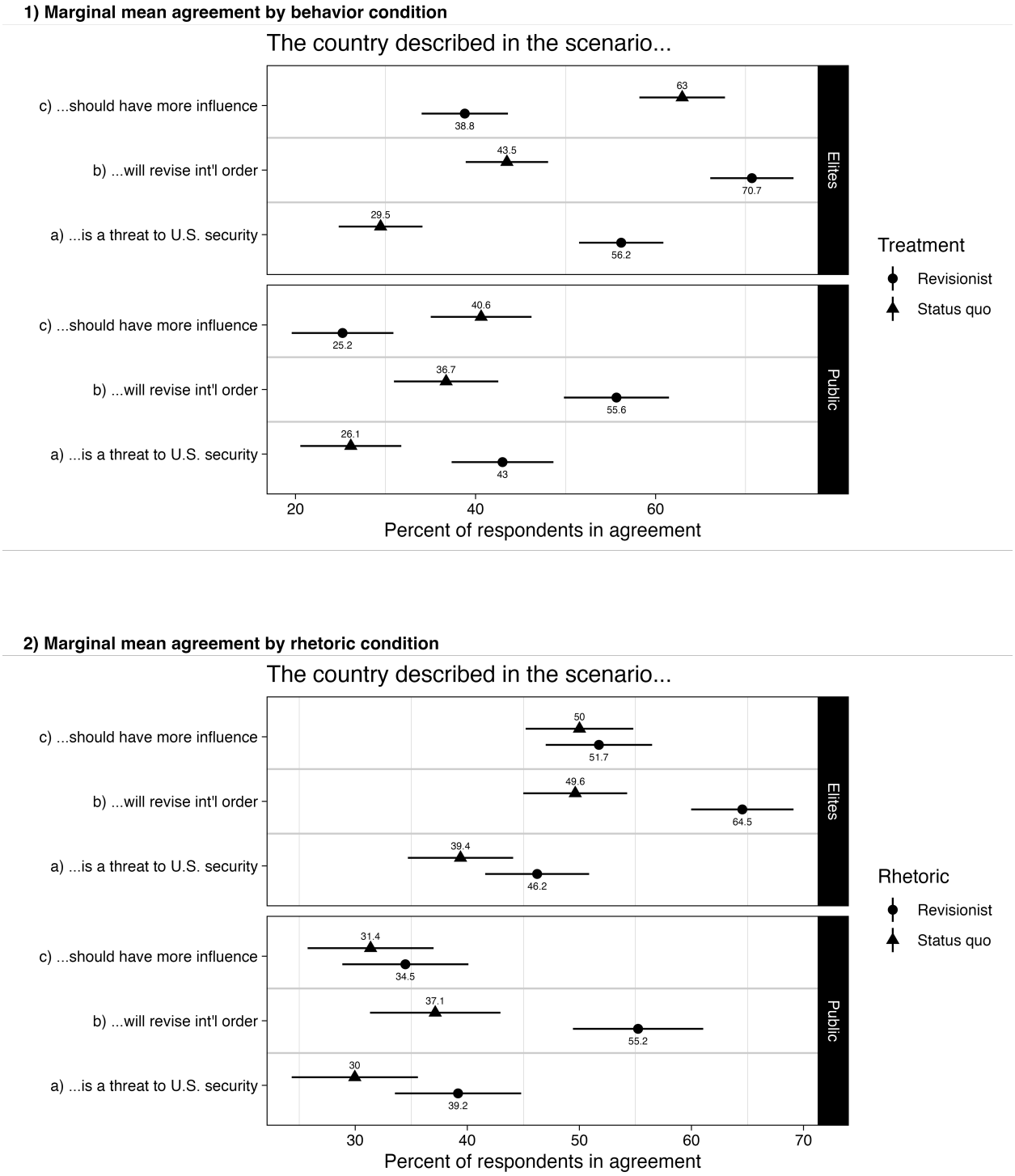
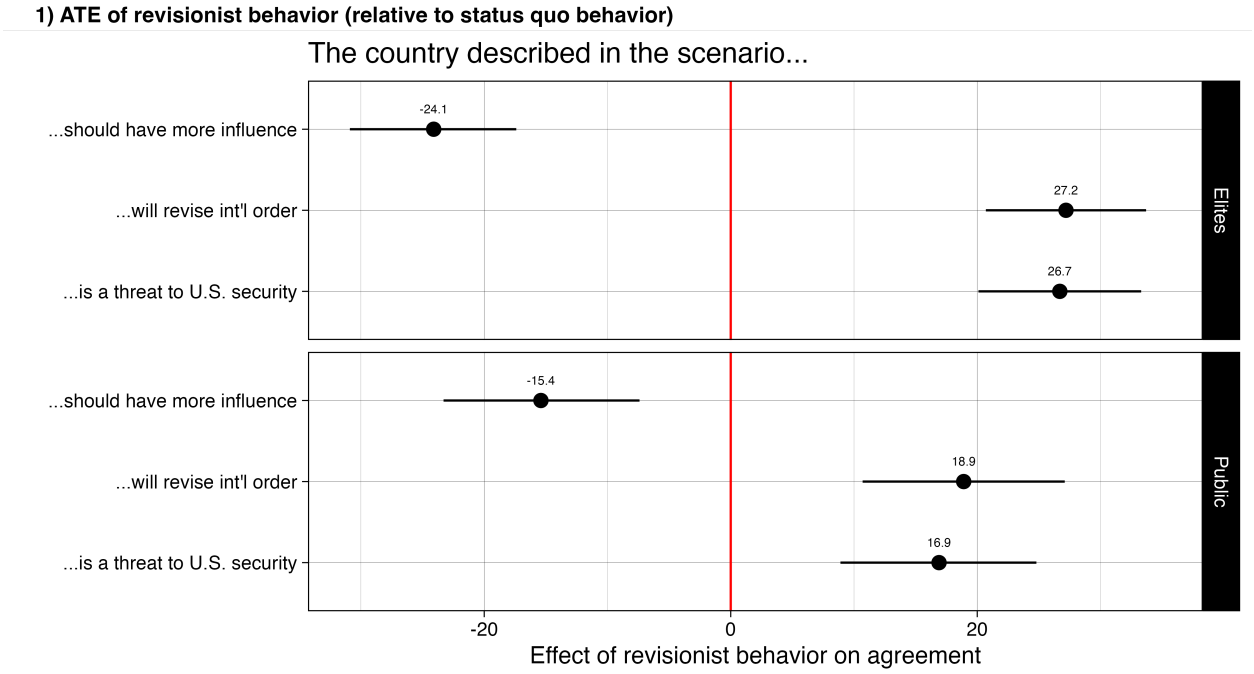


Figure 1: Marginal mean agreement among elites and public by behavior condition (top panel) and rhetoric condition (bottom panel), averaging over other conditions.



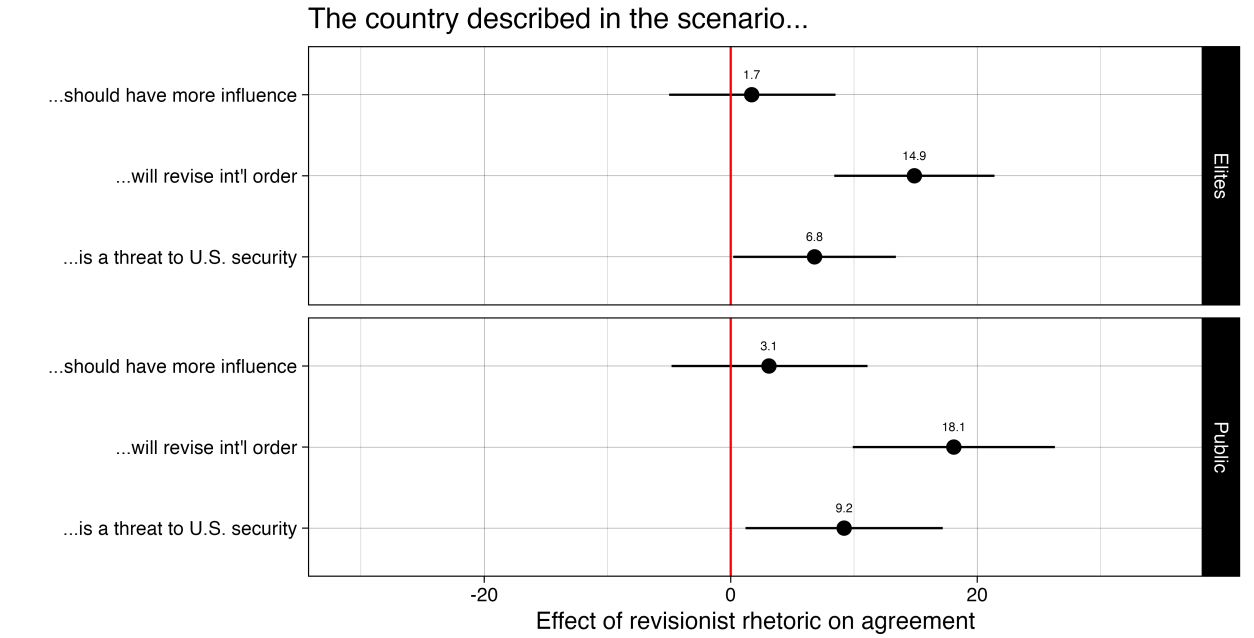


Figure 2: Treatment effect of revisionist behavior (top panel) and revisionist rhetoric (bottom panel) among elites and public condition, averaging over other conditions. Estimates relative to the status quo condition.

Status quo behavior moderates perceptions of threat and revisionist intent

We begin by examining how the aid and investment strategy of the rising power—the *Behavior* treatment—affects threat perceptions in the declining power among the public and elites. We display the marginal means and treatment effect estimates in Figures 1 and 2 respectively. The top panel of Figure 2 shows that averaging over the *Rhetoric* treatments and the identity of the recipient state, rising powers that embark on aid and investment programs that go against the prevailing norms of the status quo order are viewed as substantially more threatening than those that do not. For elites, perceptions of the rising power as a threat to national security increase by 26.7 (95% CI: 20.1, 33.3, $p<0.001$) percentage points when the state's aid and investment program is described as being inconsistent with the rules and norms of the prevailing order. With a "good aid" strategy, the rising power is viewed relatively benignly by elites with just 29.5 percent viewing the state as a threat. That figure increases to 56.2 percent when the state is described as adopting a "bad aid" strategy. Among the public, perceptions of threat increase by 16.9 (95% CI: 8.9, 24.8, $p<0.001$) percentage points from 26.1 percent in the good aid condition to 43 percent in the bad aid condition.[9]

We see a similar pattern in the case of expectations that the rising power will work to revise the prevailing order. Among elites, moving from a good aid and investment strategy to a bad one, increases expectations of revisionist efforts by 27.2 (95% CI: 20.7, 33.6, $p<0.001$) percentage points, increasing from 43 percent of respondents anticipating efforts to change the international order in ways that hurt the United States to 70.7 percent of respondents. The same contrast in the case of the public increases expectations of revisionism by 18.9 (95% CI: 10.7, 27.1) percentage points, increasing from 36.7 percent in the case of a good aid strategy to 55.6 percent in the case of a bad aid strategy.

Taken together, these results suggest significant support for H1a. Observers in declining states are quite sensitive to the foreign economic policy of rising powers in making assessments of threat and revisionism. Such assessments, however, are likely to be of little political consequence if they

[9] Across all outcome measures, we generally find larger effects among our elite sample than among the public. This is likely the result of a number of factors. First, it is possible that the elites simply paid closer attention to the details of the manipulation. A related issue is that even holding attention constant the details of the manipulation were likely more meaningful to policy elites than the public. The implications of a given state's foreign economic policy are going to be more apparent to those versed in such policy questions and, as such, the link between behavior and likely intentions is probably clearer to policy elites than the public.

are not accompanied by changes in the anticipated foreign policy behavior. As such, we study the expressed willingness of observers to cede influence to the rising power in major international organizations. Among elites, a revisionist aid strategy reduces support for ceding influence by 24.1 (95% CI: 17.4, 30.9, p <.001) percentage points relative to a good aid and investment strategy. In the case of a status quo aid strategy, allowing the rising power more influence in major IOs is quite popular, with two-thirds of respondents in that condition agreeing. In contrast, 38.9 percent of those in the bad aid strategy held the same view. In both the good aid and bad aid scenarios, support for ceding influence among the public was relatively low and never exceeded a 50 percent. Even so, the public did change its views appreciably, increasing its support for ceding influence by 15.4 (95% CI: 7.4, 23.3) percentage points. When the rising power was described as adopting a revisionist strategy, 25.2 percent of respondents supported increased influence for the rising power. This figure increased to 40.6 percent when the country was described as adopting a status quo aid strategy.

Status quo rhetoric moderates perceptions of threat and revisionist intent

We now turn to how expressions of satisfaction with the existing order affect threat perceptions among those in the declining power. We do this in two steps, first by averaging over the aid strategy treatment conditions and then, in the next section, by disaggregating to examine how expressions of satisfaction might be moderated by the particular foreign economic policy that a rising power has adopted. As the bottom panel of Figure 2 shows, those states that express dissatisfaction with the existing order are viewed as modestly more threatening by both elites and the public. The proportion of elites agreeing that the state is a threat to the United States increases by 6.4 (95% CI: 0.2, 13.4) percentage points, from 39.2 percent in the case of expressed satisfaction to 46.2 percent in the case of expressed dissatisfaction. Among the public, the same contrast increases perceptions of threat by 9.2 (95% CI: 1.2, 17.2) percentage points. Observers in the declining state are much more likely to anticipate efforts to revise the prevailing order when the rising state expresses dissatisfaction with the status quo. Among elites, expectations of revisionist efforts increased by 14.9 (95% CI: 8.4, 21.4) percentage points, from 49.6 percent when the state expresses satisfaction to 64.5 percent when the state is expresses dissatisfaction. Among the public, this effect is 18.1 (95% CI: 9.9, 26.3)

percentage points, increasing from 37.1 percent when satisfied to 55.2 percent when dissatisfied.

While changes in perceived threat were accompanied by changes in the willingness to cede influence in major international organizations when we varied the rising power's aid behavior, this is not the case when we vary satisfaction assurances. Among both elites and the public, states expressing satisfaction with the status quo and more revisionist preferences were treated similarly. Elites increase their willingness to cede influence by just 2.2 percentage points and the public by about 1 percentage point when the state is described as being satisfied with the prevailing order. Both of these effects were statistically insignificant. In short, these initial results suggest only qualified support for H2a. Observers appear to form assessments of rising power intentions based more heavily on these states' behaviors than their rhetoric.

The effect of rhetoric on perceptions of threat and revisionist intent is sometimes conditional on behavior

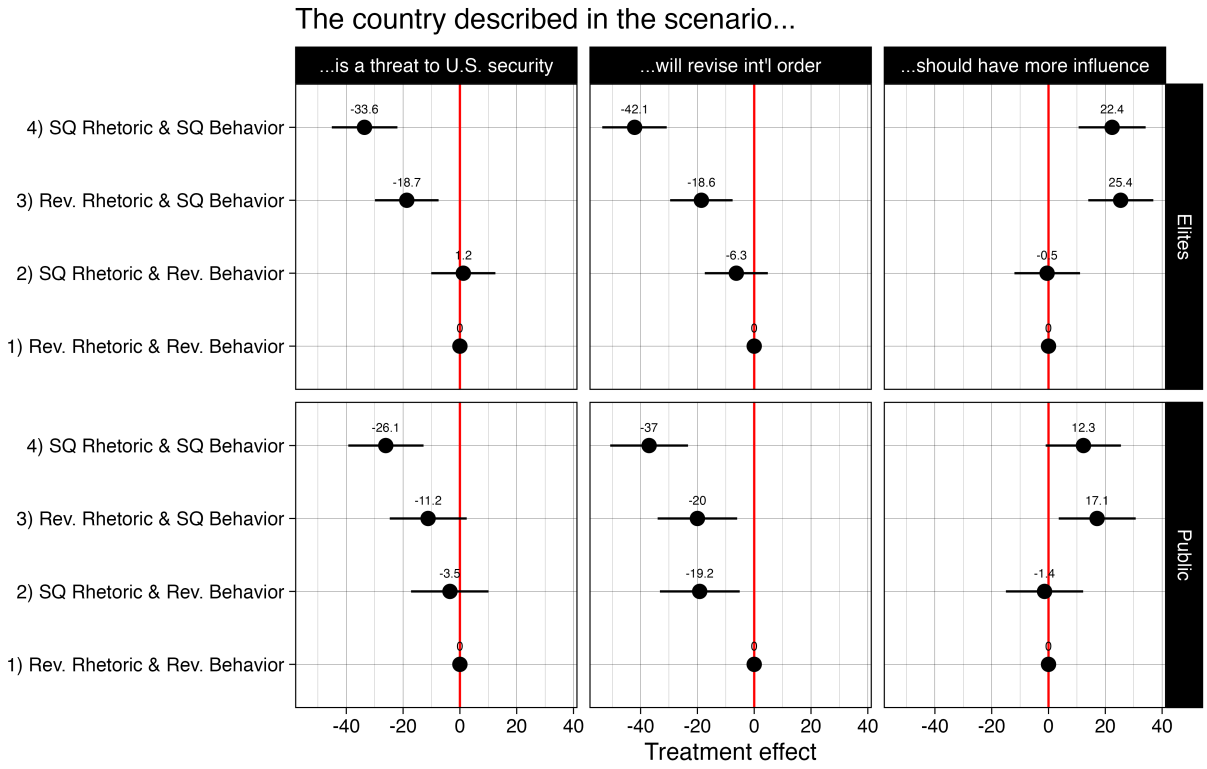


Figure 3: Disaggregated treatment effect estimates (relative to revisionist behavior/revisionist rhetoric baseline). "SQ" and "Rev" refer to status quo and revisionist, respectively.

We get a different view in Figure 3 where we disaggregate more fully to examine the effect of expressed satisfaction (rhetoric) conditional on aid and investment strategy (behavior). The results show that states adopting aid and investment strategies that violate prevailing norms have a difficult time reassuring those in the declining state. Among elites and the public, expressions of satisfaction alone have no effect on perceptions of threat (row two in both panels).

However, when rising powers adopt aid and investment strategies that are consistent with prevailing norms, assurances of satisfaction can substantially reduce threat perceptions. This effect is apparent among both elites and the public (rows three and four of both panels of Figure 3). Among elites, perceptions of threat are 14.9 (95% CI: 5.6, 24.2; p = 0.002) percentage points lower when confronted with a rising power who expresses satisfaction with the prevailing order relative to a rising power who has expressed more revisionist preferences. The public updates their views to a similar degree: 14.9 (95% CI: 3.7, 26.1) percentage points.

This conditional response to assurances is reflected in expectations of revisionist behavior as well. Among elites, when a state has adopted a bad aid strategy, expressions of dissatisfaction increase agreement with the proposition that the rising power will attempt to change the prevailing order in ways that harm the United States by 6.3 (95% CI: -3, 15.5) percentage points, but this effect is statistically insignificant. In contrast, when a state has adopted a good aid strategy, expressions of dissatisfaction increase expectations that the state will attempt to revise the order by 23.5 (95% CI: 14.4, 32.7; p<.001) percentage points.

Despite these changes in perceived threat and expectations of revisionist behavior, those in the declining country did not condition their willingness to cede influence on assurances of satisfaction. Assurances of satisfaction had no detectable effect on support for ceding influence among elites or the public in either the bad aid or good aid strategy. Presumably, this is because ceding influence is viewed as unnecessary in the case of satisfied states and unwise in the case of unsatisfied states. Thus, we find little support for H1c. While there is some evidence that status quo rhetoric can reinforce status quo behavior among elites, that is not true for revisionist behavior and rhetoric. In sum, with a few exceptions, foreign policy behavior is a more informative signal than foreign policy rhetoric.

Revisionist intentions and foreign policy effectiveness

A key theme in discussions of foreign economic policy is its utility as a political tool to sway the foreign policy choices of other states. It is possible that the results above are driven not by observers updating their beliefs about the rising power's intentions, but instead by perceptions that more benign foreign economic policy profiles are less politically effective and, as a result, less likely to materially affect the United States and its ability to pursue its interests in world affairs. That is, observers in the declining state may view some strategies as buying less political influence than others.

To account for this possibility, we asked several questions meant to measure perceptions of aid's political effectiveness. We asked whether respondents agreed or disagreed that the rising power would be "will be able to influence the foreign policy decisions of the countries to which it gives money." We present the marginal mean estimates by treatment condition in the top and middle panels of Figure 4. Regardless of treatment condition, both elites and the public agreed overwhelmingly that the rising power would be able to influence the foreign policy choices of the recipient state.

We also asked elites about how the rising power would be received by the public in recipient states. Marginal means by treatment condition are presented in bottom panel of Figure 4. Here, we get a slightly different view. Elites generally agree that the rising power will be viewed favorably by the public in the recipient state but are more likely to do so when the state is described as adopting a status quo aid strategy. Perhaps unsurprisingly, respondents did not anticipate that the recipient publics would be sensitive to the rhetoric of the donor state. In general, however, respondent perceptions about rising power influence in developing countries do not appear to drive the main results reported above.

Our results provide support for "evidence of action" arguments stressing behavior as an indicator of preferences for international order. US foreign policy practitioners and, to a lesser extent, members of the general public, appear to update their beliefs about rising powers' desires and downgrade perceived threat in response to status quo-reinforcing behavior. Strikingly, we find that they do this even when a rising power publicly expresses dissatisfaction with the status quo in terms of

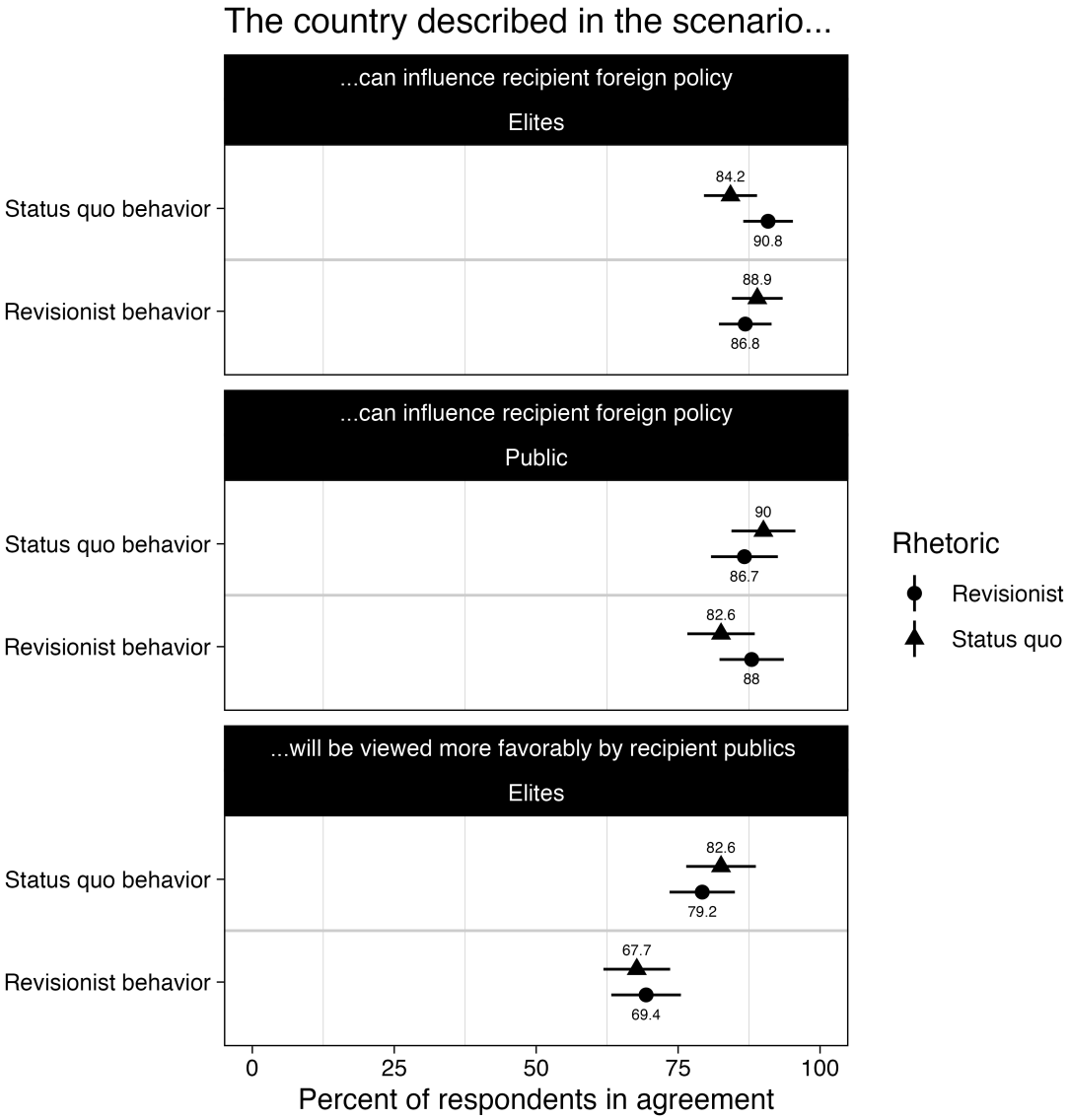


Figure 4: Marginal mean agreement among public and elites in each combination in each behavior and rhetoric condition.

their representation in international institutions. At the same time, we also find partial evidence for theories emphasizing rhetorical reassurance. When rising powers pursue status quo-reinforcing behavior, rhetoric that supports this behavior can further deflate threat perceptions and ameliorate suspicions about intentions. In other words, rather than independent substitutes, rising power behavior and rhetoric can be deployed in tandem to send more credible signals to audiences in a declining power.

Conclusion

How individuals in a declining power perceive rising power intentions is critical to understanding whether and how states can peacefully navigate power transitions. A large, diverse literature spanning power transition theory, bargaining models of war, revisionism, and rising powers offers several predictions about this dynamic, but a common theme in all of this work is the perceptions of observers in the declining state. This article studies how the perceptions of policy elites and members of the public in declining state respond to variation in the foreign economic policy profile of a rising state. While observers are generally more receptive to changes in states' behavior, rhetoric moderates perceptions of revisionist intent, too. When it complements status quo-reinforcing behavior, rhetoric can help reassure observers of a rising power's limited aims, at least in the context of our study.

It is encouraging that rising power behavior and rhetoric can potentially be used in tandem to send informative and valuable signals to elite and popular audiences in a declining power. Of course, this does not mean that rising powers can effortlessly overcome commitment problems by gesturing with consistent behavior and language. Both tools are still noisy signals and combining them does not change structural challenges inherent in power transitions. Rather, we interpret the results as evidence that rising powers can most effectively signal their intent—whether for a specific domain or for international order writ large—by adopting consistent actions and rhetoric, at least in some areas of international relations.

This article contributes to multiple literatures in international relations discussed above. First, we add to the growing microlevel experimental literature on how the behavior of states is interpreted

by observers abroad and provide new tests of theoretical predictions about rising powers' ability to reassure observers in the declining state (Quek, 2017; Tingley, 2017; Yoder & Haynes, 2021; Kertzer, Brutger & Quek, 2024). The evidence is consistent with the notion that both rising power behavior and, in some cases, rhetoric are viewed by observers as informative. However, combining consistent behavior and rhetoric that supports the prevailing international order can most effectively mitigate perceptions of sinister intent among foreign policy experts and other observers. Our paper tests canonical accounts of power transition that often dismissed rising power behavior and especially rhetoric as uninformative. Behavior and rhetoric are, of course, not the only inputs into observer threat perceptions. Future research could build on our findings by accounting for other factors that can shape perceptions, including social identity theory (Powers & Renshon, 2024), the use of "images'' and other heuristics to judge potential adversaries (e.g., Herrmann & Fischerkeller, 1995), and psychological factors more broadly (Kertzer & Tingley, 2018).

Second, the findings add to a large but mostly conceptual literature on the contours of revisionism in world politics and show that elites and members of the public can distinguish between different types of rising powers. Finally, the findings join a growing literature on public opinion toward foreign aid in the current era of geopolitical competition between "traditional" and "emerging" donors and lenders. As the field of international politics becomes more competitive between these actors, rising powers who provide significant development finance can provide informative messages to incumbent powers through a combination of behaviors and rhetoric, particularly if these strategies are synchronized and coordinated.

Replication data

The dataset, codebook, and do-files for the empirical analysis in this article, along with the online appendix, are available at https://www.prio.org/jpr/datasets/ [the author's own URL may be included in addition]. All analyses were conducted using [statistical program].

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