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Unpacking the Cues: A Survey Experiment on the Impact of International Support for Humanitarian Intervention on U.S. Public Opinion

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Abstract

Utilizing a survey experiment centering on a hypothetical proposal by the Trump administration to establish a safe zone in Syria, we seek to contribute to the “unpacking” of international-backing cues and the impact of such cues on individual-level support for the use of military force. First, we unpack the effect of backing cues from different international bodies, for unlike previous work we distinguish between the impact on respondents of backing from the UN on the one hand and NATO on the other. Second, we explore the impact of a key pre-disposition of individuals, that is, their confidence in President Trump. We find that variation in such confidence appears to make American respondents more or less receptive to international-backing cues in a way that differs from previously reported work, namely, the association appears to be curvilinear rather than purely linear.

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1. Introduction

During the past twenty years, scholars have paid productive attention to whether, when, and why public support for a proposal or a decision by a national leader to employ military force abroad may be affected by whether or not that leader has attained backing from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and other relevant international bodies, and especially the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This scholarship has examined how international backing affects public assessments of the use of force in a variety of contexts, from the suppression of piracy to helping another country repel an armed invasion to humanitarian interventions. Studies on this nexus between international backing and public support on the matter of force have been completed on the United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom, and they have employed a variety of methodologies, including game theory, qualitative studies, and, increasingly often, survey-based experiments.

These studies have often centered on the proposition that the attainment or not by a national leader of international endorsement for a proposed use of force acts as a cue that shapes the public's assessment of that use of force. In general, a cue is information that individuals obtain from an external source—a family member, faith-community leader, domestic legislative body, non-governmental organization/lobbying group, or an international organization (IO)—whose very identity helps fortify the message received by those individuals regarding the merits of a proposal by a leader. A great deal of the scholarship on external cues and the national use of force has sought to understand the meaning assigned by individuals to cues imparted by the presence or not of international backing, such as signaling that the proposed use of force is necessary, or is likely to succeed, or is likely to evoke burden-sharing by other countries, or is unlikely to generate international political costs or even resistance to the use of force.

The literature on the cueing function of international support for national military decisions has greatly augmented our understanding of the politics of the use of force in international relations. Yet, there is further room for investigation into the nature of the cues that international-institutional backing, or its absence, imparts to individuals. We suggest that such an “unpacking” exercise might productively be undertaken in connection to two specific issues. First, it would be helpful to identify differences, if any, in the magnitude of the impact of cues on public support for the use of military force that emanate from different international institutions as well as the possible circumstance in which more than one international entity has endorsed a proposed national use of force. Second, there may be fruitful opportunities to unpack more fully the extent to which the pre-dispositions of individuals may have a moderating effect on the impact of external institutional cues on their support for such a proposed use of force.

Thus, in this article, we seek to contribute to our understanding of the role of external cues on public opinion regarding the use of force through the unpacking of two potentially important factors that may affect the impact of such cues in the

context of the United States. To do so, we report on and utilize the results of a survey-experiment we conducted in December 2017, which centered on a hypothetical proposal by the administration of President Donald Trump to establish a safe zone in northern Syria. We designed our experiment, in the first instance, to assess different levels of impact resulting from support from the UNSC, NATO, and the combination of both. Second, we sought to explore how confidence in President Trump made U.S. respondents more or less receptive to cues that may have emanated from international backing for the experiments hypothetical Syrian safe zone.

2. International Support as a Cue to the Public on the Use of Military Force

The impact of external cues on public support for the use of military force has been a topic for productive research in the field of International Relations for at least two decades. The earliest reports that international backing might influence public support for the use of military force were contained in path-finding studies by Herrmann, Tetlock, and Visser¹ and Kull and Destler.² Since then, scholars have sought to measure more precisely and to account theoretically for the impact that international backing can have on public opinion regarding the use of force, and to identify and understand the conditions under which that magnitude might vary.

One initial line of work focused on an indirect but observable implication of the view that the public does assign value to international backing when using force abroad. Chapman and Reiter have shown that attainment of international backing amplifies the “rally” round the flag” effect that leaders often enjoy when they enter into military conflicts overseas through an analysis of presidential approval ratings in the context of militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) in which the United States was involved between 1945 and 2001.³ They found that such rallies in public approval surrounding MIDs were larger when the president had attained the UNSC authorization for the U.S. employment of force. Since the UNSC has no incentive to approve uses of force inconsistent with its objectives, Chapman and Reiter suggested, its approval serves a credible signal to American public that the government proposal to use force was prudent and thus worth supporting.⁴

Chapman has found a comparable effect in a later study of presidential

1 Richard Herrmann, Philip Tetlock, and Penny Visser, “Mass Public Decisions to Go to War: A Cognitive-Interactionist Framework,” *American Political Science Review* 93 (September 1999), pp. 553-573.

2 Stave Kull, and I.M. Destler, *Misreading the Public: The Myth of a New Isolationism* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).

3 Terrence Chapman and Dan Reiter, “The United Nations Security Council and the Rally’ Round the Flag Effect,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48 (December 2004), pp.886-909.

4 *Id.* In an interesting but still puzzling twist, Lai and Reiter did not find rally’ round the flag effects associated with international backing in the case where one might most expect public interest in such backing, namely, the United Kingdom. Brian Lai and Dan Reiter, “Rally ‘Round the Union Jack? Public Opinion and the Use of Force in the United Kingdom, 1948–2001,” *International Studies Quarterly* 49 (June 2005), pp. 255–272.

approval in the context of MIDs, but made an additional discovery.⁵ Focusing on the heterogeneity of UNSC membership, he found that the impact of UNSC authorization is conditional upon the members' affinity with the United States. Endorsement from members with low levels of affinity, in terms of their UNSC voting-similarity score, was associated with more highly amplified rallies in public approval. Chapman drew the important inference that individuals perceived the UNSC to be a body that includes the interests and perspectives of states quite different from that of the United States.⁶ Thus, especially when the UNSC contains views far from the United States but the latter nevertheless is able to garner support from the former for the use of force, this is likely to be viewed by Americans as indicating that the president was motivated by seeking a good policy outcome.

If the public views the attainment by its government of authorization by IOs to be an external cue that validates the utility of using force, national leaders might intentionally seek an authorization when contemplating the use of force. This basic point has been put forward with the aid of qualitative analysis by Voeten, who has argued that leaders strategically use IOs in order to signal to their respective home audiences not only that the use of force is reasonable but that, having attained international validation, their home government will be less likely to be met with resistance by foreign states.⁷ Similarly, Thompson has suggested that attaining UNSC approval by a state signals to foreign governments and foreign publics benign intentions on the part of the state proposing to use force, and the message that the proposed use of force will produce positive results.⁸ This type of analysis that focuses on the cue-producing properties of international backing has also been accorded game-theoretic grounding studies.⁹

At the core of the argument about IOs and cues is the proposition that individuals receive materially important information when international backing is or is not attained, and therefore this information influences their assessment of a proposed use of force. Recent studies have therefore utilized survey experiments to empirically test whether individuals react to IO cues and change their opinions about foreign policy. Such experiments enable researchers to directly measure public opinion on military operations by providing hypothetical conflict situations in connection to which external backing is a treatment. In their experiment relating to a hypothetical U.S. intervention in East Timor, for example, Grieco, Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler found that international endorsement increased support for the use

5 Terrence Chapman, "Audience Beliefs and International Organization Legitimacy," *International Organization* 63 (October 2009), pp. 733–64.

6 *Id.*

7 Erik Voeten, "The Political Origins of the UN Security Council's Ability to Legitimize the Use of Force," *International Organization* 59 (July 2005), pp. 527–557.

8 Alexander Thompson, "Coercion through IOs: The Security Council and the Logic of Information Transmission," *International Organization* 60 (Winter 2006), pp. 1–34. Alexander Thompson, *Channels of Power: The UN Security Council and US Statecraft in Iraq* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

9 E.g., Terrence Chapman, "International Security Institutions, Domestic Politics, and Institutional Legitimacy," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51 (February 2007), pp. 134–66. Songying Fang, "The Informational Role of International Institutions and Domestic Politics," *American Journal of Political Science* 52 (April 2008), pp. 304–321.

of force among Americans, especially those who value IOs and among those who do not have confidence in the president (as we will discuss more fully below).¹⁰ Similarly, using a scenario of civil war in Syria in two different sets of circumstances (one involving chemical weapons, the other not), Grillo and Pupcenoks observed consistent and notable increases in public support for humanitarian intervention when the U.S. attained UN authorization for an intervention.¹¹ Wallace also found by way of an experiment centered on a hypothetical humanitarian intervention that, regardless of whether the scenario entails the treating of respondents with a U.S.-only intervention, U.S.-plus others, or others but not the U.S., UN approval markedly increased support for the intervention.¹²

The impact of IO cues has been verified using non-American samples as well. Johns and Davies, for example, observed that external institutional backing buttressed the support that UK respondents expressed for hypothetical uses of force by Britain.¹³ In the same vein, Tago and Ikeda and Matsumura and Tago have reported sensitivity on the part of Japanese respondents to a treatment consisting of the information that the United States at least had sought UN approval in two hypothetical conflict scenarios, the one involving suppression of sea piracy and the other centered on regime change in a hypothetical Middle East country.¹⁴

3. Research Opportunities: Unpacking International-Backing Cues

The discussion above demonstrates that a rich scholarship has usefully explored the manner in which the presence or absence of international backing, and in particular by the UNSC, influences how members of the public may assess proposals by their leaders to employ force in the international domain. Yet, additional work on two issues might provide for a more complete understanding of the impact of IO cues on public opinion. The first area for further investigation concerns the identity of the IOs that might impart a cue for members of the public; the second focuses on characteristics of those individuals that might moderate the impact of such cues from international bodies.

10 Joseph Grieco, Christopher Gelpi, Peter Feaver, and Jason Reifler, "Let's Get a Second Opinion: International Institutions and American Public Support for War," *International Studies Quarterly* 55 (June 2011), pp. 563-583.

11 Michael Grillo and Juris Pupcenoks, "Let's Intervene! But Only If They're Like Us: The Effects of Group Dynamics and Emotion on the Willingness to Support Humanitarian Intervention," *International Interactions* 43 (2, 2017), pp. 349-374.

12 Geoffrey Wallace, "Supplying Protection: The United Nations and Public Support for Humanitarian Intervention," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 36 (3, 2019), pp. 248-69.

13 Robert Johns and Graeme Davies, "Coalitions of the Willing? International Backing and British Public Support for Military Action," *Journal of Peace Research* 51 (November 2014), pp. 767-781.

14 Atsushi Tago and Maki Ikeda, "An 'A' for Effort: Experimental Evidence on UN Security Council Engagement and Support for US Military Action in Japan," *British Journal of Political Science* 45 (April 2015), pp. 391-410. Naoko Matsumura and Atsushi Tago, "Negative Surprise in UN Security Council Authorization: Do the UK and French Vetoes Influence the General Public's Support of US Military Action?" *Journal of Peace Research* 56 (3, 2019), pp. 395-409.

3.1. Issue 1: Do IOs Differ in Their Impact on the Public?

There remain opportunities to differentiate more clearly the magnitude of the public impact of cues from different IOs. To date our scholarly investigations on this matter do not provide a strong basis for understanding whether support by different IOs has a different impact on individuals, or whether IO endorsements from multiple IOs generate relatively stronger cues compared to approval by a single IO. For example, in their study of U.S. public support for a hypothetical humanitarian intervention in East Timor, Grieco, Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler combined in one treatment support by **both** the UNSC **and** NATO, making it infeasible within the confines of that study to assess whether it was support from one or the other international body that was influencing respondents.¹⁵

In that same vein, it would be helpful to distinguish more sharply between the impact on individuals of backing by the UNSC on the one hand and other international bodies, such as military alliances, and especially NATO, on the other. We anticipate that institutional backing from **either** major international institution, the UNSC or NATO, will produce greater support among respondents so treated with this information than would be observed among a control group of respondents who were not given any information about external support. We also undertake an initial test of an intuition that the **combination** of backing by both the UNSC and NATO will have a larger impact on public support than either of the two forms **individually**.

The basis for these expectations is the intuition that the UNSC and NATO represent different roles for their member states and thus provide relevant members of their respective publics with different cues about the desirability of a use of force proposed by their national leaders. Drawing from the insights discussed above from Chapman and Reiter, Chapman, Thompson, and Voeten,¹⁶ we might anticipate that, for a given individual, and compared to NATO support, the UNSC provides cues relatively more about the legality, morality, and necessity of a proposed use of force, and relatively less so about the likely success of that use of force and especially the management of potential burden-sharing problems for the country or countries undertaking a proposed military operation. At the same time, given the view of these key scholars that it is the heterogeneity of interests within the UNSC that serves as a foundation for its cueing function, we might anticipate that NATO support for a national operation might impart less of a cue than the UNSC in regard to the operation's international legality or political necessity. At the same time, NATO support may be relatively more likely than that by the UNSC to augment for relevant members of the public the expected likelihood of military success and especially to allay public concerns about burden-sharing.

Current theories about external cues and national public opinion do not provide firm guidance as to whether UNSC or NATO support will typically produce

¹⁵ Grieco, Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler, *supra* note 10.

¹⁶ Chapman and Reiter, *supra* note 3; Chapman, *supra* note 5, Chapman *supra* note 9; Thompson, *supra* note 8; Voeten, *supra* note 7.

a stronger cue to members of the public and elicit a higher boost in support among them for a proposed use of force. At the same time, on the basis of current scholarship we can readily anticipate that either UNSC authorization or NATO support will constitute an external cue that produces greater support among members of the public for a military operation than what would occur in the absence of support by either international body. Moreover, we might anticipate that, at the margin, NATO support together with UNSC authorization might ameliorate different concerns of different members of the public regarding a proposed use of force. If that is correct, then if endorsements are provided by both international instructions then we might expect to observe a larger boost in public support for the proposed use of force than what would be observed if the operation garnered only UNSC authorization or only NATO support. Hence, below we assess two basic hypotheses:

H1: Individuals who receive the cue that either the UNSC has authorized the proposed intervention, or that NATO supports the intervention, will express, on average, a higher level of support for the intervention than those respondents who receive neither cue.

H2: Individuals who receive the cue that the proposed intervention has the backing of **both** the UN and NATO will express, on average, a higher level of support for the intervention than those respondents who receive either international-backing cue individually.

3.2. Issue 2: Do Individuals Differ in Their Openness to External Cues?

There are also grounds to explore more fully the individual-level conditions that may moderate the impact of cues on members of the public. In doing so we can draw from a rich literature in both the American Government and International Relations subfields of Political Science about the psychological mechanisms that underpin and sometimes distort the ability of individuals to employ information to update their views.¹⁷ These studies suggest that individual-level pre-dispositions can substantially moderate the impact of IO cues on members of the public.

From the discussion above we may say that, in general, when a national leader proposes a foreign use of force, members of the relevant public may harbor doubts as to whether that use of force is legal, necessary, moral, and likely to end in success

17 For overviews, see Jack Levy, "Political Psychology and Foreign Policy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology* (1st ed.), edited by David Sears, Leonie Huddy, and Robert Jervis, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 253-84. Richard Herrmann, "Perceptions and Image Theory in International Relations," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology* (2 ed.), edited by Leonie Huddy, David Sears, and Jack Levy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 334-363. Janice Stein, "Threat Perception in International Relations," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology* (2 ed.), edited by Leonie Huddy, David Sears, and Jack Levy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 364-396. Alan Gerber and Donald Green, "Misperceptions about Perceptual Bias," *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (June 1999), pp. 189-210. James Druckman, James Kuklinski, and Lee Sigelman, "The Unmet Potential of Interdisciplinary Research: Political Psychological Approaches to Voting and Public Opinion," *Political Behavior* 31 (June 2009), pp. 485-510. Charles Taber and Everett Young, Political Information Processing. In *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology* (2 ed.) Edited by Leonie Huddy, David Sears, and Jack Levy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

at a reasonable cost. IOs can provide cues to members of the public regarding those matters and thus enhance their assessment that the leader's proposal to use force represents an appropriate and rational course of action. Which members of the public are most likely to so react to information regarding international authorization or support? At least as a first cut at this question, we might anticipate that it will be those individuals who generally lack confidence in their national leader. Such individuals, lacking confidence in their leader as a general matter, are also likely to lack confidence in the foreign policy stances and actions of that leader. By consequence, the news that the leader has sought international approval for the use of force might itself constitute a cue that the leader knows what she is doing in the matter at stake, and the news that the leader has actually attained external support is likely to be interpreted as a strong indication that the leader's military stance might be worthy of public support.

This line of thought follows a key element of Bayesian thinking about the manner in which individuals process information. In the Bayesian framework, people update their prior beliefs on the basis of receiving new information and, most pertinent, the extent to which people so update their views will largely depend on the degree to which the new information deviates from their prior beliefs.¹⁸ Applying this Bayesian framework to international-cues, it is reasonable to anticipate that if a national leader attains international backing for a proposed use of force, the individuals who will be mostly likely as a result to change their views as to whether that leader is on the right track will be those with low initial levels of confidence in the leader. Those individuals might be the most skeptical about any new action proposed by the leader, and thus will be particularly surprised to learn that she has garnered international backing. At the same time, those individuals who already are highly confident in a leader might not be very surprised that she has attained international backing, and thus unsurprised they might not adjust very strongly their support for the operation.

This expectation — that there is a generally inverse-linear association between confidence in the leader and the impact of an international cue — was tested and provisionally confirmed in survey experiments undertaken by Grieco, Gelpi, Feaver, and Reiter.¹⁹ They found that Americans who have high confidence in the president were unlikely to be moved much by the additional information that the UN and NATO had supported a proposed use of force, while those who had low confidence were especially receptive to such a cue. In other words, there appeared in that study to be an inverse-linear relationship between confidence in the president and receptivity to and hence the impact of an international-support cue.

Such an inverse-linear relationship between confidence in a leader and the impact of external cues requires that individuals be essentially cold-cognition information assessors, and thus be able to employ such backing-cues as a useful

18 Gerber and Green, *supra* note 17, at 194.

19 Grieco, Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler, *supra* note 10, at 577-78.

heuristic, or shortcut, for information-processing and reaching a judgement.²⁰ In this cold-cognition framework, for IO backing-cues to have a guiding effect on individuals in a systematic manner, the relevant individuals would typically be highly open to information embedded in or transmitted by such cues, and are in that sense objectively “persuadable”.²¹

Yet, a great deal of scholarship in the subfield of political psychology has emphasized that individuals are not entirely cold-cognition agents. Instead, many individuals — as a result of their positive or negative feelings toward leaders and issues, or as a result of a need for consistency in their views about those leaders and issues — may react with “hot-cognition” dynamics that lead them to engage new information with “motivated or emotion-biased reasoning.” For example, individuals may discount information about politics and policies that challenges their prior beliefs and commitments and to overvalue information that confirms those prior beliefs and commitments.²² Thus, people with hot-cognition characteristics might, as a result of motivated reasoning, be less receptive to external IO cues than might be the case if they were cold-cognition actors.

Indeed, if enough individuals are prone to hot-cognition motivated reasoning, then international-backing cues may not have an inverse-linear impact on support for a leader’s foreign-policy proposal.²³ Instead, as a result of such dynamics, individuals who are either strongly confident or strongly lacking in confidence in their national leader may not care if international backing occurs. The former group may believe that the leader is correct in undertaking an intervention regardless of whether or not backing is attained, and the latter might be so mistrustful of the leader that they simply ignore or explain away such international backing. If this intuition is correct, that those individuals with no confidence or full confidence in the leader are relatively impervious to external cues, then we may also anticipate that cue-persuadable individuals will most likely be those who are in the middle of the distribution of confidence in the leader. This in turn produces an expectation of a **curvilinear** relationship between confidence in the national leader and receptivity to international backing cues, as depicted by H3b in Figure 1. Accordingly, we draw the following two hypotheses regarding respondents’ confidence with leaders (in our case, the U.S. president) and receptivity to cues about international-institutional backing:

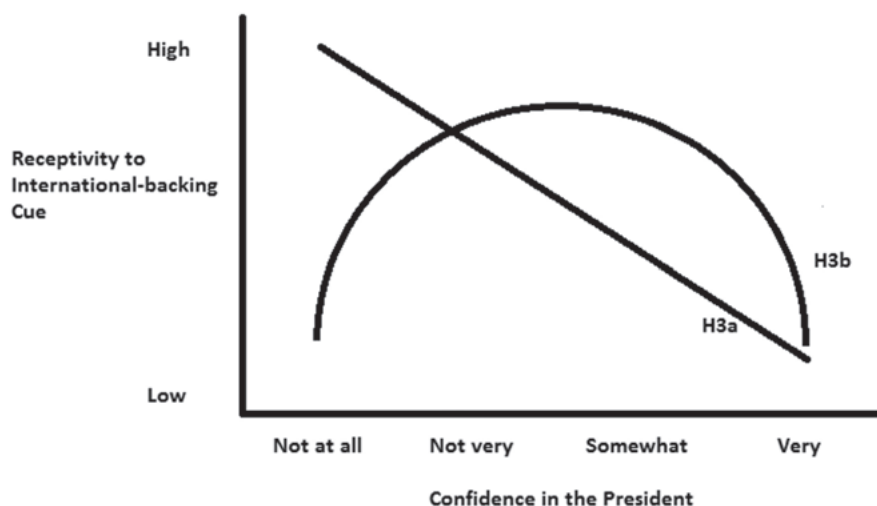
20 See Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, “Judgement Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases,” *Science* 185 (September 1974), pp. 1124-31; Druckman, Kuklinski, and Sigelman, *supra* note 17, at especially 491-94; Stein, *supra* note 17, at especially 374-75.

21 D. Sunshine Hillygus and Todd Shields. *The Persuadable Voter: Wedge Issues in Presidential Campaigns* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

22 E.g., David Redlawsk, “Hot Cognition or Cool Consideration? Testing the Effects of Motivated Reasoning on Political Decision Making,” *Journal of Politics* 64 (November 2002), pp. 1021-1044; Charles Taber and Milton Lodge, “Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs,” *American Journal of Political Science* 50 (July 2006), pp. 755-769; Druckman, Kuklinski, and Sigelman, *supra* note 17; Charles Taber, Damon Cann, and Simona Kucsova, “The Motivated Processing of Political Arguments,” *Political Behavior* 31 (June 2009), pp. 137-155; Taber and Young, *supra* note 17.

23 This line of analysis is consistent with the finding that partisan polarization can eviscerate the impact of third-party (in their case, expert) cues. See Alexandra Guisinger and Elizabeth Saunders, “Mapping the Boundaries of Elite Cues: How Elites Shape Mass Opinion across International Issues,” *International Studies Quarterly* 61 (June 2017), pp. 425-441.

Figure 1. Confidence in National Leader and Expected Receptivity to International-Backing Cue



Source: authors.

H3a: The moderating effect between the level of confidence that individuals invest in the U.S. president and the sensitivity of those individuals to an international-backing cue will be linear and inverse in character.

H3b: The moderating effect between the level of confidence that individuals invest in the U.S. president and the sensitivity of those individuals to an international-backing cue will be curvilinear in character, and in particular will take the form of an inverse U.

In addition, if individuals make decisions with hot-cognition rather than with cold-cognition attributes, the substantive messages that they will receive from international backing might also vary depending on the levels of their confidence in their leader. That is, individuals with particularly high or particularly low levels of confidence may have an attenuated tendency to assign substantive meaning to international cues, while individuals with intermediate levels of confidence might be more persuadable with respect to international-backing cues and thus on average be more likely to assign meaning to such cues. In their important work, Tago and Ikeda have explored what might be the substantive meaning of the IO cue members of the Japanese public received when they learned that a proposed use of force (in their study, the use of force was by the United States) had or had not garnered international backing.²⁴ We utilize below their measurement procedures to

²⁴ Tago and Ikeda, *supra* note 14.

assess whether confidence in a national leader produces variation in whether or not respondents assign meaning to international-backing cues. Hence, below we assess the following hypothesis:

H4: Individuals with intermediate levels of confidence in the president will perceive possible meanings associated with an international-backing cue more strongly than individuals with either very high or very low levels of confidence in the present.

4. Research Design

We conducted an online survey experiment to explore the conditions under which IO-backing cues affected the opinion of members of the public regarding a proposal by their government to use force abroad, to probe why such endorsements may matter. We begin by describing our experiment, and will then report and discuss our results.

4.1. Survey Recruitment

We administered our experiment between December 26 and 28, 2017, with a sample of U.S. adults aged 18 years old or older. In total, 2,017 survey respondents were recruited using Amazon Mechanical Turk (Mturk). MTurk is an online platform where researchers can post “tasks” in return for monetary compensation for participants who complete the tasks. In our case, the task was to complete the survey in approximately 10 minutes. Although this method of data collection does not provide a nationally representative sample, since individuals in the sample must have internet access and be voluntarily preregistered with MTurk, the observable differences following the randomly assigned treatments should provide a reliable test of whether IO backing matters. Previous research has demonstrated that treatment effects in MTurk studies are very similar to those obtained with nationally representative samples.²⁵ Demographic statistics for the sample recruited for this survey are reported in Table 1. The average response time of the participants was just over 8 minutes (the mean was 8.85 minutes, with a minimum of 1 minute and a maximum of 57 minutes).

Table 1. Summary of Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variables	<i>N</i>	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Confidence in the President	2,006	1.86	1.10	1	4
Age	2,017	3.31	1.31	0	5
Gender (Male)	2,017	0.46	0.50	0	1

²⁵ Adam Berinsky, Gregory Huber, and Gabriel Lenz, “Evaluating Online Labor Markets for Experimental Research: Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk,” *Political Analysis* 20 (September 2012), pp. 351-368.

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Education	2,017	3.96	1.19	1	6
Party Identification (Republican)	2,017	0.23	0.42	0	1
IO Favorability	1,692	4.89	1.93	1	8
Militarism	1,983	2.69	0.98	1	4
Internationalist	1,722	0.64	0.48	0	1

4.2. Experiment

Our experiment presented respondents with a scenario centered on a hypothetical U.S. humanitarian intervention in the civil war in Syria. We chose Syria because at that time that country's civil war provided the basis for a realistic and not entirely atypical scenario in which the United States might employ force for humanitarian purposes, while not presenting a fact pattern in which there was a direct threat to American national interests. U.S. respondents were likely to have heard about the civil war in Syria through media coverage, but it is unlikely that they believed that intervention to Syria was crucial to U.S. security and economic interests. Thus, responses to this kind of intervention represent a plausible testing ground for examining the potential impact of IO cues on public support for using force in circumstances in which there is some room for debate and doubt about the necessity and utility of using force. Specifically, we provided respondents with the following scenario:

The Syrian civil war is coming to an end. The Syrian government, led by President Bashar al-Assad, has defeated all major rebel forces. Syrian government forces are now attacking areas in northern Syria where the last remaining rebels have sought refuge. Civilian deaths due to these Syrian attacks have already exceeded 1,000 men, women, and children. President Trump has proposed the establishment of a safe zone in northern Syria to protect civilians. U.S. military commanders have testified that, to be successful, the proposed safe zone requires a protection force of 20,000 personnel. Protection-force fatalities might reach 100 military personnel over a period of three years.

After being shown this narrative, each respondent was randomly given additional information regarding the scenario that described whether there was international backing for the U.S.-proposed safe zone. We prepared four treatment conditions, summarized below in Table 2, with different combinations of backing by the UNSC and NATO. We chose to use both the UNSC and NATO as IO cue-givers because these are both core international security institutions, have garnered the most attention in the international-backing literature, and may represent or transmit different kinds of cues. Importantly, unlike Grieco, Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler,²⁶

²⁶ Grieco, Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler, *supra* note 10.

who as noted above pooled these two international bodies into a single treatment, in our experiment we employed each IO as a **separate** treatment **and** as part of a **combined** treatment.

Table 2. Treatment Groups

Group / Cue Category		UNSC Cues	NATO Cues
Group 1	UNSC & NATO	Support	Support/Sending Troops
Group 2	UNSC	Support	——
Group 3	NATO	——	Support/Sending Troops
Group 4	Baseline	——	——

Note: No information is provided where “——” line is shown.

To measure support for the use of force in our survey, respondents were asked if they approved or disapproved of the establishment of a safe zone in Syria, and were provided with the following options: “Approve,” “Somewhat approve,” “Somewhat disapprove,” “Disapprove,” or “Do not know.” We constructed a binary variable measuring approval versus disapproval, where we coded 1 for respondents who answered “approve” and “somewhat approve” and 0 for “somewhat disapprove” and “disapprove”. We treated “do not know” as missing data.

In addition, following Tago and Ikeda, we sought in our experiment to tap into the substantive messages respondents assigned to each IO-backing treatment.²⁷ We provided those respondents who received an IO-backing treatment with ten prompts designed to afford them the opportunity to express possible meanings of that treatment. The order of these questions was randomized in order to avoid the possibility of any ordering effects. The possible answers to each prompt was: “Approve,” “Somewhat approve,” “Somewhat disapprove,” “Disapprove,” or “Do not know.” The prompts were the following:

American use of military force would be a rule-based action.

American use of military force would be an authentically valid action.

American use of military force would be an action taken on behalf of the international community.

American use of military force would be an impartial action, not selfish.

American use of military force would be a necessary action.

American use of military force would be a well-considered action.

American use of military force would be a less costly action for us.

American use of military force would be an equitable action for us.

American use of military force would bring durable commitment from partners.

The intervention brings durable action from partners.

Before analyzing our experimental results, we sought to determine whether

²⁷ Tago and Ikeda, *supra* note 14.

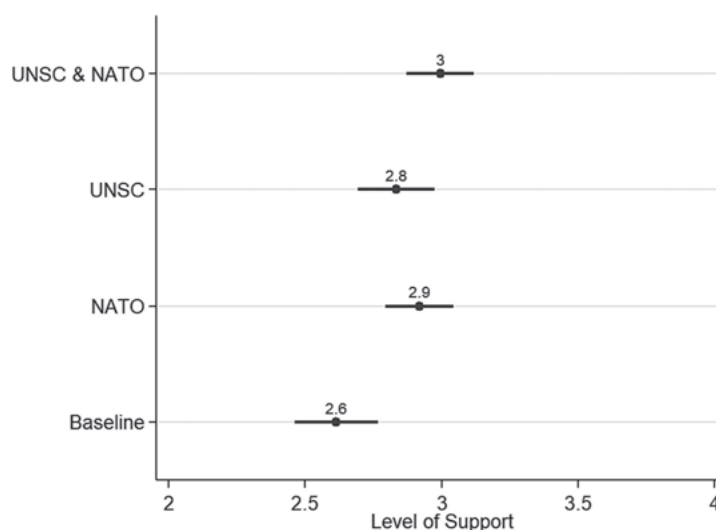
the treatment assignments might be skewed among covariates measured from these pre- and post-experiment questions. Specifically, we regressed the treatments received on the respondents' age, gender, party identification, and education level. In that analysis, not a single demographic variable was a statistically significant predictor of being assigned to a particular treatment group. Results indicate that groups assigned to the treatment groups were comparable across all of the observed characteristics (see Appendix Table A1).

5. Results

5.1. Issue 1: Variation in Impact of Cues across IOs

H1 contains our most basic expectation, namely, that compared to the control group for whose respondents no information was provided regarding international backing, support for the use of force should be higher in the treatment groups that were assigned the cue of international backing from the UNSC, NATO, or the combination of the UNSC and NATO. Figure 2 demonstrates that such backing does indeed increase support for humanitarian intervention in our hypothetical Syrian safe zone case, and thereby lends support to H1. Regardless of the forms of international backing—from both the UNSC and NATO; from only the UNSC; or from only NATO—the increased level of support by respondent groups treated with different international-backing combinations exceeded the level of support expressed by the control group. The mean score of support was 3.00 when respondents were treated

**Figure 2. Support for U.S. Humanitarian Intervention in Syria:
Impact of the UNSC, NATO, and Combination of UNSC and NATO**



by a combined cue of UNSC and NATO ($p > 0.001$); 2.83 when they were treated by a single cue of UNSC endorsement ($p > 0.05$), and 2.92 when they were treated by a single cue of NATO support ($p > 0.01$).

At the same time, Figure 2 shows that the differences in the average level of support on the part of the respondent groups that were treated with the three types of international backing were not different from one another at levels greater than what we would expect on the basis of chance. Although we had expected that respondents treated with the cue that the proposed Syria intervention had the backing of both the UN and NATO would express, on average, a higher level of support for the intervention than those respondents treated with either international-backing cue individually, this does not seem to be the case. Therefore, in contrast to our expectation in H2, an endorsement from the combination of these two international institutions does not necessarily have a greater impact on respondent levels of support for intervention than does a backing cue from either institution on its own.

5.2. Issue 2: Moderating Effect of Confidence in President on Impact of IO-Cues

As discussed above, on the basis of earlier work by Grieco, Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler,²⁸ we might expect the relationship between confidence and receptivity to an international-backing cue to be inverse and fairly linear, which we stipulated above in H3a. At the same time, we put forward above an alternative line of thinking that produced the expectation that the relationship between confidence and external-cue impact may be curvilinear in character and be represented by an inverse U, an expectation we stipulated above in H3b.

We assess these two hypotheses by differentiating between respondents in our experiment who, on the one hand, expressed either very high or very low levels of confidence in Trump and, on the other hand, those respondents who expressed either some or not a great deal of confidence in the president. Table 3 reports the answer categories and distribution of responses by respondents to the question regarding their confidence in President Trump. We can clearly see that the vast majority of respondents at the time of our experiment had very little confidence in the president,

Table 3. Confidence in President Donald Trump

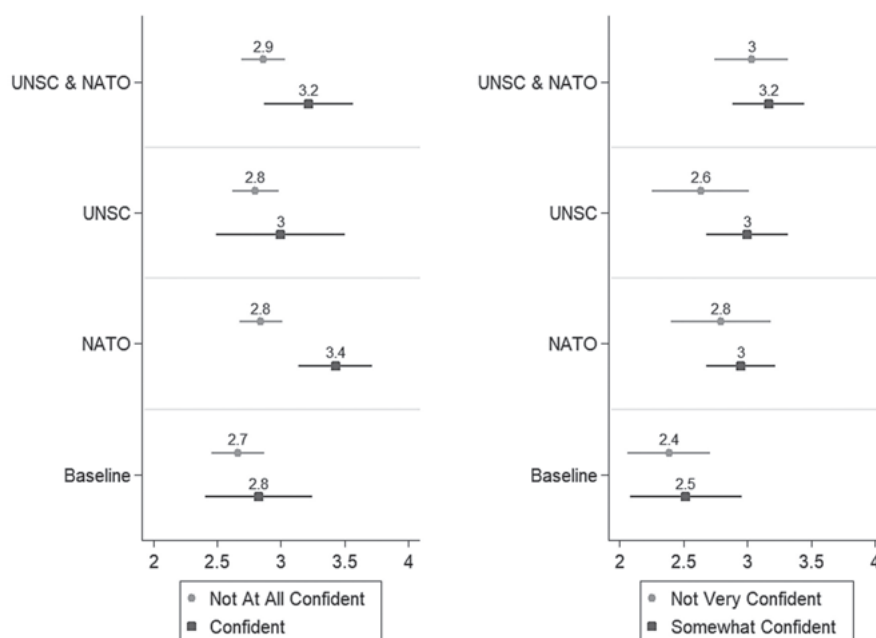
Levels of Confidence	Number of Responses
Confident	257 (13%)
Somewhat Confident	326 (16%)
Not Very Confident	306 (15%)
Not At All Confident	1,117 (56%)
Total <i>N</i>	2,006

28 Grieco, Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler, *supra* note 10, at 577-78.

and that the remaining respondents were distributed roughly equally into the three other categories.

Figure 3 presents our findings that relate international backing to respondent support for a Syrian safe zone once we take into account the possible moderating effect of confidence in the president. In general, we find that the impact of international-backing cues was most pronounced among those individuals whose responses are summarized on the right side of Figure 3, that is, those who expressed intermediate levels of confidence in Trump. On the other hand, as we can observe on the left side of Figure 3, those individuals at the extremes in confidence, and especially those who strongly did not have confidence in Trump were unlikely to be influenced by international-backing cues.

Figure 3. International Cues, Confidence in President Trump, and Support for Humanitarian Intervention in Syria



As can be observed on the left panel of Figure 3, respondents who selected Not At All Confident in President Trump were unmoved by any of the three possible combinations of international cues, that is, combined UNSC and NATO support, UNSC-only support, or NATO-only support.²⁹ Among those who selected Confident

29 Among those who are Not At All Confident in President Trump, the mean support level for intervention when respondents were assigned the UNSC & NATO treatment was 2.86 compared to the baseline (no international-backing cue provided) was 2.67 (the *p-value* for the difference in the means is > 0.15); the mean for the UNSC-only treatment was 2.80 compared to the baseline 2.67 ($p > 0.34$); the mean for the NATO-only treatment was 2.84 compared to the baseline 2.67 (p

in Trump, it is exclusively the NATO-only cue that brings about an increase in support at a statistically discernible level ($p > 0.05$).³⁰ Thus, while those who already had confidence in Trump responded to a least one international-backing cue, NATO, those who were not at all confidence in Trump but received an international-backing cue were no more likely to express support for the intervention than those who received no international cue.

Now consider the right panel of Figure 3, which reports the impact of international cues on respondents who expressed intermediate levels of confidence in President Trump, that is, when asked, the respondents replied that they were either Not Very Confident or Somewhat Confident in Trump. Among those who said they were not very confident in Trump, the cue of the combination of a UNSC endorsement and NATO support brought about a level of support for the intervention that is discernibly greater than the control group ($p > 0.01$). This is observed as well in connection to the positive effect on support of the cue of the combination of UNSC and NATO for the group of respondents who said they were somewhat confident in Trump ($p > 0.05$). This pair of findings suggest that the individuals with intermediate levels of confidence in the president were most receptive to an international positive cue in assessing a humanitarian intervention. Regarding either the UNSC-only or the NATO-only support cue, each is associated with a higher level of support for the Syrian intervention relative to the control group at a conventional level of statistical significance with the exception of individuals who reported there were not very confident in President Trump.³¹

We can also observe a curvilinear relationship between confidence in the president and responsiveness to an international cue through estimation of a series of regression models of support for intervention as a function of the combined UNSC-NATO treatment. Table 4 presents the results from ordered-probit models.

Table 4. UNSC-NATO Cue, Confidence in the President, and Support for Syrian Safe Zone: Ordered Probit Models

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
UNSC& NATO Cue	0.42**	0.44**	0.3	-0.94
Confidence in the President		0.034	-0.0072	-0.99+
Male		-0.093	-0.099	-0.094
Age		0.072	0.07	0.078

> 0.18).

30 Among those who are Confident in president, the mean for UNSC & NATO treatment was 3.22 compared to the baseline 2.83 ($p > 0.16$); the mean for UNSC treatment was 3.00 compared to the baseline 2.83 ($p > 0.60$); the mean for NATO treatment was 3.43 compared to the baseline 2.83 ($p > 0.03$).

31 Among those who are Not Very Confident in president, the mean for UNSC & NATO treatment was 3.03 compared to the baseline 2.39 ($p > 0.01$); the mean for UNSC treatment was 2.63 compared to the baseline 2.39 ($p > 0.34$); the mean for NATO treatment was 2.79 compared to the baseline 2.39 ($p > 0.12$). Among those who are Somewhat Confident in the President, the mean for UNSC & NATO treatment was 3.17 compared to the baseline 2.52 ($p > 0.02$); the mean for UNSC treatment was 3.00 compared to the baseline 2.52 ($p > 0.08$); the mean for NATO treatment was 2.95 compared to the baseline 2.52 ($p > 0.09$).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Education		-0.029	-0.028	-0.023
Republican		0.38+	0.39+	0.29
IO Favorability		0.080*	0.080*	0.079*
Militarism		0.12+	0.13+	0.12
Internationalist		0.51**	0.49**	0.51**
UNSC& NATO Cue×Conf. in President			0.073	1.52*
UNSC& NATO Cue×Conf. in President (squared)				-0.31+
Confidence in the President (squared)				0.21+
<i>N</i>	376	276	276	276

Note: + $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$. Cut-points were not displayed in the table.

In this ordered-probit analysis, we pooled respondents in the control group, who received no information about external cues, and those respondents in the experiment who were treated with the cue of the combination of a UNSC endorsement and NATO support (*UNSC&NATO Cue*). To ascertain whether there might be a curvilinear relationship between confidence in the president and the impact of the international-backing cue, we include an interaction term of these two variables. *Confidence in the President* is measured on 4-point scales from 1 to 4. A value of 1 indicates the respondents who are not at all confident in the president, while a value of 4 indicates the respondents who are very confident in the president. We square this variable, *Confidence in the President (squared)*, to capture a curvilinear relationship and then interact this term with *UNSC&NATO Cue*. We expect the interaction term between *UNSC&NATO Cue* and *Confidence in the President (squared)* to show a statistically significant coefficient.

In Model 1 we estimate the impact solely of the *UNSC&NATO Cue*; in Model 2 we evaluate that variable together with a battery of control variables including gender (or *Male*), *Age*, *Education*, party identification (or *Republican*), *IO Favorability*, *Militarism*, and *Internationalist*. For *IO Favorability*, we asked respondents to indicate whether they have favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or unfavorable opinions of the UN and NATO respectively, and then we generated a composite score which ranges from 1 to 8 with higher values indicating grater favorability toward both IOs. For *Militarism*, we asked whether respondents believe that the use of force is permissible for international problems or it is strictly prohibited. This variable is coded as 4-point scale. For *Internationalist*, we asked whether respondents agree with the statement that “the United States would be better off if we just stayed home and did not concern ourselves with problems in other parts of the world.” This variable is also coded as 4-point scale. Then, in Model 3 we introduce the interaction term between *UNSC&NATO Cue* and *Confidence in the President*, and in Model 4 we further add the interaction term between *UNSC&NATO Cue* and *Confidence in the President (squared)*.

Model 3 permits a test of H3a, that there is a linear (and negative) relationship between the impact of an IO cue and respondent confidence in the president. If H3a were correct, we would expect to observe a statistically significant negative coefficient for the interaction term between *UNSC&NATO Cue* and *Confidence in the President*. However, as can be observed in the table, the coefficient for this variable is both positive and not discernible from zero, which is not consistent with H3a. At the same time, Model 4 provides us with a test of H3b. That is, if we observe a negative and statistically discernible coefficient for the interaction term between *UNSC&NATO Cue* and *Confidence in the President (squared)*, this would be consistent with our expectation that there might be a curvilinear relationship between the impact of the international-backing cue and level of respondent confidence in the president. A statistically significant negative coefficient of the squared interaction term can be observed in Model 4, which, insofar as it suggests a curvilinear linear relationship between the UNSC-NATO cue and level of confidence in the president, is consistent with H3b.

Using Model 4, we present below in Figure 4 the predicated change in the probability that the respondents will support the establishment of the experiment's hypothetical Syrian safe zone (compared to the control group) when they are informed of the UNSC-NATO endorsement, conditioned by their confidence in President Trump. We again observe a generally curvilinear relationship (see Figure A1 in Appendix for the predicted changes in support for the safe zone). Controlling for the effects of a wide range of conditions, we observe that respondents who were not at all confident or were very confident in the president differed from the

Figure 4. Estimated Impact of UNSC-NATO Approval on Support for Syrian Safe Zone by Confidence in President Trump

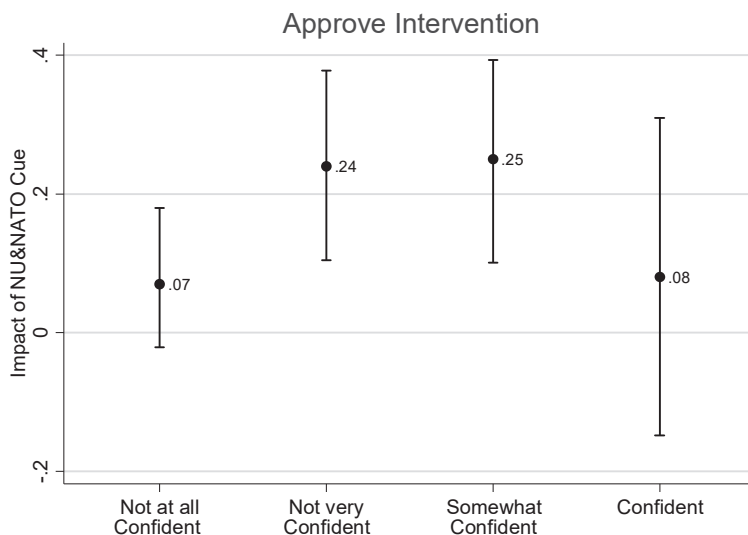
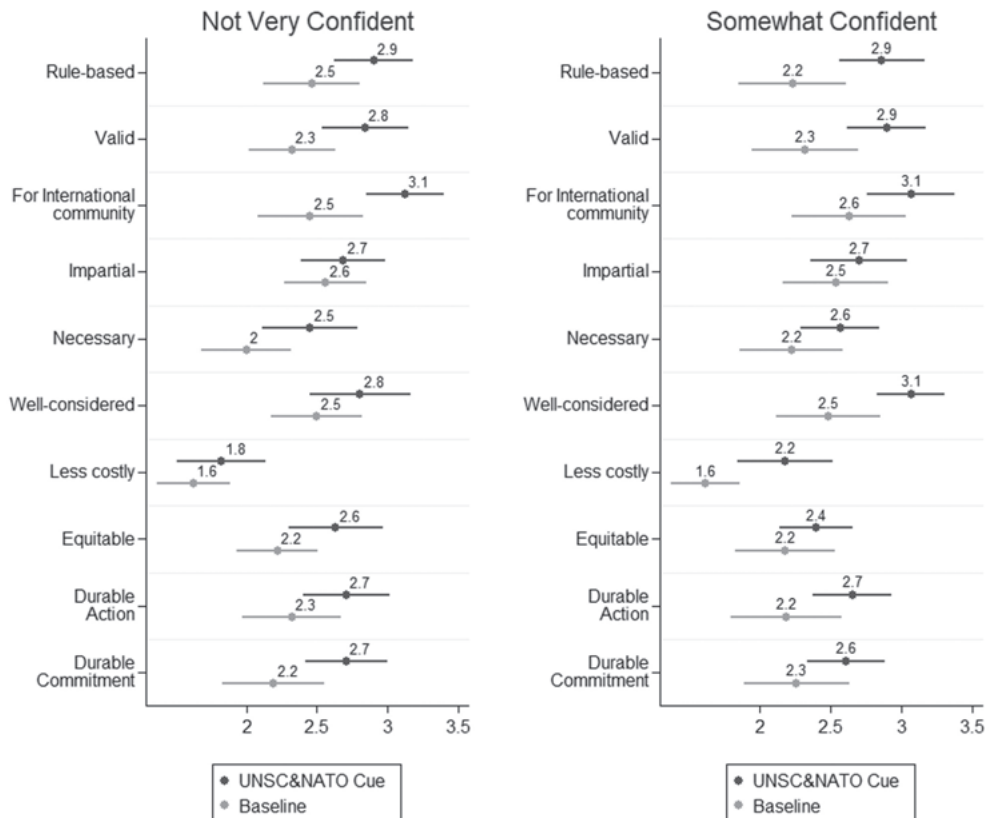


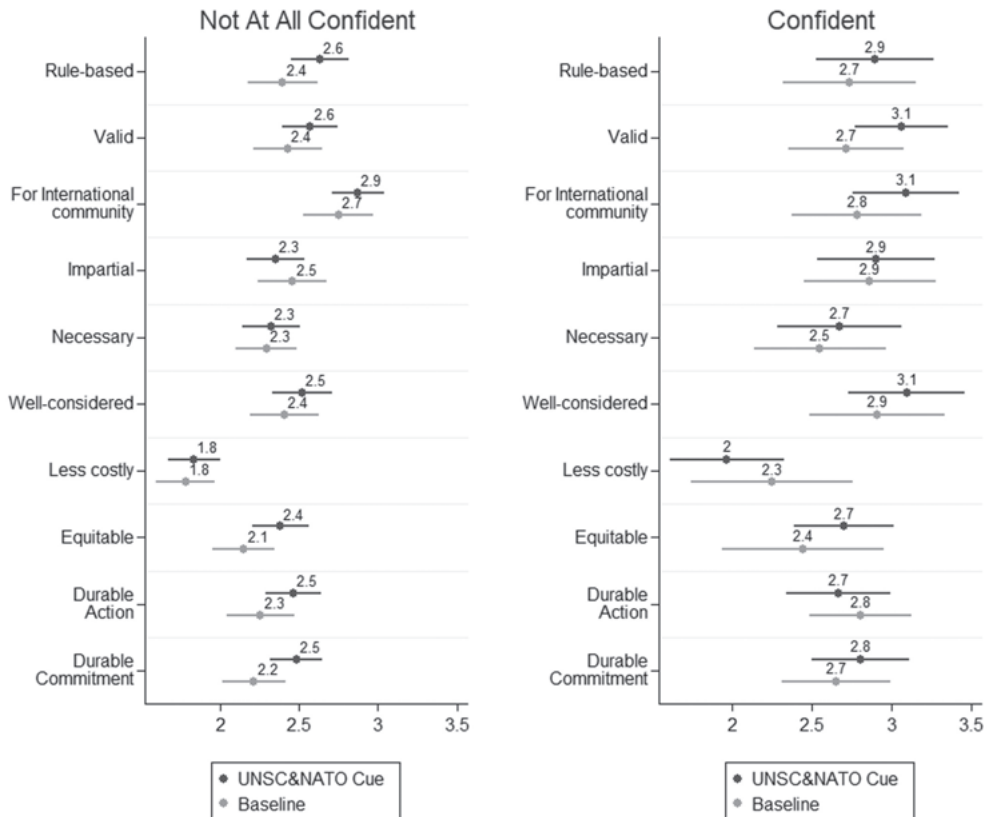
Figure 5. Meaning of International-Backing Cues, Conditioned on Confidence in President Trump



control group in support for the Syrian safe zone only modestly, and to a degree not discernible from zero. In contrast, respondents who possessed intermediate levels of confidence in the president reacted to the UNSC-NATO cue with substantial increases in their predicted probability of support for the Syrian safe zone relative to the control group, and at levels greater than what would be expected on the basis of chance.

It appears then that confidence in the president has a moderating impact on international backing cues. Specifically, those individuals with intermediate rather than the highest or lowest levels of confidence in the president appear in our experiment to have been most likely to react to this class of external cues with a change, in a positive direction, in their support for the proposed U.S. establishment of a Syrian safe zone. For this reason, we find that the evidence from our experiment weighs more in favor of H3b than it does in favor of H3a.

We find further evidence of a differential impact of confidence in the president on international-backing cues by engaging H4. As discussed above, we

Figure 5 (cont.)

asked respondents to express their level of agreement with a range of prompts that represent different inferences they may have drawn when they are told that the US government attained international backing. Figure 5 presents a summary of those possibilities and the incidence with which respondents agreed that the cue meant that the intervention possessed one or another trait or characteristic, conditioned on the confidence they expressed in President Trump. Since we found that an individual UNSC cue may not materially affect individual-level support for the proposed U.S. intervention, we focus on the UNSC-NATO combined cue.

Consistent with H4, international-backing cues do not appear to convey to respondents particularly strong meanings when those respondents have either the highest or the lowest possible levels of confidence in President Trump. For example, when treated with the combined UNSC-NATO cue, Not At All Confident respondents did not give discernibly higher scores on any of the ten prompts, except for that regarding durable action from partner states. As with our earlier finding regarding the lack of an impact of international-backing cues on support for the proposed Syrian safe zone among those respondents in our experiment with either very high or low

levels of confidence in President Trump, those respondents also seem to have been indifferent or unresponsive in terms of assigning meaning to such cues. Overall, there may be reason to believe on the basis of these results that individuals in the intermediate range of trust were more likely to assign meaning to international-backing cues, at least when the latter combined both a UNSC and a NATO endorsement of the proposed intervention.

6. Conclusion

We found, to our surprise, that while U.S. respondents expressed greater support for a humanitarian intervention when they were informed that international backing had been garnered, they did not seem to calibrate their support as a function of the number or types of international-institutional sources of such backing. In our experiment, backing from the UNSC and NATO individually produced roughly the same boost in respondent support for a hypothetical Syrian intervention as did the combination of both the UNSC and NATO. It is possible that respondents, in general, react in a somewhat binary manner, that is, whether or not there is any form of international backing. Although this finding that any one of several forms of international backing has the capacity to elicit higher levels of public support for the use of force is consistent with earlier work,³² we remain surprised that respondents would not assign greater meaning to a combined UNSC-NATO cue than to a cue consisting of one but not the other.

Furthermore, unlike Grieco, Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler, who found that the impact of international backing on respondents was inversely related to their pre-existing trust in the president, our experiment found supportive evidence for an alternative perspective, drawn from work in the American Government field on persuadable voters and motivated reasoning, that the impact of international backing might be curvilinear in character, in the form of an inverted U.³³ That is, among individuals with intermediate levels of confidence in the president, the combined UNSC-NATO cue elicited increases in support relative to the control group at a statistically discernible level. Among respondents with the highest possible confidence, in contrast, only one of three possible cues, NATO support, buttressed support to a degree discernible from the control group. At the same time, among those respondents with the lowest level of confidence, none of the three possible international-backing cues produced a meaningful increase in support for the Syrian intervention. These findings highlight the importance of unpacking international-backing cues. International backing by the UN and NATO varies across different groups of respondents, and, at least in the U.S. case, as a non-linear function of

32 E.g., Herrmann, Tetlock, and Visser, *supra* note 1; Kull and Destler, *supra* note 2; Grieco, Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler, *supra* note 10; Johns and Davies, *supra* note 13; Tago and Ikeda, *supra* note 14.

33 Grieco, Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler, *supra* note 10.

confidence in the president.

We also identified a pattern regarding the possible substantive messages that respondents receive with international-backing cues that buttresses our expectation that individuals at the extremes in confidence in the president differ systematically from individuals with intermediate levels of confidence. Just as international-backing cues produced little systematic effect on the level of support for a Syrian intervention on the part of respondents with either high levels of confidence or extreme lack of confidence in President Trump, those respondents at the extremes in confidence appear to be unable or unwilling to assign any particular meaning to those backing cues. On the other hand, those respondents with intermediate levels of confidence gave responses that suggested that some prompts resonated with them to a greater degree than did others.

Our finding that related confidence in President Trump to respondents' receptivity to international-backing cues has an important policy implication. Recall that in our experiment the percentage of participants who expressed the view that they were not at all confident in the president was 56%, which is almost twice the percentage of respondents in both of the intermediate-confidence ranges. If we think that international-backing cues actually do provide useful information to individuals, but we are living in a time when relatively few individuals have sufficient trust in the president that they are even open to those cues, then an important external source for checking on the efficacy of presidential recommendations for the use of force is, for the moment, not available to help in public discourse on foreign policy. We are, then, flying with one less navigational instrument to assist us.

Going forward, we believe that further research is warranted on the content of cues that international backing may impart to individuals as they consider leadership proposals or decisions to employ military force abroad. We also recommend additional work be undertaken on the mechanisms that may mediate between international-backing cues and respondent support for a proposed foreign policy action. In light of our discussion above, we suggest that it might be useful to explore more precisely how confidence in a president or other national leader might condition the interpretation by individuals of information embedded in international-backing cues. While the results in our experiment suggest that confidence affects the degree to which individuals are influenced by backing cues, they do not tell us *why* such variation in confidence may affect how individuals perceive and assess the success and failure of attaining international backing. Particularly, we need to know how confidence might, by way of inducing motivated reasoning, render some individuals more or less persuadable regarding their support for a foreign-policy action by virtue of learning that international backing for the action has been attained.

Appendix
Table A1. Sample Size and Mean Value of Key Variables

	UNSC&NATO Support	UNSC-only Support	NATO-only Support	Baseline
Confidence in the President	1.92	1.85	1.80	1.88
Age	3.47	3.30	3.36	3.42
Gender (Male)	0.47	0.54	0.46	0.43
Education	3.78	4.07	3.87	3.85
Party Identification (Republican)	0.26	0.23	0.24	0.18
IO Favorability	4.84	4.87	4.77	4.84
Militarism	2.71	2.58	2.69	2.76
Internationalist	0.67	0.58	0.63	0.60
<i>N</i>	214	202	214	184

**Table A2. UNSC-NATO Cue, Confidence Extremity in the President,
and Support for Syrian Safe Zone: Probit Models**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
UNSC&NATO Cue	0.42**	0.44**	0.27+
Confidence in the President Extremity (1 = Moderate, 0 = Extreme)		-0.073	-0.37+
Male		-0.078	-0.09
Age		0.073	0.074
Education		-0.031	-0.028
Republican		0.44*	0.40*
IO favorability		0.074*	0.072+
Militarism		0.13+	0.13+
Internationalist		0.50**	0.50**
UNSC&NATO Cue × Conf. Extremity			0.58*
<i>N</i>	376	276	276

Note: + $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$. Cut-points were not displayed in the table.

Table A2 displays the results of our probit-regression exercise. It provides an alternative test of whether the degree of confidence in the president conditions the impact of IO endorsements. *Confidence in the President Extremity* is coded 1 if the respondents answered “Somewhat Confident” or “Not Very Confident” in Trump and 0 for otherwise (i.e., “Confident” or “Not At All Confident”). The interaction between IO cue and the extremity in the respondents’ confidence in Trump shows a statistically significant positive effect. Thus, consistent with our expectation, it appears that people with the intermediate level of confidence in the president are more likely to be susceptible to IO cue.

Figure A1. Impact of UNSC-NATO Approval for Safe Zone in Syria by Confidence in the President

