

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 paper, we study whether and to what extent variation in the foreign economic policy of a rising power moderates 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 in the United States and members of the public. In the experiment, we systematically vary a hypothetical rising power's foreign aid and investment strategy 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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A number of rich literatures in international relations, including rationalist approaches to crisis bargaining and war (Fearon 1995), macrohistorical and formal work on power transitions (e.g., Organski and Kugler 1981; Powell 1999; Debs and Monteiro 2014), and a recent substantive literature on the rise of China and its ambitions in world affairs (e.g., Johnston 2003) outline different, but sometimes overlapping, logics of how power shifts can undermine cooperation and generate conflict between states. In each of these accounts, however, the probability of conflict depends—at least, in part—on how the foreign policy outputs of the weaker power affect threat perceptions of observers in the stronger power. The key question for observers in a declining state is whether or not the ascendant power wishes to revise the prevailing order in ways that might do harm to the declining power’s interests. On what kinds of evidence might observers base their assessments? Existing research points to two primary forms of evidence: rising power behavior and rhetoric.

At important junctures, states have declared their intention to put heavy weight on the foreign policy *behavior* of the rising power. For example, in discussing how the United States would assess whether or not to continue to welcome China as a partner in the multilateral liberal order, 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 international system (Zoellick 2005). Zoellick’s speech emphasized the central role that Beijing’s foreign policy behavior would play in convincing the international community that China’s desired changes to the existing international order are modest and benign. As Zoellick remarked, “The world will look to the evidence of actions.”

Eighteen years on, the U.S. foreign policy establishment is apparently unsatisfied with the evidence China has displayed through its foreign policy actions to date. Key points of contention include China’s state-led approach toward modernizing in key technological industries, its posture in the South China Sea and other territorial disputes, and the sometimes onerous terms imposed on host countries by China’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China’s maritime dispute behavior is viewed as an attack on the “rules-based maritime order,” to use Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s phrase. The BRI, similarly, is often construed by observers as an effort to undermine the international development finance order. In response to these perceptions, U.S. foreign policy has taken an increasingly aggressive turn towards stemming China’s influence in world affairs under

both the Trump and Biden administrations.

In addition to actions, observers may alternatively focus on rising power *rhetoric*. Throughout its rise, China has attempted to rhetorically reassure the United States and other countries that it is not a revisionist actor and is instead satisfied with the prevailing international system (Goldstein 2001, 2020; Glaser and Medeiros 2007). A statement released by President Xi Jinping after a recent in-person meeting with President Biden is characteristic of these efforts. The statement read, in part, “China does not seek to change the existing international order. . . and has no intention to challenge or displace the United States.” How are reassurance efforts of this form received by observers in the United States? Are they received differently in the context of relatively aggressive foreign policy behavior compared to more benign behavior? Even if observers claim to be reassured, are they willing to take costly actions like ceding power in important international institutions to the rising power?

And what if China had chosen a different, more outwardly reassuring portfolio of foreign policy behaviors over the past two decades, perhaps more consistently mimicking the behaviors prescribed by prevailing international rules and norms? China might, for example, have refrained from its South China Sea expansionism and/or coordinated its foreign investments and investment policies with the World Bank, IMF, and other multilateral financiers. Some suggest that such a course would likely reassure other powerful states (Johnston 2003; Mukherjee 2022). But other work, emphasizing incomplete information and incentives to misrepresent (Jervis 1978; Fearon 1995), suggests that such efforts might be dismissed by observers as not credible (Powell 1999). Moreover, as Goddard and Krebs (2015) note, “revisionist states can gain strategic advantage from pretending to be satisfied” and so “leaders often do not trust other states’ assurances.” According to this view, the behavior of rising powers within the prevailing international system may be only a mixed or even completely uninformative signal of their true ambitions, and this is especially so in the modern context where the costs borne by acting outside prevailing international institutions and norms can be exceptionally high (Keohane 2005).

The recent case of China reflects a broader puzzle in international relations. It illustrates clearly that despite important advances in our understanding of the underlying logic of power transitions

and their potential dangers, we know much less about how behavioral and rhetorical reassurances—or lack thereof—from rising powers are received by their intended audiences *in media res*. Though some work provides compelling theoretical and case study evidence on related questions (Kydd 2007; Haynes and K. Yoder 2020), the body of microlevel, causally identified evidence in this area is still quite small (Tingley 2017; Yoder and Haynes 2021; Kertzer, Brutger, and Quek 2019; Quek 2017), does not yet speak to how observers might distinguish between rhetorical and behavioral reassurances, 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 the perceptions of elites. First, power transitions are rare events making the stock of available evidence quite sparse. Second, the policy choices and statements of leaders are subject to significant strategic selection pressures making it challenging to generate unbiased estimates of the effect of particular foreign policy choices on the perceptions of observers. Third, foreign policy rhetoric and behavior are often bundled in observational data making it difficult to specify and observe relevant counterfactual scenarios. And fourth, elites are, by definition, in short supply and are generally seen as a hard-to-study population (Kertzer and Renshon 2022).

In this paper, we study how the perceptions of observers in a declining state change in response to variation in the foreign policy behavior and rhetoric of a rising state using scenario-based survey experiments fielded on a unique sample of U.S. policy elites and members of the general U.S. public. In motivating our experiments, we review a number of theories with implications for our understanding of conflict and cooperation in the context of power transitions. Our goal here is to highlight the central role that the beliefs or perceptions of observers play in each of these models. We also engage with the recent substantive work on the rise of China, noting the emphasis that scholars place on the foreign economic policy of the rising power as an indicator of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the status quo. We design and field an experiment meant to shed light on whether variation in a rising power’s foreign economic policy behavior and rhetoric affects threat perceptions among observers in a declining state. The experiment varies foreign policy rhetoric

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

and behavior independently in ways that suggest revisionist or status quo preferences. We then study how observers—foreign policy elites and the public—respond, paying particular attention to perceptions of threat and revisionist intentions. In addition, we study whether observers are willing to support potentially costly policy actions that would be consistent with moderated threat perceptions. In the scenarios, respondents are asked about their perceptions of a non-democratic rising power. For reasons discussed below, the scenarios are centered around the state’s foreign aid and investment policy behavior and rhetoric.

Our findings are similar across the two elite and public samples, showing that status quo-reinforcing behavior by the rising power generally lowers threat perceptions more than status quo-reinforcing language. We take this as evidence that observers in declining states are more likely to rely on changes in foreign policy behavior than on changes in rhetoric. This finding is consistent with the now canonical reassurance model (Kydd 2007) and with work on revisionism (Johnston 2003). We also find evidence that the combination of status quo-reinforcing behavior and rhetoric is particularly effective at moderating threat perceptions. In other words, cheap talk is informative and persuasive when accompanied by costly signals of common interests (Sartori 2002).

1 Shifting power, threat perceptions, and reassurance

How do observers in declining powers draw inferences about the intentions or aspirations of rising powers? In asking this question, we shift the analytical focus of much work on power transitions away from the foreign policy outputs of rising powers and towards how those outputs are received by foreign policy elites in declining states. This shift is important because there are a number of prominent streams of research in international relations suggesting that power transitions in world politics are destabilizing, but they all rely—in one way or another—on conflict emerging in response to powerful states conditioning their relations with the rising power on their perceptions of that power’s preferences and intentions.

Take, for example, the older macrohistorical literature on power transition theory. This work contends that shifts in power significantly increase the risk of war. This work focused on the key

destabilizing role that “dissatisfaction” among rising powers with the status quo international order built by declining powers plays in increasing the probability of war (Organski 1958).² In addition, work in the realist tradition suggests that power transitions are dangerous because leaders 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 leaders in the declining power cannot trust the rising power to honor their pre-power transition commitments not to exploit the declining power after the power transition has occurred (Fearon 1995; Powell 1999).³ And work on endogenous power shifts emphasizes uncertainty arising from the inability to perfectly observe the power shifts themselves (Debs and Monteiro 2014). When, for example, investments in military technology that could significantly alter the relative power of two states are not perfectly observable, the dominant state may be tempted to launch a preventive war. In other work, Monteiro and Debs (2020) show that the ability of powerful states to unilaterally affect the growth trajectories of weaker states can be destabilizing as well. This is the case when “powerful states fear their security will be undermined by the economic growth of weaker states” and so leaders of powerful states may use their privileged position in the global economy to arrest power transitions in their very early stages (Monteiro and Debs 2020). This, in turn, gives the weaker state incentives to fight for the opportunity to throw off the constraints imposed by the stronger state.⁴

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 policy makers in powerful states. These tasks involve, in part, accurately assessing the preferences and 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

²See also Organski and Kugler (1981) and Gilpin (1981). For critical reviews of this literature see DiCicco and Levy (1999) and Lebow and Valentino (2009). More recent work has focused squarely on what might call the “varieties of revisionist” states (Cooley, Nexon, and Ward 2019; Goddard 2018a; Ward 2013).

³The focus in this literature is often on uncertainty and incentives to misrepresent, not on satisfaction or dissatisfaction per se. However, these models do assume the two actors are engaged in a zero sum bargaining game of the kind that an incumbent and challenger might play over the shape of the international order.

⁴Monteiro and Debs (2020) is not a theory about shifting power per se; their model does not depend on power shifts to produce war. As we note below, it does generate incentives among policy makers in powerful states produce accurate predictions about the ultimate ambitions of weaker states and those incentives may be more acute in the presence of shifting power.

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. In the extreme, delay might lead to exploitation after the fact of a power transition. Concern about mistakes of this kind are what limit cooperation in many instances in world affairs (e.g., [Jervis 1978](#)). More generally, concern about the credibility of pre-power transition commitments can generate incentives to preemptive war in some rationalist models of war ([Powell 1999](#)). 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](#)).

But policy makers, as Zoellick's example and important work on reassurance in international relations ([Kydd 2007](#)) suggests, appear to appreciate that taking such a Hobbesian approach to foreign affairs entails significant opportunity costs. Indeed, a powerful state that treats a satisfied rising power as revisionist will generate needless conflict in an effort to forestall the rise of a potential challenger who would have been a cooperative partner. This outcome is what Kydd ([2007](#)) calls "mistaken mistrust" and leads to lower aggregate welfare for both states because the gains of cooperation are not realized. 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. What these foreign policy outputs might be does not quite follow from the seminal works in power transition theory or from work on reassurance ([Kydd 2007](#); [Haynes and K. Yoder 2020](#)). These works often characterize the behavior of satisfied states by contrasting it with that of archetypal dissatisfied or revisionist states. While a number of scholars have worked to identify indicators of whether a rising power finds itself dissatisfied or not (for example, [Kim 1992](#); [Kugler and 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.”⁵

There has been important progress on this front in a second-generation power transition literature focused specifically on how the structure of the status quo interacts with preferences to affect the strategies that revisionist states might choose. For example, Cooley, Nexon, and Ward (2019) divide revisionists based on two dimensions: their preferences for redistributing power within the current system and their penchant for creating 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 the revisionist state in the network of institutions that comprise the international order will condition the strategies that they employ to pursue their revisionist goals.

Meanwhile, the rise of China has generated significant interest in operationalizing measures of revisionist behavior in order to gauge the extent to which China is revisionist. Johnston (2003), for example, identifies indicators of satisfaction on the part of a rising power and then uses those indicators as a yardstick against which to measure the satisfaction of China with the status quo of the liberal international order. Kastner and 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.

Still, in our view, these efforts to conceptualize and operationalize status quo or revisionist foreign policy outputs often omit a key but fundamental variable: the perceptions or beliefs of foreign policymakers in status quo states. This is important since the mechanisms that undermine cooperation (and potentially generate war) in the theories reviewed above differ, but the effect of those mechanisms nearly always flows through the beliefs and perceptions of leaders 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

⁵As 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 and 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.”

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. In short, can rising powers reassure?

2 The portfolio of reassurance: foreign policy rhetoric and behavior

As the above discussion makes clear, the literature on power transitions and revisionism on the one hand and the smaller but quite rigorous literature on reassurance on the other suggest that a rising power's foreign economic policy outputs are a good portion of its reassurance portfolio. Foreign economic policy outputs may be broadly categorized as either rhetorical—statements and speeches from a leader or senior government officials—or behavioral—actual foreign policy actions taken by the government. A speech to the United Nations General Assembly about multilateral economic governance would be rhetorical, while a set of foreign development investments would be behavioral. Foreign economic policy outputs vary not just in form, of course; they also vary in their political content. While the political content of foreign economic policy might vary along many dimensions, the dimension that we are interested in here is whether the 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 discounting rhetoric as uninformative. Because states' true preferences are not directly observable (Frieden 1999) and states have strong incentives to misrepresent them (Fearon 1995), the commitment problems introduced by power transitions between rising and declining states may make efforts to reassure a declining state without making some costly investment in changing one's foreign policy behavior "inherently incredible" (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. The canonical rationalist account of reassurance lands here (Kydd

2007).

It might, however, be the case that both rhetorical and behavioral outputs matter and potentially compliment one another, making room for states to draw on their whole foreign economic policy portfolio to communicate their satisfaction (or lack thereof) with the status quo. This is generally where much of the recent work conceptualizing and operationalizing revisionism lands. This might be so because the rhetorical statements 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; Tingley and Walter 2011; Ramsay 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). Earlier work complements these claims by showing that rising powers make significant investments in calibrating foreign policy rhetoric.

For example, throughout its rise 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 and Sundquist Forthcoming). Johnston (2003) develops a set of indicators to examine China's participation in international institutions, adherence to international norms, and compliance with the "rules of the game" in different areas of world politics. The hope is that the behavior of China can be used to substantiate claims that it "does not seek hegemony or predominance in world affairs" in the words of Zheng (2005).

Particularly skeptical observers, of course, might discount rhetoric *and* behavior, believing that the underlying dynamics of power transitions 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.⁶ The declining state, in this case, would be facing a “clever rather than a clumsy challenger” (Kastner and Saunders 2012). As Goddard and 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.” Thus, incomplete information and incentives to misrepresent might limit the extent to which states can reveal their type. Keohane’s well-known argument that “the high costs of regime-building help existing regimes to persist” in the wake of hegemonic decline (Keohane 2005) helps underscore why participation in and reinforcing of the existing order may not be dispositive evidence of status quo intentions. Because acting within the existing infrastructure of a given regime is less costly than acting outside it, observing that a state has embedded itself in the existing institutional infrastructure provides little information about the state’s actual preferences.⁷ Importantly, as the benefits of acting within the regime increase in magnitude, choosing a cooperative strategy today provides less and less information about one’s behavior in the wake of a power transition.⁸ In this “long con” world, observers will be similarly skeptical of rising powers, regardless of their foreign policy outputs. The above discussion yields the following hypotheses:

H1a (Evidence of actions): A rising power adopting a foreign economic policy consistent with the rules and expectations of the status quo international economic order will be perceived as more benign than a rising power adopting a foreign economic policy that is inconsistent with that order.

H1b (Rhetorical reassurance): A rising power offering rhetorical assurances of satisfaction

⁶Alternatively, even if a rising power does not wish to deceive, holding preferences constant, it might still pursue a number of different behaviors conditional on existing international institutional landscape and its position therein (Goddard 2018a; Ikenberry and Lim 2017).

⁷They may cooperate because the current order is near their ideal point, or they may cooperate because the benefits of cooperation are large enough to compensate for moving away from their ideal point.

⁸Researchers focusing on the rise of China have made a similar point. As the outside option becomes more costly, rising powers need more and more extreme preferences in order to justify exercising it before they supersede the dominant state (Johnston 2003; Schweller and Pu 2011; Feigenbaum 2020).

with the status quo international economic order will be perceived as more benign than a rising power voicing dissatisfaction with the status quo.

H1c (Reinforcing signals): Relative to a rising power that has adopted a revisionist foreign economic policy and has voiced dissatisfaction with the international economic order, a rising power that adopts a status quo foreign economic policy *and* voices 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? The existing literature, as the above discussion makes clear, is not so informative on this question. Any of these are plausible models that actors might adopt, but most of the scholarly debate has been conceptual or macrohistorical to date. There is little direct, causally-identified evidence of how observers in a declining power assess the intentions of rising powers.⁹ 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. And while recent experimental work shows that shifts in power generate commitment problems (Quek 2017; Tingley 2017) and excellent laboratory experiments testing reassurance theory show that reassurance is possible (Yoder and Haynes 2021), we know of no studies that study the differential effects of foreign policy rhetoric vs behavior. This omission is surprising and important. After all, rising powers' ability to use foreign policy behavior and rhetoric to reassure the declining power about their intentions for the international system depends heavily on how such signals are received in the declining power.¹⁰

3 Research design

To shed light on this question of whether and to what extent the foreign policy outputs of rising powers shape perceptions of their intentions among observers in a declining state, we designed and

⁹For an exception see Kertzer, Brutger, and Quek (2019).

¹⁰Some work suggests that states recognize that their behavioral and rhetorical signals are subjective in the eyes of the receiver and may have incentives to transmit credible signals (Haynes and K. Yoder 2020).

fielded two original surveys with embedded experiments. We study these questions in the context of international development, which 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, and Vreeland 2009](#); [Blair, Marty, and Roessler 2022](#)). We thus expect observers, though perhaps mostly foreign policy elite observers, to be sensitive to shifting power dynamics in this area. Second, earlier international relations research may have overstated the coherence of the international order. The international order is differentially established and robust across different domains within the international system ([Johnston 2019](#)).¹¹ 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.¹² 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 aid 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, converting loans to grants, using local labor to build projects, and offering transparency to citizens in recipient countries so that they may learn how development assistance is being spent at both a national and local level.

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.¹³ 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.

¹¹In particular, hegemons themselves can weaken particular orders by engaging selectively in revisionist behavior ([Cooley and Nexon 2020](#)).

¹²In contrast, studying rising power behavior in a less developed order, such as information and communications technology (ICT), would be more difficult since there is not already a widely acknowledged set of status quo behaviors.

¹³Of course, experiments are subject to other drawbacks including a potential lack of external validity.

This makes it 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.¹⁴ 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-governmental advocacy groups in the United States. Our elite experiment was in the field 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 U.S. 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 U.S. 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

¹⁴See Schultz (2001) for a discussion of these issues in the context of audience cost theory.

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 Tingley (2017). More information about the DLABSS sample is provided in the appendix.

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. 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 country'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.

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 status quo behavior treatment read:

Using its growing economic power, the country has embarked on a large international development and investment program. Its approach generally adheres to international “best practices.” The country’s investments generally help citizens in need of assistance. The country coordinates with aid agencies like the World Bank or United Nations Development Program, rigorously checks whether its investments benefit average citizens, actively hires local laborers, and provides detailed 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. 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.

The revisionist behavior treatment read:

Its approach violates many international “best practices.” The country’s investments generally help wealthy and politically connected elites rather than the broader public in developing countries. The country does not coordinate with aid agencies like the World Bank or United Nations Development Program, does not rigorously check whether its investments benefit average citizens, rarely hires local laborers, and provides 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 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.

We identify particular recipient countries (Haiti or Dominican Republic) to ensure balance on background beliefs about the aid and investment strategy across treatment conditions. Choosing a relatively wealthy country with relatively stronger democratic institutions (Dominican Republic) and a relatively poor country with relatively weaker democratic institutions (Haiti) ensures 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. Finally, we chose a pair of recipient countries nearby the United States to make clear the global ambitions and scope of the rising power's aid and investment program.

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 satisfied version reads:

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

The dissatisfied version reads:

In recent years, the country has firmly demanded more power in those institutions because it believes its interests are often overlooked by other powerful countries. Speeches by the country's leadership consistently reflect this sentiment and suggest that the country is 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.¹⁵

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."

¹⁵In addition, the introduction to the elite survey read somewhat differently, "Below we will describe the behavior of a hypothetical country. Please consider how you might feel about the country's motives and how the United States might be affected by this country's behavior."

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 U.S. in the future.”¹⁶ 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.

4 Results

We estimate marginal means and confidence intervals for each treatment condition, averaging over the recipient country treatments. To simplify exposition, we have dichotomized our dependent variables, assigning those that expressed any agreement the value of 100 and all others 0. This

¹⁶In addition, we asked the public about two other dimensions of indirect revisionism. First, we asked whether they view the rising power to be a “a responsible stakeholder in the international community.” And second, we asked the public about whether the rising power “threatens the ability of the United States to influence the course of world affairs.” The results are qualitatively similar to those presented here.

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. In the appendix, we also estimate models that control for a battery of pre-treatment background characteristics. Those models yield qualitatively similar results, suggesting that potential chance imbalances across treatment conditions are not driving our results.¹⁷ We report models without those pre-treatment controls in the main text here because we do not have complete demographic data on our elite respondents.

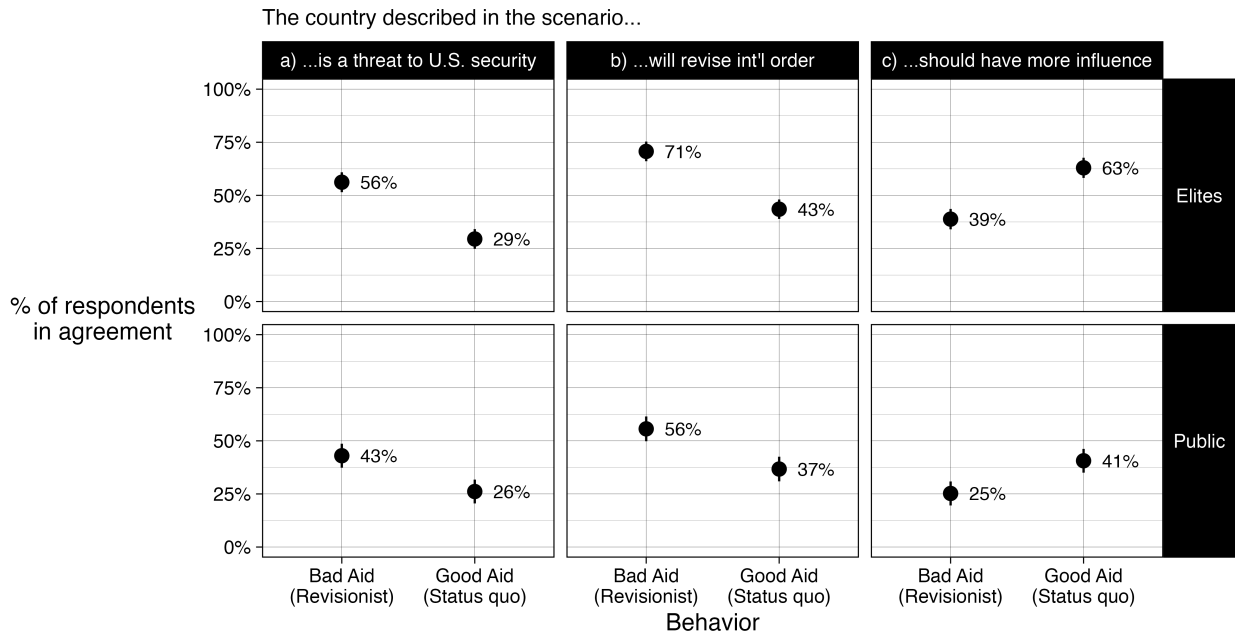
Status quo behavior moderates perceptions of threat and revisionist intent

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. 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. The results are presented in Figure 1. 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.

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

¹⁷We also report the results of balance checks in the appendix.

1) Marginal mean agreement by behavior condition



2) Marginal mean agreement by rhetoric condition

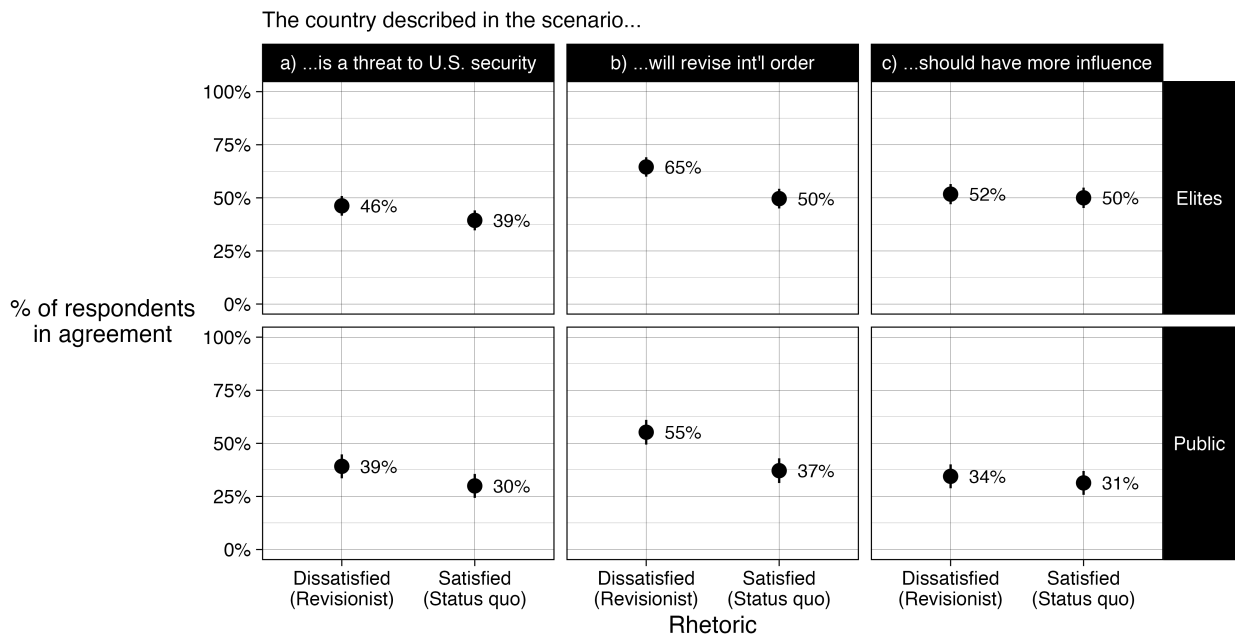


Figure 1: Marginal mean agreement among elites and public by Behavior (upper panel) and Rhetoric (lower panel) treatment conditions.

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 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 bad 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 good 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 bad aid 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 good 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 by disaggregating to examine how expressions of satisfaction might be moderated by the particular foreign economic policy that a rising power has adopted. 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 39.24 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 14.5 (95% CI: 8.4, 21.4) percentage points, from 49.6 percent when the state expresses satisfaction to 65.5 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

We get a different view, however, once we disaggregate more fully to examine the effect of expressed satisfaction conditional on aid and investment strategy. We present those results in Figure 2. The left side of the figure shows that states adopting aid and investment strategies that violate prevailing norms have a difficult time reassuring those in the declining state. Among elites, expressions of satisfaction have no effect on perceptions of threat. In both the status quo and revisionist conditions, a majority of our respondents (56.8 and 55.6, respectively) viewed the rising power as a threat to U.S. national security. This difference of 1.2 percentage points is statistically insignificant. We see a similarly null effect among the public with 44.8 percent of the public perceiving a threat in the revisionist condition and 41.2 percent of the public perceiving a threat in the status quo condition.

Marginal mean agreement by behavior and rhetoric condition

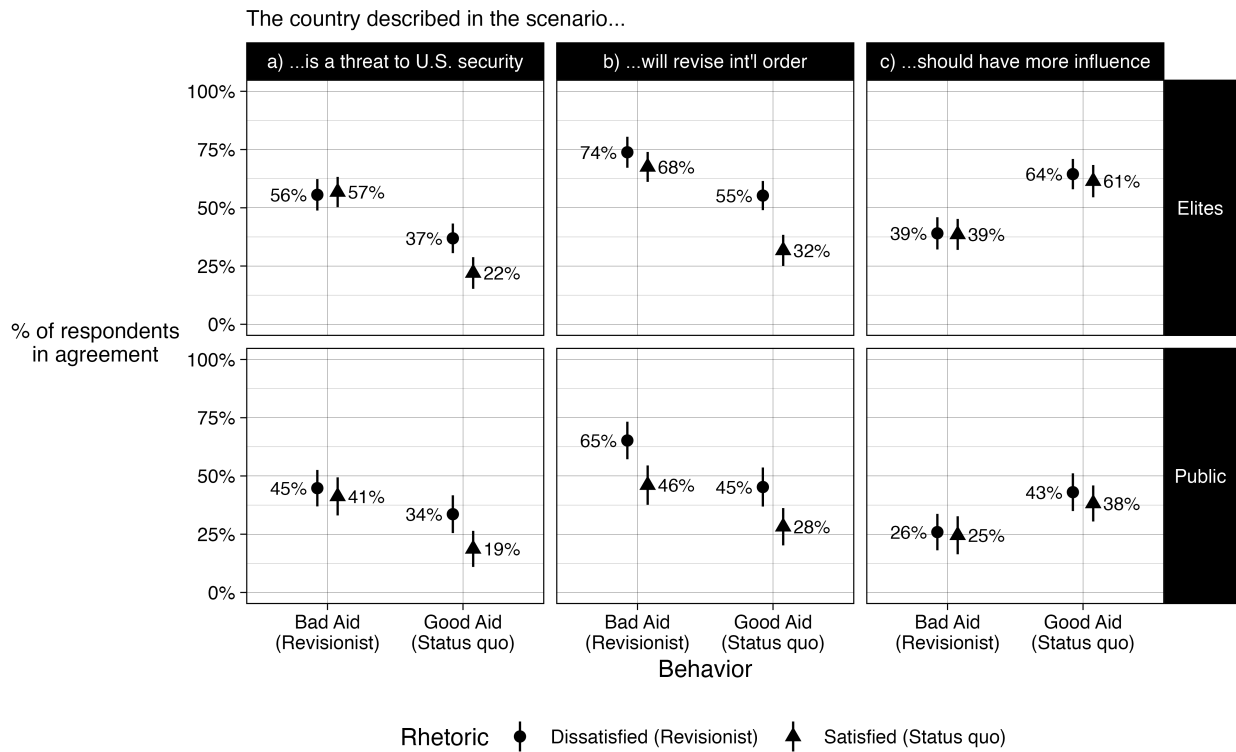


Figure 2: Marginal mean agreement among elites and the public disaggregated by each combination of behavior and rhetoric conditions.

This difference of 3.3 percentage point is, again, statistically insignificant.

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. 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.

Robustness: Revisionist intentions and foreign policy effectiveness

Above, we show that perceptions of threat and revisionist intent among observers abroad are conditional on the structure of a rising power's foreign economic policy and, in some cases, its

assurances that it is satisfied with the existing international order. We interpret this as evidence that observers update their beliefs about underlying ambitions of the state (i.e., whether the rising power is revisionist or not). But 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. These views, rather than perceptions about rising power preferences, could be driving the above results.

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 results in Figure 3. 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. 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 "good aid" strategy. Perhaps unsurprisingly, respondents did not anticipate that the recipient publics would be sensitive to the expressed preferences of the donor state. What matters for recipient publics, in the view of our elite respondents, is whether the aid and investment program is meant to help the wealthy and politically connected or is generally targeted more broadly. Averaging over the "behavior treatments" and moving from the "bad aid" condition to the "good aid" condition increases expectations that the recipient public will view the rising power favorably by 12.4 (95% CI: 6.4, 18.3, $p < .001$) percentage points. On the whole, however, respondent perceptions about rising power influence in developing countries do not appear to drive the main results reported above.

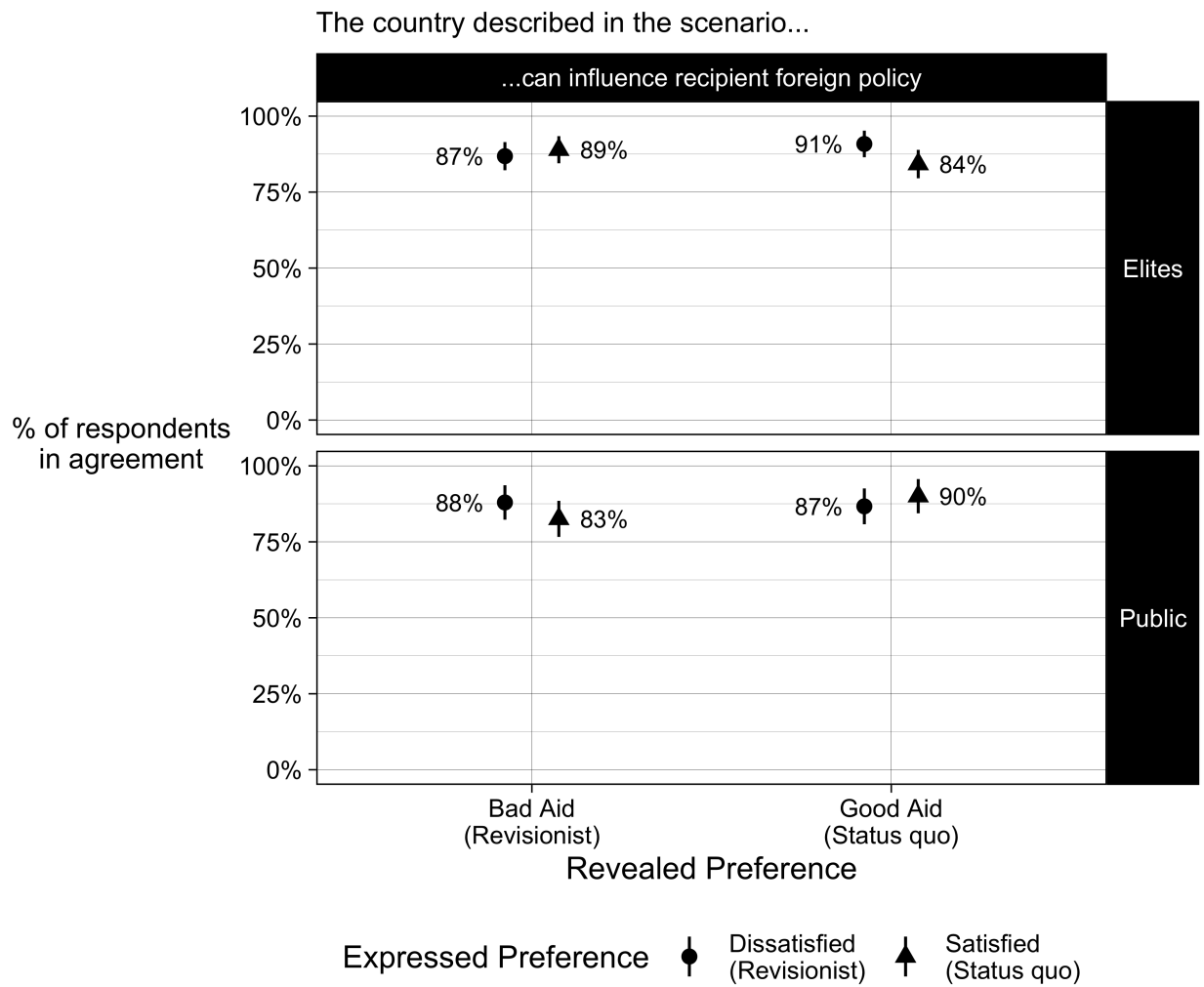


Figure 3: Marginal mean agreement among public and elites in each combination of Revealed and Expressed preference conditions.

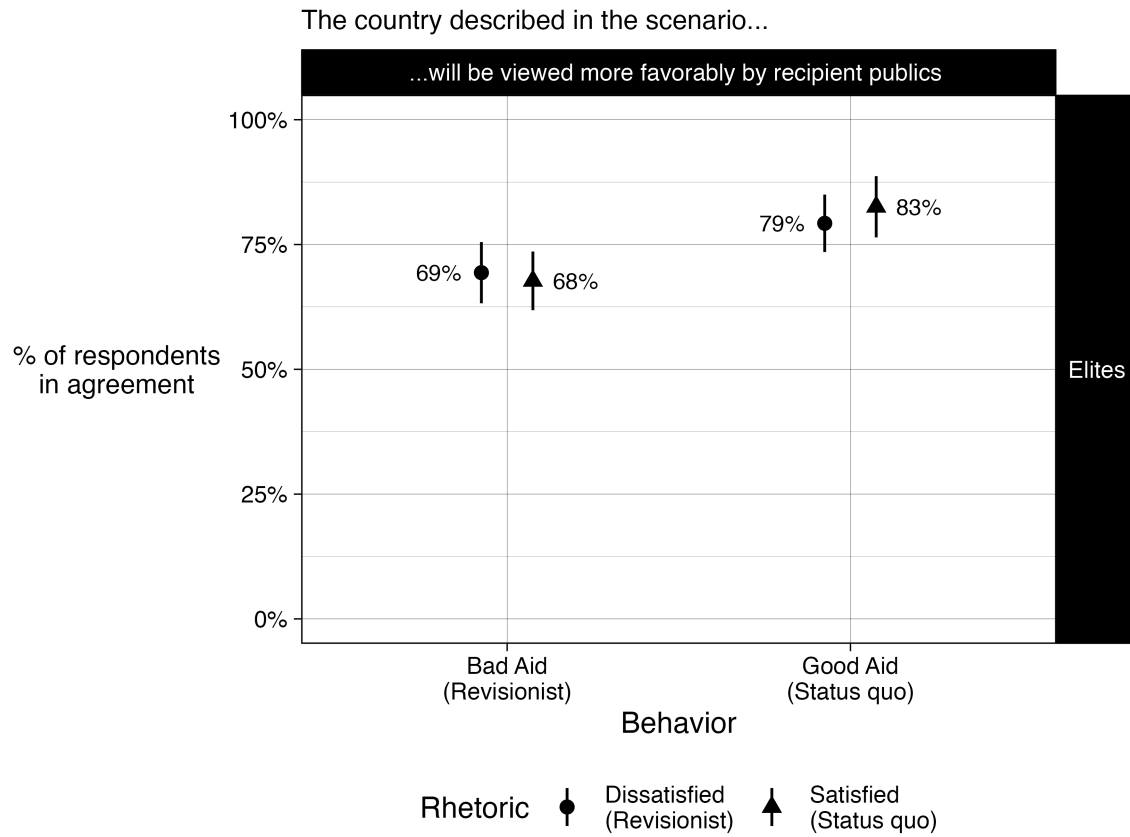


Figure 4: Marginal mean agreement among public and elites in each combination of Revealed and Expressed preference conditions.

On the whole, the results provide support for “evidence of action” arguments stressing rising power behavior as an indicator of preferences for international order. U.S. foreign policy practitioners and, to a lesser extent, members of the general U.S. public, appear to update their beliefs about rising powers’ desires and downgrading the perceived threat in response to status quo-reinforcing behavior. Strikingly, we find that they can do this even when a rising power’s government publicly expresses dissatisfaction with the international status quo in terms of their current levels of 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 rising powers’ intentions. In other words, rather than independent substitutes, we find that rising power behavior and rhetoric can be deployed in tandem to send more credible signals to audiences in a declining power.

5 Conclusion

How individuals in a declining power perceive the desires of a rising power 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 paper 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, this rhetoric can help effectively reassure observers of a rising power’s limited aims, at least in the field of international development.

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 of these 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 paper 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. 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 those foreign policy experts. 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.

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