

Public Opinion, Rivalry, and the Democratic Peace: Experimental Evidence from South Korea

RESEARCH NOTE

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Recent studies on the public opinion mechanism of the democratic peace have demonstrated experimentally that democratic citizens are averse to attacking other democracies. The presence of rivalry, however, has long been recognized as one of the important factors contributing to either initiation or recurrence of international conflict. Despite such importance, our understanding remains limited as to how rivalry affects public opinion, particularly in the context of the democratic peace. In this article, we argue that democratic publics' perception of rivalry weakens the effect of regime type. We expect democratic publics to be less reluctant in terms of fighting other rival democracies. Using an original survey experiment in South Korea, we demonstrate that the South Korean public, similar to those of western democracies, is reluctant to use force against *nonrival* democracies, but less so against rival democracies. Our findings suggest that the scope of the democratic peace should be qualified.

Los estudios recientes con relación al mecanismo de opinión pública de la paz democrática han demostrado experimentalmente que los ciudadanos democráticos son reacios a atacar a otras democracias. Sin embargo, desde hace mucho tiempo se reconoce que la presencia de rivalidades es uno de los factores importantes que contribuyen al inicio o a la recurrencia de conflictos internacionales. A pesar de esta importancia, seguimos teniendo una comprensión limitada con relación a cómo afectan las rivalidades a la opinión pública, particularmente en el contexto de la paz democrática. En este artículo, argumentamos que la percepción de las rivalidades por parte de los ciudadanos democráticos debilita el efecto del tipo de régimen. Pensamos que los ciudadanos democráticos son menos reacios a luchar contra otras democracias rivales. Demostramos, utilizando un experimento de encuesta original en Corea del Sur, que el público surcoreano, al igual que el de las democracias occidentales, es reacio a usar la fuerza contra las democracias no rivales, pero no es tan reacio a usarla contra las democracias rivales. Nuestras conclusiones sugieren que el alcance de la paz democrática debe ser matizado.

Des études récentes sur le mécanisme d'opinion publique de la paix démocratique ont démontré de façon expérimentale que les citoyens de démocraties sont réticents à l'idée d'attaquer d'autres démocraties. Néanmoins, il est depuis longtemps prouvé que la présence d'une rivalité constitue l'un des facteurs qui contribuent essentiellement à l'initiation ou la récurrence d'un conflit international. Malgré cette importance, nos connaissances restent limitées concernant les effets d'une rivalité sur l'opinion publique, notamment dans le contexte de la paix démocratique. Dans cet article, nous affirmons que la perception d'une rivalité des populations de démocratie affaiblit l'effet d'un type de régime. Nous postulons que ces populations seront moins réticentes lorsqu'il s'agit d'attaquer d'autres démocraties rivales. À l'aide d'une expérience de sondage inédite en Corée du Sud, nous démontrons que sa population, à l'instar des peuples d'autres démocraties occidentales, est peu encline à utiliser la force contre des démocraties non rivales, mais que cette relation est moins vraie pour les démocraties rivales. Nos conclusions suggèrent que la portée de la paix démocratique devrait être nuancée.

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Introduction

What is known as the democratic peace—the regularity that democracies almost never engage in militarized disputes with each other—is one of the most well-established findings in international relations. According to some, it “comes as close as anything we have to an empirical law in international relations” (Levy 1988, 662; also see Imai and Lo 2021).¹ Although scholarly debates on its causal mechanisms have not reached a solid consensus (Russett 1993; Dixon 1994; Fearon 1994; Rosato 2003; Pevehouse and Russett 2006; Hegre 2014; Goldsmith et al. 2017; Hegre, Bernhard, and Teorell 2020), public opinion has been recently considered one of the big drivers behind it (Johns and Davies 2012; Tomz and Weeks 2013; also, see Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo 2020).

With respect to the role of public opinion in the democratic peace, one important underlying assumption is that in “Kantian” states (i.e., democracies), public wants to avoid war more than elites do because they know that the costs of war fall on them. Moreover, liberal democracy and its values can be one important source of shared identity among democratic citizens, shaping their attitudes towards international relations (Chu 2021). Indeed, recent studies, through survey experiments, have shown that democratic citizens are averse to attacking other democracies (Johns and Davies 2012; Tomz and Weeks 2013; Suong, Desposato, and Gartzke 2020). However, because such an assumption has been examined primarily in democratic publics in great powers, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, and in a few others, including regional powers such as Brazil,² our current understanding of the public opinion mechanism of the democratic peace remains largely limited to such countries.

As such is the case, we are currently in need of a more nuanced approach to better understand how the mechanism operates within young and non-great power democracies, which together make up the majority of democracies in the world today.³ In this research note, we take the role of international rivalry into account by building directly on prior experimental studies (e.g., Tomz and Weeks 2013; Bell and Quek 2018).⁴ Specifically, we focus on one of the young democracies that is often considered a middle power (Mo 2016) in East Asia, which is the region that is increasingly—if not already—important from the global security standpoint.

Despite the importance of rivalry, no research, to our knowledge, examines whether the public opinion mechanism of the democratic peace is robust to its presence and dynamics. According to Colaresi, Rasler, and Thompson (2007), interstate rivals are responsible for the occurrence of most wars. As these rivals are locked into “a psychologically charged context of path dependent hostility” (Colaresi, Rasler, and Thompson 2007, 21), mechanisms restraining conflict escalation often do not operate effectively. In this regard, Colaresi and Thompson (2002), as well as Thompson (2001), show that rivals are more likely to experience crisis escalation and go to war. Theoretically, mechanisms underpinning the democratic peace, both at the *elite* level and at the *mass* level, are mechanisms restraining conflict escalation. Given the near-unbreakable robustness of the democratic peace (e.g., Imai and Lo 2021), democratic rivals—contrary to other rivals—are expected to be peaceful, regardless of the type of mechanism in operation. While elite-level mechanisms, such as norms and institutions (e.g., Owen 1994; Russett 1993; Goldsmith et al. 2017), are considered more important than mass-level mechanisms, namely, public opinion (i.e., democratic publics being favorably disposed toward other democracies), for the democratic peace, we focus on the latter and expect that democratic publics’ perception of rivalry weakens the effect of regime type.

Our contribution is twofold, as we put the existing international relations propositions about pro-democracy public opinion into a hard test. On the one hand, we test whether citizens of a young democracy, who may not have had enough time to embed democratic values, exhibit similar pro-democracy attitudes in terms of support for war. On the other hand, we examine whether such attitudes persist even in the face of rivalry. Therefore, we not only qualify the scope condition of the pro-democracy public opinion in the democratic peace (Johns and Davies 2012; Tomz and Weeks 2013; Bell and Quek 2018; Suong, Desposato, and Gartzke 2020), but also provide an implication on the extent to which democratic values shape public attitudes in international relations (e.g., Chu 2021).

We conducted a survey experiment on a nationally representative sample in South Korea.⁵ In accordance with our expectation, we find that although South Koreans are less supportive of military strike against democracies than autocracies, such tendency largely disappears in the face of rivalry.⁶ At the same time, when confronted with rivalrous democracies, they feel more threatened compared to non-rivalrous autocracies. We believe that the findings here can be extended to other regions beyond the case of South Korea because democratic rivalries related to non-traditional issues, such as environmental shocks and maritime disputes, are increasingly common (Mitchell 2020; Lee et al. 2022). Therefore, our findings offer an opportunity for us to rethink both the role and the scope condition of public opinion in the democratic peace.⁷

¹Imai and Lo (2021, 916) apply a nonparametric sensitivity analysis and demonstrate the robustness of empirical evidence for the democratic peace, stating that “the positive association between democracy and peace is at least five times as robust as that between smoking and lung cancer.”

²However, both Bell and Quek (2018) and Suong, Desposato, and Gartzke (2020) find that the Chinese public is also less likely to prefer war with a democracy than with an autocracy. It should be noted that their findings undermine the role of public opinion in the democratic peace.

³By either “young” or “new” democracies, we are referring specifically to Third Wave democracies that emerged across Europe, Asia, and Latin America, primarily “in the fifteen years following the end of the Portuguese dictatorship in 1974” (Huntington 1991, 21). We use “young,” “new,” and “Third Wave” democracies interchangeably in order to indicate the democratic countries whose citizens have had less time to absorb democratic values and norms.

⁴According to Colaresi, Rasler, and Thompson (2007), international rivalries can be conceptualized as either *strategic* rivalries or *enduring* rivalries. While strategic rivalries prioritize perceptions, enduring rivalries prioritize militarized dispute history. As such, the formation of the former does not require any militarized disputes. However, we are agnostic and conceptualize rivalry as something broad here. Dyads are considered rivalrous, as long as states in them are aware of ongoing rivalries related to their national security. In short, we focus on the *presence* of rivalry—not the *type* of rivalry—in our study. We leave it up to future research to investigate different types of rivalries.

⁵All aspects of our experiment were pre-registered (see Online Appendix 2).

⁶Still, there is a difference in treatment effects, even though it does not reach the conventional 95 percent level. Detailed information will be provided below.

⁷In this regard, two points are worth mentioning. First, while some argue that democracies are rarely rivals (e.g., Hensel, Goertz, and Diehl 2000), there are others that point out that “strategic rivalries exist even among democratic states” (Lektzian, Prins, and Souva 2010, 1074). In fact, if we take into account what are known as “lesser rivalries” (Owsiak, Diehl, and Goertz 2017) that can abruptly turn into “severe rivalries,” which have long been considered a *modus operandi* of both conflict and rivalry scholars (Diehl, Goertz, and Gallegos 2021), the number of rivalrous democracies is likely to be higher. Second, even if we accept that democracies are rarely rivals, our findings still matter because they speak directly

Motivation and Context

Prior studies focus primarily on Western democracies that are great powers, such as the United States and Britain (Johns and Davies 2012; Tomz and Weeks 2013). Only one study, to our knowledge, examines the case of Brazil, which is a regional power in Latin America (Suong, Desposato, and Gartzke 2020). Therefore, our understanding beyond them remains limited. In particular, many Third Wave democracies, including South Korea, had gone through democratic transitions under the heavy pressures of external geopolitics, which often gave birth to regional rivalries between democracies from the onset. Therefore, a more nuanced approach will help us better understand the dynamics of the democratic peace in such regions.

There are three important reasons why we focus on South Korea. First, because we are interested in the presence of international rivalry, which could be either ongoing or entrenched, South Korea makes both theoretical and practical sense. Although democratic rivalries can emerge based on traditional and non-traditional issues (Thompson 2001; Mitchell 2020; Lee et al. 2022), we field our experiment in South Korea, particularly because we deliberately adhere to the scenario on nuclear proliferation (Tomz and Weeks 2013). Simply put, we believe that South Korea's case offers a good combination of the presence of rivalry (our theoretical interest) and the feasibility of the nuclear proliferation scenario (our comparability with prior research). While South Korea faces autocratic North Korea to the north, it also has democratic Japan as its neighbor to the east; at the same time, there exists rivalry not only between South Korea and North Korea, but also between South Korea and Japan.⁸ And many South Koreans are well aware of these rivalries (Kim 1991; Jo 2022). Therefore, we expect the country to allow us to examine the role of rivalry in the public opinion mechanism of the democratic peace.

Second, South Korea is one of the typical democracies that are young and not great powers. As a leading Asian democracy, there is a scholarly consensus that the country is what is known as a middle power (Mo 2016). To our knowledge, the scope of prior research that examines the role of public opinion in the democratic peace through survey experiments remains limited only to great and regional powers, such as the United States, Britain (Johns and Davies 2012; Tomz and Weeks 2013), and Brazil (Suong, Desposato, and Gartzke 2020). Given such limitations and the fact that most democracies in the world are non-great powers, we believe that conducting a comparable experiment in South Korea will contribute to enhancing external validity of the democratic peace's public opinion mechanism.

Lastly, South Korea, as one of the Third Wave democracies, provides us with a rather difficult ground for analyzing the public opinion mechanism of the democratic peace. Existing studies suggest that both perceptions of threat and moral considerations are important mechanisms through which the democratic peace operates. Tomz and Weeks

(2013, 851) point out that “democracies view other democracies as less threatening than autocracies” because democratic publics “solve domestic disagreements peacefully and apply the same nonviolent norms internationally.” They also emphasize that citizens in democracies “will feel morally reluctant to overturn policies that the citizens of other democracies have chosen freely” (852). In a similarly vein, relying on the “us-versus-them” distinction, Chu (2021) finds that liberal democracy can be an important basis for democratic citizens' shared identity, which in turn generates both in-group favoritism and outgroup hatred.⁹ However, because authoritarian legacies tend to remain even after democratization (Neundorf and Pop-Eleches 2020), citizens in new democracies may not have had enough time to fully absorb such democratic values. In fact, recent studies demonstrate that citizens in young democracies shape their political attitudes and behavior largely based on authoritarian dispositions (Kim-Leffingwell 2023). Accordingly, we expect the case of South Korea to help improve internal validity of the public opinion mechanism of the democratic peace.

Experimental Design

We conducted a survey experiment in South Korea during the summer of 2022. To match the national census adult population, we asked an online-based private survey company in South Korea, Global Research, to recruit 4,002 respondents¹⁰ based on three demographic and political characteristics: gender, age, and political ideology (see Online Appendix 1).¹¹ Because our study builds on previous works (Johns and Davies 2012; Tomz and Weeks 2013; Bell and Quek 2018), we designed our experiment by mirroring the scenario and wording used by them to make our work comparable to theirs.

We began our experiment by explaining that there is much concern these days about the spread of nuclear weapons. After the introduction, the participants were randomly assigned to six different scenarios,¹² which include details about the situation. All scenarios commonly began as follows: “A country is developing nuclear weapons and will have the capacity to deliver them more accurately within six months. The country could then use its missiles to launch nuclear attacks against any country in the world.” The scenarios again commonly explain that the country has not signed a military alliance with South Korea¹³ and that the country has high levels of trade with South Korea.¹⁴ Then,

⁹Although Chu (2021) examines democratic citizens' attitudes toward China rather than public support for military strike, which is the primary interest of the democratic peace, he offers an important implication that liberal democracy and its values play a significant role in shaping democratic citizens' attitudes in international relations. Yet, it should also be noted that his findings are contrary to Bell and Quek (2018), who demonstrate that the Chinese public is also more reluctant to attack a democracy against an autocracy.

¹⁰We relied on Tomz and Weeks' (2013) seminal work to decide an appropriate sample size for our experiment.

¹¹Because political ideology plays an important role in shaping public perceptions of rivalry and, more broadly, national security in South Korea (Kim 1991; Jo 2022), it is important to make sure that political ideology is balanced for “randomization on the basis of a covariate” (Rubin 1974).

¹²Online Appendix 3 shows that the randomization in our experiment was successful.

¹³Although Tomz and Weeks (2013) and Bell and Quek (2018) varied military alliances, we did not. Because the only ally of South Korea is the United States in the real world, we worried that our respondents would think of the United States when they were assigned to a scenario with an ally. Thus, we presented a non-ally scenario to reflect South Korea's security reality.

¹⁴Prior studies varied trade levels in experiments in the United States and China, and commonly found that the effect of trade was not distinguishable from zero (Tomz and Weeks 2013; Bell and Quek 2018). However, we held the target

to the heart of the democratic peace: “even in the face of difficult security challenges and salient issues, dyadic democracy will associate with a lower likelihood of militarized aggression” (Ghatak, Gold, and Prins 2017, 152).

⁸It is worth mentioning that the nature of South Korea's rivalry with North Korea may be fundamentally different from that of the country's rivalry with Japan. The rivalry between the two Koreas, similar to the rivalry between India and Pakistan, is one of the prominent rivalries born feuding (Wayman 2000). On the contrary, the rivalry between South Korea and Japan, which has its origins in the Japanese colonization, is likely to be one that combines both “spatial” and “positional” rivalries (Thompson and Dreyer 2012); while the competition over territorial control characterizes the former, the competition over either regional or global influence characterizes the latter.

the respondents received information not only about the country's political regime type (democracy *vs.* autocracy) like previous studies but also about its rivalrous relationship with South Korea (none *vs.* rivalry *vs.* non-rivalry), which is our main interest.¹⁵ Thus, our experiment resulted in a 2×3 design.¹⁶

Following previous studies, we concluded all scenarios by saying that the country's motives remain unclear, but if it builds nuclear weapons, it will have the power to blackmail or destroy other countries, and that the country has refused all requests to stop its nuclear weapons program. Finally, in the third screen, we explained that South Korea and other countries are considering policy options to address the problem,¹⁷ and that one option is to attack the country's nuclear development sites. Then, we asked whether the respondents would favor or oppose the South Korean military participating in an attack on the country's nuclear development sites. [Online Appendix 2](#) presents the full text of our experiment.

Findings

Before examining the effect of rivalry, we first show South Koreans' support for military strike against democracies and autocracies by presenting our results only based on Treatments 1 (Democracy) and 2 (Autocracy).¹⁸ [Figure 1](#) compares the results to those of [Tomz and Weeks \(2013\)](#) and [Bell and Quek \(2018\)](#).¹⁹ Because previous studies analyzed

country's trade levels both constant and high, which is a conservative approach, so that we can randomize a rivalrous relationship—our main interest—in addition to regime type.

¹⁵With respect to the meaning of the term “rivalry,” there is not much difference between Korean and English. In Korean, we made sure to emphasize that “a rivalrous relationship with South Korea” is directly related to “national security.” Many of our respondents should have equated rivalry to threat.

¹⁶Nonnuclear military capabilities are varied in [Tomz and Week's \(2013\)](#) experiment, while they are held in [Bell and Quek's \(2018\)](#) experiment. However, we did not say anything about the target country's nonnuclear forces because we were interested in rivalry. Although we consciously avoided naming countries for information equivalence ([Dafoe, Zhang, and Caughey 2018](#)), which has become standard in experimental international relations research over time ([Majnemur and Meibauer 2023](#)), and for comparability maximization with prior research, most South Koreans may think of either Japan or North Korea as a rival in terms of national security. Moreover, it is well known among South Koreans that Japan's nonnuclear forces are similar to those of South Korea, while North Korea's nonnuclear capabilities are weaker than those of South Korea. Therefore, we worried that when information on nonnuclear military capabilities is given, the respondents assigned to treatments with a democratic or autocratic rivalry would easily think of Japan or North Korea, respectively, which can both violate information equivalence and reduce experimental control ([McDermott 2002](#)). To check the degree of the violation, respondents were asked in an open-ended format to write out the name of a country that came into their minds at the end of our experiment. The distribution, as shown in [Table A7 in Online Appendix 8](#), is not necessarily concentrated on the two countries. As we discuss in the main text, even when we conduct a sub-sample analysis only with those who did *not* think of the two countries, our main findings remain the same (see [figure A8 in Online Appendix 8](#)).

¹⁷Unlike [Tomz and Weeks \(2013\)](#), we presented a scenario where South Korea and “other countries” are considering policy options to address the nuclear crisis. This is because, as [Bell and Quek \(2018, 232\)](#) explained about China, South Korea's military capabilities are limited to act unilaterally. Thus, although the wording is slightly different from [Tomz and Week's \(2013\)](#) scenario in the United States, it is more plausible to South Koreans.

¹⁸Note that Treatments 1 and 2 are “Democracy” and “Autocracy,” respectively, while not mentioning anything about rivalrous relationships (see [Online Appendix 2](#)).

¹⁹Throughout the manuscript, we report our findings based on the subset of respondents who passed the manipulation checks (see [Online Appendix 4](#)). Yet, the fact that the passing and failure of the manipulation checks are not random, but related closely to respondents' levels of political sophistication (see [Table A5](#)), raises two potential concerns about our results and interpretation. First, it implies that our key findings may have been driven by those who are *already* politically

public opinion on the democratic peace primarily in countries that are advanced democracies and/or great powers, such as the United States, Britain, and China ([Johns and Davies 2012](#); [Tomz and Weeks 2013](#); [Bell and Quek 2018](#)), the figure allows us to examine whether citizens in South Korea, a young democracy and non-great power, also show similar patterns.

[Figure 1](#) clearly demonstrates that South Koreans are also less supportive of military strikes against democracies than autocracies. About 28.5 percent of respondents support a military strike when the target is autocratic, while 21.0 percent of them support it when the target is democratic. Though the absolute levels of South Koreans' support for military action are relatively lower than or equal to the levels in the United States, Britain, and China, the effect of democracy on the support in South Korea is similar to that of other countries: the effect of democracy among South Koreans is about 7.5 percentage points ($n = 897$; $t = 2.49$; $p = 0.01$; two-tailed).²⁰ Hence, [figure 1](#) suggests that public opinion may operate as the mechanism that underpins the democratic peace even in countries like South Korea that are both new democracies and non-great powers.

However, we argue that publics' perception of international rivalry weakens the effect of regime type. To investigate the effect of rivalry, we compare respondents' support for military strike not only against democracies and autocracies, but also against different rivalrous relationships. [Figure 2](#) shows that although South Koreans are significantly less willing to attack democracies than autocracies when no information about rivalry is provided (left panel), the difference in support for military strike against democracies and autocracies is no longer significant when taking the role of rivalry into account (middle panel).²¹ Specifically, about 31.8 percent of respondents are supportive of a military strike when the target is a rivalrous autocracy, and about 28.1 percent support it when the target is a rivalrous democracy. The difference is now halved to about 3.7 percentage points and statistically indistinguishable ($n = 688$; $t = -1.02$; $p = 0.30$; two-tailed).²² However, when explicit information on the non-rivalrous relationship is given (right panel), regime type matters again for South Koreans' support for military strike, although its statistical significance is at the 90 percent confidence level ($n = 434$; $t = -1.75$;

sophisticated, rather than our experimental manipulations. Second, it is possible that those with higher levels of political sophistication are driving our findings by responding more acutely to our experimental treatments. In this case, while our theory may not be fully rejected, its scope condition would be limited to only politically sophisticated citizens. However, we argue that our findings still hold because of the following two reasons: First, the inclusion of the entire respondents in our experiment produces substantively consistent results (see [Online Appendix 5](#)), which refutes the first potential concern. Second, although different levels of political sophistication may matter for *threat perception* ([figures A3 and A4](#)), there is insufficient evidence that they play a significant role in shaping *public support for military strike* ([figures A1 and A2](#)). See [Online Appendix 4](#) for our detailed discussion of the manipulation checks and their implications.

²⁰Although our effect size is lower than that of [Tomz and Weeks \(2013\)](#), who find about 11 and 13 percentage points in the United States and Britain, respectively, it is relatively higher than that of [Johns and Davies \(2012\)](#), who find about 5 and 6 percentage points in the United States and Britain, respectively. Our effect size is also higher than the size found in China, about 6 percentage points ([Bell and Quek 2018](#)).

²¹[Online Appendix 7](#) presents full regression results.

²²As noted earlier, our sample size is based on prior research ([Tomz and Weeks 2013](#)). Yet, it is still plausible that our key findings from the comparison between “Democracy (rivalry)” and “Autocracy (rivalry)” may stem from the underpowered experiment; the calculations based on our experiment suggest that it would need a sample size of about 4,600 (per group) to detect the 95 percent significance with power of 0.8. Nonetheless, we believe that our results still demonstrate that the presence of rivalry can, at least, temper the public opinion mechanism of the democratic peace.

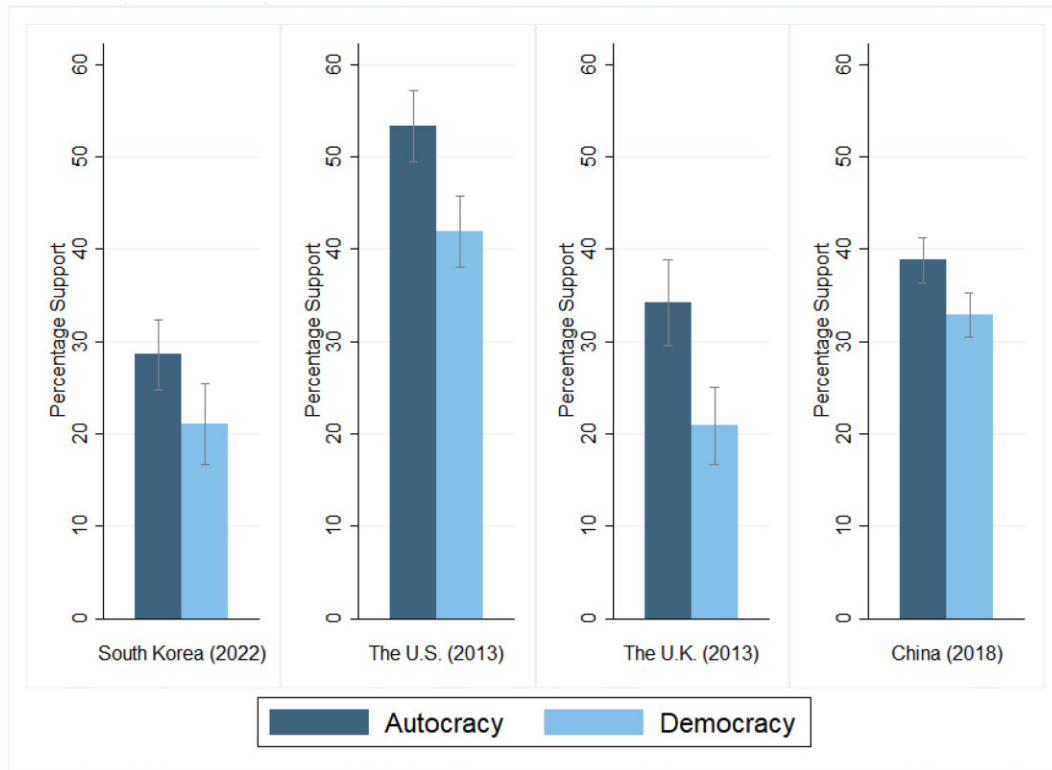


Figure 1. Support for military strike against autocracies and democracies in South Korea, the United states, the UK, and China.

Note. The 95 percent confidence intervals are shown. $N = 897$ (South Korea); 1,273 (the United States); 762 (the UK); 2,922 (China).

$p = 0.07$; two-tailed): approximately 21.8 percent of respondents support a military strike against non-rivalrous autocracies versus 15.1 percent against non-rivalrous democracies.

Our main findings that public support for military strike is indistinguishable between democracies and autocracies in the face of rivalry remain consistent, even when excluding respondents that thought of Japan or North Korea in Treatments 3 (Democracy and Rivalry) and 4 (Autocracy and Rivalry), respectively. Although our scenario features abstracted (or unnamed) countries similar to the ones in prior studies (Tomz and Weeks 2013; Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Peterson 2017; Bell and Quek 2018; Schwartz and Blair 2020; also, see Brutger et al. 2022a, 2022b),²³ the geographic reality that South Korea faces Japan, which is a rivalrous

²³In addition to random assignment, the information equivalence (IE) is an additional required assumption in survey experiments studying epistemic effects (Dafoe, Zhang, and Caughey 2018). It can be violated when “manipulating information about a particular attribute alters respondents’ beliefs about background attributes in the scenario” (400), which can result in discrepancy between the manipulation and the quantity of interest. Because our treatments include information not only about regime type and rivalrous relationship, but also about military alliance and trade levels following prior studies (Tomz and Weeks 2013; Bell and Quek 2018) (see Online Appendix 2.2), we avoided naming specific real-world actors (i.e., Japan and North Korea) in our experiment. The existing survey-experimental literature, particularly on abstraction, supports our decision. One of the key dimensions of abstraction is *actor identity* (Brutger et al. 2022a, 2022b). Regarding actor identity, first, the use of abstracted countries (i.e., “a/the country”) allows us to maintain *schema consistency*. Because a country is pursuing a nuclear weapons program in our scenario, the country used must remain consistent with the rest of the scenario. Yet, many South Koreans not only know well that North Korea already has nuclear weapons, but also do not consider Japan a likely regional proliferator. As such, the two countries are schema-inconsistent actors that can prompt respondents either not to believe the scenario or not to

democracy to the east, and North Korea, which is a rivalrous autocracy to the north, suggests that our respondents in Treatments 3 and 4 may still think of them (see Table A7 in Online Appendix 8).²⁴ Though respondents are less willing to support the use of force against real-world countries than fictitious countries (Majnemer and Meibauer 2023), it is necessary to directly test if those who thought of the two countries are driving our main findings. Yet, as shown in figure A8 in Online Appendix 8, our results do not change in any way when we analyze only with the sub-sample of respondents that did *not* think of either Japan or North Korea. Therefore, our findings demonstrate that perception of ri-

accept the treatment. Second, our design helps achieve *treatment consistency*. We fixed the level of trade with South Korea as “high” in our scenario. Given that while the high level of trade with South Korea is likely to be perceived as plausible by respondents when we name Japan, such is unlikely to be the case when we name North Korea, the latter can be treatment inconsistent. Lastly, naming Japan and North Korea in our scenario would bring about the issue of actor *salience* because the two countries are two real-world actors that are extremely salient in South Korean domestic politics and foreign policy. Thus, many South Koreans’ prior attitudes or knowledge about them would affect the size of the treatment effects. For these reasons, we employed abstraction in our design to satisfy the IE assumption. Although a good number of subjects thought of either Japan or North Korea despite the design, figure A8 in Online Appendix shows that they do not drive our main findings.

²⁴What should be noted here is that because our post-experiment question, “What country came into your mind?” is in an open-ended format and does not provide the option, “No particular country came into my mind,” it is likely to have overestimated the proportions of respondents thinking about Japan and North Korea. In other words, even if respondents were not thinking about any particular country during the experiment, they might have been compelled to think of a country. This lends further confidence to the robustness of our findings. We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this possibility.

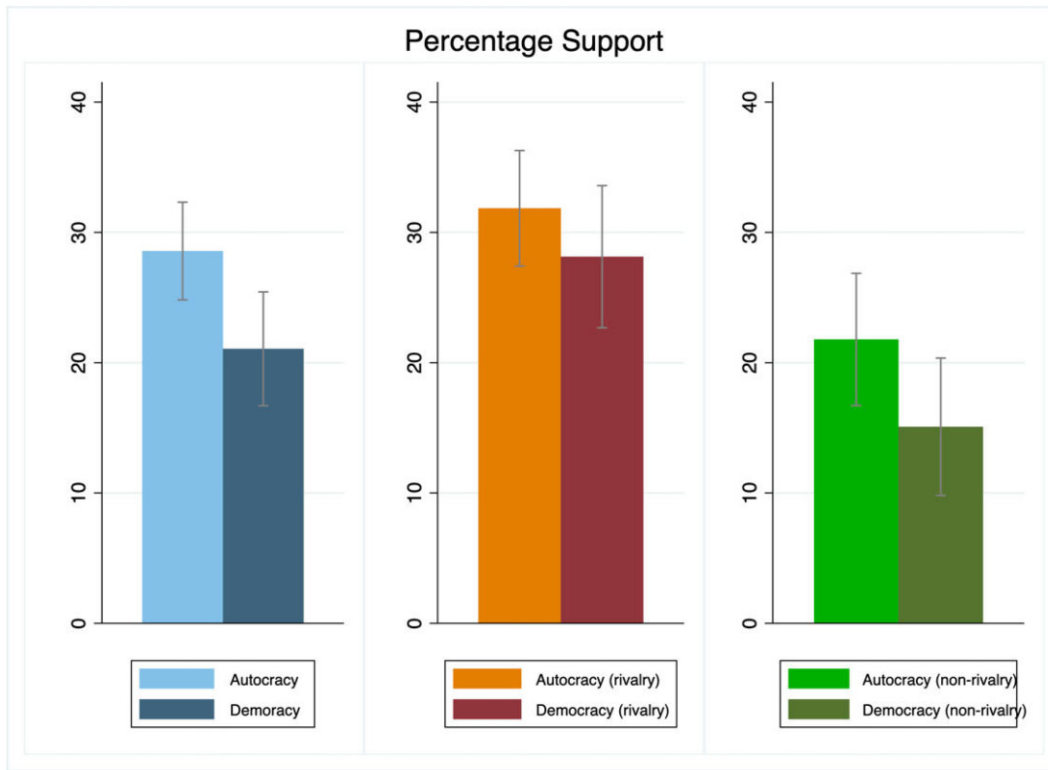


Figure 2. Support for Military Strike in South Korea: Regime Type and Rivalry.
Note. The 95 percent confidence intervals are shown. $N = 2,023$.

valry not only plays an important role in shaping public support for military action but also weakens the effect of regime type. Put differently, public opinion may no longer operate to sustain the democratic peace in the presence of rivalry.

Given our findings in [figure 2](#), we additionally investigate one of the mechanisms behind public opinion on the democratic peace: threat perception. [Online Appendix 6](#) shows that although South Koreans, regardless of the rivalrous relationship (none *vs.* rivalry *vs.* non-rivalry), tend to perceive democracies as less threatening than otherwise equivalent autocracies, they view rivalrous democracies as more threatening than other democracies. Moreover, the percentage of respondents who thought that rivalrous democracies are threatening (about 77.5 percent) is not only higher than that of non-rivalrous autocracies ($n = 520$; $t = 4.69$; $p = 0.00$; two-tailed), but also statistically indistinguishable from that of regular autocracies without any rivalry treatment ($n = 823$; $t = 1.61$; $p = 0.11$; two-tailed). This suggests that though shared democracy pacifies the public by changing perceptions of threat ([Tomz and Weeks 2013](#)), its alleviating effect decreases in the presence of rivalries between democracies. In short, publics' perception of rivalry weakens the pacifying effect of democracy.

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that in the presence of international rivalry, the content of public opinion might not contribute to the dyadic democratic peace. South Koreans, when confronted with rivalry, are just as willing to attack democracies as they are autocracies, though the effect of regime type does not fully disappear. Therefore, if public opinion matters for the democratic peace, its effect is highly likely to be

confined to democracies *without* rivalries. It should be noted that unlike [Bell and Quek \(2018\)](#), we are not directly challenging the explanation that public opinion is one of the important channels that sustains peace among democracies. Instead, we contend that it is necessary to qualify the scope of the public opinion mechanism to non-rivalrous democracies from all (i.e., both rivalrous and non-rivalrous) democracies.

The findings based on South Korea's case should be generalizable to other parts of the world. Latin America, for example, is home to at least several rivalrous democratic dyads. One of the most prominent among them is the rivalry between Bolivia and Chile, which continues to be marked by their territorial dispute over the Atacama corridor. In South Asia, India and Pakistan constitute another notable rivalrous democratic dyad. People in these countries, similar to South Koreans, might be less reluctant to attack their democratic rivals. Furthermore, because the increasing frequency and severity of environmental shocks ([Lee et al. 2022](#)) and maritime disputes ([Mitchell 2020](#)) will most likely lead to the emergence of new democratic rivals, our findings should remain relevant over time.

Our findings suggest several avenues for future research. First, future research should take variation in rivalry into account. In our experiment, we focus on the *presence* of rivalry that is related to national security, but not on the *type* of that particular rivalry. Examining how “ongoing rivalries” differ from “entrenched rivalries” would be theoretically and empirically productive.

Second, future research should explore issues other than nuclear proliferation. While our experiment maximizes the comparability with prior experiments, particularly [Bell and Quek \(2018\)](#) and [Tomz and Weeks \(2013\)](#), it limits our

understanding of the public opinion mechanism to some degree. Given that territorial disputes have been a root cause of war and conflict between states (Ghosn, Palmer, and Bremer 2004), they could be an excellent starting point.

Finally, future studies should distinguish between old and young democracies. Tomz and Weeks (2013) uncover three causal mechanisms, which are threat perception, deterrence, and morality. But unfortunately, the evidence supporting these important mechanisms comes strictly from traditional Western democracies, such as Britain and the United States. Likewise, although Chu (2021) emphasizes the role of liberal ideology in shaping democratic citizens' opinion in international relations, his analysis does not directly consider potential distinctions between old and young democracies. However, these mechanisms might not operate in the same way in young and/or non-Western democracies, primarily because of varying degrees of mass publics' exposure to democratic norms and values; it often takes time for democratic norms and values to fully take root (Neundorf and Pop-Eleches 2020; Kim-Leffingwell 2023). Through our experiment, we have shown that the "threat perception" mechanism operates as expected in South Korea (see Online Appendix 6). Yet, the other two mechanisms remain to be tested not only in South Korea but also in other young democracies.

Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available at the *International Studies Quarterly* data archive.

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