

Educating the United States on the ‘China threat’

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Abstract

This article studies representations of China as a threat in the United States with a particular focus on the years of the Trump presidency, and on actors networked in and around the administration. The research questions are: how is the ‘China threat’ image constructed through representations, and with what intentions? The article contributes to IR studies on state-based threats in general, and studies on the current US-China relations in particular. The empirical analysis shows that in representing China, the actors intentionally or unintentionally tapped onto multiple IR theories and in the process, they created a compelling blueprint for threat images. The intention of the actors was then to ‘educate’ the US with this ‘China threat’ image. This intent to educate had the objective of invoking threat perception, and thus receive public and political support for the strategies and policies the actors proposed to counter the threat. This observation leads to a proposition that threat representations have the potential to influence threat perceptions/misperceptions. Therefore, a cultural studies perspective of represented ‘China threat’ images – as adopted in this article – can complement political psychology studies of ‘China threat’ images held by individual and collective elites.

Keywords

China, image, representation, threat, United States

Introduction

In this article, ‘China threat’ is studied as an image, discursively constructed through representations of China. This approach stems from cultural studies. Utilising the method of qualitative content analysis, I analyse representations of China in three sets of sources: speeches and writings of the Trump administration, ‘China threat’ literature, and position

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papers of the Committee on the Present Danger: China (CPDC). My particular focus is on the years of Donald Trump presidency, and on actors who formed a very loosely defined network with direct and indirect ties to the Trump administration. The questions I ask are: how is the ‘China threat’ image constructed through representations, and with what intentions?

What the selected source texts and actors have in common is their intention to ‘educate’ the public, politicians, intellectuals and media on the threat China poses to the United States, and even the world at large. In some source texts this intention is explicit, in others it is more implicit, but nevertheless, it is recoverable. I argue that the main objective of this education has been to influence the threat perceptions of the audiences of these texts. This observation leads to a rather mundane proposition: representations and threat perception can be – and often are – linked. If this is true, then a cultural studies approach to studying the ‘China threat’ as something represented provides a complementary perspective to political psychology studies of ‘China threat’ as a perception and misperception¹ held by individuals and collectives.

Following Raymond Cohen,² threat perception can be defined as an estimation and anticipation of future danger. This estimation is based on observed cues and conditioned by various criteria by means of which the observer selects cues. However, cues are not objective and self-explanatory. To be considered threatening, the observer needs to understand them as *cues of danger*. Thus, the process begins with the observation of cues, proceeds to weighing on the meaning of the observed cues, and ultimately ends in perception (or misperception). However, we rarely have the opportunity and skill-set needed to complete the whole process of making first-hand observations, picking up cues, giving them meaning, and then translating them into estimations of the future all by ourselves. Instead, I would claim, representations routinely intervene in the process. Often there is someone else representing the situation to us: choosing the data to present and omit, selecting the narratives that contextualise and give meaning to events, actions, rhetoric and numbers, and providing us a frame of reference for interpreting information. When this frame of reference provided to us is the image of a ‘China threat’, it raises the likelihood that observed cues are then interpreted as cues of danger.

In political psychology, image refers to ‘the overall reputation of a state held by the elites of another state’, and the study of images is concerned with cognitive processes and psychological factors of the said elites.³ The practical significance of images lies in their potential to influence the range of policy options available for policy-making elites, as well as their policy decisions. Images certainly do not drive foreign policy responses directly, but once established in the political leaders’ minds, they guide interpretation, expectations and ultimately strategic policy choices.⁴ In cultural studies, the study of images is instead concerned with the process of producing images for others to consume. But if the images that are represented influence images people hold internally, then representations could also ultimately influence the foreign policies these people choose to advocate for. For this reason, I believe that cultural studies of representations are just as warranted as political psychology studies of perceptions.

This article is vastly indebted to Chengxin Pan’s book *Knowledge, Desire and Power in Global Politics*,⁵ in which ‘China threat’ is examined as an image in the context of International Relations (IR). The article also draws from studies in which the ‘China

threat' is studied as a narrative⁶ and a discourse,⁷ as these are also tools of representation. The article contributes to these studies first by linking the 'China threat' image to threat perception, and then analysing representations of China through the lens of contending IR theories on why some states are perceived as threats and others are not. This analysis provides us a blueprint for threat representations. Second, the selected time frame allows me to provide an update to the research published on 'China threat' in the 2000s and first half of the 2010s, and it allows me to present one more supplementary view on US-China relations during and after the Trump administration.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. First, I will introduce the sources and methods of analysis, as well as the analytical framework of cultural studies of images. Here, I pay particular attention to historical analogies as tools of representation, and especially the analogy of the Cold War. Next, I turn to the actors' intention to educate, which included efforts to push the 'China threat' image to the centre stage of public and policy discussion. In striving to make the 'China threat' image they represented as the dominant one, I argue, the actors had the ultimate objective of invoking threat perception in the US audiences, and by extension, rallying support for policies to counter that threat. The education also consisted of simultaneous efforts to marginalise the rival image of China as an opportunity, together with its concomitant policy option of engagement. As I will show, in these efforts, some of the actors went beyond merely employing the historical analogy of the Cold War, and instead, engaged in re-enacting that analogy. Then, I will focus on how the 'China threat' image was constructed through representations of Chinese material capabilities, behaviour, identity and intentions as threatening, and discuss these empirical findings in the light of main IR theories. In the concluding section, I will summarise the findings, and propound that during the Trump presidency, the represented 'China threat' image moved closer to a dominant position in the United States at the same time as public perceptions of China as a threat increased. A conclusive answer to the question of whether these two trends were connected, is unfortunately beyond the scope of this article.

Sources

The search for source texts for this article began with identifying actors within the Trump administration, as well as allies of Trump outside the government, who had been vocal on the 'China threat' either already before the Trump presidency, or during it. The first criterion for selecting which texts produced by these actors to include in the actual analysis was straightforward: in the selected source texts, China is represented as a threat. When familiarising myself with the texts selected according to the first criterion, the intention to educate started to crop up, in the broad sense of 'To inform or instruct on a particular matter; esp. to dispel public ignorance or raise public awareness of a particular issue'.⁸ Consequently, this became a second criterion refining the original selection: there is an explicit intention to 'educate' readers and listeners on the threat of China, or such an intention can be recovered from the text. Here, I understand authors' intentions in the way Quentin Skinner defines them: as something that the author is doing in making a statement, such as warning or making a move in an argument. Intentions are often

implicit and recoverable from the texts. Sometimes, however, the authors state explicitly what their intentions are.⁹

The first set of source texts focuses on the Trump administration. The main source in this set is a compilation of speeches made by senior administration officials over the course of 2020. The speeches were compiled by the former National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien into a volume titled: *Trump on China: Putting America First*, and the speakers included: Vice President Mike Pence, President Donald Trump, Federal Bureau of Investigation Director Christopher Wray, Attorney General William Barr, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and O'Brien himself. The intention to educate was made explicit in O'Brien's introduction to the volume, in which he remarked that the objective of the speeches was to 'educate our citizens about the threat posed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to their livelihoods, businesses, freedoms, and values'.¹⁰

The first set is supplemented with two longer texts: O'Brien's article 'How China Threatens American Democracy', published in the *Foreign Affairs*, and the State Department's Policy Planning Staff's paper titled *The Elements of the China Challenge*.¹¹ In his article, O'Brien reiterated his – and the administration's – intentions: 'The Trump administration is also working to highlight China's malign behavior, counter false narratives, and compel transparency. U.S. officials are leading efforts to educate the American public about the exploitation of the United States' free and open society to push a CCP agenda inimical to U.S. interests and values'.¹² The State Department's Policy Planning Staff, however, was slightly less explicit: 'the United States must educate American citizens about the scope and implications of the China challenge because only an informed citizenry can be expected to back the complex mix of demanding policies that the United States must adopt to secure freedom'. Considering that the paper was published in order to 'elaborate the elements of the China challenge',¹³ I would argue that in elaborating this challenge they participated in the education effort they were calling for.

The second set consists of a small sample of books, published in the 2010s, that are part of a specific 'China threat' literary genre.¹⁴ *Death by China*¹⁵ (2011, co-authored with Greg Autry) is one of many China threat books written by Peter Navarro, the former Director of the Office of Trade and Manufacturing Policy. *The Hundred-Year Marathon*¹⁶ (2016) is written by Michael Pillsbury, who acted as an informal adviser to the Trump administration and was recognised as an influential voice informing and shaping the White House's views towards China.¹⁷ At the time of their publication, Navarro's and Pillsbury's works were largely dismissed and considered to express marginal views.¹⁸ During the Trump presidency, however, such views came to assume new relevance and progressed towards the mainstream. Messages that failed to resonate at the time and in the context of their writing found resonance during the Trump era. These books are joined by *Trump vs. China*¹⁹ (2019, co-authored with Claire Christensen), written by the former Speaker of the House of Representatives, and a known Trump supporter, Newt Gingrich (R-GA).

Gingrich claimed that he wrote his book 'in part because I believe that a communist totalitarian Chinese system is a global threat capable of submerging the United States over the next generation', and similarly to the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, he called for an education campaign: 'We must educate the public and have a national dialogue about the challenges we face with China'.²⁰ Presumably, he envisioned himself

as part of the ‘we’. Navarro, on the other hand, did not have a stated intention to educate, but rather to ‘expose and catalog of China’s abuses’. In the sense of making known to the public some information previously not fully disclosed or misrepresented, ‘exposing’ here is synonymous with ‘educating’ in the sense of informing the public. Pillsbury, too, did not explicitly claim to educate, but sought to counter public ignorance and correct false assumptions regarding China. What should be noted is that in his book, Pillsbury rejects the premature ‘fear of a China threat’ and ‘sensationalized warnings about China’s imminent global takeover’. He does not reject the threat itself: that China has a strategy to replace the United States as a global superpower, but rather the exaggerated time-scale of when China fulfils this strategy.²¹

The third set of sources comes from a group that came to fill the marginal position previously held by Navarro and Pillsbury, namely, the Committee on the Present Danger: China. This committee was established in 2019. One of its founding members is the former Trump advisor Steve Bannon. Other members include, for example, former conservative military and intelligence officers, think tank scholars, religious freedom and human rights activists, and authors with a long track record of writing about the ‘China threat’. Like the previous iterations of the Committee, the 2019 group is dedicated to sounding an alarm. On their website, they state that the CPDC is ‘a wholly-independent and non-partisan effort to educate and inform American citizens and policymakers about the existential threats presented from the Peoples Republic of China under the misrule of the Chinese Communist Party’.²² In this article, I concentrate on the five CPDC position papers published in 2020.²³

The decision not to restrict the analysis solely on the Trump administration was based on Zhengqing Yuan and Qiang Fu’s observation that besides the core government policymakers, also other political and business elites, intellectuals and media have been playing an increasingly significant role in the making of the ‘China threat’. True, they cannot claim the kind of authority as, for example, the president of the United States, but they can be influential, nevertheless.²⁴ Of the actors listed by Yuan and Fu, the one notably missing in this analysis is the media, because I have covered its role in constructing the ‘China threat’ elsewhere.²⁵

One final thing to note is that despite the authors’ connections with each other and with the Trump administration, here ‘China threat’ is not considered as a distinctly Republican image. To make such a claim, I would first have to systematically compare these source texts to Democratic representations of China as a threat. However, a different set of source texts could – and probably would – represent a different image of a ‘China threat’.

Method and analytical framework of images

The focus of my analysis is on representations of China as a threat. The end product of representations is called an image – in this case, the image of a ‘China threat’. Pan describes ‘China threat’ as ‘a fundamental image that casts China’s rise and its international implications primarily in a negative, alarming, and threatening light’.²⁶ In cultural studies, image is understood as the outcome of a process of observation and representation, with various potential factors in play at every step. Obviously, the main factor in the

process is the person who observes, as well as their mental ‘filters’ that function as sieves, sifting the bits of reality entering their mind, thus guiding and affecting the observation process.²⁷ Conceivably, such filters could be personal, such as ideologies, values, predispositions, preconceptions, previous knowledge and experiences; alternatively, they could be cultural and social, perhaps relating to the collective identities the observer has adopted, or images prevailing in the time and place of the observer. Thus, from a cultural studies point of view, represented images are one of the factors influencing perceptions.

The objective and perceived reality being observed also has a bearing on the image. However, while representations may be fairly accurate, they are not simple mirror images of reality.²⁸ Rather, they are interpretations. This applies to threat images as well, for as David Campbell notes, ‘danger is an effect of interpretation’.²⁹ The ways in which the observer conveys – that is, represents – their observations give the image its form and composition. It is likely that the author has a primary audience in mind and that they tailor the form and means of communication to suit the tastes of that audience. If the author wishes their image to have influence and resonate widely, the best bet is to use words and arguments that are easily understood, and that draw on the common discourses, values and concerns of the target audience.³⁰

The source texts selected for this article are not suited for a study of the whole process from an observation to an image, but they are suited for analysing the act of representation, that is, the meaning-making and the tools that can be utilised in constructing an image. An author has a wide array of tools of representation at their disposal, such as rhetoric, narratives, frames, memes, metaphors, discourses, arguments, stereotypes and visuals when building an image. One prominent tool in the analysed sources is the use of historical analogies. History is often used as an aid in understanding and examining novel dangers, since past experiences offer a familiar and well-tested frame of analysis. Similarly, in representations, it can be expedient to merely replace an old threat with a new one and represent the new with old techniques.³¹

In the selected source texts, historical analogies serve at least two functions: first, they make the authors’ arguments more intelligible, relatable and convincing; and second, they assist in determining a range of possible policy options. Most conspicuously, some of the authors utilise analogies of the Cold War – a threat that, in the words of Janice Gross Stein, has become culturally routine, taken-for-granted, embedded in US political institutions, and highly resistant to change.³² In fact, the CPDC bluntly claimed that the United States finds itself in a ‘Second Cold War’.³³ The source texts also include scattered comparisons to World War II, such as Gingrich’s warning that the US is ‘as unprepared for the new totalitarian Chinese challenge’ as ‘in 1939 for Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan – or in 1946 for the worldwide challenge of the Soviet Union’.³⁴

In practice, I utilised qualitative content analysis for identifying and categorising – or ‘coding’ – the recurring contents of the source texts. The unit I coded was text excerpts of varying length.³⁵ The question guiding the collection of data from the sources was straightforward: How is China represented as a threat? All categories arose from the source texts rather than being pre-selected. In the first phase, I created four categories of domains, which the authors identified as domains which demonstrated the threat of China. Each main category contained one or more narrower subcategories, as can be seen

Table 1. Domains of the ‘China threat’.

Main categories	Subcategories
World order	Hegemony Primacy China-led World Order International Organisations International Law The South China Sea
Military	Armed Forces and Capabilities
Economy and trade	Not capitalist, Not free market Unfair trade practices Not playing by the rules The Belt and Road Initiative, The Digital Silk Road
Ideology and values	Totalitarianism Communism Human Rights Violations
Culture and history	Chinese History and Philosophy Chinese Nationalism <i>Chinese Communism</i>

in Table 1. The lines between categories are not neat. Technology, for example, was discussed under multiple main categories.

While the main categories were broad enough to accommodate excerpts from all three sets of sources: the Trump administration, ‘China threat’ literature, and the CPDC, this is not true for all subcategories. There is no quantitative component in the analysis, but by checking the references in the endnotes, one can roughly estimate the prevalence of each statement, argument, or content that is brought up in the article. In the second phase, I analysed the categories against existing IR theories on state-based threats to examine how the ‘China threat’ image was produced.

Educating the United States

The main problem Pillsbury identified is that the US public, intellectuals, and policy-makers have shown ‘little awareness of the [Chinese] challenge and, in any event, even less of an appetite to confront it’.³⁶ The US had failed to understand China. Partly, the prevalent ignorance and misunderstanding was ‘just as the Chinese have planned it’.³⁷ The authors agreed that China is manipulating and controlling its image abroad, and these claims were a vindication of the need and intention to educate the US.

However, Pillsbury and Gingrich argued that partly the ignorance and misunderstanding are due to the US experts and other elites wilfully accepting false images of China. On that basis, they have produced misdiagnoses and misinterpretations, which have then been perpetuated by the media, academia and other institutions. Pillsbury and Gingrich did not go easy on these elites. They accused them of being either naïve and blinded by optimism or, alternatively, possessing a ‘strong self-serving desire to see, hear, and report

no evil in China'. The suggestion is that these experts are ideological allies of China: the pro-Beijing 'Red Team' or 'Panda Huggers'.³⁸ There is an apparent effort on the part of Gingrich and Pillsbury to discredit these elites and question their motives, integrity, judgement and trustworthiness. And it was perhaps Navarro, who went to greatest lengths in naming and shaming this unofficial 'China Apologist Coalition'.³⁹

It is not so much the elites as such that the educators feel the need to refute, but the image they have propagated of China as an opportunity. Pan notes that 'China opportunity' and 'China threat' are the two rivalling images and paradigmatic frames in which China has traditionally been viewed in the United States.⁴⁰ Christopher Jespersen elaborates further that the view of China as an opportunity has historically related to the lure of the China market as well as to an impulse to participate in remaking China in 'America's spiritual, political, and cultural image'.⁴¹

In political psychology, strategic judgements of a threat or opportunity the target state presents are variables in determining the image of that state as, for example, an enemy or an ally.⁴² This exemplifies a fertile ground for conceptual confusion between the different strands of 'China threat' research. Unlike in political psychology, in this article the focus of the study is not on the cognitive processes that lead a person to hold an image. Rather, the focus is on the act of representation, and 'China threat' and 'China opportunity' are images constructed through representation. They are fundamental frameworks for viewing China, with a long history in many countries, and they have international dimensions as well as domestic ones. In the US, the domestic dimensions include, for example, immigration, race and Chinese influence within US borders. Thus, 'China threat' and 'China opportunity' are not one image but many. They are often simplistic, stylised and polarised, and in between of these extremes, there can be a host of other images and even plain indifference.

Yuan and Fu explain that while there are usually many competing national security narratives, one of them may rise to a dominant position and hold on to it by marginalising and crowding out other narratives.⁴³ However, at critical junctures, the hold of the dominant narrative may weaken if it is exposed as inadequate and incapable of explaining reality. This observation is consistent with Pan's conception of paradigmatic images and leads to another authorial intention that is recoverable across all three sets of source texts. Majority of the analysed actors appear to believe that the 'China opportunity' image has held sway in recent decades in the US, and their intention was to marginalise it.

The authors seized on the argument that the image of China as an opportunity is out of touch with reality, and that its attendant strategy of engagement has been – as O'Brien put it – 'the greatest failure of American foreign policy since the 1930s'.⁴⁴ Engagement, the authors claim, is based on false assumptions on China's peaceful rise and peaceful coexistence. As Pompeo explains: 'We imagined engagement with China would produce a future with bright promise of comity and cooperation'.⁴⁵ The authors claim that the policy has failed to deliver its promise of China becoming a 'responsible stakeholder' in the international order. It has also defied the expectation of China becoming like the US, that is, transforming into a liberal democracy with a free market economy. And what is worse, through the policy of engagement, the US has actively aided China's rise to a threat.⁴⁶ Pompeo, however, did not flatly reject the policy of engagement with China, only engagement with the Chinese Communist Party, and engagement on CCP's terms.⁴⁷

Alastair Ian Johnston criticises such arguments for being caricature-like in their understanding of what engagement is and what its goals have been. Johnston also thinks that those propagating the failure of engagement tend to be unjustifiably dismissive in their assessments of the outcomes of the policy.⁴⁸ But such nuances were beside the point for the majority of authors. Their objective was to show that the China opportunity image and the policy of engagement have ‘proved to be just plain wrong’.⁴⁹ They claimed instead that it is their image of China that corresponds to reality and reveals ‘the true nature of the Chinese Communist Party and its threat to America’s economic and political way of life’.⁵⁰

The first step to counter a threat, Pillsbury argued, is to recognise it. After all, it would be easy for China to supplant ‘the United States as the global hegemon, creating a different world as a result’, if the Chinese were the only ones knowing that this is their objective.⁵¹ To bring about that recognition is the main goal of the education campaigns waged by at least Pillsbury, Gingrich, Navarro and O’Brien. Gingrich, for example, believed that the campaigning should ‘continue until at least 70 percent of the country agrees that success in meeting the challenge of the Communist Chinese dictatorship is the key to our national survival’.⁵² The sources evince a common-sensical awareness that there cannot be concerted action without a collective perception of threat. As Raymond Cohen points out, ‘when threat is not perceived, even in the face of objective evidence, there can be no mobilization of defensive resources’.⁵³ And, I would add, often there cannot be a perception of threat without previous representations of it.

In his book, Gingrich mapped out a pattern of decision-making and policy implementation, with recognition of an existential threat being phase one, followed by debate, consensus, mobilisation, implementation and success. He proposed that this was the pattern followed in the early stages of Cold War regarding the threat of Soviet Union. Then, Gingrich deplored that this time around, there had not yet been an extensive public debate on China, let alone the kind of consensus about the threat, and the need to confront it, as there was during the Cold War.⁵⁴ Gingrich specifically cited George Kennan’s ‘Long Telegram’ as providing the clarity that was needed for transitioning from the recognition phase to national debate in the 1940s.⁵⁵ Kennan’s telegram and the subsequent *Foreign Affairs* article are indeed the canonical texts of the Cold War,⁵⁶ and their familiarity and game-changing nature explain the determined effort by Gingrich – as well as by Kiron Skinner, the former Director of Policy Planning at the US Department of State⁵⁷ – to find a corresponding definitive text outlining the China threat. It seems that when such a text was not forthcoming, the Trump administration officials decided to produce one themselves. In an introduction to a collection of speeches by Trump and his top officials, O’Brien likened the document to the ‘Long Telegram’.⁵⁸ Similarly, in a footnote, the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff equated their own report with the ‘Long Telegram’.⁵⁹ Fabricating the ‘Long Telegram’ is an example of not only employing the historical analogy of Cold War as a tool of representation but re-enacting the analogy. The same could be argued about the establishment of CPDC.

The CPDC also called for ‘a crash-program akin to the Cold War-era’ that would provide the engineering, hard science and language skills needed ‘to contend with the present and growing danger posed by the Chinese Communist Party’.⁶⁰ Similarly, the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff proposed the training of a new generation of public

servants and policy thinkers well-versed in Chinese language, culture and history.⁶¹ Also Gingrich deplored the lack of in-depth knowledge on China, and recalled how the US had ‘launched a substantial intellectual effort to study and understand the nature of the Soviet regime and its military, diplomatic, economic, and political doctrines’ when it had become clear that the US and its allies were under a threat.⁶² Effectively, these actors were suggesting the re-enactment of Sovietology – only this time with Sinology. Stephen Cohen describes Sovietology as the booming US intellectual enterprise in the late 1940s–1960s, spurred on by tensions and crises in the relations between the United States and Soviet Union. Sovietology may have been a largely academic pursuit, funded by private and federal money, but its development and objectives were influenced by domestic and foreign policies, and considerations of strategy and national interest. Its reason for existence was the strive to know the enemy and to envision ways in which ‘the free world’ should counter the communist threat.⁶³

However, it should be emphasised that the historical analogy of Cold War was not utilised in all of the source texts. Moreover, while Pillsbury saw China as a threat akin to the Soviet Union, he considered calls for a new Cold War exaggerated and concluded that much of the US strategy during the Cold War was not relevant for dealing with China – ‘at least not yet’.⁶⁴ This was in 2016. By 2023, Pillsbury has apparently had a change of heart, as he is the co-author of a Heritage Foundation report titled *Winning the New Cold War: A Plan for Countering China*, which elaborates on the ‘ends, ways, and means to secure America’s future while confronting the greatest external threat the U.S. has faced since the collapse of the Soviet Union—the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’.⁶⁵

Representing the ‘China threat’

Debunking and marginalising the image of ‘China opportunity’ was only one part of the project. The second part was to propagate the image of ‘China threat’ and insert it into mainstream discourse. In representing this image, the educators singled out China’s material capabilities, behaviour, identity, and intentions as signs that China poses a danger. These signs are familiar from IR theories in which they are hypothesised to be the factors that trigger threat perception. However, it is impossible to ascertain from the source texts at hand whether the authors tapped into these theories intuitively, utilised them intentionally to induce threat perception in their audiences, or if the texts, in fact, genuinely reflected the authors’ own perceptions. This is due to the fact that there is no inevitable causal relation between what one observes, how one makes sense of the observation, and how one represents the observation. In representing an image, one can avail oneself of all the artistic, intellectual, and rhetorical freedom in the world, although if one is concerned about the reception of the image, then representations should at least be plausible.

Before moving on, another thing that should be noted is that when studying ‘China threat’ as a *theory* about rising China,⁶⁶ one can attempt to make a balanced and objective analysis of it, assess the threat, and according to one’s assessment, take part in the debate whether China poses a threat.⁶⁷ However, when studying represented *images*, the premise is that their relationship with the observed reality is complex. It is doubted whether any image is a perfectly accurate, objective, and truthful representation of reality. Hence, it is pointless to assess the truth claims made in the source texts against observed reality and

try to determine whether the image they represent is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. This is why my focus here is on the question how a threat is represented, not assessments of the threat.

The fundamental signal of danger underlying many IR theories is a marked shift in the global balance of power. In different variants of realism, balance of power is the main concern. In an anarchic world, all states compete for power to ensure their survival. A lack of equilibrium in the distribution of power is inherently threatening.⁶⁸ Power transition theory, while sharing the realist preoccupation with power, conceives a hierarchical international setting, in which rising powers inevitably strive to overtake the dominant power. Both balance-of-power realism and power transition theory provide a structural and deterministic view of rarely inescapable conflicts between rising and relatively declining powers or hegemons.⁶⁹ In these views, material power is taken as the prime indicator of the threat other states pose. This is because it is safest to think that a state is likely to inflict harm on others if it is capable of doing so.⁷⁰

All three sets of source texts were attentive to balance of power considerations. Pillsbury, for example, saw the balance of power between the US and China slowly but steadily tilting towards the latter, and with each phase of improvement in the balance, ‘China would become more assertive’.⁷¹ Also Gingrich claimed that China was incrementally accumulating potential power in the long-term, as if playing go (weiqi), while the US was playing chess and worrying about the balance of visible power.⁷² The sources were also attuned to the idea of material capabilities as a measure of power. Especially China’s economic power drew the authors’ attention. Gingrich and Pillsbury emphasised that China’s goal was to surpass the US as the world’s leading economic power.⁷³ Writing few years later, the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff estimated that China already wields ‘vast economic power globally’,⁷⁴ while Barr thought that China is on the verge of eclipsing the US economy,⁷⁵ and CPDC claimed that China has ‘made a concerted effort to hollow out, undermine and otherwise neutralize our economy’ and the US is close to ‘losing the global economic and military dominance we have enjoyed since World War II’.⁷⁶ Closely related to China’s growing economic power was also the Chinese ‘drive for technological supremacy’ and ‘plans to dominate the world’s digital infrastructure through its “Digital Silk Road” initiative’, as Barr put it.⁷⁷

While economy and technology are forms of power that can tilt the balance of power in and of itself, their main significance for realists lies in that, in the long run, they can be translated into military power.⁷⁸ Accordingly, Navarro noted that China is using its economic growth to fund a massive military build-up, and the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff’s report posited that Chinese economic power, together with technological prowess, has enabled the ‘development of a world-class military that is intended to rival and in the long-term surpass the U.S. military and those of its allies’.⁷⁹ However, Pillsbury maintained that Chinese military spending and capabilities are not necessarily about China trying to match US military power. Instead, China is preparing for asymmetric warfare, investing in so-called ‘Assassin’s mace’ weapons, or modernised versions of weapons described in ancient Chinese folklore, with which an inferior power can defeat a superior power.⁸⁰

From a realist point of view, representations of China as a rising (or already risen) power capable of outcompeting the US add to an image of ‘China threat’. Yet, in the source texts, China’s growing material power alone was not enough to complete the

image. This is in line with Oliver Turner's observation that not all rising and competing powers have been considered as a threat in the United States, and thus, the question of 'China threat' has less to do with 'China's rise' than with 'China's rise'.⁸¹

The authors directed their audiences' attention towards China's threatening behaviour. Gingrich pointed out that it is not the Chinese goal of becoming a modern, prosperous, and strong country that is reprehensible, but rather the manner in which the CCP is trying to achieve this goal. China was not playing by international rules, agreements or norms. In effect, Gingrich, along with practically all others, represented China as a rule-breaker.⁸² China is flouting international law by expanding territorially in the South China Sea and by militarising the area.⁸³ China is violating human rights.⁸⁴ Chinese economic strategy relies on cheating, counterfeiting, stealing, violating intellectual property rights, and generally abusing the international trading and financial system.⁸⁵ Out of all speeches compiled in the *Trump on China* volume, President Trump's speeches were relatively muted on the threat of China. However, when it came to the argument that China is not playing by the rules in its economic and trade relations, the president was anything but muted.⁸⁶ Thus, when it came to economy, finance and trade, there were two kinds of narrative templates⁸⁷ at play: first, China's economic and financial capabilities as a threat to US economic hegemony, and second, the US as a victim of unfair Chinese economic practices.

Another form of rule-breaking that was brought up was espionage. Wray identified Chinese espionage as the greatest threat to US economic vitality and national security.⁸⁸ Gingrich elaborated that China is 'using the Sun Tzu model for espionage' that pervades the military, political and economic sectors, and extends to gathering data on common citizens. The perpetrators were Chinese students, academics, and employees residing in or visiting the US. However, Gingrich added that he did not 'mean to give the impression that every Chinese person you meet is secretly a spy'.⁸⁹ Here, Gingrich echoed earlier fears about an enemy within, such as the McCarthy era 'Red Scare' of infiltrating communists.⁹⁰

Representations of China as a rule-breaker evokes the argument put forward by Raymond Cohen and Barbara Farnham that threat perceptions are triggered by the idea that a state has infringed on the rules of the international game, betrayed trust, and ceased to be a predictable and responsible actor in world politics.⁹¹ Questions of rule-abiding and rule-breaking are also tied to the notion of identity. Adam Breuer and Johnston argue that a perception that a state is operating outside the rules and norms of the self-identified international community and order tends to be interpreted as a sign of its 'Otherness'.⁹² Identity is at the forefront of liberal and constructivist theories of threat. The hypothesis is that if a challenger state is viewed to share the same values, ideologies and identity as the dominant state(s), it is less likely to be viewed as a threat, even though it may have evident material capabilities to cause harm.⁹³ In democratic peace theory, it is especially the state's regime type that constitutes its identity,⁹⁴ making democratic states, such as the US, predisposed to perceive authoritarian states as threats.

In the source texts, identity, ideology, values and regime type coalesce in representations of the People's Republic of China as an authoritarian, one-party state in which the Marxist-Leninist CCP holds absolute power. True to its totalitarian ideology, the CCP surveils its own citizens, oppresses minorities, represses and crushes dissent, wages war

on free speech, and censors and controls the public through ‘e-tyranny’.⁹⁵ The Chinese political system is an “‘Orwell on steroids’ totalitarianism’, Navarro concluded.⁹⁶ China, then, is ‘fundamentally different’, Gingrich claimed, from the US – a country where power originates from the people, rights of the people are respected and protected, and vast freedoms are ‘inalienable and nonnegotiable’.⁹⁷ Furthermore, Pence, reminded, ‘a country that oppresses its own people rarely stops there’.⁹⁸ Pillsbury, Gingrich, O’Brien, and the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff claimed that China is intent on exporting its totalitarian system and creating an alternative world order by eroding, undermining, and threatening democracies, while protecting autocracies.⁹⁹

And herein lies a future conflict. The CPDC portrayed China and the US as locked in on an ideological battle – ‘a Second Cold War’.¹⁰⁰ The ideological battle is fought out between totalitarianism and communism on one hand, and freedom and democracy on the other. China, moulding the world according to its own image, ‘will erode our freedoms’, Pompeo asserted.¹⁰¹ China is ‘the greatest threat to a free America that we have faced in our lifetime’, Gingrich claimed.¹⁰² And according to the CPDC, China ‘poses an existential threat to the security and sovereignty of the United States and all other liberal democratic republics and non-totalitarian nation states’.¹⁰³

While there is a strong emphasis on identity in the source texts, there is no consensus on which of the identity markers of the Chinese Communist Party – that it is *Chinese* or that it is *communist* – is the overriding factor that ultimately determines that China is a threat. Pillsbury appeared to incline towards ‘Chineseness’ as the determining factor, as he downplayed the party’s communist ideology,¹⁰⁴ and highlighted Chinese history, culture, mindset and nationalism throughout his book. Similarly, a CPDC position paper characterised the CCP’s ‘Socialism with Chinese Characteristics’ as ‘a distinctly Chinese ideology more akin to National Socialism than to Communism’.¹⁰⁵ On the other hand, O’Brien argued that it is the CCP’s Marxist-Leninist ideology that defines its agenda, behaviour and objectives; and he specifically noted that the Party General Secretary Xi Jinping sees himself as the successor of Stalin.¹⁰⁶ By emphasising that the CCP’s ideology conforms to Soviet-style communism, O’Brien diagnosed the threat as familiar, as something the US has encountered before.

Especially Navarro¹⁰⁷ and the members of the Trump administration insisted that ‘the Chinese Communist Party does not equal China or her people’.¹⁰⁸ They attempted to divorce the people from the Party, and to portray the threatening communist ideology only as a constituent element of the identity of CCP, not of China or the Chinese. Gingrich seconded these ideas, claiming that there is a competition between ‘two different systems – not civilizations’, and that it ‘is the ambitions of the leadership – not the characteristics of the people – that make a totalitarian communist-ruled China dangerous’. If only China was not communist, the US could collaborate with it. However, Gingrich muddled his argument in the next breath by contending that the CCP is both deeply Chinese and fundamentally Leninist, and that it is ‘this Leninist totalitarianism with Chinese characteristics that is a mortal threat to the future of freedom and the rule of law in which Americans believe’.¹⁰⁹ The State Department’s Policy Planning Staff also pinpointed the CCP as the main foe, and stated that the Party’s domestic and global ambitions and actions stem from both a 20th century version of a Marxist-Leninist ideology, and hyper-nationalism rooted in Chinese culture, history, and political traditions.¹¹⁰

Pan argues that there has been a tendency in the US to take these two identity markers – communism and nationalism – as indicators of China’s aggressive intentions.¹¹¹ Intentions of states are a key variable inserted into discussions on threat perception by the balance of threat theory, for example. Power transition theory, too, pays attention to a rising state’s dissatisfaction with the existing international order, and to its potentially revisionist intentions.¹¹² Stacie Goddard explains that, according to conventional wisdom, the decision of the status quo power on how to respond to a rising power depends on how it perceives the intentions of the challenger. Paraphrasing Goddard, if the dominant power infers that the challenger’s intentions are either benign or moderately revisionist, meaning that it seeks only minor alterations in the international order, then the challenger is less likely to be viewed as a threat, and its rise will be accommodated. However, if the challenger is believed to have extensively revisionist or revolutionary intentions, the preferred policy options are containment and confrontation.¹¹³

The problem with intentions is that they are uncertain, and from the balance-of-power perspective, ultimately unknowable. Even if the rising state signals benign intentions, its capabilities will inevitably generate fear in others, thus opening the road to a security dilemma and conflict.¹¹⁴ In fact, Pillsbury emphasised that China’s entire strategy is based on the principle of concealing one’s true intentions. He argued that deception is a unique and central component of Chinese strategic thinking.¹¹⁵ Pillsbury believed that the Chinese have deceived the US and concealed their malign intentions and hostility in order to dispel suspicions and elicit assistance in their rise to the present position of wealth and power.¹¹⁶

Yet, despite the Chinese subterfuge, all actors were confident that they know exactly what the CCP’s intentions are. And, according to Goddard, the real potential for conflict may not lie in the uncertainty of the rising power’s intentions, but in certainty.¹¹⁷ As already noted, China was represented as a revisionist or even a revolutionary power, intent on transforming the world order.¹¹⁸ China was also represented as an aspiring hegemon. Pillsbury, for example, contended that the Chinese intentions are captured in the presently unfolding ‘Hundred-Year Marathon’, according to which China aspires to avenge the Century of Humiliation and replace the United States as the economic, military and political leader of the world. The Chinese may assure that they are merely seeking ‘a modest leadership role within an emerging multipolar world’, but that is only one leg of the marathon. The final goal is the realisation of ‘the China Dream’ of reclaiming a place ‘atop the global hierarchy’.¹¹⁹ Others agreed with Pillsbury’s assessment: China sees itself as the ‘inevitable Middle Kingdom of the future’¹²⁰; ‘seeks not merely to join the ranks of other advanced industrial economies, but to replace them altogether’¹²¹; pursues ‘global preeminence’¹²² and aims to ‘defeat American primacy’ and project its domination worldwide.¹²³

Conclusion

The current iteration of ‘China threat’ images surfaced in late 1990s with the publication of such books as *The Coming Conflict with China* by Richard Bernstein and Ross Munro (1997), *Red Dragon Rising: Communist China’s Military Threat to America* by Edward Timperlake and William Triplett II (1999) and *Hegemon: China’s Plan to Dominate Asia*

and the World, by Steven Mosher (2000). These images are part of a much longer history of 'China threat' images in the United States, the most notable examples being the 19th century image of Chinese immigrants as a racial threat¹²⁴ and the Cold War image of 'Red China' as a communist threat.¹²⁵ In content and style, the 'China threat' images flouted around during the presidencies of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama¹²⁶ are not that different from the images put forward during the Trump presidency. Even the historical analogy of the Cold War was invoked back then.¹²⁷ However, during the Trump era, some of the actors not only utilised the historical analogy as a tool of representation, but they were also trying to re-enact familiar Cold War signposts: the 'Long Telegram', founding of a Committee on the Present Danger, and Sovietology.

Taken all together, the three sets of source texts produced the image of 'China threat' by representing China as a rising power, a rule-breaker, communist and totalitarian, and a revisionist, aspiring hegemon. While different IR theories often take into consideration one or more signals of threat and exclude or ignore others, the source texts tapped on all of them: material capabilities, behaviour, identity and intentions. In fact, the source texts provide a compelling blueprint for any threat image: material capabilities offer a tangible and simple measure of power; behaviour provides real-life examples; identity suggests that it is not only material interests at stake, but values and political organisation as well and finally, intentions confirm that the target state poses a threat to national interests and security. Apparently, at least when it comes to representing threat, the contending IR theories on what constitutes a signal of danger, are not contending at all. This blueprint is also largely consonant with the image theory of political psychology, according to which an enemy image comprises understandings of the structural features of the international system; assessments of relative power, capability and status and cognitions and beliefs regarding the target state's motives, goals, culture and leadership.¹²⁸

The intention recoverable from the source texts was to educate the US about the threat China poses. I argue that the objective in educating the US was to induce threat perception in the audiences of the texts and speeches, and thus receive support for policy strategies to counter China. However, in 2019, Gingrich lamented that the US public was only just beginning to recognise the threat.¹²⁹ And yet, a year later, the recognition phase appears to have been well under way. The change was noted, for example, by the president of the Halifax International Security Forum, Peter Van Praagh:

The 2020 paradigm shift in people's attitudes toward China was a concrete change from the old conventional wisdom that an economically vibrant China would progress toward more freedom for its people, to the new conventional wisdom that the Chinese Communist Party is, in fact, the virus that endangers the world.¹³⁰

This excerpt reflects the dynamics of an increasingly shared perception of China as a threat, and marginalisation of perceptions of China as an opportunity. In the United States, this paradigm shift manifested itself, for example, in the US Congress. Christopher Carothers and Taiyi Sun note that 'the number of China-related congressional bills garnering bipartisan support rose dramatically in the 116th session of congress, in 2019 and 2020. In that period, China became the leading focus of legislation'.¹³¹

Converging views in Congress were in keeping with US public opinion. In April 2020, a Pew Research Center poll showed that nine out of ten US respondents perceived China's power and influence as a threat.¹³² In July 2020, 73% of the US respondents said that they have an unfavourable view of China. One in four considered China to be an enemy of the United States.¹³³ In 2023, half of the respondents to a Pew survey named China as the greatest threat to the United States in an open-ended question.¹³⁴ The US public opinion on China has fluctuated over the years,¹³⁵ but the overall trend has been unmistakable: views of China have grown increasingly negative.¹³⁶

Year 2020 witnessed events that accelerated and accentuated this trend. In his overt snub to China, Van Praagh identified the most obvious event: COVID-19. As Pew polls show, 78% of US adults blamed China's initial handling of the coronavirus outbreak for the global spread of COVID-19, and the respondents who held China responsible for the pandemic were also more likely to consider China an enemy.¹³⁷ The year 2020 also included other notable Chinese actions and antagonistic US reactions, such as sanctions on Chinese officials over the country's treatment of Muslim minorities in Xinjiang and sanctions on Hong Kong officials for assisting in the implementation of the new national security law. Rhetoric may have played its part, too. The Chinese 'Wolf Warrior diplomacy', that is, the nationalistic and often combative verbal offensives by Chinese diplomats and officials,¹³⁸ was a recurrent topic in US media.¹³⁹

However, as I have proposed in this article, representations are likely to have intervened in the process and contributed to increasing threat perception. The 'China threat' image was arguably becoming more dominant: it was touted by the media, politicians and intellectuals, and it was one of the centrepieces of Trump administration's foreign policy. It provided a powerful and accessible frame of reference for interpreting and making meaning of the ongoing events and rhetoric, and thus potentially influenced threat perceptions.

If we grant that both the perceived and represented 'China threat' image have become dominant in recent years, this could have a lasting impact on US foreign policy and US-China relations. The image could narrow down the policy options and rhetoric available to the Biden administration, and administrations following it. Some analysts argue that this is precisely what is happening: the US policy-makers are rhetorically inflating the 'China threat'¹⁴⁰ and reviving strategies that helped them win the Cold War.¹⁴¹ In his speech in 2022, Secretary of State Antony Blinken laid out the Biden administration's approach to China. Blinken represented China led by the CCP as a rule-breaker ('advancing unlawful maritime claims in the South China Sea . . . , circumventing or breaking trade rules') and as totalitarian ('the ruling Chinese Communist Party has become more repressive at home'; 'We see that in how Beijing has perfected mass surveillance within China and exported that technology to more than 80 countries'). Blinken also represented China as a rising power and a revisionist aspiring hegemon ('China is the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it'; 'And it has announced its ambition . . . to become the world's leading power').¹⁴²

Blinken represented China as challenging the US vision for a world order in which freedom, rules, and universal human rights prevail. Nevertheless, he concluded that 'There's no reason why our great nations cannot coexist peacefully'.¹⁴³ In his speech, Blinken

introduced a strategy of alliance-building and competition (called ‘integrated deterrence’), which arguably is reminiscent of Cold War era strategies. But otherwise, he downplayed the Cold War analogy that the two countries are locked in an ideological competition so decisive, that it amounts to an existential threat. This is a reminder that even the ‘China threat’ images are many. While all of them share in on a long history of ‘China threat’ images, at the same time, each image is also individual, unique and contingent. And therefore, also their concomitant policy options are not few and preordained, but many and protean.

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