A Second Cold War? Explaining Changes in the American Discourse on China: Evidence from the Presidential Debates (1960–2020)

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Abstract

When and how do the American political elites react discursively to China as a rising power? Do they depict it as an economic or military risk? What role do discursive references to China play in the US populist discourses? Relying on the thematic and critical discourse analysis of all the American presidential debates, this article explores the way US politicians portray China throughout three eras marked by distinct global power configurations. Several types of discourses have been identified. In contrast to the belligerent rhetoric of the early Cold War, when China was framed as a major military threat, after 2004, presidential candidates started referring to Beijing as an economic rival. By 2008, the emerging bipartisan consensus centered on China as mainly a trade competitor. By contrast, populist narratives in 2016 and 2020 stood out because they included emotional appeals and inflated the risks of the Sino-American rivalry to mobilize voters. In doing so, the populists sought to forge coalitions in favor of protectionist policies among those voters, who were employed in manufacturing sectors facing growing international competition. The anti-China mentions reached a peak during the 2020 debates amidst the pandemic when the populist candidate used biased language, relying on tropes resembling the 19th century racist "yellow peril" rhetoric.

Keywords Threat Perception · US-China Relations · Public Discourse · Political Elites

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Introduction

The rise of China means that the future of global stability will depend on the politics of the Sino-American relations. According to alarmist theories originating in the 1990s, China's economic development will inevitably lead to challenges of the American global primacy and interests in East Asia (Bernstein and Munro, [1998]; Gertz, [2000]; Gries 2005). A prominent international relations (IR) scholar theorized that the United States (US) and China are headed toward a risky situation in which the US as the dominant power would seek to prevent the rise of a rival state (Allison 2017). Other scholars have questioned the underlying assumptions of the China threat perspective pointing to its limitations (Roy, [1996]; Broomfield, [2003], p. 265; Callahan 2005). Brooks and Wohlforth (2016) argue that Beijing will not overtake the US, while Chinese officials emphasize its peaceful rise (heping jueqi), rejecting the description of Beijing as a revisionist power dissatisfied with the status quo (Zheng 2005). It is, therefore, essential for IR scholars to clarify when, how and why the American political elites frame China's ascent as a risk.

Among the US academics, the anticipation of a great power conflict is anchored in the neorealist and power transition literature. Both structural and offensive realists focus on factors situated at the systemic level, viewing states as interested in acquiring power in an anarchic environment and postulating that emerging asymmetries of power reflexively trigger perceptions of threat, which produce security dilemmas and conflict (Waltz, [1979]; Mearsheimer 2001). Similarly, power transition scholars hold that any changes in the global distribution of power entail conflict as either the dominant state or the challenger express dissatisfaction with the status quo (Tammen, 2000). By focusing exclusively on systemic factors, such international relations theories undertheorize the agency of the domestic political elites.

Constructivists, on the other hand, claim that the harmful effects of structural power asymmetries may be mitigated by political elites, which interpret power transitions and assign meanings to global processes (Wendt 1999). Moreover, political elites display significant agency as they may sway citizens toward confrontation or peace. Still, despite the well-documented role of the political elites in shaping public perceptions of foreign policy issues (Brewer, [2006]; Baum and Potter, [2008]; Kertzer and Zeitzoff, [2017]; Gelpi 2010), existing theoretical frameworks in IR have neglected the mechanisms through which the US domestic elites interpret and integrate references to global power transitions into political communications targeting the electorate.

Studying the American elite discourses toward China helps us understand the processes whereby global transformations are incorporated into new domestic narratives reflecting the shift from a US-dominated international system to one marked by contestations of America's primacy. The way relations with China are discussed by the US elites matters policywise. Hawkish discourses will eventually result in voters growing accustomed to viewing China exclusively as a menace and could generate public support for a more confrontational foreign policy. Yet, the origins of such discourses are not clear. Are such adversarial narratives rooted in the unfolding redistribution of power in the global system? Or are they mostly elite-level constructions of the foreign Other meant to stir negative emotions and garner more votes? The

answer carries divergent policy implications. If discursive framings of China reflect structural determinants, then the agency of the US elites may be limited. By contrast, if such narratives are driven by domestic electoral considerations, then IR theories would require a rethinking of the ways in which power transitions are understood by the elites of the dominant state in the system.

Consequently, this study pursues three goals. It contributes to the scholarship on threat perception and power transitions by examining empirically whether and how the US political elites adjust their discourses about China across time. In doing so, it first shows that the relationship between China's rise and its depiction in the US by elite members is not linear and deviates from the predictions of the neorealist and power transition frameworks. Second, the paper identifies the domestic incentives and the constraints under which politicians in the leading state employ adversarial frames to attract domestic support. Indeed, in China's case, constructivist approaches would emphasize how ideations of China as the Other are collectively imagined. My point here is that they are not simply collectively imagined but do overlap with discourses opposing further global economic integration and free trade, which are tied to the material interests of various actors from the economic sectors (mostly manufacturing) losing out in the competition with China. Third, the article investigates whether the US political elites frame China as a major security and/or economic rival, tracing the broader discursive themes and questioning the idea that the dominant state and the rising power have entered what some scholars have called another Cold War (Zhao 2019). In doing so, the paper devotes much attention to the way populist politicians in the US rely on adversarial China frames in order to inflate the external threat and generate negative emotions such as fear and anxiety among voters.

The article is structured as follows. The first section reviews the extant literature on how the political elites of the dominant state react to rising powers. Next, an argument is formulated, linking power shifts, domestic factors, and the framing of China as a threat in the US. In the third section, I employ thematic analysis to identify and investigate all China frames across the US presidential debates (1960–2020). The last section lays out some theoretical implications of the findings.

Domestic Politics and Power Transitions

Do the political elites of the dominant state in the international system inevitably depict the rising state as a menace? According to the power transition logic, the state enjoying the preponderance of power in an anarchical international system automatically reacts to global power shifts, crafts policies to defend the status quo and prevents the rise of any competitors (Mearsheimer, [2001], pp. 5–45). In *Destined for War*, Allison notes that the US might attempt to prevent China's rise much like Sparta as the hegemon in the Peloponnese initiated a war to thwart Athens' expansion (Allison, [2017], pp. 154–187). The Thucydides Trap argument advanced by Allison centers on power disparity as the main driver of the Peloponnesian War and can been criticized for multiple reasons (Platias and Trigkas 2021).

An important omission from Allison's account has to do with the domestic politics of Sparta. While Thucydides mentioned that some Spartans viewed the rise of Athens

with fear, he also stated that the Spartan king, aware of the depleted public finances, was reluctant to embark on a costly war path with the wealthy and innovative Athens. Sparta's leader was persuaded to confront Athens by the hawkish faction of the political elite and some of its foreign allies involved in military conflicts with Athens over control of distant colonies (Thucydides, [1951], pp. 46–49; Allison, [2017], pp. 27–40). Domestic politics, *mutatis mutandis*, may partially explain why the US pivot to Asia initiated by the Obama administration continued under the Trump and Biden administrations (Clinton, [2011]; Pompeo, [2020]; Blinken 2021). Taking the analogy with Sparta further, it could be argued that the current bipartisan consensus in US regarding the twin-policies of decoupling from and containment of China may have its origins at home rather than abroad.

Moreover, the assumption of the Thucydides Trap argument that the dominant state is always reacting to rising challengers is questionable. While the British elites were worried about the German naval buildup preceding World War I, the rise of Germany and Japan during the interwar period did not cause much balancing in the West, leading to the well-known appeasement policy. The cases of interwar Germany and Japan also illustrate the notion that rising states are dissatisfied with the international rules upheld by the dominant power. However, comparisons with other power transitions suggest that the elites of the rising state do not necessarily perceive the perpetuation of the status quo as a major disadvantage. Indeed, some scholars have noted that compared to China, US during the Trump era displayed more dissatisfaction with the status quo (Chan et al., 2019).

Furthermore, little is known about the emergence of hostile images toward rising powers in the first place. Politicians often refer to multiple threats of varying gravity, highlighting some of them as critical and downplaying others. Under the bipolar Cold War system, the Soviet Union (USSR) with its nuclear arsenal and illiberal ideology was defined by the US political elites as an existential peril (Mearsheimer, [2001], pp. 5–45). Such perceptions were further reinforced by several proxy wars across the globe in which the two superpowers backed opposing sides. The end of bipolarity produced a relatively stable, brief unipolar world in which US enjoyed a preponderance of power (Wohlforth 1999). Even though enemy images toward the USSR and Russia in the US exhibited inertia, persisting long after the end of the Cold War, the 9/11 attacks caused a shift in threat perceptions from traditional to new risks, specifically transnational terrorist networks, overshadowing concerns about great power rivalries. In the mid-2010s, threat perceptions shifted again. During the Trump Administration, the US military doctrine was adjusted to classify China and Russia as revisionist powers, downgrading international terrorism as a security issue.

Why would democratic politicians primarily concerned with reelection highlight certain threats and ignore others? How did elite discourses in the US shift from international terrorism to great power rivalry? Existing explanations of changes in threat perceptions focus on systemic factors, leaving out mechanisms embedded in domestic politics and at individual-level, a grey area in the field of IR, requiring further exploration.

So far, there is no scholarly consensus regarding the formation of public opinion on international affairs. Earlier studies emphasized the incoherence of foreign policy views among the US public (Lippman, [1922] (1998); Almond, [1950] (1960); Hol-

sti, [1992], p. 442; Holsti 2011). Perhaps politicians construct hostile images of other nations because hawkish voters expect them to adopt such discourses. In this sense, political elites may often formulate their positions on foreign affairs in alignment with the public opinion, elevating on the agenda specific issues and downplaying others. In doing so, they react to and, at the same time, shape the public opinion. By framing foreign policy topics in a certain way, politicians rely on media to provide cues to poorly informed voters, forming their views toward other nations (Brewer, [2006], pp. 94–97; Kertzer and Zeitzoff, [2017], pp. 2–5). It has also been shown that elite consensus leads to higher public support for a foreign policy, whereas elites that are divided over foreign affairs often mirror a polarized electorate, prompting voters to acquire foreign policy beliefs by taking cues only from the politicians they trust (Guisinger and Saunders, [2017], p. 426).

Consequently, US elite discourses about external threats deserve more attention as they are central to both policymaking and public opinion formation. Threat perception is defined here as the process whereby political elites extract information from the environment to form beliefs about the intentions and capabilities of foreign states as well as other risks associated with global phenomena such as climate change, terrorism, or pandemics (Cohen, [1978], p. 95). Politicians' assessments vary with the type of the threat, carrying different consequences for constituency groups. Hence, explaining the proliferation of adversarial frames among the US political elites toward a rising China, requires the study and clarification of the reasons behind the adoption of such narratives by elected officials. In this sense, the origins of threat perception may be partially grounded in domestic electoral calculations rather than international politics.

As such the link between global power shifts and the discursive reactions of the domestic elites to such transformations has been undertheorized. The rise of populism in the US poses additional questions regarding the relationship between political speech and the redefinition of China as a revisionist power. What discursive means do politicians in democracies use to construct hostile images of a rising power? Does the depiction of China as a threat align with its economic rise? Following Jervis (1976, p. 7), the question here is not whether the US political elites perceive foreign threats accurately (they often don't), instead I explore how and why US politicians portray China the way they do.

Electoral Calculations and Narratives about China's Rise

State leaders depict foreign nations as external threats for a variety of reasons pertaining mostly to domestic politics. In contrast to the systemic level factors theorized by neorealists, I argue that US politicians construct foreign threats to garner domestic support for their policies and international bargaining positions. In doing so, they may be driven by a combination of economic, security, and ideological concerns, interest groups, outright prejudice, or regime-related considerations (Fordham and Kleinberg, [2011]; Roy, [1996]; Callahan, [2005]; Tien and Nathan, [2001]; Farnham 2003).

The argument proposed here draws on the constructivist conceptualization of international politics proposed by Wendt (1999). Whereas neorealist theories of IR often focus on the systemic and national levels of analysis, it is contended here that the sub-national electoral calculations matter as well in how political elites portray a rising power. To craft coalitions among their constituents, politicians in democratic contexts often rely, among other things, on discursive techniques presenting foreign powers as adversaries. Such representations are shaped by domestic electoral considerations and the material interests of political actors active in industrial sectors negatively impacted by globalization. In adopting the constructivist lens and exploring the way top US politicians talk about China, the article elucidates how images of the rising power as extremely belligerent are linked to the process of forging domestic coalitions, an aspect largely ignored by major IR theories.

In line with the constructivist literature, another contention here is that elected officials construct China as a major foreign threat to garner support for new trade and foreign policies (Wendt, [1999], pp. 246–312). Two Chinese scholars studying threat construction in the US noted that national security stories guide behavior and often embed an adversarial 'Other' that is antithetical to the Self (Yuan and Fu, 2020). In this sense, the depiction of China by the US elites as a menacing state is projected onto a public largely lacking direct knowledge of China and its intentions. However, narratives about China are not simply discursive constructions of otherness as Pan (2004, p. 235) and others have suggested, but serve electoral purposes, whereby members of the US political elite describe a distant state as a major danger to international stability to build up popular support for its containment through new security alliances and the adoption of enhanced protectionist policies (Fig. 1).

Due to the limited knowledge about China in the West, the construction of the Chinese threat in the US must by necessity be partly rooted in the domestic political and economic situation rather than simply linked to global power shifts as many IR scholars assume. In this sense, the external threat is not completely imagined and detached from the material interests of specific groups within the US as the two states compete and cooperate across multiple policy areas. Elite narratives are articulated for economic as well as electoral reasons with identity-related factors playing a secondary role. Unlike the Soviet-American strategic rivalry, China and the US are enmeshed in a dense network of trade ties, shaping their economies and leading to the emergence of domestic winners and losers, each holding diverging interests and varying degrees of influence over policymaking. In a study of anti-China legislation,
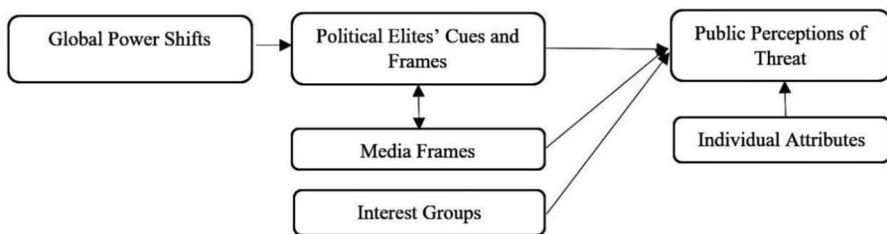

Fig. 1 The Formation of the US Political Discourse on China

Fordham and Kleinberg (2016) contend that Congress members frame China as an adversary taking in to account, among other factors, the economic interests of their voters. Since the 2000s, economic rather than ideological or partisan reasons explain the adoption of anti-China legislation (Fordham and Kleinberg, [2016], pp. 27–29). Consequently, the spread of adversarial images can be traced to actors in sectors of the economy negatively affected by the growing Sino-American interdependence. Such groups seek allies to counter the influence of the winners, the economic actors gaining from increased trade ties with China. Furthermore, both Republicans and Democrats strategically portray each other as "weak on China" to mobilize constituents dissatisfied with the status quo. As shown by Kaufmann (2004) in the case of the Iraq War, in the highly polarized US political environment, party competition provides incentives for actors to inflate an external threat to mobilize support for war.

Ideology, partisanship and interest groups may further shape elite views on China. Conservatives seem more critical of China compared to liberals (Gries 2014). Still, the adoption by liberals and conservatives of adversarial frames vis-à-vis China depends on the type of salient issues and historical conditions at a particular historical juncture (Fordham and Kleinberg, [2016], p. 28). The process of threat construction is also influenced by interest groups. In the 2000s, the PRC worried about the political influence of the 'blue team' – a group of journalists, congressional staffers, and security analysts backing Taiwan and opposing Beijing (Callahan, [2005], p. 705; Tien and Nathan, [2001], p. 127). The 'blue team' sought to counter the activities of 'the red team', a competing network of associations and experts working to improve China's image in the US (Kaiser and Mufson 2000). Scholars have shown that such advocacy coalitions acting on behalf of foreign nations sway the public opinion via public relations campaigns centered on arguments rather than cues (Wang and Shoemaker, [2011], p. 14; Dür 2019). Additionally, threat perceptions may be affected by the so-called wolf warrior diplomacy (zhanlang waijiao), an effort of the Chinese state officials to "correct" Western narratives about the country.

At the individual level, perceptions of China as a threat may be linked to prejudice and authoritarian inclinations. For instance, some research shows that negative stereotypes about Asian Americans and Asians correlate with the China threat perception (Roy, [1996], p. 764; Gries, [2014], p. 338). Similarly, authoritarian personalities react more dramatically to threats and support wars, while democratic leaders perceive illiberal regimes as more aggressive than democracies (Hetherington and Suhay, 2011, p. 546; Mirilovic and Kim, 2017; Farnham 2003). Variables such as age, partisanship, occupation, and income may explain why some Americans are more receptive to elite cues about China (Mirilovic and Kim, 2017).

In all, the US political elites provide cues to the public via frames incorporated into broader political narratives, which, so far, have received scant attention from IR scholars. Next, the US presidential debates are analyzed to better understand the types of China frames used during the ongoing global power transition.

Data and Methods

Even though most IR scholars study conflict processes using quantitative techniques anchored in the positivist tradition, this article adopts an alternative, mixed methods approach. To explore foreign policy narratives about China, its representation as the rising power is analyzed here via a combination of content and discourse analytical methods. Content analysis enables researchers to draw inferences about the context from texts treated as data (Krippendorff, 1989). From the multitude of content analysis techniques employed by researchers, I select the method of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Developed by psychologists, thematic analysis has been rarely utilized by IR scholars. The method is helpful when working with text-based sources as it allows researchers to create coding schemes and divide the content into smaller segments, which then can be organized into broader themes.

Given that the US is a presidential republic, the inquiry focuses on the communications produced by presidential candidates during election debates. Secondary sources of political communications such as statements about China by Congress members, governors, state legislatures, party officials were excluded from the analysis in order to narrow down the scope of the paper. The transcripts of all the US presidential and vice-presidential debates from 1960 to 2020 have been collected into a text corpus, further sub-divided into thirteen files corresponding to a particular election year.

Two reasons stand behind the selection of the presidential debates as text-data for the analysis of elite discourses. Regular televised presidential debates in the US are a relatively new phenomenon. Even though the first debates took place in 1960, for the next sixteen years no meetings were organized. Starting with 1976, every four years, the Commission on Presidential Debates sets up televised encounters between the top presidential contenders. As such the debates feature as the focal moments of the presidential election campaigns. Attracting millions of viewers, they are governed by confidential memoranda between the two parties and moderated by prominent US journalists. For instance, the first Trump-Clinton contest in 2016 reached a record audience of 84 million viewers, surpassing the Reagan-Carter debate of 1980 watched by over 80 million voters (Nielsen Polling Agency 2016). Likewise, it is widely assumed that the classic 1960 Nixon-Kennedy encounters decisively influenced the election in Kennedy's favor. These verbal contests provide crucial information about the candidates' issue positions, enabling undecided voters to compare the contenders. At the same time, such focal events also provide cues to voters on, among other things, each candidate's foreign policy priorities.

Second, given their large audience, the debates serve an agenda-setting function, increasing the salience of the issues discussed (McKinney and Carlin 2004). Existing research has shown that American debates are mostly positive in tone, policy rather than character-oriented, with incumbents usually defending their achievements from the attacks launched by challengers (Benoit et al., 1998). Candidates do not use teleprompters during debates and their answers can be regarded as more authentic compared to other types of political speech. Equally important, the salience of the issues varies depending on historical context and domestic constraints. Even though candidates stake out their positions in debates, their statements should not be regarded as fixed positions on an issue as the winners often retract their campaign promises.

Thus, the analysis of the debates helps us understand the ways in which the US political elites present China to constituents across time as well as the salience of China's rise as an issue on the public agenda.

Flexibility is one of the key merits of the thematic analysis. It can integrate both theory-driven elements and original insights derived from the text. The researcher can alternate between inductive and deductive techniques. Proceeding inductively, upon the analysis of all China-related debate references, an initial set of codes was first generated. The deductive element consists in the subsequent examination of the debates through the prism of neorealist and power transition theories with the expectation that the discursive reaction of the US political elites closely trails China's rise. In line with the theoretical expectations, the processing of the data sought to establish whether mentions of China fell under one of the three broad themes – *Cooperation*, *Competition*, and *Conflict* – each corresponding to distinct perceptions of the rising state. With these goals in mind, the text corpus was subjected to both thematic and critical discourse analysis.

The underlying philosophy of this methodological approach is qualitative. The codes and themes are not simply generated via content analysis but reflect a critical and reflexive examination of the official political discourse. More importantly, they are evaluated through the lens of the critical discourse analysis (CDA), going beyond the superficial layers of meaning to detect less obvious relations of power embedded in the structure of the narrative (Wodak and Meyer 2009). Such an interpretative exercise involves the reconstruction of the semantic relationships between the identified frames and broader themes across historical periods corresponding to bipolar, unipolar, and changing distributions of power in the international system. CDA is useful in this case as it points to the close relationship between discourse, power and underlying ideologies in the US context. On a more general level, CDA enables researchers to understand the way politicians from both parties, in particular populists, interpret relations among great powers. In doing so, the researcher identifies implied meanings (i.e. hidden clues) in elite discourses, illustrating how presidential candidates view China's place in world affairs.

In line with earlier scholarship using the same method (Braun and Clarke, [2006]; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006), the thematic analysis proceeded as follows. The NVIVO 12 software package was used to identify the mentions of China throughout all debate transcripts. The initial step involved a keyword search containing the following China-related items – 'China', 'Chinese', 'Taiwan', 'Formosa', 'Pescadores', 'Quemoy', 'Matsu', 'Penghu', 'Beijing', 'Peking', 'Xi', 'Communist', 'Chinese Communist Party', 'PRC', 'Sino', 'Mao', 'Taipei', and 'Hong Kong.' Once all China occurrences were identified, each reference was coded into more general frames with all the contextual characteristics recorded and classified with regards to type of historical period, candidate, party, frame, and theme.

Framing China in Presidential Debates

The thematic analysis results in Table 1 reveal three trends. First, the number of China references varies across debates, peaking in 1960, 2012 and 2020. This initial finding partially confirms the broad expectation from the IR literature that the political elites in the US would react to China's rise by including it more often in their speeches. The 2020 debates contain most China mentions, signaling a turning point in the way US presidential contenders talk about the rising power. Second, even though references to China can be found in both Democratic and Republican discourses, right-wing populist candidates invoke China more often in 2016 and 2020. Third, since 2008, all candidates frame China as an economic competitor rather than as a security threat. The present focus on the economic dimension of the global power transition stands in contrast to the debates of the 1960 and 1970 s, when the scenario of a military entanglement over Taiwan dominated the public discussions.

During the next stage of the analysis, the references were coded into semantic groups, obtained inductively from the text without imposing any extra-discursive constructs (Saldana 2015). References carrying several meanings were sorted under multiple frames. For instance, mentions of the defense of Taiwan were commonly accompanied by rhetoric about the containment of Communism. Such assertions were placed under two frames – Taiwan and containment. For more accuracy, the economic occurrences were further aggregated into general categories, yielding seven frames pertaining to trade, manufacturing, currency, debt, intellectual property, tax, and economic growth. Overall, the classification of the 305 discursive references to China (Table 1) produced over five hundred codes and twenty-two frames (Table 2).

The second stage of the analysis revealed that China was mentioned in a variety of contexts. Economic frames proliferated after 2004. Since then, presidential candidates portrayed China mainly as an economic competitor. In doing so, candidates compared China and the US across multiple areas, highlighting either China's superiority or its backwardness in relation to the US. Specifically, China is described

Table 1 China in the US presidential debates, 1960–2020

Presidential Debates	1st	2nd	3rd	4th /VP	Dem	Rep	Economic	Security	Total
Kennedy-Nixon 1960	0	17	25	16	26	12	2	16	58
Carter-Ford 1976	0	11	2	1	4	7	0	9	14
Reagan-Anderson-Carter 1980	0	0	NA	NA	0	0	0	0	0
Reagan-Mondale 1984	0	1	NA	0	0	0	0	1	1
Bush-Dukakis 1988	2	0	NA	0	0	2	2	0	2
Clinton-Bush-Perot 1992	10	2	0	0	6	2	10	0	12
Clinton-Dole 1996	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bush-Gore 2000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bush-Kerry 2004	9	3	2	0	7	6	3	10	14
Obama-McCain 2008	5	3	5	2	9	6	12	3	15
Obama-Romney 2012	3	21	32	5	32	29	50	8	61
Clinton-Trump 2016	12	4	7	9	15	17	22	10	32
Trump-Biden 2020	13	54	NA	29	32	60	29	12	96
Total	54	116	73	62	131	141	130	69	305

Table 2 China frames in the US presidential debates, 1960–2020

Global Power Distribution	Bipolar Cold War			Unipolar Moment				Rivalry & Populism		
Theme and Frame/Year *	1960	1976	1988	1992	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	Frames
1. Competition	5			13	9	24	52	39	85	238
1.1. Economy				5	4	10	45	16	24	104
1.1.1. Trade			2	3	1	3	14	4	1	28
1.1.2. Jobs and Manufacturing				2	2		12	3		19
1.1.3. Currency					1	1	8	2		12
1.1.4. Debt						6	3	1		10
1.1.5. Intellectual Property							3	4	1	8
1.1.6. Offshoring & Tax							5			5
1.1.7. Growth								2		2
1.2. Democracy & Human Rights	1			3		1	2	2		9
1.3. United Nations	4					1		1		6
1.4. Education					1	1	2			4
1.5. Environment						1	3		6	10
1.6. Corrupt Ties to China								2	17	19
1.7. Infrastructure								2		2
2. Conflict	29	6				1	2	6	39	83
2.1. Taiwan	16	4								20
2.2. South China Sea									3	3
2.3. Containment	12	2				1	2	1		18
2.4. Military buildup	1							1		2
2.5. Cyberattacks								4		4
2.6. COVID-19									36	36
3. Cooperation		9		4	5	2	9	5	2	36
3.1. Nuclear Proliferation		1		1	5	1	4	4	2	18
3.2. Pandemic									4	4

* The 1980, 1984, 1996, and 2000 debates did not contain any China references.

Source: Author's calculation using the transcripts from the Commission on Presidential Debates

as outperforming the US across environment, education, and infrastructure policies, while lagging in terms of democracy, human rights, and innovation.

During the third stage of the analysis, the identified frames were grouped under three general themes to track whether candidates adapted their discourses in response to the global power transition. Depending on whether China was represented as a partner, adversary, or competitor, the codes and frames were placed under *Cooperation*, *Competition*, or/and *Conflict*. Whereas most frames fit neatly under one theme, some codes belong to two themes. For instance, statements by both Barack Obama and Mitt Romney stressing that China can be simultaneously an adversary and a partner were placed under both *Cooperation* and *Conflict*.[1] Despite claims about the beginning of a new Cold War, the results in Table 2 fail to confirm such assertions,

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[1] Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, The Third Obama-Romney Debate. Florida: Boca Raton, Oct 22, 2012.

indicating that *Competition* rather than *Conflict* features as the major theme across the post-2004 debates.

These discursive transformations can be traced across three historical eras marked by distinct distributions of global power: bipolarity during the Cold War (1960–1992), unipolarity (1992–2016) and strategic rivalry (2016–2020). Throughout each era, US politicians depict China in distinct ways or completely ignore it. Having mapped out the relevant frames across debates, the rhetorical strategies vis-à-vis China are explored below with special emphasis on the discursive purpose of the frames, the implied semantic associations with regards to China's role in the international system, and candidates' visions about the future of global affairs.

Cold War Frames: from Conflict to Engagement (1960–1992)

Conflict with Beijing dominated the 1960 Nixon-Kennedy debates. The election was preceded by the two Taiwan Strait crises. The first, unfolding during the 1954–1955 period, was an attempt by Beijing to end the ROC-imposed blockade of the PRC coast, so that it could benefit from international trade as part of its Bandung era policies. The second crisis in 1958 was initiated by Mao, who sought to wrestle control over the Kinmen and Matsu islands from the US-backed ROC. The scenario of a US – PRC war over Taiwan attracted much attention, because in 1954 the US concluded a mutual defense treaty with the Republic of China (Taiwan). The treaty, however, did not mention explicitly the Kinmen and Matsu islands with Nixon and Kennedy disagreeing on whether American lives should be sacrificed to defend several islands lacking strategic importance. Taking place in the aftermath of the Chinese involvement in the Korean War and after Eisenhower's public threat to use the nuclear arsenal against a non-nuclear China, the Nixon-Kennedy debates stand out from all the televised encounters as the most belligerent toward China. Both candidates pledged to defend Taiwan and depicted mainland China as a Communist totalitarian regime, threatening the US allies in East Asia. Both Nixon and Kennedy opposed China's admission to the UN, resisted Beijing's efforts to acquire nuclear weapons, and backed *Containment*, a foreign policy doctrine aiming to stem the global spread of Communism.

The tone of the 1976 Carter-Ford debates reflected the improved relations between the two countries.[2] In the early 1970s, the Nixon administration engaged China, exploiting the deepening rift between Beijing and Moscow. The engagement policy proceeded with the so-called ping-pong diplomacy, followed by Nixon's surprising visit to China and meetings with Mao. *Cooperation* as a theme replaced mentions of a military conflict. Respectively, in 1976, Carter talked freely about expanding the collaboration, while promising to defend Taiwan's freedom. His opponent, Gerald Ford, faced public backlash for claiming that Eastern Europe was not under Soviet occupation. After his election win, Carter walked back on his promise regarding Taiwan, abrogating unilaterally the mutual defense treaty, cutting off diplomatic ties with the island and moving the US embassy from Taipei to Beijing. During the next

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[2] The Carter-Ford Presidential Debates, Commission on Presidential Debates, Debate Transcripts, 1976.

decade, China largely became a non-issue, ignored by candidates until the end of the Cold War.

Globalization further decreased the salience of the Sino-American relation. The combination of Western engagement and Beijing's implementation of the *gaige kaifang* reforms led to the expectation that markets would cause political liberalization, and even democratization. The suppression of the Tiananmen protests shattered such beliefs, generating diverging perspectives among candidates. In the first post-Cold War debates taking place in 1992 Bill Clinton blamed G.H.W. Bush, the Republican incumbent, for coddling dictators, betraying the Tiananmen activists, and running a trade deficit with China.[3] In response, Bush maintained that China deserved the most favored nation status, because it was moving toward a free economy, opening its domestic markets to Western goods, and banning forced labor.[4] While the Republican candidate linked free markets and trade to the prospect of democracy, the Democrat demanded sanctions against Beijing for its poor human rights record.

Debate statements need to be contextualized. At other campaign events, candidates talked about China, emphasizing cooperation. According to Brewer (2006, p. 89), on the campaign trail, Bill Clinton described China as a strategic partner, while Bush referred to it as a strategic competitor. This observation suggests that policy positions on China shift depending on the target audience and the stage of the campaign. Similarly, major China-related events may not be reflected in debates. For instance, the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis, leading up to a major US military build-up in GUAM and renewed military ties between the US and Taiwan, did not feature in the 1996 debates at all. The key reasons behind the absence of China in the 1996 and 2000 debates may be linked to timing, issue salience and new topics on the public agenda. Despite the growing US-China interdependence, contenders ignored China until 2004 (Table 1).

Economic Competition Under Unipolarity (1992–2016)

Concerns about China as a potential competitor re-emerge in the post-2004 debates. Still preoccupied with the global threat of terrorism, presidential candidates frame the growing interconnectedness as a potential vulnerability, expressing worries about China's relative gains from trade.

From 2004 onwards, economic *Competition* as a theme pervades the political discourse about China. Presidential hopefuls discuss key aspects of the US-China economic relations. Frames of China as an economic challenge appear first during the 2004 Bush-Kerry contest, peaking in the Obama-Romney debates (Table 2). The spike coincides with an attitude change toward China. Beijing is accused of disregarding international rules, stealing jobs and intellectual property, destroying the US manufacturing sector, and engaging in currency manipulation. Republican and Democratic candidates contrast China's high growth with the sluggish domestic economy, blaming each other and China for America's industrial decline.

[3] Bill Clinton, The First Clinton-Bush-Perot Presidential Debate, WA: St. Louis, October 11, 1992.

[4] George H. W. Bush, The First Clinton-Bush-Perot Presidential Debate, WA: St. Louis, October 11, 1992.

Trade with China was the economic issue debated by candidates most frequently (Table 2). Bilateral trade has increased continuously since 1985, leading to a trade deficit.[5] Since the mid-2000s, candidates promise to address the unbalanced trade relation by increasing exports to China, appointing a trade prosecutor, and introducing protectionist measures.[6] Both Democrats and Republicans accused China of dumping aluminum, tires, and steel on the US market.[7] In the 2012 debates, then-president Obama defended his record, emphasizing that the tariffs introduced against Chinese imports saved domestic jobs in the tire and steel industries. In 2016 and 2020, Trump featured as the champion of industrial protectionism.

Currency manipulation, unemployment, and debt are invoked repeatedly. A bipartisan consensus emerged regarding the damaging effects of the renminbi devaluation policy, benefitting Chinese exporters, and hurting US firms. John Kerry, a Democrat, attacked George W. Bush for refusing "to take on China for currency manipulation."[8] Barack Obama repeated the claim, while Mitt Romney promised to designate China a currency manipulator and introduce tariffs to protect manufacturing jobs.[9] Candidates attributed domestic unemployment to outsourcing and proposed reshoring initiatives to reverse the trend. Likewise, in the 2008 and 2012 debates, all candidates expressed their dissatisfaction with China owning a significant portion of the US debt.[10]

During this period, any business ties to China become a liability. A common rhetorical strategy used in recent debates casts the opponent as having private interests in China. Such links are framed as evidence of insufficient patriotism. Thus, Obama alleged that Romney invested in firms outsourcing jobs to China and manufacturing surveillance equipment.[11] Hillary Clinton observed that her opponent imported cheap Chinese steel to build his skyscrapers, while Kaine claimed that Trump was indebted to the Bank of China.[12] On the other hand, Trump depicted Democrat candidates as negotiating disadvantageous trade deals with Beijing and "letting China use the US

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[5] US Department of Commerce, *Trade in Goods with China*, (Washington, DC, 2021). https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5700.html.

[6] See Barack Obama, The Second Obama-McCain Debate. Nashville, TN: Belmont University, October 7, 2008; Hillary Clinton, The Third Clinton-Trump Presidential Debate. Las Vegas, NV: University of Nevada, Oct 19, 2016; Donald Trump, The Second Clinton-Trump Presidential Debate. St. Louis, MO: Washington U, October 9, 2016.

[7] Hillary Clinton, The Third Clinton-Trump Presidential Debate; Barack Obama, The Second Obama-McCain Debate; Donald Trump, The Second Clinton-Trump Presidential Debate; Hillary Clinton, The Second Clinton-Trump Presidential Debate. St. Louis, MO: Washington U, October 9, 2016.

[8] John Kerry, The Second Bush-Kerry Presidential Debate. MO: St. Louis, October 8, 2004.

[9] John Kerry, The Second Bush-Kerry Presidential Debate; Mitt Romney, The Second Obama-Romney Presidential Debate. Hempstead, NY: Hofstra U, October 16, 2012.

[10] Barack Obama and John McCain, The First Obama-McCain Debate. Oxford, MS: University of Mississippi, September 26, 2008.

[11] Barack Obama, The Second Obama-Romney Presidential Debate, NY: Hofstra University, October 16, 2012.

[12] Hillary Clinton, The Second Clinton-Trump Presidential Debate. St. Louis, MO: Washington U, October 9, 2016; Tim Kaine, The Kaine-Pence Vice-Presidential Debate. Farmville, VA: Longwood U, Oct 4, 2016.

as a piggy bank."[13] The veracity of such statements is rarely confirmed and, probably matters less, since the purported association with China only serves to discredit the other candidate in front of an electorate presumed to be sensitive about the matter.

In contrast to the Cold War era, during the unipolar era, China has rarely been described as a military threat. Even though it was framed as an aggressive economic competitor, the potential for some limited security cooperation always remained. In 2012, Romney, for instance, categorized China as a status quo power, sharing the same interests as the US:

> China has an interest that is very much like ours. They want a stable world not war. They do not want protectionism. They do not want the world to break out into various forms of chaos, because they have to manufacture goods and put people to work. Every year, they have about twenty million coming out of the farms into the cities, needing jobs. That is why they want the economy to work and the world to be free and open. And so, we can be a partner with China. We do not have to be an adversary in any way. We can collaborate with them if they are willing to be responsible.[14]

Nuclear proliferation is another often-evoked area of cooperation. Candidates expect China to use its leverage over North Korea and slow down its nuclear program. Kerry praised China's positive role in the six-party talks, while, a decade later, Trump suggested that China should solve the North Korea problem for the US.[15] Likewise, Kaine stated that China penalized its own companies by backing Western sanctions against North Korea.[16] Similar frames were applied in relation to Iran's nuclear program with candidates highlighting China as a valuable partner in denuclearizing both North Korea and Iran.

When candidates mention military primacy, it is mostly as an instrument to prop up the existing trade regime in East Asia. Obama defines America as a Pacific power, pivoting to Asia to uphold the freedom of navigation:

> When it comes to our military and Chinese security, part of the reason that we were able to pivot to the Asia-Pacific region after having ended the war in Iraq and transitioned out of Afghanistan is precisely because this is going to be a massive growth area in the future. And we believe China can be a partner, but we are also sending a very clear signal that *America is a Pacific power* [emphasis mine], that we are going to have a presence there. We are working with countries in the region to make sure, for example, that ships can pass through, that commerce continues. We are organizing trade relations with coun-

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[13] Donald Trump, The First Clinton-Trump Presidential Debate, NY: Hofstra University, September 26, 2016.

[14] Mitt Romney, The Third Obama-Romney Presidential Debate. FL: Boca Raton, October 22, 2012.

[15] John Kerry, The Third Bush-Kerry Debate. AZ: Tempe, October 13, 2004; Donald Trump, The First Clinton-Trump Presidential Debate.

[16] Tim Kaine, The Kaine-Pence Vice-Presidential Debate. Farmville, VA: Longwood U, Oct 4, 2016.

tries other than China, so that China starts feeling more pressure about meeting basic international standards.[17]

Asked in 2012 whether China endangers the American national security, Obama and Romney identified international terrorism and a nuclear Iran as major threats, noting prudently that Beijing can be simultaneously a partner and a rival. In 2016, the sole reference to China as a security risk and the need to build up the US military came from vice-presidential candidate Pence, who cautioned that China is challenging American power by building new islands in the South China Sea.[18]

Besides economic frames, competitive thinking can be noticed across other policy areas. US politicians take pride in the functioning of the American democracy, contrasting it with China's political institutions and suppression of protests. The one-child policy was disparaged by some Democrat contenders for violating women's rights, while Republicans framed it as an attack on traditional family values. With regards to education, the candidates lament the fact that China and India graduate more STEM students than the US. Similarly, environmental policy is a field for symbolic comparisons. Democrats portray China as a polluter, building coal factories, while, at the same time, investing more than the US in renewable energy. Likewise, the deficient infrastructure in US is compared to China's modern airports and high-speed rail.

Such multidimensional comparisons propagated by contenders contain deeper layers of meaning, exposing the complex power relations between China and the US. They point to American visions of the international system as a power hierarchy. Much of the economic competition rhetoric depicts China as a challenger, relying on dishonest means and "cheating" its way to a higher status. In bending the post-WWII rules to its advantage, candidates imply that China casts doubt on the legitimacy of the US-led order. Such language suggests that voters are presented with a concept of the international order imagined as a power hierarchy in which US is setting the rules to be followed by other states. At the same time, such statements point to the role of status in global affairs, which is linked to reciprocal perceptions and acceptance by a group of relevant peers (Renshon 2017). US politicians employ upward interstate comparisons across multiple policies, revealing that implicitly they regard China as an equal, a peer of sorts, which in some instances outperforms America and is worthy of emulation. In this sense, the penchant of US politicians for upward instead of downward comparisons with China indirectly confirms Beijing's enhanced international status, while conveying to the domestic electorate a sentiment of dissatisfaction with what some candidates qualify as America's decline. Such declinist resentments were further hyperbolized by the rise of populist narratives in 2016 and 2020.

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[17] Barack Obama, The Third Obama-Romney Debate. Florida: Boca Raton, October 22, 2012.

[18] Mike Pence, The Kaine-Pence Vice Presidential Debate. Virginia: Farmville, October 4, 2016.

Populism and Strategic Rivalry (2016–2020)

Populism changed the discourse toward China in several ways. The first effect was ideological. Populism has been often defined as "a thin ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* of the people" (Mudde, [2004], p. 543). References to China occupy a central place in the populist discourse embraced by Donald Trump. They fulfill a rhetorical function by conveying a conflictual 'us versus them' worldview. The adversarial image of China is integrated into the core of the populist narrative, which postulates that the "corrupt elites in Washington" collude with an external adversary to betray "the will of the American people."

Yet, populism is more than a thin ideology as China frames serve, at the same time, a mobilizational purpose. Weyland ([2001], p. 14) noted that populism can be conceptualized as a political strategy, whereby a personalistic leader exercises power based on the direct support from numerous unorganized followers. In this sense, by presenting China as a major foe, American populists seek to unify the divided public against a common rival. Inflating the external threat to project opinion leadership as if amidst an international crisis has been shown to generate a rally-around-the-flag effect, boosting presidential approval ratings (Baker and Oneal [2001]). Hence, emotional descriptions of China as taking advantage of the US and gaining unfair trade benefits appeal to unemployed, blue-collar workers and residents of the Rust Belt. Trump's campaign manager observed that his candidate selected trade with China and immigration as key campaign issues to connect with the American working class (Bannon [2019a]).

Populists adeptly insert figures of speech to stir negative emotions and inflate the China threat. In his public appearances, Trump stated that "China raped America", "perpetrated the greatest theft in the history of the world", "killed our steelworkers", "cheated" and "stole."[19] Peter Navarro, Trump's chief economic adviser co-authored a volume titled bluntly *Death by China*, while Steve Bannon, the main ideologue of the Trumpian brand of populism, spoke of China posing an existential threat to the US and waging an economic war against the US (Navarro and Autry, [2011]; Bannon [2019b]). Such tropes mix affect and policy aiming to elicit negative emotions – anger and fear – among voters. Furthermore, it could be argued that Trump's reference to sexual violence when discussing the Sino-American relationship draws on historical Western stereotypes and fears of the unknown Other, resembling the discourse of Orientalism, in which the irrational, backward, and mean "Orient" is contrasted with a morally superior, scientific, civilized West (Said, [1978], p. 11; Ooi and D'Arcangelis, [2017], p. 270).

The 2020 debates differ from the previous ones in two respects. First, these are the only encounters to contain references to anti-Asian xenophobia and China, a link explored by researchers in the broader context of race and foreign policy (Roy,

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[19] Donald Trump, Campaign Speech. Indiana: Fort Wayne, May 1, 2016; Donald Trump, The First Clinton-Trump Presidential Debate. Hempstead, NY: Hofstra U, September 26, 2016; Donald Trump, The Second Clinton-Trump Presidential Debate. St. Louis, MO: Washington University, October 9, 2016.

[1996], 764; Pan, 2004, 306; Mirilovic & Kim, 2017). The populists describe China as a "cunning" competitor, while the COVID-19 virus has been labeled by Trump as "the Wuhan virus", "the Chinese virus", "the China plague" and "the Kongflu virus." Such frames contain implicit associations reminiscent of the dehumanizing "yellow peril" metaphor dating from earlier eras, exacerbating pre-existing prejudice toward Asian Americans and possibly contributing to the multiplication of hate crimes targeting the minority during the pandemic (Gover et al., 2020). By anthropomorphizing and attributing negative human qualities to a foreign state, the populist rhetoric shares affinities with the prejudiced discourse toward Asia prevalent in the West in the nineteenth century.

Obviously, there is a historical dimension to the link between foreign policy and minorities in the US. The suspicions toward the German minority during World War I, the internment of the Japanese Americans during World War II, the various Red Scares, and the excessive surveillance of the Muslim Americans after 9/11, all point to the aggravation of biased attitudes toward minorities perceived to be associated with the opposite side. During the heightened tensions with China, a similar trend is observable with regards to Asian Americans, in particular Chinese Americans. Civil society organizations in US have protested the rise of anti-Asian hate, but the issue is more complicated as it involves emotions, questions about loyalty, various forms of othering, all fitting into longstanding patterns of suspicion toward the group going back to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Despite their contributions to the US innovation economy and being touted as a model minority, the populist rhetoric came as a rude awakening for many Asian Americans, a diverse group as its members realized that the pandemic and China's rise could reinforce systemic inequities.

In the 2020 debates, the Republican incumbent blames China for the mismanagement of the crisis, all while promoting conspiracy-like theories about the origins of the virus and pseudo-scientific public health behaviors. Both Biden and Trump insist that China should pay for the economic damage caused by the pandemic. Also, unlike previous debates, the topic of corrupt ties to China ranks second in salience after the pandemic issue (Table 2). Candidates portray each other as doing business with and being influenced by Beijing. In doing so, they transform the election debates into attacks on character, something rare in the US presidential debates, which traditionally have focused on discussing policy issues rather than personal qualities.

The populist interlude produced strategical adjustments. The US national security and defense doctrines were updated, classifying China and Russia as revisionist powers:

> China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity. […] China and Russia want to shape a world antithetical to US values and interests. China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor (US Government National Security Strategy, 2017, p. 2).

The populist rearrangement of national security priorities merely continued the pivot to Asia – the Obama administration policy toward China. The Trump administration,

however, abandoned the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a regional free trade agreement seeking to sideline China, opting instead for decoupling, a new policy, which aimed to reduce the interdependence between China and the US. Additionally, the Trump administration bolstered its arms sales to Taiwan and India, linked economic interests to national security goals, initiated trade disputes with China, introduced protectionist measures, slowed down technological transfers, reduced academic exchanges, and prevented Chinese state-owned companies from expanding their operations in the US. In response, China introduced import restrictions on certain agricultural products, forcing the Trump administration to provide side-payments to US farmers, a group historically backing populist movements.

The populist rhetoric and policies accelerated the transition from economic competition to strategic rivalry, a situation which makes escalation more likely (Colaresi et al. 2007). In this respect, the populist discursive and policy legacy with regards to China weighed heavily on the Biden administration as it maintained the same foreign policy course toward Beijing.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of the thematic and critical discourse analysis carry several implications for the theorization of the link between global power transitions and elite political discourses in the US.

First, presidential candidates approaching the topic of China's rise framed it mostly as an economic not as a security challenge. With the notable exception of the early Cold War debates of 1960, presidential candidates ignore contentious issues such as Taiwan, security alliances in East Asia, ideology, and human rights. Instead, in line with the neorealist and power transition logic, they worry about the relative gains resulting from the growing economic interdependence with China (Waltz, [1979]; Powell, [1994]; Mearsheimer 2001). By tracing the China threat rhetoric to the material interests of certain groups of voters and industrial sectors rather than the logic of international competition, the preceding analysis lends some credence to the argument formulated by Fordham and Kleinberg (2016).

Consequently, analogies with the Cold War era are misplaced. The post-2004 discourse on China differs significantly from the early Cold War narratives in that it lacks references to the US military commitments to its allies in East Asia. By contrast, in the 1950s, Eisenhower publicly mentioned the possibility of a nuclear attack on mainland China, whereas in the 1960s, US politicians pledged to defend Taiwan, prevent the PRC from gaining nuclear weapons, and slow down China's accession to the UN Security Council. As the Sino-American relations improved due to their mutual interest in counterbalancing the Soviet influence, China disappeared from election debates. The absence of discursive references to China until the mid-2000s suggests that engagement, increased trade, and competing threats such as international terrorism mitigate the perception of a rising power as a strategic rival.

The findings align with constructivist accounts such as Wendt's (1999). There is an element of social construction in the process of presenting rising powers as threats in election debates as most Americans hold limited information about the

topic and form their opinions about foreign affairs based on cues from political elites and media. Using China as a scapegoat to shift the blame for the perceived American decline, such references served both ideological and mobilization purposes in the populist discourse, often generating biased attitudes toward Asian Americans. Amidst the ongoing decoupling and growing geostrategic tensions, the article points to the need to craft foreign policy narratives without fueling prejudice toward Chinese Americans as it happened in the past.

Second, the critical discourse analysis tells us much about how US politicians view global affairs. Most often, US politicians define the relation with China from a position of authority and strength, envisioning a hierarchical, unipolar world rather than an emerging polycentric international system. Presidential candidates demand in unequivocal terms that China adjusts its economic policies to accommodate the concerns of various US constituencies. Such calls may persuade undecided voters, but are unlikely to have any practical effect as they require the Chinese leadership to undertake changes, which would weaken its own authority. And while up until the populist interlude, the US presidential candidates depicted China as a status quo power, since 2016, Beijing has been catalogued as a revisionist state.

Yet, the evidence from the thematic analysis supports the notion advanced by Chan, Hu and He (2019) that the US rather than China may be the dissatisfied power. Election discourses are interspersed with hints pointing to the American discontent with the status quo, which originates from the realization that the US-led liberal order has provided China with sufficient growth opportunities to overtake the dominant state. The populist narratives were accompanied by the withdrawal of the US from various multilateral agreements, designed to prevent Washington from using its superior military power to advance economic goals. In this sense, as China rises, it does not appear to push for a decisive makeover of the international rules, but advocates for the enforcement of the US-dominated order as it still benefits China's development. Paradoxically, Beijing, thus, still supports an international governance system designed by the US, while, in parallel, it is setting up alternative regional cooperative frameworks such as the Belt and Road Initiative, influencing the security and economic order in East Asia and beyond.

The findings confirm that status considerations play a fundamental role in global affairs (see Renshon 2017). Even though China has been conceptualized as a status-seeking power, the discursive analysis suggests that US politicians care about status as well, employing frequent comparisons with competing states in their debate speeches. The upward comparisons with China employed by US politicians are meant to highlight America's need for modernization across multiple policy areas. In relying on such unfavorable comparisons, presidential candidates acknowledge that China is a peer competitor worthy of emulation in certain respects.

Finally, presidential candidates and the public may react to global power shifts in a non-linear manner. To illustrate the non-linear relationship, in Fig. 2, I have plotted China's economic rise measured in terms of GDP, historical public opinion trends and the frequency of China references across presidential debates. References to China and unfavorable public opinion reached a peak during the current era of approximate power parity, when the size of China's economy nearly equaled America's.
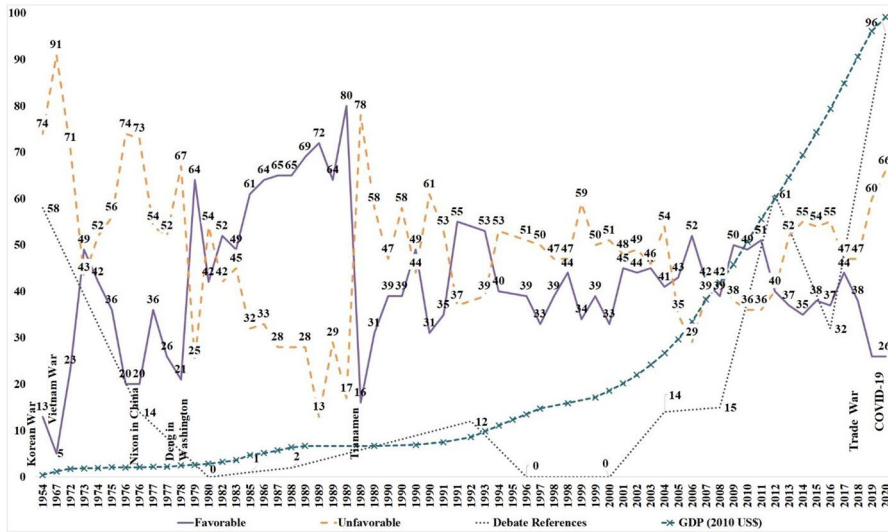
Fig. 2 Historical public opinion trends, GDP growth and references to China across debates. Source: Author. Public Opinion Data from Hirshberg (1993), Kulma (1999); Pew Research Center, "U.S. Politics and Policy Survey" (Washington, D.C., 2005–2020); Gallup Organization, Gallup Opinion Polls (1992–2004)

Furthermore, the strategic use of emotions, economic competition frames, scapegoating, social upward comparisons, and the redefinition of China as a revisionist power, all indicate that the interaction between populism and the pandemic accelerated the shift from the relatively bland economic rhetoric toward a situation of long-term strategic rivalry.

Conclusion

This article contributes to the IR literature on power transitions by demonstrating that as China and the US approach power parity in economic terms, the American political elites adjust their discourses to reflect China's new status. In contrast to the discursive emphasis in Beijing on a peaceful rise in the mid-2000s, China under Xi Jinping has become more assertive in world affairs, amplifying US concerns about the closing power gap and the vulnerabilities of interdependence. Consequently, after 2016, one observes the emergence of a bipartisan consensus at the discursive level centered on the notion that China is outcompeting the US and challenges its primacy. However, references in the international media to a Second Cold War are premature as American politicians talk about China mostly in economic terms with the US expressing dissatisfaction with the status quo precisely because it facilitated China's growth. In contrast to the early Cold War confrontational frames, the US political elites have not adopted a militarist rhetoric, upholding strategic ambiguity toward Taiwan, strengthening existing alliances and proposing new ones in East Asia. This falls in line with earlier research by Zhao (2019) showing that Chinese policymakers

and academics tend to be more optimistic about the future of the US-China relations compared to their American counterparts.

The paper also finds that US politicians construct hostile images of China for domestic reasons rather than simply in reaction to global power shifts. Specifically, the populists adopt inflammatory language about China to stir anger, fear, and resentment among working-class voters across those industrial sectors, losing to international competition. Such emotional language coupled with the display of prejudice during the pandemic has caused worries among the Asian American community and concerns about democratic backsliding.

Finally, the absence of references concerning a grand security strategy toward China suggests that the presidential candidates still show restraint, regarding the possibility of a confrontation with Beijing as a matter of choice rather than an inevitable scenario akin to the Thucydides Trap analogy proposed by Allison (2017). While new military conflicts such as Russia's war against Ukraine divert the attention of the US political elites from the Asia-Pacific region, such events will not shatter the bipartisan consensus regarding the strategic rivalry with China. If anything, the Russian defeat under Kyiv in 2022 may be interpreted by the US as a sign that the risks to the international order posed by a weakened Russia entangled in Ukraine are less significant compared to the challenges coming from a stronger China allied with Moscow. Moreover, the ways in which China is framed in the American political discourse may evolve again as an eventual return to bipolarity would contradict the hierarchical vision of global affairs held by many US politicians.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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