

# Public Preferences Between Wars of Necessity and Wars of Choice

**Dr. Yao-Yuan Yeh** (ORCID: 0000-0001-9160-1239),

University of St. Thomas – Houston,

Department of International Studies & Modern Languages

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Since its earlier study by Mueller, the literature on public support for war or military intervention has been one of the most critical subfields in international relations for over five decades.<sup>1</sup> Various scholars have found a series of factors explaining the fluctuation of public support for war, including the human and financial cost of war<sup>2</sup>, objectives of war<sup>3</sup>, multilateral linkages and institutions<sup>4</sup>, ethnicity<sup>5</sup>, partisanship<sup>6</sup>, education<sup>7</sup>, gender<sup>8</sup>, and war experience<sup>9</sup>. The accumulation of these research findings provides a strong benchmark for policymakers to assess the costs and impact of their foreign intervention policies and behaviours from the domestic audience.

Nevertheless, the extant literature suffers two major shortcomings. First, most cases of this study focus on the Western states, especially the public opinion in the United States and United Kingdom, with a few exceptions.<sup>10</sup> This generates a generalizability issue as to whether the extant literature findings could apply to explain the fluctuations of public support for wars in non-Western contexts. Following the first notion, the second critical issue in the current studies of war support is that in most cases, since these are established powers, and their foreign military operations are all interventionist wars outside their homelands; to the public in these countries, whether to support these operations is considered as a choice instead of a “must.”

To elaborate, citizens in non-Western and non-major power states are more likely to be subject to the threat of war in which their livelihood may become the battlefield if the war occurs. For example, if China decides to

invade Taiwan for the purpose of unification, then Taiwan will likely be the battlefield where Taiwanese citizens have to defend the island from a Chinese military operation. Another vivid example is Russia's military intervention in Ukraine. What Ukrainians needed to consider was whether they would stand up and fight against Russian troops and how exactly they could defend against Russian troops in the Ukrainian homeland. Unlike the US military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US citizens only needed to consider whether they should support the administration's decisions in waging wars on foreign soil without worrying that the wars could spread back to the US homeland. Therefore, it is reasonable to suspect that the mechanisms driving the public support for war outside the Western contexts are different. That is, how the public views wars of choice is not the same as wars of necessity.

Three reasons support this articulation. First, the research on war support indicates that when the public learns about casualties originated from local neighbourhoods, they would reduce their support for this ongoing military operation.<sup>11</sup> Wars would certainly incur a higher number of casualties, and these casualties, undoubtedly, would come from the homeland. However, whether the public would simply reduce their support of self-defence willingness due to the increase in casualties is not clear, since losing the battle may mean the elimination of their beloved sovereign state and the political institutions and society they embrace.

Second, we often see that countries facing wars of necessity rely on a conscription system instead of a voluntary military system. Research has shown that the employment of conscription systems has a substantial impact on public support for wars.<sup>12</sup> The conscription enhances the capability of defending from an aggressor and helps the public be more aware of the cost and consequence of war. Some research has indicated that the public will be more supportive of conflict when they consider their training could help them better prepare to defend themselves.<sup>13</sup>

The reason is obvious. When a large segment of the population is required to serve in the military, the public is generally more aware of the costs and benefits of an armed conflict. Moreover, in the event where people's living environment will be intruded by the war, the public will certainly take a different type of consideration when judging the utility of defending their livelihood, given the fact that more accurate information

and understanding of warfare is aware by the general public. Thus, with the conscription system installed, the general public would certainly take a different standpoint when considering their support of self-defence, especially in the case of wars of necessity.

Third, considering those countries that face immediate threats from aggressors, such as South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, they often need to rely on other major powers to support their military operations against the aggressors. In this scenario, public support for wars of necessity would have to channel in the security commitment from the major powers and their likelihood of intervention if the war occurs. The literature on war support has found that the public tends to feel more secure and confident with their capability of defending from aggressors if an ally provides a strong security commitment.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, some do disagree with this view and contend that the ally's security provision may invoke backlash. Scholars have found that the public in Japan and South Korea perceive the United States troops who station in these two countries as a source of social chaos and unease.<sup>15</sup>

By far, it is clear that the public may react in distinctive ways toward wars of necessity and wars of choice. In this chapter, I discuss how the existing mechanisms explaining public support for war could be altered under the condition of wars for necessity. Yeh and Wu provided an empirical examination of public support for wars of necessity with a case study on Taiwan.<sup>16</sup> It would serve as the benchmark for our theoretical reasonings below. I focus my discussion on four main factors – costs of war, objectives of war, ethnicity, and multilateralism.

As mentioned before, the literature of public support for wars of choice has generated a solid conclusion that war costs, such as casualties and financial expenses, would lead to a lower level of support for this military operation, as evidenced in the Vietnam War, US military intervention in Somalia, Iraq War in 2003, and many others. In general, public support for war declines along with the increase of war costs.

However, in the context of public support for wars of necessity, it may not work in the same venue. In studies of public support for wars of choice, the costs are tangible and often can be observed in the real world (unless it is an experimental study with a hypothetical scenario). In studies of public support for wars of necessity, the costs are *always* hypothetical. That is, it is impossible to examine the public support for wars of necessity with a

war onset as the subjects' livelihood is invaded by perpetrators at the same moment. All we can understand is the willingness to defend the subjects' homeland before the war occurs.

Therefore, whether the public facing wars of necessity would be relatively more supportive of self-defence is likely to depend on how it views the importance of defending the country. This means, the willingness of self-defence is highly contingent on the perceived objectives and values among the public when the war breaks out. If defending the state's sovereignty, its political institution, and the society is considered the top priority of its citizens, then war costs may not be associated with the degree of willingness of self-defence. On the other hand, if the public deems the invasion from a foreign state as favourable, or at least is indifferent to the idea of replacing the current government with the one from the invader, then they may be unwilling to support the hypothetical war and are very sensitive to the war costs.

To be specific, in the scenario whether the public is choosing to support an intervention war where their homeland is intact, which applies to every foreign intervention operation carried out by a major military power, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, the public can comprehend the war objectively and rationally in a simple cost and benefit calculation. But when the war is determined to intrude on the citizens' livelihood, it is a matter of life and death, and the public does not have a choice. Therefore, when the public faces the potential challenge of wars of necessity, they rely on another rationale to consider whether they are willing to protect their home country. This includes whether protecting their political institutions and society is critical in their value system, and also whether they perceive the enemy is generally an acceptable alternative ruler due to ethnical similarity, economic incentives, party identification if there are political parties promoting a narrative favouring surrender to the potential perpetrator, etc.

In addition to a different calculation of war costs and other political and social factors when comparing public support for wars of necessity and wars of choice, the influence of multilateralism is critical in gauging the will to defend. This is particularly the case for those small powers under the threats of major powers. As the nature of this war is likely to be unbalanced, the public of those small states tends to evaluate the chances of a successful

defence or deterrence against the major power invader to be lower. Thus, whether another major state or a set of strong powers are willing to bear the costs of war collectively is important in citizens' calculation of war success and leads to a higher level of showing their defence willingness.<sup>17</sup> However, alternatively, citizens may free ride the major powers' commitment, and they may instead become unwilling to defend their home country. Future studies may discover more evidence in this domain.

Taiwan would serve as an excellent example to illustrate the mechanisms mentioned above. Its complicated historical past, including the Japanese colonization and the loss of war to the Communist Party of China and the Mainland China by the Nationalist party (Kuomintang) and its authoritarian rules before democratization in 1996, the public in Taiwan used to encounter some identity crises in their entangling cultural, social, and historical traits with China. On the other hand, China has also tried its best to co-opt Taiwanese business and political elites and wished this could attract the public to be more leaning toward the idea of unification without warfare. However, as the majority of Taiwanese has claimed a Taiwanese identity<sup>18</sup> in recent years and the favouritism toward unification declined significantly<sup>19</sup>, China has resorted to coercion with the People's Liberation Army's fighter jets crossing the median line of the Taiwan Strait constantly since the campaigning period of the 2020 Taiwanese presidential election to even now in 2021.<sup>20</sup> Aside from the bilateral interaction, the US-China relationship also plays a critical role as we are witnessing another great power competition after the Cold War, starting during the US-China trade war in 2018.<sup>21</sup> Compared to China's military threats to Taiwan, the United States is making its stance over Taiwan's security clearer without fundamentally altering its foreign policy doctrine, Strategic Ambiguity, toward the Strait.<sup>22</sup> This evidences that studies of public support for wars of necessity are ever more critical than now.

As Yeh and Wu detail in their study of the war of necessity in Taiwan against a potential invasion from China: "Although there are several reasons to postulate that the public facing a war of necessity will react differently from those facing wars of choice in Western states, we found support for most of the indicators such as principle policy objectives, multilateralism, ethnicity, partisanship, generation, and education. This result increases our confidence of the generalizability of existing findings in the literature."<sup>23</sup>

In addition, other research also has shown that the security commitment from the United States is vital to the self-defence willingness among the Taiwanese public.<sup>24</sup> To enhance the generalizability of the research on the willingness of self-defence for wars of necessity, replications of the research by Yeh and Wu and its extension are urgent.

Taken together, individual preferences of wars of choice compared to wars of necessity is certainly different. This chapter provides an overview and illustrates some mechanisms that would extend our understanding of this comparison. Scholars and policymakers have to consider these visible and vital differences to better understand the public support for wars of necessity.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> John E. Mueller, "Trends in popular support for the wars in Korea and Vietnam," *American Political Science Review* 65, no. 2 (1971): 358–75.

<sup>2</sup> See Ibid.; Gustavo A. Flores-Macias and Sarah E. Kreps, "Political parties at war: A study of American war finance, 1789–2010," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 4 (2008): 833–848.

<sup>3</sup> John R. Oneal, Brad Lian, and James H. Joyner Jr., "Are the American people 'pretty prudent'? Public responses to US uses of force, 1950–1988," *International Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 02 (1996): 261–279. Bruce W. Jentleson and Rebecca L. Britton, "Still pretty prudent: Post-Cold War American public opinion on the use of military force," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42, no. 4 (1998): 395–417.

<sup>4</sup> See Benjamin I. Page and Marshall M. Bouton, *The foreign policy disconnect: What Americans want from Our leaders but don't get*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, (2008); Ole R. Holsti, *Public opinion and American foreign policy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1996); Geoffrey PR Wallace, "Supplying protection: The United Nations and public support for humanitarian intervention," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 36, no. 3 (2019): 248–269.

<sup>5</sup> See Miroslav Nincic and Donna J. Nincic, "Race, gender, and war," *Journal of Peace Research* 39, no. 5 (2002): 547–568; Cindy D. Kam, and Donald R. Kinder, "Terror and ethnocentrism: Foundations of American support for the war on terrorism," *Journal of Politics* 69, no. 2 (2007): 320–338; Scott Sigmund Gartner and Gary M. Segura, "War, casualties, and public opinion," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42, no. 3 (1998): 278–300.

<sup>6</sup> See Adam J. Berinsky, "Assuming the costs of war: Events, elites, and American public support for military conflict," *Journal of Politics* 69, no. 4 (2007): 975–997; Matthew A. Baum and Tim Groeling, "Reality asserts itself: Public opinion on Iraq and the elasticity of reality," *International Organization* 64, no. 3 (2010): 443–479.

<sup>7</sup> See Jody C. Baumgartner, Peter L. Francia, and Jonathan S. Morris, "A clash of civilizations? The influence of religion on public opinion of US foreign policy in the Middle East," *Political Research Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2008): 171–179; Ben Clements, "Public opinion in Britain towards military action in Libya: A micro-level analysis," *Politics* 32, no. 2 (2012): 109–119.

<sup>8</sup> See Richard C. Eichenberg, "Gender differences in public attitudes toward the use of force by the United States, 1990–2003," *International Security* 28, no. 1 (2003): 110–141; Leonie Huddy, Stanley Feldman, Charles Taber, and Gallya Lahav, "Threat, anxiety, and support of antiterrorism

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- <sup>10</sup> For example, two recent studies investigate public support for war in Japan, Taiwan and Baltic states, respectively. See Seiki, Tanaka, Atsushi Tago, and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, “Seeing the lexis for the olive trees? Public opinion, economic interdependence, and interstate conflict,” *International Interactions* 43, no. 3 (2017): 375–396; Yao-Yuan Yeh and Charles K. S. Wu, “When war hits home: Taiwanese public support for war of necessity,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 21, no. 2 (2021): 265–293; Māris Andžāns, and Andris Sprūds, “Three-Decade Evolution of the Willingness to Defend One’s Own Country: the Case of the Baltic States,” *Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review* 18, no. 1 (2020): 195–220.
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- <sup>13</sup> Yao-Yuan Yeh, Charles K. S. Wu, Austin Wang, and Fang-Yu Chen. 2019. “Are Taiwan’s citizens willing to fight against China?” *The Diplomat* (March 22, 2019), <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/are-taiwans-citizens-willing-to-fight-against-china/>; Fang-Yu Chen, Yao-Yuan Yeh, Austin Wang, and Charles K.S. Wu. “PacNet #21A – Self-defense in Taiwan: New findings from surveys.” Pacific Forum CSIS (April 5, 2019), <https://pacforum.org/publication/pacnet-21a-self-defense-in-taiwan-new-findings-from-surveys>; Yao-Yuan Yeh, Charles K.S. Wu, Austin Wang, and Fang-Yu Chen, “Meet the New Taiwan: Trained for War and Ready to Fight,” *The National Interest* (April 10, 2019), <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/meet-new-taiwan-trained-war-and-ready-fight-51797>.
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- <sup>16</sup> Yao-Yuan Yeh and Charles K. S. Wu, “When war hits home: Taiwanese public support for war of necessity.”
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> “Trends of Core Political Attitudes: Taiwanese / Chinese Identity (1992/06–2021/06),” Election Study Center, National Chengchi University (July 20, 2021), <https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/PageDoc/Detail?fid=7800&id=6961>.
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- <sup>20</sup> Kari Soo Lindberg and Cindy Wang, “Why China Keeps Sending Warplanes to Fly Near Taiwan,” Bloomberg (July 7, 2021), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-07-07/why-china-keeps-sending-warplanes-to-fly-near-taiwan-quicktake>.
- <sup>21</sup> See Yao-Yuan Yeh, Charles K.S. Wu, Austin Wang, and Fang-Yu Chen, “China vs. America: A New Cold War Means New Great Power Blocs,” The National Interest (September 4, 2020), [https://nationalinterest.org/blog/skeptics/china-vs-america-new-cold-war-means-new-great-power-blocs-168480?fbclid=IwAR045jSFCTsa\\_9w7H7prnpYMJcfB-C5SkXEW-3MRTRIk9XDl9k8KUH5nVe4](https://nationalinterest.org/blog/skeptics/china-vs-america-new-cold-war-means-new-great-power-blocs-168480?fbclid=IwAR045jSFCTsa_9w7H7prnpYMJcfB-C5SkXEW-3MRTRIk9XDl9k8KUH5nVe4).
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- <sup>23</sup> Yao-Yuan Yeh and Charles K. S. Wu, “When war hits home: Taiwanese public support for war of necessity,” 287–288.
- <sup>24</sup> Yao-Yuan Yeh, Austin Wang, Charles K.S. Wu, and Fang-Yu Chen, “Would Taiwan Fight China Without U.S. Support?” The National Interest (December 9, 2018), <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/would-taiwan-fight-china-without-us-support-38057>.