



The 'China Threat': Stereotypical representations in the US competition with China

Flavia Lucenti¹

Accepted: 15 January 2024
© The Author(s) 2024

Abstract

When Donald Trump was elected, the idea of the 'China Threat' gained popularity. Nonetheless, this was not a novelty. From the early nineties, when the country consolidated its economic growth, concern had begun to spread that China would convert its economic resources into a military force to turn against the US. This article explores whether the concept of the China Threat may have been influenced by stereotypical representations rooted in US academic thinking and shared at the government level. The analysis proceeds by adopting a three-stage approach. First, it draws a theoretical framework that intertwines a constructivist perspective from IR theory with social psychology, referring to Social Representations Theory and theories of stereotypes. Second, while focusing on the expressions 'Thucydides' Trap' and 'New Cold War', it describes how the China Threat has been elaborated in the US scholarly agenda. Finally, it discusses how the China Threat has found an outlet especially in the Trump administration's narrative.

Keywords China Threat · Donald Trump · IR theory · Stereotypes · Social representations

Introduction

Beginning with his electoral campaign, Donald Trump compulsively indicated China as a danger to the United States (US) national interests (Turner 2017).¹ Naming the 'other' as a rival is a recurring narrative pattern (Geis and Wunderlich 2014), often employed to ensure the legitimacy of measures taken on behalf of security

¹ As compulsive as Trump was in mentioning China during the campaign, humorous videos began to circulate on the web, especially on YouTube, mocking the frequency with which candidate Trump says 'China' in his public speeches. See, for instance, the video 'Donald Trump Says "China"', available on YouTube (Trump 2015).

✉ Flavia Lucenti
flucenti@luiss.it

¹ Department of Political Science, Luiss University, Viale Romania, 32, 00197 Rome, Italy



(Buzan and Hansen 2012; McDonald 2008; Olesker 2018). This narrative tendency extends to the US, where political discourse has long revolved around the existence of an external rival or, as seen in this context, a ‘threat’.² Once Trump was elected, such rhetoric concretised a set of political actions aimed at containing China’s economic power and damaging its reputation,³ by blaming the Beijing government for being a menace to the survival of the Liberal International Order (LIO). This resulted in an exponential deterioration of relations and dialogue between the two countries, whereby Trump, routinised the use of hostile language, spurring an assertive reaction from the Chinese leadership (Xiying 2021), as well as the US imposing higher import tariffs and bans on products to be exported to China.

During Trump’s administration the idea of China as a threat gained increased popularity (Frauen 2021, 379, 385), although not being a novelty in the US political debate (Gries 2005; Pan 2004; Roy 1996; Yang and Liu 2012).⁴ Since the early nineties, when the country improved its economic power, scholars and commentators on international politics have pointed out how China would sooner or later pose a challenge to the US. Many of them, above all Western academics belonging to the realist school(s), were concerned that China would convert its economic resources into a military force with which to turn against the US (Friedberg 1993; 2005, 18; Mearsheimer 2006). Likewise, the perception of China as a potential threat to the US had already been circulating in political circles, mainly—but not exclusively—within the Republican ranks (Nymalm 2020, 190–192).⁵

The article introduces how this description of China, mostly recognised with the term ‘China Threat’ (Broomfield 2003), might be influenced by stereotypical representations of social reality rooted in US mainstream academic thinking and shared at the government level, above all, at a time when an emotional leader, such as Trump, came to the presidency. Therefore, it also shifts attention to the implications of what we as scholars accept as sound interpretations of international politics and whose adequacy we tend not to question. Such an attitude may lead to stereotypical understandings, making theory emerge as a distorting lens of social reality rather than an explanatory tool for understanding this.

To substantiate this argument, the analysis proceeds by adopting a three-stage approach. First, it explains the existence of biased social representations of international politics by applying a cross-disciplinary framework that intertwines a

² Pan (2004, 313) recognises how there is an ‘autobiographical nature in the US’ in treating the ‘other’ as an external enemy and how, in this regard, the China Threat responds to the US identity’s need to define itself through otherness.

³ On the importance for China to defend its reputation and status as a great power, see Deng (2008).

⁴ In 2020, the Pew Research Centre published a report investigating the deterioration of China’s perception in different countries. In 2018, 15% of US people surveyed said they share an unfavourable view of China, while in summer 2020, this figure rose to 42% (23% in spring 2019 and 33% in the spring of 2020) (Pew Research Center 2020). See also Gries and Jing (2019), who tested the impact of the narrative of the China Threat on individuals in the US starting from 2015, detecting an increase in the ‘altered by the media’ perceptions concerning the likelihood of the US-China military conflict.

⁵ In his book, Nymalm (2020) elaborates extensively on the roots of the economic China threat to explain how this was not new in Trump’s narrative, but nonetheless an attitude that his administration has exacerbated.



constructivist perspective from IR theory (Wendt 1992, 1999) with social psychology, by referring to the Social Representations Theory, as other IR scholars have previously done (Larson and Shevchenko 2019; Ward 2017), but also to theories of stereotypes (Augoustinos and Walker 1998; LaViolette and Silvert 1951). In so doing, it offers an innovative approach to discuss great powers relations at the present day, further contributing to the ongoing debate in the IR literature questioning the interpretations suggested by mainstream theory (George and Campbell 1990; Jones 2021; Turner 2014; Turner and Nymalm 2019; Wendt 1998). Second, it delves into how the China Threat has been elaborated in the US scholarly agenda, focusing on the diffusion of the expressions 'Thucydides' Trap' and 'New Cold War', which have helped popularise the belief of China as a threat also in the US political debate (Gries and Jing 2019; Yang and Liu 2012; Winkler and Jerdén 2023). Third, the article explores the extent to which the China Threat has found an outlet in the narrative adopted by the White House, in particular during the years of the Trump administration.

Stereotypes in IR theory

To discuss the existence of stereotypical thinking in IR theory and its implications on international politics, the article adopts a theoretical framework drawn on the constructivist paradigm. One of the main contributions of constructivism is understanding politics as socially constructed, making it possible to appreciate the impact of ideational variables in interaction among international actors. Furthermore, constructivist scholars pave the way to intertwine IR theory with other social sciences, including social psychology (Jervis 2017; Wendt 1999) to which this study also refers. Specifically, it deals with the Social Representations Theory developed by the psychologist Serge Moscovici (1984; Moscovici and Farr 1984), who argues that individuals construct the social significance of what they perceive through the senses, by 'literally re-present(ing)' social reality (Neumann 2008, 61) coherent with a set of pre-existing information. This not only emphasises the importance of shared beliefs and ideas in shaping our social reality, a concept that constructivism also embraces, but it explains how people use social representations to navigate the complexities of the world in which they live.

Social representations are indeed necessary to give meaning to experiences and transform them into usable knowledge. This is a process driven by two main socio-cognitive mechanisms: 'anchoring' and 'objectification' (Moscovici 1984). Anchoring is the practice whereby individuals relate new and pre-existing information, comparing what is still unknown with what one had previously learnt. It helps to decode, store, and categorise the flow of input received from outside and to draw parallels with what people already understand. For example, naming—i.e. giving something a name—is a case of anchoring, as it connects what is foreign to our experience and labels this consistently with a known 'category' of things, events and emotions (Lippmann 1992). Instead, objectification supports individuals in dealing with the excess of abstract meaning, which is created when they translate the multitude of information they receive from outside. It consists in considering social



representations as if they were concrete aspects of reality so that one can ‘[...] touch and thus control’ them (Höjjer 2011, 7). Objectification helps communicate intangible concepts and grasp them as if they were physical objects, making individuals easier to work with (Staerklé 2009, 1099–1100).

Both cognitive mechanisms can lead to the production of stereotypes, as these are predisposed to oversimplifying and generalising experiences, encouraging people to accept social constructions as factual.⁶ Stereotypes can be seen as the result of these processes whenever individuals anchor new information by associating it with pre-existing knowledge and store it in simplified categories, which they objectify to the point of believing it to be real.

Stereotypes tend to proliferate when, in order to gain an immediate understanding of the world (Fiske 2000), individuals feel the need to reduce its interpretation to what they find satisfactory. This, however, narrows their awareness of available information, diverting attention to what is consistent with their expectations and emotions and ignoring other evidence.⁷

Once established, this makes stereotypes persistent and resistant to change (LaViolette and Silvert 1951),⁸ as they are hesitant to refutation but prone to confirming convictions already held by individuals. The inherent cognitive mechanism of stereotypes hence can be defined as ‘self-protective’, as it is closed to receiving external information, and ‘self-feeding’ as it inclines to reproduce a representation of social reality that is always the same. It follows that stereotypical thinking is difficult to reverse if set in motion.

This article further explores whether mainstream IR theories, mostly the realist school(s), have contributed to providing stereotypical representations of international politics believing in the general application of their arguments to all places at all times. Like constructivist and critical scholars point out even a theory can be affected by stereotypical representations. For example, Wendt (1998, 106) argues that: ‘What we see in the world is always and necessarily mediated by the background understandings we bring to bear on our inquiries’ and consequently, as elaborated by Jones (2021, 87), can be influenced by ‘[...] the biases and imperfections of humans’. This is a tendency that mostly becomes evident when a theoretical approach is based on a single view of social reality. In this regard, Cynthia Weber (2021, 6–7) labels mainstream approaches as ‘myths’, namely the products

⁶ When the concept of stereotype applies to the interaction between individuals, indeed, this is defined as a process of generalisation and categorization (Tajfel 1969) according to which the same characteristics are assigned to all members of a given group disregarding the differences among them (Aronson et al. 2010).

⁷ This is what is referred to in the psychological literature as ‘confirmation bias’ (Nickerson 1998), namely a predisposition to define first and observe second (Katz and Braly 1933).

⁸ The etymology of the word stereotypes derives from the ancient Greek *στερεός* (*stereos*), which means stiff. Following the invention of printing, the same word was employed to indicate the metal plate used for printing more copies of the same newspaper. To link the term stereotypes to a social and psychological dimension was Walter Lippmann who, in 1922, published a book entitled ‘Public Opinion’, in which he defined stereotypes as the ‘pictures in our heads’ (Lippmann, 1997). On persistence and rigidity of stereotypes, see Alexander, Brewer and Hermann (1999, 78), Augoustinos and Walker (1998), Lippmann (1997), Rokeach (1948).



of certain cultural practices, which also suffer from a biased perspective, through which scholars have explained international politics.

For decades, realist thinkers have framed IR as essentially conflicting and theorised a complex cluster of ideas and theoretical models consistent with this belief (Gilpin 1981; Morgenthau 1948; Organski 1968; Waltz 1979). Some of them have reiterated how the emergence of a rising power leads to an almost inevitable competition with the incumbent one (Mearsheimer 2001, 2006). In some cases, they have empirically supported their hypotheses by drawing upon historical analogies (Allison 2017b). Historical analogies, projecting the past onto the current or future situations, may suffer from simplifications and generalisations, leading to a superficial understanding and inaccurate representations of the facts with which the comparison is made (Karner and Mertens 2013, 9–10). Analogical reasoning is associated with stereotypes, being based on the cognitive mechanisms of anchoring, when new information is linked to familiar categories, and objectification, when abstract 'historical lessons' are treated as concrete principles. Like Khong (2020, 212) writes: 'When faced with a new situation, individuals turn to their repertoire of historical memories to make sense of this', seeking to find patterns from the past to guide their understanding of the world around them.

Against this background, the conflictual nature of IR is an assumption that realism, and particularly offensive realism, has not questioned but that been applied to explain the recent US-China rivalry, as a rising power challenging the hegemonic one. This has resulted in what Turner and Nymalm (2019, 409) call 'ordering narratives', that is, stories whose function is to replicate 'selective logics about the world and actors within it'. Alternative theoretical approaches have also emerged within the IR literature, providing different interpretations of the relationship between these two powers, also in an attempt to overcome the Western-centric perspective (Acharya 2014, 2017; Buzan and Zhang, 2012; Pan 2004, 2012; Storey and Yee 2004). However, using offensive realism as a lens for understanding US-China relations remains a mainstream view and the notion of the China Threat continues to be recurrent.⁹ This partly confirms the hesitation of some scholars, as well as opinion leaders, policymakers, and a portion of the public, to see international affairs beyond realist core beliefs. Furthermore, it signals how this assumption is affected by static interpretations of social reality, mostly inherent in the stereotypical thinking that international relations are anarchic and therefore prone to conflict. This has contributed to the possibility of a conflict between Beijing and Washington being perceived as inevitable (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019), even at a time when the two powers were not competing.¹⁰

⁹ On criticisms of offensive realism as a lens for US-China relations see also Kirshner (2012; 2019, 59–62). Although the author criticises offensive realism, he still suggests an approach based on classical realism as a solution, 'to accommodate its (China's) peaceful rise to great power status' (Kirshner 2019, 71).

¹⁰ Up until the first decade of the 2000s, the US and China had maintained a decent interaction, even in moments of crisis – to mention the most relevant, the Taiwan strait in 1995–1996, the bombing of the US-led NATO coalition of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, and the air collision in 2001 between a US spy-plane and a Chinese fighter jet in the proximity of the Hainan Island. Nonetheless, realists have continued to describe China as an eventual threat to US security.



The China Threat: a trope in IR theory

Since the early nineties, China's impressive economic growth has attracted the attention of IR scholars, many of whom postulated that, within a few decades, it would have presented a challenge to the US leadership (Friedberg 1993; Huntington 1996; Johnston 1998; Krauthammer 2002; Mearsheimer 2001, 2006). Offensive realists believe it inevitable that a rising power like China would have entered into competition with the existing one, the US, turning this into a trope of the literature.

In support of this argument, in one of his early works, the scholar Alastair Iain Johnston argued how China pursues a *realpolitik* strategy, which he associated with a '*parabellum*'—prepared for war—behaviour (Johnston 1998). At a time when concerns about China's economic growth were spreading, Johnston, one of the leading experts on Chinese foreign policy, provided a conceptual framework that anticipated the eventuality of a conflict. In doing so, he grounded this outlook in the Chinese historical context and cultural background, further entrenching the spread of a stereotypical representation of politics.

Over time, however, Johnston has revised his portrayal of China, even recommending a less hawkish US approach. In his latest publications, he not only criticised the tendency of Trump's administration to demonise the Beijing government (Johnston 2019b), but also questioned the US engagement strategy towards China because it was partly associated with the attempt to democratise it. This provoked a narrative of the failure of the engagement policy, leading the US to gradually move away from it (Johnston 2019a, 100).

Although Johnston's perspectives evolved, the notion of the China Threat has persisted, resonating in both academic discourse and government considerations. Most of all, it found an outlet during Trump's years as president when this was brought back into the spotlight, mainly thanks to the spread of two expressions: the Thucydides' Trap and New Cold War. Both of these terms endorse a stereotypical social representation of international politics, through what can be defined as 'the use of facile historical analogies' (Sierp and Karner 2017, 8) that allow anchoring and objectifying social reality to an idea of conflict (Khong 2020). Analogies can therefore be another hallmark of stereotype propagation (Karner and Mertens 2013), if they are applied to read the present but standardise this into an oversimplified version of the past. When this happens, analogies tend to self-confirm their validity, rather than looking at experiences that might contradict what is being talked about, thus producing stereotypical thinking.

The Thucydides' Trap

In 2017, the realist scholar Graham Allison (2017b), published a book entitled 'Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?',¹¹ which explores the propensity to conflict among great powers. Allison argues that conflict is the almost inevitable consequence of the deadlock situation, which occurs when

¹¹ See also Allison (2015).



the gap between an established power and an emerging one starts to close, creating the 'trap'. In those circumstances, the status quo power feels threatened and tries to countenance the advent of the new power, stimulating an escalation of tensions. Moreover, both the two powers are influenced by a zero-sum logic according to which any gain for one side is perceived as a loss for the other, preventing any possibility of cooperation. The established power and the rising one are, hence, most likely to be destined for war. In corroborating his approach, Allison discusses several case-studies in which the advent of a competitive and powerful rival challenged the survival of the incumbent power,¹² taking lead from the war described by the ancient historian Thucydides between Athens and Sparta (431–411 BC). Consequently, Allison resolves, as occurred with other rising powers against the hegemonic one in the past, China could sooner or later challenge the US if nothing is done to prevent this from happening.

In a short time, Allison's book turned into a classic piece of IR theory and the term 'Thucydides's Trap', while already in use amongst realist scholars (Brzezinski 2014; Shirk 2008, 4; Welch 2003, 304; Zoellick 2013), became known to the public at large, with mentions not only in academia but also the Western media¹³ to indicate a potential clash between Beijing and Washington.¹⁴

The attractiveness of Allison's Thucydides's Trap was likely due to the ease with which it allowed the reader to grasp international politics (Caffarena 2018, 102), namely on the belief that history has a tendency to repeat itself, and on its timing. Firstly, by appealing to the historical analogy (Peters et al. 2022, 1506–1507), it upheld the perception that US authority would be challenged by China only because other powers have done it in past, ignoring the existence of potential circumstances that might disprove the occurrence of such a scenario. This is clearly a stereotypical way of thinking. Secondly, the book was published at the same time as the incipient dissemination of Trumpian anti-Chinese rhetoric, followed by the adoption of an increasingly assertive attitude by the Beijing government. The combination of these two factors arguably contributed to the perception in the US public opinion that China was an imminent threat to US security. Shortly afterwards, given the possibility of an imminent conflict between great powers, a new expression began to circulate, suggesting that the US was on the verge of a New Cold War.

¹² In his book, Allison defined twelve of the sixteen cases analysed as cases of hegemonic transitions. Consistent with what Nye (2020) argues, however, some deserved a different understanding which it lacks because of a tendency to generalise. See also Kirshner (2019, 52–53).

¹³ After the publication of his book, Allison also published many policy opinions and commentaries in newspapers on the Thucydides's Trap and the eventuality of a conflict between China and the US. See Allison (2017a, 2018a, b). In 2018, Graham Allison also was invited to participate in a TED Talks talking about Thucydides's Trap (TED 2018).

¹⁴ It is a well-known fact that the Chinese president Xi (2015) also quoted the concept of the Thucydides' Trap, in a speech he delivered in the US to reaffirm the importance of keeping up good relations between the two countries without compromising them because of prejudice. However, the expression 'Thucydides' Trap' did not become as famous as it began to be after the publication of Allison's work.



The new cold war

The expression New Cold War has been picked up by a number of IR scholars over the last three decades, when tensions arose between the US and other rising powers, in particular, Russia¹⁵ and China, suggesting an historical analogy with the Cold War era.¹⁶ In relation to the case of China, such a catchphrase was first mentioned on occurrence of the mid-nineties Taiwan Strait missile crisis (Shambaugh 1995),¹⁷ when Beijing conducted a set of missile tests near Taiwan's coasts. To counterbalance China's military presence around the island, the US staged a display of its aircraft carriers in the Strait, in support of the Taipei government. According to Shambaugh, the situation was reminiscent of the tense atmosphere of the Cold War, but in new clothes and with new protagonists.¹⁸

Nonetheless, it was with Trump's arrival in the presidency that academic publications investigating a Cold War-like struggle, which sees China as a rival to the US, remarkably increased (Brands and Gaddis 2021; Goldstein 2020; Mearsheimer 2021; Westad 2019).¹⁹ Analogously, a series of articles were released in renowned US newspapers, also authored by prominent IR scholars (Allison 2018b; Kupchan 2023), featuring the term New Cold War in the headlines.²⁰

The New Cold War offered an easy-to-understand and catchy explanation regarding the ongoing deterioration of relations between the two countries for two main reasons. To begin with, as little over thirty years had passed since the end of the Cold War, the memory of the US-USSR rivalry was still quite fresh in people's minds.²¹ Although 'New', the expression Cold War thus evoked a scenario that most individuals could understand. Then, by including the word 'war', this directly anchored the idea of an impending conflict that unsurprisingly attracts the public's attention.

¹⁵ After the war in Georgia in 2008 and the conflict in eastern Ukraine that began in 2014, followed by the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, there have been frequent comparisons describing relations between Russia and the US as a new Cold War (Kalb 2015; Lucas 2014; Sakwa 2021; Smith 2019).

¹⁶ Buzan (2006) also asks whether it is possible to talk about a New Cold War concerning the rise of international terrorism.

¹⁷ In this regard, as early as 1995, Nye (1995, 94) warned that treating China as an enemy, as suggested by the scenario of the New Cold War, might result in a self-fulfilling prophecy. See also Roy (1996).

¹⁸ After Shambaugh, also Friedberg (2005, 8) used this term over the years to describe the evolution of US-China relations.

¹⁹ In contrast, others offered critical considerations about the idea of the New Cold War (Campbell and Sullivan 2019; Christensen 2021; Nye 2021), nonetheless, favouring the promotion and diffusion of the expression.

²⁰ To mention a few, Gladstone (2020); Osnos (2023); Rachman, (2020). On 'the increase in the number of new articles that include that words 'China' and 'threat' in close proximity' see also Winkler and Jerdén (2023, 162).

²¹ Many of the authors who have quoted this expression have focused on the similarities between today's competition between the US and China and that with the USSR. Westad (2019) even published an article on Foreign Affairs titled, 'The Sources of Chinese conduct: are Washington and Beijing Fighting a New Cold War', which was an apparent reference to the article written for the same journal by Kennan (1947) 'The Sources of Soviet Conduct', which symbolically marked the beginning of the Cold War.



However, the historical analogy with the Cold War has been misleading in portraying US-China relations. On the one hand, it attached to their rivalry a typical Cold War image of a world divided into two camps, each with its own clashing ideology. It was a perspective that had not been applied to US–China relations before this expression became popular. On the other one, it left out one of the main features of the Cold War period: the nuclear deterrence between the two superpowers, which had made a direct confrontation between the US and the USSR unlikely. The combination of these factors returned a defective analogy, which reduced social reality to an idea of confrontation largely based on a stereotypical interpretation of China as a threat to the US. The term New Cold War mainly offered a generalised reading of the present connecting this to a past struggle between superpowers, but selecting which elements from the historical analogy to keep and which to eliminate. As a result, as Campbell and Sullivan (2019, 98) argue, the correlation between the old and new Cold War has 'exaggerate(d) the existential threat posed by China', to the point that the Trump administration has become obsessed—at least, rhetorically—with containing it.

The China threat in the Trumpian era

With the arrival at the US presidency of Trump and the turnover of the government staff and foreign policy experts to shadow him (McCourt 2020),²² the China Threat became crucial in the White House agenda and narrative, provoking a more hostile US posture towards Beijing.²³ The trade war, characterised by contentious negotiations, tariff increases and trade disputes between the US and China, was a significant step in this direction. It was initiated by Trump's administration in 2018 as a response to China's long-term unfair trading practices and non-compliance with international standards, which had contributed to making Chinese products cheaper while undermining the attractiveness of the US industry, primarily regarding the high technology sector. Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China has begun to highly invest in tech-production (Pei 2020, 85), contending the market with the US – and other US-friendly leading countries in the field, like Japan and South Korea (Bell et al. 2023).

Alongside economic barriers and bans, Trump routinised the use of hostile language against Beijing, confirming the undiplomatic style exhibited during his election campaign. The scale of the China Threat grew in the Trumpian anti-Chinese

²² Among those in Trump's administration who had an exaggeratedly anti-Chinese view were Steve Bannon, the White House Chief Strategist – removed from his office after only seven months – Peter Navarro, Director of Trade and Manufacturing Policy and co-author of the book 'Death by China' (Navarro and Autry 2011) on the threat by China to US economic dominance, and Michael Pillsbury, author of 'The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as a Global Superpower' (Pillsbury 2015), who was considered by President Trump to be one of the leading experts on China.

²³ However, it should be noted that Trump's behaviour towards China has not always been consistent. As Balduino and Dian (2018, 25) point out, mainly during his first years in office, Trump often criticised the Beijing government but also emphasised a special relationship with Xi Jinping, praising his achievements in governing the country.



rhetoric. Within a few years, China went from being described as a danger to US security, to that of its citizens, and ultimately to the entire LIO, fitting rather well Trump's legitimisation strategy. Similarly, Trump largely built his consensus through a narrative designed to persuade people to confront what he portrayed as an imminent threat.²⁴ Likewise, it neither explores how domestic legitimacy was sought through a discourse that delegitimises 'external' actors, which is not the goal of this analysis. Instead, it focuses on how Trump, by adopting more anti-Chinese rhetoric than any previous administration, has facilitated the wider transmission and reinforcement of the social representation of China as a threat to the US public. As George and Campbell write (1990, 288), '[...] The "world" we so often take for granted was not given by nature, convened by God, or planned by the intentions of statesmen: It came to be through multiple political practices related as much to the constitution of various subjectivities as to the international action of predetermined subjects.'

During the Trump presidency, therefore, the concept of the China Threat has largely circulated both at the academic and governmental levels, progressing in parallel with the entrenchment of the rivalry between the US and China, whose relations shifted from deep competition to sharp confrontation. This US stance, characterised by confrontation policies and rhetoric, significantly contributed to the intensification of tension with China, which has responded in assertive tones to the US attempts to contain its power and damage its reputation. It was, indeed, when the concept of the China Threat was embedded into the Trump administration's narrative that US–China relations reached their lowest point (Nymalm 2020, 188).

In detail, since his run for the White House began, Trump and those in his administration essentially echoed the realist belief explained by Thucydides' Trap, which was gaining popularity at the time, that a rising power may be a threat to the established one (The White House 2017, 23–24; Trump 2020e). Taking advantage of a domestic audience that was more receptive to the idea of China as a defying power, Trump pursued a nationalist foreign policy focused on US interests, which compromised the dialogue—as a battle of narratives began—and relations with Beijing. Most American IR scholars and pundits read the situation as evidence of impending hostility that realists had long foreseen. As Allison said in an interview with Bloomberg Surveillance: 'Donald Trump is in effect an expression of what Thucydides would call the ruling power syndrome that is fearful of a China that has been growing and is having greater impact on our lives every day' (Allison 2017c). Differently, few questioned whether the China Threat was actually acting as a self-fulfilling prophecy, inducing both parts to act consistent with stereotypical expectations attached to this representation of international politics.

Trump's temperament, and that of prominent members of his cabinet, like vice-president Mike Pence, the secretary of state Mike Pompeo and the national security advisor Robert O'Brien, also played a crucial role. Trump was, quoting Turner and

²⁴ On the topic, reference is made to the existing literature (Holland and Fermor 2017; Homolar and Scholz 2019; Jaworsky and Qiaoan 2021; Kowalski 2018; Löffmann 2022; Turner and Kaarbo 2021).



Kaarbo (2021, 462), '[...] unusually emotive for a sitting US president', and surrounded by people who shared with him the tendency to dichotomize social reality, and which found an outlet in the growing competition with China.²⁵ From the trade war onward, the more interactions with Beijing soured, the more Trump's administration conveyed the impression that if the US was unable to preserve its authority over China, this would become hegemonic and promote an illiberal version of the international order where its fundamental values would no longer be guaranteed (The White House 2017, 2, 55; 2020, 4–6). Specifically, they began to accuse China of not respecting liberal civil and political liberties, showing an unexpected interest in protecting these principles, considering President Trump's intentions to disengage the US from the role of guarantor of a universal liberal order (Chan 2021; Peterson 2018).²⁶ For one thing, US citizens were told that China was interfering with their privacy by spying on American users of TikTok (Trump 2020a, 2020b). Then, when it came to light in the US public debate,²⁷ the smothering of Hong Kong and the systematic suppression of the Uyghur minority let the Trump administration boost the propagation of alarming rhetoric towards China's human rights abuses (O'Brien 2020; Pompeo 2020; Trump 2019a, b, 2020e; b).²⁸ Making the picture even worse was the spread of COVID-19 in early 2020, when Trump blamed Beijing with hiding the contagion, infecting the world and challenging anyone's health and security, going so far as to repeatedly term the pandemic 'the Chinese virus' (Trump 2020b; c) —or using an overtly racist language, the 'Kung Flu' (Trump 2020c).

Through this narrative, Trump has influenced the degree to which US society fears China (Lerner 2021; Turner 2013), paving the way for further association of China as 'other' by emphasising its differences to the US-led West (Pan 2004; Turner 2013; 2014, 21). Such a renewed concern about the China's rise developed in parallel with improved attention in academia to the notion of the New Cold War. During the years of Trump's administration, the confrontation with China took on a deeper dimension, becoming a matter of identity for the US. This meant that every interaction with Beijing was framed not just as a political or economic struggle, but as a battle for the soul of the world that the US had to win in order to protect and

²⁵ On the tendency of President Trump and his staff to exacerbate tensions by spreading a narrative in which those who did not act in accordance with US interests were considered enemies, see also Ducci and Lucenti (2022), who examine the US contestation against the International Criminal Court and the norm of non-impunity in Trump's era.

²⁶ At the beginning of his term, Trump did not show a particular commitment to human rights protection and was rather indifferent to what was happening in Chinese civil society. When in July 2019, in a meeting that President Trump held with the survivors in religious persecutions, one of the guests, Ms. Ilham, asked him: 'Mr. President, one to three million Uyghur population are locked up in concentration camps in China, including my father, who is now serving a life sentence. I haven't seen him since 2013', Trump replied, 'Where is that? Where is that in China?' (Trump 2019b).

²⁷ It was the publication of the reportage 'The Xinjiang Papers', published by The New York Times, that brought American public attention to the genocide of the Uyghurs (Ramzy and Buckley 2019).

²⁸ As Trump (2020b) affirmed '[...] the world is still plagued by tragic human rights abuses [...]. My Administration continues to fight these injustices on all fronts [...] and also seeks to combat human rights abuses abroad, like the mass imprisonment of religious minorities in China, which are often obscured by a cloud of false information online'.



promote the values and identity that the US believed it represented.²⁹ However, giving US–China relations the dimension and complexity of an ideological rivalry radicalised in-depth the hostility between the two countries, making their diplomatic dialogue more difficult to restore, even when Trump left the White House.

When elected in late 2020, President Joseph Biden instead rejected the portrayal of China as an ‘enemy’ while considering it as the US’s ‘most serious competitor’ (Biden 2021). Nonetheless, the narrative adopted by the Trump administration has left its mark on the relationship between the two powers.³⁰ The US has adopted what seems to be a long-lasting hostile attitude towards Beijing, leading to the definitive end of the policy of engagement pursued until then (Campbell and Sullivan 2019, 96). In turn, China, which has expressed its discontent with the trade war, sanctions or being described as a threat to the LIO, is now considerably less sympathetic to the US than in the past (Fang et al. 2022). To complicate the picture, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and Beijing’s choice not to take sides against Russia, are further exacerbating the friction between the US and China, whose relations have increasingly settled on an identity-value clash.³¹

Conclusion

The article opens once again the debate on two relevant issues for those involved in IR theory: the validity of assumptions hitherto seen as capable of explaining international politics, and the impact of the scholarly agenda on foreign policy. In this respect, the realist version of the China Threat offers an interesting case of study, as the mounting competition between the US and China is an event that was first theorised and then gradually materialised in practice, being widely discussed in academia and whispered about in the White House since the early Nineties. This led to the question of whether IR theory, and the social representations it proposes, can act as a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ (Merton 1948; Wendt 1992, 410)—and whether realist beliefs about rising powers set the stage for perceptions of China. Such a description of great power relations may exhibit characteristics of stereotypical thinking and have influenced US–China interactions by inducing both countries to behave according to the prescriptions and conform to the expectations outlined in the concept of the China Threat. The creation of a threat is likely to require a response from the political leaders, thus escalating the risk of becoming trapped in unnecessary conflicts, as in the case of China, which has asserted itself more forcefully to protect its

²⁹ Zhao (2021, 2) writes that this behavior was mutual. During Trump’s administration, both China and the US began to consider ‘[...] each other as trying to subvert its political system and fight(ing) to preserve its exclusive way of life’.

³⁰ On more than one occasion Biden has called the US–China relations as a battle between ‘autocracy versus democracy’ (Biden 2020, 2021).

³¹ During the Biden administration, the issue of China’s disregard for liberal values, first and foremost, human rights and democracy took prominence in his narrative. From the meeting in Alaska in 2021, although the Chinese and US delegations have met very little, these issues have been brought to the table by the US, in particular, by the Secretary of State Antony Blinken to emphasise the difference between liberal countries and the Beijing government. See, for instance, US Department of State (2021, 2023).



interests and preserve its reputation when faced with an increasingly confrontational approach from the US. Hence, while this analysis mainly focuses on the US, the emergence of competition between the two countries is also attributable to China, which under the leadership of Xi Jinping has become assertive towards the US-led West.³²

This awareness should invite reflection regarding the role of scholars and how the things we say might affect international politics. Emphasising the idea of a looming threat, may be found appealing by policymakers to legitimise themselves or their actions, and ultimately stimulate further anxiety in civil society. In a world where uncertainty dominates, the importance of providing a thoughtful understanding of international politics takes on a new urgency. Uncertainty is a key condition for the diffusion of stereotypical representations, the attractiveness of which intensifies to the extent that individuals need to decode social reality in a simplified way, anchoring to prior knowledge and objectifying it, as this is becoming a too complex and chaotic place to live in.

In conclusion, while the interaction between the US and China is still harsh, as an international environment based on mistrust, blame, and rivalry has been established today that is difficult to smooth, other and new interpretations need to be provided by IR scholars. However, it is also important to clarify that the primary objective of this article is not to present a definitive alternative approach to understanding the evolution of China–US relations. This manuscript instead draws attention to the presence of stereotypical representations in international politics and urges scholars to recognise and question assumptions that we often tend to accept as true. Against this backdrop the trajectory of Sino-American relations can be redefined in future research beyond the notion of the inevitable conflict between these two great powers, which is mostly attributable to theoretical discussions that originally emanated from Western academia. Although there is already a growing strand of IR literature that engages in this endeavour (Storey and Yee 2004; Dian 2022; Nordin and Smith 2022; Kavalski and Pan 2022), the knowledge of the China Threat as a stereotypical representation of international politics can indeed enhance the possibility of envisioning scenarios where cooperation and dialogue among powers are still achievable.

Acknowledgements The author is grateful to Matteo Dian, Silvia Menegazzi, Giuseppe Gabusi and the anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier versions of this article.

Funding Open access funding provided by Luiss University within the CRUI-CARE Agreement.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author certifies that she has no affiliation with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial or non-financial interests in the subject matter or materials discussed in the submitted manuscript.

³² Not only that, as examined by other authors, such as Cervasio, the idea of the China Threat has also spread beyond the US and the West, for example, to South Asia, and in particular, to India but also Taiwan, becoming a key aspect of anti-Chinese posturing in Asia (Cervasio 2023).



Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Acharya, A. 2014. *The End of American World Order*. Cambridge: Polity Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S089267941700020X>.
- Acharya, A. 2017. After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order. *Ethics & International Affairs* 31 (3): 271–285. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S089267941700020X>.
- Allison, G. 2015. The Thucydides Trap: Are the US and China Headed for War? *The Atlantic*, 24 September.
- Allison, G. 2017a. China vs. America: Managing the Next Clash of Civilizations. *Foreign Affairs* 96(5): 80–89.
- Allison, G. 2017b. *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* Boston-New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Allison, G. 2017c. Harvard's Allison Says Trump's Fearful of a Growing China. Bloomberg Surveillance. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w5LPkJK3W8w>, Accessed 4 October 2023.
- Allison, G. (2018a). Opinion: The Next Great War. *The Washington Post*, 9 November 2018. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-worldpost/wp/2018/11/09/china/>, Accessed 4 October 2023.
- Allison, G. (2018b). The US Is Hunkering Down for a New Cold War with China. *Financial Times*, 12 October. *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/666b0230-cd7b-11e8-8d0b-a6539b949662>, Accessed 4 October 2023.
- Aronson, E., T. Wilson, and R. Akert. 2010. *Social Psychology*, 7th ed. New York: Pearson.
- Augustinos, M., and I. Walker. 1998. The Construction of Stereotypes within Social Psychology: From Social Cognition to Ideology. *Theory & Psychology* 8 (5): 629–652. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354398085003>.
- Baldaro, E., and M. Dian. 2018. Trump's Grand Strategy and the Post-American World Order. *Interdisciplinary Political Studies* 4 (1): 17–45. <https://doi.org/10.1285/i20398573v4n1p17>.
- Bell, C., Collinson, E., and Shi, X. (2023). The China Factor in Japan-South Korea Rapprochement. *The Diplomat*. 31 May 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/05/the-china-factor-in-japan-south-korea-rapprochement/>, Accessed 4 October 2023.
- Biden, J. 2020. Why America Must Lead Again. Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump. *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020.
- Biden, J. 2021. Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World. The White House.
- Brands, H., and Gaddis J. 2021. The New Cold War: America, China, and the Echoes of History. *Foreign Affairs* (November/December).
- Broomfield, E. 2003. Perceptions of Danger: The China Threat Theory. *Journal of Contemporary China* 12 (35): 265–284. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1067056022000054605>.
- Brzezinski, Z. 2014. Can China Avoid the Thucydides Trap? *New Perspectives Quarterly* 31 (2): 31–33. <https://doi.org/10.1111/npqu.11444>.
- Buzan, B. 2006. Will the 'Global War on Terrorism' Be the New Cold War? *International Affairs* 82 (6): 1101–1118. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2006.00590.x>.
- Buzan, B., and L. Hansen. 2012. Widening and Deepening Security. In *The Evolution of International Security Studies*, ed. B. Buzan and L. Hansen, 187–225. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Caffarena, A. 2018. *La Trappola di Tucidide e Altre Immagini. Perché la politica internazionale sembra non cambiare mai*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Campbell, K., and J. Sullivan. 2019. Competition without Catastrophe: How American Can Both Challenge and Coexist with China. *Foreign Affairs* 98 (6): 91–111.



- Cervasio, C. 2023. Exercising Status Recognition Sensibility: The Empathic De-escalation of the Sino-Indian 1998 Status Dilemma. *International Relations*: 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178231186270>.
- Chan, S. 2021. Challenging the Liberal Order: The US Hegemon as a Revisionist Power. *International Affairs* 97 (5): 1335–1352. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iab074>.
- Christensen, T. 2021. There Will Not Be a New Cold War. The Limits of U.S.–Chinese Competition. *Foreign Affairs*, 24 March.
- Deng, Y. 2008. *China's Struggle for Status*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511790768>.
- Dian, M. 2022. The Rise of China between Global IR and Area Studies: An Agenda for Cooperation. *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana Di Scienza Politica* 52 (2): 252–267. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2021.31>.
- Ducci, C., and F. Lucenti. 2022. 'Contestation from Within': US Escalating Aversion to the International Criminal Court and the Non-impunity Norm in the Trump Era. *Interdisciplinary Political Studies* 8 (2): 281–297. <https://doi.org/10.1285/i20398573v8n2p281>.
- Fang, S., X. Li, and A. Liu. 2022. Chinese Public Opinion about US–China Relations from Trump to Biden. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 15 (1): 27–46. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poac001>.
- Fiske, S. 2000. Stereotyping, Prejudice, and Discrimination at the Seam between the Centuries: Evolution, Culture, Mind, and Brain. *European Journal of Social Psychology*. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1099-0992\(200005/06\)30:3%3c299::AID-EJSP2%3e3.0.CO;2-F](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-0992(200005/06)30:3%3c299::AID-EJSP2%3e3.0.CO;2-F).
- Frauen, J. 2021. Narrations of the 'China Threat': An Analysis of the Discursive Roots of US-Western China Perception from the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century until the Trump Presidency. *International Communication of Chinese Culture* 8 (3): 363–389. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40636-021-00229-x>.
- Friedberg, A. 1993. Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia. *International Security* 18 (3): 5–33. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539204>.
- Friedberg, A. 2005. The Future of US-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable? *International Security* 30 (2): 7–45. <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228805775124589>.
- Geis, A., and C. Wunderlich. 2014. The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Comparing the Notions of 'Rogue' and 'Evil' in International Politics. *International Politics* 51 (4): 458–474. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2014.19>.
- George, J., and D. Campbell. 1990. Patterns of Dissent and the Celebration of Difference: Critical Social Theory and International Relations. *International Studies Quarterly* 34 (3): 269. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2600570>.
- Gilpin, R. 1981. *War and Change in World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511664267>.
- Gladstone, R. 2020. How the Cold War Between China and US Is Intensifying. *The New York Times*, 22 July 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/22/world/asia/us-china-cold-war.html>, Accessed 4 October 2023.
- Goldstein, A. 2020. US–China Rivalry in the Twenty-First Century: Déjà vu and Cold War II. *China International Strategy Review* 2 (1): 48–62. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-020-00036-w>.
- Gries, P. 2005. Social Psychology and the Identity-Conflict Debate: Is a 'China Threat' Inevitable? *European Journal of International Relations* 11 (2): 235–265. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066105052966>.
- Gries, P., and Y. Jing. 2019. Are the US and China Fated to Fight? How Narratives of 'Power Transition' Shape Great Power War or Peace. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32 (4): 456–482. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1623170>.
- Hagström, L., and K. Gustafsson. 2019. Narrative Power: How Storytelling Shapes East Asian International Politics. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32 (4): 387–406. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1623498>.
- Höijer, B. 2011. Social Representations Theory. *Nordicom Review* 32 (2): 3–16. <https://doi.org/10.1515/nor-2017-0109>.
- Holland, J., and B. Fermor. 2017. Trump's Rhetoric at 100 Days: Contradictions within Effective Emotional Narratives. *Critical Studies on Security* 5 (2): 182–186. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2017.1355157>.



- Homolar, A., and R. Scholz. 2019. The Power of Trump-Speak: Populist Crisis Narratives and Ontological Security. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32 (3): 344–364. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1575796>.
- Huntington, S. 1996. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Jaworsky, B., and R. Qiaoan. 2021. The Politics of Blaming: The Narrative Battle between China and the US over COVID-19. *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 26 (2): 295–315. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-020-09690-8>.
- Jervis, R. 2017. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 2nd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400885114>.
- Johnston, AI. 2019a. The Failures of the ‘Failure of Engagement’ with China. *The Washington Quarterly* 42 (2): 99–114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2019.1626688>.
- Johnston, AI. 2019b. Shaky Foundations: The ‘Intellectual Architecture’ of Trump’s China Policy. *Survival* 61 (2): 189–202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2019.1589096>.
- Johnston, AI. 1998. *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*. Princeton University Press.
- Jones, C. 2021. Western Centric Research Methods?. *Journal of ASEAN Studies* 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.21512/jas.v9i1.7380>.
- Kalb, M. 2015. *Imperial Gamble: Putin, Ukraine, and the New Cold War*. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Karner, C., and B. Mertens. 2013. *The Use and Abuse of Memory: Interpreting World War II in Contemporary European Politics*. Piscataway: Transaction Publishers.
- Katz, D., and K. Braly. 1933. Racial Stereotypes of One Hundred College Students. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 28(3), 280–290. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0074049>
- Kavalski, E., and Pan C. 2022. Epilogue: Towards International Relations beyond Binaries. In *China’s Rise and Rethinking International Relations Theory* ed., C. Pan and E. Kavalski, 234– 244. Bristol: Bristol University Press. <https://doi.org/10.51952/9781529212969.con001>.
- Kennan, G. 1947. *The Sources of Soviet Conduct*. Foreign Affairs.
- Khong, Y. 2020. *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvzxx9b5>.
- Kirshner, J. 2012. The Tragedy of Offensive Realism: Classical Realism and the Rise of China. *European Journal of International Relations* 18 (1): 53–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066110373949>.
- Kirshner, J. 2019. Offensive Realism, Thucydides Traps, and the Tragedy of Unforced Errors: Classical Realism and US–China Relations. *China International Strategy Review* 1 (1): 51–63. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-019-00013-y>.
- Kowalski, J. 2018. *Reading Donald Trump: A Parallax View of the Campaign and Early Presidency*. Cham: Springer.
- Krauthammer, C. 2002. The Unipolar Moment Revisited. *The National Interest* 70: 5–18.
- Kupchan, C. 2023. A New Cold War Could Be Much Worse Than the One We Remember. *The Atlantic*. June 3, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2023/06/cold-war-china-risks/674272/>, Accessed 4 October 2023.
- Larson, D., and A. Shevchenko. 2019. *Quest for Status: Chinese and Russian Foreign Policy*. New Haven: Yale University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvbnm3jd>.
- LaViolette, F., and K. Silvert. 1951. A Theory of Stereotypes. *Social Forces* 29 (3): 257–262. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2572414>.
- Lerner, A. 2021. Theorizing Unpredictability in International Politics: A New Approach to Trump and the Trump Doctrine. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 34 (3): 360–382. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2020.1842329>.
- Lippmann, W. 1992. *Public Opinion*. New York: Free Press Paperbacks.
- Löfflmann, G. 2022. Enemies of the People’: Donald Trump and the Security Imaginary of America First. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 24 (3): 543–560. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481211048499>.
- Lucas, E. 2014. *The New Cold War: Putin’s Russia and the Threat to the West*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- McCourt, D. 2020. The Domestic Resonance of Geopolitical Competition in American Foreign Policy: The Rise of China and Post-War US–Soviet Relations Compared. *International Politics* 57 (1): 21–40. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-019-00174-y>.



- McDonald, M. 2008. Securitization and the Construction of Security. *European Journal of International Relations* 14 (4): 563–587. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-019-00174-y>.
- Mearsheimer, J. 2001. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: Norton.
- Mearsheimer, J. 2006. China's Unpeaceful Rise. *Current History* 105 (690): 160–162. <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2006.105.690.160>.
- Mearsheimer, J. 2021. The Inevitable Rivalry: America, China, and the Tragedy of Great-Power Politics. *Foreign Affairs* 100 (6): 48–58.
- Merton, R. 1948. The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy. *The Antioch Review* 8 (2): 193–210. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4609267>.
- Morgenthau, H. 1948. *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Moscovici, S. 1984. The Phenomenon of Social Representation. In *Social Representations*, ed. S. Moscovici and R. Farr, 3–68. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Moscovici, S., and R. Farr. 1984. *Social Representations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Navarro, P., and Autry G. 2011. Death by China: Confronting the Dragon-A Global Call to Action. Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Neumann, I. 2008. Discourse Analysis. In *Qualitative Methods in International Relations*, ed. A. Klotz and D. Prakash, 61–77. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nickerson, R. 1998. Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises. *Review of General Psychology* 2 (2): 175–220. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.2.2.175>.
- Nordin, A., and Smith, G. 2022. Friendly Rise? China, the West and the Ontology of Relations. In *China's Rise and Rethinking International Relations Theory* ED., C. Pan and E. Kavalski, 83–101. Bristol: Bristol University Press. <https://doi.org/10.51952/9781529212969.ch004>.
- Nye, J. 2020. Power and Interdependence with China. *The Washington Quarterly* 43 (1): 7–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1734303>.
- Nye, J. 1995. The Case for Deep Engagement. *Foreign Affairs*: 90–102. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20047210>.
- Nye, J. 2021. With China, a 'Cold War' Analogy Is Lazy and Dangerous. *The New York Times*, 2 November.
- Nymalm, N. 2020. From 'Japan Problem' to 'China Threat'? *Rising Powers in US Economic Discourse. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-44951-3>.
- O'Brien, R. 2020. The Chinese Communist Party's Ideology and Global Ambitions. Remarks Delivered by National Security Advisor Robert C. O'Brien. June 24, 2020. Washington: The White House.
- Olesker, R. 2018. The Securitisation Dilemma: Legitimacy in Securitisation Studies. *Critical Studies on Security* 6 (3): 312–329. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2018.1427948>.
- Organski, A. 1968. *World Politics*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Osno, E. 2023. Sliding Toward a New Cold War. *The New Yorker*, 23 February 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/03/06/sliding-toward-a-new-cold-war>, Accessed 4 October 2023.
- Pan, C. 2004. The 'China Threat' in American Self-Imagination: The Discursive Construction of Other as Power Politics. *Alternatives* 29 (3): 305–331. <https://doi.org/10.1177/030437540402900304>.
- Pan, C. 2012. *Knowledge, Desire and Power in Global Politics: Western Representations of China's Rise*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Pei, M. 2020. China's Coming Upheaval: Competition, the Coronavirus, and the Weakness of Xi Jinping. *Foreign Affairs* 99: 82–95.
- Peters, M., B. Green, C. Mou, S. Hollings, M. Ogunniran, F. Rizvi, S. Rider, and R. Tierney. 2022. US–China Rivalry and 'Thucydides' Trap': Why This Is a Misleading Account. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 54 (10): 1501–1512. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1799739>.
- Peterson, J. 2018. Present at the Destruction? The Liberal Order in the Trump Era. *The International Spectator* 53 (1): 28–44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2018.1421295>.
- Pew Research Center, 2020. Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries.
- Pillsbury, M. 2015. *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Pompeo, M. 2020. Secretary Michael R. Pompeo Remarks at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum: 'Communist China and the Free World's Future'. July 23, 2020. In R. O'Brien, ed. *Trump on China. Putting America First*, Washington DC: The White House, 89–103.
- Rachman, G. 2020. A New Cold War: Trump, Xi and the Escalating US-China Confrontation. *Financial Times*, 4 October 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/7b809c6a-f733-46f5-a312-9152aed28172>, Accessed 4 October 2023.



- Ramzy, A., and Buckley C. 2019. The Xinjiang Papers. The New York Times, 16 November.
- Rokeach, M. 1948. Generalized Mental Rigidity as a Factor in Ethnocentrism. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0056134>.
- Roy, D. 1996. The 'China Threat' Issue: Major Arguments. *Asian Survey* 36 (8): 758–771. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2645437>.
- Sakwa, R. 2021. *Deception: Russiagate and the New Cold War*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Shambaugh, D. 1995. The United States and China: A New Cold War? *Current History* 94 (593): 241–247.
- Shirk, S. 2008. *China: Fragile Superpower*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sierp, A., and C. Karner. 2017. National Stereotypes in the Context of the European Crisis. *National Identities* 19 (1): 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2016.1209646>.
- Smith, N. 2019. *A New Cold War?: Assessing the Current US-Russia Relationship*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-20675-8>.
- Staerklé, C. 2009. Policy Attitudes, Ideological Values and Social Representations. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 3 (6): 1096–1112. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2009.00237.x>.
- Storey, I., and Yee H. 2004. *The China Threat. Perceptions, Myths and Reality*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203642795>.
- Tajfel, H. 1969. Cognitive Aspects of Prejudice. *Journal of Social Issue* 69: 797–811. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1969.tb00620.x>.
- The White House. 2017. *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Washington DC: The White House.
- Trump, D. 2019a. *Remarks by President Trump and Vice Premier Liu He of the People's Republic of China in a Meeting*. Washington DC: The White House.
- Trump, D. 2019b. *Remarks by President Trump in Meeting with Survivors of Religious Persecution*. Washington DC: The White House.
- Trump, D. 2020a. *Executive Order on Addressing the Threat Posed by TikTok*. Washington DC: The White House.
- Trump, D. 2020c. *Remarks by President Trump at a Turning Point Action Address to Young Americans*. Washington DC: The White House.
- Trump, D. 2020e. Remarks Delivered by President Donal J. Trump. May 30, 2020. In: R. O'Brien, ed. *Trump on China. Putting America First*, Washington DC: The White House, 33–38.
- Trump, D. 2015. Donald Trump Says 'China'. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDrfE9I8_hs, Accessed 4 October 2023.
- Trump, D. 2020b. Proclamation on Human Rights Day, Bill of Rights Day, and Human Rights Week, 2020. The White House.
- Turner, O. 2013. Threatening' China and US Security: The International Politics of Identity. *Review of International Studies* 39 (4): 903–924. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210512000599>.
- Turner, O., and J. Kaarbo. 2021. Predictably Unpredictable: Trump's Personality and Approach towards China. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 34 (3): 452–471. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2021.1879018>.
- Turner, O., and N. Nymalm. 2019. Morality and Progress: IR Narratives on International Revisionism and the Status Quo. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32 (4): 407–428. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1623173>.
- Turner, O. 2014. *American Images of China: Identity, Power, Policy*. Routledge. London. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315776705>.
- Turner, O. 2017. The United States and China: Raptures and Realignments in Trump's First Six Months. *Swedish Institute of International Affairs* (April 2017) (9): 3.
- US Department of State. 2021. Secretary Antony J. Blinken, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, Director Yang and State Councillor Wang at the Top of Their Meeting, March 18, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-chinese-director-of-the-office-of-the-central-commission-for-foreign-affairs-yang-jiechi-and-chinese-state-councillor-wang-yi-at-th/>, Accessed 4 October 2023.
- US Department of State. 2023. Secretary Blinken's Visit to the People's Republic of China (PRC), June 19, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-visit-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china-prc>, Accessed 4 October 2023.
- Waltz, K. 1979. *Theory of International Politics*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Ward, S. 2017. *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316856444>.



- Weber, C. 2021. *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 5th ed. London-New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003008644>.
- Welch, D. 2003. Why International Relations Theorists Should Stop Reading Thucydides. *Review of International Studies* 29 (3): 301–319. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210503003012>.
- Wendt, A. 1992. Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics. *International Organization* 46 (2): 391–425. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300027764>.
- Wendt, A. 1998. On Constitution and Causation in International Relations. *Review of International Studies* 24 (5): 101–118. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210598001028>.
- Wendt, A. 1999. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511612183>.
- Westad, O. 2019. The Sources of Chinese Conduct: Are Washington and Beijing Fighting a New Cold War. *Foreign Affairs* 98: 86.
- Winkler, S., and B. Jerdén. 2023. US Foreign Policy Elites and the Great Rejuvenation of the Ideological China Threat: The role of rhetoric and the ideologization of geopolitical threats. *Journal of International Relations and Development* 26(1): 159–184. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-022-00288-6>
- Xi, J. 2015. Full Text of Xi's Speech on China-US Relations in Seattle at the Welcoming Dinner Hosted by Local Governments And Friendly Organizations in the United States. China Internet Information Center.
- Xiying, Z. 2021. The Trump Effect: China's New Thoughts on the United States. *The Washington Quarterly* 44 (1): 107–127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1893515>.
- Yang, Y., and X. Liu. 2012. The 'China Threat' through the Lens of US Print Media: 1992–2006. *Journal of Contemporary China* 21 (76): 695–711. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2012.666838>.
- Zhang, Y., and B. Buzan. 2012. The Tributary System as International Society in Theory and Practice. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 5 (1): 3–36. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pos001>.
- Zhao, S. 2021. The US–China Rivalry in the Emerging Bipolar World: Hostility, Alignment, and Power Balance. *Journal of Contemporary China*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2021.1945733>.
- Zoellick, R. 2013. US, China and Thucydides. *The National Interest* 126: 22–30.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

