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Review of International Political Economy

ISSN: 0969-2290 (Print) 1466-4526 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rrip20

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**To cite this article:** Yeling Tan, David Steinberg & Daniel McDowell (2025) Global economic influence and domestic regime support: evidence from China, Review of International Political Economy, 32:1, 202-225, DOI: 10.1080/09692290.2024.2402817

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2024.2402817

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REVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL ECONOMY
2025, VOL. 32, NO. 1, 202–225
https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2024.2402817

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# Global economic influence and domestic regime support: evidence from China

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**ABSTRACT**

Rising powers typically seek to play a larger role in international economic affairs, but we know little about the impact of this overseas expansion on domestic publics. This paper examines the domestic political consequences of rising states' efforts to increase their foreign economic influence. We argue that public approval for these governments depends on whether they succeed or fail to expand their country's global economic influence. To test this argument, we fielded three survey experiments in China, each focusing on a different component of China's foreign economic strategy. In all three experiments, informing individuals that China has failed in increasing its role in the global economy reduced average levels of government satisfaction. Our evidence suggests that this drop in government approval operates through a weakened sense of national pride, rather than other channels based on economic prospects.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 2 October 2023; Accepted 25 July 2024

**KEYWORDS** Global economic expansion; China; public opinion; survey experiments

## Introduction

The competition for global power and influence between established powers, such as the United States, and emerging powers like China, has intensified in recent years. The degree to which rising powers succeed in expanding their global influence will shape the contours of world politics. Perhaps less obviously, however, is the potential for this competition to shape *domestic* politics. Existing evidence from established powers such as the United States finds that success in the global arena influences the popularity of incumbent governments. In a series of experiments, Powers and Renshon (2023) find that American leaders who fail to maintain America's status in international affairs are punished with lower approval ratings. Observational studies on American public opinion find that wars, terrorist attacks, and other high-profile events increase Presidential approval (Hetherington &

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Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2024.2402817.

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Nelson, 2003; Kam & Ramos, 2008; Lee, 1977; Mueller, 1970) whereas 'events reflecting international setbacks tend to reduce the public's approval of the President' (Lee, 1977, p. 253).

This paper looks beyond established powers to examine rising states. It explores whether citizens in rising states reward their governments for growing their country's economic influence on the international stage and, conversely, withdraw support when their governments fail to expand their country's global influence. Observers of major emerging powers have suggested that this is the case. In India, for example, the country's 'global role is now a central issue in politics', and this has become 'one of the key dimensions on which citizens evaluate their government' (Mukherjee, 2024). Similarly, China's central government views the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—a program that aims to expand China's global influence—as one of the 'pillars of domestic support' that 'affect[s] its survival prospects' (Weiss & Wallace, 2021, p. 644). While these assertions seem plausible, there has been little systematic theory or evidence about the relationship between global influence and domestic popularity in rising states, particularly those with authoritarian regimes.

Our study examines the relationship between global economic expansion and incumbent approval in rising powers. We focus on the case of China, the most ambitious rising power today. China has poured immense resources into expanding its global economic footprint through initiatives such as the BRI, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and extensive foreign aid, as part of a broader effort to win foreign support, especially as US-China geopolitical competition intensifies. Whether China's global economic leadership influences popular support for the regime is a substantively important question. Despite China's authoritarian system of government, a robust body of research finds that the Chinese government is highly attuned to and responsive to public attitudes on both domestic and foreign policy issues (Chen, Pan, & Xu, 2016; Distelhorst & Hou, 2017; Weiss, 2014; Zhao, 2013). In a 2013 speech, General Secretary Xi Jinping asserted that 'winning or losing public support is an issue that concerns the CPC's survival or extinction' (quoted in Weiss & Dafoe, 2019, p. 963).

We argue that government popularity in rising powers depends on their (perceived) success in expanding the country's foreign economic influence. When rising-power governments grow their influence abroad, we expect them to become more popular at home. But governments that fail in expanding their international role are likely to suffer a loss of domestic support. We further theorize that this relationship might operate through two channels: by influencing citizens' sense of national pride, or by altering their assessments of their country's economic prospects.

To address this question, we fielded three online survey experiments in China between 2019 and 2021. Each experiment focused on a different overseas economic initiative aimed at expanding China's global influence: (1) the BRI, (2) the AIIB, and (3) COVID-19 vaccine aid. Each experiment randomly assigned subjects to receive different information about these programs. A 'successful expansion' group received information highlighting ways in which China has increased its role in the world economy. A 'failed expansion' group received information suggesting that China's foreign economic influence has not substantially improved. Our results are

clear and consistent: informing individuals that China has failed in expanding its global economic presence leads to poorer evaluations of the government, while information about success has no impact. The patterns in the data suggest that this response is unlikely to be due to social-desirability biases, but rather reflects a genuine reaction to failure on the international stage.

We then assess the causal mechanisms through which failed global economic expansion impacts government support. Notably, we find repeated evidence across all three experiments that a country's performance in global economic initiatives influences regime support predominantly by altering individuals' sense of national pride. By contrast, we find little evidence for an economic channel. Evaluations of national economic wellbeing do not appear to be a primary mediator of the relationship between international economic expansion and incumbent support.

Finally, we consider whether the public reacts similarly to failure in other policy realms. To address this, we conduct a fourth experiment that follows a parallel design to our prior experiments but focuses on two major domestic economic goals, inflation and unemployment. We estimate that domestic economic failure has a somewhat larger negative impact on government popularity than foreign economic failures, though the differences in effect sizes across experiments are statistically insignificant. More notably, information that the government missed its inflation and employment targets reduced government satisfaction by provoking more pessimistic economic evaluations, not by influencing national pride—the opposite of what we find in the three experiments on foreign economic expansion. While these channels are not mutually exclusive, our evidence suggests that different criterion might dominate the minds of citizens when assessing governments' foreign versus domestic economic performance.

These findings broaden our understanding of how China's rise is reshaping world politics. Previous research examines how China's increasing assertiveness influences international politics (e.g. Broz et al., 2020; Friedberg, 2018; Johnston, 2019; Mearsheimer, 2019; Qian et al., 2023; Shambaugh, 2013; Stephen & Skidmore, 2019; Weiss & Wallace, 2021; Yang et al., 2022). Influential scholarship has also broadened our understanding of the effectiveness of China's economic statecraft, particularly the impact of its overseas activities on attitudes in recipient countries (Dreher et al., 2022; Mattingly & Sundquist, 2023; Rabe & Kostka, 2023; Raess, 2021; Urdinez, 2023; Wong, 2021). Our findings complement this work by highlighting the channels through which these initiatives can impact domestic politics within rising powers themselves.

Existing studies have focused on the relationship between citizen satisfaction with the Chinese government and its performance on domestic public goods provision (Dickson et al., 2016; Saich, 2007). As the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) economic policies increasingly turn outward, our analysis suggests that China's ambitious global economic initiatives can also have domestic ramifications.[1] While the CCP might hope to reap a domestic political dividend from its economic statecraft, its overseas initiatives also carry potential downsides: failure to achieve their stated aims could end up costing the Party support among the public.

To be sure, for these risks to materialize, the Chinese public must also become aware of the ways in which China's overseas initiatives have under-performed. Given China's infamous 'Great Firewall', this is far from automatic. Yet, '(f)or the most part, these efforts at censorship are porous—frequently circumvented by savvy

internet users, accidentally evaded by citizens wasting time on the web, and rarely enforced with punishment' (Roberts, 2018, p. 2). Hence, despite high levels of censorship, information that does not show the government's international economic performance in a positive light is available to Chinese citizens through various outlets, including in Chinese language media, through access to international media via VPNs, and through sharing in private channels on social media platforms. This implies that there is some chance that negative developments on the global economic stage could seep into the domestic information environment, thereby impacting public support for China's central government. These odds are potentially higher for the multiple subgroups that regularly access non-mainland Chinese language media or international news outlets, as well as the broad segments of society who are plugged into social media networks that include savvy news consumers. Our evidence therefore highlights a potential risk that the CCP needs to at least be attentive to—a risk that becomes increasingly complex to effectively manage as China's overseas economic engagements continue to multiply across diverse countries.[2]

## The effect of global economic expansion on government support

### *Argument and testable hypotheses*

We argue that rising powers' efforts at global economic expansion impact domestic support for the government, by which we mean the degree to which individuals express approval of or confidence in incumbent governments. Governments that are perceived to successfully expand their country's global economic influence—meaning that their perceived impact on the world economy has increased—should benefit from a public approval dividend. Meanwhile, governments that are perceived to have failed in their efforts to expand their country's foreign economic influence should lose public support. We theorize that initiatives focused on expanding a country's foreign economic influence impact domestic government support through two channels.

The first mechanism, which draws on social identity theory and prior research on status in world politics, posits that an expanded (diminished) role in the global economy affects government support by strengthening (weakening) citizens' sense of national pride. The nation is often an important identity group for individuals, and citizens evaluate international events based on whether they improve or detract from their nation's status (Gruffydd-Jones, 2019; MacDonald & Parent, 2021; Powers & Renshon, 2023). We expect individuals to view a country's degree of influence in the global economy as an important indicator of their country's status. The rise in patriotism associated with enhanced status may intensify one's attachment to political leaders because they are viewed as symbols of the nation (Hetherington & Nelson, 2003; Kam & Ramos, 2008). Indeed, research indicates that high levels of national pride often translate into stronger support for incumbent governments (Dickson et al., 2017; Nathan, 2020; Pan & Xu, 2018). In short, we expect successful (failed) global expansion to increase (diminish) feelings of national pride, which will in turn increase (reduce) support for incumbent governments.

Citizens may also assess global economic initiatives through an economic lens. For instance, when a country shifts from being a recipient of development aid to one that provides such aid to other, needier, countries, citizens might view this as

an indicator of national economic strength. Similarly, growing foreign trade and investment ties might signal expanding market opportunities for their nation's firms, leading individuals to expect stronger future economic growth and brighter individual prospects. Conversely, citizens might view their country's failed efforts to expand trade and investment ties or the inability to deliver development finance to foreign countries as a signal of their country's economic weakness. In other words, a country's global economic influence might affect citizens' evaluations of their country's and their household's future economic prospects. In turn, individuals' prospective economic evaluations have a sizable impact on support for incumbent governments, both in democracies (MacKuen et al., 1992; Michelitch et al., 2012; Singer & Carlin, 2013) and in authoritarian regimes (Chen et al., 1997; Ou-Yang & Zhou, 2019; Wilking & Zhang, 2013). Thus, expanding (deteriorating) international economic ties might enhance (reduce) support for the incumbent government through citizens' assessments of future economic performance.

To test our argument, we examine whether information about their country's global economic expansion influences citizen support for the central government. We focus on information about success or failure because the effects of objective outcomes can only influence public opinion when individuals are informed about them. There are also pragmatic reasons to focus on information. Researchers are unable to directly control China's objective performance in the overseas initiatives, which in reality has been mixed with elements of both success and failure. However, we are able to vary the information that subjects receive about global economic initiatives. Our argument implies the following three testable hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a: Information suggesting that the country has successfully expanded its influence in the global economy increases public support for the central government.

Hypothesis 1b: Information suggesting that the country has failed in expanding its influence in the global economy reduces public support for the central government.

Hypothesis 2: Information about global economic expansion influences public support for the central government because it changes individuals' level of national pride.

Hypothesis 3: Information about global economic expansion influences public support for the central government because it changes individuals' prospective economic evaluations.

## *Applying the argument to the case of China*

We focus on China, the world's most important rising power. Consistent with theoretical expectations regarding rising powers (Gilpin, 1981, p. 70, 187), China is working to expand its role in global economic affairs through multiple initiatives. We focus on three specific projects: the BRI, the AIIB, and COVID-19 vaccine aid for several reasons. First, these activities cut across different aspects of China's expansionary efforts, from trade and investment to multilateral financing and foreign assistance. Second, claims of success and failure are plausible in each case, making these suitable initiatives for testing our hypotheses. Finally, Chinese media have emphasized both symbolic and economic benefits of these initiatives, suggesting that our two proposed mechanisms—national pride and prospective economic evaluations—plausibly apply in each case.

The BRI was announced in 2013 and aims to better connect China to countries in Africa, Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Since its launch, China has signed BRI-related agreements with over 100 countries and concluded trade and investment deals worth over $1 trillion USD, with substantial participation from a wide variety of actors including China's local governments, state-owned enterprises and more. However, the program has also been critiqued for funding projects that fail to deliver on their promised return, for saddling countries with unsustainable debts, and for operating as a tool of Chinese diplomatic influence (Gerstel, 2018; Shepard, 2020). Amid such concerns, countries like Malaysia, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Sierra Leone have scaled back or canceled planned BRI projects (Chandran, 2019).

Founded in 2016, the AIIB is the first China-led multilateral development bank.[3] As of the end of 2020, the bank boasted 103 member states, had approved over 108 projects, and had disbursed over $9 billion in funding (AIIB, 2021). Yet, AIIB lending has fallen short of initial projections (Babones, 2018), and has not won the support of the United States or Japan. Some experts view AIIB as an institution that adheres to the lending principles established by other multilateral banks (Stephen & Skidmore, 2019), but other analysts criticize the AIIB for lacking both transparency and stringent lending standards (Horta & Wang, 2021).

COVID-19 vaccines took center stage in China's foreign aid regime beginning in early-2021 when Beijing pledged to provide vaccines to 53 developing countries (Xinhua News, 2021). China soon became the world's largest exporter of COVID-19 vaccines (Parkinson et al., 2021). Even so, China's overseas vaccine aid has met with mixed results. Efficacy rates of Chinese vaccines are lower than those produced by the United States and Europe. Additionally, a lack of information regarding the clinical trial results has weakened receiving nations' public trust in China's vaccines relative to Western alternatives (Kelland, 2021).

While China's record of success on these initiatives is decidedly mixed, Chinese citizens are likely to consume more positive than negative content about these initiatives due to the overwhelmingly positive slant of Chinese media stories on these topics. Nevertheless, Chinese citizens can be exposed to content about these initiatives that are either critical or which highlight potential challenges to success, albeit at a lower rate compared to positive coverage.[4] For instance, Chinese language media have published stories exposing some of the failings of BRI projects, such as the fact that 'few BRI projects meet commercial standards' (Ding, 2017), and that 'extremely untransparent' large firms have been favored (Dong & Peng, 2017). Articles also feature mainland scholars' concerns about the AIIB's future success given heightened global tensions and the 'significant gap between China's vision and the external policy agendas of some important countries in the AIIB' (Lianhe Zaobao, 2020), as well as hesitancy towards China-made vaccines in Southeast Asia (Ha & Zaini, 2021). Furthermore, a substantial number of Chinese citizens also consume Western news sources (Huang & Yeh, 2019), where they encounter reports of the BRI, AIIB, and Chinese vaccine aid that are not wholly positive (e.g. Xiao et al., 2019).[5]

In terms of the content of that coverage, national pride plays a prominent role in how each of these initiatives are portrayed within China. Chinese government and state media have characterized the BRI as a means to 'arouse national self-confidence, self-esteem, and national pride' (State Council Information Office,

2015a). Similarly, the AIIB has been depicted as evidence of China's growing strength and the 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' (Lianyungang Propaganda Net, 2015). State media coverage of vaccine aid have trumpeted how China is 'hailed' globally for its overseas assistance, pointing out that Chinese vaccine aid exceeds that of the United States and European Union (China Daily, 2021).

Media coverage also emphasizes the initiatives' economic benefits. The BRI has been touted as 'a new engine of economic development' (State Council Information Office, 2015b) that will 'open … new spaces for global economic growth' (Renmin Net, 2019). State media reported that the AIIB will improve the rate of return of China's foreign exchange reserves, boost Chinese exports, open international markets for China's manufacturing and construction industries, and promote the internationalization of the RMB (Renmin Net, 2015). Finally, China's vaccine aid is pitched as a critical part of aiding the recovery of the world economy (Global Times, 2021). Existing media coverage therefore supports both of our hypothesized causal mechanisms (national identity and economic prospects), which are not mutually exclusive.

The BRI, AIIB and China's vaccine aid are three major initiatives that reflect China's expanding activism and influence in international economic affairs. Within each, markers of success sit alongside examples of underperformance. Our argument implies that informing Chinese citizens about their country's achievements in these arenas will increase their support for the central government, while information that these programs have faltered should reduce individuals' support for China's Communist Party. Consistent with the media coverage, we further hypothesize that the effect could be mediated through two different channels: altering individuals' sense of national pride or changing their prospective economic evaluations.

We expect that there will be variation in the degree to which failure on the international stage impacts public support for the government. While we focus on high-profile initiatives that reflect substantial global economic expansion, our theoretical expectations are less likely to extend to international activities that have low salience for the domestic public, or which are less subject to international competition (Weiss & Wallace, 2021). Overseas activities that are of low centrality to an incumbent government's agenda are also less likely to affect public support. Examples could include narrowly focused and highly technical issues, such as soil management or horticulture.

## Research design

We fielded three original internet-based survey experiments to test our argument. Our first survey, fielded in April 2019, focused on the BRI. In July 2019, we conducted an experiment on the AIIB. The third experiment, fielded in April 2021, examined vaccine aid. Surveying public opinion on a range of different economic issues helps provide a more generalizable understanding of Chinese citizens' reactions to their government's global economic initiatives. In addition to the different topics covered in each survey, the larger political and economic context in China and externally differed across the three surveys. For example, China's GDP growth rate was notably higher in 2021 (8.45%) compared to 2019 (5.95%) (World Bank, 2024). The first two surveys were fielded during a time when US-China tensions over trade and tariffs ebbed and flowed. The third survey was fielded during the

COVID-19 pandemic. If we obtain similar results across these varied circumstances, this would indicate that our findings are more generalizable across time and context.

All three experiments followed an analogous format. Respondents were first randomly assigned into one of three experimental conditions: a control group receiving no information about the success or failure of the specific initiative; a 'successful expansion treatment' that provided respondents with some factual information about the country's achievements in this issue-area; or a 'failed expansion treatment', where respondents received information that, despite its efforts, China remains a laggard in this area. All information conveyed was accurate and based on mainstream media reporting. In doing so, these treatments operate as 'emphasis frames', which selectively emphasize certain dimensions of an issue over others (Druckman, 2001; Nelson, 2019). In each experiment, the treatment conditions are similar in word length and priming strength. Table 1 provides the complete text for these treatments across the three experiments.

At the end of these brief scripts, respondents were asked whether they think China's government should expand its role in this issue-area. The main purpose of this question was misdirection—to create the appearance that foreign economic policy was our main question of interest, and disguise our true intention of examining how the treatments influenced attitudes about the central government. We also use responses to this question to conduct manipulation checks to ensure that our treatments had the anticipated effect on perceptions of these issues. In each experiment, respondents were offered an 11-point sliding scale asking them to rate their level of agreement or disagreement that the government should continue to support these initiatives.[6]

After completing this first question, respondents proceeded to a new page of the survey, which included several questions about China's government and economy. The first question, which serves as our dependent variable, asked respondents how much they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: 'I am very satisfied with the performance of China's central government'. Those surveys offered an 11-point sliding scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree', where higher values indicate stronger government support. The remaining questions, whose order was randomized, asked respondents about their attitudes towards the economy and national pride. These questions serve as tests for our proposed causal mechanisms.

A fourth survey, fielded in January/February 2022, tests the impact of success or failure in *domestic* economic governance on support for the central government. As described in more detail below, this survey uses an identical experimental set-up, but focuses on the government's performance on inflation and employment. Our goals here are to (1) compare the relative effect sizes of domestic and international economic outcomes on regime support; and (2) explore whether international and domestic economic outcomes affect government support through different causal channels.

The surveys were completed online using convenience samples. Subjects were recruited using a Chinese crowd-sourcing service that operates in similar fashion to Amazon's Mechanical Turk. This is a cost-effective method that enabled us to reach around 2,500 respondents or more per survey. While the sample skews younger, has a higher education profile than the average citizen, and contains a larger share of Party members than the overall population, these 'netizens' represent a politically salient segment of the Chinese population. This younger, more educated group makes up an important sub-population that online public opinion

**Table 1.** Summary of experimental treatments.

| | Control group | Successful expansion | Failed expansion |
|---|---|---|---|
| BRI (04/2019) | In 2013, the Chinese government launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). ($N = 920$) | 'Control Group' + Since its launch, it has attracted global attention and 152 countries have joined. BRI projects have led to the successful building of dams, ports, and railways in these countries and increased connectivity among participants. ($N = 919$) | 'Control Group' + which seeks to build dams, ports, and railways in participating countries. Some prominent countries have decided to stay out of the BRI while others that initially joined subsequently decided to cancel their BRI projects. ($N = 934$) |
| AIIB (07/2019) | In 2014, the Chinese government launched the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank, which supports the building of infrastructure throughout Asia. ($N = 1037$) | 'Control Group' + The AIIB has attracted global praise and over 70 countries have joined it. The number of projects financed by AIIB has grown rapidly, with more than 40 financed in over a dozen countries. ($N = 1052$) | 'Control Group' + The AIIB has drawn international criticism and several influential foreign countries have declined to join it. The number of projects financed by the AIIB is far below what was initially expected. ($N = 1049$) |
| Vaccine aid (04/2021) | The Chinese government has been offering Chinese-made vaccines as aid to other countries. ($N = 925$) | 'Control Group' + China's vaccine trials have met international standards and have efficacy levels that meet the World Health Organization's effectiveness criteria. The vaccines are in high demand and so far, 53 developing countries are receiving vaccine aid. ($N = 1005$) | 'Control Group' + However, detailed information about the vaccine trials has been lacking. Surveys show that this has reduced confidence in recipient countries that these vaccines are effective. ($N = 990$) |

monitors target in their work for China's government (Denyer, 2013). Additionally, a recent study on Internet recruitment in China finds that online convenience samples produce attitude estimates that are highly consistent with national probability samples (Li et al., 2018), offering some reassurance that our results are likely to generalize to the Chinese population as a whole.

One challenge with using online samples is that paid respondents may be inattentive (Harden et al., 2019). To mitigate this concern, we drop all subjects who finished the survey in three minutes or less.[7] It is unlikely that respondents that completed the survey that quickly paid full attention to the questions. Supplementary Appendix A reports similar results when all observations are included and when using different thresholds for excluding observations.

## Main findings

### *Support for global economic expansion*

We first examine public support for China's global economic expansion, which was our distractor question in each experiment. Our surveys suggest that respondents have highly favorable baseline attitudes for all three external initiatives. Among

control-group respondents, the mean level of support on a zero-to-ten scale for BRI, AIIB, and vaccine aid is 8.6, 7.3, and 7.6, respectively.[8] Our treatments have the expected impact on support for global economic expansion. The failed expansion treatment reduces support for global economic expansion by around 0.7 points in all three experiments, and this effect is statistically significant in all cases (see Supplementary Appendix, Table B4). The success treatment had more modest effects, which were no larger than 0.2 points, and were not always statistically different from zero.

The weaker effects of the successful expansion treatments may reflect the fact that these initiatives receive highly positive coverage in official media. Hence, the treatments may be more consistent with our respondents' priors about these initiatives, tempering the treatments' effects. In contrast, information on failed expansion may be less consistent with the priors of our survey respondents, given the nature of China's information environment discussed earlier. Additionally, high baseline levels of support may limit the ability of any new information to further boost support for these initiatives. These results are consistent with research findings that novel information that is less consistent with one's priors are more likely to have an effect in changing individual attitudes (Gerber & Green, 1999; Guess & Coppock, 2020). Overall, the data indicate strong enthusiasm amongst the Chinese public for global economic expansion while information portraying these initiatives as failing to achieve their aims diminishes that enthusiasm.

### *Support for China's central government*

We now turn to our primary subject of interest: the effect of our treatments on support for China's central government. Figure 1 presents the estimated effects of the successful and failed expansion treatments on support for China's central government, compared to those in the control condition. (Full regression output is provided in Supplementary Appendix, Table B5.) For each experiment, we present average treatment effects from two models: one without control variables, and one that controls for some pre-treatment demographic covariates (respondent age, income level, educational attainment, membership in the CCP, gender, and Hukou status; for more details on the demographic controls, see Supplementary Appendix B).

All three experiments provide some support for our main argument. The failed expansion treatment has a remarkably consistent effect on support for China's central government. Across the three experiments, information about failed expansion reduces satisfaction with the central government by around 0.2 points. The effect of the failed expansion treatment is negative and statistically significant at the 95% level in the BRI and vaccine aid experiments. The effect of the failed expansion treatment is less precisely estimated in the AIIB experiment, though the effect is negative and significant at the 90% confidence level. In sum, our results indicate that information suggesting that China's efforts to expand its global economic influence have failed has a negative effect on support for the country's central government.

The magnitude of these treatment effects is modest in an absolute sense, but this is unsurprising for at least two reasons. First, our experimental treatments are quite subtle, and the treatments and outcome questions appear on separate survey pages. Second, and perhaps most importantly, an individual's satisfaction with the

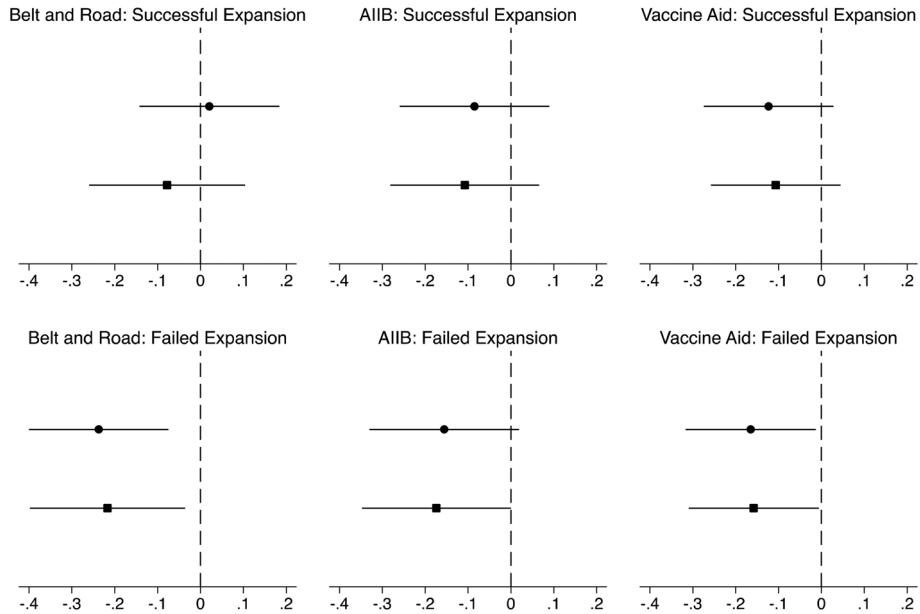



**Figure 1.** Support for China's central government.

government is shaped by many factors, most of which are stable. Thus, it is unlikely that the government's performance in one specific issue-area will drastically change a person's support for the central government. In line with this expectation, other survey-based studies of performance-based citizen satisfaction with the central government (observational and experimental) report coefficients of similar or smaller magnitude (Alkon & Wang, 2018; Dickson et al., 2016). Additionally, the effect of the failed expansion treatment is only slightly smaller than the effects of CCP membership and gender, the two most robust demographic predictors of regime support in our multivariate models.[9] This suggests that, relative to other factors, the information contained in these treatments has a substantively meaningful impact on support for China's central government.

Figure 1 also shows that the successful expansion treatment has little impact on central-government support. The effects of the successful expansion treatment are never statistically significant and they are smaller in (absolute) size than those of the failed expansion treatment. Surprisingly, these point estimates are negative in some cases. Given that the coefficients are not statistically different from zero, one should probably not read too much into the direction of this effect. That said, one possible explanation for this negative sign is that some respondents may interpret the information about successful expansion as a form of state propaganda, resulting in a backlash effect that worsens citizens' opinions of the regime (Huang, 2018).

The asymmetry of our findings—with consistent negative effects for the failed expansion treatment in contrast with null effects for the success treatment—may derive from two factors. First, the null effects may reflect the fact that support for China's government is already high, and therefore difficult to raise further. In addition to this 'ceiling effect', information in the successful expansion treatments is

likely to be consistent with subjects' priors,[10] whereas respondents are less likely to have had high exposure to information in the failed expansion treatment.

Overall, our results across three experiments focused on distinct issue-areas, fielded over three years, support our argument that domestic evaluations of China's government are sensitive to the country's initiatives on the global stage. Information about China's rising global economic influence does not appear to increase government satisfaction. However, consistent with our expectations, information suggesting that China has not been successful in expanding its international economic presence hurts the government's standing with the public.

Our research design does not allow us to capture the persistence of these treatment effects. However, existing studies suggest that experiments which provide new or novel information (such as that shown in our failed expansion treatment) are more likely to produce durable effects (Baden & Lecheler, 2012). Future research could fruitfully examine whether, and under what conditions, information about government performance has longer-term impact on levels of government satisfaction.

### *Addressing potential threats to validity*

Next, we address two potential threats to inference. The first possible concern is that our measure of government support might be affected by social desirability bias. Citizens in authoritarian regimes such as China may be reluctant to respond sincerely, and they may report strong support for China's central government even if this is not their true opinion. Several features of our survey are likely to mitigate this risk. Online surveys, which are relatively more anonymous, reduce the degree of social desirability biases compared to in-person surveys (Heerwegh, 2009). Our use of an ordinal scale for this question, which offered subjects multiple response categories, should reduce the extent to which respondents would believe that there is only one politically correct answer.

We also conducted several analyses that suggest that social desirability biases are unlikely to be driving responses to our government support question. First, if respondents viewed this question as overly sensitive, we would expect high non-response rates to our government support measure (Jiang & Yang, 2016; Robinson & Tannenberg, 2019). But, as we show in Supplementary Appendix Table C1, response rates to our question about the central government are very high in all three surveys and across all treatment conditions. Second, we examine whether reported levels of approval are higher among individuals that would be more motivated to falsify their preferences (Huang et al., 2023). One survey included a question about how much respondents think the government trusts them and their life choices. Individuals that believe the government has little trust in them should be more likely to think the government monitors their responses, and thus feel more pressure to report high levels of satisfaction. Two of the surveys asked respondents about their levels of anxiety. Anxious individuals might be more likely to fear retribution if they do not respond appropriately. Yet, perceptions that the government distrusts you and measures of anxiety levels are not associated with higher levels of central-government support. Rather, they are negatively correlated with the outcome variable (Supplementary Table C2). Third, our survey data show that Party members, more nationalistic individuals, and those that are more optimistic about

the economy express higher support for the central government, which are patterns that we would expect to find among the population if responses are sincere (Supplementary Tables B5, E1, and E2). These overall patterns provide indirect evidence that our main findings are not driven by social desirability biases.

Another potential concern is that the netizens in our sample respond differently to our treatments than other segments of the population. Without data from other groups, it is impossible to fully rule out this possibility. However, if responses to our treatments are similar across age, education and income profiles within our sample, this would indicate that our main findings are likely representative of the broader population (Coppock, 2019). Another concern might be that our treatment effects vary across subgroups due to distributional considerations. For instance, some might expect lower-income groups to hold more negative assessments of these overseas initiatives because they may view such spending as better invested on social welfare programs. To address these types of concerns, we run a series of estimations where we add interaction terms between our treatments and age, income, and education to our regressions. Supplementary Appendix D presents the overall results. There is very little evidence that these demographic variables moderate individuals' responses to our treatments. We also examined whether other pre-treatment covariates, such as CCP membership, gender, and household registration status moderate our treatment effects, and find little heterogeneity along these dimensions. While a lack of statistical power may limit our ability to detect heterogenous treatment effects, our failure to detect heterogenous effects within our samples provides suggestive evidence that our sample average treatment effects provide a valid estimate of the average treatment effects for the broader population.

## Causal mechanisms

This section examines the channels through which global economic expansion influences support for the central government. We focus on testing the roles of identity-based versus economic concerns in driving the link between foreign economic expansion and central-government support. In all three experiments, following the question about central government support, we included questions that tap into these mechanisms. To measure national pride, respondents were asked how much they agree with the following statement: 'I would rather be a citizen of China than of any other country in the world'.[11] We measure economic perceptions based on the degree to which respondents agreed or disagreed that 'the economic situation in China will improve over the next five years'.[12] Respondents answer both questions on 11-point scales where higher values indicate more positive assessments.

Our results focus on the effect of the failed expansion treatment because this was the treatment that consistently impacted support for the central government. We use causal mediation analysis to test whether nationalism and prospective economic evaluations are important causal channels through which the failed expansion treatment influences central-government support.

Causal mediation analysis decomposes the 'total effect', or average treatment effect, into two components. The first component, the 'mediation effect', refers to the effect that is accounted for by the mediator variable (either national pride or economic evaluations). A mediation effect exists when the treatment influences the mediator

and the mediator in turn influences the outcome. Mediation effects are quantified as the product of two coefficients: (1) the estimated effect of the treatment on the mediator; and (2) the estimated effect of the mediator on the outcome. The 'direct effect' is the remaining effect, comprising all other potential channels through which the failed expansion treatment influences central-government support. It is measured as the effect of the treatment on the outcome, after controlling for the mediator. To estimate the causal mediation effects, we include the same set of pre-treatment covariates as in the earlier models. We include these controls as other factors could also be influencing our mediators. Failure to control for potential confounders could bias our estimates of the effect of the mediator on the outcome variable, and in turn bias the estimated mediation and direct effects (Imai et al., 2011, pp. 770–772).

Figure 2 presents the main results from our tests of the national identity mechanism. For each experiment, the figure plots three quantities, along with 95% confidence intervals: (1) the total effect of the failed expansion treatment on support for the central government; (2) the mediation effect of the failed expansion treatment, which is the share of the total effect that is accounted for by the national pride mediator; and (3) the direct effect, which is the share of the total effect that is driven by channels other than national pride.[13] Consistent with the findings in Figure 1, the total effect of the failed expansion treatment is negative and statistically significant in all three experiments. Figure 2 also shows that the mediation effect is negative and statistically significant at the 95% level in all three experiments. The magnitude of the mediation effect is substantial as well, ranging between 40 and 50% of the total effect. These results indicate that a loss of national pride is one important channel through which failed global economic expansion reduces support for China's central government.

Next, we test the economic evaluation channel. The main results, presented in Figure 3, provide more limited support for this mechanism. In the BRI and AIIB experiments, economic evaluations have similarly sized mediation effects as national pride. However, the mediation effect of economic evaluations is very small in the vaccine aid experiment. Furthermore, the economic assessment variable is not a statistically significant mediator in any of the three experiments. We fail to find much evidence that the effect of unsuccessful global economic expansion on government satisfaction is driven by individuals' economic evaluations.

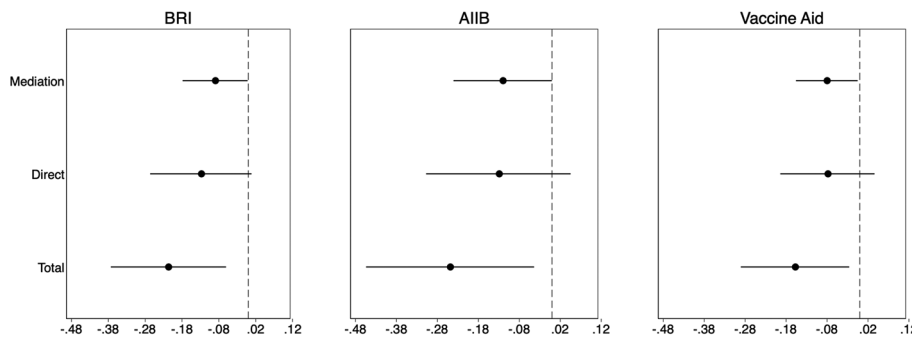



**Figure 2.** Testing the national identity mechanism. *Note:* Figure displays the point estimates of the average causal mediation effect of national pride together with the direct and total effects for the failed expansion treatment, with 95% confidence intervals. Estimation is based on Hicks and Tingley (2011).

The identification of causal mediation effects relies on a 'sequential ignorability' assumption, which requires that there are no pre-treatment variables that confound either the relationship between the treatment and the mediator or the relationship between the mediator and the outcome variable (Imai et al., 2011). Since this assumption cannot be directly tested, we follow the suggestion of Imai et al. (2011) to use sensitivity analysis to assess how robust our mediation results are to possible violations of this assumption. Table E3 in the Supplementary Appendix presents the main results of the sensitivity analysis, which indicate that a very substantial level of pre-treatment confounding would be required to overturn our finding that national pride is an important mediator. In sum, our results provide robust support for the hypothesis that national pride mediates the relationship between global economic expansion and support for the central government.

## The effect of domestic economic performance

The results thus far indicate that information about the government's inability to achieve its foreign economic objectives reduces government support primarily through a national pride channel. An important question is whether the public would respond similarly to any government failure in any arena or whether different logics are operative in rising powers' efforts to expand their international presence. To address this question, we implemented a fourth experiment that follows a parallel design but focuses instead on domestic economic outcomes.

The survey was fielded in January/February 2022 using the same online sampling methods as the prior surveys. Consistent with prior experiments, we include three conditions. The control group receives a neutral description of this issue, which states 'China's government has pledged to keep the economy strong, by keeping growth rates high, unemployment low, and prices stable'. Subjects in the domestic economic success condition receive the following additional information after that introductory sentence: 'Consistent with these goals, China continues to meet its economic growth target, has exceeded its goals for job creation, and current inflation is low compared to earlier decades'. A third group instead receives text

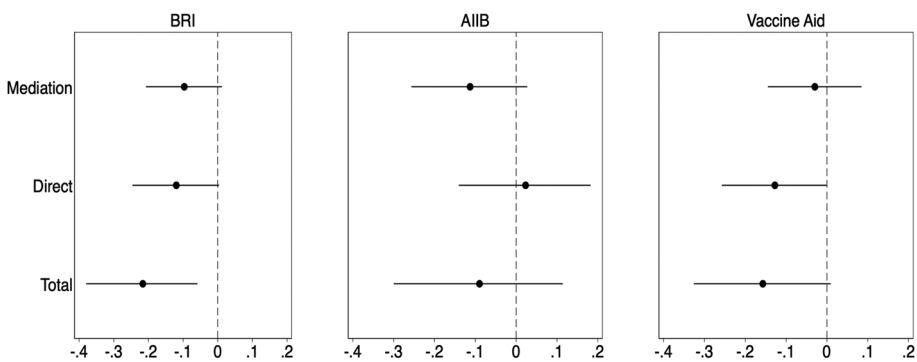



**Figure 3.** Testing the economic evaluation mechanism. *Note:* Figure displays the point estimates of the average causal mediation effect of personal economic evaluations together with the direct and total effects for the failed expansion treatment, with 95% confidence intervals. Estimation is based on Hicks and Tingley (2011).

highlighting facts about domestic economic weaknesses: 'However, China's growth rate has been steadily falling since 2007, unemployment has been increasing since 2018, and prices are currently rising faster than they have in over a decade'. As in the prior experiments, we first ask subjects a distractor question about their views about domestic economic policy. That question asks: 'Do you think that the government should do more, less, or about the same to achieve its economic goals?' On the next page of the survey, they receive the question about central-government approval followed by (in random order) questions about national pride and prospective economic evaluations.

Figure 4 presents the effects of these treatments on support for China's central government (with and without controls).[14] The domestic success treatment has a small and statistically insignificant impact on regime support. The domestic failure treatment reduces support for China's central government by 0.27. This pattern, in which poor performance matters more than strong performance, mirrors the results in prior experiments. In this experiment, the failure treatment has a larger effect on government approval. In the model without covariates, the effect is 13% larger in this experiment than in the BRI experiment, and about 60% larger than the AIIB and vaccine aid experiments. This suggests that domestic economic performance may have a larger impact on regime evaluations compared to international performance, but the differences in effect sizes across experiments are not statistically significant (Supplementary Table F5).

Lastly, we explore whether foreign and domestic economic performance influences government approval through similar mechanisms. We again use causal mediation analysis, focusing on the failure treatment and two separate mediator variables, national pride and economic evaluations. The left panel of Figure 5 presents the results for the national pride mediator. Unlike in Figure 2, we find that

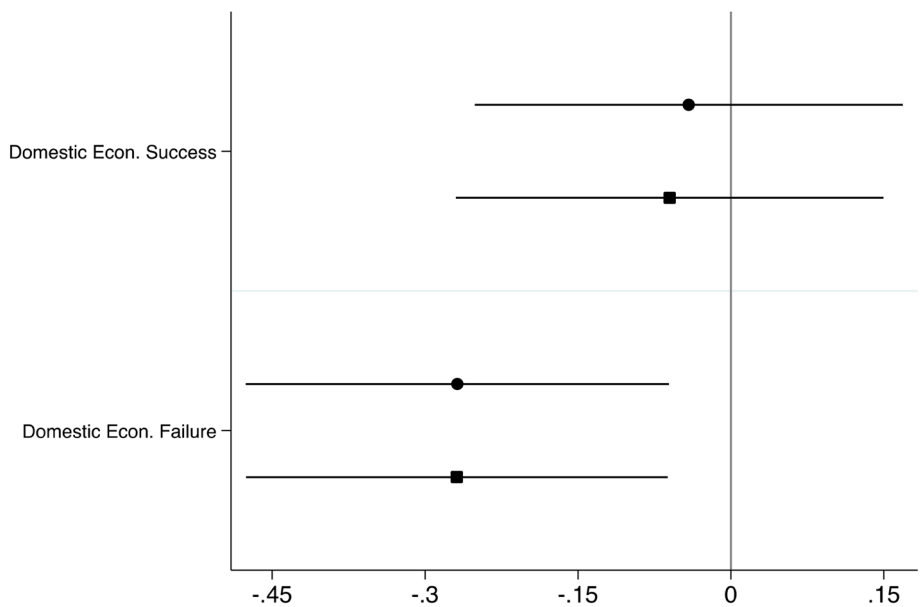



**Figure 4.** The effect of domestic economic performance on government support.

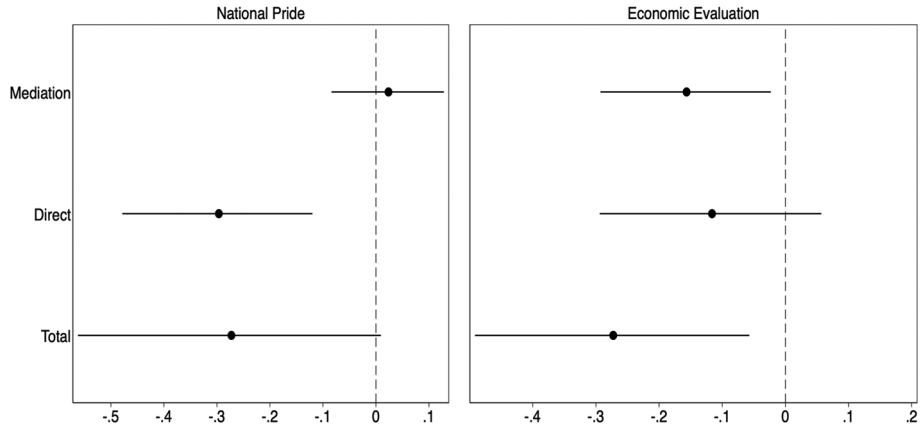



**Figure 5.** Causal mechanisms for domestic economic performance. *Note:* Figure displays the point estimates of the average causal mediation effect of national pride (left panel) and personal economic evaluations (right panel) together with the direct and total effects for the failed expansion treatment, with 95% confidence intervals. Estimation is based on Hicks and Tingley (2011).

national pride does not mediate the relationship between domestic economic performance and government satisfaction. The mediation effect of national pride is close to zero and is not statistically significant in this experiment. By contrast, the mediation effect of prospective economic assessments accounts for more than half of the total effect of the domestic economic failure treatment, and its effect is statistically significant. Rising inflation and unemployment, then, appear to reduce government popularity because they change individuals' subjective evaluations of the national economy.

This evidence on domestic economic performance presents an interesting contrast with our main findings. While our two hypothesized mechanisms could in theory operate at the same time in both domestic and foreign settings, the evidence suggests that this is not the case. Contrasting the results of this experiment with our main findings, a different channel appears to be more dominant in shaping citizen support for the government when it comes to global economic expansion. When rising powers fail to expand their international economic influence, citizens do not seem to evaluate the government through an economic lens, but rather through an identity-based mechanism. In contrast with their performance on the domestic economy, failure on the global stage weakens government approval by diminishing people's pride in their nation.[15]

## Conclusion

As US-China rivalry intensifies on the world stage, this paper highlights an important domestic dimension to China's expansionary efforts. Our evidence shows that China's foreign economic initiatives influence public satisfaction with the central government. In particular, we find that information indicating that China has failed to expand its global economic role generates dissatisfaction with the central government. This finding is consistent across three survey experiments covering three different facets of Chinese foreign economic policy between 2019 and 2021. These

global economic initiatives have nearly as large an impact on regime support as does failure to control domestic inflation and unemployment.

Our causal mediation analysis further reveals a potential vulnerability that rising-power governments face from their efforts to enhance their foreign economic influence. While all governments are evaluated on their domestic economic performance, the decision to undertake expansionist economic initiatives appears to shape citizens' evaluations of their government through an identity-based channel. Whereas poor domestic macroeconomic performance primarily depresses citizens' prospective economic evaluations, failure in the global arena appears to reduce support for the central government mainly by eroding the pride that citizens have in their nation.

Our research adds a new dimension to scholarship on Chinese economic statecraft. As the country aspires to great power status, its sources of legitimacy become less confined to performance on domestic issues. Citizens also judge the ruling party based on its performance on the world stage. While success might strengthen China's international position and boost domestic support, failure to expand the country's foreign economic influence would not only undermine China's geopolitical ambitions but could also increase risks that, without careful management, the regime's domestic standing might be damaged along the way. While China's information environment is restricted, censorship controls are not airtight. Rather, the media landscape is porous, and negative information continues to be accessible to a Chinese public that has become increasingly savvy at bypassing censorship controls. As the government's international economic activities multiply, so grows a concurrent pressure on the regime to exert greater management over domestic sentiments and access to non-PRC media. Given rising levels of nationalism amongst the Chinese public, and the sheer diversity of countries and economic activities that China is involved with globally, the government's ability to perfectly calibrate the domestic reception of its many global economic initiatives is far from given.

More generally, these results contribute to a body of evidence that foreign policy performance can have an important impact on governments' popularity at home. We add to this literature by showing that incumbent popularity does not just depend on the outcomes of the highest-profile military crises. Rather, a government's gradual efforts to boost its international stature in economic arenas, from development banking to foreign aid, also affect its domestic support. Our findings also contribute to literature on economic voting, which has largely focused on the domestic, rather than international, economic performance of incumbent governments.

Our findings provide highly suggestive evidence that perceived failures in expanding the country's global economic influence can end up undermining political support for China's central government. While our study covered three distinct issue-areas within China, future research could consider whether other policy arenas, such as the internationalization of China's currency and efforts to expand China's influence within the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, have similar effects on regime satisfaction. Future research could also build on studies focusing on the differing levels of support for China's central versus subnational governments to examine whether or not the overseas activities of subnational governments similarly have an impact on public approval. Likewise, our study focused specifically on the most prominent rising power in the current world order, but it would be fruitful to explore whether incumbent approval in other emerging

powers, such as Brazil, Russia, India or South Africa, are also affected by their country's global economic expansion. Another interesting extension would be to test whether similar dynamics operate within hegemonic or declining powers, such as the United States, where many citizens have grown concerned about the country's relative economic decline (Clement & Balz, 2019). Our findings raise the possibility that perceptions of America's waning international economic dominance could influence domestic public opinion within the US, and future research should explore this possibility.

## Notes

1. Related research focuses on the domestic-political *drivers* of China's international economic policies (Lin & Katada, 2022; Li & Zeng, 2019; Ye, 2019; Yu, 2017). We complement this literature by exploring how international economic outcomes influence domestic politics, and by focusing on the role of public opinion, which has received little attention in previous scholarship on Chinese foreign economic policy.
2. To prevent a loss of public support, China's government could potentially exert closer management over its citizens' opinion of these overseas activities. But such activities are costly as well, and success is not guaranteed.
3. One initial purpose of the AIIB was to help fund BRI projects, but it has emerged as a major institution in its own right, and the two initiatives, while part of China's broader global economic strategy, have different groups of member countries.
4. This partly reflects the fact that issues surrounding the economy are considered less sensitive and have a lower likelihood of censorship (King et al., 2013). However, even when the state aims to prevent negative information and objective coverage of crises from reaching its citizens, these efforts often fail due to the efforts of critical journalists and rapid sharing through social media platforms (Repnikova, 2017).
5. Huang and Yeh (2019, p. 613) note that 'The WSJ (Chinese) alone, for instance, currently has over eighteen million followers on Weibo. Blocked newspapers such as the NYT have also developed sophisticated methods such as mirroring and mobile applications to make their articles available to Chinese readers, with the NYT's Chinese-language website generating millions of unique users monthly from within China'.
6. The questions are worded as follows: Do you agree that the government should continue to support BRI/the AIIB/providing vaccine aid to other countries?
7. This approach follows previous studies utilizing online survey experiments in China (Gueorguiev et al., 2020).
8. See Supplementary Appendix Table B6 for the full distribution across treatment groups.
9. The coefficients on CCP member and Female are both about 0.3 on average across the three surveys (Supplementary Table B5). Hence, the treatment effects are about two-thirds the magnitude of these other major covariates.
10. As shown in Supplementary Table B5, mean levels of regime support are around 8 on a zero-to-ten scale in all three experiments. The high reported level of support is consistent other survey research on China (Dickson et al., 2017; Huang, 2018; Tang, 2016).
11. This question has been used to measure nationalism in previous research on Chinese public opinion (Johnston, 2019) and in studies examining public opinion towards foreign-economic policy issues in other countries (Mansfield & Mutz, 2009).
12. This question is similar to the standard measure of (prospective, sociotropic) economic evaluations. The main difference is that previous surveys typically ask about economic changes over the next year while we ask about the next five years. We do so because changes in China's global economic position are a long-term trend that are unlikely to influence peoples' views about China's short-term economic well-being, but could plausibly impact perceptions of economic performance over a longer period.
13. Supplementary Appendix E presents the full regression results.
14. The complete regression output and results of our manipulation checks are available in Supplementary Appendix F.

15. Our research design does not extend to situations where domestic economic performance is framed in terms of international competition. Future research could explore this promising avenue, and examine scenarios where domestic economic performance might influence government support through identity-based, rather than economic, logic.

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to participants of the 2020 APSA annual conference and the 2021 IPES conference for useful feedback. We would also like to thank the organizers and participants of the UC San Diego China Research Workshop and the Georgetown Chinese Politics and Economy Research Seminar for their constructive comments. Our thanks also go to Yinxuan Wang and Xiuyi Li, who provided excellent research assistance for the project.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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