

Worried Taiwanese vs. Angry Taiwanese: Emotional Responses to Chinese Aggression and Their Impact on Ally Preferences*

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Abstract

This study examines how Taiwanese citizens' emotional responses to Chinese military aggression shape their preferences for alignment with the United States or China. Using data from the Taiwan Election and Democratization Study (TEDS), it analyzes the distinct roles of worry about armed conflict and anger toward Chinese military actions in influencing public attitudes. The results show that worry about war increases the likelihood of supporting closer ties with China, suggesting an accommodating stance, while anger toward the PLA motivates stronger preferences for alignment with the

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United States and, to a lesser extent, equidistance. A robustness check using a trichotomous measure of ally preference confirms these patterns. These findings underscore the importance of emotional responses and political identity in shaping foreign policy attitudes within Taiwan's unique geopolitical context.

Keywords: ally preferences, political psychology, emotional responses, Chinese aggression, public opinion

Introduction

The question of ally preferences has traditionally been analyzed through the lens of international relations (IR) theory, where state behavior is often viewed as a rational response to external threats and geopolitical dynamics (Mearsheimer 2001; Waltz 1979). However, this perspective often overlooks the psychological processes that shape how individuals—and by extension, societies—perceive threats and make foreign policy judgments. In practice, public attitudes toward alliances are not formed solely through strategic calculations but are influenced by emotions, cognitive biases, and social identities (Casler and Yarhi-Milo 2023; Kertzer, Renshon, and Yarhi-Milo 2021; Levy 2023). Particularly in democracies, where public opinion can influence foreign policy (Aldrich et al. 2006), understanding these psychological underpinnings becomes essential.

In Taiwan's unique geopolitical context—marked by its complex relationship with China and dependence on the U.S. for security guarantees—public attitudes toward foreign alignment are shaped by more than just cold strategic logic (Wu 2017). China's ongoing military coercion generates not only rational threat assessments but also emotional reactions among Taiwanese citizens. This study examines how two key emotional responses—worry about armed conflict and anger toward China's military actions—shape Taiwanese preferences for alignment with the United States or China. These emotions are theorized to have different effects—worry is expected to foster more risk-averse orientations, potentially leading individuals to favor accommodation or to avoid deeper entanglement with either major power, while anger is anticipated to drive stronger support for alignment with the United States as a form of resistance.

Empirically, this research uses data from the Taiwan Election and Democratization Study (TEDS) to examine the effects of emotional responses on ally preferences. The analysis employs both continuous and categorical measures

of alignment preference, including a trichotomous variable distinguishing between pro-U.S., pro-China, and equidistant positions. The findings reveal that anger significantly increases support for closer ties with the United States and, to a lesser extent, equidistance, while worry about conflict increases the likelihood of preferring closer ties with China—suggesting that worry manifests primarily as a cautious preference for accommodation.

By distinguishing between the effects of worry and anger, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying foreign policy preferences in Taiwan. It also highlights the importance of integrating emotional dynamics into analyses of public opinion in geopolitically sensitive contexts.

The structure of the paper is organized as follows: first, a review of the literature on emotional responses and ally preferences is presented, setting the theoretical framework for the study. Next, the methodology and data analysis are outlined, followed by a discussion of the empirical findings. The paper concludes with a consideration of the implications of these findings for both theory and practice, along with suggestions for future research.

Literature Review

Classic international relations theories—realism, liberalism, and constructivism—offer foundational perspectives on how states behave and interact in the global system. Realism emphasizes the pursuit of power and security in an anarchic international environment, where states act rationally to maximize their survival, often through military alliances and balancing against perceived threats (Waltz 1979). Liberalism, on the other hand, highlights the role of cooperation, institutions, and economic interdependence in promoting peace and stability, arguing that international organizations and democratic

governance reduce the likelihood of conflict (Doyle 1986; Keohane and Nye 1977). Constructivism shifts the focus to the role of ideas, norms, and identity in shaping state behavior, asserting that the international system is socially constructed, with states' actions influenced by shared values and beliefs rather than material power alone (Wendt 1992).

While these theories provide critical insights into state behavior, they overlooked the psychological dimensions of decision-making—a gap that recent research has sought to address. Kertzer and Tingley (2018) highlight a growing “behavioral revolution” in international relations, emphasizing the role of political psychology, emotions, and cognitive processes in shaping foreign policy preferences and alliance choices. This shift reflects an increasing recognition that individual-level psychological factors play a significant role in driving public opinion and elite decision-making in IR. As scholars integrate these psychological insights into IR theories, they provide a more nuanced understanding of how emotions and cognition influence strategic decision-making (Goldgeier and Tetlock 2001; Levy 2023).

In the realm of political psychology, information processing is crucial in decision-making, particularly in how individuals evaluate political events, threats, and alliances. Theories of information processing suggest that individuals do not always function as purely rational actors weighing all available information systematically. Instead, cognitive limitations, biases, and heuristics significantly shape how people perceive and interpret political realities (Kahneman 2011; Taber and Young 2013). For example, the availability heuristic can lead individuals to overestimate the likelihood of events they have recently encountered, while confirmation bias may prompt them to seek out information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs (Kertzer 2023; Levy 2023).

In the context of international relations, this implies that individuals might fail to fully process or accurately interpret the complex signals sent by other states, resulting in misjudgments about threats or the intentions of

potential allies (Jervis 1976). Psychological research indicates that both voters and policymakers often resort to cognitive shortcuts when confronted with overwhelming information or when they lack complete knowledge (Streich and Levy 2016; Tversky and Kahneman 1974). This perspective transcends purely rational decision-making models, underscoring that individuals' perceptions, prioritizations, and actions concerning political information are shaped by underlying psychological processes. These processes can ultimately give rise to emotional responses, influencing decision-making outcomes in significant ways.

1. The Role of Emotions in Ally Preferences

Political psychologists now recognize that emotion is fundamental to rational decision-making (Mercer 2005; 2010). They no longer regard thinking and feeling as distinct processes; instead, they are seen as intricately connected, which has significant implications for our understanding of perception, both in terms of its mechanisms and its outcomes (Marcus 2013). Information processing arises not only from deliberate cognitive activities but also from subconscious neurological functions. The unconscious mind plays a crucial role in managing the vast amount of information that our brains encounter. Emotion is central to both preconscious processing and the realms of perception and thought.

The phenomenon described earlier finds further support in “dual-process” theories in psychology, which propose that human cognition operates through two distinct systems: one implicit and the other explicit (Barrett et al. 2004; Kahneman 2003; 2011; Sloman 1996). The implicit system functions automatically, is rapid, and evolved earlier in human history. It utilizes parallel processing, operates with high capacity, and requires minimal conscious effort, often without deliberate reflection. In contrast, the explicit system is slower, deliberate, and evolved more recently. It engages in sequential processing, is limited by attentional and working memory constraints, and requires

considerable cognitive effort to operate effectively (MacDonald 2008). These dual systems illustrate how both automatic and deliberative processes shape decision-making, reinforcing the interdependence of cognition and emotional responses in political judgments.

In recent years, IR scholars have increasingly recognized the importance of emotion in shaping critical concepts such as deterrence, reputation, signaling, and responses to terrorism. Traditionally, these areas were analyzed through rationalist frameworks, assuming that leaders and individuals act based on strategic calculations and clear cost-benefit assessments. However, emerging research has challenged this perspective, demonstrating that emotional responses profoundly influence judgment and policy outcomes. For instance, Mercer (2005, 2010) argues that emotions like fear, anger, and humiliation play pivotal roles in deterrence and signaling, while Bleiker and Hutchinson (2008) highlight how emotional considerations underpin state responses to terrorism. Saurette (2006) emphasizes the role of emotions in shaping national reputations, where the desire to preserve honor or avoid humiliation can drive confrontational policies.

Building on this literature, it is important to recognize that rational decision-making fundamentally depends on access to accurate and comprehensive information. Unlike policymakers who have privileged access to strategic intelligence, ordinary citizens face significant informational constraints. Their perceptions of external threats are shaped by incomplete, filtered, and often biased information from media, political elites, and partisan narratives. Under such conditions of uncertainty, emotional responses serve as intuitive heuristics that help individuals interpret ambiguous threats and guide foreign policy preferences. Emotions do not replace rational reasoning but complement bounded rationality by influencing how people perceive risks, assign blame, and prioritize actions.

Among the various emotions that influence foreign policy, fear and anger stand out for their distinct and often opposing effects on decision-making and

international behavior. Fear tends to encourage caution, risk aversion, and defensive strategies, as it heightens perceptions of threat and vulnerability (Lerner and Keltner 2000; 2001). When policymakers or the public experience fear in the context of international relations, they may prefer diplomatic engagement, appeasement as a way to mitigate risks and avoid escalation. For instance, research shows that fear can lead to more conservative foreign policy decisions, such as in times of military tension, where the goal is to prevent conflict rather than provoke it (Huddy et al. 2005).

In contrast, anger often has the opposite effect, fueling more aggressive and risk-seeking behaviors (Gadarian and Brader 2023; Lerner and Keltner 2001). When individuals or states feel anger—whether due to perceived injustices, provocations, or threats—they are more likely to favor retaliatory actions or assertive foreign policies. Anger narrows focus on punishment or revenge, often leading to decisions that escalate conflicts or intensify hostilities (Saurette 2006). For example, studies demonstrate that anger can drive support for military interventions, even when such actions may carry significant risks or consequences (Huddy et al. 2005; Löwenheim and Heimann 2008). In the context of international relations, anger can push states toward punitive responses or uncompromising stances, complicating diplomatic efforts (Lim and Tanaka 2022). The contrasting effects of fear and anger underscore how emotions can shape foreign policy choices, not only by influencing risk tolerance but also by framing the interpretation of threats and opportunities in the international arena.

Building on the role of emotions in shaping foreign policy preferences, emotional responses are particularly relevant to Taiwanese citizens' attitudes toward international alignment amid rising cross-Strait tensions. As China intensifies its military pressure on Taiwan, public concerns about potential conflict have grown (Rich et al. 2023).¹ Drawing from political psychology

¹ Also see Nachman, Lev, Shelley Rigger, and Nathan Kar Ming Chan. 2024. "Taiwanese

literature, fear—operationalized here as worry about armed conflict—tends to elicit cautious, risk-averse behaviors aimed at avoiding escalation and reducing perceived vulnerability.

However, in Taiwan’s unique geopolitical context, such caution does not necessarily translate into a desire for closer ties with China. Rather, worried citizens may seek to avoid entanglement with either great power, preferring strategies that preserve flexibility and minimize provocation. This cautious orientation can manifest in multiple ways: some may advocate for strategic ambiguity or equidistance—maintaining balanced relations with both the U.S. and China—while others may lean toward accommodation with China to reduce immediate military threats. Both are grounded in conflict-avoidance, but differ in their strategic implications.

In contrast, anger toward China’s military actions reflects a more confrontational emotional response, mobilizing support for strengthening alliances, particularly with the U.S., as an act of defiance and resistance. Anger fosters an assertive orientation, reinforcing alignment with democratic allies to counter perceived aggression.

This framework anticipates that fear and anger shape ally preferences through distinct psychological pathways. Fear is expected to steer individuals toward more cautious orientations, such as preferring closer ties with China or maintaining equal distance, while anger is likely to fuel support for assertive alignment with the United States. The empirical analysis presented below tests these propositions using both continuous and categorical measures of ally preference.

Perceptions of Conflict: Continuity in the Face of Change.” *Brookings*, May 21. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/taiwanese-perceptions-of-conflict-continuity-in-the-face-of-change/?utm_campaign=Center%20for%20Asia%20Policy%20Studies%20Bulletin&utm_medium=email&utm_content=309261400&utm_source=hs_email (accessed March 9, 2026).

2. Other Models Explaining Public Opinion About Foreign Policy

While emotional and psychological factors have recently gained attention, other models rooted in rational choice theory, political culture, and media effects have long dominated the study of foreign policy preferences. In this section, I explore these alternative models and how they contribute to our understanding of public opinion formation.

2.1 Rational Assessments of Threat

Rational assessments of threat, rooted in realist international relations theory, suggest that individuals' preferences for international alliances are primarily shaped by perceived threats to their security and national survival. This framework posits that people make strategic decisions by weighing the security benefits offered by potential allies (Walt 1985; 1987; Waltz 1979). For example, Mearsheimer's (2001) balance of power theory illustrates how external threats drive states toward stronger alliances with security actors that can effectively counter these threats. In the case of the United States, public opinion on intervention is largely driven by national security concerns and a calculation of costs and benefits (Eichenberg 2005).

In Taiwan, given the island's geopolitical situation, heightened perceptions of military aggression or economic coercion from China could theoretically drive the Taiwanese public to seek closer alignment with the U.S. For example, Lee (2024) demonstrates that individuals who perceive China as a direct threat tend to exhibit stronger alignment with the U.S. Similarly, studies also find that heightened perceptions of Chinese hostility significantly increase public support for balancing efforts against China (Chong et al. 2023; Huang and Wu 2023; Yu 2023). However, while this model provides a systematic framework for understanding opinion formation, it may overlook the role of non-rational factors, such as emotions and cognitive biases (Stein 2023).

2.2 Political Culture and Ideological Alignment

Political culture models explain foreign policy preferences through the lens of deeply embedded values and beliefs. Citizens' opinions are often influenced by national identity, historical legacies, and dominant ideological frameworks (Almond and Verba 1963). In democracies, partisanship and ideological alignment play crucial roles in shaping public attitudes toward foreign policy. For instance, conservatives may favor more hawkish foreign policies that emphasize military strength, whereas liberals might prioritize diplomacy and international cooperation (Kertzer 2017). In Taiwan, key determinants of foreign policy preferences include partisan identification, stances on Taiwan independence or unification with China, and the strength of Taiwanese identity, all of which play critical roles in shaping mass opinion on ally preferences between the United States and China (Huang and Wu 2023; Lee et al. 2024; Lin and Wu 2019; Tsai et al. 2024; Wang and Tan 2021).

In addition to political orientations, values and ideological alignment also play a significant role in shaping alliance preferences. The democratic peace theory posits that democracies are less likely to engage in conflict with one another due to shared liberal values and institutional constraints (Maoz and Russett 1993; Owen 1994). Supporting this, Tomz and Weeks (2021) provide evidence that democratic citizens tend to favor alliances with other democracies. This tendency can be further understood through the concept of group identification, where public perceptions are shaped by the belief that democracies belong to a common community (Hayes 2016; Risse-Kappen 1995). In the context of Taiwan, Wu and Lin (2024) demonstrate that a significant portion of the Taiwanese public believes the U.S. would come to Taiwan's defense in a military conflict, based on the expectation that democracies support one another. Thus, ideological alignment with democracy adds a normative dimension to the formation of ally preferences.

2.3 Media Effects and Framing

Another significant model highlights the role of media and political elites in shaping public opinion on foreign policy. Zaller's (1992) receive-accept-sample (RAS) model posits that individuals' political attitudes are shaped by three key processes: (i) the information they are exposed to, (ii) their decision to either accept or reject that information, and (iii) the ease with which certain considerations come to mind when responding to survey questions. Building on Zaller's (1992) RAS model, the influence of media on public opinion is particularly relevant when considering public preferences for international alliances. Media not only determines the flow of information about foreign policy but also frames how issues such as security, diplomacy, and international relations are perceived by the public (Baum and Potter 2008; Iyengar and Simon 1993). The information the public is exposed to, especially regarding potential allies, can shape their attitudes toward these alliances. If the media consistently highlights the benefits of aligning with certain countries, such as shared democratic values or security guarantees, individuals may be more inclined to support such alliances. Conversely, negative portrayals or skepticism expressed by political elites regarding foreign partnerships can lead to increased resistance or rejection of certain alliances. Through the media's framing and agenda-setting effects, public preferences for international allies are shaped by what information is emphasized and how it is processed, aligning with Zaller's model of information exposure and acceptance.

Research Design

1. Data Collection and Sources

The data analyzed in this article were obtained from Taiwan's Election and Democratization Study (TEDS), specifically the 2020-2024 series, which

includes the Survey of the Presidential and Legislative Elections, 2024 (TEDS 2024).² This survey represents a comprehensive effort to capture the political attitudes and behaviors of Taiwanese voters during a pivotal election cycle. The dataset provides detailed insights into voter preferences, party support, electoral participation, and public opinion on key issues influencing Taiwan's political landscape. The TEDS2024 survey was meticulously conducted through face-to-face interviews, ensuring a representative sample of the Taiwanese electorate. A total of 1,206 respondents participated in the survey, which was conducted over a period of several months, from January 15th to May 31st, 2024. Data collection adhered to rigorous methodological standards, with stratified random sampling employed to achieve proportional representation across various demographic groups, including age, gender, and geographic location.

2. Variable Construction

This study examines three dependent variables to analyze how emotional responses to Chinese aggressions shape Taiwanese ally preferences: preference for the United States, preference for China, and preference difference between the United States and China. The survey questions and the construction of the variables can be found in the appendix.³

² Data analyzed in this paper were from Taiwan's Election and Democratization Study, 2020-2024 (IV): the Survey of the Presidential and Legislative Elections, 2024 (TEDS 2024) (NSC 109-2740-H-004-004-SS4) (Chen 2024). The coordinator of multi-year project TEDS is Professor Chi Huang (National Chengchi University). The principal investigator is Professor Lu-Huei Chen (National Chengchi University). More information is on TEDS website (<http://www.tedsnet.org>). Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board for Humanities & Research Ethics Committee at National Chengchi University (approval number: NCCU-REC-202007-I073 v.25). The author appreciates the assistance in providing data by the institute and individual(s) aforementioned. The author is alone responsible for views expressed herein.

³ All data and replication code used in this study are publicly available and can be accessed at <https://figshare.com/s/5b94f3d7f9096f03b4e9>. For any inquiries regarding data access, please contact the author.

- (1) **Preference for the United States:** Measured by the survey item asking, “In terms of Taiwan’s relations with the United States, which direction do you think Taiwan should move in the future?” Respondents rated their preference on a scale from 0 (keeping distance) to 10 (building close ties). A higher score indicates a stronger preference for closer relations with the United States.
- (2) **Preference for China:** Similarly, respondents rated their preference for Taiwan’s relationship with China on the same 0 to 10 scale. A higher score denotes a stronger inclination towards closer ties with China.
- (3) **Preference Difference:** Calculated as the difference between the preference scores for the United States and China. Positive values indicate a stronger preference for the United States, while negative values reflect a preference for China.

The independent variables are categorized into several key groups that influence ally preferences. The first group encompasses emotional responses to Chinese aggression, specifically measuring two distinct emotions: worry and anger. In the TEDS dataset, worry was gauged by asking respondents, “Do you worry about the possibility of military conflict between Taiwan and mainland China?” Conversely, anger was assessed through the question, “Have you ever felt upset about the frequent circling of Taiwan by China’s warplanes and warships?”⁴ Both variables are coded on an ordinal scale ranging from -2 to 2, where higher values represent stronger emotional reactions. While these variables capture respondents’ retrospective self-assessments rather than immediate emotional arousal, prior research suggests that such measures can still reflect meaningful and persistent affective orientations toward politically salient threats (Marcus and MacKuen 1993). On average, respondents reported feeling

⁴ While the TEDS official English translation uses “upset,” the original question in the Chinese-language survey used the term “生氣,” which directly translates as “angry.” As the interviews were conducted in Chinese, the responses reflect this stronger emotional framing.

more anger (mean = 0.24) than worry (mean = -0.02), suggesting that Taiwanese people tend to experience greater anger than worry in response to Chinese military actions.

The second block of independent variables focuses on threat perception regarding China's military actions. To capture this concept, I construct a measure based on respondents' assessments of the potential threat posed by China. In the TEDS dataset, threat perception is measured by asking, "In our society, some people think communist China will attack Taiwan, and some people think it will not. If 0 means that communist China will never attack Taiwan, and 10 means that communist China will definitely attack Taiwan, how likely do you think it?" Responses are recorded on a scale from 0 to 10, with higher values indicating a greater perceived threat. Respondents rated the perceived threat at 4.16, suggesting a moderate level of concern about China's military attack.

Media exposure significantly influences ally preferences, as the content and perspectives presented through media can shape public attitudes towards potential international allies. In constructing the media exposure variable, the TEDS dataset utilizes information about respondents' preferred TV news channels. Participants were asked, "Which TV news do you watch most often?" Responses were categorized into two distinct media types: green media and blue media (two dummy variables). Green media includes Formosa TV (民視) and SET News (三立), which are generally supportive of Taiwan's sovereignty and cautious about China. Blue media encompasses TVBS and CTi TV (中天), which tend to promote perspectives favoring closer relations with China. On average, respondents who predominantly consume green media reported a media exposure mean value of 0.25, whereas those who primarily consume blue media had an average media exposure mean value of 0.27.

Preference for democracy plays a critical role in shaping ally preferences, as individuals who favor democratic governance are more likely to support alliances with democratic nations. To construct this variable, the TEDS dataset includes

the question: “Democracy is always and under all circumstances preferable to any other kind of government.” Respondents rated their agreement with this statement on a 5-point scale, ranging from -2 (strongly disagree) to 2 (strongly agree), with higher values indicating a stronger preference for democracy. The mean value for this variable was 0.36, suggesting that, on average, respondents slightly favored democracy over other forms of government.

Drawing from social contact theory, which posits that increased exposure to another group fosters positive attitudes toward that group, two variables were constructed to assess the impact of personal and familial experiences in China on favorability toward China. The first variable captures the frequency of trips to China. In the TEDS dataset, this was measured by the question: “In the past five years, how many trips have you taken to Mainland China?” This variable was recoded as a dummy variable, where 1 indicates at least one trip to China and 0 indicates no trips. The mean value for this variable was 0.13, indicating that a small portion of respondents had traveled to China. The second variable addresses deeper personal or familial engagement, measured by asking: “Have you or any member of your family made investments, conducted business, held employment, settled down, or studied in Mainland China?” This was also recoded as a dummy variable, where 1 indicates any such experience and 0 indicates none. The mean value for this variable was 0.15, reflecting a slightly higher, but still limited, level of direct or indirect experience with China.

Political variables, such as party identification, attitudes toward Taiwan independence and unification with China, and Taiwanese/Chinese identity, are deeply intertwined with ally preferences, as these factors shape individuals’ geopolitical orientations and, by extension, their support for specific international alliances. In the absence of a direct measure of hawkish versus dovish orientations, these variables—particularly the independence/unification position—serve as appropriate proxies for ideological tendencies in Taiwan’s unique political context. Additionally, the inclusion of preference for democracy

captures value-based ideological alignment relevant to foreign policy attitudes.

Party identification was measured by asking respondents which political party they identify with or feel closest to, with categories representing major political groups such as the Pan-Blue coalition, Pan-Green coalition, and the Taiwan People's Party (TPP), as well as those without party affiliation. Attitudes toward Taiwan independence or unification with China were assessed by asking respondents to indicate their position on a spectrum ranging from immediate independence to immediate unification with China. Additionally, identity was measured by asking respondents to specify whether they identify as Taiwanese, Chinese, or a combination of both. Each of these variables was recoded as dummy variables to enable an analysis of how political orientations influence preferences for stronger alliances with democratic nations versus more favorable relations with China.

Demographic variables, such as gender, age, and education, were included as control variables to account for their potential confounding effects on ally preferences. Gender was coded as a binary variable (0 for male, 1 for female). Age was measured as a continuous variable in years but was subsequently categorized into distinct age groups for analysis. Education was measured based on respondents' highest level of educational attainment and was recoded into ordinal categories reflecting different educational levels. By including these demographic controls, the analysis accounts for potential variations in ally preferences that may arise from differences in basic sociodemographic characteristics, ensuring a clearer interpretation of the relationships between the key independent variables and ally preferences.

3. Statistical Method

In this study, Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression facilitates the examination of how various factors—such as emotional responses, threat

perceptions, media exposures, preference for democracy, social contact experiences, political orientations, and demographic characteristics—affect respondents’ preferences for international alliances. This method allows for the estimation of the magnitude and direction of these relationships, providing a nuanced understanding of how these factors collectively influence ally preferences. The OLS regression model can be expressed as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} Y = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 (\text{Emotional Responses}) + \beta_2 (\text{Threat Perceptions}) \\ & + \beta_3 (\text{Media Exposure}) + \beta_4 (\text{Pref for Democracy}) \\ & + \beta_5 (\text{Social Contact}) + \beta_6 (\text{Political Orientations}) \\ & + \beta_7 (\text{Demographic Controls}) + \varepsilon \end{aligned}$$

Where Y represents the dependent variable—ally preferences—and the independent variables include emotional responses, threat perceptions, media exposure, preference for democracy, social contact, political orientations, and demographic characteristics. Each coefficient ($\beta_1, \beta_2, \dots, \beta_7$) reflects the impact of the corresponding independent variable on ally preferences, with ε representing the error term.

In addition to the primary OLS specification, a robustness check was conducted using a trichotomous dependent variable that categorizes respondents as preferring closer ties with the U.S., equidistance, or closer ties with China. This approach addresses potential central clustering and better captures the strategic ambiguity held by many Taiwanese. The outcome was estimated using a multinomial logistic regression model, with “closer ties with China” as the reference category. To aid interpretation, predicted probabilities were computed for key covariates, including emotional responses and party identification. These results are presented in the following section to illustrate how emotions and partisan alignment shape ally preferences across the three categories.

Empirical Findings

1. The Distribution of Respondents' Ally Preferences

Figure 1 reveals histograms of respondents' ally preferences, arranged in columns from left to right. The first column displays the histogram of respondents' preferences for the United States, the second column shows preferences for China, and the third column depicts the preference difference between the United States and China.

The histogram for preferences toward the United States reveals a mean score of 6.08 on a scale from 0 to 10. While most respondents' preferences cluster around a score of 5, indicating a moderate inclination, the distribution is slightly skewed towards higher values. This suggests that, on average, Taiwanese citizens lean more favorably towards closer relations with the United States, although there is notable variability in individual preferences. However, it is important to note that there exists a clear partisan gap: Pan-Green supporters align more strongly with the United States, whereas Pan-Blue supporters tend to exhibit less favorable preferences. Respondents from the TPP and nonpartisans are positioned in the middle, reflecting a more neutral stance. This partisan and political affiliation divide underscores the varying degrees of preference for the United States based on political orientation.

The histogram for preferences toward China, shown in the second column of Figure 1, reveals an overall mean score of 5.1. This mean score is centered around the midpoint of the scale, indicating a neutral stance on average. This central tendency reflects a balanced view among respondents, with no strong bias toward either end of the preference spectrum. However, there is a pronounced partisan disparity in preferences. Pan-Blue supporters demonstrate a stronger inclination toward China, whereas Pan-Green supporters exhibit less favorable attitudes. Respondents from the TPP and nonpartisans occupy a middle ground, reflecting a more balanced or neutral position. This partisan divergence

underscores the influence of political affiliation on attitudes toward China.

The histogram in the third column of Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of preference differences between the United States and China. This measure highlights the relative strength of respondents' preferences for one ally over the other. The mean value of 0.98 indicates a slight overall preference for the United States over China. Additionally, respondents' party affiliation exerts a significant impact on these preferences. Pan-Green supporters tend to exhibit a greater preference for the United States compared to China, whereas Pan-Blue supporters show a stronger inclination towards China. This partisan effect underscores how political alignment can shape relative preferences between the two major allies.

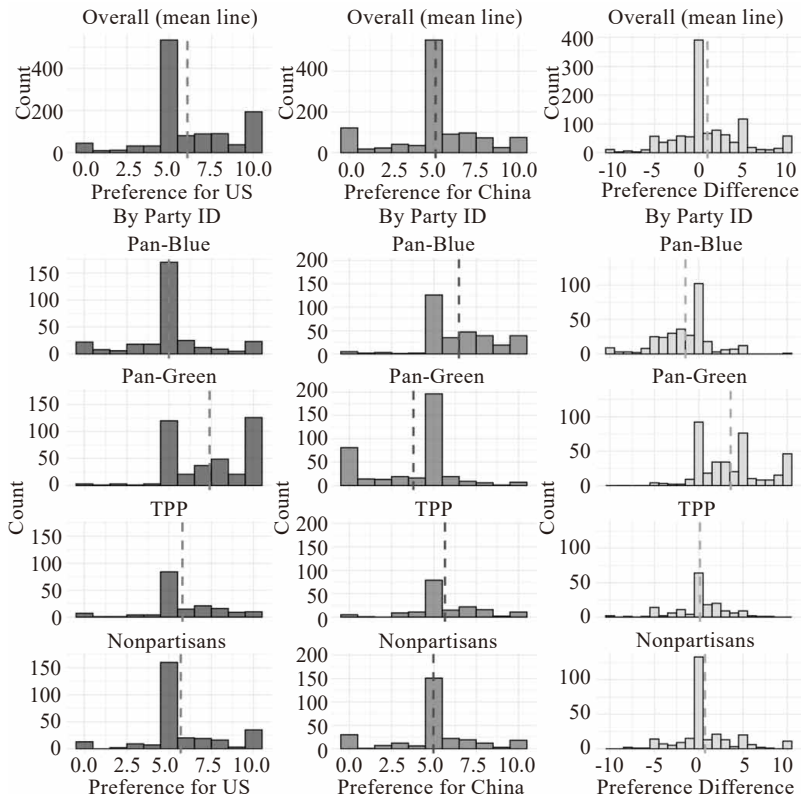


Figure 1. The Distribution of Ally Preferences

Source: TEDS (2024).

2. The Impact of Emotional Responses on Ally Preferences

This section explores how emotional responses, specifically worry about potential military conflict and anger toward China's aggressive actions, influence the Taiwanese public's preferences for the United States and China.

Table 1 presents the mean preferences for the United States, China, and the difference between them across different levels of worry about war. The analysis reveals a clear relationship between worry and ally preferences. Individuals who are very worried about potential conflict show a mean preference of 5.18 for the U.S. and 5.59 for China, resulting in a mean difference of -0.41. This group exhibits the lowest preference for the U.S. compared to those in other worry categories. In contrast, those who are a little worried have a mean preference of 6.07 for the U.S. and 5.29 for China, with a mean difference of 0.77, indicating a greater preference for the U.S. relative to the very worried group. Those who are not too worried demonstrate a mean preference of 6.19 for the U.S. and 4.90 for China, resulting in a mean difference of 1.31, showing a stronger preference for the U.S. compared to those less worried. Finally, individuals who are not worried at all have the highest mean preference for the U.S. at 6.48 and the lowest for China at 4.61, with a mean difference of 1.84, indicating the greatest preference for the U.S. among all groups.

Statistical analysis using F-tests reveals significant differences across these groups. Post hoc Tukey's tests show that those not worried at all have significantly higher preferences for the U.S. compared to those very worried. Additionally, individuals who are a little worried and not too worried also display significantly higher preferences for the U.S. compared to those very worried. Conversely, those very worried exhibit significantly higher preferences for China compared to individuals in other worry levels.

Table 1. Influence of Worry on Ally Preferences

Worry about war	Ally Preferences					
	U.S.		China		Difference	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1. Very worried	5.18	2.73	5.59	2.96	-0.41	4.55
2. A little worried	6.07	2.20	5.29	2.23	0.77	3.48
3. Not too worried	6.19	2.28	4.90	2.29	1.31	3.42
4. Not worried at all	6.48	2.91	4.61	2.93	1.84	4.71
F-test with p-value	7.88***		5.82***		10.1***	
Post hoc Tukey's test	2 > 1**, 3 > 1***, 4 > 1**		1 > 3*, 1 > 4**, 2 > 3**		2 > 1*, 3 > 1***, 4 > 1***, 4 > 2**	

Source: TEDS (2024).

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Table 2 examines the impact of anger toward China’s aggressive actions on respondents’ preferences for the United States and China. The data indicate a strong influence of anger on ally preferences. Individuals who are very upset with the PLA exhibit a mean preference of 7.01 for the U.S. and 3.78 for China, resulting in a mean difference of 3.21. This group shows the highest preference for the U.S. and the lowest for China. Those who are somewhat upset have a mean preference of 6.28 for the U.S. and 5.06 for China, with a mean difference of 1.22. In contrast, individuals who are not very upset have a mean preference of 5.62 for the U.S. and 5.68 for China, resulting in a mean difference of -0.06, indicating a nearly neutral preference. Finally, those not upset at all have the lowest mean preference for the U.S. at 5.03 and the highest for China at 6.01, with a mean difference of -1.01.

F-tests reveal significant differences across these levels of anger. Post hoc Tukey’s tests indicate that individuals who are very upset exhibit significantly higher preferences for the U.S. compared to those somewhat upset, not very

upset, or not upset at all. Conversely, those who are not upset at all have significantly higher preferences for China compared to the very upset, somewhat upset, and not very upset groups.

Table 2. Influence of Anger on Ally Preferences

Angry at PLA	Ally Preferences					
	U.S.		China		Difference	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1. Very upset	7.01	2.53	3.78	2.65	3.21	4.02
2. Somewhat upset	6.28	2.30	5.06	2.23	1.22	3.46
3. Not very upset	5.62	2.07	5.68	1.98	-0.06	3.00
4. Not upset at all	5.03	2.85	6.01	3.00	-1.01	4.52
F-test with p-value	26.67***		37.47***		53.15***	
Post hoc Tukey's test	1 > 2***, 1 > 3***, 1 > 4***, 2 > 3***, 2 > 4***		2 > 1***, 3 > 1***, 4 > 1***, 3 > 2**, 4 > 2***		1 > 2***, 1 > 3***, 1 > 4***, 2 > 3***, 2 > 4***, 3 > 4*	

Source: TEDS (2024).

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

The analysis of emotional responses reveals distinct patterns in how worry and anger influence Taiwanese citizens' preferences for the United States and China. Worry about potential military conflict is associated with a decreased preference for the U.S. and an increased preference for China. In contrast, anger towards China's aggressive actions significantly boosts preferences for the U.S. and diminishes support for China. The stark contrast between these two emotions highlights that while worry drives individuals to favor China as a means of addressing perceived threats, anger enhances support for the U.S. as a response to aggressive behavior. This comparative analysis underscores how different

emotional reactions shape the Taiwanese public's ally preferences in divergent ways.

3. Results of Statistical Modeling

In this analysis, OLS regression models are employed to assess the impact of various factors on ally preferences for the United States and China, as well as the difference in these preferences. The models incorporate key independent variables such as emotional responses, threat perception, media exposure, political orientations, social contact experiences, and demographic controls. To aid in the interpretation of the results, coefficient plots are utilized (Figure 2). These plots visualize the estimated coefficients from the regression models, with black dots indicating non-significant results, triangles representing significant negative relationships, and squares highlighting significant positive relationships.

In interpreting the statistical models, the findings indicate that emotional responses, particularly anger and worry, play a pivotal role in shaping ally preferences. Anger toward the PLA significantly enhances support for closer ties with the United States while simultaneously diminishing favorability toward China, resulting in a pronounced positive difference in ally preferences. These results suggest that individuals who harbor strong negative emotions toward China's military encroachments are more likely to align with the U.S. as their preferred ally. In contrast, worry about war exhibits a more nuanced effect. While the relationship between worry and U.S. preference is not statistically significant, increased worry correlates positively with preference for China, suggesting that those concerned about potential conflict may be more inclined to favor diplomatic balance rather than exclusively supporting one power.

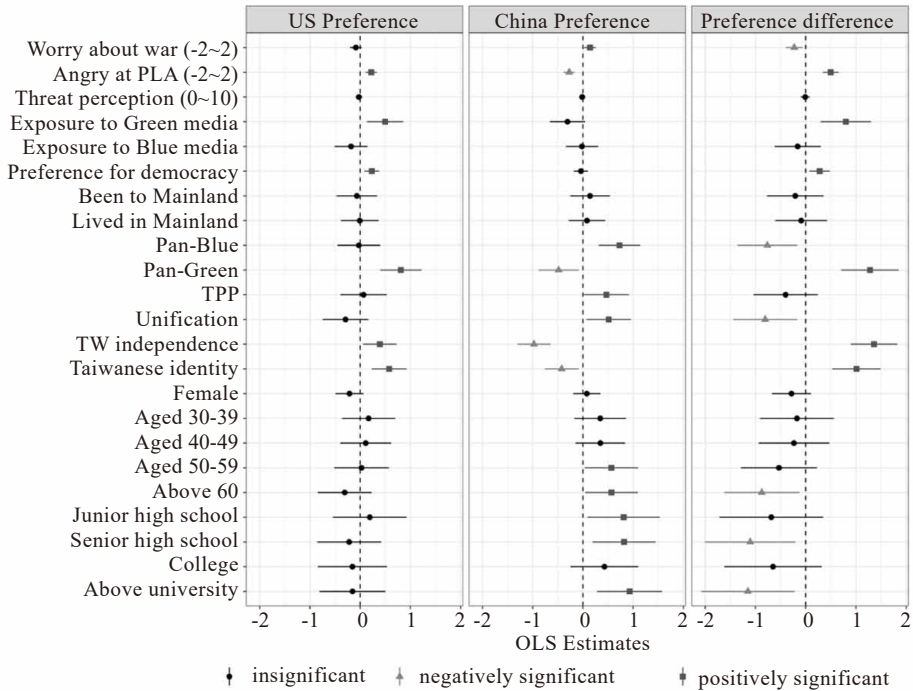


Figure 2. OLS Estimates on Public Preferences between the U.S. and China

Source: TEDS (2024).

In addition to the influence of emotional responses, other key variables also shape ally preferences. First, interestingly, threat perceptions do not significantly influence ally preferences. While one might expect that heightened perceptions of threat from China would lead individuals to align more closely with the U.S., the model reveals no statistically significant effect of threat perceptions on preferences for either country. This suggests that emotional responses, rather than rational assessments of threat, are more potent drivers of ally preferences. This distinction highlights the complementary role of emotions as heuristics in shaping public opinion under conditions of uncertainty.

Media exposure emerges as a significant factor, with individuals exposed to green-leaning media showing a stronger preference for the U.S. and a

marginally negative, though not statistically significant, preference for China. This suggests that Taiwanese media with a pro-independence or Pan-Green slant enhances pro-U.S. sentiment. In contrast, exposure to blue-leaning media does not produce any significant effect on preferences for either country, highlighting the asymmetrical impact of media environments in shaping international orientations.

Support for democracy also plays a notable role in determining ally preferences. Respondents who express stronger support for democracy show a positive inclination toward the U.S., while their preference for China is not significantly affected. This underscores the alignment between democratic values and pro-U.S. attitudes, reinforcing the notion that support for democratic governance may predispose individuals toward alliances with other democratic nations.

Social contact experiences, such as having traveled or lived in Mainland China, fail to yield significant effects on ally preferences. The coefficients for both having visited and having lived in China are statistically insignificant, indicating that personal contact with China does not substantially shift public attitudes. This weakens the expectation posited by social contact theory that greater interaction with China would lead to more favorable views of it.

Political orientations, as measured by party identification, further underscore the partisan divide in ally preferences. Pan-Green identifiers display a significantly stronger alignment with the U.S. and a marked aversion to China. On the other hand, Pan-Blue supporters express greater favorability toward China but do not significantly distance themselves from the U.S. This suggests a more nuanced approach among Pan-Blue supporters, who, while more open to China, do not categorically reject the U.S. The TPP identifiers, positioned more centrally, show a mild preference for China, but their influence remains less pronounced compared to the major partisan camps.

Regarding Taiwan independence and Taiwanese identity. Support for

Taiwan independence has a strong and positive association with preferences for the U.S. and a significant negative relationship with preferences for China, resulting in a large positive difference in ally preference. This suggests that those who favor Taiwan's independence are much more likely to align with democratic allies, particularly the U.S., while distancing themselves from China. Similarly, Taiwanese identity exerts a significant influence on ally preferences. Individuals who identify more strongly as Taiwanese, rather than Chinese, show a clear preference for the U.S. and a notable aversion to China. This reinforces the notion that national identity and political stances on Taiwan's sovereignty are critical in shaping public attitudes toward international alliances, driving the Taiwanese public toward stronger ties with the U.S. and more distant relations with China.

4. Robustness Analysis Using a Trichotomous Measure of Ally Preference

To more clearly distinguish between directional and non-directional preferences in international alignment, a trichotomous outcome variable was constructed, categorizing individuals as preferring closer ties with the U.S., equidistance, or closer ties with China. This approach captures the strategic ambiguity held by many Taiwanese who consciously avoid siding with either power. The classification is based on the difference between respondents' U.S. and China preference scores.⁵ Figure 3 presents results from a multinomial logistic regression model using this outcome. While the model specification differs from the OLS approach, the substantive findings are broadly consistent—emotional responses, political identity, and generational differences remain key predictors of ally preference. Detailed model estimates, including all covariates, are reported in Appendix Table A3.

⁵ Categories are based on the difference between U.S. and China preference scores: U.S. > China = “closer ties with the U.S.”; U.S. = China = “equidistance”; U.S. < China = “closer ties with China.”

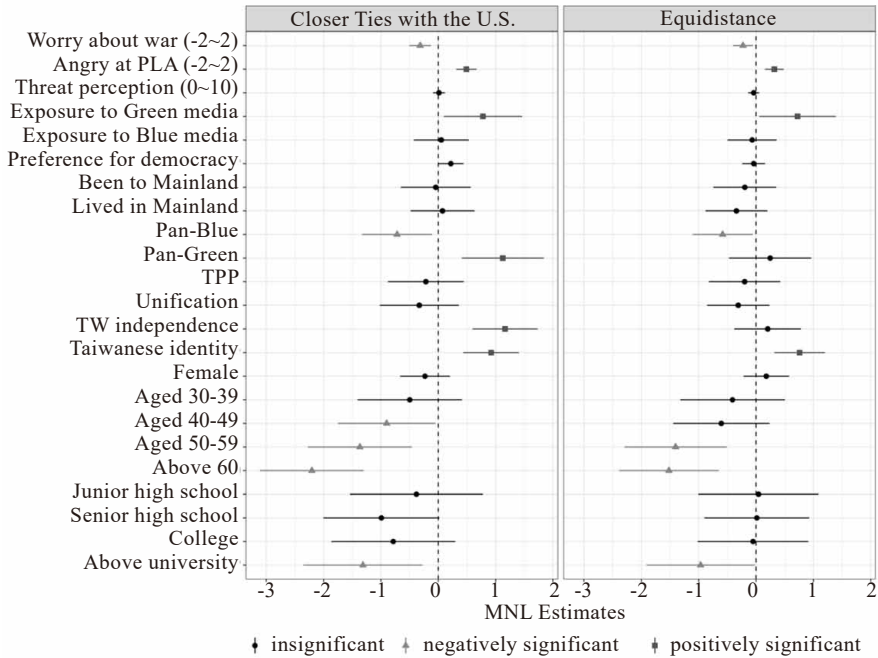


Figure 3. MNL Estimates for Ally Preference Categories

Source: TEDS (2024).

To illustrate how emotional responses shape public attitudes toward international alignment, Figure 4 presents predicted probabilities of ally preference across the full range of reported worry and anger. Higher levels of anger toward China’s military actions are associated with a clear increase in the likelihood of preferring closer ties with the United States, accompanied by a decline in support for equidistance and closer ties with China. In contrast, worry about armed conflict increases the probability of preferring closer ties with China, while reducing the likelihood of preferring the United States. Although the predicted probability of equidistance appears to rise slightly as worry increases, this change is not statistically significant. These results suggest that anger drives assertive, alliance-oriented preferences, whereas worry fosters a

more cautious and accommodating stance, with voters gravitating toward China.

To assess whether these two emotions operate in combination, an interaction term between worry and anger was tested in the multinomial model. The estimated interaction effect was not statistically significant, indicating that these emotions influence ally preferences independently rather than in a reinforcing or conditional manner. This finding suggests that anger and worry reflect distinct public reactions to external military pressure: while anger tends to mobilize support for strengthening alliances, worry is more closely associated with caution and the desire to avoid escalation.

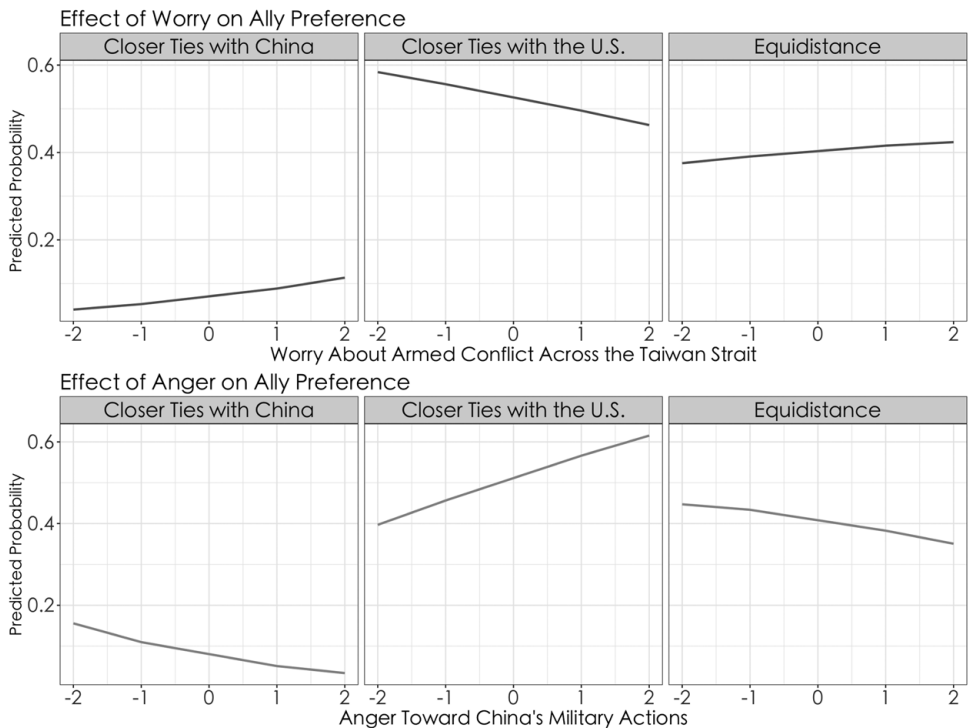


Figure 4. Predicted Probabilities of Ally Preference by Emotional Response

Source: TEDS (2024).

Figure 5 presents predicted probabilities of ally preference by party identification. As expected, Pan-Green supporters overwhelmingly prefer closer ties with the United States, with limited support for equal distance or alignment with China. In contrast, Pan-Blue supporters are notably more inclined than other groups to favor closer ties with China, while also showing moderate support for the U.S. and equal distance. TPP supporters and nonpartisans fall between the partisan extremes, with their preferences tilted toward the U.S. but with slightly higher probabilities of equal distance compared to Pan-Green respondents. However, there is little evidence that these groups strongly endorse an equal distance strategy. Instead, the results suggest that public preferences are primarily structured by partisan differences in support for the United States, with Pan-Green respondents showing the strongest alignment, and other groups—especially Pan-Blue supporters—exhibiting more divided or ambivalent views.

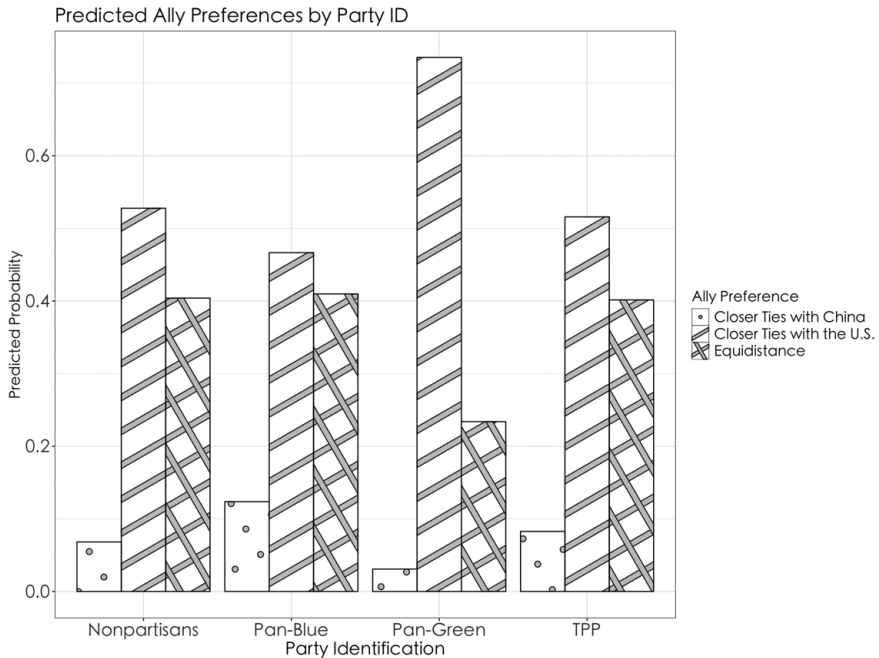


Figure 5. Predicted Probabilities of Ally Preference by Party Identification

Source: TEDS (2024).

Conclusion

This study examines the complexities of ally preferences among the Taiwanese public in the context of escalating geopolitical tensions between the United States and China. As Taiwan navigates its international relationships, understanding how citizens perceive these two major powers is essential. Integrating insights from political psychology, this analysis emphasizes how emotional responses, alongside partisan affiliations, shape public perceptions of national security and foreign policy alignment.

The findings reveal a moderate overall preference for the United States, with significant partisan variation. Emotional responses—specifically worry about armed conflict and anger at China’s military actions—emerge as key drivers of these preferences. Anger consistently increases support for U.S. alignment and, to a lesser extent, equidistance. By contrast, worry about armed conflict increases support for closer ties with China, suggesting a cautious and accommodating orientation. Importantly, these emotional effects persist even after accounting for perceived external threats, suggesting that emotions exert an independent influence beyond cognitive threat assessments. This highlights the role of emotions as heuristics in public opinion formation, particularly in a complex and uncertain geopolitical environment like the Taiwan Strait.

By demonstrating that emotional responses shape alignment preferences independently of rational threat evaluations, this study contributes to both the political psychology and international relations literatures. It advances our understanding of how affective reactions interact with political identity to influence foreign policy attitudes. Moreover, it underscores the need to move beyond purely rationalist models when analyzing public opinion in security contexts characterized by information asymmetry and strategic ambiguity.

The findings also carry practical implications. Policymakers should

recognize the emotional dimensions of public sentiment when crafting strategies for international engagement. Effective communication and outreach efforts that acknowledge and address public emotions can foster stronger support for security partnerships deemed vital to Taiwan's national interests. Understanding the emotional foundations of ally preferences may also help counter disinformation, mitigate polarization, and enhance Taiwan's international standing through more resonant diplomatic messaging.

Nevertheless, this study has limitations. The measurement of emotional responses relies on retrospective self-reports, which, while common in survey research, may reflect enduring affective dispositions more than momentary emotional arousal. Future research could address this limitation through experimental designs or real-time methods that better capture the dynamic influence of emotions on foreign policy attitudes. Furthermore, emotions may be rooted in deeper psychological or social predispositions shaped by long-term experiences and socialization. While this study captures the correlational effects of emotional responses on ally preferences, future research could more directly examine the antecedents of these emotions to provide a fuller account of their origins and influence.

Further studies could also explore how emotional responses evolve in relation to geopolitical developments. Experimental approaches using media cues or political messaging would help clarify causal mechanisms, while panel data could reveal how emotions and ally preferences shift over time. These methods would deepen our understanding of the emotional foundations of public opinion and inform more effective foreign policy communication strategies in Taiwan.

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Appendix

To view this paper's appendix, please visit Journal of Electoral Studies official website after the current issue is published.⁶

Appendix Table A1: Variables, measurement and descriptive statistics.

Appendix Table A2: OLS Regression Models.

Appendix Table A3: Multinomial Logistic Regression Model.

⁶ *Journal of Electoral Studies* official website: <https://jestw.nccu.edu.tw/>

擔憂與憤怒：台灣民衆對中國軍事行動的情緒反應及其對盟友選擇的影響*

李冠成**

《摘要》

本研究探討台灣民眾對中國軍事施壓的情緒反應，如何影響其對美中兩國的對外結盟偏好。研究使用「台灣選舉與民主化調查」(TEDS)資料，分析「對戰爭的擔憂」與「對中國軍事行動的憤怒」這兩種情緒，在形塑民意中的不同作用。研究結果顯示，對戰爭的擔憂提升支持與中國建立更緊密關係的可能性，反映出較為保守與安撫的傾向；相對地，對中國軍事行動的憤怒則強化支持與美國結盟的偏好，並在較小程度上提升對維持等距策略的支持。進一步以三分法的結盟偏好變項進行穩健性檢驗，亦

* 本文使用的資料全部(部分)係採自「2012年至2016年『選舉與民主化調查』四年期研究規劃」、「2016年至2020年『台灣選舉與民主化調查』四年期研究規劃」、「2020年至2024年『台灣選舉與民主化調查』四年期研究規劃」。「台灣選舉與民主化調查」(TEDS)係2000年由黃紀教授整合跨校的研究計畫，2012年至2020年計畫召集人為國立政治大學黃紀講座教授，2020年至2024年計畫召集人為國立政治大學陳陸輝研究員；詳細資料請參閱TEDS網頁：<http://teds.nccu.edu.tw>。作者感謝上述機構及人員提供資料協助，惟本文之內容概由作者自行負責。

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顯示一致結果。整體而言，研究突顯了情緒反應與政治認同，對於理解台灣在特殊地緣政治情境下的外交態度，具有重要解釋力。

關鍵詞：盟友偏好、政治心理學、情緒反應、中國軍事侵擾、民意調查

