Just business? Moral condemnation and virtuous violence in the American and Russian mass publics

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Abstract

More often than not, violence between states in the field of international relations is understood in instrumental terms. States are thought to act purposively in the pursuit of some tangible object, treating those in their way as objects; the targets of that violence respond to such treatment phlegmatically, without any sense of outrage. Drawing on psychological research in 'virtuous violence', which argues that intergroup violence is primarily moralistic in character, we present results from three survey experiments in the United States and Russia and a re-analysis of a recent study, which demonstrate that moral condemnation of adversaries is extremely easy to invoke, hard to avoid, common across different cultural contexts, and a central feature of 'binding' morality, one of the most fundamental moral foundations. Our first survey experiment presents American respondents with a fictional state developing nuclear weapons. Strategic features of the situation – offensive capability, past history, and interest divergence – generate not only threat perception but, crucially, negative moral attributions that mediate between the two. In the next two survey experiments, we show that American and Russian respondents judge aggressive action against a third country, regardless of whether the aggressor pursues water necessary for its population or oil useful for its economy. Finally, our re-analysis of Rathbun & Stein[1] shows that moral condemnation strongly mediates the effect of binding morality on support for nuclear weapons use against terrorists. Our results suggest a future agenda on morality's role in international relations that highlights ethical dynamics beyond the taming influence of humanitarianism and cosmopolitan individualism. Morality can drive conflict, not just restrain it.

Introduction

More often than not, the field of international relations understands violence between states in instrumental terms. Not only are states thought to act purposively in the pursuit of some tangible object, they treat those in their way as objects, albeit calculating ones. In violence of this sort, 'perpetrators have no destructive motive like hate or anger. They simply take the shortest path to something they want, and a living thing happens to be in the way. At best it is a category by exclusion: the absence of any inhibiting factor like sympathy or moral concern'. Others are simply 'part of its environment like a rock or a river' (Pinker, 2012: 509).

Even more strikingly, those 'inhibiting factors' respond to such treatment phlegmatically, without any

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[1] Rathbun & Stein, 2020.

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sense of outrage, presumably because they are thought to objectify adversaries in the same manner. International relations is 'just business'; it isn't personal. There is nothing to be upset about. War resembles an athletic competition in which beating the other is part, indeed the very point, of the game. Just as we cannot presume that others will not try to score, there is nothing to morally judge if another state desires a piece of your territory. There is simply a divergence of interests.

What does this phrase, 'just business', really mean? It associates with excuses offered by dastardly mafiosos to avoid moral condemnation from others. It presumes that a different set of moral standards applies to the transactional world of business. Better said, there is an absence of ethical restrictions.

Psychologists increasingly take issue with this understanding of violence, including the motivation behind it and the response to it. Fiske & Rai (2014: 5) describe this as 'virtuous violence': '[M]ost violence is morally motivated […] [T]he person doing the violence subjectively feels that what she is doing is right: she believes that she should do the violence'. Anyone who has seen *The Godfather* knows that even mafiosos rarely stick to the rule of 'just business'. For every Michael Corleone, there is a Sonny. These insights are beginning to penetrate the ostensibly amoral realm of international relations theory, most notably in studies of revenge and retribution (McDermott et al., 2017; Stein, 2019; Liberman, 2006). However, whether such virtuous violence is the exception or the rule remains unclear.

Virtuous violence entails more than revenge and retribution. It is any violence that the perpetrator believes is morally justified. Virtuous violence involves moral condemnation (De Scioli & Kurzban, 2009), the ethically laden judgment and potentially punishment of bad individuals or groups. This dynamic is present in rivalries, which constitute most uses of force in international relations. But, we expect this dynamic to exist beyond dyadic relations with significant psychological baggage based on perceived historical wrongs.

In this article, we show that among ordinary individuals, moral condemnation is easy to invoke, hard to avoid, and manifests similarly across different populations. Given that moral condemnation is so common, psychologists believe that it has evolutionary origins, helping groups to punish opportunism and predatory behavior. In this way, it is similar to in-group favoritism, another intuitive and automatic tendency likely with evolutionary origins (Choi & Bowles, 2007) and thought to have implications for international relations (Mercer, 1995). We present results from three original

survey experiments and a re-analysis of Rathbun & Stein's (2020) survey on attitudes towards nuclear weapons use, showing in all four cases that the American and Russian publics do not think of international relations as just business. They take it quite personally, which entails moral judgements of those who threaten and harm.

Our first survey experiment presents American respondents with a fictional state developing nuclear weapons. Strategic features of the situation – offensive capability, past history, and interest divergence – generate not only threat perception but, crucially, negative moral attributions that mediate between the two. In the next two survey experiments, we show that American and Russian respondents judge aggressive action against a third country, regardless of whether the aggressor pursues water necessary for its population or oil useful for its economy. Finally, our re-analysis of Rathbun & Stein (2020) shows that moral condemnation strongly mediates the effect of binding morality on support for nuclear weapons use against terrorists. Thought to be one of the most common moral foundations, our analysis indicates that binding morality's effects on foreign policy flow through the mechanism of moral condemnation.

Given that moralization of this kind is so easy to generate and hard to avoid, even across different cultural contexts, international relations is unlikely ever 'just business'. It is a *just* business, inherently moral in character. The conclusion further notes that moral judgments play a stronger mediating role between the actions of adversaries and threat perception than perceptions of resolve, bringing home that international conflict is more moralized than the game of poker we often use as a metaphor.

Force for good: Virtuous vs. instrumental violence

Central theories of international relations adopt an instrumental conception of state action and violence, devoid of questions about virtue and ethics. Structural realists are most explicit on this score (see e.g. Waltz, 1959: 238; Kennan, 1985: 206). Subsequent research traditions retain structural realist assumptions about the 'just business' nature of international relations more implicitly. Pivoting from the 'first debate' between pessimistic realists and optimistic liberal internationalists – which hinged on the centrality of ethics in IR – rationalists drew on microeconomic theories of bargaining failure to account for interstate conflict (Fearon, 1995). Save references to 'greedy states' (Glaser, 2010), generally ethically sanitized under a 'revisionist'

label, there is no mention of ethics in rationalist IR theory.

Psychologists (and some IR scholars) increasingly reject this instrumental conception of state aggression, distinguishing between virtuous violence, in which violence is morally justified, and instrumental violence, 'characterized by perpetrators who do not necessarily desire to harm victims, but who knowingly harm them in order to achieve some other objective' (Rai et al., 2017: 8532). In this view, presumptions of instrumental violence in theory overlook the fact that most uses of physical force are moralistic in practice, from the 'war room to death row' (Slovic et al., 2020). Pinker (2012: 622) argues that '[t]he world has far too much morality. If you added up all the homicides committed in pursuit of self-help justice, the casualties of religious and revolutionary wars, the people executed for victimless crimes and misdemeanors and the targets of ideological genocides, they would surely outnumber the fatalities from amoral predation and conquest'.

Virtuous violence is highly emotional, insulating it from the calculating, consequentialist judgements presumed to operate in rationalist accounts (and which classical realists advocate as prudent policy, to their perpetual disappointment). This likely explains the inattention of rationalist and other accounts. As Skitka (2010: 276) explains, '[a]ll major theories of morality predict that there should be strong associations between moral concerns and emotion. Consistent with this idea, there are strong connections between having moral convictions about issues and having correspondingly strong emotional reactions to these issues'. Ginges & Atran (2011: 2930) write that '[d]ecisions based on sacred values, such as whether to become a priest or a suicide bomber, often seem to follow a rule-bound logic of moral appropriateness and absolutist thinking, which, at least in a proximate sense, defies the cost-benefit calculations and means-end logic of realpolitik and the marketplace'. Note their equation of realist thinking about the amoral sphere of IR with the transactional realm of economic exchange.

Calling out bad guys: Virtuous violence and moral condemnation

In this tradition, there is a recent surge of interest in revenge in international relations. Liberman (2006) shows that desires for retribution, captured in support for the death penalty, drive support for violence in the American mass public, a phenomenon that Stein (2019) indicates is also evident in a cross-sectional, cross-national analysis of state behavior. Rathbun & Stein

(2020) show that revenge is the primary individual-level driver of willingness to use nuclear weapons. More generally, feelings of injustice are thought to drive conflict, such as perceived gaps between entitlements and actual benefits (Welch, 1993).

However, revenge is only one form of virtuous violence. Virtuous violence, unlike instrumental violence, involves what DeScoli & Kurzban (2009: 285) call 'moral condemnation', the use of 'moral concepts to judge and punish a perpetrator'. It is not simply that our interests diverge (although they might) but that others are bad people. Moral condemnation differs from moral conscience, our internal restraints on action based on our desire to be a good person, or even a good country. In fact, moral condemnation can release us from what would normally be unethical behavior, most notably violence, and makes what was unethical righteous. Revenge is a clear, but only one, example of such a process.

Instrumental violence associates with dehumanization of others, treating others as 'inhibiting' objects that obstruct our path of goal pursuit (Rai et al., 2017). While we generally associate dehumanization with sadistic pleasure gained from harming others, it might just as commonly involve indifference. Dehumanization reduces the ethical inhibitions of moral conscience, allowing for instrumental violence. The debate over morality in IR generally takes place on this terrain, between skeptics who argue that states rarely account for humanitarian concerns in foreign policy and optimists who argue that ethical considerations and moral conscience increasingly penetrate the instrumental considerations of state leaders and mass publics, progressively making the traditionally amoral sphere more moral (Lumsdaine, 1993; Finnemore, 2003; Tannenwald, 1999).

By contrast, attributions of blame and immoral qualities drive virtuous violence, thereby justifying the harm we do to adversaries. Morality is a quality that humans only assign to other humans, not objects or animals. Rai et al. (2017) find that the use of dehumanizing language rather than humanizing language increases willingness to harm strangers for money but not for immoral behavior and that individuals spontaneously dehumanize strangers when they imagine harming them for money but not for immoral behavior.

There is good reason to believe that the same applies to international relations, as evidenced by research on 'rivalries' (Thies, 2002). Rivalries are dyadic conflicts with a 'life of their own' (Thompson, 1995: 196) due to 'psychological baggage' (Colaresi & Thompson, 2002: 1181). An enormous percentage of state conflicts involve the same parties. Colaresi & Thompson (2002: 266)

report that 31 pairs account for 245 crises in the 1918–95 International Crisis dataset, about 60% of the total number. Thompson finds the same with interstate wars. Strategic 'rivals' fought 77% of wars since 1815, a percentage that increases to 87% when restricting the count to the 20th century and 91% after 1945. Moral condemnation drives rivalries. Colaresi & Thompson (2002: 63) explain: 'vengeance for past defeats and worries about the probability of future defeats intrude into the decisionmaking processes. Compared to non-rivals, rivals have […] had time to develop images of their adversaries as threatening opponents with persistent aims to thwart their own objectives. If rivals offer concessions, why should such offers be viewed as anything but attempts at deception? Concessions and movement towards some middle ground, accordingly, are more difficult to attain'. Rivals have categorized others as enemies intent on doing harm; they have made inferences about their moral character.

While revenge is the most obvious type of virtuous violence, this category captures any harm that is morally justified. Most obvious for international relations is the protection of the group from evil deeds of immoral adversaries. While this might seem like a simple case of self-defense – an instrumental pursuit of security as modeled in rationalist or structural realist accounts – such a characterization does not capture the moral feelings involved in the process. When others mean our group harm, we morally judge them. As Fiske & Rai (2014: 5) write, 'judgments about the use of war are bounded by rules of deontological reasoning and *parochial* commitment'. Participants in virtuous violence are 'actually moved by moral emotions such as loyalty or outrage'. Our third empirical section discusses this further.

Moral judgment comes naturally: The ease of moral condemnation in international relations

The importance of moral judgments for conflict behavior – the punishment that comes after judgment – is well established. Weisiger (2013) demonstrates that states are more likely to demand unconditional surrender when states make attributions about the evil character of the regime they are fighting. Rivalry theory shows that when states pass moral judgments about others they are more inclined to interpret ambiguous information as indicating hostile intent and more inclined to use force over trivial rather than vital matters (Colaresi & Thompson, 2002). Neoclassical realists show that when leaders use moral frames to dramatize conflicts, the public can become more aroused than a calm evaluation of interests

would dictate, leading to threat inflation and overbalancing (Christensen, 1996). Welch (1993) explores the importance of moral outrage, labeled the 'justice motive', in a number of prominent international conflicts, noting that this feeling begets emotional urgency to act. Hall (2017) notes that states can manipulate moral outrage to induce conflicts that they want to fight. Tomz & Weeks (2020) show that Americans are more inclined to fight states with bad human rights records. For this reason we focus on the prior step, the generation of moral condemnation: the attribution of immoral characteristics to other countries and their actions.

The extent of moral condemnation's ubiquity remains unclear, however. We suspect that moral condemnation is widespread in questions of international security given what foreign policy is meant to secure: the sacred value of human life. We also expect that it should be intuitive and easy to invoke given its hypothesized role in human evolution. Numerous evolutionary scholars argue that moral conscience and a sense of internal ethical restraint are impossible to explain without moral condemnation.

In the absence of moralistic punishment, a conscience would not be fitness-enhancing. Scholars argue that conscience is an evolutionary adaptation to the threat of condemnation (Boehm, 2012). Wrangham argues that premeditated group punishment was so violent that it directly affected the prevalence of reactive aggression, literally taming the human species (Wrangham, 2019). Other accounts emphasize the ongoing opportunity costs of being branded a cheater. Evolution favored the development of a moral reputation. In any case, moral condemnation helps groups police excessive opportunism, particularly predatory behavior by others that aims at bodily harm, facilitating the cooperation that explains human success.

DeScioli argues that moral condemnation evolved to help individuals recruit allies in struggles with others. 'A persuasive moral argument can launch a barrage of stones at an opponent. It can sever an opponent's relationships, cut off trade and supplies, and cast them into exile. However, these powers require an audience who will listen to moral accusations' (2016: 23). DeScioli takes issue with the cooperation account, a divide that we cannot adjudicate here. For our purposes, both arguments make morality central to the human experience, one that is virtually impossible to extricate from any domain of interaction.[2] Research indicates that at the

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[2] Evolution alone likely cannot explain the ubiquity of morality. Scholars of religion note that the mechanism of moral reputation as

individual level, morality is the most important attribute we evaluate in the formation of threat perception, an argument that has been found to apply to international relations as well. For this reason, calling an individual or group threatening carries a moral valence. It is an ethical judgment (Goodwin et al., 2014; Rathbun & Pomeroy, 2022).

Another likely evolved and therefore intuitive and ubiquitous tendency thought to have implications for international relations, in-group favoritism, has been studied with a 'minimal group paradigm', in which participants are given very sparse and trivial information about group membership, which proves sufficient to develop in-group favoritism (Turner et al., 1979; Brewer, 1999). Because such favoritism is so easy to invoke, it is presumed to be universal and relevant for international relations even though the findings are at the micro level. We use a similar type of logic in our experiments, hypothesizing that individuals do not require substantial amounts of information about others to draw negative moral judgments and that such condemnation is difficult to shake, even with exculpatory evidence.

In this way, moral condemnation differs from 'image theory', which maintains that the 'pictures people have of other countries become central building blocks in their identification of the threats and opportunities their country faces' (Herrmann, 2013: 5). These stereotypical images become so taken-for-granted that they produce habits and define parameters surrounding a country's interests. While images are frequently negative and moralistic – degenerate or evil, for instance – and are schemas used to simplify decisionmaking, they are typically pictures formed of particular countries based on historical interactions. We are sure that images are important; they are at the heart of rivalries. But we imagine that it is considerably easier to generate negative moral attributions. The remainder of the article presents four studies that suggest as much.

Nuclear proliferation experiment: Where there's a centrifuge, there's fire

While revenge or self-defense are clearcut cases of virtuous violence against those who have already harmed us,

we suspect that even the possibility of violence likely generates moral condemnation and negative moral attributions. The security literature on threat, most notably Walt's (1987) balance of threat theory, makes no mention of morality, in keeping with the instrumental nature of structural realist thought. However, aggressiveness, encapsulated in Walt's key variable of 'aggressive intentions', is a primary way by which human beings assess the moral character of others (Goodwin et al., 2014).

In our first experiment, respondents face a hypothetical country developing nuclear weapons to examine whether the strategic and situational factors that typically generate threat perception also produce negative moral attributions, as expected by a virtuous violence account but not an instrumentalist account. In the latter, threats are threats; it is not personal. Someone simply has designs on you. We fielded an adaptation of Tomz & Weeks's (2020) study, which demonstrates that those who violate moral principles – like human rights abuses – are regarded as more threatening and deserving of moralistic punishment. We test whether the mere presence of potential threat induces moral condemnation in the first place. Where there's smoke, there's fire.

We fielded the experiment on 1,022 respondents recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk in May 2018.[3] We asked respondents to 'imagine a country with a major regional rival is dramatically increasing the size of its military, including a nuclear weapons program'. We manipulate three elements of the scenario, yielding a fully crossed 2×2×2 design. The first factor varies offensive vs. defensive capability, a primary element in Walt's (1987) balance-of-threat theory. Respondents are presented with a country for whom 'there is a fear that its nuclear weapons could be used offensively since its main adversary does not have nuclear weapons', or one in which 'it is thought that its nuclear weapons cannot be used offensively since its main adversary also has nuclear weapons'. The second factor varies the country's past behavior, another indicator of aggressive disposition and a key element in theories of credibility assessment (e.g. Kertzer, 2017). Respondents are told either that 'this country has been engaged in conflicts with that rival in the past and has taken part of its rival's territory' or that 'this country has never fought its rival in the past'. The final factor varies the country's past relations with the United States – namely, historically good or poor relations – given that interest conflicts are a basic component of threat assessment (Press, 2005).[4]

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inducement to the development of an internal moral sense is difficult to sustain in large-scale societies where monitoring is impossible. Religion, a cultural product thought to be an evolutionary by-product of the theory of mind, was increasingly leveraged as societies grew larger, explaining the success of societies fostering belief in 'Big Gods' that took an interest in human morality, imbued with supernatural monitoring capacities. See Norenzayan et al. (2016).

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[3] Online appendix A1.1 presents the sample characteristics.
[4] Online appendix A1.2 presents the full instrument.

After treatment, subjects assessed the morality of the hypothetical state at the first and second image levels. The former included judgments about the country's leaders, namely whether the leaders are trustworthy and greedy; the latter included assessments of the country's human rights record and level of democracy. We chose 'trustworthy' and 'greedy' due to their high ranks in a list of 170 traits that individuals use to assess the morality of others (Goodwin et al., 2014).[5] Each DV was gathered on ten-point scales. This mix of first and second image DVs allows us to establish whether individuals make not only personal but also more essentialist attributions about the actors in question with the assumption that American respondents regard democracy and human rights as indicators of the morality of societies. We then estimate the extent to which these moral attributions mediate between the treatments and threat perception.[6]

Results

Figure 1(A) displays linear regression estimates of the effect of our treatments (the y-axis) on subjects' assessments of the first and second image attributes (the x-axis). Standard predictors of threat – namely, offensive capability, past conflict, and poor US relations – decrease perceptions that the hypothetical state is a democracy or respects human rights.[7] However, in contrast to a purely instrumental account, these traditional threat factors also significantly affect perceptions of leaders' moral attributes. Beyond inferences about the state, subjects believe that the leaders must also be untrustworthy and greedy, most notably when primed with histories of conflict or a lack of interest overlap (i.e. poor relations) with the United States. Offensive capability has the weakest effect of the treatments, shifting only trustworthiness and human rights respect. Notably, the effect of past conflict and poor US relations have a more consistent effect on leader attributions of immorality than institutional attributions.

The fact that both first and second image attributions operate in the same direction is particularly noteworthy. One might argue that drawing inferences about the regime type and human rights practices of American adversaries is merely a function of past observation. After all, the United States often fights autocracies with poor human rights records, so this result could be seen as a matter-of-fact conclusion. However, the first image attributions – devoid of such past associations – display the same pattern, buttressing our argument.

These results suggest that standard predictors of threat shape subjects' moral attributions. But, do moral attributions in turn shape threat perception? Figure 1(B) displays a mediation analysis between the treatments (the y-axis) and threat perception (the x-axis), with each of the first and second image attributes serving as possible causal pathways.[8] Each treatment significantly increases threat perception – the 'total' effect – as expected, given that the treatments draw from standard predictors of threat. But, substantial variation exists in the mechanisms that transmit these effects, the 'average causal mediation effect' (ACME).

As expected, American respondents form threat perceptions as a partial function of beliefs that the other state is undemocratic or disrespects human rights, in line with the findings of Tomz & Weeks (2020). But, importantly, the effect of these standard predictors of threat also flow through negative moral attributions about leaders. While we would certainly expect that human rights violations would generate perceptions of immorality (Tomz & Weeks, 2020), it is more surprising to find that even traditional materialist and interest-based predictors of threat also flow through moral condemnation, as a virtuous violence account would expect. Most notably, subjects told that the state has a poor history of US relations do not discount this information as a matter-of-fact divergence of interests. Rather, subjects use their moral attributions about the state's leaders – as greedy and untrustworthy – to infer threat. Indeed, these moral attributes mediate 71.6% and 97.2% of the 'poor US relations' effect, respectively. Together, these results provide preliminary evidence that standard, strategic predictors of threat in IR theory activate moral attributions that in turn shape threat perception.[9]

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[5] We thank the authors for sharing their data, in order to assess the ranks of each item.
[6] Threat perception was gathered on the following item: 'How threatening do you think this country is with 0 being completely harmless and 10 being extremely dangerous?'
[7] Online appendix A1.3 presents the full regression results.

[8] We conduct non-parametric mediation analyses (Imai et al., 2011) using the mediation package in the R statistical programming environment (Tingley et al., 2014). The 'direct' effect represents the amount of the treatment effect that flows through all other pathways apart from these state and leader attributions.
[9] Online appendix A1.5 shows that the results are robust to exclusion of potentially problematic responses (e.g. bots). Furthermore, we find that the mediation effects are relatively robust to potential violations of the sequential ignorability assumption (see Imai et al., 2010). The ACMEs would be zero at the following correlations (ρ) between mediator and outcome model residuals: democracy: $\rho = -0.29$; human rights respect: $\rho = -0.34$; trustworthiness: $\rho = -0.33$; greediness: $\rho = 0.41$.

A

Effect on attributes

B

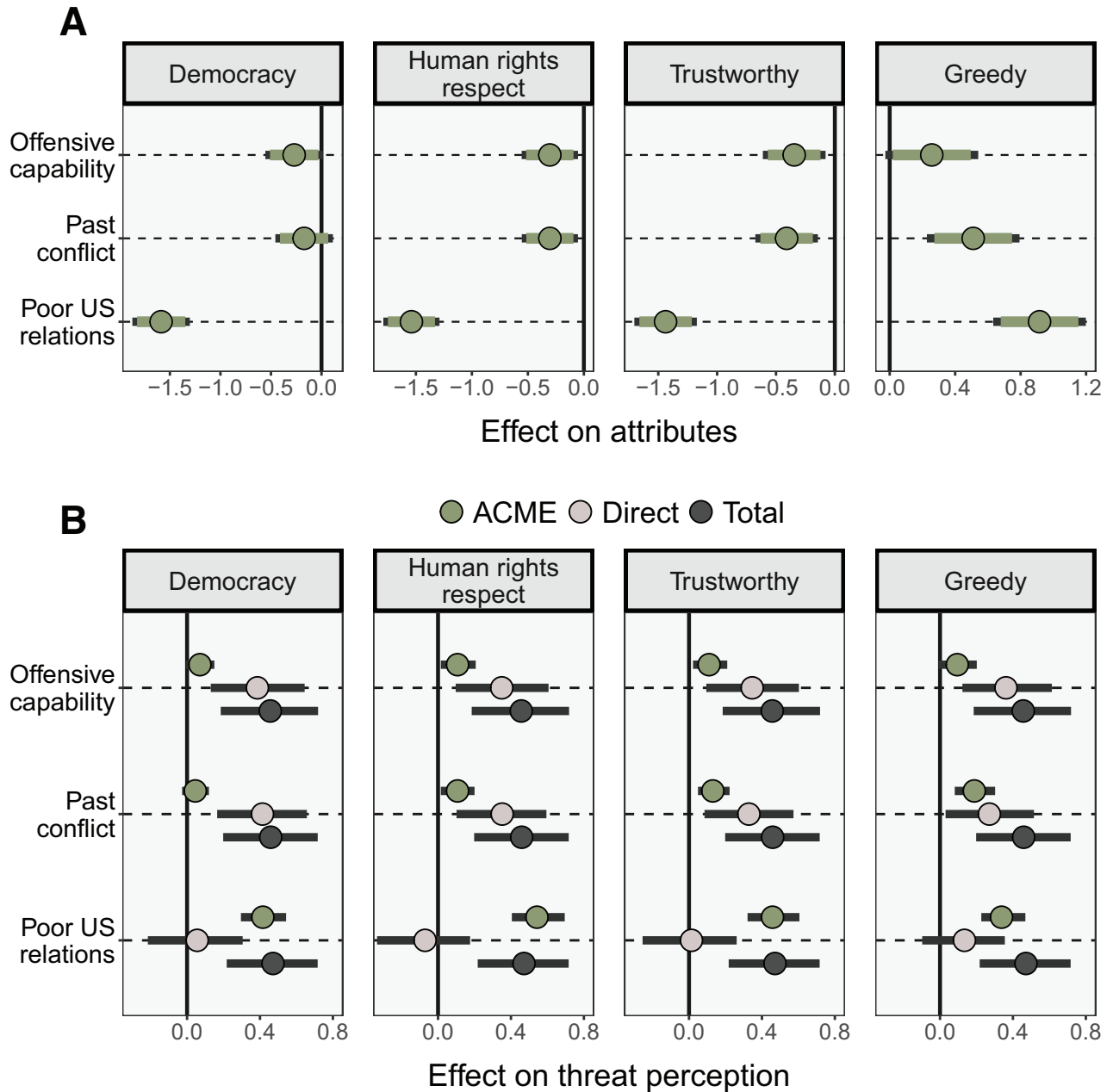○ ACME ○ Direct ● Total

Effect on threat perception

Figure 1. Nuclear proliferation results

In (A), OLS estimates of the effect of our three treatments – offensive capability, past conflict, and nature of US relations – on perceptions of state and leader attributes. Note the x-axis scales vary. 95% confidence intervals are plotted in gray, and 90% confidence intervals are plotted in green. In (B), mediation analysis of the effect of our treatments on threat perception, using the state and leader attributions as mediators. We use $N = 2,000$ simulations to produce 95% non-parametric bootstrapped confidence intervals. All models include controls for gender, race, age, political ideology, and party identification.

It is also important to note that moral condemnation does not fully mediate the treatments. This suggests that there is indeed a direct pathway between objective features of the adversary and threat perception, as an instrumental account would expect. If moral condemnation fully mediated the treatment effects, we might conclude that moral condemnation is merely objective description

of an instrumental threat. If we condemn any and every threat to our interest, then paradoxically condemnation really does not matter in explaining threat perception. This is not the case in our data.

Finally, we primarily posit that the treatments shift moral inferences, which in turn shape threat perception. However, because we observed – rather than randomized

– the mediators, a conceivable alternative pathway is that the treatments induce greater threat perception, which in turn generates post hoc moralization, perhaps as a rationalization for tough policies towards the state. We would note that this alternative pathway is entirely consistent with our critique of 'just business' conceptions of international relations. If foreign affairs were just business, our treatment effects should stop at threat perception, no moralization of 'bad guys' required. Nevertheless, Online appendix A1.4 statistically investigates the strength of each pathway.

We find that the lower bound of the 95% confidence interval on the proportion mediated by the threat → attribution pathway never falls above the proportion mediated estimate of the attribution → threat pathway, at both the leader and state levels. That is, in no instance can we conclude that the former mediates a greater proportion of the treatment than the latter. The fact that respondents so intuitively make moral judgments, even in the absence of audiences, is striking. However, we caution that these observational analyses only provide suggestive evidence about the causal path.

Oil and water: Resource conflicts and moral condemnation

Our nuclear proliferation experiment suggests that subjects morally condemn states that are developing nuclear weapons – despite the absence of observed harm – and in turn use those judgments to form perceptions of threat. We expect this effect to be stronger when actual harm is done. However, we are also interested in whether certain circumstances might morally excuse predatory behavior, particularly when actual harm is observed. The most likely case is a situation of great scarcity, which demands a literal choice between life and death. Here, we might escape moral condemnation even if we prioritize our own welfare. Hardin (1974) famously calls this 'lifeboat ethics'. Hardin asks us to imagine the following:

> So here we sit, say 50 people in our lifeboat. To be generous, let us assume it has room for 10 more, making a total capacity of 60. Suppose the 50 of us in the lifeboat see 100 others swimming in the water outside, begging for admission to our boat or for handouts. We have several options: we may be tempted to try to live by the Christian ideal of being 'our brother's keeper', or by the Marxist ideal of 'to each according to his needs'. Since the needs of all in the water are the same, and since they can all be seen as 'our brothers', we could take them all into our boat, making a total of 150 in a boat designed for 60. The boat swamps, everyone drowns. Complete justice, complete catastrophe.

Although this situation is an extreme, our second experiment approaches this intuition by distinguishing between conflict over the pursuit of water – a necessary ingredient for life – and oil, only necessary for material welfare. If instrumental violence fails to escape moral censure in the former instance, this would be further evidence of moral condemnation's banality. Oil and water would indeed mix.

US sample and results

Our first resource conflict experiment uses the same May 2018 MTurk sample described above. All participants were given the following prompt: 'Imagine a country that is having a dispute with its neighbor over who owns a particular piece of territory.' Participants were then randomly assigned to a cell in a 2×3 fully crossed factorial, which randomized resource type (water or oil) and outcome of the action (US casualties, local casualties, or demand for a 50–50 split). The first randomized factor corresponded to one of the following two prompts:

1. This territory is considered of vital importance because it contains significant amounts of fresh water that the country desperately needs for its people.
2. This territory is very economically valuable because it contains a significant amount of oil.

The text for the second randomized factor – outcome of the action – corresponded to one of the following prompts, increasing in the severity of harm:

1. Suppose that the country demands that its neighbor split the territory 50/50.
2. Suppose that the country seizes 50% of the territory from its neighbor in a military operation that leads to the death of civilians.
3. Suppose that the country seizes 50% of the territory from its neighbor in a military operation that leads to the death of American citizens who were in the region.

After treatment, subjects responded to the same set of questions used in the nuclear proliferation experiment above, again gathered on ten-point scales: perceptions of democracy, human rights respect, trustworthiness, and greediness, as well as overall threat perception.

We manipulate the type of casualties to establish whether respondents are more likely to morally condemn
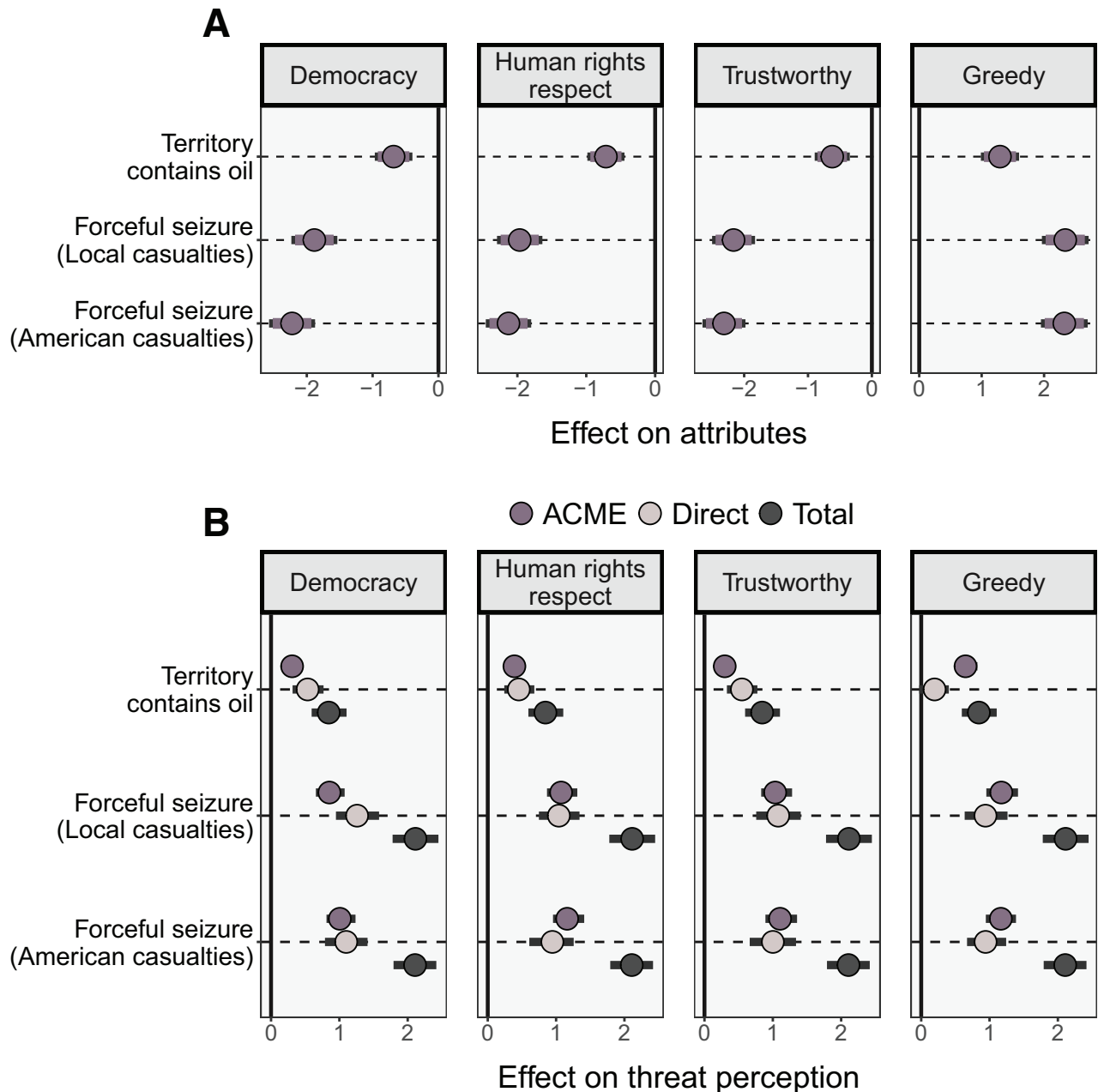
Figure 2. Resource conflict results (US sample)

In (A), OLS estimates of the effect of our treatments on perceptions of state and leader attributes, with 95% and 90% confidence intervals. The y-axis presents the oil condition relative to the water baseline, as well as the seizure conditions relative to the 50–50 split baseline. In (B), mediation analysis of the effect of the treatments on threat perception, using the state and leader attributions as mediators. We use $N = 2,000$ simulations to produce 95% non-parametric bootstrapped confidence intervals. All models include controls for gender, race, age, political ideology, and party identification.

those who do violence, whether to their own citizens or the citizens of other countries, comparing each to a scenario in which no forceful action is taken. We expect that military actions will evoke greater moral condemnation than simple demands, even though in all three manipulations the state is seeking the same ends. The use of force tells us not only about the interests of other states but also about their ethical character. The less that respondents distinguish between civilian casualties local to the region and American civilian casualties, the more

the results indicate genuine third-party moral outrage rather than a post-hoc emotional reaction to a threat to US interests.

Figure 2(A) reports the moral condemnation results, estimated via linear regression, with results plotted for the oil condition (relative to the water condition baseline), as well as the effects of the forceful seizure conditions (relative to demands for a 50–50 split baseline).[10] As expected, subjects perceive countries that use violence to be less moral, both in terms of the country's characteristics and leader's attributes. Those states are judged to be less democratic and committed to human rights. Their leaders are less trustworthy and more greedy. Further, the effects are substantively large, about 20% of the scale.

These findings buttress our first experiment. Notably, respondents do not seem to respond differently to American vs. foreign casualties in terms of their moral inferences. We find scant evidence of statistical or substantive differences between the perceptions of subjects assigned to the 'other casualties' or 'US casualties' conditions, both at the levels of the second image (democracy: $t = 1.91$, $p = .06$; human rights respect: $t = 0.96$, $p = .34$) and the first image (trustworthy: $t = 0.94$, $p = .35$; greedy: $t = 0.04$, $p = .97$). Bad guys are bad guys.

Casualty manipulations generate substantially larger effects on second image attributions than the oil/water manipulation. When it comes to leaders, there is a slight effect of the oil condition on trustworthiness and a substantially larger effect on greediness, as we might expect. In general, however, Americans give little benefit of the doubt to countries trying to provide for the basic essentials of life. That is, subjects do not forgive situational constraints, operationalized here by water instead of oil. The same is largely true of the second image DVs. Said differently, we find some support for moral psychological arguments that need justifies greater self-interest than desire, but the effect is not extremely large. This reinforces our argument that moral condemnation and moralized conflict are very common in international relations.

Figure 2(B) displays the mediation analysis, the extent to which these treatments shape threat perception via moral attributions. Again, moral assessments are decisive for threat evaluation, with considerably larger ACMEs than the previous experiment. Beliefs about the country's respect for human rights, leader greed, and leader trustworthiness all significantly explain threat perception.

The larger mediation effects likely reflect the difference between the actions taken by the fictional countries in question, with the casualty conditions leading to the largest mediation effects.[11]

Online appendix A2.2 considers the alternative pathway of threat → attributions, that is, the possibility that subjects post hoc moralize in the face of threat rather than use moral inferences to form threat perceptions. We find clear evidence that the attributions → threat pathway presented above mediates a larger proportion than the reverse, particularly at the leader level.

Russia sample and results

In March 2020, we repeated the resource conflict experiment in Russia to improve upon the US experiment in a number of ways.[12] First, we wanted to more cleanly distinguish the actions taken by the hypothetical state. In the casualty treatments above, the state both takes military action and kills others, preventing us from disentangling the morally condemnable use of force from the morally condemnable effects of that force. Therefore, in our Russia experiment, we changed the three actions taken by the state to (1) a diplomatic demand for 50% of the territory, (2) a military action that seized 50% of the territory *without* casualties, and (3) a military action that seized 50% of the territory *with* civilian casualties.

Second, we included first image attributions with a stronger moral valence to allay concerns that the above attributions might be interpreted in an amoral manner. For instance, some in the rationalist tradition interpret trust devoid of moral content. Here, our first image attributes include reliable and honest (Надёжность и честность), just and objective (Справедливость и объективность), and greedy and selfish (Жадность и эгоистичность), again gathered on ten-point scales. However, we omitted second image attributions because democracy and human rights commitment do not necessarily have the same positive moral connotations in a semi-authoritarian state.

Third, a US sample might be an outlier. Americans are sometimes accused of moralizing conflicts in ways

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[10] Online appendix A2.1 presents the full regression results.

[11] Online appendix A2.3 shows that the results are robust to exclusion of potentially problematic responses (e.g. bots). Further, the ACMEs would be zero at the following correlations (ρ) between mediator and outcome model residuals: democracy: $\rho = -0.49$; human rights respect: $\rho = -0.55$; trustworthiness: $\rho = -0.49$; greediness: $\rho = 0.57$.

[12] The study was fielded before the COVID-19 pandemic became salient in Russia.

untrue of other countries that have a more Realpolitik understanding of international relations (Krebs & Lobasz, 2007). Russia, known for a much more power political foreign policy approach, serves as a critical test for our argument.

We recruited the sample (N = 1,246) through the survey firm Anketolog with quotas on age, gender, and region of residence to increase the sample's representativeness.[13] We used the same resource conflict scenario described above, in which an unidentified state 'is having a dispute with its neighbor over who owns a particular piece of territory'. We again assigned participants to a cell in a 2×3 fully crossed factorial, in which the first factor randomizes resource type: oil that is simply economically valuable versus water desperately needed for the country's people. We adjust the second factor – the action taken by the hypothetical state – as described above. As in the US version of the experiment, we expect respondents to draw inferences about the moral character of other countries based on the extent to which they took aggressive action and caused harm to the hypothetical country.

Figure 3(A) reports the moral condemnation results, estimated via linear regression with results plotted for the oil vs. water condition, as well as the effects of the seizure conditions above and beyond the 50–50 split baseline condition.[14] As expected, subjects perceive leaders of countries that use violence to be less reliable/honest and just/objective, and more greedy/selfish. Further, many of the effects are substantively large, about 20% of the ten-point scale. The results are extremely similar to the US survey. Although the two samples are not directly comparable given the slight change in treatments, Americans are not generally more moralistic than Russians in our samples. Just like Americans, Russian respondents give little benefit of the doubt to countries trying to provide for the basic essentials of life. That is, subjects do not forgive situational constraints, operationalized here by water instead of oil. Moral condemnation is easy to elicit and hard to avoid.

Beyond the comparisons to the 50–50 split baseline, subjects assigned to the seizure with casualties condition reported significantly different perceptions in comparison to subjects assigned to the seizure without

casualties condition. The former subjects believe the leaders of the more violent state are less just (t = 2.66, p < .01) and more greedy (t = –3.17, p < .01). We find only a marginal difference for honesty, however (t = 1.59, p = .11). When people get hurt, moral condemnation increases. This might strike us as intuitive, but that is precisely the point. It is phlegmatic IR theory that lacks this intuition.

Figure 3(B) displays the mediation analysis, the extent to which the effects on threat perception flow via these attributes. Moral attributions mediate less between fictional country behavior and threat perception than is the case with Americans. However, there is nevertheless substantial mediation, again in those treatments in which forceful action is taken.[15] The fact that different populations with very different foreign policy histories and cultures react similarly to the same scenarios increases our confidence that moral condemnation is an intuitive process common in IR.

Further, Online appendix A3.4 considers the alternative pathway of threat → attributions. Again, we find substantial evidence that the attributions → threat pathway mediates a larger proportion than the reverse, with each proportion mediated falling above the alternative's 95% confidence interval.

No rest for the wicked: Moral condemnation and support for nuclear weapons use

The above studies suggest that individuals morally condemn states and use those judgments to form threat perceptions, both under conditions of uncertainty before any harm occurs (in the case of nuclear weapons development) and in cases where harm does occur but could be morally justified (in the case of conflict over different types of resources). Our final study ties our argument to public opinion work on support for nuclear weapons use, pivoting from threat perception to expressed support for violence.

Specifically, Rathbun & Stein (2020) field a replication of a nuclear taboo experiment by Press et al. (2013), finding that retributiveness and commitment to the binding moral foundations are the most important individual-level drivers of preferences for nuclear (versus conventional) strikes against terrorist groups developing weapons of mass destruction. As we have seen,

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[13] Online appendix A3.1 presents the sample characteristics, and Online appendix A3.2 presents the instrumentation in both Russian and English.
[14] Online appendix A3.3 presents the full regression results.

[15] The ACMEs would be zero at the following values of ρ: reliable/honest: ρ = –0.26; just/objective: ρ = –0.27; greedy/selfish: ρ = 0.39.
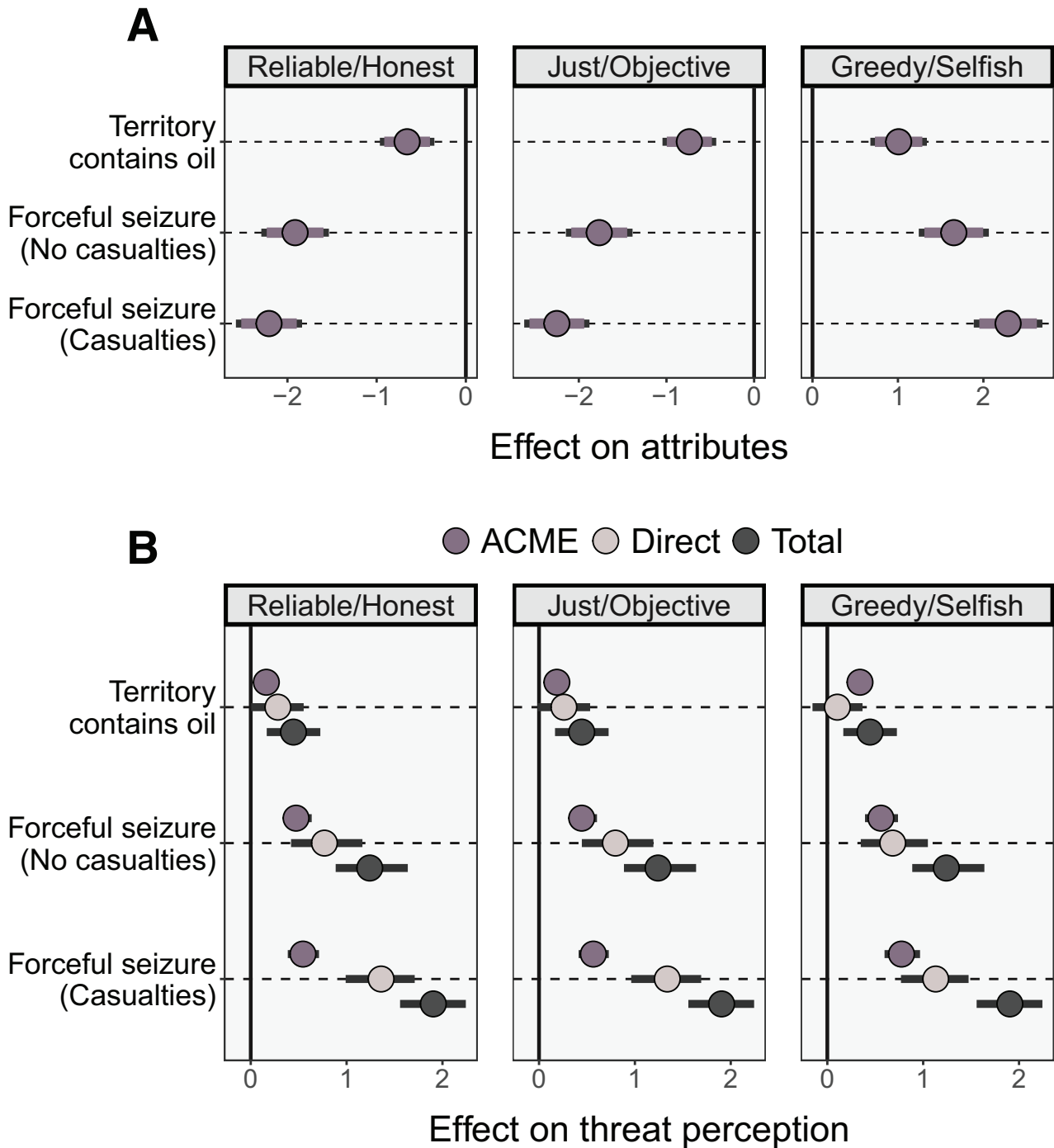
Figure 3. Resource conflict results (Russian sample)

In (A), OLS estimates of the effect of our treatments on perceptions of leader attributes, with 95% and 90% confidence intervals. The y-axis presents the oil condition relative to the water baseline, as well as the seizure conditions relative to the 50–50 split baseline. In (B), mediation analysis of the effect of the treatments on threat perception, using the leader attributions as mediators. We use $N = 2,000$ simulations to produce 95% non-parametric bootstrapped confidence intervals. All models include controls for gender, age, education, and income.

retributiveness is a clear type of virtuous violence. However, binding foundations lead to a propensity for moralistic foreign policy as well.

Binding morality is an 'ethics of community', in which individuals owe their groups loyalty and must defer to authority (Graham et al., 2009, 2013). Binding
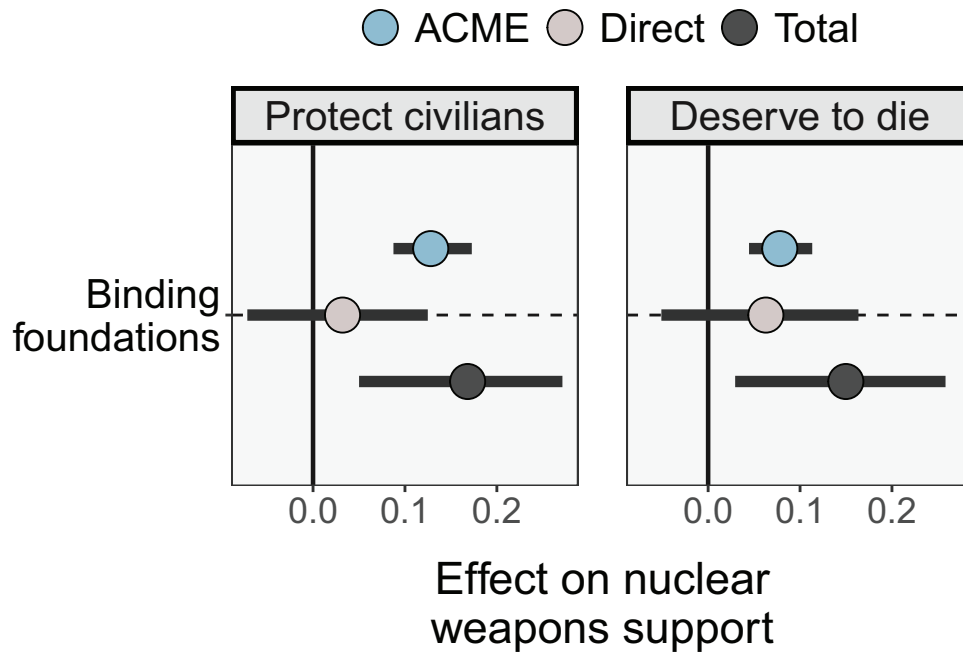
Figure 4. Rathbun and Stein re-analysis

The desire to `protect civilians' mediates a greater proportion of the binding foundations' effect on support for nuclear weapons use than the belief that those who harm innocent Americans `deserve to die'.

morality is the ethics of authoritarianism, the belief that individuals must forgo personal freedom and make personal sacrifices to the group so the group can act cohesively in the face of threats, both internal and external (Altemeyer, 1998). While authoritarianism sounds extreme, all individuals endorse such sentiments to some degree, and binding morality is what most differentiates liberals from conservatives in domestic politics in terms of their ethics (Graham et al., 2009). Kertzer et al. (2014) connect binding foundations to hawkish foreign policy attitudes; binding foundations strongly predict militant internationalism, a key dimension of foreign policy ideology.

As a number of psychologists note, binding morality associates with a particular Weltanschauung, a belief that the world is a dangerous place in which the bad do the good harm (Duckitt et al., 2002). This heuristic provides the motivation to protect and makes group loyalty and deference to authority a moral good. In other words, binding morality is built on moral condemnation of those who aim to harm the community, both from within and without. This is why strong law-and-order policies at home couple with strong military force abroad. We defer to authorities and come together in solidarity (and moralize such behaviors) because of threats. Janoff-Bulman & Carnes (2013) explain that this group-based morality's core motivation is protection.

Here, we conduct a re-analysis of Rathbun & Stein (2020). They asked American respondents a number of questions about terrorism before presenting respondents with an in-depth experimental scenario in the form of a fictional newspaper article. Prior to the survey, along with a questionnaire capturing agreement with sentiments of binding morality, respondents were asked the degree to which they agreed with the statement that 'using force against terrorist groups is morally justified because it protects innocent civilians from those who would do them harm'.[16] This is the essence of binding morality, one which draws a bright line between the good and the bad with the aim of protecting the former. We rerun their analysis in which the dependent variable is a dichotomous choice between a conventional and a nuclear strike. They report that a one-standard-deviation increase in the binding morality index associates with an increased likelihood of a nuclear strike of 2.9 percentage points. Over the full range of the scale, the likelihood of preferring a nuclear strike increases by 13.9 percentage points (from 23.1% to 37.0%).

Figure 4 shows that this single statement mediates 78.5% ($p < .01$) of the effect of binding morality on the

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[16] Online appendix A5.1 presents the moral foundations instrumentation used in Rathbun & Stein (2020).

choice of nuclear over conventional strikes. Compare this to the effect of another mediator, agreement with the statement, 'Using force against terrorist groups is morally justified because anyone who kills innocent Americans deserves to die', also asked as part of the pre-experimental questionnaire. Not surprisingly that variable also acts as a strong mediator (55%, $p < .05$), given the similarly Manichean framing. However, the just deserts motivation is less motivating than the protection motivation for these binding moralists.[17]

This finding is important for three reasons. First, it shows the effect of moral condemnation in a much more involved scenario in which respondents are given significantly more information. Second, it shows the effect of moral condemnation on willingness to use force, something evident in other research but replicated here. Third, binding morality is one of the most foundational of moral values. It is the basis of in-group loyalty, which is arguably necessary for the very existence of nation-states. Yet, baked into this moral commitment is a moralized rather than merely instrumental view of foreign adversaries.

The skeptic might argue that rationalist and other instrumentalist approaches are built on this moral foundation which they can simply assume and which makes national egoism possible. This morality by assumption, however, does not match with the evidence offered by previous work on virtuous violence, nor the Rathbun & Stein (2020) study. They report no interaction between binding moral commitments and the prospects of success for nuclear weapons that we would expect if binders were simply responding rationally on behalf of compatriots. Moreover, those who score high on binding values demonstrate less but still substantial resistance to high levels of civilian casualties than those who score low. They are not simply indifferent to the out-group.

Conclusion: Are norms the norm?

We have shown that moral condemnation is a basic component of foreign policy opinion. It is easy to invoke across different cultural contexts, even with hypothetical countries with which no previous rivalry dynamics exist. Adversaries receive some benefit of the doubt if they need rather than want the things they take, but not much.

To bring this point home empirically, consider another variable, non-moral in character and crucial to instrumental, rationalist accounts of conflict: the attribution of resolve (Kertzer, 2016). Alongside moral characteristics, each of our experiments asked respondents to assess the opponent's resolve. If international relations is a simple poker game devoid of ethical considerations, escalatory actions should induce greater attributions of resolve. These are costly signals. And yet, in Online appendix A4, we show that the nuclear proliferation and resource conflict treatments have no effect on Americans' attributions of resolve, with a single exception in the opposite direction expected. Only in the Russia sample do we find that the forceful seizure of resources, as opposed to demands, leads to greater attributions of resolve. But, in comparison to moral inferences, this variable hardly affects threat perception.

A research agenda on moral condemnation, particularly as a driver of state-to-state conflict, is a departure from the longstanding agenda on norms. In this largely liberal tradition, ethics are a conflict restrainer rather than enabler. These are ultimately different moral foundations (Graham et al., 2009, 2013). Liberal norms research focuses on the morality of caring for others. Virtuous violence involves the equally universal moral principles of retribution, negative reciprocity, and fairness (Kertzer & Rathbun, 2015), which can make international relations more, rather than less, conflictual. Importantly, research shows that compromise on moralized issues is particularly difficult, irrespective of preferences over the issues (Skitka, 2010; Ryan, 2014).

The norms literature also implicitly or explicitly endorses a deliberative conception of the effect of ethics on decisionmaking. Entrepreneurial actors, whether state or non-state, bring about normative change through a conscious process of principled persuasion in which norms reconstitute interests (Risse, 2000; Klotz, 1995). The mechanisms we describe in this article are more automatic, emotional, and intuitive. Our findings would lead naturally to a research agenda at the intersection of morality and emotion. In one influential study, Ginges & Atran (2011) find that judgments about participating in and endorsing intergroup violence are insensitive to quantitative indicators of success, driven instead by the use of deontological reasoning. In another, they find that offering material incentives to compromise – a side payment of the kind that Fearon (1995) presumes to easily solve issues of indivisibility – actually *increases* violent opposition to compromise over issues considered sacred (Ginges et al., 2007). When we think of sacred issues, our thoughts generally turn to highly potent,

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[17] Online appendix A5.2 shows that binding foundations exert no effect on a more instrumental DV in the Rathbun and Stein survey: the use of force proportionate to the objective at hand.

emotionally charged issues (e.g. of religious significance) that, while consequential, are relatively uncommon (Hassner, 2009). However, there is strong reason to think that this is just the tip of the iceberg. This is business to which we must justly attend.

Replication data

The datasets and R scripts for the empirical analysis in this article, as well as the Online appendix, can be found at http://www.prio.org/jpr/datasets.

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