Fighting Facts or Fighting Norms: Reputation Management and International Norm Transgressions

Julia C. Morse[*]and Tyler Pratt[‡]

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Abstract

Scholars have long argued that reputational concerns motivate compliance with international laws and norms. In practice, governments that violate norms frequently engage in reputation management: the articulation of public narratives designed to reduce backlash and minimize demand for punishment. Under what conditions do these strategies avoid the reputational consequences of non-compliance? We theorize that transgressor governments can reduce reputation costs by contesting facts about the transgression ("information engagement") and/or challenging prevailing standards of behavior ("norm engagement"). While these strategies can mitigate reputational damage, their effectiveness is shaped by the presence and structure of international organizations (IOs). IOs shape audience perceptions by providing credible third-party information and affirming the widespread acceptance of the violated norm. These functions increase the reputation costs of transgressive behavior and shape the rhetorical strategies adopted by governments. We find support for our theory in a survey experiment examining US citizens' willingness to punish foreign governments for violations related to military aggression and torture.

[*]Assistant Professor, UCSB. Email: jcmorse@polsci.ucsb.edu

[†]Assistant Professor, Yale University. Email: tyler.pratt@yale.edu

1   Introduction

A central challenge of international order is how to constrain the worst impulses of sovereign governments. Over the past century, states have constructed a sophisticated system of international norms, laws, and institutions in support of this goal. Yet governments continue to commit transgressions against other states and their own citizens. Russian military aggression against Ukraine, Chinese atrocities in Xinjiang, and the US military's Abu Ghraib scandal are just a few prominent examples in recent years.

Without a global executive to enforce compliance, whether governments face consequences for misbehavior depends fundamentally on the attitudes of and responses from third parties. When foreign and domestic audiences impose costs on transgressors, they give force to international rules, norms, and laws. When they do not, violating governments evade responsibility and face fewer incentives to comply in the future. Punishment, however, is far from automatic; instead, audience perceptions are shaped by a complex process of interpretation, contestation, and persuasion.

In this environment, a government's ability to craft a compelling narrative is a core tool of statecraft. A variety of state and non-state actors stand ready to highlight offensive actions and advocate for punishment. A strategic government cannot simply stand back and let events unfold. Instead, transgressor governments spend significant energies engaging in *reputation management* - the manipulation of public perceptions to minimize punishment for transgressions. A transgressor government may challenge the basic facts of an allegation, claiming the reporting is "fake news" and introducing ambiguity into whether events transpired as described. It might justify its behavior with normative claims or new contextual details. Or a government might own up, apologize, and pledge to do better. Regardless of the approach, strategic governments work to mitigate the negative consequences of bad behavior.

In this paper, we develop a typology of reputation management strategies and examine their effects on audience's willingness to punish foreign government transgressions. We focus specifically on strategies designed to influence public opinion in democracies about events that happen in other countries. Democratic publics are not the only potential audiences for reputation management; governments seek to shape the perceptions of foreign elites, financial actors, and domestic citizens. But democratic publics are a common and important target for reputation management. The free press increases the odds that such citizens will be exposed to foreign messages. Moreover, public opinion is more likely to be an influential constraint on governments' response to transgressions in democratic systems. For these reasons, we theorize about how foreign government messaging might affect public opinion in democracies.

A core objective of this study is to understand how international organizations (IOs) alter the effectiveness of reputation management. A transgressor government may craft a compelling narrative, but the relative success of a specific strategy will depend on the broader informational and normative context. IOs can provide credible information about a specific transgression or can clarify the extent to which norms are established through international law. We expect that IO interventions thus shift the optimal reputation management strategies for transgressor governments, encouraging them to engage with international law through specific rhetorical pathways.

The paper begins by delving into the politics of reputation management amid international scandals. Drawing on image repair theory and crisis communications scholarship, we theorize that accused governments work to persuade relevant audiences to shift their attitudes, that is, to view the government's alleged bad behavior in a more favorable light. Two forms of attitude engagement are core to this process. *Information engagement* occurs when a government works to shift audience certainty about the transgression, acknowledging reports as true, denying certain details, or rejecting an entire account. *Norm engagement*

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takes place when a government tries to shift the perceived offensiveness of its behavior, often by contesting prevailing norms or emphasizing its commitment to future cooperation. Combining these two approaches produces 4 ideal-type strategies: apology, which acknowledges the behavior as true and reinforces existing norms; attack, which acknowledges facts but rejects norms; concealment, which challenges facts but accepts norms; and repudiation, which rejects both facts and norms.

A government faces trade-offs in choosing between different strategies based on the institutional environment it confronts. We argue that the presence and structure of international institutions constrain a government's ability to successfully employ different reputation management strategies. Two aspects of the institutional environment loom large. First, IOs can provide credible information that reduces secrecy, limiting the government's ability to conceal its behavior. This is particularly true when IOs have robust monitoring capabilities. Second, IOs can reinforce and entrench norms, signaling to audiences that the alleged conduct is worthy of censure and undermining government attempts to challenge prevailing standards of behavior. These two features enter the theoretical model as moderating variables, shaping the effect of reputation management strategies.

We test this theory through a survey experiment that examines how reputation management and IO interventions shape the public's willingness to punish a foreign government for international law violations. We examine responses across two core transgressions - violations of territorial integrity, either by military force or cyber warfare, and human rights rules related to torture. Across issue areas, we find that reputation management is generally effective: all strategies reduce audiences' willingness to punish the transgressor. We also find that IO interventions constrain states' optimal strategies. When IOs provide information about a violation, government denials are less effective and strategies that acknowledge bad behavior are optimal. IO reinforcement of norms similarly shapes the relative effectiveness of norm engagement, increasing the attractiveness of norm reinforcement over norm attack

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strategies.

Our results suggest at least two pathways through which IOs may support long-term cooperation. First, our study suggests that international institutions increase the reputation costs of violations. This finding is consistent with existing research: the increase in expected punishment should motivate strategic states to comply with international laws and norms. Second, IOs shape the public discourse surrounding violations of international commitments. Robust and well-designed IO interventions incentivize states to admit wrongdoing and reinforce existing international norms. When states evade norms with impunity, their actions signal that existing rules are inadequate and create a constituency for rule reform (Leitzel, 2002). Our work suggests however that in trying to evade reputation costs, states may retroactively engage in ways that reinforce institutions, ultimately helping sustain international regimes.

2 Reputation and International Law

Scholars have long been interested in the role of reputation in international politics. Leaders, governments, and even citizens develop beliefs about the characteristics of foreign actors, based on social cues and previous behavior; these beliefs influence the conduct of foreign policy. Although elites often hold nuanced understandings of individual leaders and government officials, the public is more likely to assign a reputation to a particular country or regime. But even at the country level, reputations are complex and multifaceted. A country might have a general reputation for overarching qualities like consistency and resolve (Weisiger & Yarhi-Milo, 2015), and also an issue-specific reputation that applies to only a subset of topics or agreements (Downs & Jones, 2002). Moreover, different aspects of a country's reputation may matter more or less to different people, depending on their individual values (Brutger & Kertzer, 2018; Morse & Pratt, 2022).

Governments benefit from different reputational attributes depending on the specific area of foreign policy. A strong reputation for resolve allows a country to make more credible threats[1] and affects the credibility of commitments to deter adversaries (Schelling, 1966). A government with a reputation for neutrality, on the other hand, might be well-positioned to broker a bilateral agreement between adversaries. In more technocratic issue areas like financial regulation, a government might leverage its reputation for bureaucratic expertise to gain influence over international standards. A negative reputation in one issue area can trigger backlash or consequences on unrelated issues.[2]

While reputations are often treated as fixed in the short term, they are mutable across time, particularly if conduct deviates from expectations. A generally uncooperative state that undertakes costly measures to comply with a treaty, for example, will improve its reputation to a greater degree than a country that always follows international law (Guzman, 2008). Similarly, when a government with a history of defaulting on debt pays its creditors (Tomz, 2007b), this action is likely to result in greater reputational gains than when the United States or United Kingdom undertakes a similar action. When a government acts contrary to type in a negative way, this is likely to trigger reputational losses and even the possibility of material penalties. Fear of shaming or stigmatization following negative updating may lead governments to be more cooperative. If governments generally value having positive reputations for following international law, they should also seek to defend themselves against allegations of wrongdoing.

When information surfaces that a country has contravened an established international norm, this can create a specific type of international crisis that we refer to as a scandal. In international politics, scandals are tied to transgressions of international norms, that is,

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[1]On the link between credibility and resolve, see Mercer (1996); Tang (2005); Weisiger & Yarhi-Milo (2015) among others.

[2]For example, Woo & Murdie (2017) find that when human rights organizations publicize poor conditions in debtor countries, the International Monetary Fund is less likely to loan these countries money.

widely shared standards of appropriate behavior (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Scandals pose particular threats to reputation because they can lead to crises of legitimacy, which may corrode state power (Reus-Smit, 2007). Military aggression, human rights abuses, and sovereign default are examples of behaviors that precipitate international scandals. Notably, while some scandals may be linked to larger international crises (particularly violations of sovereignty), not all scandals are crises and not all crises are scandals.[3] Defensive military action, for example, is not considered a violation of international law nor of sovereignty norms and therefore would not constitute a scandal, although the onset of a war might be a crisis. Similarly, revelations of a government's historical torture activities could constitute a scandal but not a crisis.

We focus on international scandals, in part, because they are a most likely case for observing reputational effects in world politics. A shift in reputation occurs when audiences update their perceptions of a government's conduct, motives, or disposition. In theory, reputations are updated continuously, since domestic and foreign audiences receive a constant stream of information about the behavior of governments; however, research suggests that this does not play out in practice. Most people give disproportionate weight to recent communications when forming opinions (Chong & Druckman, 2010).[4] Scandals represent a sudden and immediate reputational threat. By definition, a government's transgressive behavior violates norms of conduct in a way that could lead to attitude adjustment. Moreover, scandals typically coincide with significant media coverage, and thus citizens are often exposed to critical new facts with which to assess the government. If reputational effects matter at all, we should observe them in these instances.

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[3]We draw on De Maria (2010, p.69), which highlights this point with respect to organizational crises and scandals. Crises are defined as 'high consequence, low probability, overlaid with risk and uncertainty, conducted under time-pressure, disruptive of normal business and potentially lethally damaging to organizational reputation' (Gregory 2005).

[4]Chong and Druckman (2010) also find that a minority of individuals engage in more deliberate information processing, displaying attitude stability and giving disproportionate weight to previous messages.

3 Theorizing Reputation Management Amid Scandals

To unpack the reputational dynamics of international scandals, we develop a theoretical model involving three sets of actors. The transgressor is a government that has contravened an international norm. This actor is the villain in the traditional reputation story: the government that has violated an arms control agreement, illegally expropriated foreign assets, or invaded its neighbor. As others learn about the transgressor's behavior, it faces the risk of direct punishment or more diffuse reputational damage. Its goal is to minimize backlash and evade reputation costs.

Transgressors must contend with a set of competing actors who want to see rules followed and non-compliance punished. States, IOs, transnational advocacy networks, and even firms can all serve this purpose, and indeed, the motivations of each might differ significantly. States may be inclined to criticize adversaries while going easy on friends (Lebovic & Voeten, 2006; Donno, 2010; Terman & Voeten, 2018), or such choices may depend on the perceived sensitivity of the specific issue in question (Terman & Byun, 2022). While transnational activist networks might mobilize and lobby for punishment of transgressors (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Murdie & Polizzi, 2016), IOs may serve more of a neutral role, clarifying information and norms. In most cases, however, these competing actors provide some type of counter-narrative to the transgressor's claims, creating rhetorical contestation.

Transgressors and compliance advocates compete to shape audience perceptions in a way that furthers their political goals. For compliance advocates, the battle may begin far in advance of a scandal, as they shape the institutional environment with the goal of constraining future transgressors' abilities to evade reputation costs. Compliance advocates may work to institutionalize clearly defined norms (reducing the power of norm challenges) and may empower IOs with strong monitoring capabilities to reduce deception and concealment. Once a scandal occurs, the IO is well-position to step in and act on behalf of the interests of other

states and non-state actors who are interested in compliance.

During an international scandal, reputational contestation plays out in the public arena as both sides battle for the decisive interpretation of behavior. This brings in the third set of actors in our model: foreign and domestic audiences who receive information and render judgment on the scandal. Relevant audiences observe the norm violation, draw inferences about the transgressor's culpability, and adjust their behavior accordingly. These are the actors who present a potential threat to the transgressor. If they update their attitudes in a negative manner, they may retaliate against the violating government or exclude it from future cooperative endeavors.

While there are an infinite number of potential audiences for any given scandal, we focus here on how citizens in democracies view foreign transgressions. Public opinion in democratic states is likely to be an important battleground for reputation management. A significant body of research has documented that democracies behave differently from autocracies in military disputes, trade negotiations, and other types of foreign policy challenges.[5] Public opinion is likely to carry more weight in democracies; Tomz *et al.* (2020) find that Israeli parliamentarians are more willing to use military force when the public is in favor of such action. Leaders in democracies may pay bigger costs from backing down on threats (Tomz, 2007a) or breaking international agreements, although presidential rhetoric plays an important role in shaping such consequences (Levendusky & Horowitz, 2012), as does the leader's gender (Schwartz & Blair, 2020).[6] In the context of international scandals, citizen attitudes in democracies may play a crucial role in determining to what extent democratic governments punish other countries for violating international law.

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[5]Leeds (1999, 2003); Mansfield *et al.* (2002); Russett & Oneal (2001). See also Mearsheimer (2011) on why democratic leaders may be more likely to lie than leaders of autocracies. Others argue that democracies tend to be more involved in international affairs. See Kegley and Hermann (1997), Regan (2000), and Shanks, Johnson, and Kaplan (1996).

[6]Notably, trade may work differently from security in this regard. See, for example, Chaudoin (2014) or Casler & Clark (2021).

We assume that transgressor governments will work to minimize the likelihood of punishment for their behavior by adopting optimal strategies of reputation management. A violating state may sow doubt about its culpability, work to reduce the perceived offensiveness of its behavior, or combine both approaches. These efforts take place after the scandal begins, as the transgressor highlights specific aspects of the scandal and the surrounding context in an effort to increase uncertainty or encourage clemency. If the transgressor is successful, it evades the reputation costs arising from the norm violation.

Notably, this contested model of reputational effects differs from some other theories in which reputation costs automatically follow from bad behavior. In the spirit of recent work highlighting the need for more attention to the process by which actors draw inferences about reputation (Jervis *et al.*, 2021), audiences in our framework do not react to scandals via a linear or straightforward learning process. Instead, they must reach judgments about transgressors in a messy atmosphere of considerable uncertainty, multifaceted preferences, and competing narratives about the value of the underlying norm. This complex, ambiguous environment is precisely what allows the narratives advanced by compliance advocates and transgressors to shape audience perceptions. Relevant audiences need an organizing framework through which to understand the violation and assign culpability. Strategic actors supply them to shape the scandal to their advantage.

3.1   A Typology of Reputation Management Strategies

While our theory is centered on contestation over reputation costs, we focus most closely on the public narratives advanced by transgressor governments. There are several reasons for this choice. When a scandal occurs, the transgressor usually has the first opportunity

to offer a public explanation of its behavior.[7] This provides it with agenda-setting power over the ensuing debate about the norm violation and the transgressor's culpability. If the transgressor admits responsibility for the violation and apologizes, for example, compliance advocates have little reason to directly contest this narrative. If the transgressor denies the violation, establishing the factual record becomes an important effort.

In addition to a first-mover advantage, the transgressor enjoys an informational advantage. In most international scandals, the violating government has a better view of the actual pattern of events than audiences or compliance advocates. Of course, the transgressor's access to private information also generates credibility problems when justifying its behavior to audiences. For example, in 2003 the US government became embroiled in a scandal over the use of torture in detention centers in Iraq, including the Abu Ghraib prison. The Bush Administration was in a unique position to determine the severity and scope of the violation, and it claimed the behavior reflected a few isolated, unauthorized incidents.[8] While subsequent investigations and legal proceedings revealed those claims to be false,[9] the claim of plausible deniability likely reduced backlash among domestic and international audiences.

Finally, the transgressor also enjoys a publicity advantage. News coverage is likely to give disproportionate voice to a transgressor government because it is the central actor in

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[7]There are exceptions that prove this general rule. Transgressors may adopt a strategy of "strategic silence," ceding agenda-setting powers to others during reputational crises, though this is generally considered a poor strategy (Pang 2013). In other cases, compliance advocates may race to preempt transgressor narratives before they are expressed. In February 2022, for example, the United States government accused Russia of planning to release a fabricated video purporting to show Ukrainian military attacks on Russian citizens. By detecting and releasing this information before Russia could act, the US government eroded its agenda-setting power. In both cases, however, compliance advocates are responding to the actual or expected narratives of the transgressor.

[8]See, for example, the White House Press Briefing from April 30, 2004, where Press Secretary Scott McClellan said "But the President made it very clear that he was disgusted when he saw these photographs. And the President made it very clear that this does not represent what the United States stands for, and it does not represent our values, nor does it represent the great work for the vast majority – the 99 percent of our men and women in uniform." Retrieved from the US Presidency Project.

[9]Tom Bowman and Julie Hirschfield Davis, 5 May 2004, "Army reveals wider abuse investigation," The Baltimore Sun, retrieved from: `https://www.baltimoresun.com/bal-te.congress05may05-story.html`

a story. Compliance advocates are more diffuse, stretching across borders and with varying ties to the media. For this reason, a transgressor government has significant influence over how the public understands a scandal, especially in its early stages.

The transgressor sets the terms of contestation through its choice of strategy. Drawing inspiration from influential research on public communications and image repair (Benoit, 2015), we argue that limiting backlash to scandalous behavior requires reducing the audience's belief that the transgressor committed the violation, diminishing the perceived offensiveness of the behavior, or both.[10] We therefore characterize a transgressor's reputation management strategy based on how it engages with the information and normative environment of the scandal, which we call "information engagement" and "norm engagement," respectively. Put simply, the transgressor's strategy is defined by whether it chooses to fight over facts or fight over norms.

Many transgressors prioritize information engagement, that is, manipulating the level of certainty about the offensive behavior.[11] At one end of the spectrum, a government can acknowledge an allegation as completely true. At the other, a government can completely deny the incident. Government justifications may also involve partial denials to "muddy the waters," admitting to some facts while obscuring or denying others. Many reputation management strategies fall in this intermediate category as governments contextualize their actions, make claims about the scope and severity of the transgression, or deny government culpability in a violation. During the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) 1999 bombing campaign in Serbia, for example, NATO missiles killed civilians and struck the Chinese embassy. In response to these events, NATO officials minimized perceived responsibility by arguing these targets were hit unintentionally as "a weapon went astray and hit

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[10]Benoit (2015) points to perceived responsibility and perceived offensiveness as the two fundamental elements of image repair in response to a scandal.

[11]This corresponds to what Pomerantz (1978) terms "blame" and what Fishbein & Ajzen (2010) describe as "beliefs."

civilian buildings."[12]

In addition to information engagement, transgressors may employ norm engagement whereby they endorse or reject the violated international norm. As with information engagement, norm engagement falls along a continuum from complete norm reinforcement to total renunciation. Norm endorsement occurs when the transgressor explicitly endorses the standard of behavior at the center of the controversy. Norm rejection involves attacking the behavioral standard, often by challenging its legitimacy. As with information engagement, transgressor strategies often occupy a middle ground: instead of explicitly rejecting a norm, they may cite competing principles, contest the scope of the norm, or argue that it is routinely violated in practice.[13] Such strategies can be effective by priming individuals to consider other values. A government accused of torture or repression, for example, might label an abused individual as a "terrorist," bringing to mind national security concerns; Bracic & Murdie (2019) show that this approach makes message receivers less likely to take action in support of a human right cause.

The two dimensions of information and norm engagement jointly characterize the set of possible reputation management strategies that transgressors can employ. Figure 1 combines the dimensions to present a typology of four "ideal type" options at the transgressor government's disposal during an international scandal. The horizontal axis describes the strategy's information engagement - i.e., whether it acknowledges or denies its participation in the norm violation. The vertical axis reflects the strategy's norm engagement, distinguishing between norm endorsement and rejection.

The cells of the 2×2 represent the ideal-type strategies. Transgressors that acknowledge

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[12]Daniel Williams, "Missiles Hit Chinese Embassy," 8 May 1999, *The Washington Post*, retrieved from: `https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/longterm/balkans/stories/belgrade050899.htm`.

[13]Norm engagement includes what Alter (2022) calls "extra-ordinary contestation," whereby a state seeks to escape the authority of international law through competing domestic legal authority, maneuvering around regime complexes, or attacking the legitimacy and authority of law.

	Acknowledge Info	Deny Info
Endorse Norm	**Apology**	**Concealment**
Reject Norm	**Attack**	**Repudiation**

Figure 1: *Typology of Reputation Management Strategies.*

responsibility for the violation and endorse the underlying norm employ an *apology* strategy. Others admit their responsibility but challenge the norm as illegitimate, which we label an *attack* strategy. When governments choose to deny the violation, they may do so while accepting or contesting the underlying norm, which we call *concealment* and *repudiation*, respectively. Below, we describe each strategy in greater detail.

Apology

An apology strategy occurs when a transgressor seeks to minimize reputational costs by making amends for bad behavior. At its core, this response includes a government accepting responsibility for the violation and thus acknowledging the facts of the case. Information engagement may be explicit or implicit. A government may express regret that an action occurred without explicitly accepting culpability, as corporations often do when confronting large scandals. In common verbiage, this is the "mistakes were made" defense. In practice, though, when a government uses an apology strategy, it concedes both the existence of the transgression and its own (at least partial) responsibility.[14]

Apologies endorse established norms in either implicit or explicit ways. A government

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[14]See the discussion of sympathy, compensation, and accepting responsibility in Coombs & Holladay (2008).

may simply ask for forgiveness, a request that implicitly endorses the standard of behavior.[15].
Other variations of this strategy include a more explicit commitment to follow the rules in
the future. In 2008, for example, the Canadian Prime Minister formally apologized to and
asked forgiveness of indigenous Canadians who were removed from their families and forced
to attend residential schools. While his apology was considered a victory for indigenous
communities, he was also criticized for failing to take forward-looking action that would
have reaffirmed the norm, such as endorsing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights
of Indigenous Peoples.[16]

Apology has several strategic advantages. Some studies have found this approach to
be more effective at protecting the transgressor's reputation than other strategies like no
comment, denial, excuse, or justification (Bradford & Garrett, 1995; Dean, 2004; Coombs
& Holladay, 2008). An apology may be a particularly advantageous strategy if the norm is
deeply entrenched in a relevant audience and denial is unfeasible.

Apologies may also entail political risks. By admitting that a violation occurred, a
government reduces uncertainty about its responsibility. Compliance advocates may still
lobby for retribution, and audiences may still support punishment because the government
undeniably committed the bad behavior. Moreover, even if an apology successfully appeases
foreign audiences, a government's domestic public may punish it for pursuing this approach.
Morse & Pratt (2022) find that while apologies have a positive impact on a government's
image, they are less effective than attack strategies at signaling that a government looks out
for its citizens. Contrition can even trigger a domestic backlash, which may alarm former
adversaries and potentially increase tensions (Lind, 2008).

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[15]Benoit and Drew (2007) and Fuchs-Burnett (2002) suggest an apology is marked by both responsibility
and a request for forgiveness

[16]"Government apologizes for residential schools in 2008," CBC Archives, 25 June 2018, retrieved from:
`https://www.cbc.ca/archives/government-apologizes-for-residential-schools-in-2008-1.`
`4666041.`

Attack

An attack strategy occurs when a transgressor accepts the facts of a situation but contests the underlying norm. The core of this approach is focused on recontextualizing the morality of behavior - a government reduces the outrage associated with its actions by contesting the behavioral standard. Direct norm attacks include challenging the norm as unjust or illegitimate. Such rhetoric targets regulative norms, which proscribe and prohibit behavior. Attack strategies may also include indirect norm attacks, which focus more on constitutive norms that define when a particular action violates an agreed upon standard. Indirect norm attacks might invoke competing norms, argue that a norm does not apply, or offer contextual details to excuse offensive action. Alter (2022) describes a larger pattern of "extra-ordinary contestation" whereby countries contest the normative boundaries of international law by redrawing domestic legal boundaries and citing competing standards within a regime complex. If a state engages in extra-ordinary contestation in response to an international scandal, we consider this action to be part of an attack strategy.

Direct and unconditional norm attacks are rare in international scandals, in part because the very presence of a norm implies that audiences have come to value a standard of behavior. When they do occur, political leaders often feel compelled to offer alternative norms to justify their actions. In 2016, for example, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte responded to international condemnation over extra-judicial killings by explicitly declaring "I don't care about human rights."[17] He further argued that the pursuit of domestic stability and anti-corruption effort justified setting aside human rights norms.

Attack strategies can also involve attempts to reduce the scope of norms rather than directly challenge them. Governments often point to extenuating circumstances to justify transgressions – a form of "norm minimization" that limits the range of conditions in which

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[17] "Rodrigo Duterte: 'I don't care about human rights'." Al Jazeera News, 8 August 2016. Retrieved from: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/8/8/rodrigo-duterte-i-dont-care-about-human-rights.

the behavioral standard is expected to apply. National security emergencies are a common manifestation of this tactic. When former U.S. President Trump imposed tariffs on steel and aluminum in 2018, for example, he justified the move by arguing that unfettered imports of these goods threatened national security. More generally, Trump's attacks on trade norms focused on justifying US violations by accusing other countries of violating norms of fairness and reciprocity (Carnegie & Carson, 2019; Brutger & Rathbun, 2021).

Concealment

Concealment occurs when a transgressor's reputation management strategy focuses primarily on concealing the truth of a violation through denials. Denials might include calling information about an allegation "fake news," attacking an information source or media outlet as biased, or suggesting an incident was staged to make a country look bad. Some aspects of Russian military action in Ukraine exemplify of reputation management via concealment. When gruesome reports surfaced suggesting Russian troops executed civilians in Bucha, the Russian defense ministry claimed the scenes were faked and a provocation. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov even went so far as to demand a meeting of the Security Council because "we see such provocations as a direct threat to international peace and security."[18]

In addition to denying that scandalous behavior occurred, concealment can include denying government responsibility for the behavior. When the Iranian military shot down a civilian airliner in January 2020, for example, Iranian government officials initially denied that missiles could have destroyed the aircraft and blamed a mechanical malfunction. As Western intelligence agencies began to contradict the report, Iran was eventually forced to change its

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[18] "Russian claims Bucha civilians massacre faked as "provocation" as outrage builds over Ukraine war atrocities," 4 April 2022, *CBS News*, retrieved from: `https://www.cbsnews.com/news/bucha-massacre-ukraine-russia-putin-provocation-war-crimes-atrocities/`.

approach and acknowledge the mistake.[19]

Concealment strategies do not challenge the underlying transgressed norm, and indeed, in some cases, governments may even explicitly endorse the norm in question. When Myanmar was accused of committing genocide against the Rohingya minority, for example, the government both denied the allegation and emphasized its commitment to prevent human rights violations in the country.[20] In other cases, the transgressor engages in a blanket denial without explicitly discussing the underlying norm. Since the transgressor is clearly distancing itself from the alleged behavior, we consider these cases implicit norm endorsement.

Concealment strategies are often constrained by context. A government can deny an allegation of wrongdoing or call a story fake news if significant ambiguity exists. For high-stakes issues or those subject to outside monitoring, however, other parties may be able to prove that a denial is a lie. Confronted with proof, a government may continue to espouse the same concealment rhetoric, or it may be forced to change strategies. Because of this potential downside, governments sometimes pair denials with norm rejection —- a strategy that we call repudiation.

Repudiation

Repudiation is the most antagonistic reputation management strategy. When a transgressor relies on repudiation, it challenges both facts and norms. Denials may include all of the concealment techniques discussed above (calling reporting fake news, denying allegations, and citing alternative explanations), while norm engagement is more likely to be indirectly antagonistic. Rather than arguing an allegation is a lie and the norm is illegitimate, for ex-

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[19]Bethan McKernan, 11 Jan 2020, "Iran admits unintentionally shooting down Ukrainian airliner," *The Guardian*, retrieved from: `https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/11/iran-admits-shooting-down-ukrainian-airliner-unintentionally`.

[20]Sam Gringlas, 11 December 2019, "Myanmar's Suu Kyi Denies Charges Of Genocide Against Rohingya Minority", NPR, retrieved from: `https://www.npr.org/2019/12/11/787076560/myanmars-suu-kyi-denies-charges-of-genocide-against-rohingya-minority`.

ample, a government may claim that reporting is false while also citing competing standards or a lack of general cooperation. Often information and norm engagement are linked in a way that reinforces each other. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, for example, was criticized for his environmental record and his desire to open the Amazon to business interests - an approach to economic growth that directly challenged norms of ecological protection. When record fires burned the rainforest in 2019, Bolsonaro combined his broader normative challenge with direct disinformation, claiming that non-governmental organizations (NGOs), rather than farmers, were starting the fires to hurt his government because his administration had cut NGO funding.[21]

Some forms of repudiation are less transparent than Bolsonaro's brazen norm challenge and denial. When reporters asked about the Bush administration's use of "enhanced interrogation techniques" in 2006 and 2007, for example, White House officials relied on partial evasions, legal carve outs, and competing norms to try to repudiate allegations that the Central Intelligence Agency tortured detainees. At a September 2006 press conference, Press Secretary Tony Snow told reporters "Torture is illegal. The meaning of torture is fixed in international law and convention," but acknowledged that a few phrases surrounding the exact definition of torture remained unclear. When asked about the US public's views of such techniques, Snow replied, "I think what the public wants is safety. They want to beat the terrorists, and they want to keep our principles intact and that's what we're trying to do."[22] Bush administration officials used this repudiation approach, combining legal justifications and denials with competing principles of security and counter-terrorism throughout the remainder of Bush's term.

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[21] Anthony Boadle and Gabriel Stargardter, 21 August 2019, "Igniting global outrage, Brazil's Bolsonaro baselessly blames NGOs for Amazon fires," *Reuters*, retrieved from: `https://www.reuters.com/article/us-brazil-politics-idUSKCN1VB1BY`.

[22] White House Press Briefing by Tony Snow. 14 September 2006.

3.2 How IOs Constrain Reputation Management

The effects of reputation management strategies are likely to vary depending on the strategic context in which the scandal unfolds. We focus specifically on two contextual features: the presence of an IO that can credibly provide information about the transgressor's culpability, and whether the underlying norm is institutionalized in international law. These features create different constraints and incentives for a government working to manage its reputation after a transgression.

The information-provision function of international institutions serves to reduce the level of secrecy surrounding the scandal, reducing the ability of transgressor governments to engage in denial strategies. High levels of secrecy provide transgressors with an informational advantage. Transgressor denials may still be met with skepticism, but counterclaims by compliance advocates may also lack credibility. International institutions with robust monitoring capabilities alter the information environment, offering the potential to verify facts about the scandal.

A second function of international institutions is to clarify and fortify international norms. Norms that have been codified into international law are likely to be viewed as more important, legitimate, and compulsory than less institutionalized norms. This effect may occur because transgressions of institutionalized norms represent a dual violation of the specific norm itself and the broader obligation of states to comply with international law. Alternatively, audiences may perceived institutionalized norms to have greater support from states and citizens than informal norms. In this view, norms that are codified in international law are those that have passed the norm cascade or "tipping" point stage and have been internalized by a broad set of actors (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). We argue that norm institutionalization serves as a constraint on transgressor governments' ability to use norm challenge strategies.

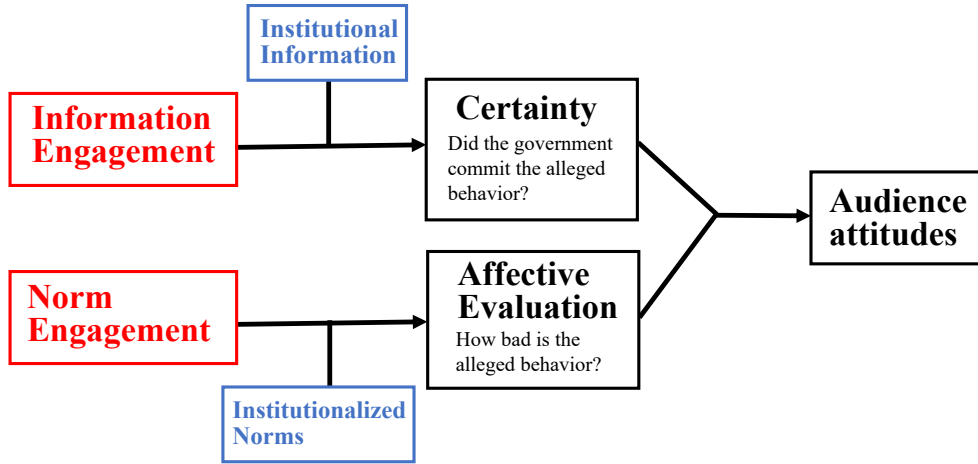Figure 2 visualizes how reputation management strategies and the institutional envi-

Figure 2: *Theoretical Model of Reputation Management and IO Intervention.*

ronment interact to shape audience attitudes. Certainty about the government's behavior, combined with the audience's affective evaluation of the behavior, work together to shape an audience's willingness to punish a transgressor. Governments shape an audience's certainty through the use of information engagement (acknowledgement vs. denial of the allegations). As the figure demonstrates, international institutions that can credibly provide information about the government's culpability reduce the effectiveness of transgressor denials. Similarly, governments shape an audience's affective evaluation of the behavior through the use of norm engagement (challenging vs. affirming the prevailing standard of behavior). When international institutions can credibly signal that the norm is legitimate and widely held, this reduces the effectiveness of norm challenges.

4   Testing Reputation Management

We test the effect of reputation management strategies and institutional constraints using an original survey experiment. An experimental design allows us to randomly assign the rhetorical justification offered by the government as well as the IO intervention, avoiding the selection bias that would plague an observational study in this area. In adopting this approach, we build on a growing body of work leveraging experimental methods to assess

the effect of international law on public attitudes (e.g., Chaudoin (2014); Chilton (2014); Zvobgo (2019); Powers (2022); Brutger & Strezhnev (2022); Morse & Pratt (2022)).

The survey presents respondents with a hypothetical future scenario where a foreign government allegedly violates international norms related to territorial integrity, either by invading a neighboring country or by launching a cyber attack, or a scenario where the foreign government is accused of torturing its citizens. Respondents are randomly assigned to a control condition or one of the four reputation management strategies. Each treatment is presented as a foreign government's public comment about the alleged transgression; in the the control condition, the foreign government declines to comment.

Separately, we randomly assign two IO treatments that we expect to moderate the effect of reputation management strategies. The first treatment is an IO information intervention, in which IO monitors corroborate the alleged transgression. The second treatment is an IO normative intervention in which respondents learn that the behavior violates a core principle of international law.

The reputation management strategies and IO conditions are our primary treatments of interest, allowing us to assess the theory described in the previous section. In addition to these features of the scandal, we vary some characteristics of the transgressor government to probe for additional heterogeneous effects. Since a government's previous record may shape the persuasiveness of some justifications, we vary whether the transgressor "has" or "does not have" a history of prior violations. We also randomly assign the regime type of the transgressor government.

We are interested in learning how reputation management and IO interventions affect respondent attitudes about the foreign government. Our main outcome of interest in respondents' willingness to punish the foreign government for its transgression. If transgressor governments are able to minimize support for punitive action, this would suggest a direct pathway through which transgressors could limit the consequences of misbehavior, at least

among democratic states. In contrast, if the public remains supportive of punitive action, democratic governments will have stronger political incentives to respond to violations.

In addition to this primary outcome of interest, we examine how reputation management and IO interventions affect two intermediate outcomes: respondents' certainty that the government committed the violation and respondents' affective evaluation of the behavior. We probe these outcomes because we theorize that certainty and affective evaluation are mediators that allow reputation management strategies to shape respondents' willingness to punish transgressors.

4.1 Hypotheses

We test a series of hypotheses derived from the model of reputation management described in the previous section.

First, we hypothesize that a foreign government use of reputation management can successfully reduce punitive attitudes among respondents. Although the four strategies vary in their underlying logic, each is designed to minimize blame in the wake of an alleged violation. We formalize this expectation in our first hypothesis:

> *H1*: All four reputation management strategies decrease respondent willingness to punish the transgressor government, compared to no justification.

Second, we expect that strategies will operate by shaping two important perceptions among respondents: *certainty* that the violation occurred and *affective evaluation* of the alleged behavior. Certainty is shaped via information engagement. Reputation management strategies that include denials should reduce certainty about the transgressor's culpability, relative to strategies that acknowledge the violation.

> *H2*: Denial strategies (concealment, repudiation) reduce respondent certainty that the government committed the alleged behavior, compared to acknowledgement strategies (apology, attack).

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Affective evaluation, on the other hand, is shaped by norm engagement. Strategies that include norm challenges are designed to reduce backlash by portraying the behavior as less offensive. We hypothesize that respondents who view norm challenges will evaluate the alleged behavior as more acceptable than those that view strategies that include norm acceptance

> *H3*: Norm challenge strategies (attack, repudiation) improve affective evaluation of the alleged behavior, compared to norm acceptance strategies (apology, concealment).

Finally, we hypothesize that institutional interventions interact with reputation management strategies in ways that shape their relative effectiveness. IO information verifying a transgression should reduce the effectiveness of denial strategies, compared to acknowledgments (*H4*). When respondents learn that norms are codified in international law, they should find norm acceptance strategies more persuasive than norm challenge strategies (*H5*).

> *H4*: IO corroboration of violations reduces the effect of denial strategies on respondent willingness to punish, compared to acknowledgment strategies.

> *H5*: Legalization of international norms reduces the effect of norm challenge strategies on respondent willingness to punish, compared to norm acceptance strategies.

4.2 Survey Methodology

We administered a pre-test of the survey in April 2023 to a nationally representative sample of 1,500 attentive US-based respondents.[23] We present the results of this pretest in the following section. The experiment consists of two hypothetical scenarios involving transgressions of international norms. Respondents are presented with the first scenario and a

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[23]See Appendix Table A1 for summary statistics of our sample. Respondents were recruited via Lucid Theorem. Inattentive respondents were screened out with attention checks. Our plan is to administer the full survey in July 2023 in four countries: the United States, Germany, India, and South Africa.

description of the country's characteristics (regime type, previous reputation);[24] they then view a government's defense (or no comment in the control condition) and the IO conditions. After these treatments, respondents are asked for their opinion on retaliatory punishment for the violating government, and are also asked to report their certainty and affective evaluation of the alleged behavior. Respondents then proceed to the second scenario, a different violation, and again provide their views on punishment. We randomly assign the order of the scenarios.

The two scenarios depict violations related to territorial integrity and human rights. Within the scenario related to territorial integrity, we randomize whether the transgression includes the offensive use of military force or a cyber attack. We include both versions of this treatment because norms on the use of conventional military force are significantly more established than norms related to cyber-warfare, and we want to probe whether this difference in the underlying norm translates into different responses to reputation management. To minimize the effect of respondent views on current US or foreign political leadership, we set each scenario five years in the future. The military aggression scenario is included below, and the full survey text can be found in the appendix.

> Imagine it is ten years in the future. A foreign country is involved in an escalating dispute with a neighboring country. The foreign country is [a democracy/not a democracy] and [has/does not have] a history of military aggression against other countries in the region.
>
> Media sources report that military forces from the foreign country have crossed the border and seized control of several government buildings and checkpoints. Some news outlets suggest that the foreign government initiated the military attack to coerce and intimidate the neighboring state.
>
> [Institutional Information Treatment: United Nations investigators corroborate the reports, describing the incursion as a coordinated military offensive by the

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[24]We randomize regime type and previous reputation because Renshon *et al.* (2023) show that democracies have unique reputations in crises and in war.

foreign government.]

[Institutionalized Norms Treatment: Respect for the territorial integrity of other countries is a core principle of international law. Under the Charter of the United Nations, all countries have agreed to avoid threatening or using offensive military force against other countries.]

[Reputation Management Treatment]

For the reputation management treatment, respondents in the control condition are told that the foreign government declines to comment on the reports. Others are presented with a rhetorical justification from the foreign government. The justification takes one of four general forms. We present the language from the territorial aggression scenario here.

- **Apology**: The foreign government acknowledges the attack, apologizes, and pledges its future commitment to respecting territorial integrity.

- **Attack**: The foreign government acknowledges the attack and argues that aggressive actions are justified to defend itself against countries that harbor terrorists.

- **Concealment**: The foreign government denies that it was involved in the attack, arguing that the action was taken by separatists in the neighboring country.

- **Repudiation**: The foreign government denies that it was involved in the attack, arguing the action was taken by separatists in the neighboring country. The government also argues that aggressive actions are justified to defend itself against countries that harbor terrorists.

After viewing the scenario, respondents proceed to an outcome questionnaire. Our primary outcomes measure respondents' preference for punishing the foreign government. We gauge support for three punitive measures: working to expel the country for the UN Human Rights Council, joining partner countries in imposing economic penalties on the foreign country, and transferring military weaponry to the neighboring country to help it defend itself. Respondents indicate their level of support for each option on a five-point scale, ranging from "strongly oppose" to "strongly support." The results below use the average level of support across these measures.

We measure perceived certainty by asking respondents, "Based on what you just read, how likely is it that the foreign government attacked its neighbor with military force, as alleged by media reports?" Respondents select from a five-point scale ranging from "Very likely" to "Very unlikely." We measure affective evaluation (acceptability) by asking "Is it acceptable or unacceptable for a government to attack its neighbor with military force, given the circumstances in the scenario?" Responses range from "Completely acceptable" to "completely unacceptable."

5   Results

We begin by testing how each reputation management strategy affects citizens' preferences for punishment. Figure 3 presents the treatment effects and 95% confidence interval on respondent willingness to support the three punitive measures. We use an average measure of the three punitive measures in the main text; for results broken down by punishment type, see Appendix Table A2. Estimates in figure 3 reflect the difference in respondent views between the control group (no foreign government commment) and the four response types (*Apology*, *Attack*, *Concealment*, and *Repudiation*). We display the average treatment effects across the three scenarios as well as the issue-specific estimates. In all results, standard errors are clustered by survey respondent.

The results are generally supportive of hypothesis *H1*, which predicts that all strategies should reduce punitive attitudes about the foreign government. The estimated treatment effect of each strategy is negative, indicating reduced support for punitive measures. *Apology* has the largest substantive effect, reducing support for punishment by 0.27, or about 1/3 of a standard deviation in the outcome variable. The other strategies have a smaller but consistently negative effect on respondent willingness to punish, though some are just outside conventional standards of statistical significance ($p = 0.11$, 0.08, and 0.05 for *Attack*, *Concealment*, and *Repudiation*, respectively). When broken down by issue area, estimates are
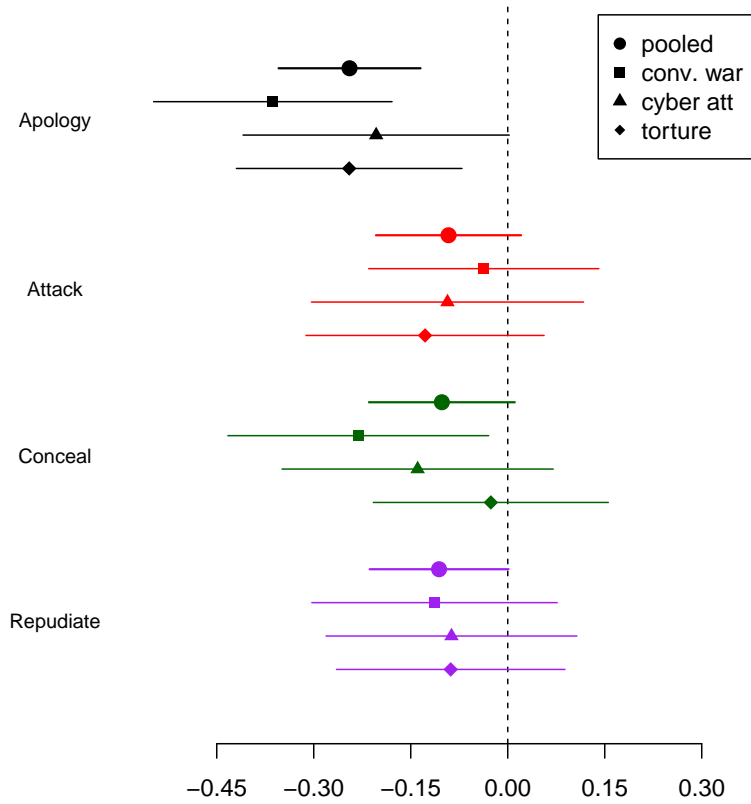
Figure 3: *Effect of Response Strategies on Respondent Willingness to Punish*: The figure shows the treatment effect of each reputation management strategy on respondent willingness to punish the transgressor. All effects are relative to the control condition (no government comment). Point estimates and 95% confidence intervals are displayed for each treatment.

noisier, perhaps due in part to power considerations, but appear to follow similar patterns across conventional warfare, cyber attacks, and torture violations.[25]

The next set of tests interrogate the effect of each strategy on perceptions of certainty and affective evaluation (acceptability) surrounding the violation. We hypothesized that strategies involving denials should decrease respondent certainty that the violation occurred as reported, relative to acknowledgment strategies (*H2*). Similarly, strategies involving norm challenges should increase the acceptability of transgressive behavior, compared to norm

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[25]In the Appendix, we probe whether the effect of reputation management strategies vary by respondent party ID and characteristics of the transgressor government (specifically, whether the transgressor government is a democracy and whether it has a history of norm violations). See Figure A1 and Table A3 for these results. We find no significant interaction effects.

reinforcement strategies.

Figure 4 presents the findings for these hypotheses. The left panel examines the treatment effect of denial strategies (*Concealment* and *Repudiation*) on respondent certainty that the transgression occurred as reported. The comparison group are respondents who viewed strategies that acknowledged responsibility (*Apology* and *Attack*). We find that denials have a significant negative effect on respondent certainty, consistent with expectations. In the pooled estimate, foreign government denials reduce reported certainty by 0.28 on the 5-point scale. Broken down by issue area, all estimated effects are negative and statistically significant with the exception of the torture scenario, where denials have no significant effect on certainty.

The right panel examines the effect of norm challenge strategies (*Attack* and *Repudiation*) on respondents' affective evaluation of the alleged behavior. Estimates reflect the change in respondent attitudes about the acceptability of transgressive behavior, as we move from norm reinforcement strategies (*Apology* and *Concealment*) to norm challenges. As the figure demonstrates, norm challenges improve affective evaluations, making respondents view the transgressive behavior as more acceptable. Treatment effects separated by issue area display a similar pattern of response, though the estimates lose statistical significance in these subsamples.

In Table 1, we investigate the relationship between certainty, acceptability, and willingness to punish the foreign government. Our model of reputation management suggests that these variables should be strong predictors of audience attitudes. We test this expectation in a linear model regressing the punishment measure on perceptions of certainty and acceptability. While these results are not causally identified (we do not randomly assign certainty and acceptability), they provide insight into the mechanisms driving preferences for punishment.

The results are consistent with expectations. Respondent certainty and affective evaluation are strongly linked to support for punishment, whether we use the average measure

Effect of Denials on Certainty | **Effect of Norm Challenges on Affective Evaluation**
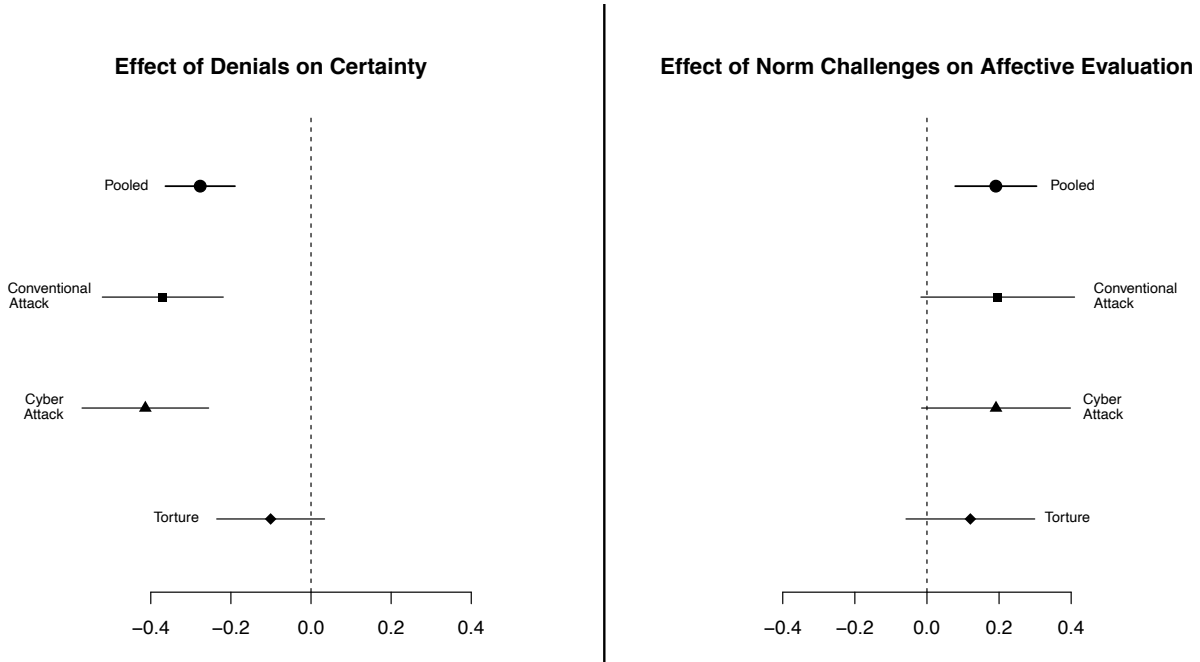
Figure 4: *Effect of Response Strategies on Respondent Certainty, Acceptability*: The figure shows the treatment effect of each reputation management strategy on perceptions of certainty and acceptability of the violation. All effects are relative to the control condition (no government response). Point estimates and 95% confidence intervals are displayed for each treatment.

	Average Punishment (1)	Expel from UN HRC (2)	Join Sanctions (3)	Support Opposition (4)
Certainty	0.194*** (0.022)	0.199*** (0.0027)	0.256*** (0.024)	0.127*** (0.026)
Acceptability	−0.139*** (0.016)	−0.189*** (0.021)	−0.169*** (0.019)	−0.060*** (0.020)
Observations	2,436	2,436	2,436	2,436

Table 1: *Effect of Respondent Certainty, Acceptability on Preferences for Punishment*. Results of linear models predicting willingness to punish on the basis of respondent perceptions of certainty and acceptability. Standard errors are clustered by respondent. Statistical significance is denoted by *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

(Column 1) or examine the three punitive measures separately (Columns 2-4). In terms of effect size, a one-unit increase in the certainty scale is associated with about a 0.2 increase in support for punishment (both measures are 5-point scales). The estimates for acceptability are consistently smaller, suggesting that perceptions of culpability are potentially more powerful determinants of punishment than moral outrage about the underlying behavior.

Finally, we assess whether interventions by international institutions can moderate the effects of reputation management strategies. We hypothesized that information about culpability from IO monitors makes government denials less effective at reducing punishment than acknowledgment strategies ($H4$). We test this expectation by examining whether the effect of denial changes when respondents receive IO information corroborating the transgression.

Column 1 of Table 2 presents estimates from a linear regression model regressing respondents' willingness to punish on the use of a denial strategy, the institutional information treatment, and the interaction between the two. The comparison group is respondents who received an acknowledgement strategy by the foreign government. The marginal effect of denial is very close to zero, suggesting that denials are not significantly different than acknowledgments in the absence of institutional information. The interaction term is positive and significant at the 0.1 level ($p = .08$). This means that incriminating information from IOs inhibits the ability of denials to reduce punishment.

Column 2 performs the same procedure for norm challenge strategies. The control group for this specification are respondents who received norm reinforcement strategies by the foreign government. We observe very similar results in this case. The effects of norm challenges do not significantly diverge from norm reinforcement strategies when norms are not codified into international law. When respondents learn that international law prohibits the alleged transgression, however, this mitigates the effect of norm challenges.

These findings highlight the crucial role that IOs play in providing information and shaping norms, even in the modern, crowded arena of international politics. In our scenario,

	DV: Willingness to Punish	
	(1)	(2)
Denial	0.008	
	(0.056)	
IO Info	0.014	
	(0.055)	
Denial × IO info	0.138*	
Norm Challenge		0.027
		(0.053)
IO Norms		−0.057
		(0.058)
Norm Challenge × IO Norms		0.132*
		(0.078)
Observations	1,953	1,953

Table 2: *Effect of International Institutions on Denials and Norm Challenges.* Standard errors are clustered by respondent. Statistical significance is denoted by *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

as is often the case in the real world, media outlets first report the transgressive behavior. Yet the government is able to successfully counter this narrative, reducing the expected costs of its behavior, when IOs aren't present. Based on open-ended response data, we suspect this is because respondents understand that context varies, particularly around military aggression, and that sometimes using force can be justified. When an IO steps in to verify bad behavior or signal international norms, however, respondents reward governments that are truthful or embrace established norms. IOs thus constrain government reputation management, creating incentives for governments to rely on less combative rhetoric when engaging with

international law and perhaps even altering future non-compliant behavior.

6 Conclusion

This paper examines contestation over non-compliance with international law. We argue that the choice to punish violating governments is inherently linked to how audiences interpret the alleged transgression. Acts of non-compliance trigger a political process in which the transgressor looks to strategically shape perceptions of the violation to their advantage. Such reputation management can acknowledge or deny an allegation (information engagement) and embrace or attack the underlying norm (norm engagement), leading to four 'ideal-type' strategies: apology, attack, concealment, and repudiation. Each strategy operates in a different way, but all are successful in mitigating reputation costs.

Yet government rhetoric does not operate in a vacuum, but rather is met with counter-messaging from compliance advocates like IOs. We theorize that IOs constrain reputation management by providing information about the transgressor's behavior, thus increasing certainty about the violation, and by clarifying norms, thus reducing the perceived acceptability of the behavior. IO interventions thus shift the range of optimal strategies for a transgressor state.

We test this theory through a pre-test of 1500 US respondents. We examine reputation management and IO interventions in the context of two types of international law violations: military aggression (proxied through territorial invasion and cyber attack) and torture. Across issue areas, we find that all four strategies reduce audiences' willingness to punish the transgressor, but that IO interventions constrain states' optimal strategies.

These findings have important implications for understanding the role of IOs in supporting long-term cooperation. When states establish IOs that have credible monitoring capabilities, these bodies constrain state behavior through a variety of channels. Some

IOs draw initial attention to non-compliance, while others may intervene only to support a broader narrative about a state's actions. This latter type of intervention may seem less important, but the results presented in this paper suggest it may still constrain transgressor states in important ways. If a government understands that an IO is well-positioned to respond to a transgression, it may shift how it defends a transgression from the get-go. Denials may become acknowledgments, and norm challenges may become norm acceptance. As rhetoric shifts, the underlying behavior may have a less negative impact on international law itself. Thus IO interventions increase the possibility that even transgressors engage with international law in manner that reinforces the longevity of regimes.

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Appendix

Variable	Sample Proportion
Party ID	
Democrat	0.45
Republican	0.35
Independent	0.20
Age	
18-30	0.24
31-45	0.27
46-60	0.25
over 60	0.23
Education	
High School or Less	0.03
Some College	0.49
College Degree	0.32
Post-Graduate	0.16
Ethnicity	
White	0.73
Black or African American	0.12
Asian	0.05
Hispanic	
Yes	0.12
No	0.87
Household Income	
< \$25,000	0.29
\$25-45,000	0.22
\$45-65,000	0.17
\$65-95,000	0.14
> \$95,000	0.15
Region	
Northeast	0.20
Midwest	0.19
South	0.38
West	0.23

Table A1: *Survey sample statistics*

	Join Sanctions	Expel from UN HRC	Support Opposition
Apology	−0.296***	−0.324***	−0.184**
	(0.069)	(0.070)	(0.073)
Attack	−0.096	−0.110	−0.072
	(0.070)	(0.073)	(0.072)
Concealment	−0.133*	−0.112	−0.075
	(0.072)	(0.073)	(0.073)
Repudiation	−0.090	−0.094	−0.109
	(0.068)	(0.070)	(0.070)
Observations	2,436	2,436	2,436

Table A2: *Effect of Response Strategies on Specific Punishment Options.* Standard errors are clustered by respondent. Statistical significance is denoted by *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.
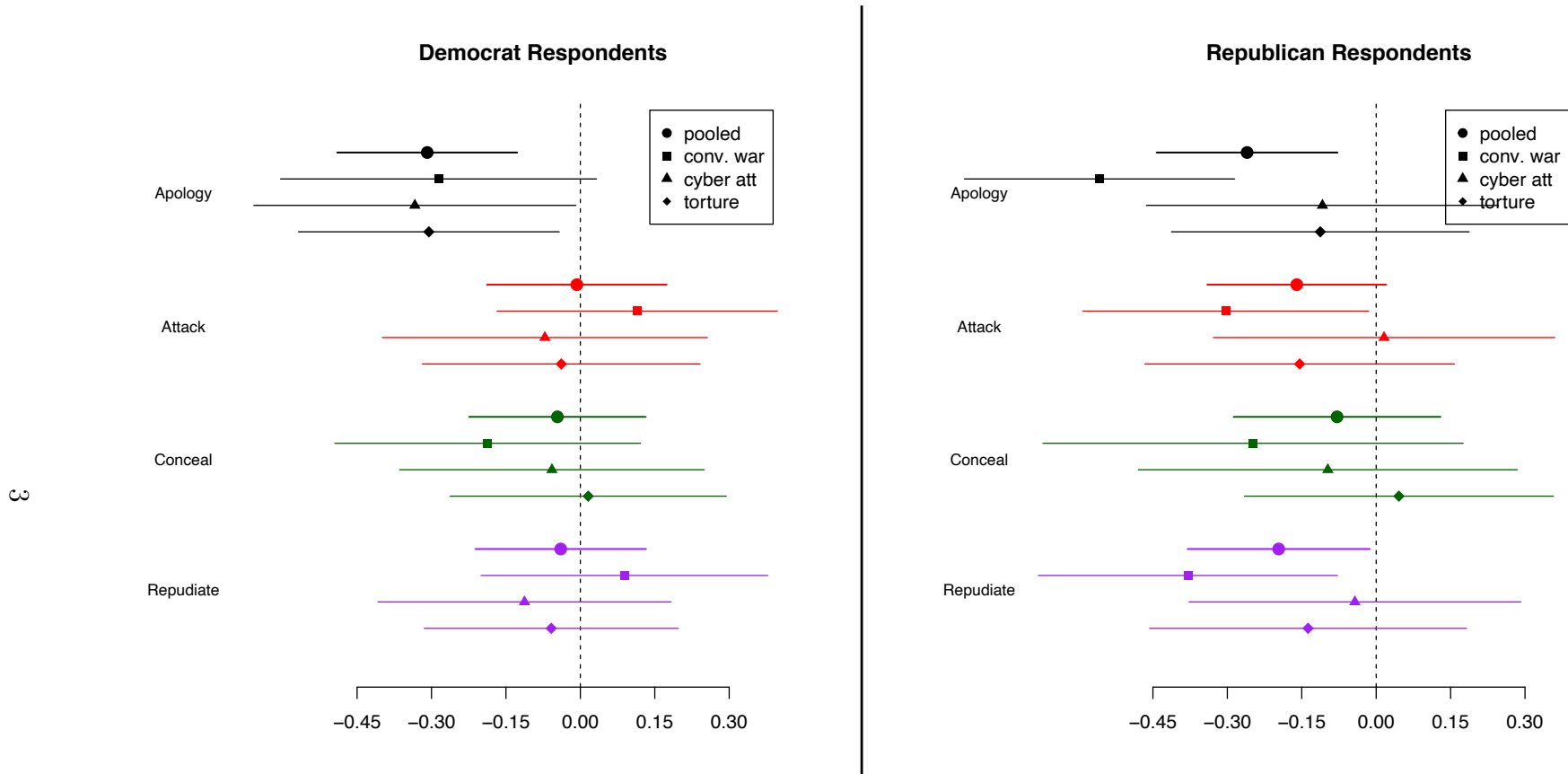
Figure A1: *Effect of Response Strategies on Respondent Willingness to Punish by Party ID*: The figure shows the treatment effect of each reputation management strategy on respondent willingness to punish, among respondents identifying as democrats (left panel) and respondents identifying as republicans (right panel). All effects are relative to the control condition (no comment). Point estimates and 95% confidence intervals are displayed for each treatment.

	DV: Willingness to Punish	
	(1)	(2)
Apology	−0.259***	−0.225***
	(0.082)	(0.080)
Attack	−0.161**	−0.113
	(0.082)	(0.080)
Concealment	−0.127	−0.054
	(0.085)	(0.082)
Repudiation	−0.084	−0.038
	(0.081)	(0.080)
Democratic Transgressor	−0.059	
	(0.082)	
Apology × Democratic Transgressor	−0.019	
	(0.115)	
Attack × Democratic Transgressor	0.136	
	(0.112)	
Concealment × Democratic Transgressor	0.041	
	(0.118)	
Repudiation × Democratic Transgressor	−0.029	
	(0.113)	
Violation History		0.125
		(0.078)
Apology × Violation History		−0.085
		(0.111)
Attack × Violation History		0.030
		(0.110)
Concealment × Violation History		−0.107
		(0.117)
Repudiation × Violation History		−0.122
		(0.107)
Observations	2,436	2,436

Table A3: *Interaction of Response Strategies with Transgressor Government Characteristics.* Standard errors are clustered by respondent.4Statistical significance is denoted by *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

Appendix:

Reputation Management Survey Text

April 2023

VPN Warning!

This survey uses a protocol to check that you are responding from inside the United States and not using a Virtual Private Server (VPS), Virtual Private Network (VPN), or proxy to hide your country. In order to take this survey, please turn off your VPS, VPN, or proxy if you are using one and also any ad block applications. Failure to do this might prevent you from completing the survey.

Page Break

Consent We are asking you to take part in a research study examining individuals' opinions about actions taken by foreign governments. The purpose of the study is to understand how individuals assess the behavior of foreign countries.

The study will take approximately 10 minutes to complete. If you agree to take part, you will be asked to answer some questions about yourself and your preferences.

There are no known or anticipated risks to you for participating, and you will not have to pay for taking part. All of your responses will be anonymous. The researcher will not know your name, and no identifying information will be connected to your survey answers in any way. When we publish the results of the research or talk about it in conferences, we will not use your name.

Taking part in this study is your choice. You can choose to take part, or you can choose not to take part in this study. You also can change your mind at any time.   Please feel free to ask about anything you don't understand.

If you have questions later or if you have a research-related problem, you can email the Principal Investigator at jcmorse@ucsb.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or you have complaints about this research, you call the UCSB Institutional Review Boards at 805-893-3807 or email hsc@research.ucsb.edu.

If you would like to participate, simply click the 'I agree to participate' box below, then click the ">>" button to start the survey."

○ Yes, I agree to participate (3)

○ No, I do not wish to participate (4)

End of Block: IRB Consent

Start of Block: Foreign Policy Orientation and Ideology

O_FP On the next few pages, we will ask you some questions about how you believe the United States should act when it engages with other countries. There is no right or wrong answer - we are simply interested in your opinion.

To be sure that you read all the questions closely, you will not be able to proceed to the next page until 10 seconds have passed.

- -

Page Break

INTL_CO Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement for each item:

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat disagree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat agree (5)	Agree (6)	Strongly agree (7)
It is essential for the government to work with other countries to solve problems such as hunger and pollution. (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
We should not think so much in international terms but instead focus on our own domestic problems. (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
The world would be a better place if people from other countries were more like Americans. (5)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Please select Agree if you are still closely reading this survey. (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

FP_2
Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement for each item:

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat disagree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat agree (5)	Agree (6)	Strongly agree (7)
Countries should always honor international law, even when it conflicts with national interests. (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
During war, militaries should never target civilians. (6)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
All countries should respect the human rights of their citizens. (7)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Foreign Policy Orientation and Ideology 2

Start of Block: Issue Area 1

Tran1 Now we will ask for your opinion about a hypothetical situation that could take place in the future. The situation is general and is not about any specific country in the news today. Some parts of the description may seem important to you; other parts may seem unimportant. After describing the situation, we will ask your opinion about some policy options.

End of Block: Issue Area 1

Option 1: Conventional Attack

Imagine it is five years in the future. A foreign country is involved in an escalating dispute with a neighboring country. The foreign country is [a democracy/not a democracy] and [has/does not have] a history of military aggression against other countries in the region.

Media sources report that military forces from the foreign country have crossed the border and seized control of several government buildings and checkpoints. Some news outlets suggest that the foreign government initiated the military attack to coerce and intimidate the neighboring state.

- -

IO Info Treatment

[Control: no info]

[IO Info: United Nations investigators corroborate the reports, describing the incursion as a coordinated military offensive by the foreign government.]

- -

IO Norms Treatment

[Control: no info]

[IO Norm: Respect for other countries' sovereignty is a core principle of the UN Charter and international law. All countries have agreed to avoid threatening or using offensive military force against other countries.]

- -

Reputation Management Treatment

[Control: The foreign government declined to comment on the reports.]

[Apology: The foreign government acknowledges the attack, apologizes, and pledges its future commitment to respecting territorial integrity.]

[Attack: The foreign government acknowledges the attack and argues that aggressive actions are justified to defend itself against countries that harbor terrorists.]

[Concealment: The foreign government denies that it was involved in the attack, arguing the action was taken by separatists in the neighboring country.]

[Repudiation: The foreign government denies that it was involved in the attack, arguing the action was taken by separatists in the neighboring country. The government also argues that aggressive actions are justified to defend itself against countries that harbor terrorists.]

Option 2: Cyber Attack

Imagine it is five years in the future. A foreign country is involved in an escalating dispute with a neighboring country. The foreign country is [a democracy/not a democracy] and [has/does not have] a history of military aggression against other countries in the region.

Media sources report a massive unexplained electricity outage in the neighboring country. Thousands are left without power. Some news outlets suggest that the foreign government has initiated a cyberattack to coerce and intimidate the neighboring state.

- -

IO Info Treatment

[Control: no info]

[IO Info: United Nations investigators corroborate the reports, describing the incident as a coordinated cyber offensive by the foreign government.]

- -

IO Norms Treatment

[Control: no info]

[IO Norm: Respect for other countries' sovereignty is a core principle of the UN Charter and international law. All countries have agreed to avoid threatening or using offensive military force against other countries. According to widely accepted international principles, cyberattacks constitute an impermissible use of force.]

- -

Reputation Management Treatment

[Control: The foreign government declined to comment on the reports.]

[Apology: The foreign government acknowledges the cyberattack, apologizes, and pledges its future commitment to respecting territorial integrity.]

[Attack: The foreign government acknowledges the cyberattack and argues that aggressive actions are justified to defend itself against countries that harbor terrorists.]

[Concealment: The foreign government denies that it was involved in the cyberattack, arguing the accusations are unfounded and defamatory.]

[Repudiation: The foreign government denies that it was involved in the cyberattack, arguing the accusations are unfounded and defamatory. The government also argues that aggressive actions are justified to defend itself against countries that harbor terrorists.]

Imagine it is five years in the future. A foreign country is experiencing a domestic crisis. The foreign country is [a democracy/not a democracy] and [has/does not have] a history of domestic human rights abuses.

Media sources report that thousands of citizens in the foreign country have been rounded up and imprisoned indefinitely without trial. Some news outlets suggest that the foreign country's security forces have begun a systematic campaign of unlawful detention and torture to re-establish control.

IO Info Treatment

[Control: no info]

[IO Info: United Nations investigators corroborate the reports, describing the government's actions as a coordinated campaign of torture and repression.]

IO Norms Treatment

[Control: no info]

[IO Norm: The prohibition against torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment is a core principle of international law. Several United Nations treaties forbid countries from arbitrary arrests, forced disappearances, and torture.]

Reputation Management Treatment

[Control: The foreign government declined to comment on the reports.]

[Apology: The foreign government acknowledges the alleged campaign, apologizes, and pledges its future commitment to respecting the rights of its citizens.]

[Attack: The foreign government acknowledges the alleged campaign and argues that emergency actions are justified to combat the violent extremists who are terrorizing the country.]

[Concealment: The foreign government denies the alleged campaign, arguing the accusations are unfounded and defamatory.]

[Repudiation: The foreign government denies the alleged campaign, arguing the accusations are unfounded and defamatory. The government also argues that emergency actions are justified to combat the violent extremists who are terrorizing the country.]

MC1a Before continuing, we need to make sure you read this information carefully.

In the situation you just read, did the foreign government comment on the allegations?

○ Yes, they responded to the allegations (1)

○ No, they declined to comment (7)

MC1b In the situation you just read, did the foreign government deny the allegations?

○ Yes (1)

○ No (7)

MC1c In the situation you just read, did the foreign government argue that the alleged behavior was justified?

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

Page Break

InfoNorms_remind1

Here is the information again, for your reference: ${e://Field/background_reminder}

UN investigators corroborate the reports${e://Field/norms_reminder}${e://Field/Treat1Reminder}

Norms_remind1

Here is the information again, for your reference: ${e://Field/background_reminder}
${e://Field/norms_reminder}${e://Field/Treat1Reminder}

Info_remind1

Here is the information again, for your reference: ${e://Field/background_reminder}

UN investigators corroborate the reports${e://Field/Treat1Reminder}

Con_remind1

Here is the information again, for your reference: ${e://Field/background_reminder}
${e://Field/Treat1Reminder}

Certainty1 Based on what you just read, how likely is it that the foreign government ${e://Field/DidTheViolation1}, as alleged by media reports?

○ Very likely (1)

○ Likely (8)

○ Neither Likely nor Unlikely (9)

○ Unlikely (10)

○ Very Unlikely (11)

AffectiveEvaluation1 Is it acceptable or unacceptable for a government to ${e://Field/DoTheViolation1}, given the circumstances in the scenario?

○ Completely Acceptable (1)

○ Somewhat Acceptable (8)

○ Neither Acceptable nor Unacceptable (9)

○ Somewhat Unacceptable (10)

○ Completely Unacceptable (11)

Affective_Open1 Please write 1-2 sentences explaining your response above.

_____

Page Break ─────────────────────────────────────

InfoNorms_remind1a

Here is the information again, for your reference: ${e://Field/background_reminder}

UN investigators corroborate the reports${e://Field/norms_reminder}${e://Field/Treat1Reminder}

Norms_remind1a

Here is the information again, for your reference: ${e://Field/background_reminder}
${e://Field/norms_reminder}${e://Field/Treat1Reminder}

Info_remind1a

Here is the information again, for your reference: ${e://Field/background_reminder}

UN investigators corroborate the reports${e://Field/Treat1Reminder}

Con_remind1a

Here is the information again, for your reference: ${e://Field/background_reminder}
${e://Field/Treat1Reminder}

R_Punishment_Agg1 Suppose the US government is considering a policy response to punish the foreign government in the scenario. Please rate your level of support for the following policy options:

	Strongly oppose (4)	Oppose (5)	Neither support nor oppose (6)	Support (7)	Strongly support (8)
Work to expel the foreign country from the UN Human Rights Council (4)	○	○	○	○	○
Join partner countries in imposing economic penalties on the foreign country (2)	○	○	○	○	○
Transfer military weaponry to the neighboring country to help it defend itself (5)	○	○	○	○	○

R_Punishment_HR1 Suppose the US government is considering a policy response to punish the foreign government in the scenario. Please rate your level of support for the following policy options:

	Strongly oppose (4)	Oppose (5)	Neither support nor oppose (6)	Support (7)	Strongly support (8)
Work to expel the foreign country from the UN Human Rights Council (4)	○	○	○	○	○
Join partner countries in imposing economic penalties on the foreign country (2)	○	○	○	○	○
Provide financial support to citizen groups that oppose the foreign government (5)	○	○	○	○	○

Punish_Open1 Please write 1-2 sentences explaining your response above.

_____

R_FutureCoop1 Suppose that, prior to the incident, the US government was negotiating a new international agreement to increase economic and diplomatic ties with the foreign country. Do you support or oppose the United States signing this agreement?

○ Stongly support (4)

○ Support (2)

○ Neither support nor oppose (3)

○ Oppose (5)

○ Strongly oppose (6)

- -

Page Break ————————————————————————————————————

InfoNorms_remind1b
Here is the information again, for your reference: ${e://Field/background_reminder}
UN investigators corroborate the reports${e://Field/norms_reminder}${e://Field/Treat1Reminder}

Norms_remind1b
Here is the information again, for your reference: ${e://Field/background_reminder}
${e://Field/norms_reminder}${e://Field/Treat1Reminder}

Info_remind1b
Here is the information again, for your reference: ${e://Field/background_reminder}
UN investigators corroborate the reports${e://Field/Treat1Reminder}

Con_remind1b
Here is the information again, for your reference: ${e://Field/background_reminder}
${e://Field/Treat1Reminder}

R_NormLegit1 Based on what you just read, to what extent do you think the norm that ${e://Field/norms_query} is widely accepted by foreign governments?

○ Widely accepted (4)

○ Somewhat accepted (2)

○ Neither accepted nor unaccepted (3)

○ Somewhat not accepted (5)

○ Widely not accepted (7)

R_IOCred1a1 Suppose that several years later, UN investigators report that **another foreign country** has ${e://Field/DidTheViolation1}. In your opinion, how credible is the United Nations as a source of information on this issue?

○ Very credible (1)

○ Credible (2)

○ Neither credible nor not credible (3)

○ Not credible (5)

○ Not at all credible (6)

R_IOCred1b1 Suppose that several years later, UN investigators report that the **United States** has ${e://Field/DidTheViolation1}. In your opinion, how credible is the United Nations as a source of information on this issue?

○ Very credible (1)

○ Credible (2)

○ Neither credible nor not credible (3)

○ Not credible (5)

○ Not at all credible (6)

Tran2 Now we will discuss another hypothetical foreign policy situation that could take place in the future. After describing the situation, we will ask your opinion about some policy options.

[All Respondents receive a second vignette. Those who viewed the conventional or cyber attack are offered the human rights scenario. Those who viewed the human rights vignette are offered the conventional or cyber attack scenario. Outcome questions are identical to above.]

PolTransition Now, we'd like to ask you a question about your political views. There is no right or wrong answer, so please select whatever option best describes your views.

- -

Page Break ⸻⸻⸻⸻⸻⸻⸻⸻⸻⸻⸻

Viewpoint Thinking about politics these days, how would you describe your political viewpoint?

○ Very Liberal (1)

○ Liberal (2)

○ Slightly Liberal (3)

○ Moderate (4)

○ Slightly Conservative (5)

○ Conservative (6)

○ Very Conservative (7)

Page Break

Transition Only one section left! You will now be asked a few questions about current events. You may or may not know the answers. If you don't know, please select your best guess.

PK1 Who is the current Vice President of the United States?

○ Hillary Clinton (1)

○ Mike Pence (2)

○ Joe Biden (3)

○ Kamala Harris (4)

PK2 What does "NATO" refer to?

○ The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (1)

○ The Non-Aligned Treaty Outlet (2)

○ The North African Tribal Organization (3)

PK3 What is the name of the leader of Russia?

○ Vladimir Putin (1)

○ Boris Yeltsin (5)

○ Jair Bolsonaro (2)

○ Valery Gerasimov (3)

Page Break

End of Block: Political Knowledge Questions

CONCLUSIO Thank you for completing this survey.