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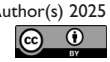

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The enemy behind the scenes: How China's propaganda shores up support for Russia's war in Ukraine

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Abstract

How can authoritarian propaganda effectively shape people's foreign policy attitudes? In this article, we assess a method of information manipulation that autocrats often use: exploiting the heuristic of an archenemy nation to influence the public's views of specific foreign policy issues. In particular, we argue that autocracies can manipulate public opinion by providing citizens with cues – even if fabricated – about the involvement of their main adversary in an international crisis. To test the argument, we examine the propaganda campaign in China during Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Using a unique two-wave longitudinal survey collected from the very beginning of the Ukraine war, we find observational evidence that propagandists successfully persuaded Chinese people to support Russia's invasion, specifically by blaming the war on China's main adversary, the U.S. We also document that this tactic was more effective in persuading the less-nationalist citizens to adopt pro-Russian attitudes.

Keywords

authoritarian politics, China, foreign policy attitudes, propaganda, public opinion, the heuristic of enemy nations, the Ukraine war

> *The war in Ukraine is the result of the U.S. government's continuous efforts to 'add fuel to the fire'. It is also a crisis that the U.S. deliberately allowed or even created for the sake of hegemony.*
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> *Xinhua News*, April 2, 2022

> *From a historical and global perspective, the Ukraine crisis is another global security crisis orchestrated by the United States.*
>
> *People's Daily*, March 29, 2022

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How do authoritarian governments manipulate people's foreign policy attitudes? The epigraphs, both from Chinese state media, illustrate a broad tactic that autocracies often use to influence public opinion: tapping into citizens' pre-existing views of the main adversary and exaggerating its involvement in an international crisis. At the inception of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, for example, China's propaganda machine exploited the deeply ingrained enemy image of the United States in the Chinese populace, both directly and indirectly. The mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, *Xinhua News*, published six consecutive commentaries accusing the U.S. of being the true instigator of the conflict (Xinhua News, 2022c). Their narrative suggested that Russia, boxed in by U.S. actions, had no choice but to invade Ukraine. More subtly, state media launched a national campaign to commemorate the victims of the 1999 U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, which resulted in the deaths of three Chinese state media journalists. The awkward timing speaks for itself – this year's commemoration occurred 2 months earlier than the anniversary in May. The point was to reignite anti-American sentiment in the context of the Ukraine war, which had long been stored in the collective memory.

Does such propaganda persuade? Existing literature on authoritarian propaganda offers limited direct evidence regarding its efficacy. Much of the research in propaganda studies has focused on the effectiveness of information manipulation in domestic contexts, such as its impact on regime stability (e.g. Bleck and Michelitch, 2017; Geddes and Zaller, 1989; Huang, 2015, 2018). In contrast, studies examining how government-controlled media shapes foreign policy attitudes remain relatively limited, and evaluations of the effectiveness of these propaganda efforts have predominantly centred on measures such as the promotion of anti-foreign and nationalist sentiments or the framing of external threats (Chubb and Wang, 2023; Liu and Shao, 2023; Mattingly and Yao, 2022; Sinkkonen and Elovainio, 2020; Wang, 2021; Weiss and Dafoe, 2019).

In this article, we examine a method of information manipulation that authoritarian states often use to influence people's foreign policy attitudes, assessing its effectiveness in a real-world propaganda campaign. The strategy in question is to exploit citizens' pre-existing attitudes towards an archenemy nation, a cognitive heuristic upon which individuals rely to formulate opinions about specific foreign policy issues. By providing the public with cues – even if fabricated – about the involvement of its main rival in an international crisis, authoritarian governments can manipulate people's specific foreign policy preferences.

We test this argument on the case of China during Russia's invasion of Ukraine, an example of authoritarian propaganda mobilising the domestic population to support a war waged by its ally. China has developed one of the most technologically sophisticated propaganda machines of the 21st century, and this is not the first time it has promoted pro-Russian narratives. When Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, for example, Chinese state media adopted a similar framing, portraying the 5-day war as Russia's response to U.S. containment (Turner, 2011). However, swaying Chinese public opinion in favour of Russia – particularly in the context of the Ukraine conflict, given its scale and protracted nature – is no easy task. The Chinese public's pre-existing views of Russia had long been divided. There were plenty of Russia sceptics within China, including some nationalists who had never forgiven Russia for its imperial past, which saw the annexation of more territory from China than any other Western power in the modern era (Wang, 2023). Survey results corroborate this division. A 2012 Pew survey shows that while 48% of Chinese viewed Russia favourably, almost 40% held negative views of the country (Pew Research Center, 2012). A more recent survey, conducted in 2018, finds that less than half

of Chinese respondents regarded Russia as China's friend (Institute of National Communication Strategy, 2019). In this sense, prior to the war, Russia was not widely perceived as a natural ally by ordinary Chinese citizens. More importantly, Russia's unprovoked attack on Ukraine is obviously at odds with the principle of territorial integrity – a concept that the average Chinese has internalised as a fundamental norm through decades of education and propaganda.[1] Any information campaign to deviate from the norm could face pushback from the public. Taken together, the Ukraine war presents a 'hard case' (Eckstein, 2000) for testing the argument that propaganda can persuade people.

Using data from a unique two-wave longitudinal survey collected from the very beginning of the Ukraine war, we find strong evidence that propaganda was effective – China's government-controlled media successfully increased public support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It did so, in particular, by exploiting the enemy cue of the U.S. widely embedded in its populace. State media blamed the U.S. for the war, rekindling anti-American sentiment stored in collective memory, which in turn shaped public attitudes in favour of Russia. Interestingly, we document that the effectiveness of this propaganda tactic was uneven depending on the political predispositions of Chinese citizens: while blaming the U.S. generated support for Russia overall, it was particularly effective in persuading less-nationalist citizens to adopt pro-Russian attitudes.

These findings advance our understanding of the efficacy of authoritarian propaganda, particularly in the domain of foreign affairs. Research shows that propaganda in domestic contexts is often less about persuasion than coercion and, at times, even backfires and worsens individuals' opinions of the regime (Elfstrom and Li, 2025; Huang, 2015, 2018). This is because, in domestic affairs, citizens can benchmark official narratives against private information – such as incomes, market prices, and their personal experiences – and any inconsistencies may undermine the credibility of official propaganda (Rozenas and Stukal, 2019). By contrast, our findings show that propaganda can persuade the public during an international crisis. Despite the challenge posed by the deeply divided views on Russia prior to the war, the Chinese government succeeded in mobilising public opinion in favour of Russia's actions. These results suggest that authoritarian propaganda may be more effective in the realm of international affairs. Ordinary citizens have little or no direct experience with foreign policy events and, as a result, must rely on official narratives. In the absence of alternative sources of information, propaganda can work at full strength.

This study also expands our knowledge about the role of the archenemy heuristic in shaping public attitudes. Hurwitz and Peffley (1990) first pioneered this concept in the context of American public opinion. Their research, conducted during the Cold War, demonstrates that the rivalry between the U.S. and the Soviet Union made the image of the main adversary a crucial information shortcut that people, as 'cognitive misers', rely on to form opinions about foreign policy. Many Americans formulated their preferences about specific foreign policy issues, such as nuclear arms and Central American policies, based on their perceptions of the USSR. We extend this idea to the contemporary era, examining how autocracies exploit this heuristic. The U.S.-China rivalry has become the dominant feature of the geopolitical landscape, reminiscent of the Cold War era. Similarly, perceptions of the U.S. in China have increasingly become an effortless cue that people use to make sense of the outside world. Our study of Beijing's information campaign during the Ukraine war indicates that the enemy cue of the U.S. is so pronounced in the

Chinese populace that simply blaming an international crisis on China's main adversary can foster a broad consensus in society aligned with the state's preferred position.

Finally, this article contributes to the case-specific scholarship about China's role in the Ukraine war (Chang-Liao, 2023; Düben and Wang-Kaeding, 2024; Pulford, 2022; Zhang, 2023). While qualitative studies suggest that China's state media sought to shape public attitudes towards the conflict (Greitens, 2022; Repnikova, 2022), there has been no quantitative evidence establishing whether these efforts succeeded in persuading the Chinese public. We provide rare observational evidence documenting the broad effectiveness of this information campaign and identify which segments of the population were more susceptible to its influence.

This article proceeds in six stages. The following section reviews the gaps in the extant literature on authoritarian propaganda and foreign affairs. We then lay out a theoretical framework for leveraging the heuristic of archenemies to shape foreign policy attitudes and how it applies to the case of China. Next, the methods section describes the sample, measurements, and analytic approach. It is followed by a presentation of the results, analysing the main and heterogeneous effects of China's state media messaging during Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Finally, we conclude with a summary of our findings.

Authoritarian propaganda and foreign affairs

Although political elites in autocratic regimes are less responsive to public opinion than their counterparts in democracies, as they do not face electoral pressures, scholars of authoritarian politics have demonstrated that public attitudes still play a significant role in the policy-making process, particularly in the realm of foreign policy (Gries, 2004; Reilly, 2011; Weiss, 2014). One line of inquiry suggests that authoritarian leaders often leverage anti-foreign sentiment as a tool in diplomatic negotiations, using public opinion to signal their bargaining position (Chubb, 2016; Weiss, 2013, 2014). Authorities may allow certain nationalist protests to signal resolve to foreign counterparts, while repressing others to convey a willingness to cooperate. Another body of work identifies specific conditions – such as divisions within the political elite – under which authoritarian leaders are more likely to be responsive to public opinion (Gries and Wang, 2022; Rosen and Fewsmith, 2001). A third strand of research points out that, similar to democracies, public opinion in autocracies can 'spin out of control' (Weiss, 2013: 3). In certain circumstances, large-scale, violent public opposition to foreign policy can compel a dictator to alter their decisions, reverse policies, and even threaten regime stability (Gries et al., 2016; Weeks and Crunkilton, 2017).

Faced with these opportunities and risks, autocrats do not remain passive. Rather, they take preemptive action, launching extensive information campaigns to align public attitudes with their preferred foreign policy stances. Recent research by Chubb and Wang (2023) and Wang (2021) categorises these propaganda efforts into four distinct types: (1) a mobilisation campaign, which seeks to rally public support for the state's position when public opinion is uncertain or opposed to the government's stance during an international crisis; (2) a pacification campaign, aimed at calming public sentiment when it becomes overheated, even when directed at the government's own policies; (3) a diversion campaign, which uses foreign policy events to deflect public attention from domestic issues; and (4) a signalling campaign, targeting foreign audiences.

Among these types, mobilisation campaigns have garnered particular attention in the literature. Scholars have examined the efficacy of various tactics authoritarian regimes employ to mobilise public support for their policies, such as framing, priming, and censorship (Fu, 2023; King et al., 2013; Pan et al., 2022). For example, leveraging in-group national identification to influence citizens' policy preferences is known to be a fairly effective mobilisation strategy. Weiss and Dafoe (2019) find that highlighting a shared history of China's victimisation successfully generates solidarity among Chinese citizens, fostering support for the government during international crises. Similarly, Liu and Shao (2023) show that invoking a shared sense of national pride can be equally effective. Their research demonstrates that even simply exposing Chinese respondents to the national anthem – without explicitly mentioning Taiwan – can mobilise support for using military force against the island.

This article contributes to the growing body of research on the effectiveness of authoritarian propaganda with a focus on domestic mobilisation. We examine the efficacy of a distinct tactic: using the heuristic of an archenemy nation to shape public attitudes towards specific foreign policy issues. There are two related but separate bodies of literature that explore its effectiveness. First, scholars have amassed considerable evidence that government-controlled media in autocracies often invoke or amplify antipathy towards foreign countries, particularly those perceived as adversaries. For instance, Rozenas and Stukal (2019) demonstrate that Russia's state-controlled media consistently employs a strategy of selective attribution, crediting domestic politicians for positive economic outcomes while blaming negative developments on foreign actors, especially Western countries. In China, long-standing observational studies have consistently shown that exposure to state-controlled media is correlated with perceiving Japan and the U.S. as threats (Piao and Wu, 2023; Sinkkonen and Elovainio, 2020). Recent experimental research by Mattingly and Yao (2022) further substantiates these claims, showing that soft propaganda materials – including real-world content from Chinese television dramas, news broadcasts, and state-run social media – effectively stoke resentment towards Japan and the U.S., with anti-Japanese sentiment lingering for up to a week.

Second, a related body of research examines the role of external threats in shaping citizens' attitudes and preferences across various domains. For instance, a recent survey experiment found that emphasising U.S. economic coercion led Chinese respondents to blame their country's economic downturn on the United States (Elfstrom and Li, 2025). Other experimental studies have shown that perceived threats from the U.S. or Japan lead Chinese citizens to embrace more authoritarian values, become less willing to compromise in foreign policy crises, and show greater support for using military force in territorial disputes (Davies et al., 2023; Quek and Johnston, 2018; Reilly, 2016). Similar findings have emerged in other non-democratic regimes, such as Russia (Krishnarajan and Tolstrup, 2023).

These two strands of research, while related, do not directly address the efficacy of the propaganda tactic in question. Although we know that autocrats can cultivate antipathy towards rival nations and that views of these countries can influence individuals' policy preferences, there is a lack of *direct, observational* evidence linking the two. It remains an open question whether propaganda can effectively generate negative sentiment towards enemy nations, where such sentiment shifts are in large enough doses to subsequently shape public attitudes towards specific foreign policy issues. This article aims to bridge the gap by providing observational evidence on the effectiveness of this propaganda tactic in a real-world setting, rather than in controlled experimental environments.

Social cognition of propaganda: Harnessing the heuristic of archenemies

We draw upon psychological models of social cognition to characterise this mobilisation tactic. A large number of studies in social psychology have shown that humans are 'cognitive misers' – imperfect, fallible, and limited in cognitive capacity (Fiske, 2018; Kahneman, 2011; Stanovich, 2018). People are assumed to save cognitive effort in opinion formation by taking information shortcuts, cues, and heuristics whenever possible. Instead of systematically processing new information, we often select and retrieve existing, generic beliefs long stored in memory – heuristics – to interpret new, ambiguous stimuli. This mechanism is known as heuristic processing in social psychology, and its usage tends to increase as the complexity of the issue grows (Chen and Chaiken, 1999).

The reliance upon shortcuts and cues is exceptionally prevalent in the political world (Kam, 2005; Popkin, 1991). Voters, for example, often use the heuristic of party affiliation to make sense of candidates. In the U.K., if a candidate is affiliated with the Conservative Party, voters would readily infer that he or she would support a small government, lower taxes, and tough immigration policies, and quickly make voting decisions based on their stereotypical views of the party. Thus, the heuristics of party labels provide great cognitive efficiency because voters can make up their minds without the need for diving into each issue position of the candidate. The downside, however, is that they often introduce serious biases and errors, as the candidate may not agree with the party on all issues.

The usage of effortless heuristics extends to foreign policy attitudes (Gelpi, 2010; Johns, 2009; Kertzer and Zeitzoff, 2017). Compared to their domestic counterparts, understanding foreign affairs costs even more cognitive efforts – issues involved are often far away, fast-changing, and extraordinarily complicated – and relying on heuristics provides obvious cognitive savings (Aldrich et al., 2006; Aldrich et al., 1989; Baum and Potter, 2008; Hurwitz and Peffley, 1987; Krosnick and Kinder, 1990; Larson, 2000). One such heuristic is the image of enemy nations (Brownlee, 2020; Herrmann, 1988; Herrmann et al., 1997, 1999; Hurwitz and Peffley, 1990). Research shows that when geopolitical rivalry is intense, the image of the primary adversary becomes the most salient feature of the international environment. The basic understanding of the main rival functions as a schema that people often use to interpret and simplify complex international affairs. As a result, to a large extent, individuals' judgements about specific foreign policy issues should flow from their fundamental assumptions concerning the nature of the enemy nation.

During the Cold War, for example, scholars find that views of the main U.S. adversary – the Soviet Union – served as such superordinate shortcuts that underlay American citizens' foreign policy attitudes (Hurwitz and Peffley, 1990; Peffley and Hurwitz, 1992). Average Americans often are not interested in, nor have time to get into the nuts and bolts of specific foreign policy issues. To formulate opinions, many relied on their pre-existing beliefs about the fundamental nature of the Soviet Union. If one perceived the Soviet Union as an expansionist nation, then he or she tended to assume that any international crisis in favour of or backed by the USSR would, by default, pose a security threat to the United States. Relying on beliefs about the nature of the USSR, therefore, helped ordinary Americans compensate for their lack of knowledge about complex international affairs and make economical judgements on specific issues such as nuclear arms and defence policies in Central America.

The human tendency to use effortless heuristics of enemy nations provides political elites with opportunities to exploit for various political purposes. By 'scaring the hell out of the American people', for example, President Truman sought to leverage the public fear of the USSR in his speech on March 12, 1947, as a way to rally support for the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan (Peffley and Hurwitz, 1992). More recently, the Bush Administration exploited the enemy image of al-Qaeda after the September 11 attacks and exaggerated the Saddam–al-Qaeda connections in order to generate support for invading Iraq in 2003 (Record, 2010).

Similarly, we argue that political elites in autocracies can use the heuristics of enemy nations to manipulate public opinion on specific policy issues. Compared to their counterparts in democracies, political leaders in authoritarian regimes enjoy the benefit of the institutionalised control of media and face limited to no pushback from opposing parties (Stockmann and Gallagher, 2011). Absent any constraint, claims that exaggerate the threat from rival nations often go unchallenged, leaving the public discourse a one-sided narrative. There are abundant examples in practice. In many Muslim countries, for instance, competing political groups exploit the widely popular image of the United States as an enemy, and seek to outbid each other by invoking grievances against the U.S. as a way to recruit supporters. Anti-Americanism has thus become an all-purpose heuristic used by political entrepreneurs to link to their on-the-ground agenda (Blaydes and Linzer, 2012). In Syria, for another example, the Assad regime played the 'resistance card' to its main adversary – Israel – to compensate for its rampant corruption and poor governance (Alrababa'h and Blaydes, 2021). More recently, when Russia intruded into Georgia in 2008, the Putin regime blamed the 'Georgian aggression' on Russia's geopolitical adversaries, namely, the U.S. and NATO, in a bid to maximise domestic support (Pupcenoks and Klein, 2022). The same tactic was adopted in its invasion of Ukraine (Goode, 2023).

The case of China: It's all about the U.S.

In the case of China, we argue that views of the U.S. have become such effortless, superordinate, and all-purpose heuristics upon which many Chinese today rely to formulate their opinions about specific policy issues, especially in the domain of foreign policy. Among ordinary Chinese, a primary political cleavage opens up along the lines of their different attitudes towards the U.S. (Lin, 2021; Wu, 2023). Conservatives detest the U.S., considering it a main adversary, an evil hegemony, with malign influence in international politics. By contrast, Chinese liberals embrace America as a beacon of hope, with nearly absolute trust in American foreign policy. On both sides of the political spectrum, their assumptions about the fundamental nature of the U.S. play an essential role in shaping their specific foreign policy preferences. To formulate opinions on an international event, many will not research its complex details. Instead, they will base their policy choices on the perceived role of the U.S. in the said event and the pre-existing understanding concerning the nature of the U.S. In this sense, the image of the U.S. serves as a superordinate heuristic among ordinary Chinese today, just as that of the USSR underlaid American citizens' foreign policy attitudes during the Cold War.

Notably, the enemy image of the U.S. that the conservatives espouse has become greatly accessible to China's public in the last ten years or so, thanks to the deteriorating U.S.-China relations. Survey evidence shows a clear trend – while only 37% of Chinese respondents saw the U.S. negatively in 2010, 57% did so in 2019 (Pew Research Center,

2012; Piao and Wu, 2023). At the height of the pandemic around 2021, an extreme anti-American sentiment had dominated public attitudes within China, with 75% of the Chinese public holding a negative opinion of the U.S. (Liu et al., 2023).

In addition to this prevailing negative view of the U.S., the Chinese state media has conducted a series of propaganda campaigns, making the enemy image of the U.S. a cue that can be readily activated in a wide range of scenarios. Government-controlled media, for example, persistently portrayed the U.S. as the most significant security threat to China, blamed the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic on the U.S. army, alleged that the U.S. had covertly aided the 2019 Hong Kong protests, and reacquainted TV viewers with decades-old Maoist-era war films about the Korean war to fan anti-Americanism, to name just a few (Fu, 2023; Gries and Sanders, 2015; Mattingly and Yao, 2022; Sinkkonen and Elovainio, 2020). Since the Chinese populace is frequently bombarded with the narrative that the U.S. is behind almost every turmoil, it is perhaps not surprising that whenever an international crisis occurs, people will first recall similar examples in which the enemy cue of the U.S. comes to mind easily – thanks to the availability bias.

The heuristic of the enemy nation was precisely used to induce support for Russia in the propaganda campaign during the Ukraine war. This approach originated at the highest levels of the party-state. On the first day of Russia's invasion, China's Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hua Chunying, explicitly identified the United States as 'the culprit of current tensions surrounding Ukraine'. She accused the U.S. of driving 'five waves of NATO expansion eastward all the way to Russia's doorstep' without considering 'the consequences of pushing a big country to the wall' (PRC Foreign Ministry, 2022).

Blaming the Ukraine war on the U.S. has, in fact, become 'the most consistent theme' in China's propaganda efforts throughout the conflict (Greitens, 2022; Repnikova, 2022; Repnikova and Zhou, 2022). Evidence indicates that the propaganda department established a 'general direction' to promote this narrative. From 29 March to 11 April, the party's flagship newspaper, *People's Daily*, in its print version, published ten commentaries titled 'Looking at American Hegemony from the Ukrainian Crisis', accusing the U.S. government of being the true instigator of the conflict (People's Daily, 2022). Notably, these articles were written under the pseudonym *Zhongsheng* (钟声, indicating 'voice of China'), representing the party-state and carrying the same official weight as figures like *Ren Zhongping* and *Guo Jiping* (Wang, 2024). Moreover, authorities directed media outlets to ensure that coverage of the Ukraine war aligned with 'China's position', which centres on the view of U.S. culpability (Qiao, 2022).

On 4 March, a leaked propaganda directive explicitly prohibits 'any challenge to China's official statements' and outlaws anti-war declarations, as well as 'harmful viewpoints that support or adulate the United States' (China Digital Times, 2022b; Repnikova, 2022). Similarly, an earlier directive, accidentally leaked on 22 February, restricted reports that were 'unfavourable to Russia or pro-Western'. It also noted that 'if using hashtags, only use those issued by the *People's Daily*, Xinhua News Agency, or CCTV' – the three most influential state media outlets (China Digital Times, 2022a; Liu, 2022). As Greitens (2022: 757) observes, these directives have 'effectively centralised official control of the narrative'.

An analysis of the state media coverage during the first 8 months of the conflict that we studied (and thereafter) also reveals a consistent emphasis on the culpability of the U.S. (Greitens, 2022; Repnikova, 2022). For example, right before Russia's attack, official media, including *Xinhua News*, accused the U.S. of 'stoking the fire' by 'exaggerating' the imminent danger of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Xinhua News, 2022a). Once the

war started, the narrative shifted, but the central character did not. It was alleged that the U.S. is ultimately responsible for the conflict by overexpanding NATO in Eastern Europe. The war broke out, it argues, because the U.S. 'forced a major country into a dead end by expanding NATO eastward to Russia's doorstep', echoing Hua's official statement (Global Times, 2022). *Xinhua News* further published a commentary in March, claiming that the U.S. had 'triple-gained' by successfully containing Russia, undermining Europe's strategic autonomy, and enriching its defence industry that profited from the war (Xinhua News, 2022b).

Notably, propagandists did not forget to remind the Chinese public about who their real enemy was. In a February news article about the Ukraine war, the Communist Youth League first launched a campaign to commemorate the victims of the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade (The Communist Youth League of China, 2022). They 'still owe the Chinese people a blood debt', it claimed, referring to the three Chinese staff killed in May 1999. A dozen official media followed suit. The enemy image of the U.S. stored in the collective memory two decades ago was resurrected to sway mass opinion in favour of Russia's invasion.

Did all these propaganda efforts persuade? We test the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). Exposure to state media increases public support for Russia's war in Ukraine by attributing the conflict to China's main adversary – the United States.

We also explore the heterogeneous effects of propaganda. Individuals with different political priors tend to respond to the same message in distinct ways, although the empirical evidence on this is conflicted. One body of literature suggests that persuasion is most effective among those with strong prior beliefs, indicating that people are more likely to be persuaded by information that aligns with their existing dispositions. For instance, Adena et al. (2015) demonstrate that Nazi Germany's radio propaganda was most effective in increasing political support in regions with historically higher levels of anti-Semitic sentiment, i.e. among people already predisposed towards Nazi policies. Similarly, Peisakhin and Rozenas (2018) find that when Russian propaganda sought to influence Ukraine's elections with a pro-Russian agenda, its impact was greatest among Ukrainian voters who already held strong pro-Russian views. In contrast, other studies suggest that the stronger the prior beliefs, the less likely individuals are to update their attitudes based on new information (DellaVigna and Gentzkow, 2010; DellaVigna and Kaplan, 2007). For example, Zaller (1992) provides evidence that Americans with extensive prior knowledge of Reagan's performance were less inclined to change their views of him following the Iran–Contra scandal.

In this study, we focus on nationalism as a key political predisposition in the context of China. Echoing the existing literature, we suggest that the 'blaming the U.S.' information campaign may have divergent effects on Chinese respondents, depending on the level of their nationalism. First, the government's anti-American messaging is likely to be most effective among those who already lean in the same direction as the propaganda. In China, nationalism strongly correlates with anti-Americanism (Sinkkonen and Elovainio, 2020; Xie et al., 2024). The more nationalist an individual is, the more likely they are to perceive the U.S. as China's principal adversary. This narrative of U.S. culpability in the Ukraine war aligns with the pre-existing anti-American sentiments of highly nationalist individuals. Consequently, those who are more predisposed to believe

in the anti-American messaging *ex ante* – namely, the highly nationalist – are more readily persuaded by state-controlled media. Similarly, since this 'blaming the U.S.' narrative resonates strongly with highly nationalist individuals, it can also serve to mobilise them more effectively to support Russia.

On the other hand, the impact of state media messaging could be more pronounced among less-nationalist individuals. Weaker nationalist sentiments may result from limited prior exposure to political propaganda or a lack of political awareness. In a sustained and intensive propaganda campaign lasting several months, these individuals may be more susceptible to political persuasion due to their lower levels of prior knowledge. When presented with new information, they are more likely to update their attitudes. In this case, by providing them with new knowledge about U.S. culpability, government-controlled media could more effectively persuade less-nationalist respondents. Exposed to this new information, these individuals may also be more effectively mobilised to adopt pro-Russian attitudes.

Given the conflicting theories in the literature, we hypothesise that individuals with different levels of nationalism are persuaded in distinct ways following exposure to the propaganda campaign, although we leave the direction of this effect open.

Hypothesis 2 (H2). The effects of state media exposure and attributing the conflict to the U.S. are more substantial among the highly (or less) nationalist individuals.

Methods

Sample

To test the argument, we adopted a two-wave longitudinal design and collected data through a reputable Chinese survey platform, Credamo, which is widely used by local psychologists and behaviour scientists (Lian and Chen, 2024; Peng et al., 2023; Zheng, 2023). Questionnaires were completed online and anonymously, and participants received cash rewards afterwards. The first wave was conducted 10–16 March 2022, the third week after Russia invaded Ukraine. It consisted of 1034 respondents, of which 34 were excluded for failing to pass the attention check. The second wave of data collection took place 20–26 November 2022, about 8 months after the first wave. Five hundred of the original interviewees completed the Wave 2 questionnaire, with a retention rate of 50%.

An online sample is appropriate for this study. First, much of the propaganda campaign, including commemorating the victims of the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, took place online. It is then natural to use online participants to investigate the effect of propaganda. Note that this is no small group – there are 854 million Chinese netizens, over 60% of China's population (Hua and Zhang, 2022). Understanding how propaganda influences their opinions is, therefore, vitally important. Second, although not nationally representative, such samples tend to produce similar results as a nationally representative sample of Chinese netizens (Li et al., 2018). Thus, they have been increasingly employed to study the effects of media exposure in China (Huang and Yeh, 2019), and those of propaganda in particular (Huang, 2018; Huang et al., 2018). Third, online anonymity has the advantage of reducing response bias. Given the topic's sensitive nature, people are likely to feel more free to express their opinions truthfully when the survey is anonymous. By contrast, a nationally representative survey with stratified sampling in

China inevitably needs face-to-face interviews, a format that risks increasing response bias when it comes to politically sensitive questions (Huang and Yeh, 2019).

Supplementary Appendix 1 shows that our sample consists of respondents from widely diverse sociodemographic backgrounds, coming from almost all provinces in mainland China, with a good mix of male and female, young and old, well-educated and less-educated residents. The occupational distribution covers the full spectrum, ranging from private sector employees, government and state enterprise employees, and self-employed individuals to students and retirees. The various sociodemographic profiles, especially gender and geographical regions, are broadly comparable to the Chinese Internet population, although our sample is younger and better educated.

To evaluate the quality of our data, we compared our Wave 1 headline finding with that of a survey conducted by the Carter Centre (U.S.-China Perception Monitor, 2022). The latter collects a sample representative of China's online population, fielded between 28 March and 5 April 2022 – about 3 weeks after our first wave of data collection. The Carter Centre finds that 75% of respondents generally sided with Russia. Our first-wave survey similarly demonstrates that 78% of respondents supported Russia's invasion.[2]

Measures

War support. Following Everts and Isernia (2005), we used a battery of two questions to gauge generalised levels of support for the war in Ukraine. Respondents were asked to rate their support for both Russia and Ukraine in the conflict, respectively, on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 0 ('Not support at all') to 4 ('Completely support'). We then reversed the support score for Ukraine and combined it with that for Russia to create an additive scale of *War Support* (Wave 1: $r = -0.47$, $p < .001$; Wave 2: $r = -0.60$, $p < .001$). As illustrated in Figure 1, on a 9-point scale, 81% of respondents supported Russia's war at Wave 1, with a slight increase to 81.8% at Wave 2. When comparing the responses at Wave 1 and Wave 2, the most significant changes occurred in two areas. The proportion of respondents selecting 'stay neutral' declined from 14.9% at Wave 1 to 12.6% at Wave 2. In contrast, the proportion of those who scored 6 – the third highest level of war support – increased from 32.2% at Wave 1 to 34.4% at Wave 2.

Exposure to state media. While all news media in China are state-owned, two outlets stand out as the core of its propaganda machine. The *People's Daily* is the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, with its editorials and commentaries (especially in its print version) typically setting the tone and agenda for major information campaigns (Wang, 2024; Wu, 1994). The Xinhua News Agency is the official state news agency, likewise serving as 'the eyes and mouth of the party' (Hong, 2011). Both the *People's Daily* and *Xinhua News* lie at the centre of China's propaganda apparatus and are often the focus of research on authoritarian propaganda (Chubb and Wang, 2023; Huang, 2018; Huang and Cruz, 2022). To measure exposure to propaganda in this study, we employed an item that taps how frequently participants read Xinhua News or the *People's Daily* as their news sources. Response options range from 0 (never) to 4 (every day). Given the massive coverage of the Ukraine war during this period, a broad measure of state media exposure serves as a close proxy for gauging their exposure to war propaganda. Our results indicate that respondents generally experienced intensive exposure to state news media, with 75.4% at Wave 1 and 73.8% at Wave 2 reading official media 'frequently' or 'everyday' as their news source.

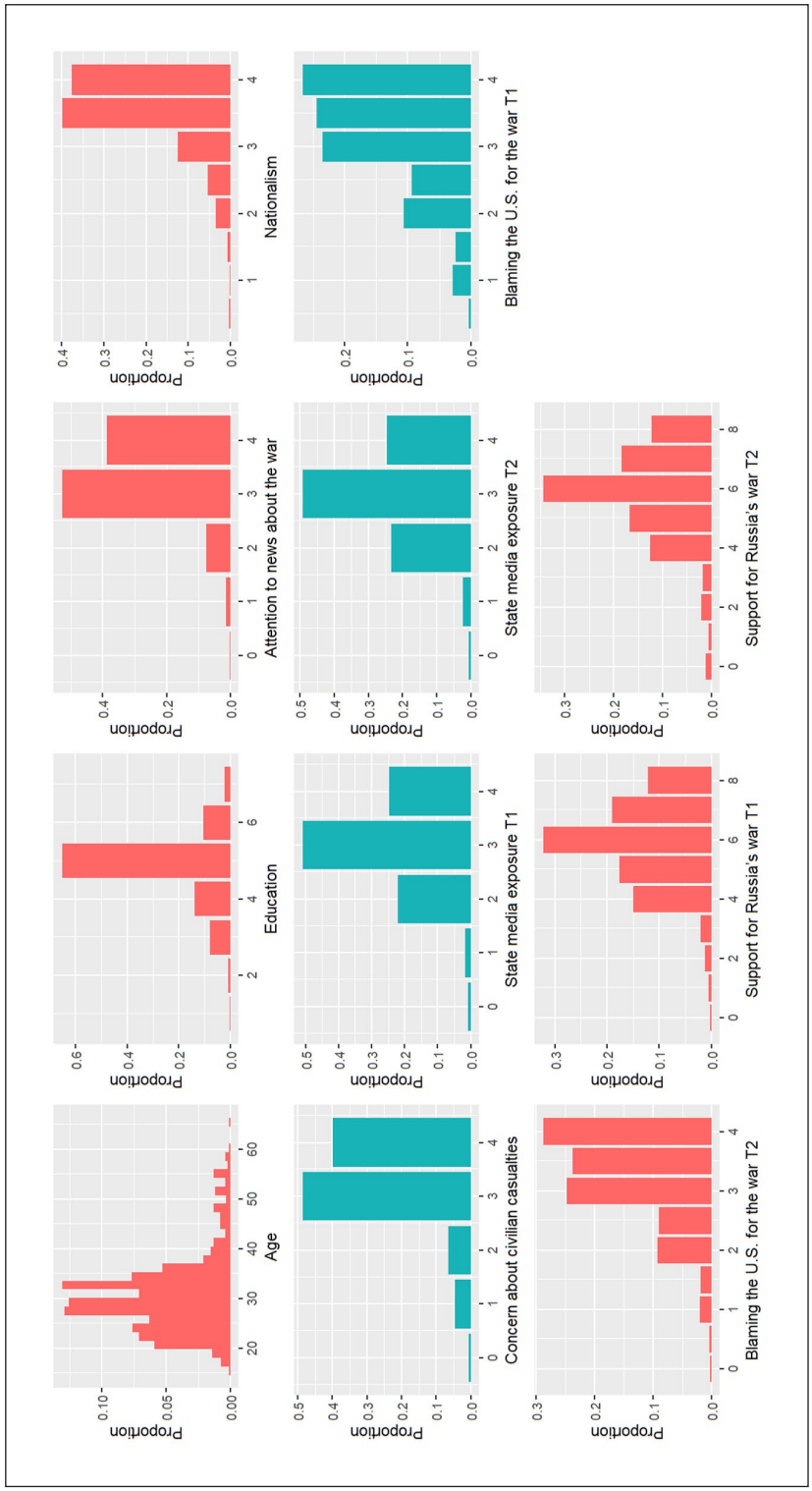

Figure 1. The distribution of the study variables.
Note: T = time point.

Blaming the U.S. Two items compose a scale measuring to what degree respondents believed that the U.S. was blamed for the war in Ukraine. We specifically asked to what extent the United States is 'morally wrong about the war' and 'responsible for the war', on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 0 ('Not wrong at all' and 'Not responsible at all') to 4 ('Very seriously wrong' and 'Totally responsible' respectively). The two items were averaged to produce the scale of *Blaming the U.S.* (Wave 1: $r = 0.70$, $p < .001$; Wave 2: $r = 0.68$, $p < .001$). Figure 1 shows that on a 9-point scale, 83.8% of respondents blamed the U.S. at Wave 1, which increased to 86.4% at Wave 2. Among those who blamed the U.S., the perceived levels of U.S. culpability also varied significantly.

Nationalism. Since nationalism is often assumed to be *the* most important driver of militant attitudes within the literature about China (Davies et al., 2023), we included it as a control variable, besides exploring its moderating effect. However, not all dimensions of nationalism (say, national attachment) contribute to belligerent attitudes. We focus on one particular dimension of nationalism – national chauvinism – which is known to fuel militarist dispositions (Herrmann et al., 2009). We measured it using two items derived from Herrmann et al. (2009) and Sinkkonen (2013). They were then averaged to create a nationalism score (Wave 1: $r = 0.38$, $p < .001$). As shown in Figure 1, our sample at Wave 1 leans towards higher nationalism scores. On a 9-point scale, 37.7% of respondents reported the highest level of nationalism, while 39.9% received the second-highest score.

Control variables. We included a variety of control variables that have been shown to influence the level of war support in the literature, including attention to news about the war, nationalism, concern about civilian casualties, and demographical variables. While we hypothesise the effect of propaganda on war support, it is worth noting that heavier exposure to news about the war, *in general*, tends to be positively associated with war support (Althaus et al., 2012). This positive relationship has been well-documented in the Vietnam War (Hofstetter and Moore, 1979), the Gulf War (Iyengar and Simon, 1993), the Afghanistan War (Berinsky, 2009), and the Iraq War (Hayes and Myers, 2009). Therefore, we controlled for attention to the conflict by adding a 0–4 scale that measures the extent to which respondents are attentive to news about the war in Ukraine. The results suggest that our respondents skewed towards being well-informed about the ongoing war, with 52.7% 'somewhat attentive' and 38.6% 'very attentive' to the conflict at Wave 1.

In addition, foreign civilian casualties tend to dampen war support. Killing innocent civilians in large numbers is morally wrong and can undermine the justice of a war's cause. There has been well-documented evidence that as foreign civilian casualties increase, support for military action drops (Dill and Schubiger, 2021; Johns and Davies, 2019). This is especially relevant to the Ukraine war, as its civilian casualties were heavy. We thus controlled for civilian casualty aversion, using an item tapping the level of concern about civilian deaths on a 0–4 scale. Our respondents demonstrated great concern over civilian casualties at Wave 1, with 48.5% somewhat worried and 39.9% very worried about the loss of innocent lives in the conflict.

Finally, we controlled for demographical variables, including gender, age, education (measured by the highest level of education they have completed), and membership in the Chinese Communist Party. Table 1 includes descriptive statistics and correlations for the study variables. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the responses. The full wording for these questions is reported in Supplementary Appendix 2.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations for the study variables.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.
1. Age											
2. Education	–0.089**										
3. Attention to news about the war	0.138***	0.023									
4. Nationalism	0.105***	0.088**	0.264***								
5. Concern about civilian casualties	0.030	–0.018	0.135***	0.139***							
6. State media exposure T1	0.089**	0.104**	0.395***	0.285***	0.089**						
7. State media exposure T2	0.126**	0.087	0.383***	0.213***	0.070	0.471***					
8. Blaming the U.S. for the war T1	0.023	–0.013	0.298***	0.189***	0.045	0.190***	0.153***				
9. Blaming the U.S. for the war T2	0.050	0.032	0.230***	0.343***	–0.049	0.241***	0.167***	0.567***			
10. Support for Russia's war T1	0.098**	0.030	0.277***	0.260***	–0.112***	0.232***	0.074	0.307***	0.303***		
11. Support for Russia's war T2	0.055	0.027	0.242***	0.309***	–0.133**	0.120**	0.158***	0.268***	0.403***	0.606***	
M	30.68	4.83	3.29	3.50	3.23	2.97	2.95	3.13	3.19	5.81	5.77
SD	7.65	0.83	0.66	0.57	0.80	0.78	0.79	0.79	0.77	1.42	1.54

Note: T = time point.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

Analytic approach

A methodological challenge in this study is to disentangle the mobilisation effect of media exposure, from individuals' selective exposure effect. Students of political communication have long found that people selectively expose themselves to sources of information that conform to their pre-existing beliefs, values, and issue positions (Hart et al., 2009; Katz et al., 1973; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). For instance, Iyengar and Hahn (2009) show that Republicans and conservatives preferred Fox News but dodged news reports from CNN and NPR, whereas Democrats and liberals demonstrated the exact opposite pattern. The self-selection bias thus leads to the potential issue of reverse causation between media exposure and its effects. While propaganda may successfully shore up individuals' support for Russia to invade Ukraine, using our study as an example, it is also plausible that people backing Russia from the onset of the war choose to seek out information from state media congruent with their prior views.

Our solution is to utilise Cross-Lagged Structural Equation Modelling, which is most appropriate for addressing the indeterminacy of causal direction (Finkel, 1995). Using longitudinal data, it simultaneously models (1) the effects of prior media exposure on current war support and (2) those of prior war support on current media exposure while controlling for past war support and exposure to media, respectively. It allows us to parse whether propaganda makes people more supportive of Russia, or vice versa – people who are already pro-Russia seek congenial information from propaganda. This approach has been widely used to examine the effects of media exposure on political participation (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Kahne and Bowyer, 2018; Lee and Xenos, 2022), political trust (Avery, 2009) and attitudes towards the U.S. (Shi et al., 2011).

To disentangle the causal directions, we estimated cross-lagged models that specify different paths. These include autoregressive paths between each variable measured at Wave 1 and the same variable measured at Wave 2, as well as cross-lagged paths between exogenous variables measured at Wave 1 and their corresponding endogenous variables measured at Wave 2. The former produces coefficients that estimate the intertemporal stability of each variable measuring the same phenomenon at two different times. The higher the stability coefficients are, the more stable the variable is over time. Of greater interest to this study are cross-lagged paths. They provide estimates examining how much a variable at Wave 1 can predict change in another variable from Wave 1 to Wave 2, after controlling for covariates. Notably, since the purpose of our study is to assess cross-lagged paths via mediators based on two-wave data, we followed Cole and Maxwell (2003) and employed a pair of longitudinal tests most appropriate for this design: (1) estimate the path between the exogenous variable (e.g. media exposure) at Wave 1 and its mediator (e.g. blaming the U.S.) at Wave 2; (2) estimate the path between the mediator (e.g. blaming the U.S.) at Wave 1 and its corresponding endogenous variable (e.g. war support) at Wave 2. The two paths together provide an estimate of the mediational effect of propaganda on war support by blaming the U.S.

In our structural equation modelling, we used full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation to address missing values, as FIML estimations help correct for selective attrition biases (Asendorpf et al., 2014). In addition, since standardised data may produce inaccurate parameter estimates, standard errors, and goodness-of-fit indices in structural equation modelling, we followed Cole and Maxwell (2003) and reported unstandardised coefficients throughout this study, unless otherwise specified.

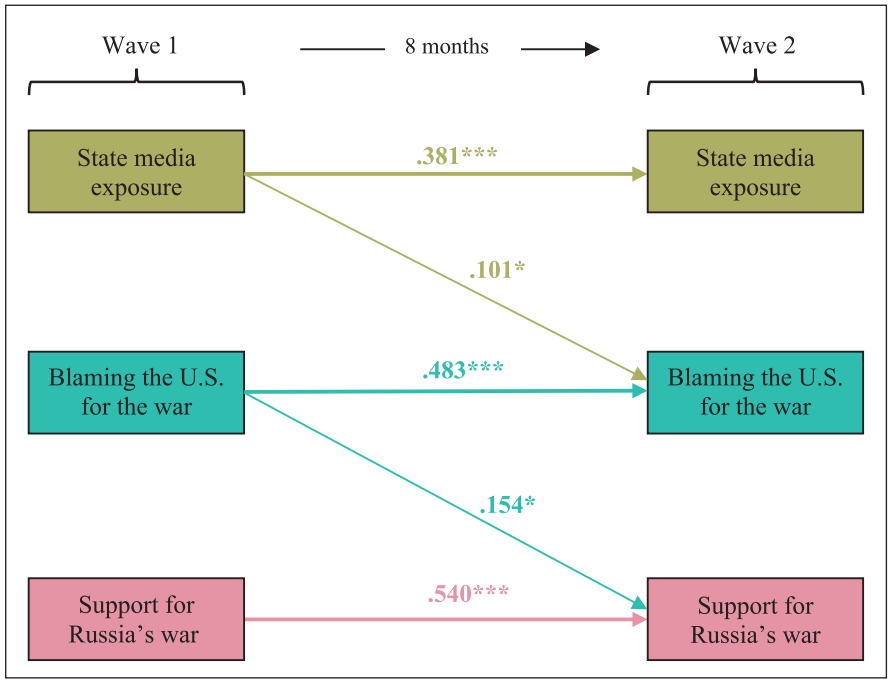

Figure 2. Path model with unstandardised coefficients modelling the cross-lagged mediated effect of state media exposure on war support via blaming the U.S. over 8 months.
Note: Control variables, nonsignificant paths, and coefficients for covariances and variances are omitted for clarity.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

Results

We tested our hypothesis that state media exposure strengthens public support for Russia's invasion by blaming the U.S. The model controls for covariates measured at Wave 1, including attention to news about the war, nationalism, concern about civilian casualties, gender, age, education, and party membership.

Figure 2 presents two sets of coefficients. First, the coefficients that estimate the intertemporal stability of autoregressive paths between each variable at Wave 1 and its measurement at Wave 2 are positive and statistically significant. They show that the measurements of state media exposure ($b = 0.381$, $p < .001$), blaming the U.S. for the war ($b = 0.483$, $p < .001$) and support for Russia's war ($b = 0.540$, $p < .001$) were generally stable over the 8 months. Second, the cross-lagged coefficients test the mediational effect of propaganda on war support via blaming the U.S. Following Cole and Maxwell (2003), we examined two diagonal paths: (1) the path from state media exposure at Wave 1 to blaming the U.S. at Wave 2; and (2) the path from blaming the U.S. at Wave 1 to war support at Wave 2.

Our analysis lends support for H1: state media exposure measured at Wave 1 led people to experience a greater increase in blaming the U.S. for the war between the two waves ($b = 0.101$, $p < .05$), and blaming the U.S. measured at Wave 1 also significantly predicts increased support for Russia's war 8 months later ($b = 0.154$, $p < .05$). The

effect sizes of state media exposure (*standardised* $b = 0.103$) and blaming the U.S. (*standardised* $b = 0.080$) are considered medium, corresponding to the 65th–55th percentiles of effect size in similar studies using cross-lagged models (Orth et al., 2024). After controlling for the indirect effect of state media exposure mediated via blaming the U.S., its remaining direct effect on war support at Wave 2 was not significant ($b = -0.066$, $p = .406$). Hence, it appears that state media galvanised pro-Russian attitudes primarily in an indirect way. This echoes several qualitative studies showing that an emphasis on U.S. culpability has been the dominant propaganda tactic (Greitens, 2022; Repnikova, 2022; Repnikova and Zhou, 2022). The model shows a good fit, yielding a chi-square value of 11.276 with 3 degrees of freedom and p value of .01, a CFI value (0.988) above the conventional threshold of 0.95, an SRMR value of 0.012 far below the conventional threshold of 0.08 (Hu and Bentler, 1999) and an RMSEA value (0.053) lower than the cutoff value of 0.06 (Kenny et al., 2015; Shi et al., 2022). In addition, the model accounts for 37.7% of the variation in blaming the U.S. at Wave 2, and 39% of the variation in war support at Wave 2. Overall, this suggests that, all else being equal, respondents with greater exposure to state media tended to believe that the U.S. is the most to blame for the Ukraine war, which in turn bolstered their support for Russia's invasion over time.

Is the result subject to selective exposure bias? We examined the possibility of reverse causality, where people supportive of Russia's war opt to seek information from state media that conforms to their pre-existing pro-Russian views. As shown in Supplementary Appendix 3, neither war support ($b = -0.042$, $p = .075$) nor blaming the U.S. for the war ($b = 0.024$, $p = .558$) at Wave 1 had a significant effect on state media exposure at Wave 2. The results suggest that the effect of propaganda on war support was more substantial than the self-selection effect. Further supporting H1, we find evidence that exposure to state media drove war support, instead of vice versa.

We further explore the heterogeneous effects of propaganda. The results are illustrated in Figure 3. First, the interaction between state media exposure and nationalism at Wave 1 did not have a statistically significant effect on blaming the U.S. at Wave 2 ($b = 0.000$, $p = .995$). This suggests that exposure to state media led people to blame the Ukraine war on the U.S., regardless of whether they were highly or less nationalist. In other words, people with different levels of nationalism reacted to the state media messaging in a strikingly similar way.

However, the interaction between blaming the U.S. and nationalism at Wave 1 had a statistically significant effect on support for Russia's war at Wave 2 ($b = -0.215$, $p = .025$). To illustrate the results, we followed Hayes (2017) and used the 16th and 84th percentile of nationalism scores to represent those who were relatively low and high on nationalism, respectively. As shown in Figure 4, while blaming the U.S. drove war support in general, its impact was largest on people with relatively lower nationalist priors. In contrast, this U.S. culpability narrative was less effective in persuading highly nationalist individuals. The results support H2 while leaning towards the second explanation of the moderating effects of nationalism. That is, a compelling narrative about U.S. culpability in the Ukraine war may offer a new piece of information important to the less-nationalist individuals, successfully moving them towards supporting Russia. By comparison, blaming the U.S. may not provide the hardline nationalists with information substantial enough to harden their pro-Russian attitudes in an equally effective way. Regression tables with full results are illustrated in Supplementary Appendix 4.

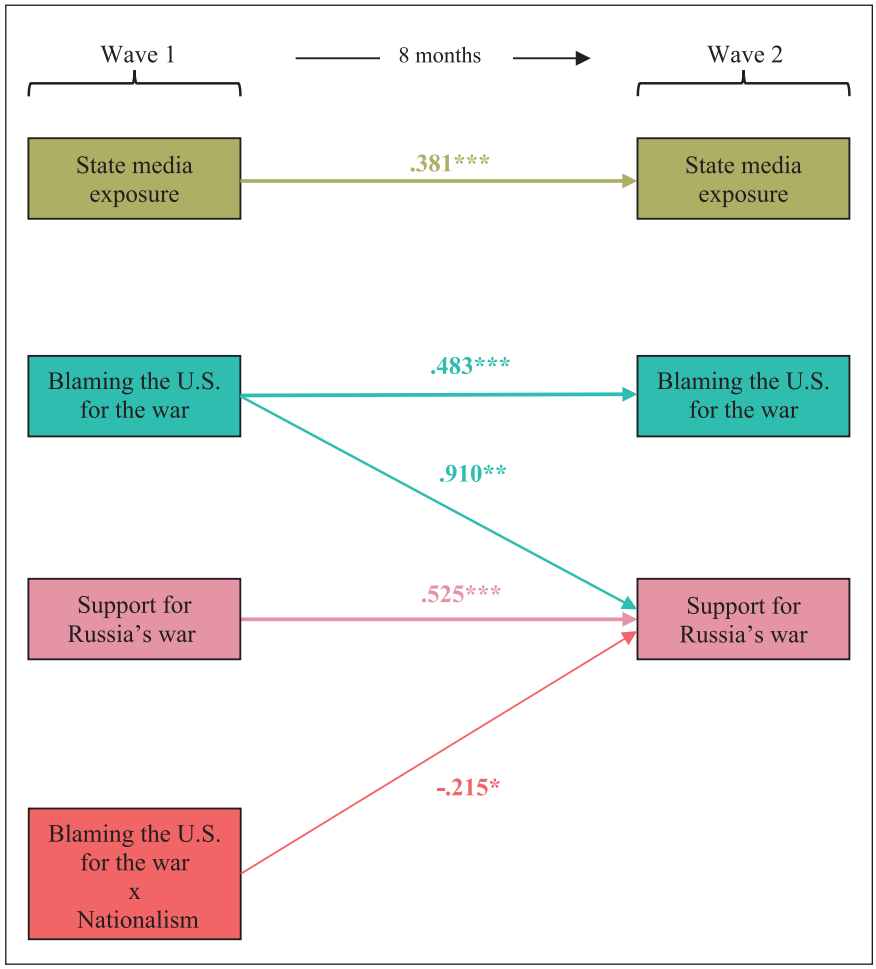

Figure 3. Path model with unstandardised coefficients modelling the cross-lagged mediated effect of state media exposure on war support via blaming the U.S., moderated by nationalism.
Note: Control variables, nonsignificant paths, and coefficients for covariances and variances are omitted for clarity.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

Conclusion

To summarise, we present a case study illustrating how autocracies can effectively shape public opinion on an international crisis by exploiting people's pre-existing attitudes towards an archenemy nation. Our results show that despite the deeply divided views of Russia held by ordinary Chinese before the war and the obvious challenge that Putin's war in Ukraine posed to the territorial integrity norm many Chinese have internalised, China's government-controlled media succeeded in swaying public opinion in favour of Russia. They achieved this by attributing the responsibility for the war to the U.S., China's main adversary. In addition, we document the heterogeneous effects of this information

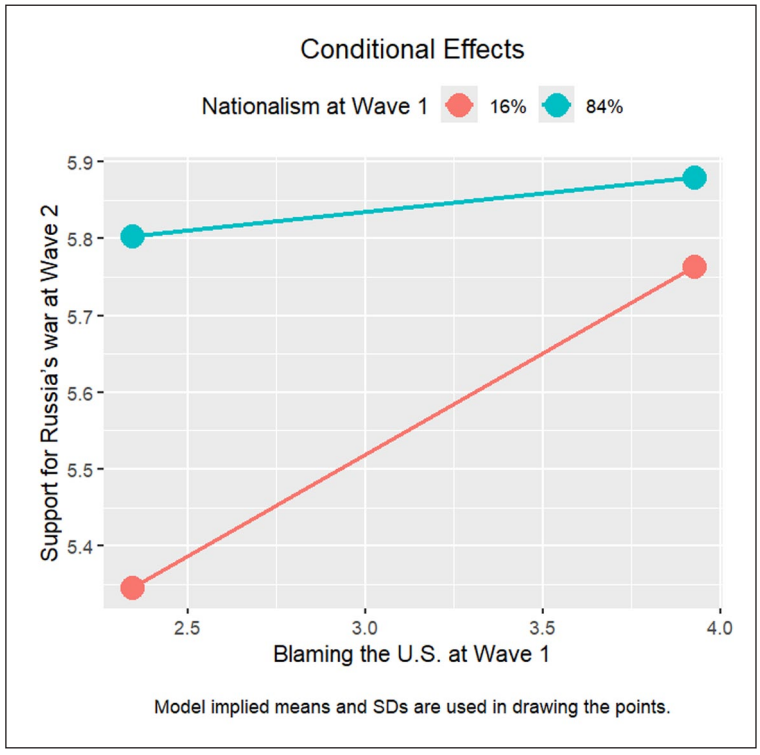

Figure 4. Moderating effect of nationalism.

campaign. While propagandists managed to create a broad consensus about U.S. culpability in the conflict, the strategy of blaming the U.S. to garner support for Russia had an uneven effect. It was most effective in persuading the less-nationalist Chinese to adopt pro-Russian attitudes.

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Supplementary information

Additional supplementary information may be found with the online version of this article.

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Notes

1. According to a representative sample that Pan and Xu (2018) reweighted based on the online *zuobiao* survey between 2012 and 2014, 65% of Chinese respondents 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that 'national unity and territorial integrity are the highest interest of society' (for details, see their Supplementary Appendix Table A1. Item 9).
2. This result is based on a single-item measure, similar to the one used by the Carter Centre: In your opinion, how much do you support either side of the Russia-Ukraine conflict? Russia: 0 ('Not support at all'), 1 ('Not very much support'), 2 ('Stay neutral'), 3 ('Somewhat support'), 4 ('Completely support').

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