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The China Threat Narrative in American Bestselling Non-Fiction Books

East Asian Studies / Faculty of Social Sciences

Master's thesis

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In this thesis, I examine contemporary perceptions of the China threat in the United States by analyzing American bestselling, non-fiction literature. The purpose of the research is to investigate how China, and the perceived China threat, are portrayed and constructed. Additionally, I observe what types of policy recommendations the authors of the bestselling books propose for the American leadership to confront the challenge of a rising China. The data of the research consists of ten bestselling China threat books, released during the first term of Donald Trump (2017–2021) and the subsequent Joe Biden presidency (2021–2025). The books were selected from the Amazon.com ‘Bestsellers in Asian Politics’ -list. The research deploys thematic narrative analysis to trace patterns and identify reoccurring tropes in the China threat literature. The findings of the primary source analysis are interpreted by adopting Chengxin Pan’s China threat discourse -dichotomy and Weiqing Song’s three modes of securitizing the China threat.

The results of this research posit that the contemporary China threat literature reproduces popular threat tropes that have already been identified by previous research on the topic. These are: China as a military, ideological, political and economic threat. An additional threat category, representing China as a threat to the international system, was also identified. The study finds that the authors of the bestselling, China threat books propose containment and competition-oriented policy approaches for the US in order to respond to the challenges posed by a rising China. The primary source analysis further indicates that the authors mostly agree on the types of behavior that are interpreted as threatening towards the US. However, the authors’ assessments on China’s intentions differed considerably. Moreover, the research shows that the ten bestsellers belonging to the ‘China threat’ genre can be further categorized into two separate subgenres including popular books and expert manuals. Alternatively, Weiqing Song’s three modes of securitization can be used to interpret the books’ intentions and categorize them into distinct modes. Finally, the study extends some critique onto the China threat bestsellers for their biased representation and disregard for American strategies which have historically resembled those adopted by China today. The research concludes that the contemporary China threat literature is part of a historical continuum of Western and American representations of China. This representation has traditionally served the political interests of the West or the US and it contemporarily functions as a legitimizer of the American hegemonic position.

Key words: China, distribution of power, hegemony, international relations, the People’s Republic of China, narratives, othering, representation, securitization, Sino-US relations, the United States, the China threat

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Abbreviations

AI – Artificial intelligence

BLM – Black Lives Matter

BRI – Belt and Road Initiative

CCP – Chinese Communist Party

CFR – Council on Foreign Relations

CNP – Comprehensive National Power

IMF – International Monetary Fund

IR – International relations

MFN – Most-favored-nation

NSC – National Security Council

PLA – People’s Liberation Army

PRC – People’s Republic of China

ROC – Republic of China

UN – United Nations

US – United States of America

WB – World Bank

WHO – World Health Organization

WTO – World Trade Organization

1 Introduction

Those who play with fire will perish by it. It is hoped that the US will be clear-eyed about this.

– Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2022

These were the words conveyed by the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) General Secretary, Xi Jinping, to President Joe Biden during a phone call on July 28th, 2022. President Xi’s warning referred to the delicate issue of Taiwan. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) (2022) reported, that during the phone call, President Xi emphasized the role of China and the United States (US), as two major countries, in preserving world peace, security, global development, and prosperity. Moreover, the statement emphasized that China affirms the principle of one China—the recognition of the PRC as the only legitimate Chinese government—to be “the political foundation for China-US relations.” President Xi further expressed his desire for the US to respect this principle and to avoid meddling with Taiwan. Despite the warning, only five days after the phone call, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, visited the island causing some turbulence in the countries’ bilateral relations.

The above-mentioned incident is only one example of the current tense relations between the United States and China. After the Cold War, the United States emerged as a global superpower and it has been leading the globe for decades ever since. In the 21st century, however, the PRC has been increasingly demonstrating its potential to challenge the American hegemony. This challenge—in the eyes of numerous American authors—has been viewed as a serious threat. In his book titled *The Final Struggle: Inside China’s Global Strategy* American security policy analyst Ian Easton (2022) writes:

For the United States and our allies and friends, the People’s Republic of China is a threat like no other. Never before in modern times has a totalitarian one-party dictatorship exercised so much power and influence on the world stage (Foreword).

Easton’s book represents just a small fragment in the extensive China-themed publications written by American authors. These publications suggest that the PRC has a strategy to surpass the US in power and influence. The authors are concerned about the perceived threat that China poses. Intrigued by the representation of China in the US, I decided to focus on the topic in my MA thesis. More precisely, I will observe the Sino-US relations by studying the China threat narrative as presented in ten American popular, non-fiction books that have been

published during the presidencies of Donald Trump and Joe Biden. Specifically, I will be analyzing books released during Trump's first term in office (2017–2021) and titles published during the subsequent presidential term of Joe Biden (2017–2025). The objective of this study is to investigate how China and the perceived China threat are portrayed and constructed. Additionally, I will consider the policy recommendations that the authors of the books propose for the US to effectively respond to the observed China threat. The primary source analysis is conducted by utilizing thematic narrative analysis. The results are thereafter interpreted with the help of Chengxin Pan's dichotomy of capabilities and intentions-focused China threat discourses and the concept of securitization as presented by Weiqing Song.

This study finds that the 21st century China threat bestsellers reproduce most of the popular threat tropes—including China as a military, ideological, political, and economic threat—that have already been identified by previous scholars. Additionally, two of the bestsellers demonstrate a new threat trope: China as a threat to the international system. Furthermore, the authors of the books propose competition and containment-oriented policy approaches while none suggests that the US should deploy engagement or accommodation in its China-policy. The results indicate that the authors share concerns regarding China's actions but the intentions behind China's strategy are interpreted in diverse ways. Moreover, the research shows that the ten bestselling, China threat books can be categorized into two distinct subgenres: popular books and expert manuals. An alternative model for categorization is also offered by adopting Weiqing Song's three modes of securitizing the China threat. Lastly, the study suggests that the authors' representation of the China threat can be scrutinized for biases and the lack of consideration for similar strategies deployed by the US.

I argue that studying American perceptions of the China threat is important for two main reasons. First, researching Western representations of non-white peoples contributes to the postcolonial body of knowledge that seeks to understand how the unequal power dynamics during the colonial period and the relations between the ruler and the ruled have shaped our current understandings of non-Western cultures, societies, and peoples. Second, the perceived—yet contested—shifts in the global balance of power largely deal with the rise of China. How the US, as the reigning hegemon, understands China's growing power, influence, and position in the world has important repercussions not only for the academic study of international relations but the practicalities of global politics in the 21st century. Therefore, in this research the analysis of the China threat books is positioned into the context of postcolonial studies and theorized within the framework of international relations literature.

2 Sino-US Relations: From the 1700s to the Present

In this chapter, I briefly introduce the history of Sino-US relations from the 1700s onwards. Instead of giving an excessively detailed account on the bilateral history between China and the US, the purpose of this chapter is to help the reader to contextualize the current power dynamics within the continuum of the centuries-long relations. I refer to the book by Dong Wang (2013) titled *The United States and China: A History from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, to describe this history. Wang structures the book into three time frames: relations between a dynastic empire and a young nation-state (1784–1911), the contact between two nation-states (1912–1970), and the interactions amid a nation-state and a hegemonic empire (1970–present). This division also inspired the structure of the following chapter. Finally, because Wang’s book was released in 2014 and therefore excludes later events, I examine Zeno Leoni’s (2024) *A New Cold War* and a timeline compiled by China Briefing to trace Sino-US relations during the past decade.

2.1 1784–1911: Trade Relations, Opium Wars, Immigration Waves, and Missionary Efforts

The first American merchant vessel, *Empress of China*, arrived at Macau in August 1784 (p. 28). According to Wang (2013)

“...in the early Canton trade, the United States essentially provided raw materials, whereas the Chinese offered sophisticated, processed manufactures such as tea, silk, and porcelain” (p. 29).

During the rule of China’s last imperial dynasty Qing, foreign trade was centered into Canton to facilitate Chinese control over foreign activities and to limit foreigners’ access to the less guarded coastal areas (p. 24). The Canton trading system produced significant profits and tax revenues for the Chinese government (p. 26). Despite the widespread perception according to which the Chinese aimed to restrict and limit international trade, the number of foreign vessels in Canton steadily increased over the late 18th century (p. 27). However, as the power imbalance between European empires and the Qing dynasty grew wider, while the lack of shared legal doctrines persisted, tensions began to arise which ultimately culminated in the Opium Wars between China and Britain (p. 27–28). These wars significantly altered the condition of Sino-US relations.

The significant proportion of tea being imported to Britain created a trade imbalance which the British attempted to hatch by exporting opium to China (p. 46). The illegal opium trade worsened the bilateral relations between China and Britain which eventually led to the confiscation of opium in March 1839 by Chinese commissioner Lin Zexu (p. 46–47). Declining relations coupled with failed diplomacy finally resulted in the first Opium War (1839–1842) (p. 46–47). Although triggered by illegal drug trafficking, the conflict can be understood as a trade war where the British merchants aimed to get access to China's interior markets and secure profitable trade terms (p. 49). During the war, the US dispatched vessels to Macau in order to protect American merchants, missionaries, and their property in China (p. 52). The war was ultimately settled in favor of Britain as the Treaty of Nanjing (the first of the so-called Unequal Treaties) was imposed to guarantee trade rights in China (p. 53). After the war, the Americans funded a mission to China in 1844 (p. 53). As part of diplomatic efforts to secure friendly relations with the Qing court, commissioner Caleb Cushing proposed the American envoy to visit Beijing (p. 53). The request was met with suspicion and reluctance by the Qing government (p. 53–54). To prevent such an inappropriate visit from taking place in Beijing, imperial commissioner Qiying agreed to negotiate trade terms with the US in the village of Wanghia in July 1844 (p. 54). The meeting produced the Treaty of Wanghia which granted the US trade privileges in China, including the most-favored-nation (MFN) status (p. 54).

Although the British had secured favorable trade terms with the Qing court after the first Opium War, the trade deficit with China continued to bother Britain (p. 55). Additionally, questions of British permits to trade and reside in Canton stirred controversy (p. 55). The Second Opium War (1856–1860) was fought to solve these issues (p. 55). The US, together with several European powers, joined Britain in the military intervention to revise trade treaties with the Qing government (p. 56–57). The eventual defeat of Qing produced the Treaty of Tianjin which legalized opium as a legitimate product for importation (p. 55). Additionally, the British, American, and French troops' march to Beijing resulted in the signing of a Sino-British Convention of Beijing, granting the right for foreign diplomatic representation in the capital (p. 58). Although the US had participated in the suppression of Chinese resistance to enforce the unequal treaties, it nonetheless later promoted the criminalization of opium trade out of moral considerations (p. 58–59). The US' involvement with these conflicts and its relations to the Qing court demonstrate American Open Door

policy towards China, the intention of which was to safeguard American commercial interests and built soft power by maintaining China's territorial integrity and sovereignty (p. 59–63).

Sino-US relations also experienced shifts in 1848–1943 as a result of American discriminatory policies towards Chinese immigrants in the US (p. 73). A significant number of Chinese immigrated to the US in the 19th century to work as laborers on plantations (p. 74). The discovery of gold in California in 1848 further accelerated immigration and Chinese were increasingly employed in mining, railroad construction, and agriculture (p. 74). Already from the mid-19th century onward, California passed discriminatory bills aimed at marginalizing Chinese immigrants (p. 75–76). However, the anti-Chinese sentiments spread nationwide in the 1870s and 1880s as the rate of unemployment in the US increased while Americans' trust for financial markets declined (p. 76). The racially-informed Chinese Exclusion Acts of 1882 and 1894 denied Chinese ability to remain or enter the US and gain an American citizenship (p. 80–81).

Lastly, American missionary efforts in China have contributed to the relations between China and the US. Already during the Tang dynasty (618–960), the Chinese were exposed to Christianity as a result of Nestorian missionaries' arrival to China (p. 97). Elijah C. Bridgman's entrance into China in 1830, in turn, marked the beginning of American Protestant influence in the country (p. 99). The spread of Christianity had important repercussions as the Christian minority in China both actively participated in politics by organizing into the anti-Qing Taiping rebellion (p. 102–105) and were the unfortunate victims of anti-Christian violence, perhaps most notably during the Boxer Rebellion of 1899–1900 (p. 105–110).

2.2 1912–1970: Revolutions, Wars, and Communism

The fall of the Qing empire in 1912 marked an end to China's dynastic history and an entrance into the period of nation-states with the establishment of the Republic of China (ROC) led by Yuan Shikai from Beijing (p. 124–125). However, consolidating power in the young republic was difficult as warlords and two political parties—the Nationalist Party and the Chinese Communist Party—continued to struggle over influence in China (p. 125). In 1914, the US recognized the Beijing-led Republic of China and extended some praise for China's transformation from autocracy into republicanism (p. 127).

The start of the first World War in 1914 produced statements of neutrality from China and the US (p. 128). However, after Germany sank American commercial liners in 1917, the US got engrossed into the conflict and assumed a new position, declared by Woodrow Wilson, as an emerging world power whose mission was to serve the humankind (p. 128). In August of the same year, China entered the war on the side of the US and other nations belonging to the coalition of Allies (p. 129). The war came to an end in 1918 with the Allies' victory (p. 129). Despite being invited to the Paris Peace Conference where the major powers of the alliance—Britain, Italy, France and the US—drafted a peace settlement, the proposed treaty did not recognize China's right to the German-held Shandong Province which was instead given to Japan (p. 129–130). The issue regarding the restoration of Shandong ultimately led China to refrain from signing the Treaty of Versailles, consequently deteriorating the Sino-US relations (p. 130–131). The treaty sparked anti-Japanese sentiments in China, fueling demonstrations on the 4th of May, 1919 which eventually formed into the May 4th Movement (p. 131–132). The disappointment surrounding the Treaty of Versailles contributed to the Chinese leadership's growing interest in a Russian-style Bolshevik revolution which was viewed as an alternative way to accumulate national power (p. 132).

In the 1920s China faced domestic political struggles and instability (p. 133). Simultaneously, issues related to China's territorial integrity and political, jurisdictional, and administrative freedoms were settled at the Washington Conference of 1921–1922 while China's tariff autonomy was acknowledged in a treaty signed at the Special Conference on Tariffs (p. 132–134). After internal divisions and conflict over Nanjing beginning in 1927, the Nanjing government declared China unified in 1928 and entered negotiations with the US on the recognition of the Nationalist government and the guarantee of China's tariff autonomy (p. 136–138).

The Sino-US relations of the 1930s and 1940s are largely defined by the behavior of Japan on the international arena. The Second Sino-Japanese War, beginning in 1937, was a time of inaction for the US, despite Chiang Kai-shek's request for intervention by the League of Nations (p. 149–150). Only the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941 by Japanese forces rallied the US into action and introduced the official alliance between the Americans and Chinese (p. 152). The two countries signed the Sino-American Treaty for the Relinquishment of Extraterritorial Rights in China in 1943 (p. 152). Additionally, the US strongly advocated for China to become one of the signatories of the Declaration of Four Nations on General

Security, endorsed in Moscow in 1943 (p. 152). The US's China-policy at the time was motivated by the American desire to contain Japan's expansion in Asia (p. 153).

Another important event affecting the relations between China and the US in the 1940s was the Chinese Civil War. After the end of World War II, the US attempted to mediate between the Chiang-led Nationalist Party (Guomindang) and Mao Zedong's Communists by promoting the formation of a coalition government and the consolidation of Chinese military power (p. 156–164). To solve the disputes between the two political parties, the US deployed several advisors (Joseph W. Stilwell, Patrick Hurley, George C. Marshall, Albert C. Wedemeyer) to China to promote the reorganization of the Chinese government through settlement negotiations, often favoring the Guomindang (p. 156–164). However, the US was reluctant to directly intervene in the military conflict of 1946–1949 between the Nationalists and Communists which was finally settled in favor of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (p. 162–165). The CCP victory signified American failure to introduce a democratic government into China and a vital “loss of China” to a competing ideology (p. 165).

Lastly, the events taking place during Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s had an impact on the state of relations between China and the US. During the so-called great interregnum (1950s and 1960s) China and the US did not have formal diplomatic relations and the two countries often stood in the opposite ends of the Cold War camps led by the US and the Soviet Union (USSR) (p. 193). The bilateral relations between China and the US were directly impacted by this political dynamic: The Nationalist government in Taiwan was holding the Security Council seat of China as one of the founding members of the United Nations which the US strongly supported in order to halt the spread of Communism in Asia (p. 196). Additionally, the two countries fought on the opposite sides during the Korean War (1950–1953) (p. 197–201) and the Vietnam War (1955–1975) (p. 206–210). During the Korean War, the Chinese People's Volunteer Army and American troops directly clashed on the peninsula (p. 199–200). Moreover, the conflict in Korea triggered the still-ongoing controversy over Taiwan after President Harry S. Truman dispatched the 7th American Fleet to the Taiwan Strait in 1950 to protect the island from Communist China's possible aggression (p. 202). The tensions over Taiwan only deepened as a result of disputes over Nationalist-occupied offshore islands on the east coast of the mainland China, known as the First (1954–1955) and Second (1958) Taiwan Strait Crises (p. 203–206). Despite these conflicts, the American leadership continuously discouraged Chiang from initiating a military attack against the Communist mainland (p. 193–213). The Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s brought relief to the heated Sino-

US relations. The death of Joseph Stalin and the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev were followed by border clashes, uncoordinated foreign policies, and dissenting attitudes towards the legacy of Stalin between China and the Soviet Union (p. 209). The dismantling of the Sino-Soviet alliance, coupled with China's domestic chaos and instability after the Great Leap Forward (1958–1959) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1969) created a new type of political environment, one in which improved relations to the US appeared reasonable (p. 206–210). From the perspective of the US, the American leadership had not always been successful in asserting its power in Asia during the Cold War which is why cooperation with China started to appear more appealing (p. 210–211).

2.3 1970–Present: Cooperation, Conflict, and the China Market

Although the relations between China and the US were publicly stagnant, efforts to privately improve the bilateral affairs persisted throughout the 1960s (p. 223). Therefore, the eventual establishment of diplomatic relations beginning from President Richard Nixon's historic visit to China in 1972 was not as sudden as it might appear to outside observers (p. 224). Both countries had an interest in improving the relations, informed by domestic affairs as well as the changes in the international power dynamics: On the one hand, the US' unsuccessful war in Vietnam prompted the leadership to consider the limits of American power in foreign politics (p. 224–226). On the other hand, China began to be more concerned over the Soviet threat as a result of repeated border clashes with the USSR while also pondering the possibility of a Soviet-American alliance against China (p. 226–228). The mutual interest to improve the relations led to Nixon's national security adviser Henry Kissinger's two secret visits to China in 1971, followed by the president's visit the next year (p. 229–230).

Furthermore, in 1971 mainland China replaced Taiwan's position as the representative of China at the United Nations Security Council (p. 230). Overall, the improvements in the Sino-US relations during the early 1970s—led by Nixon and Kissinger from the side of the US and Mao and Zhou Enlai from China—were a result of mutual efforts and shared interests where trust was built by openly sharing Soviet-American discussions on China and by practicing flexibility in the handling of the Taiwan question (p. 230–232).

Despite the efforts and numerous advances in improving the relations, China and the US still faced numerous issues that severed the bilateral affairs. The handling of the Taiwan question was still incomplete, strained by the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1954 between Taiwan and the US (p. 233). Moreover, the leadership changes in both countries—in China as a result of Mao's

deteriorating health and in the US prompted by Nixon's resignation after the Watergate scandal—stalled the momentum achieved in the in the early 1970s (p. 233–234). The normalization of diplomatic relations between the PRC and the US finally took place in early 1979, driven by a shared interest to halt the expansion of Soviet influence (p. 235). Deng Xiaoping's leadership from the late 1970s onward, characterized by his keen focus on the industrialization and modernizations of China, signaled improved relations during which Deng made a weeklong visit to the US in 1979 (p. 236–237). However, the Taiwan question continued to strain the relations as contradictions between President Jimmy Carter's announcement to adhere to the One China -policy and Congress' passing of the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979 caused confusion (p. 236). Ultimately, the Carter administration's affirmation of the One China -principle and Deng's promise to solve the issue of unification peacefully contributed to the normalization of relations (p. 237). During the leaderships of Ronald Reagan and Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s, the relations remained comparatively stable, although disputes over American arms sales to Taiwan continued (p. 237–239).

In the 1980s and 1990s, the opening of China's markets and the growth of its economy sparked positive sentiments from the US. Legislative and administrative barriers on trade were gradually dismantled and in 1980 China was granted the most-favored-nation status by the US Congress (p. 251). However, issues over human rights deteriorated the relations, most notably as a result of the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) forceful crackdown of the Tiananmen student protests in 1989 (p. 274 –279). The US Congress deemed President George H. W. Bush's response to the Tiananmen Incident inadequate and passed laws that secured Chinese students' right to reside in the US and imposed sanctions on arms sales to China (p. 227). The human rights violations not only harmed the diplomatic relationships between the countries, but also restrained trade relations because the American Jackson-Vanik Amendment, passed by Congress in 1974, linked Communist countries' human rights records to their trade advantages (p. 251). The amendment enabled the annual renewal of China's most-favored-nation status until President Bill Clinton's administration decoupled human rights from China's MFN status in 1994 with the strong support of American business community (p. 281).

During the 1990s the American-Chinese relations experienced periods of stability and turbulence. Tensions mounted after Lee Teng-hui became the first freely elected President of the Republic of China on Taiwan in 1988 (p. 283). Championing for the sovereignty of its government and attempting to lift Taiwan's international profile, Lee managed to get a visa to

the US where he held a speech at Cornell University (p. 283–284). Although the speech was expected to be nonpolitical, Lee referred to Taiwan as “the Republic of China in Taiwan,” angering the PRC and deteriorating Sino-US relations (p. 284). The Cornell speech sparked a series of responses from China who withdrew its ambassador from Washington and begun military exercises at the Taiwan Strait in July 1995 (p. 284). To respond to China’s military engagement around the island at the time of Taiwan’s presidential elections, the US send its Navy to the strait, followed by China’s deployment of nuclear submarines (p. 284). The conflict finally resolved after the US withdrew its warships and China decided to end the military exercise (p. 284). After the third Taiwan Strait Crisis, Sino-US relations experienced a period of stability when Jiang Zemin visited the US in 1997, followed by Clinton’s visit to China in 1998 (p. 285).

Fluctuations between periods of tension and stability in the Sino-US relations continued in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In 1999, the US and its NATO allies’ attempt to resolve the conflict between Albanians and Serbs in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia had unexpected repercussions for the state of Sino-American relations (p. 286). During the intervention, American forces bombed Chinese embassy in Belgrade, causing the death of three Chinese journalists and the injuring of numerous embassy staff (p. 286). Although the US deemed the bombing accidental, widespread anti-American demonstrations erupted in China (p. 286). After a series of apologies, reimbursements for property damages, and compensations for the families of the deceased, the tensions finally resolved (p. 286). However, the relieve was short-lived as the embassy bombing was soon followed by another disruption, this time concerning American reconnaissance flights off the coast of China (p. 286–287). In the early 2000, the US increased its reconnaissance activities, with some of the US Air Force planes reaching close to the Chinese mainland and causing the PLA to intercept American flights (p. 287). On April 2001, an accident took place between an American navy airplane and an intercepting Chinese fighter which collided midair, killing the Chinese pilot and causing the PRC to temporarily detain the crew of the American plane that had resorted to emergency landing in China (p. 287). In the remaining 2000s and early 2010s the bilateral relations improved, partially as a result of the emergence of Islamic terrorism which reoriented American foreign policy priorities (p. 289). Moreover, the growing economic interconnectedness between China and the US as a result of foreigners’ increased access to the vast China market, as well as China’s entrance into the World Trade Organization (WTO)

in 2001 have affected the relations (p. 305–314). Issues with trade have stirred controversy in the US since commercial activities between the nations have skyrocketed:

Critics of China attribute the trade deficit to a raft of factors, most of which are related to job losses in the U.S. manufacturing sector and obstacles to U.S. exports to China. These include the low cost of Chinese goods and services, arbitrary devaluation of the currency (renminbi, CNY), market-access barriers, poor handling of intellectual property rights, and a low level of government transparency (p. 315–316).

Moreover, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, notions of the “China threat” in the US prompted a rhetoric centered around “China’s peaceful rise” by the Chinese leadership (discussed in more detail in section 5.1), making the relations ever more complex (p. 291–292).

Finally, in the 2010s and 2020s China’s growing power and influence have impacted its relations to the US. The modern relations are part of the continuum of earlier engagement. In *A New Cold War*, Zeno Leoni (2024) observes that President Bush’s modest response to the events at Tiananmen Square was informed by American optimism towards China’s prospects for democratization as a result of its active participation in the global economy (Leoni, 2024, p. 66–67). However, after the end of Cold War, the accelerating economic interdependence between China and the US began to be considered as a potential source of danger (p. 67). China’s economic growth was accompanied by a mounting defence budget and advanced military and technological capabilities which started to alter the power dynamics in the Asia-Pacific region (p. 68). What is more, China’s foreign policy transformed from Deng Xiaoping’s guideline of “hiding capabilities and biding time,” into a more assertive stance under Hu Jintao (p. 68). These changes in geopolitical dynamics led to the US’ altered strategy towards China under the first Obama administration (2009–2012) known as “pivot to Asia” (p. 69). The new geostrategic policy increased American military presence in the Pacific Ocean, although the administration refrained from undertaking a blatantly confrontational stance towards the PRC (p. 94). The perception of China as a geopolitical rival augmented during Donald Trump’s presidency (2017–2021) (p. 95–96). The Trump administration increased American focus on the Indo-Pacific by increasing the number of American troops and US Navy warships in the region (p. 95–96).

The following Biden administration (2021–2025) undertook a China-policy that combined Trump’s determination and Obama’s attentiveness, with a distinct emphasis on regional allies (p. 96). Similar to his predecessors, Biden continued to stress the importance of American role in the Indo-Pacific and the priority of China in the US’ foreign policy (p. 96). Lastly,

during the second Trump administration (2025–), trade tensions between China and the US have intensified (China Briefing, 2025). In line with his first term in office—and largely continued during Joe Biden’s presidency—the current Trump administration has increased import tariffs on Chinese goods and tightened export controls (Ibid.).

The purpose of this section was to introduce the major trends in the Sino-US relations from the 1700s to the present. Even a brief observation into the bilateral affairs reveals that the changes in the political dynamics between China and the US have often been driven by their shared or colliding interests. Wang (2013) captures this ongoing dynamic:

From China’s perspective, its diplomatic efforts have largely been in reaction to issues and criticism initiated by the United States. China’s chief priority has been to maintain a sense of national dignity while remaining open to the world. From the American perspective, China has been steadily pushing the United States out of the Asia-Pacific region, and a strong China is seen as a threat to American national and international interests (p. 8).

Building onto this history, the next chapter observes the fluctuating representations of China in the US.

3 From the Feared Yellow Peril to a Trusted Ally: A Brief History of American Representations of China Pre-1990s

The main determinant of Western images of China is the West itself.

– Colin Mackerras (1999, *Western Images of China*, p. 183)

In his book, *Western Images of China*, Australian sinologist Colin Mackerras (1999) observes that Western perceptions of China have traditionally been dominated by one powerful country at a time: France in the 18th century, Britain in the 19th and the US in the 20th (p. 4). Since the focus of this research is on American perceptions of the China threat, I mostly concentrate on examining the history of China representations in the US¹. The existing literature on American (and Western) perceptions, representations, and images of China is indeed extensive: Scholars have studied the American history writing on China (Cohen, 2010), Western perceptions of China's rise (Page & Xie, 2010 & Zhang, 2010), representations throughout the Sino-US bilateral relations (Cohen, 1978; Li & Hong, 1998 & Turner, 2011), images of Chinese in American film (Greene, 2014; Yang & Zhang, 2021), theater (Lee, 2022), and advertisement (Li, 2020), as well as American misperceptions about China (Mosher, 1990 & Stoessinger, 1967). More recent studies have also analyzed the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the increased prejudice against Asian Americans in the US (Croucher et al. 2020 & Darling-Hammond et al.2020)².

In this chapter, I refer to the work of several scholars to trace how American perceptions of China have changed over time. These scholars have approached the study of American representations of China in distinct ways. In *Western Images of China*, Colin Mackerras observes both societal and political images of China in the West (p. 4). His analysis includes books, films, TV programs, and magazine articles (Ibid. p. 7). Similarly, in *American Images of China: Identity, Power, Policy*, international relations scholar Oliver Turner (2014) traces American images of China by analyzing media outlets such as films, TV programs, newspapers, and magazine articles (p. 9). Additionally, Turner also examines academic

¹ Evidently, Chinese images and perceptions of the US have also been studied (see Deng, 2001, Sinkkonen & Elovainio, 2020). Moreover, some scholars have examined the perceptions that China and the US hold toward each other (see Chung, 2019; Li & Hong, 1998 & Wang, 2000). I will not focus on these studies any further as they are beyond the scope of this research.

² This list is by no means all-encompassing. Rather, its main purpose is to introduce some examples of different scholarly perspectives to the study of American images of China.

publications, governmental documents as well as journals and records by politicians, diplomats, missionaries, and traders (Ibid. p. 9). Unlike Turner and Mackerra's, American political scientist Harold R. Isaacs' (1972) *Images of Asia: American Views of China and India* is based on interviews of 181 Americans conducted within a 14-month-period (p. 13). Although these scholars are without doubt accomplished, citing only their work is hardly enough to present a comprehensive account of American representations of China. Indeed, one could even question what this "American" representation is: Do we talk about imagery circulated in the media, attitudes of individual people, or rather the state of diplomatic relations? My intention is to observe all of the above—but none in excruciating detail. By studying the works of Mackerras, Turner and Isaacs, I aspire to introduce general trends and patterns of China representation in the US to emphasize that these representations have always been dependent on the political climate and historical context within which they surfaced.

Several scholars (Isaacs, 1972; Mackerras, 1999; Pan 2004 & Turner 2014) examine that the portrayal of China has fluctuated from negative to positive throughout the history of Western contact with the country. For example, Isaacs discovers two sets of images Americans hold in relation to China or the Chinese people: On the one hand, China has been perceived as a great civilization where people are intelligent, competent, honest, and physically attractive. On the other hand, images of China as a military menace and the Chinese as unreliable, devious, and cruel have also existed throughout the Sino-US relations (Ibid. p. 73). Scholars have categorized these China perceptions in multiple ways. Isaacs presents six periods of different attitudes: The Age of Respect (18th century), The Age of Contempt (1840–1905), The Age of Benevolence (1905–1937), The Age of Admiration (1937–1944), The Age of Disenchantment (1944–1949) and, finally, The Age of Hostility (1949–) (Ibid. p. 71). Turner (2014), in turn, identifies four constructions of the US' attitudes towards China—idealized, opportunity, uncivilized, and threatening—all of which have endured for the entire duration of Sino-US relations, although in varying degrees (p. 6). Regardless of the means of categorization, it is evident that different, even contradictory, representations of China can coexist (Ibid. p. 27). Therefore, it should be noted that when I discuss positive or negative China images, I am referring to the predominant trends at a certain time. Let us move on to consider some concrete examples of these changing attitudes.

As briefly indicated above, China has been portrayed positively in several occasions throughout the shared history of China and the US. According to Isaacs, favorable views of

China often relate to the admiration of China's ancient civilization and culture which produced novel inventions such as paper, porcelain, gunpowder, and the compass (p. 90). Moreover, China's antique wisdom is also appreciated, including the work of philosophers such as Lao Tzu and Confucius (Ibid. p. 91). Additionally, *Chinoiseries*, such as Chinese silk and porcelain, have been highly valued goods in the West (Ibid. p. 93). In the US specifically, China was viewed positively from the 18th century onwards as a country that could provide Americans with opportunities for trade and Christian missionary activities (Isaacs, 1972, p. 125 & Turner, 2014, p. 5). In his work, Isaacs observes American notions of the Chinese as peaceful, kind, and appreciative to missionary efforts (p. 129) while Turner finds that Americans viewed China as mysterious, exotic, and even romantic (p. 5). Although China was still perceived as less civilized than the West, the images of the time were largely positive (Turner, 2014, p. 5).

In 1939–1945 when China and the US participated in the World War II as allies, images of the Chinese as heroic soldiers began to emerge and positive representation increased (Isaacs, 1972, p. 117 & Turner, 2014, p. 12). Moreover, at the time of the alliance, US-founded organizations such as the United China Relief, reconstructed images of China as civilized, less foreign, and more equal to justify the aid and support given to China (Turner, 2014, p. 82). American novelist Earl Derr Biggers' fictional character Charlie Chan was part of this effort to enforce more positive China representations during the alliance (Isaacs, 1972, p. 120). The character, first introduced in 1925, was a likable and clever detective who often quoted the wisdoms of Confucius (Isaacs, 1972, p. 119). While Chinese people were presented in a more positive light during the war, the Japanese—who had previously been depicted as modern and more similar to Westerners—became viewed as backward and uncivilized (Ibid. p. 82).

Another peak of favorable China representation occurred during Deng Xiaoping's economic Open Door -policies in 1976–1989 which led many Westerners to view China and its large market as a great opportunity and potential source for profit (Mackerras, 1999, p. 121). Indeed, Westerners were enthusiastic about selling color TVs, washing machines, and other consumer goods to the growing Chinese middle class (Ibid. p. 121). Overall, China's westernization was welcomed with open arms, and it was accompanied by a more positive Western representation of China (Ibid. p. 134). However, these positive images have, throughout the Sino-US relations, been accompanied by more negative representations.

In contrast to the positive portrayals, China has continuously been represented unfavorably at various times in the West and in the US in particular. A notable example of negative representation occurred in the 19th century with the emergence of the so-called Yellow Peril. A painting by the German artist Hermann Knackfuss, depicting a malicious Buddha looming over Europe, was one of the first illustrations of the Yellow Peril to become widespread among Western audiences at the end of the 19th century (Lyman, 2000, p. 689). The painting had been commissioned by German Kaiser Wilhelm II who started to distribute copies of it to his fellow European leaders and the US' president William McKinley to encourage the construction of a Western alliances against races of the Orient (Ibid. p. 689). This call for cooperation between the powers of the Occident was prompted by the Boxer Rebellion, a Chinese resistance against the growing influence of foreign powers in the country (Mombauer, 2004, p. 93). During his leadership, Wilhelm II both actively deployed, and at times, refrained from using the Yellow Peril alarmism to serve his foreign policy objectives and to foster alliances (Mombauer & Deist, 2004).

Contemporarily, the term Yellow Peril refers the fear of East Asian peoples (Tchen & Yeats, 2014, p.11). In this context, its first connotations emerged in the United States in the 1880s during the California Gold Rush, when thousands of Chinese were decoyed into the US to take over the jobs left undone by those traveling to California to make a living off the gold (Turner, 2013, p. 910 & Isaacs, 1972, p. 111). At the beginning of the period, the Chinese were portrayed favorably because they were useful for the society (Isaacs, 1972, p. 112). However, the increasing unemployment (partially as a result of finished railroad constructions), shifted the American attitudes towards the Chinese who were now being blamed for shutting out white labor, and pushed out of sectors such as service, manufacturing, and agriculture (Ibid. p. 112)³. Consequently, Chinese begun to be depicted as dishonest, devious, and morally flawed (Ooi & D'arcangelis, 2017, p. 273). British writer Sax Rohmer's fictional character Dr. Fu Manchu—a Chinese eager to enslave Westerners—became the embodiment of this American suspicion towards, and fear over, the “Yellow race” (Turner, 2014, p. 74). Dr. Fu Manchu appeared in several novels, movies, and TV series (Ibid. p. 74) and his popularity peaked especially after 1929 (Isaacs, 1972, p. 116). Essentially, Dr. Fu Manchu was a merciless and sinister torturer who possessed peculiar drugs and an army of

³ Turner (2013) emphasizes that analyzing the negative images of China does not necessarily suggest that China or the Chinese did not pose any danger to the US (p. 913). Rather the Chinese were represented as a specifically non-white threat which contrasted well with the American imagined identity that had to be protected (Ibid. p.913). The next section will discuss this idea in more detail.

slaves (Ibid. p. 116–117). He was portrayed as especially threatening to white women (Turner, 2014, p. 74) while also being depicted as a non-heteronormative queer (Tchen & Yeats, 2014, p. 5). Although the term Yellow Peril is seldom used contemporarily, it still affects Western attitudes towards Asians and the Chinese in particular (Ibid. p. 15) This is because the present-day negative China reporting continues to draw from the old tropes utilized during the height of the Yellow Peril (Ooi & D'arcangelis, 2017, p. 279).

Negative portrayal of China and the Chinese continued to emerge time and again in the US even after the 19th century immigration disputes. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Western images of the country grew more negative than ever before as a result of “losing” China to Communism (Mackerras, 1999, p. 83 & Goh, 2004, p. 17). The attitudes towards China as a communist threat, also referred to as Red Menace, strengthened when China sent volunteer troops to fight in the Korean War in the 1950s (Goh, 2004, p. 18). However, a key point of negative images occurred due to the massacre at the Tiananmen Square in 1989 when student protests were violently put down by the Chinese Communist government (Hirshberg, 1993, p. 261 & Mackerras, 1999, p. 83). In his analysis, Mackerras observes that images of China in the West shifted from mainly positive to overwhelmingly negative after the Tiananmen Incident (p. 154).

This chapter has briefly described the history of China representation in the West and in the US in particular. The purpose of the chapter has been to demonstrate that the representation of China has not been stagnant but rather illustrates fluctuations from positive to negative China images, often informed by the hopes and needs of the West. The next section demonstrates this argument in more detail by examining the use of China representation in relation to American identity, politics, and global position.

4 Representation as Strategy: Interpreting the Diverse Views of China and the Chinese in the US

If being an American means being committed to the principles of liberty, democracy, individualism, and private property, and if there is no evil empire out there threatening those principles, what indeed does it mean to be an American, and what becomes of American national interests?

– Samuel P. Huntington, 1997, *Foreign Affairs*, p. 29–30

To understand the fluctuations in American portrayals of China, it is useful to consider the history of Western representations of non-White peoples. In his influential book *Orientalism* Palestinian American scholar and literary critic Edward Said (1978) discusses Western knowledge production on non-European societies in the 18th century. Said argues that the purpose of producing knowledge on foreign cultures was to control the European-dominated colonies (Ibid.). In this tradition, it was customary for the Orient to be presented as backward and inferior while the Occident became defined as advanced and superior (Ibid. p. 7). In a book titled *Empire* Hardt and Negri (2000) further describe this tradition:

...in the colonial imaginary the colonized is not simply an Other banished outside the realm of civilization; rather, it is grasped or produced as Other, as the absolute negation, as the most distant point on the horizon (p. 127).

Therefore, the origins of knowledge production on the Orient were neither neutral nor objective, yet they continue to influence the contemporary understandings of non-Western societies. Similarly, the US' representations of China have repeatedly served American interests. These interests have either related to the construction of the American national identity, its political objectives, or the maintenance of American position in the international system.

4.1 China Representation as a Component of the American Identity

By constructing an us-and-them dichotomy, a nation can produce otherness and form an enemy identity. Drawing from Said's work, scholars (Ooi & D'Arcangelis, 2017 & Pan, 2004) have observed that the US tends to define itself mainly in contrast to the Orient or the

Other.⁴ In 1997, Samuel Huntington wrote in his famous book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*:

...people use politics not just to advance their interests but also to define their identity. We know who we are only when we know who we are not and often only when we know whom we are against (p. 21).

According to Huntington, since the US was founded upon the ideas of liberty, democracy, and equality, resisting actors who oppose those ideas has become an essential part of the American identity, and an important contributor to national unity and cohesion (Ibid. p. 29–32). By examining American history, we can observe how several opponents have been playing the role of the other in the quest for American identity-building: for the young nation it was the “Old World” of Europe, during Cold War the Soviet Union, and after its collapse, China, which was temporarily replaced by Islamic terrorism after the September 11 terrorist attacks of 2001 (Pan, 2004, p. 313).

Producing enemy others can introduce cohesion to a country’s national identity. However, sometimes the values deemed important for a nation can stand in contrast to desired policies. Such was the case in the 19th century when the US had to justify its participation in the British-initiated enforcement of an unequal treaty with Beijing after the first Opium War (Turner, 2014, p. 3). The treaty was contradictory with Washington’s self-proclaimed values as a condemner of imperialism and as a nation founded upon imperial liberation (Ibid. p. 3). To justify the implementation of the treaty, the US represented China as uncivilized and backward—a nation that would essentially benefit from Western intervention (Ibid. p. 4). Therefore, the representation of China related not only to American national identity but to its desired policies, as discussed in the next section.

4.2 China Representation as a Political Tool

Several scholars (Isaacs, 1972; Mackerras, 1999; Pan, 2012 & Turner, 2014) have analyzed the role of China representation in the process of legitimizing American policy approaches. Oliver Turner (2014) argues that the US has continuously produced China into a friend or a foe to serve its own political agendas. Mackerras (1999) similarly asserts that Western images

⁴ This argument is not limited to the United States. A French biologist, Felix le Dantec suggests that for any social unit (such as a nation), to exist, it needs to have a common enemy (Allport, 1979, p. 41). Therefore, the US is certainly not the only nation that utilizes the tools of negative representation to manage its own national image, although scholars such as Samuel Huntington (1997) have suggested that having an enemy other might be especially important in the case of the US because of the society’s racial and cultural plurality (p. 32).

of China have frequently correlated with the interests of Western authorities (p. 178). Scholars have observed, that the China threat narrative is not merely concerned with the PRC's material capabilities and forces but has been constructed and utilized to rationalize American foreign policy initiatives (Jespersen, 1999, p.xvii; Pan, 2004, p. 320 & Turner, 2013, p. 909). This argument was already demonstrated in the previous chapter, by examining the shifts in American representations of China and by identifying their connection to specific political needs of the time. This section will further elaborate on the argument by discussing both historical and contemporary examples.

The history of American representation of Chinese people cannot be detached from the 19th century racial theories. These theories contributed to suspicion and hostility towards the Chinese who were seen as an inferior race and located as the bottom of the racial hierarchy (Turner, 2013, p. 910). Since the unequal positioning of different races benefited white Caucasians, people in positions of power (such as lawyers and politicians) began to promote the findings of the new, allegedly scientific, discipline to legitimize their superior status in the society (Ibid. p. 911). Turner (2013) argues:

Those who gained from the establishment of the fantasised China 'threat' were therefore principally those who attributed the most significance to particular (racial) understandings about the US and how its identity was threatened by non-white immigrant Chinese (p. 913).

Indeed, asserting images of Chinese as foreign and inferior allowed certain desired policies to be implemented, one of which was the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (Ibid. p. 912). Overall, the adoption of discriminatory laws created a sort of self-fulfilling prophesy where race-based laws reaffirmed racist prejudice more effectively into the society (Ibid. p. 912).

Beyond justifying desired policies, the China threat narrative has been adopted to secure personal wins in politics. This is especially true contemporarily: Despite their often contrasting views, both the Democratic and the Republican Party have continuously invoked negative perceptions of China in official speeches and campaign rallies. From Bill Clinton advocating to confront dictators of Beijing, to George H. W. Bush proclaiming to sell fighters to Taiwan, the American presidential candidates have repeatedly tapped into the China threat narrative to gain political advantages (Pan, 2012, p. 69–70 & Rosenberg, 2025). American scholar and former appointee in the White House and Department of State in the Biden administration, Brett Rosenberg (2025) outlines in a Carnegie Endowment for International Peace publication how politicians can utilize the China threat in two ways to attract political

wins. First, they can present themselves as capable of ensuring the safety of American people against the threat of China (Ibid.). Second, politicians might accuse their opponents for undermining the China threat (Ibid.). This strategy was adopted by both Donald Trump and Joe Biden in the 2020 presidential election as the two candidates blamed each other for being weak towards the PRC (Ibid). In addition to harvesting personal wins, American politicians might utilize the China threat issue to encourage depolarization, pass preferred legislations, initiate policies, encourage bipartisan agreement, and influence the behavior of other states (Ibid.). On a larger scale, the China threat discourse might also be used to legitimize the US' global position. This argument is explored in the next section.

4.3 China Representation as a Justifier for American Hegemony

As I have illustrated throughout this chapter, American images of China often serve the purpose of either 1) making sense of the American self or 2) justifying desired policy approaches. Samuel Huntington (1997) argues that in the post-Cold War world, the US has been lacking a reason that would justify its continued engagement and active participation in global affairs: “the need is not to find the power to serve American purposes but rather to find purposes for the use of American power” (p. 35–36). In this section, I discuss how the US benefits from embracing the China threat discourse in order to legitimize its hegemonic position in the world.

In the global arena of the 21st century, characterized by the rise of the PRC and the shifting of the international balance of power, the US has not hesitated to embrace the China threat narrative to justify the employment of desired policies. According to political scientist Chengxin Pan (2012), China is an especially convenient enemy for the US for several reasons. First, its notable size can rationalize the need for expensive strategic programs launched by Washington (p. 51). Much like during the Cold War, when major foreign policy initiatives such as the Marshall Plan, NATO and the Vietnam War, were all rationalized by the threat of communism (Huntington, 1997, p. 30), the current US is able to justify key policy approaches by imagining China as a threat. This also applies to American institutions. According to Pan, for certain American governmental institutions (such as Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency) to exist—and for them to be able to justify their extensively large budgets—having an opponent is beneficial, if not crucial (2012, p. 50). Both of these practices (major foreign policy operations and the maintenance of powerful institution) contribute to the persistence of the US' superior global position. Second, the illiberal regime of the PRC creates demand for

the US' moral guidance and leadership (Ibid. p. 51). This point has been skillfully demonstrated by Samuel Huntington in his 1997 article. Huntington deems the existence of an enemy to be so crucial for the US that promoting the spread of liberal democracy globally might not actually serve the superpower's interests—success in this pursuit and the subsequent absence of rival ideologies could jeopardize American global appeal and even tremble the unity of the nation (1997, p. 32). Hence, a compelling paradox emerges: China is seen as a threat because it endangers the hegemonic position of the US and possibly the entire liberal world-order. At the same time, the rise of the PRC as an illiberal, authoritarian regime creates demand for a superpower that is able to balance out the system and confine rival powers, thus legitimizing the hegemonic position of the US.

In this chapter, I argued that the US' China representation has served American interests in three ways: first, by bringing cohesion to the American identity, second, by proposing justifications for the implementation of desired policies, and third, by legitimizing American hegemonic position internationally. In summary, I have argued that the West, and the US specifically, have a vested interest in maintaining—if not producing—the discourse of otherness, the target of which in the 21st century has overwhelmingly been China. The chapter that follows moves on to consider the China threat theory in the field of international relations.

5 Threat, Opportunity, or a Future Hegemon? The China Threat Discourse in International Relations Literature

In this chapter, I introduce the main arguments and areas of interest regarding China's rise and global position in the contemporary international relations (IR) literature. My intention is to first contextualize the China threat theory within the existing body of research in the IR literature. This is done by introducing the contemporary debates on China's rise which have mostly resembled a dichotomy between threat and opportunity (or peaceful rise) perceptions. Additionally, I examine the discussion around polarity and consider how China's position has been understood regarding the modern distribution of power in international relations. After that, I introduce a key concept of this research, securitization, and discuss how it relates to the maintenance and construction of the China threat argument. Finally, I discuss four policy approaches—accommodation, engagement, competition, and containment—that the US has deployed in order to respond to the rise of China.

5.1 China's Rise From the Perspective of International Relations Theories

Perceptions about China's rise have been plentiful among international relations scholars ever since the country's economy started to grow in the late 20th century. Generally, the field has been characterized by diverging theorizations depicting China's rise either as peaceful (see, for example Taylor Fravel 2010 & Weede, 2010 & Kang, 2007) or threatening (see, for example, White, 2008; Roy, 2009 & Mearsheimer, 2021). These two predictions about China's rise are commonly allocated to specific schools among international relations scholars. China's peaceful rise and its potential to foster opportunities (see, for example, Xin 2012) are often supported by liberal proponents of international relations (Huwaidin and Antwi-Boateng, 2021, p. 2). The realist school of thought, in turn, advocates for the China threat theory (Mearsheimer, 2021).

The realist school is perhaps the most keen advocate of the China threat theory. The premise of realism is that people are naturally selfish and prone to compete in order to advance their own interests (Kegley & Blanton 2014, p. 25). In international politics, realists explain the international system to reside in a state of anarchy where the absence of a higher political authority pushes sovereign states to compete with each other and struggle over power (Ibid. p. 25–26). Keen to safeguard their own interests, states are quick to interpret any increases in their opponents' capabilities as threatening and to respond by accumulating their own power

(Ibid. p. 26). One of the most well-known contemporary scholars of realism is John Mearsheimer from the University of Chicago who has contributed to the field significantly by developing a theory on offensive realism. For Mearsheimer (2021) the current Sino-US competition is hardly surprising, given that it follows the exact trajectories laid out by the realist theory (p. 48). China's efforts to dominate its own region and the US' subsequent attempt to halt China's pursuits are both anticipated behavior of states in the framework of realist logic (Ibid. p. 48–50). Indeed, Mearsheimer suggests that it would be foolish of China to not chase its objectives since it has the adequate power to do so (Ibid. p. 51).

Chengxin Pan (2012) argues that the China threat is a particular type of normative paradigm that produces negative images of China. For Pan, the China threat is “a fundamental image that casts China's rise and its international implications primarily in a negative, alarming, and threatening light” (p. 23). By utilizing the paradigm -framework, Pan identifies two sub-paradigms which emerge in scholarly discussion around China's rise: capability-based and intentions-based threat discourses (Ibid. p. 25). The capability-based discourse is informed by structural realism which interprets states' behavior by examining disparities in their power. Excessive focus on capabilities often signals an interest in China's military budget (Ibid. p. 25). Additionally, in the capability-focused discourse, China's economy has been a source for concern as cheap Chinese labor and products have distorted the competition and caused unemployment and trade deficit in the US (p. 27). The intention-focused discourse, in turn, addresses China's strategic objectives in assessing the China threat. Here, China's regime type is cited as indication for its potential misbehavior because a country's treatment of its own population is expected to parallel with its relations to outside actors (Ibid. p. 28). Additionally, China is viewed as threatening towards democratic values as a result of its cooperation with undemocratic governments internationally (Ibid. p. 29). Lastly, the intentions-focused discourse has understood China's Confucian culture as a source for conflict with the Christian West, akin to Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations -thesis (Ibid. p. 29). Overall, Pan observes that both the capabilities and intentions-focused discourses reproduce and maintain the prevalent China threat paradigm (Ibid. p. 30). Pan critique the paradigm for solidifying particular normative constraints into the analysis on China's rise which reinforce a set image of China instead of encouraging diversity in China analysis (Ibid. p. 23–30).

Unlike scholars such as John Mearsheimer who view power struggle between China and the US as a zero-sum game, American political scientist Joseph S. Nye—known for his pioneer

work on neoliberalism and soft power—has argued that “some aspects of the relationship will involve a positive-sum game” (Nye, 2018). According to Nye, China and the US are currently in a situation of ‘cooperative rivalry’ where competition is coupled with the existence of economic, social and ecological interdependences (Nye, 2018 & 2023). Nye’s assessments reflect the arguments in the liberal school of international relations which has traditionally emphasized economic interconnectedness and the use of international institutions as a means to secure peace (Kegley & Blanton 2014, p. 31–32). Among these scholars, the implications of China’s rise have been met with more optimism. For example, the works of American political scientists Edward Steinfeld and John Ikenberry demonstrate this line of argumentation. In 2010, Steinfeld suggested in his book *Playing Our Game: Why China's Rise Doesn't Threaten the West* that China’s entrance into the liberal market has essentially benefited the West by strengthening the leading position of its companies and regulatory institutions because the PRC integrated into the existing system. Similarly, in 2014, Ikenberry famously argued that China’s rise does not automatically jeopardize the liberal world order—instead of eschewing international organization (such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization) the PRC’s ascendance has taken place within them (p. 4). According to Ikenberry, the competition is not so much about the system itself but more about who gets to wield authority within it (Ibid. p. 4). Rising states essentially benefit from having an open and stable international order so it does not seem to be in their interest to try and overturn the current system (p. 8). Essentially, this line of argument sees China’s engagement with the existing institutions, and the benefits that it is able to gain from that engagement, as important contributors to the maintenance of the status quo and the preservation of peace.

The discourse on China’s peaceful rise is connected to the idea of China as an opportunity. The opportunity perspective can generally be understood as consisting of three main components: China as economic, political, and international opportunity (Pan, 2012, p. 31). These are all closely connected, since China’s economic growth has often been anticipated to foster political change as a result of an emerging middle class (Ibid. p. 33–34). Growing interconnectedness through trade, in turn, has been expected to increase the prospects of China becoming a “responsible stakeholder” that shares common interests with liberal democracies and thus contributes to the international system (Ibid. p. 36). It is important to note that contemporarily, the arguments in favor of China’s peaceful rise are significantly less common among observers and academics of global politics than they were a decade ago.

Scholars have presented rational and plausible arguments in favor of the peaceful rise of China. However, advocating for the aforementioned discourse has also been an important strategy for the Chinese government which of course has a vested interest in maintaining and reproducing such narrative. The concept of “peaceful rise” was first articulated by the former vice-president of the Central Party School of the CCP, Zhen Bijian, in 2003 (Clarke, 2008, p. 113). Zheng suggested that China should engage in economic globalization while continuing to pursue its aim to obtain socialism (Ibid. p. 113). The next year, President Hu Jintao made a similar remark by referring to the “peaceful development” of China (Ibid. p. 113). Essentially, the “peaceful rise” rhetoric has acted as China’s foreign policy strategy, the purpose of which is to promote the PRC’s transition into great power status (Ibid). Indeed, the strategy has been deployed in different times during the history of the PRC. For example, a scholar of Chinese history, Elisabeth Forster (2021) analyses how the PRC’s assertions of peacefulness functioned as a negotiation tool to secure the mainland’s position as a representative of ‘China’ in the United Nations (UN). What is more, Forster observes that the PRC has also used the peacefulness rhetoric to present itself as pacific, anti-imperialist, and potential leader to the decolonized or soon-to-be-decolonized developing states (Ibid. p. 426–427).

The discourses on China’s peaceful rise and China as an opportunity can appear contradictory to the China threat argument. However, as Pan (2012) points out, they are not mutually exclusive (p. 39). Indeed, some scholars argue in favor of both of these paradigms and the concepts and observations presented in them often overlap (Ibid. p. 39). For example, international relations scholars Huwaidin and Antwi-Boateng (2021) propose that the implications of China’s rise are better understood as a combination of the two, often rivalry, perspectives rather than in terms of a strictly binary debate (p. 2). According to Huwaidin and Antwi-Boateng, China is likely to embark on a partial peaceful rise where the PRC assertively advances its interests and continues its military modernization while operating cautiously in its relation with the US in order to avoid direct confrontation (Ibid. p. 11–17).

5.2 The Distribution of Power in the International System

Discussion on the China threat theory closely relates to the concept of power distribution in the international relations literature. Distribution of power refers to the allocation of material capabilities and influence which causes a certain power, or multiple ones, to dominate the system. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the world became unipolar, with a single state—the United States—dominating the system as a hegemon. According to American foreign

policy scholar Christopher Layne, hegemon refers to a state that enjoys both military and economic supremacy, and which intentionally behaves in a way to promote its own interests and security (2006, p. 11). Furthermore, a hegemon is the dominant power in international system and therefore one without an equal (Ibid. p. 11). The hegemonic position of the US emerged both as a result of its material strength (in economic and military terms) and the absence of a challenging power after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Ibid. p. 12). The domination of the US has been maintained through conscious policymaking by American presidents, the intention of which has been to constrain the rise of rivalry powers (Ibid. p. 12). The scholarly community lacks consensus regarding the current state of the US' hegemony: Some argue that the world remains dominated by one superpower (the US) and thus illustrates a unipolar distribution of power in the international system. Others express skepticism towards the prospects of a US-dominated system and anticipate a bipolar distribution of power—a world ruled by two superpowers. Still others perceive the world as multipolar with three or more concentrations (or poles) of power. In this section, I focus on the works of different scholars and analysts to demonstrate how versatile interpretations for the contemporary distribution of power are rationalized.

In their article titled “The Myth of Multipolarity: American Power’s Staying Power” American political scientists Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth (2023) propose that the age of unipolarity is not yet over: instead the contemporary balance of power in the international system can be understood in terms of partial unipolarity. Brooks and Wohlforth remark that the US’ failed interventions in the Middle East, the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, and the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine could be cited as evidence for the diminishing influence of the US in the international system (Ibid. p. 78). However, the authors question the notion that the decrease of American influence signifies the collapse of its unipolar moment (Ibid. p. 78). After all, the US still remains more powerful than any other country in the world (Ibid. p. 78). Indeed, Brooks and Wohlforth illustrate the superior position of the US by noting that while discussing the distribution of power, what is central is not a state’s ability to influence others but instead the amount of resources, both economic and military, it possesses (Ibid. p. 79). Certainly, China has risen in terms of economic strength, but it is still far behind the US when it comes to military capability and technology (Ibid. p. 85). Therefore, the US’ failed operations abroad and its inability to halt Russia’s attack of Ukraine should not be seen as indicators of its declining power on the international arena. If polarity is defined in terms of resources, the US still remains the leader of a unipolar

world (Ibid. p. 79). As the world got used to American dominance, any disturbances to its power are quickly interpreted as a shift in the balance of power (in favor of a multipolar system) when in reality, Brooks and Wohlforth suggest, we are lacking adequate terminology to explain the state of the international system where the dominant hegemon has lost some of its power but still remains the dominant player in the arena (Ibid. p. 85). Hence, Brooks and Wohlforth use the expression ‘partial unipolarity’ to describe the current state of international relations:

To argue that today’s system is not multipolar or bipolar is not to deny that power relations have changed. China has risen, especially in the economic realm, and great-power competition has returned after a post-Cold War lull...But the world’s largest-ever power gap will take a long time to close, and not all elements of this gap will narrow at the same rate (Ibid. p. 85).

Similarly, Norwegian international relations scholar Pål Røren (2024) argues that the current international system remains unipolar as the US continues to dominate the system. However, Røren’s assessment is based solely on the evaluation of military capability which he argues to be the best measure to indicate the realized power of states (p. 2). Unlike economy or demography—which Røren understands as more suited to portray states’ material capabilities and potential—military capability best corresponds to states’ realized coercive power, making the current international system unipolar in favor of the US (Ibid. p. 2).

Contrary to the views of Brooks, Wohlforth and Røren, several scholars and analysts maintain that the current international order has two poles of power. In 2018 Norwegian international relations scholar Øystein Tunsjø famously argued that a bipolar system is emerging both because of the shrinking power gap between China and the US and because of the widening gap between them and any third powerful state. More recently, American political analyst Cliff Kupchan and political scientist Jennifer Lind, among others, have argued that the contemporary world is bipolar. In an article titled “Bipolarity Is Back: Why It Matters” Kupchan (2021) observes that notable asymmetries can exist between states on certain metrics for measuring capabilities (such as military realm), yet they can still constitute a bipolar international system (p. 124). What is important is that the states’ capabilities are generally comparable and that disparities between their capabilities remain significantly smaller than those between the two major powers and their follow-ups (Ibid.). Similarly, in a 2024 article titled “Back to Bipolarity: How China's Rise Transformed the Balance of Power,” Jennifer Lind emphasizes that the existence of disparities does not erase the possibility for bipolarity. Lind’s assessment on the current bipolarity of the international system is based on an

inductive method for comparing national power. By establishing a threshold for great power capabilities, Lind demonstrates that countries can engage in security competition despite significant disparities in their material capabilities (Ibid.). Moreover, Lind argues that China's current capabilities are comparable to, if not exceeding, those of other great powers in history (Ibid.). The US might be the most powerful country in the system, but China's ability to compete with it strongly indicates that the balance of power has shifted towards bipolarity (Ibid.). Therefore, Kupchan and Lind challenge the idea that bipolarity is about competition between two equally powerful states and propose that it should instead be understood as competition between two great powers.

Lastly, some scholars argue that the international system not only has two but several poles of power. One of them is John Mearsheimer (2019), who argues that the world became multipolar around the year 2016 (p. 8). Mearsheimer anticipates a multipolar world where China and the US, with their respective allies, lead competitive, bounded orders within the system (p. 44). He expects an intense Sino-US security competition where US-led and Chinese-led orders, characterized by military alliances, compete over economic and military issues (Ibid.). According to Mearsheimer, the end of unipolarity will have fatal implications for the liberal international order (Ibid. p.17–18). More recently political scientists Emma Ashford and research analyst Evan Cooper (2023) have contributed to the debate by proposing that the power allocation in the current international system reflects an unbalanced multipolarity. Although their assessment on the polarity of the current international system differs from that of Tunsjø, Kupchan and Lind, Ashford and Cooper similarly note that disparities in capabilities should not define our understanding of the overall power distribution in the system (Ibid.). By analyzing various data for measuring power, Ashford and Cooper conclude that the term 'unbalanced multipolarity' best describes the current state of power distribution (Ibid.). In brief, while the US and China visibly lead the pack in the 21st century, less powerful middle states such as Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom, India, Turkey, and France also play a crucial role in it, making the system multipolar (Ibid.).

5.3 The Securitization of the China Threat

Debate on the implications of China's rise does not simply portray the realities of world politics in an objective manner. Sometimes states have an interest in promoting the perception of other states or international actors as threatening to preserve their own position in the system or safeguard national security. The concept of securitization has been designed to

observe this phenomena. In the field of international relations, securitization refers to a process by which a public issue is transferred from the domain of normal politics into the realm of security (Buzan, Wæver et al. 2022, p. 23–24). The intention of securitization is to legitimize the use of extraordinary measures by presenting an issue as a threat to a referent object (Ibid. p. 24–25). The securitizer argues that inaction would lead to a point of no return where latent responses might be inadequate or impossible because the threat to the referent object is so existential (Ibid. p. 24–45). Therefore, the process of securitization allows a hasty response and even the bypassing of standard regulations of democratic policy-making to answer to a specific threat at hand (Taureck, 2006, p. 55). According to IR and security studies scholar Rita Taureck (2006) “securitization theory is not a *political* statement on the part of the analyst,” instead it is “a theoretical tool of analysis with which the analyst can trace incidences of securitization and desecuritization” (p. 55) [italics original]. Considering the topic of this research, it is helpful to examine the process of securitization in relations to the rise of China. In this endeavor, Chinese political scientist Weiqing Song’s (2015) article “Securitization of the ‘China threat’ Discourse: A Poststructuralist Account,” comes in useful. In the article, Song demonstrates the securitization of the China threat issue by identifying three modes of securitization: scientific theory, normative analogy, and political myth. In each of these three modes, the securitizer deploys specific language to address a distinct target audience. The securitizer adopts either a deductive, inductive, or psychologically intuitive method to appeal to their audience. Let us consider each of the three modes in more detail below.

The scientific theory to securitization approaches the rise of China as an academic issue that can be explained and predicted in order to better understand world politics (Song, 2015, p. 153). China is therefore securitized through academic, deductive reasoning where the securitizer constructs theories, anticipates outcomes, and provides policy recommendations (p. 153–154). The people producing the scientific mode to securitization (the securitizers) are academic professionals such as policy analysts and IR scholars (p. 153.). Their arguments are characterized by professionalism and the use of academic language (p. 154). Although proposals about China’s rise in the scientific mode present only a single interpretation among many, the academic’s authority on the field can strengthen the credibility of their argument (Ibid. p. 154). Song refers to John Mearsheimer as an example of such academic, securitizing the China threat through scientific theory (p. 152–155). Intellectual elites and American policy makers are among the target audiences of the scientific theory approach (p. 153).

In the normative analogy mode, the China threat is securitized by offering analogies that connect historical events to the present (p. 156). For example, China can be associated to Nazi Germany or militarist Japan to make sense of its contemporary behavior (p. 156). Moreover, China's growing nationalism is often cited as a source for concern (p. 156). Essentially, in this mode the China threat becomes inductively incorporated into a wider security discourse about political analogies and different practices of governing a society (p. 156–157). Because this securitization mode is mainly concerned with political threats, the state or the nation are commonly depicted as the objects under threat from China (p. 158). Furthermore, the normative analogy relates to the politics of identity by which China is produced into an antagonistic actor that is differentiated from the Western understanding of itself as a community of peace-loving democracies (p. 157). In the normative analogy mode, the audience consists of an informed, and often well-educated public (p. 157). The ideas presented by the securitizer can be introduced, for example, in columns or opinion pieces in prestigious journals or newspapers (p. 158).

Lastly, the political myth mode securitizes the China threat issue by addressing the general public through mass media and other popular genres (p. 160). Here, China poses an all-encompassing threat that connects to a wide range of sectors such as military, strategic, political, economic, environmental, social or cultural (p. 162). For example, the economy is presented to face an existential threat from China who refuses to respect the established rules, norms, and institutions of the free, liberal market system (p. 162). The consequences of China's unfair economic practices are portrayed as having devastating implications for the traditional American industries by fostering unemployment (p. 162). Overall, the China threat is implied to have real and grave repercussions for the rest of the world (p. 162). References are made to the ethnicity, race, culture, and civilization of the securitized, to inflict psychologically intuitive myths which can even be openly discriminatory (p. 160). In this mode of securitization, prompting emotional responses by the use of appealing rhetoric and visual illustrations are meant to stimulate action to respond to the China threat (p. 162). According to Song, in the political myth mode of securitization "it matters little whether the content communicated is factual," instead the securitizer's "real purpose is to convince an audience of its urgency and consequently persuade them to take action" (p. 160). Here, China can be securitized by exclusion, marginalization, and alienation from the Western culture and identity (p. 161). According to Song, the myths used in this mode of securitization can be

derived from the historical Yellow Peril narrative and Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations -thesis (p. 164).

5.4 Policy Approaches to Respond to China's Rise

The scholarly community, China analysts, and strategists have proposed several policy approaches that American decisionmakers can employ in order to respond to the rise of China. In this section, I introduce these approaches, discuss their underlying assumptions about China's intentions and demonstrate their usage in practice. Articles by IR scholars Chiang-Liao Nien-chung and Ye Xiaodi are used as the main reference points. First, to trace the unique features of each policy approach, I refer to the article by Chang-Liao (2019) titled "From Engagement to Competition? The Logic of the US China Policy Debate." Second, Ye's (2021) article "To Engage or Not to Engage? Explaining the Logic of the US's China Strategy in the Post-Cold War Era" is cited to situate the different approaches in their respective historical contexts.

5.4.1 Engagement

Engagement, as the name suggests, refers to policies that attempt to integrate a rising power into the dominant international system (Lynch, 2002, p. 203). Policies of engagement promote cooperation and increased interdependence between nations, often pursued through incentives, diplomatic dialogue, and trade (Ibid. p. 203). Welcoming the rising power into international organizations is also seen as a beneficial practice of engagement (Ibid. p. 203). The advocates of the engagement approach believe that cooperation with China aligns with American interests (Chang-Liao, 2019, p. 251 & Ye, 2021). Indeed, engagement was previously expected to integrate China into the liberal economic system and eventually transform it into a democracy (Ye, 2021).

The policy of engagement was first adopted by the Clinton administration to respond to the uncertainties caused by China's growing material capabilities and the ambiguity of its intentions (Lynch, 2002, p. 188). Moreover, the potential of cooperating with China on areas such as the economy, security, and environmental protection appealed to the administration (Ye, 2021). For the Clinton administration, another important objective of the engagement-oriented policy was to integrate China into the liberal market economy and to promote democratization (Lynch, 2002, p. 188 & Ye, 2021). These efforts were pursued by increasing interactions between the two countries and they ultimately led to the historic meeting between

Bill Clinton and Jiang Zemin in the US on October, 1997 (Ye, 2021). The meeting produced a joined statement on the development of constructive strategic partnership between the two countries, stressing cooperation and durability in the relations (U.S. Department of State Archive, n. d.). After Clinton's presidency, the engagement approach was again adopted by George Bush (Ibid.). Having previously criticized Clinton's China-policy, the Bush administration turned out to embrace some of the same practices, prompted by the 9/11 attacks after which China became to be seen as a potential ally in the war on terror (Ibid.). In his speech to the National Committee on US-China relations on September 2005, Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick famously argued that China "has a responsibility to strengthen the international system that has enabled its success" and called for the PRC to become a "responsible stakeholder" in the system (U.S Department of State Archive, n.d.).

In an article titled "Why Engage? China and the Logic of Communicative Engagement" political scientist March Lynch (2002) remarks that the majority of China observers in the US have come to perceive engagement as unsuccessful—an argument that has been demonstrated by Beijing's continued conflict with Taipei, its accelerating military build-up, and persistent human rights abuses (Ibid. p. 188). However, Lynch argues that the earlier attempts on engagement have largely been evaluated in terms of American interests and often lacked genuine dialogue between the two parties (Ibid. p. 219). The essential problem, Lynch asserts, was the practice of 'strategic engagement' where China was expected to abide to the interests of the US which were largely dependent on American domestic politics and strategic considerations (Ibid. p. 219–220). In strategic engagement, the target country is manipulated with the use of threats and incentives to behave in a way that promotes the interests of the other party (Ibid. p. 203). Instead of adopting this self-interest-oriented, strategic approach to engagement, Lynch suggests that a form of communicative engagement would be more successful (Ibid. p. 222). In communicative engagement, the interests of both parties are acknowledged and the general objective is to reach consensus through dialogue (Ibid. p. 204). Therefore, in communicative engagement, the strategic aims are not pre-defined but rather become realized through mutual understanding and negotiations (Ibid. p. 204).

5.4.2 Accommodation

Policies of accommodation are usually initiated when a declining power attempts to promote its own interests in the emergence of a rising power (Chang-Liao, 2019, p. 252). A key objective is to ensure peaceful coexistence by sharing power with the rising state (Ibid. p

252). In the case of Sino-US relations, an important premise for the accommodation advocates is the belief that China will surpass American domination (Ibid. p. 252). A well-known advocate for accommodation is the Australian strategist Hugh White. In his 2013 book *The China Choice: Why America Should Share Power*, White argues that the US should maintain its presence in Asia while permitting China a larger role in the region in order to avoid war (p. 5–6). Similarly, in an article published the same year, American political scientist, Charles L. Glaser (2013), argued that a policy of accommodation could be applied to avoid Sino-US conflict. Glaser proposed, that the US should retreat from its obligation to defend Taiwan in exchange for the PRC's commitment to peacefully settle its territorial and maritime disputes while recognizing the US' long-term, military security role in East Asia (p. 50).

The earlier pro-accommodation literature interestingly showcases the differences between contemporary and pre-2020s debate on the rise of China. Over a decade ago, in 2013, IR scholar Amitai Etzioni argued that China is a regional power, lacking the capability or even willingness to establish a new global order: instead of spreading its ideology abroad, China was more occupied with its geopolitical objectives in East Asia (Ibid. p. 46). Moreover, Etzioni evaluated that domestic issues such as demographic changes and societal shifts would preoccupy the Chinese leadership in the future (Ibid. p. 46). Because of this, Etzioni asserted that the West could accept increases in China's regional influence and practice accommodation:

China does not pose an *immediate* threat to US interests in the same way as Iran or Pakistan. It is still in the early stages of building-up and modernising its military. Rather than rushing to pre-empt China as a military threat with a more aggressive defence policy, the United States *has time* to help bring about a peaceful coexistence (2015, p. 46–47) [Italics added for emphasis].

Etzioni's arguments are an interesting reflection on the nature of the debate in 2010s—similar ideas are evidently less common in the contemporary discussions and policy approaches. As China's rise accelerated, the urgency of American responses has moved to the forefront of the contemporary debate, as demonstrated in the previous section discussing securitization.

The accommodation approach has been demonstrated by the first Obama administration which encouraged the US to welcome the rise of China (Ye, 2021). The background of this approach can be traced to the 2008 financial crisis which had a major effect on the policies of the first Obama administration (Ibid.). The crisis also shaped American views on China as the PRC participated in efforts to recover the global economy after the recession (Ibid.). The

Obama administration saw China's behavior and its cooperation in domains such as the economy, climate change, and security as signs of the regime's responsibility and therefore strengthened China's role in organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) (Ibid.). Obama's second term, however, shifted the China policy away from accommodation and towards competition as a result of China's increased material capabilities, shifts in American domestic debate on China, and changes in China's foreign strategy such as the establishment of Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the launch of the One Belt One Road Initiative (BRI) (Ibid.).

5.4.3 Competition

Despite being alarmed by the PRC's authoritarian regime, its diplomatic outreach, and displays of strength, proponents of competition remain confident that the US is able to counterbalance a possible Chinese aggression (Chang-Liao, 2019, p. 253). Essentially, advocates of competition view the preservation of American dominance with optimism and are thus willing to partake in competition with China to ensure the continuation of that dominance (Ibid. p. 253). A proponent of the competition approach might, for example, suggest that the US should maintain its military presence in Asia to deter China and to indicate American commitment to its allies (Ibid. p. 253). Chang-Liao remarks:

It should be noted that the competition option does not assume an inevitable conflict with China, but neither does it assume that US engagement with China will produce a relationship of amity. This camp holds that the United States' China policy must be calibrated towards competition, and not to mistake a competitor for a friend, a partner, or an enemy (2019, p. 253).

President Barack Obama's second term reflects the competition approach to China's rise (Ye, 2021). The administration regarded China as a challenger to the US-dominated international order and launched policies that aligned with this understanding (Ibid.). For example, the administration strengthened American alliance systems in Asia, attempted to restore the economic leadership of the US in the Asia-Pacific, and increased human rights diplomacy (Ibid.).

An interesting take on the competition approach is offered by China analyst Ryan Hass. Reflecting on the deteriorating Sino-US relations during Trump's first term, Hass (2018) remarks that both Beijing and Washington have a choice to make regarding the future direction of the bilateral relations (p. 7). According to Hass, competition does not have to be erased to avoid further deteriorating the relations; instead, a manageable competition, guided

by mutually developed boundaries, could foster stability (Ibid. p. 6–7). This type of manageable competition could be built, for example, by conducting regular leader-level exchanges, cooperating on shared domestic challenges such as healthcare and energy infrastructure, and establishing protocols to manage unintended crises including naval encounters and cyber incidents (Ibid. p. 3–4). Moreover, addressing major challenges in the bilateral relations, such as the issue of Taiwan and the trade war, is crucial to move forward with a more durable and stable competition (Ibid. p. 5–6). Similar to Hass, American political scientist and sinologist David Shambaugh (2018) has argued that Washington and Beijing should handle their tensions and avoid direct conflict by exercising ‘competitive coexistence’ before the competition turns into a zero-sum struggle, akin to Cold War (p. 126).

5.4.4 Containment

An important component of the containment approach is the concern over a diminishing power gap between Washington and Beijing as a result of China’s rise (Chang-Liao, 2019, p. 253–254). Increases in the PRC’s capabilities are expected to contribute to China’s growing ambitions, for example, regarding East Asian regional dominance (Ibid. p. 254). Unlike proponents of competition, advocates of containment see the prospects of China surpassing the US as more likely (Ibid. p. 254). Moreover, proponents of containment are not only aiming to maintain a power equilibrium in East Asia; rather they view the obstruction of China’s rise and ascendance to hegemony as important in itself (Ibid. p. 254). Therefore, advocates of containment typically promote policies that aim to impede China’s economic growth and emphasize the need for a balancing coalition to counter China (Ibid. p. 254). Chang-Liao summarizes the main factors of the containment approach as follows:

This camp has no illusions about the prospects for democratization in China or the effect of economic interdependence. Compared to competition, containment favors a strategy of coercion rather than deterrence and a network of collective defence over bilateral alliances, and it prefers mercantilist economic policies to liberal ones. In short, the objective for containment is to create geopolitical counterweights around China’s peripheries to prevent further expansion of its power and influence (p. 254).

Donald Trump’s policies are a reflection of the containment approach. Already during the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump articulated his containment-prone stance towards China and his discontent with the trade policies of the time (Ye, 2021). Once elected for his first term as the president, Trump defined China as a great challenger to American power, prosperity, and interests and later proclaimed China to be a revisionist power (Ibid.). The

PRC's renewed foreign policy strategy likely contributed to the Trump administration's assertive views on China as the CCP had recently communicated its plans for national rejuvenation (Ibid.). Trump's containment policies have included the implementation of tariffs on Chinese products, the investigation of Confucius Institutes and certain Chinese-American scholars, as well as the restriction of key technology transfers (Ibid.).

Former US Deputy National Security Adviser Matt Pottinger, previous US Representative from Wisconsin Mike Gallagher and American political scientist Michael Beckley⁵ have argued in favor of the containment approach in recent years. In their *Foreign Affairs* article titled "No Substitute for Victory: America's Competition With China Must Be Won, Not Managed" Pottinger and Gallagher (2024) argue that Beijing is attempting to establish an antidemocratic order globally: "the CCP has no desire to coexist indefinitely with great powers that promote liberal values and thus represent a fundamental threat to its rule" (p. 39). The authors maintain that China's recent behavior, such as the growing of its nuclear arsenal and support for dictatorships internationally, demonstrate the regime's ambitions for domination (Ibid. p. 26). For these reasons, the US should not shy away from "uncomfortably confrontational" rhetoric and policies because admitting the existence of a new Cold War can prevent the conflict from turning into an actual, "hot" war (Ibid. p. 26). Measures that Washington could employ to win the Sino-US competition include strengthening the defense capabilities of the US, restricting American investments and critical technology exports to China, building a coalition of partners to cooperate on trade, recruiting citizens of ally countries to work on American defense industry, and increasing military recruitments (Ibid. p. 34–38). Additionally, Michael Beckley (2023) offers another take on the benefits of containment in another *Foreign Affairs* article titled "Delusions of Detente: Why America and China Will Be Enduring Rivals." According to Beckley, the PRC has repeatedly interpreted American attempts to integrate China into the liberal world order as a strategy of containment, even when American policies have aimed for cooperation (p. 11). Although the US has transferred weaponry to PLA, facilitated China's entrance into international organization, and even suggested Taipei to consider unification with the mainland, Beijing continues to view American intentions as insincere (p. 19). Despite American efforts, Beckley reasons, China has not been demonstrating any willingness to engage with or improve relations to the US (p.

⁵ Beckley's book with Hal Brands titled *Danger Zone* is one of the primary sources of this research. Brands also advocates for containment, as demonstrated by the arguments presented in the book.

21). Since the previous attempts on engagement and cooperation have not improved Sino-US relations, Beckley suggests that Washington should pursue a policy of clear containment that has a potential to deter Chinese aggression.

The intentions of this chapter have been twofold. First, I positioned the China threat theory within the context of the international relations discipline. By describing the debate on China's rise—with a particular focus on the China threat theory and the distribution of power—I have attempted to illustrate that a single, underlying truth or a shared consensus does not exist when it comes to scholarly discussion on the implications of China's increased power and capabilities. Second, this chapter has introduced Chengxin's Pan's paradigm on capabilities- and intentions -focused China threat discourses, Weiqing Song's three modes of securitization, and four policy approaches to China's rise which together form an important analytics framework for the study of primary sources. Pan's paradigm is applied to explain how the authors of the China threat books are able to come to drastically different conclusions about China's strategies and intentions while citing the same events and behavior by the PRC. Song's modes of securitization, in turn, offer an alternative analytical lens through which to categorize the books based on the authors' styles of securitization. It reveals that although China's intentions are interpreted in varying ways, the authors still share a common objective—to securitize the China threat issue in order to justify a hasty response by the US. Lastly, the four policy approaches to China's rise offer an important historical and political framework for understanding the American contemporary policies on China, characterized by a sense of urgency and an increased potential for conflict.

6 What Makes China Threatening? An Overview of the Existing Literature on the China Threat in the US

Studying American representations of China is not a new venture for the scholarly community. Indeed, this was already demonstrated in chapter three where I discussed the historical changes in American perceptions of China. In this chapter, however, I examine the contemporary literature on China threat in the US. Modern research has analyzed the portrayal of China in various outlets including American newspapers (Liss, 2003; Liu 2009; Yang & Liu 2012), books (Broomfield, 2003; Frauen, 2021 & Pennanen 2025) and administrative documents (Lehto, 2021). After familiarizing myself with the work of these scholars, I have identified several reoccurring themes that dominate American perceptions of China which continuously occur in the arguments of those who subscribe to the China threat theory. These themes present China either as military, economic, political, ideological, or technological threat.

Military threat is one of the most central dimensions of the China threat narrative (Al-Rodhan, 2007; Broomfield 2003; Roy 1996; Yang & Liu 2012 & Pennanen, 2025). It has been both the most often occurring (Yang & Liu, 2012, p. 704) as well as the most concerning (Broomfield, 2003, p. 277) aspect of China threat in various American publications. Especially in the 1990s and early 2000s, concerns have focused on the People's Liberation Army's modernization, acquisition of weapons of mass destruction, and the PRC's arms sales to countries deemed hostile or rogue (Broomfield, 2003, p. 277; Roy, 1996, p. 759). Moreover, China has been expected to attempt to surpass the military might of the US and those of its allies (Pennanen, 2025, p. 11). Despite the popularity of the military threat narrative, some scholars have also questioned its plausibility (Al-Rodhan, 2007; Broomfield, 2003; Roy, 1996). For example, China's military budget has been described as modest compared to that of the United States which per capita expenditure on military is significantly larger (Al-Rodhan, 2007, p. 49; Broomfield, 2003, p. 278 & Roy, 1996, p. 764). According to the data of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), in 2025 the US still constituted the largest share of the world's military expenditure, accounting for 37% of the total, while the share of the PRC was at 12% (SIPRI Fact Sheet, 2025). Additionally, the US' military presence abroad still far exceeds that of the PRC with 800 American military bases worldwide compared to the sole Chinese overseas military base in Djibouti (Huwaitin and Antwi-Boateng, 2021, p. 9–10). Moreover, in her research, BA in International Affairs graduate

Emma V. Broomfield (2003) remarks that having the capability to confront the US does not mean that China has any actual intentions to do so—instead the PRC is more focused on growing its economy which is dependent on good relations with trade partners (p. 278). Broomfield's argument, proposed already in 2003, aligns with the messages of the PRC in the early 21st century (Bijian, 2005) and could perhaps be deemed incompatible with the current realities of the PLA's power. Despite the criticism, concerns about the PRC's growing military strength do not appear baseless, at least to the extent that China's real military equipment spending has been continuously growing at a 10% rate since 2000 (Robertson, 2024). Interestingly, however, a 2015-study found that between 1979–2010, China's growing military spending did not indicate more conflicts between China and other states (Xiang, Primiano & Huang, 2015).

China's economic expansion has frequently been deemed threatening (Al-Rodhan, 2007; Broomfield, 2003; Frauen, 2021; Yang & Liu, 2012 & Pennanen, 2025). For example, there has been discontent with the implementation of policies such as import substitution which distort economic competition for foreign companies in China (Broomfield, 2003, p. 273). Additionally, the PRC's economic growth has been viewed as harmful for the environment (Ibid. p. 273). American authors have also expressed concerns about the possibilities created by economic growth which may allow China to challenge the leadership position of the US (Ibid. p. 271). In addition to observing these concerns about the PRC's economic influence, scholars have also expressed several doubts about their plausibility. In an article titled "A Critique of the China Threat Theory: A Systematic Analysis," scholar Khalid R. Al-Rodhan (2007) observes that economic growth has caused disturbances in China's domestic stability and social cohesion as citizens have protested against income inequality (p. 62). Therefore, economic growth has not unequivocally increased the PRC's power, but has instead brought about new challenges to the Chinese leadership. In 1996, political scientist Denny Roy additionally suggested that if the PRC wishes to continue to expand its economy, cooperation with the outside world is unavoidable (p. 762). Since ensuring economic growth has been one of the PRC's main objectives, it would be peculiar for China to act in a way that would jeopardize this goal. Therefore, it can be argued that China actually benefits from preserving the status quo (Broomfield, 2003, p. 284). Economic ties with the US and neighboring countries, in turn, increase interdependence and therefore foster stability in the region (Ibid. p. 275). Although several scholars in the late 1990s and early 2000s observed that China has an

interest in maintaining the status quo to continue its economic growth, contemporary assessments on the issue have been far less optimistic.

Researchers have observed the tendency among American authors and journalists to depict China as an ideological or a political threat to the United States. For example, concerns have been voiced about China's role as the new communist leader after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Broomfield, 2003, p. 268). Here, China becomes understood as a specifically Marxist-Leninist type of ideological threat, akin to the earlier challenge of Soviet-communism (Pennanen, 2025, p. 13). Moreover, some American publications suggest that Chinese nationalism will prompt military-led expansionism and, consequently, pose a threat to regional stability (Ibid. p. 269). Anti-American sentiments have also created concern about China's challenge to American liberal values (Broomfield, 2003, p. 269 & Roy, 1996, p. 761). Indeed, China has been feared to export its totalitarian system of governance outside of its own borders while attempting to form a world order that undermines the existence of democracies and promotes autocracies (Pennanen, 2025, p. 13). These efforts are seen as part of China's quest for domination to reclaim its lost position as the Middle Kingdom, avenge the Century of Humiliation, and replace the US as the superior power (Ibid. p. 14). Lastly, for many China observers, the essential cause for concern is the manner in which the PRC is operating on the international arena. China's perceived reluctance to obey with international rules of law, its human rights violations, the use of espionage, and neglect for the international trade rules (e.g. by cheating, stealing, counterfeiting, and violating intellectual property rights) have all fueled concerns over the PRC's growing influence internationally (Pennanen, 2025, p. 12).

Finally, China's growing technological influence has been a more recent topic of discussion in the China threat literature (Pennanen, 2025). The discussion has been marked by notions of China seeking to attain technological supremacy and the PRC using its Digital Silk Road initiative to dominate digital infrastructure globally (Ibid. p. 11). Although they can be divided into distinct categories, technological threat is closely related to economic and military capabilities. Indeed, with a strong economy and technological know-how, the Chinese military has been able to develop significantly (Ibid. p. 11).

As I have been demonstrating throughout this chapter, many scholars have been skeptical towards the China threat theory. For example, Al-Rodhan (2007) argues, that the subscribers of the threat theory assume the PRC's economy to keep growing and its military to keep

expanding, while the possibilities of social unrest and political instability are largely neglected (p. 63). Indeed, pro-China advocates in the 1990s and early 2000s have argued that a unified, developed China would actually maintain stability in the region by counterweighting other powers and by moving towards modernization—and possible democratization—with the help of economic growth (Roy, 1996, p. 765)⁶. In addition to that, critics of the China threat school have deemed Western perception of China as racist and prejudiced (Ibid. p. 764). Finally, some scholars (Al-Rodhan, 2007 & Pan, 2004) have discussed the potential of the China threat theory to become a self-fulfilling prophecy: instead of describing China as it is, American authors tend to produce China threat into a social reality by encouraging the PRC to respond to the emerging rivalry by increasing military rearmament. These discussions prove that predicting China's future is a challenging, complex and, presumably, an impossible task. Whether China becomes proclaimed as a threat or an opportunity is largely dependent on the political standpoint of the proclaimer. If we wish to assess China objectively, it is crucial to study the arguments on both sides. Al-Rodhan (2007) summarizes this idea by writing that "China is neither as benevolent as most of its supporters claim nor as malicious as its critics assert" (p. 64).

I have now given a brief overview of some of the most relevant literature regarding the China threat narrative in the US. After going through the existing research, I identified several gaps in knowledge. Although there is extensive literature concerning the China threat narrative, the research to date has tended to focus on American newspapers rather than books. The only studies which investigate the China threat narrative precisely in books are by BA graduate Emma Broomfield (2003), German philosopher of science Jan-Boje Frauen (2021), and Finnish historian and IR scholar Henna-Riikka Pennanen (2025). Broomfield has contributed to the field by analyzing threat perceptions in several American conservative books and other publications. However, her paper is already twenty years old and it is unclear if the results are applicable to the contemporary China threat discussion. This research focuses on books released during the first term of Donald Trump and the subsequent presidency of Joe Biden. Therefore, the timeframe is considerably different from that of Broomfield's study. Frauen's research, in turn, mainly focuses on books in the economy or business genre. The data chosen

⁶ This argument is seldom used in the contemporary discussion on China's growth. Several authors of the China threat books, analyzed for this research, observe that the West anticipated China to democratize as a result of greater economic interconnectedness (see for example Ward, 2019; Spalding 2019; Ellis 2023; Brands & Beckley, 2022 & Economy, 2021). The disappointment resulting from the failure of this presumption is an important premise for the China threat narrative in many of the books. For example, the US is often seen as responsible for welcoming China into international institutions which it later failed to respect.

for my analysis covers books on a wider spectrum of topics. Additionally, the books chosen will not overlap with those analyzed in Frauen's research. Lastly, Pennanen has contributed to the research by collectively analyzing a compilation of speeches by senior administration officials during the first Trump administration, books that belong to the China threat literary genre, and position papers published by the Committee on the Present Danger: China. Although Pennanen also analyzed China threat books, her research only covers three of them, thus leaving room for additional research focusing on similar sources. Moreover, the books analyzed in this research were not part of Pennanen's analysis. All of these considerations taken into account, I am confident that my research can contribute new and interesting observations to the study of the China threat narrative. Importantly, this research adds to the existing body of knowledge by examining whether the same China threat tropes found in the existing literature are also present in the primary sources of my analysis.

7 Research Questions, the China Threat Categories and Methodology

This chapter consists of three parts the purposes of which are to 1) introduce the research questions, 2) provide definitions for the China threat categories, and 3) explain the chosen method of data analysis. Together, these sections outline the methodology of the research.

7.1 Research Questions

The objective of this research is to study the China threat narrative in American popular, non-fiction books. The timeframe of the research and the selection of data is based on the presidential terms of two recent US presidents, Donald Trump (2017–2021) and Joe Biden (2021– 2025). Derived from these aims the research questions are:

1. How is the China threat narrative described in American popular, non-fiction books?
2. Are the popular tropes identified in the existing literature (China as military, economic, political, ideological, or technological threat) also present in the bestseller books analyzed for this research?
3. How do the authors' recommend the US to respond to the emerging China threat?

Before proceeding to examine the selection of data for my thesis, it is important to consider the intentions of this research. I would like to emphasize that the purpose of the research is not to cement the wide-spread notion that China is, or will be, a threat in the global arena. Nor is my intention to suggest that China does not pose any real threat or challenge to the current US-led world order. Instead, I attempt to observe the China threat narrative as a construction in the American non-fiction literature, one that may or may not be accurate in reality. Hence, my thesis contributes to the wider body of research arguing that China threat is not a new phenomenon that has emerged solely as a response to the PRC's growing material capabilities. Instead, the image of a threatening China has a long history and an important function in American identity-building. I subscribe to the words of Chengxin Pan (2004), who describes a similar objective in his research:

Certainly, I do not deny China's potential for strategic misbehavior in the global context, nor do I claim the 'essential peacefulness' of Chinese culture. Having said that, my main point here is that there is no such thing as 'Chinese reality' that can automatically speak for itself, for example, as a 'threat.' Rather, the 'China threat' is essentially a specifically social meaning given to China by its U.S.

observers, a meaning that cannot be disconnected from the dominant U.S. self-construction. Thus, to fully understand the U.S. 'China threat' argument, it is essential to recognize its autobiographical nature (p. 313).

Therefore, this research follows the interpretivist ontology, according to which social reality is a construct created by and dependent on peoples' subjective interpretations (Denscombe, 2010, p. 121).

7.2 The China Threat Categories

After identifying several reoccurring themes in the existing literature, I have prepared five threat categories which I am expecting to discover through the primary source analysis of this research. These include: military threat, ideological threat, political threat, economic threat, and technological threat.

- **Military threat:** China provokes military or armed conflict regionally or inter-continently. China hinders American status as a military superpower. China provokes other states to increase their military capability.
- **Ideological threat:** China spreads communist and/or authoritarian political ideology to other states. China hinders development towards democracy in certain countries. China encourages or stabilizes authoritarian and/or communist ideologies outside its borders.
- **Political threat:** China causes turmoil in international and/or East Asian regional political stability. China jeopardizes political order in liberal and democratic or soon-to-be-liberal/democratic states. China endangers the US-led, liberal world order.
- **Economic threat:** China takes the US' place as the economic superpower. China develops a global monopoly in certain industrial sectors. China jeopardizes economic stability globally. Inexpensive Chinese labor decreases American jobs as companies move their businesses abroad, causing domestic challenges in the US.
- **Technological threat:** China's technological advancements hinder the competitiveness of the US and other countries. China creates a monopoly in certain technological sectors. Chinese technology jeopardizes security internationally.

This typology is informed by the literature review which revealed that the five aspects of China threat mentioned above (military, ideological, political, economic and technological)

have all been identified in previous research on the topic. Although I am expecting to encounter similar themes in my own primary source analysis, these categories are not intended to function as a fixed framework. Rather, the typology serves as an analytical tool that can be modified and adjusted to make space for additional findings. Indeed, while conducting the primary source analysis, I discovered a threat category that was not present in the existing literature. I have defined it as follows:

- **Threat to the international system:** China is/will be a threat to the international system because of its role as a rising power. The China threat issue is contextualized within the framework of global politics and explained through theories according to which changes in the international distribution of power lead to instability in the system. The perception of threat is based on theoretical concepts and frameworks that can be adopted to any other state or international actor in a similar position within the system.

7.3 Methodology

It is through the stories we tell and are told that we make sense of society; it is through narratives that our situation in the political and cultural landscape, and that of everyone else, is reinforced.

– Boréus & Bergström, 2017, p. 122

This section introduces the methodology of the research. First, I discuss the selection of primary sources. After that, I define the concept of a narrative. In the final section, I introduce the chosen method of data analysis—thematic narrative analysis—and explain how it serves the intentions of this research.

7.3.1 Primary Data

As noted, the objective of this thesis is to investigate the China threat narrative in American bestselling, non-fiction books. I argue that books are among the most fruitful sources to study these narratives because their large word count allows authors to discuss ideas in great detail. Moreover, I have decided to focus specifically on bestsellers. This approach was inspired by

the study of Jan-Boje Frauen (2021).⁷ Bestsellers fit the purpose of this research well because they have reached a large audience and are therefore more representative of the general trends and attitudes towards China in the US compared to books that have not been read so widely. Amazon.com and Barnesandnoble.com appeared as the most prominent places for the selection of these bestsellers because they dominate the American online bookstore industry (Chevalier & Goolsbee, 2003, p. 205). However, Amazon.com, was chosen as the source for finding the data for reasons of convenience: unlike Barnesandnoble.com, its website featured a separate section for Asia-related books in the bestseller-list.

The time-frame of this research is based on the subsequent presidential terms of Donald Trump and Joe Biden. It includes Trump's first term in office from 2017 until 2021, and the following Biden presidency from 2021 until 2025. Evidently, books related to the China threat narrative have already been published in the US for decades. However, to ensure that the research serves the intentions of an MA thesis, a shorter time-frame had to be chosen. I decided to settle for the presidential terms of Trump and Biden to include the most topical books into my research.⁸ The research includes five books published during Trump's first term and another five published while Joe Biden was in office.

I have now introduced the logic for selecting the data. The books were chosen on the 16th of April, 2023 from the US Amazon.com 'Bestsellers in Asian Politics' -list.⁹ I conducted the selection procedure by using the following criteria:

- The book was published between 2017–2025
- The author of the book is based in the US
- The title of the book contains words with negative connotations about the PRC or Sino-US relations (e.g. “conflict,” “attack,” “war,” and/or “threat”)
- The cover of the book features pictures where the PRC is presented as threatening or malicious

⁷ Frauen Jan-Boje analyzed 21st century bestseller books on economy and business to observe how the threat narrative has changed over time.

⁸ When I began to work on this thesis in 2022, Donald Trump had yet to be reelected. Therefore, the time frame reflects the most recent presidencies at the time.

⁹ Recent events in the countries' bilateral relations might have affected the sales numbers of the books on that particular day. In 2023, relations between Washington and Beijing experienced tensions as China's suspected spy balloon was spotted in South Carolina. As a result of the event, US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken's visit to Beijing was cancelled (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). More recently, on the 13th of April, US national Mark Swidan's appeal on the Jiangmen Intermediate Court was detained and his two-year suspended death sentence was prevailed. U.S Department of State condemned the decision and demanded for Swidan's immediate release and return to the US (United States Department of State, 2023).

- A closer examination of the book's content reveals that the PRC is depicted as a potential threat or that it has malicious intentions

The list of books selected using this method can be found in Appendix 1.

7.3.2 Defining Narratives

As indicated in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, narratives (or stories) are tools we use to understand ourselves and the people, societies, events, and phenomena surrounding us. Since narratives can be found perceivable everywhere, there is a risk for the definition of a narrative to become overly obscure and all-encompassing (Boréus & Bergström, 2017, p. 124). Despite this challenge, various scholars have attempted to form a comprehensible definition of the term. Finding a definition is important because our understanding of what narratives are has an impact on how we go about studying them (Sclater, 2017, p. xi).

Although there are numerous approaches for defining a narrative, many of the diverse definitions seem to agree with the notion that a narrative has to have a plot (Bremond & Cancalon 1980; Czarniawska, 2004; Hinchman & Hinchman 1997; Sclater 2017). This implies that a narrative is by nature a sequential story: it has a distinguished beginning, middle, and end. French semiologist Claude Bremond and translator Elaine D. Cancalon (1980) remark that “without succession there is no narrative, but rather description...Neither does narrative exist without integration into the unity of a plot” (p. 390). Lastly, some scholars (Todorov, 1990, p. 30) have emphasized the importance of transformation—a turn of events—in a story. Therefore, a plot can be understood as a successive unfolding of events, often involving some form of a twist in the storyline.

Another fairly agreed upon criteria for a narrative is that it has to have both a narrator and an audience—a storyteller who is conveying the tale to a reader or a listener (Elliot, 2005; Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997). Indeed, narratives are constructed as a result of collaboration between the narrator and their audience: the latter is not just passively absorbing the story but rather actively participating in its interpretation (Elliot, 2005 & Franzosi, 1998). Similarly, scholars Sandra and Lewis P. Hinchman (1997) suggest, that narratives are inevitably interpretive and subjective. According to them, “narrativists recognize that stories do not simply mirror reality; storytelling inevitably involves selectivity, rearranging of elements, redescription, and simplification” (p.xvi).

I have now introduced the key components of a narrative. As demonstrated above, in social sciences narratives are often understood as the combination of a plot, a narrator, and an audience. Therefore, I will settle for a definition provided by Sandra and Lewis P. Hinchman (1997) according to which narratives are “discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience, and thus offer insights about the world and/or people’s experiences of it” (p. xvi).

7.3.3 Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis is a method of data analysis focusing on the interpretation of stories. In its contemporary form, narrative analysis is often credited to the work of Russian formalist Vladimir Propp who studied the structure of Russian folktales in his famous 1928 *The Morphology of the Folktale* (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 13). Indeed, the formation of narrative analysis has been argued to strive from Russian formalism, American new criticism, French structuralism, and German hermeneutics (Boréus & Bergström, 2017, p. 125 & Czarniawska, 2004, p. 13). There are four commonly agreed upon models of narrative analysis: structural, functional, thematic, and dialogic (Parcell & Baker, 2017). In this research, I utilize thematic narrative analysis as a tool for examining the data.

Thematic narrative analysis focuses on the identification of reoccurring themes or patterns in a story (Esin, 2021, p. 98 & 108). The researcher can create groupings which demonstrate the various themes found in the narrative (Esin, 2021, p. 19). Furthermore, the absence of commonly occurring themes can also form an interesting analytical lens (Esin, 2021, p. 108; Parcell & Baker, 2017). In this research, I follow the University of Auckland’s six-phase process of doing thematic analysis. The six phases include: (1) familiarizing oneself with the dataset, (2) coding (labeling and highlighting initial patterns in the text), (3) generating initial themes, (4) developing and reviewing themes, (5) refining themes, and (6) writing the final analysis (The University of Auckland: Doing Reflexive TA, n.d). Instead of strictly following this six-phase process, however, I have adjusted it to serve the distinct needs of my research. Overall, I am expecting the thematic narrative analysis to be a fruitful tool for examining the data of my research, because it allows me to observe the similarities (reoccurring pattern) and differences (absence of commonly found themes) in the China threat literature.

A possible pitfall of thematic analysis is that the researcher might categorize narratives under the same group although their context can vary and might not necessarily refer to the same phenomena (Esin, 2021, p. 108). In the case of the China threat narratives, this means that I

could create a category of 'China as a political threat' but different authors might articulate and understand the concept of a political threat in different ways. Therefore, careful observation of the context is needed to fully understand the varying aspects of different narratives on China. I have now introduced the methods of data collection and analysis. In the next part, I introduce the findings of the primary source analysis.

8 Research Findings

To some, China resembles a cuddly panda, but others view it more as a hungry, fire-breathing dragon, while still others point to a fragile power under the constant danger to collapse.

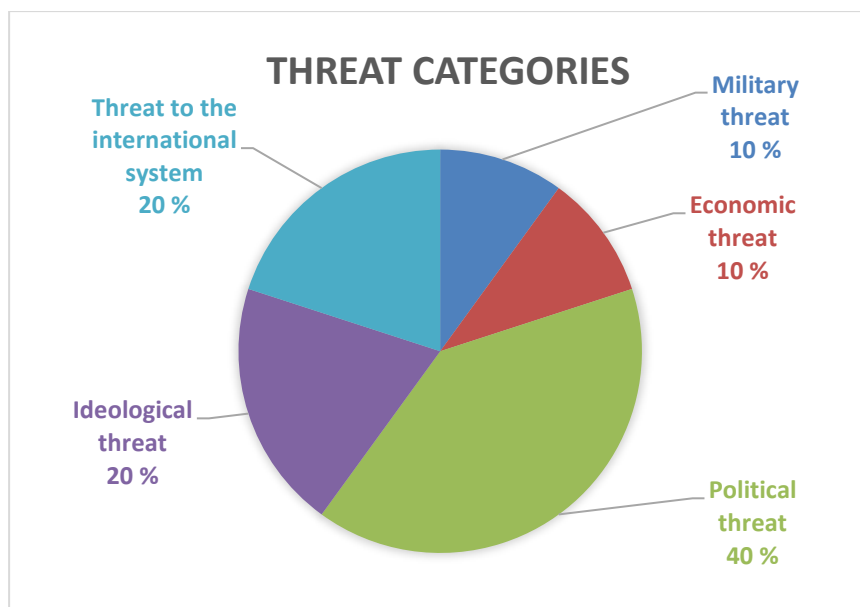
– Chengxin Pan, 2012, p. 21

The purpose of this section is to introduce the findings of the primary source analysis. To understand the contents of the books, I briefly summarize all of them in four to five pages. I have incorporated each summary under a distinct analytical cluster based on the threat category/trope they represent. I have decided to structure the chapter in this way for two reasons. First, presenting the summaries and the analysis in different sections would give the faulty impression that the summaries are not a central part of the actual primary source analysis. Second, it is my intention that this structure will serve the reader by making it easier to understand how each book demonstrates the specific narrative category under which it is positioned.

The comprehensive description of the primary sources, offered in this section, provides evidence on why these books can be defined as works of China threat literature and situates them in the context of previous research by identifying parallel threat categories. More importantly, it provides answers to research questions one, two, and three. Research question one asked: How is the China threat narrative described in American popular non-fiction books? The primary source analysis indicates, that the China threat narrative is described in varying ways in different books and is largely dependent on the narrative style of the author. The majority of the books, however, emphasize the urgency of the China threat and call for swift action from the American leadership. This finding parallels with the understanding of the process of securitization, as described in section 5.3. Another common notion that most of the authors share is that China has a set strategy, a well-thought-out and intentionally crafted plan to overtake the US as the world's leading superpower and to undermine the rules-based, liberal world order. Overall, descriptions of the China threat are closely linked to the threat category they represent. This brings us to the second research question: Are the popular tropes identified in the existing literature (China as military, ideological, political, economic, and technological threat) also present in the bestseller books analyzed for this research? As anticipated, the primary source analysis reveals that the bestseller, non-fiction books repeat all of the same China threat tropes found in previous research, with the exception of

technological threat. Additionally, a new threat category was identified: China as a threat to the international system. Books belonging to this category approach the current Sino-US competition from the perspective of international relations theories and anticipate turbulence in the current global order as a result of shifting power distribution. Overall, the majority of the books present China as a political threat, while two of the books reflect the ideological threat trope and two belong to the category of China as a threat to the international system. The military and economic threat tropes are the least common, with only one book belonging to each category (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 The China threat books based on the identified threat categories (N = 10).



Finally, research question three asked: How do the authors recommend the US to respond to the emerging China threat? The research finds that the proposed courses of action exemplify containment and competition-oriented policy approaches, as defined in section 5.4. None of the authors recommend the US to pursue engagement or accommodate to China's rise. Indeed, the latter approaches have been more common before the 21st century, as discussed in the aforementioned section.

Before introducing the primary sources in more detail, two issues with the chosen method on analysis should be addressed. First, although I sort the books into distinct categories based on the threat they underline, it should be noted that these groupings are not fixed, but rather demonstrate which topics are most emphasized in the books. In reality, all of the categories are closely intertwined. For example, considerations around China's technological or economic influence become ever more concerning because of the PRC's illiberal regime. The

possibility that China either acquires or uses its wealth and resources in a threatening way are thus seen as more likely because its communist government does not abide to the same values as liberal democracies such as the US. Second, while conducting the primary source analysis, it became evident that certain authors expressed their main thesis more clearly than others. Discovering the China threat narrative was unambiguous in the instances where the authors clearly stated their arguments on why China should be understood as a threat in the 21st century. However, some authors did not express their main thesis in such an explicit manner. In the more ambiguous instances, the main focus was hidden in the structure of the narrative and in the contents it most outlined. Therefore, my understanding of these authors' theses is more subject to debate and faulty interpretation compared to the books in which the authors clearly state their main focus. However, by carefully explaining my reasoning behind the interpretations of the authors' theses, I attempt to avoid this pitfall to the best of my ability.

The following section will explore each of the books in detail. In the beginning of each section, I first introduce the author(s) and the publisher of the book. Thereafter, I discuss the book's main contents. The last paragraph of each summary discusses the authors' policy proposals to counter the China threat. I have compiled a summary of the books' allocation into different threat categories in Appendix 2 to increase accessibility.

8.1 China as a Military Threat

In this threat category, the author anticipates China to provoke military conflict. The narrative of the book is mostly concerned with assessing the expected threat, examining the military strategies of states involved, and reflecting on how such aggression could be prevented. The author encourages the US to practice sustainable competition with the PRC while also constraining its power.

8.1.1 *The Chinese Invasion Threat: Taiwan's Defense and American Strategy in Asia* by Ian Easton (2017)

The Chinese Invasion Threat: Taiwan's Defense and American Strategy in Asia (hereafter *The Chinese Invasion Threat*) is written by Ian Easton. Easton is an Associate Professor at China Maritime Studies Institute of U.S. Naval War College (U.S. Naval War College, n.d.). He has previously worked as a research fellow and a senior director at Project 2049 Institute, as a visiting fellow in Japan Institute for International Affairs, and as a China analyst at the Centre for Naval Analyses (Ibid.). Easton acquired his Master's degree in 2008 at the National

Chengchi University in Taipei (Ibid.). His most recent book *The Final Struggle: Inside China's Global Strategy* was published in 2022 while *The Chinese Invasion Threat* came out in 2017 (Ibid.). Both of the books were published by Eastbridge Books. On their official website, Eastbridge Books states that the company's mission is to "publish worthwhile books on Asia for Western readers that will enhance their understanding of and appreciation for the complexity and distinctiveness of the many Asian cultures and societies" (Eastbridge Books, n.d.). The company publishes both English-language titles as well as English translations of books originally written in Asian languages (Ibid.). The collection of books published by Eastbridge does not indicate any clear political bias.

In *The Chinese Invasion Threat* Ian Easton argues that China is a threat because its increased military capabilities and advanced armaments hinder American allies' confidence in the US which consequently introduces instability in Asian regional security. The China threat narrative presented by Easton aligns with the definition of military threat, as expressed in a previous chapter of this research. *The Chinese Invasion Threat* thus becomes the first and only book to be categorized into the military threat section. While Easton's book lays a framework on the threat that China's potential invasion of Taiwan (ROC) poses, it is essentially a work of military science, focused on explaining the detailed military plans of both the PRC and the ROC. For this reason, my summary will not cover the book's contents entirely. Instead, for the sake of this research, it concentrates on the following questions: Why is China's invasion of Taiwan seen as likely? What is the role of the US in case of an attack against the ROC? What are the possible implications of a successful invasion?

The Chinese Invasion Threat treats the PRC's future invasion of Taiwan as a real and grave threat.¹⁰ In the book, Easton analyses several Chinese military documents and PLA manuals to conclude that the PLA is indeed planning an attack on Taiwan (p. 10–11). According to Easton, the PRC wants to invade Taiwan for several reasons. First, the existence of a democratic Chinese government causes insecurity among the CCP elites and jeopardizes their prospects of remaining in power (p. 217). Easton explains: "Taiwan is anathema to them [the CCP elites] because it serves as a beacon of freedom for ethnically Chinese people everywhere" (p. 217). Therefore, the issue of Taiwan is central to the Communist Party

¹⁰ The book was published in 2017. At the time of writing, Easton did not yet believe that China possessed the capabilities and power necessary for a successful invasion (p. 2). However, Easton notes that China is investing heavily on a number of fields to facilitate conducting an effective invasion in the future (p. 2).

because it threatens the PRC's legitimacy as an authoritarian state (p. 8). This, consequently, causes Chinese officials to view Taiwan's government and military as hostile, separatist forces (p. 11). Indeed, Easton notes that the invasion of Taiwan was supposed to be a closure of the Chinese civil war (p.22). Second, the invasion of Taiwan is seen as vital because of its positive implication for the PRC. To begin with, control of the strait would secure access to central shipping routes that allow China to maintain its economic growth (p.12). Furthermore, command of Taiwan is essential in denying the US the ability to build a military base on the island (p. 12). Finally, the location is seen as useful in the potential blockade of Japan (p. 12–13). Indeed, the manuals analyzed by Easton describe a situation where the PRC would have the ability to block Japan's access to crucial sea lanes and by doing so, trigger a nationwide famine (p. 13).

Another major theme in *The Chinese Invasion Threat* is American involvement in defending Taiwan in case on an invasion. According to Easton, the US would likely intervene in a possible conflict because of “legal and moral” considerations (p. 3). The legal considerations include the Taiwan Relations Act which—by law—obligates the US to provide Taiwan with defense arms and services, and to maintain American military capacity to respond to Chinese threats (p. 4). Moral considerations, in turn, refer to the American interest in safeguarding freedom and supporting democratic countries. In Asia specifically, the US seeks to preserve peace and stability in order to protect its democratic allies (p. 4). Losing Taiwan to the PRC would signify decreased security for Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines—central US allies whose security is easier to guarantee when Taiwan is governed by a friendly administration (p. 218). Evidently, Taiwan is also a liberal democracy that shares many common values with the US (p. 219). This, Eaton explains, generates shared interests between the countries and makes the ROC an important partner for the US, to whom nations that hold democratic values are “the best partners and worth defending” (p. 220). These moral considerations lead Easton to the conclusion that the US has an interest in protecting democracies but also in opposing authoritarian states. According to Easton, the US, although an “imperfect democracy,” does have a representative government, independent legal system, and a market economy—political practices that Easton assesses to be vastly different from the PRC's oppressive and authoritarian system (p. 215). He states that “the political systems and national interests of the United States and PRC stand in fundamental opposition to each other” (p. 215). Here, Easton suggests that China's communist leadership makes it into a resilient competitor: the CCP has participated in border clashes with neighboring countries, increased

tensions in its region, and supported nuclear proliferation to countries such as North Korea and Iran (p. 216). Furthermore, it is willing to break the rules of economic order as well as to steal and cheat to get access to American investments and intellectual property (p. 215–216). Lastly, Easton notes that losing the war over Taiwan, or being unable to deter it, would signal a strategic defeat for the US (p. 219). According to Easton, the US should recognize China as its number one rival and “the most dangerous source of instability in the world today” (p. 227). Here, Taiwan becomes important as a tool (although Easton never uses this word explicitly) in the Sino-US competition. For example, Easton considers how the US benefits from trade with Taiwan, and from having access to its advanced technologies such as microchips (p. 220). Losing Taiwan to the PRC would hence indicate the loss of advanced technologies to a major US competitor (p. 220).

The potential implications of a successful invasion of Taiwan are portrayed as concerning. Easton estimates that upon successful invasion, Taiwan would become a garrison state of the PRC, hosting the CCP’s puppet government (p. 120). He anticipates a martial law to be declared in Taiwan while the PLA would secure control over towns, farmlands, and mountains (p. 120–121). Civilian population would be controlled through the implementation of propaganda-filled radio broadcasts, TV programs, and newspaper articles (p. 121). The propaganda would, according to Easton, attempt to vilify Taiwan’s democratic government and erase memories of the time of freedom (p. 122). Easton estimates, that the PLA would also protect Taiwanese factories and social infrastructure while attempting to create manufacturing jobs for the residents (p. 121–122).

Easton suggest several strategies to answer to the China threat. He proposes three pillars for a renewed American policy toward the PRC:

...external resistance to Chinese expansionism, especially as it relates to Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines; internal pressure to weaken the CCP and peacefully nudge China toward democracy; and purposeful negotiations on the basis of reciprocity (p .227).

Easton promotes ‘sustainable’ competition and calls for American support to political change in China (p. 227). Moreover, he suggests constraining the power of the CCP and gradually introducing institutional checks and balances into the political system (p. 228). Additionally, Easton argues that the US should introduce distinct consequences for unacceptable behavior on part of the PRC and communicate them clearly to the Chinese leadership (p. 228).

Furthermore, Easton maintains that the US should keep signaling its unwavering support for

peace, prosperity, and self-determination by showcasing its strength both to allies and the PRC through military advancements (p. 229). Finally, to decrease the likelihood of aggressions on the Taiwan Strait, the US should integrate the ROC more effectively into its foreign policy strategy (p. 229). Easton views improved Washington-Taipei relations as essential in ensuring stability in the region and believes that without increased American support, Taiwan is unable to guarantee its own security (p. 232).

8.2 China as an Ideological Threat

In the books belonging to this category, the threat of China relates to its system of governance and/or political ideology which are deemed incompatible with the values of the US. The authors of the books expect China to either spread communist/authoritarian/totalitarian structures abroad or to support illiberal and dictatorial governments internationally. The US is encouraged to compete with and contain China through the use of trade restrictions, tariffs, and investment embargos. Furthermore, a robust American military armament is viewed as beneficial in responding to China's rise.

8.2.1 *Stealth War: How China Took Over While America's Elite Slept* by Robert Spalding (2019)

Stealth War: How China Took Over While America's Elite Slept (hereafter *Stealth War*) was published in 2019 and is written by Robert Spalding, a retired US Air Force general who currently holds the position of a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute and a membership to the Council on Foreign Relations (Hudson Institute, n.d.).¹¹ Spalding has worked as a chief architect for the Trump administration's National Security Strategy, a director for strategic planning at the National Security Council (NSC), as a strategist on China issues for the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Joint Staff at Pentagon, as a US Defense official, and as a Defense attaché to China (Spalding, 2019). While working in the National Security Council, Spalding wrote a memo outlining a plan for government takeover of 5G mobile network development (Rogin, 2018). The plan eventually went public, stirring widespread criticism for its proposals (Ibid.). As a result of the controversy, Spalding's contract with the

¹¹ Both the Council on Foreign Relations and the Hudson Institute are influential think tanks in the US. The former was established already in 1921 and, together with other early think tanks, it mainly focused on policy research (Abelson & Lindquist, 2000, p. 39–40). Founded in 1961, the latter represents one of the government contrast research institutions established in the post-World War II environment to respond to the US' new role as a global hegemon (Ibid. p. 41 & 47).

NSC was not renewed as his advocacy for the plan was deemed beyond his position (Ibid.).¹² *Stealth War* is published by Penguin Random House's Portfolio which concentrates on the release of non-fiction books focusing, for example, on technology, economics, and biography (Penguin Publishing Group, n.d.). Books published by the Penguin Random House's Portfolio do not appear to present a specific political standpoint.

In *Stealth War*, Robert Spalding argues that China is a threat because it has deployed a strategy to increase its global influence and undermine American values of freedom and liberty. Moreover, the Chinese government is seen as threatening because it is able—and even willing—to export undemocratic and illiberal practices abroad. I have decided to categorize *Stealth War* into the ideological threat section. Although Spalding does not necessarily present the spread of communism as alarming, he continuously stresses that the increased influence of the authoritarian/totalitarian (both expressions are used consistently¹³) regime of the PRC endangers fundamental American values of freedom. Indeed, Spalding continuously likens China to the World War II Nazi-Germany and argues, that the Chinese regime illustrates features of what Spalding describes as “Post-Nazism.” These features include repressive behavior towards minorities, surveillance of population, suppression of dissidents, and the extensive power of the state (p. 223). In *Stealth War* Spalding discusses a wide range of topics from the economy to the military, global diplomacy, technology, education, and infrastructure. However, in this summary I will not cover all of the areas in detail but instead demonstrate three major arguments presented in the book: First, China is waging a non-combat war that is difficult to detect but actively carried out. Second, the unlawful practices of the regime and its reluctance to abide to international rules make China threatening. Third, China is jeopardizing American values of freedom, as outlined in the US constitution. This summary outlines these major arguments while also discussing the credibility of the book. In

¹² In *Stealth War* Spalding suggests that representatives of an American tele-company pressured the administration to remove him from the NSC (p. 119).

¹³ Spalding refers to both totalitarianism and authoritarianism when discussing China's political system. However, he does not provide clear definitions for the terms and appears to use them interchangeably. According to Andrew Heywood (2019), an authoritarian system exercises power despite the lack of popular consent and seeks to suppress political opposition, while a totalitarian political rule attempts to politicize the entire society (p. 113 & 121). Unlike authoritarianism, totalitarianism is therefore characterized by an absolute control over the population which is often accompanied by a prevalent ideology and the use of terror (Ibid.). During the leadership of Xi Jinping, classical totalitarian features have been reintroduced into the Chinese political system after a period of post-totalitarianism in China's contemporary history (Paltmaa, 2021).

the last section of the summary, I present Spalding's policy recommendations to challenge China's strategy.

A central argument that Spalding presents in his book is that the CCP is fighting a stealth war¹⁴ where military combat is replaced by a strategy designed to control the economics, finance, data, manufacturing, infrastructure, and communications systems internationally (p. xii). This strategy is carried out by using influencing operations. Spalding repeatedly refers to *Unrestricted Warfare*, written in 1999 by PLA colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, to demonstrate how China is increasing its control over other nations by using non-military means (p. 12–13). For example, Spalding discusses China's use of enticements to encourage leaders of developing nations to accept Chinese infrastructure projects that often have disadvantageous terms for the recipient country (p. 123). However, Spalding stresses that economy is the most essential arena in China's strategy because economic growth correlated with increased strength in other areas of engagement (p. 13–14). According to Spalding, China uses American elites to access profits and investment in the US. This is done by striking profitable deals with politicians and corporations. For example, the heads of major investment houses often refrain from critiquing China's economic practices because of the significant brokerage profits they are able to secure from engaging with Chinese stocks and bonds (p. 8–9). Spalding critiques corporate America, Wall Street, and institutional investors for being more concerned with profits than national security and notes that the outsourcing of manufacturing results in excessive dependence on Chinese-produced goods (p. 82–83).

Throughout *Stealth War* Spalding stresses that China is deploying unlawful practices and refusing to abide to international trade rules while promoting its own interest. In examining the economy, he first turns to domestic issues to explain the threat posed by the Chinese state. According to Spalding, domestic businesses are suffering from the unfair market practices of the PRC as Chinese manufacturers are counterfeiting American products (p. 58–65) and the Chinese government is endorsing corporate espionage (p. 68–72). Moreover, Spalding critiques the PRC for restricting foreign access to its domestic markets, confining cash flows, and limiting the free flow of ideas (p. 45). He further demonstrates the unsafe and unregularly nature of Chinese economy by focusing on exports. According to Spalding, the PRC only

¹⁴A similar observation was made by Pennanen (2025) in her analysis of Michael Pillsbury's *The Hundred-Year Marathon*—a book also belonging to the China threat literature. In the book, Pillsbury explains that China's strategy is founded on a principle of masking its true intentions (p. 14).

allows four American shipping inspectors to supervise Chinese shipments while none of them are allowed to actually open the containers they are supposed to examine (p. 67).

Additionally, Spalding notes that the absence of regulatory agencies makes it impossible to ensure the safety of Chinese products:

If tires explode, if airbags don't open, if a brake-pad sensor fails after one hundred miles, if a licensing fee wasn't obtained, if a product contained poison, so what? The products are gone. The sale is made. Next! (p. 68).

Throughout the book, Spalding extensively critiques China's trade practices and questions whether a nation that deploys protectionist trade policies, manipulates its currency, and restricts the transfer of profits overseas, can even be viewed as a practitioner of free trade (p. 43–44).

Another important, reoccurring theme in *Stealth War* is Spalding's desire to protect the fundamental values and personal freedoms outlined in the US Constitution. Here, Spalding suggests that China's strategy and vision for the world directly contradict with the four fundamental liberties—freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear—found in the US Constitution and also present in the Atlantic Charter (p. xv–xvi). According to Spalding, the Chinese leadership feels threatened by the American constitution because the rights of individuals jeopardize the PRC's authoritarian power (p. xiii). As China influences American politicians and corporations, these fundamental freedoms are under attack (p. xiii–xiv). Spalding views China's infrastructure projects as especially alarming in this regard. He explains how China's projects in developing countries in Africa principally function as nation-building strategies: Building mines and investing in low-value-added manufacturing creates demand for related infrastructure, resulting in additional projects (p. 169–170). After some time, China is able to construct telecommunications networks while also embedding its surveillance technology and social monitoring systems into the infrastructure (p. 170). Essentially, China is both aiding authoritarian leaders to more effectively control their population while also accessing foreign nation's data which it can later use to pressure the nation to bend to its will (p. 169–171). With this strategy, Spalding argues, China is attempting to “turn African countries into governments with Chinese totalitarian characteristics” (p. 172). Spalding furthermore views Chinese tele companies' software updates which allow better selfies of darker-skinned features as concerning because China “basically engineered this to deploy their IT-based authoritarianism” (p. 170). Spalding observes that better selfies lead to better social monitoring (p. 170–171).

The lack of references in *Stealth War* decreases the credibility of Spalding's arguments. Although he reasons that the decision to not include references was made to increase user-friendliness and protect the confidentiality of those interviewed (p. x), I suggest that the readers' inability to confirm the information provided by Spalding actually contributes to excessive incoherence and hearsay in *Stealth War*. Rush Doshi (2021) makes a pointed observation in *The Long Game* by remarking that Pentagon official Michael Pillsbury's *The Hundred-Year Marathon* (another bestselling, China threat book published in 2015) "argues somewhat overstatedly that China has had a secret grand plan for global hegemony since 1949 and, in key places, relies heavily on personal authority and anecdote" (p. 8). Similar critique can be applied to *Stealth War*: the book does not lose all of its credibility for the lack of references because of Spalding's authority as a retired US general.

Finally, Spalding offers some competition and containment-oriented policy recommendations for American decisionmakers to tackle the challenge of an ascending China. He promotes practices of fair trade and stresses that China should be held accountable for violating international trade laws (p. 187). For example, if a Chinese company gets caught using stolen intellectual property, the US should insert tariffs and bans on Chinese products (p. 188). Furthermore, investment embargos should be used to slow down China's economy (p. 187–192). Indeed, Spalding views president Trump's 2017 trade tariffs on China as a welcomed change in the US' policy toward the PRC (p. 196). Additionally, Spalding suggests that investing in American infrastructure, manufacturing, research, and development can offer an effective response to counter China's rise (p. 187). Moreover, the building of long- and mid-range ballistic missiles and the possession of nuclear bombs are presented as effective deterrence strategies (p. 201). When it comes to 5G, Spalding suggests introducing national security standards to control the implementation of the networks (p. 216). Spalding also offers the development of reliable and independent Chinese-language media alternatives (p. 205), the closing down of Confucius Institutes (p. 206), and the reassuring of American position in international finance agencies such as the World Bank and IMF (p. 217) as possible strategies to respond to China's growing influence.

8.2.2 *When China Attacks* by Grant Newsham (2023)

When China Attacks is written by Grant Newsham. Newsham is a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Security Policy, a far-right American think tank known for its anti-Muslim discourse and Islamophobic conspiracism (O'Donnell, 2017). Newsham is also a retired U.S. Marine

Colonel who served as the first US Marine Liaison Officer to the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force (Centre for Security Policy, n.d.). *When China Attacks* was published in 2023 by Regnery Publishing. The publishing house describes itself as “the country’s leading publisher of conservative books” (Regnery Publishing, n.d.). The company was founded in 1947 by Henry Regnery who focused on publishing conservative writers (Ibid.).

In his book titled *When China Attacks*, Newsham presents China as an ideological threat that has a strategy to expand its control and impose its authoritarian system onto other states. Newsham argues that China’s strategy for global domination will begin with the annexation of Taiwan (p. 3–18). The control of Taiwan subsequently allows the PRC to dismantle the US and its allies’ defense on the First Island Chain, to proceed to Western Pacific Ocean, and eventually to the west coast of Central and South America (p. 18). Newsham does not anticipate China to occupy American territory (p. 279). However, he expects Beijing to coerce the US into subjugation to avoid casualties of kinetic warfare (p. 280). After being restrained under China’s influence, the US is “allowed a degree of internal self-governance, but foreign affairs are de facto controlled by the PRC” (p. 289). In Newsham’s argument, China becomes threatening because of its Marxist-Leninist regime that is “in a constant struggle for domination against those that would hold down or hold back communist China from taking its rightful place as the ruler of the world” (p. 250). Therefore, *When China Attacks* belongs to the ideological threat category. Similar to Spalding, Newsham also discusses various topics and areas of competition including the economy, the military, technology, and finances, to demonstrate his argument. However, unlike any of the other authors analyzed in this research, Newsham depicts an exceptionally dystopian vision on what future under China’s influence would look like while continuously associating the China threat to American domestic political and racial issues. In this summary I first discuss Newsham’s assessment on China’s global strategy. After that, I consider the book’s dystopian vision for a future under the PRC rule. Next, I examine how Newsham’s argument connects to the American domestic culture war debate. I conclude the summary with considerations on the credibility of Newsham’s argument and his proposals for future American strategy.

According to Newsham, to realize its objective of global dominance, China has deployed a strategy that is a combination of entropic and unrestricted warfare. Entropic warfare refers to Beijing’s attempt to hinder other countries’ ability to respond to China’s attacks. Unrestricted warfare, in turn, signifies a strategy of non-kinetic warfare which is informed by a book of the same name, also referred to by Spalding in *Stealth War* (p. 47–51). Indeed, the arguments

made by Spalding and Newsham resemble one another as both of the authors use the same source material.¹⁵ Similar to Spalding, Newsham notes that China's strategy does not include waging physical combat but is instead concerned with infiltrating and influencing other countries through bribery, blackmail, manipulation, and financial enticements (p. 50). To make the strategy more effective, China deploys the opponent's own citizens as agents of influence to carry out its operations (p. 50). While Spalding maintains that China's unrestricted warfare strategies are realized through influencing operations, Newsham refers to Comprehensive National Power (CNP) to explain China's approach. According to Newsham, CNP refers to a country's combined strength in various areas that together form an across-the-board capability in relation to its competitors (p. 45–46). Related to China's CNP efforts, Newsham introduces several areas of warfare that China has been deploying to extend its influence internationally. These include psychological (p. 63–80), biological (p. 125–132), chemical (p. 133–144), economic (p. 145–177), financial (p. 179–191), cyber (p. 193–208), proxy warfare (p. 209–223), and lawfare (p. 81–99).¹⁶ Interestingly, Newsham refers to many of the same influencing operations that other authors also explore but unlike the rest, regards them as adequate to infiltrate foreign countries in an extremely profound manner, as demonstrated below.

A central component of Newsham's narrative is his dystopian vision of a future where the PRC leads the globe. Newsham argues that China is attempting to force its authoritarian system of governance onto other countries, including the US.¹⁷ As outlined above, Newsham does not anticipate a direct, Sino-US military confrontation but he believes that China might be able to control and influence the US to the extent that the latter de facto loses its

¹⁵ Newsham also mentions Spalding in his book by pointing out that Spalding was “forced out” of the US National Security Council for trying to confront the PRC's political warfare operations (p. 58). Here, Newsham likely refers to the incident of the leaked 5G memo.

¹⁶ Some examples of each area of warfare include: promoting the CCP's narrative and monitoring student activity on American university campuses (psychological) (p. 75), acting opportunistically during the COVID-19 pandemic by allowing Chinese to travel abroad and spread the virus (biological) (p. 126), deliberately exporting drugs such as fentanyl to the US (chemical) (p. 135), working to increase other countries dependence on the Chinese market (economic) (p. 156), promoting yuan as a reserve currency (financial) (p. 180–181), counterfeiting goods and pirating software (cyber) (p. 195), leveraging North Korea to lock American resources onto the Korean peninsula (proxy) (p. 210–213), and disobeying regulations and using other countries' legal systems to serve China's objectives (lawfare) (p. 81).

¹⁷ Newsham emphasizes the threat of authoritarianism while repeatedly praising the Trump administration for its firm policies towards the PRC (p. 74–75, 88, 128 & 137). These two notions could be deemed inconsistent with one another as some of the Trump administration's practices (e.g. attacks on the media, challenging the independence of courts, questioning the validity of election results) have been argued to resemble those traditionally undertaken by authoritarian leaders (Masaru, 2021, p. 88–89).

sovereignty. In this new American reality, Beijing oversees American elections, reviews court verdicts, and demands the US to decrease the size of its military (p. 289). Moreover, the PRC demands Chinese companies access to American markets while the US' economy turns into a raw-material production base (p. 289). Additionally, Newsham anticipates the White House to “issue executive orders suspending the Constitution, declaring martial law, and federalizing state National Guards” (p. 290). Essentially, a nation under the PRC's influence would experience the construction of an Orwellian state where the use of social credit scores, AI-based surveillance technology, and a government-funded digital currency are deployed to control the population (p. 38–39). Additionally, cell phones become personal tracking and monitoring devices that have to be kept on in fear of punishment while Beijing decides the number of children American citizens can have and controls which industries operate in the US (p. 39–40). Should anyone try to disobey the PRC's rule, they will be punished through the use of violence or by sending them to detention camps (p. 40–41).

Throughout the book, Newsham emphasizes China's influencing operations that have contributed to domestic polarization and societal instability in the US. For example, Newsham argues that China has a history of presenting itself as a denouncer of racism and deploying individuals and groups of people working on racial issues as its proxies. He refers to Malcolm X's positive comments on Mao Zedong and Black Panther founder Huey Newton's visit to China to meet Zhou Enlai in the 1970s as examples of China recruiting allies to operate inside of the US (p. 217–218). Furthermore, Newsham associates the 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations to China's influencing operations by suggesting that Beijing's social media political warfare efforts, coupled with the COVID-19 lockdowns, created an environment in which “Marxist-led mobs” (BLM activists) could operate (p. 54).¹⁸ Newsham

¹⁸ Newsham is not the first to suggest that there is a connection between the BLM movement and China. In 2020, American news media repeatedly reported on a controversy around China's involvement in the funding of BLM. The controversy became widespread after the Heritage Foundation-owned news site *Daily Signal* published an article written by Mike Gonzalez. In the article, Gonzalez revealed a financial connection between a pro-PRC organization called the Chinese Progressive Association, and the Black Futures Lab venture by BLM co-founder Alicia Garza (Gonzalez, 2020). Three days later, *The New York Times* published a counter article suggesting that Gonzalez had conflated two different non-profit organizations of the same name (Roose, 2020). According to journalist Kevin Roose, tax records revealed that the Chinese Progressive Association funding Garza's project was a San Francisco-based organization founded in the 1970s to support Chinese immigrants in the US (Ibid.). Gonzalez responded by writing a new article in which he argued that both of the Chinese Progressive Associations in question promote pro-China sentiments and continued to propose that “Garza and other founders of the Black Lives Matter organizations are committed Marxists” (Gonzalez, 2020). Although disagreements on the issue remain due to lack of evidence, scholars and researchers have identified a different type of connection between the BLM and China. For example, Burcu and Wang (2023) found that the Chinese propaganda apparatus actively covered the BLM demonstrations in the US to stress the chaotic nature of protests and undermine their effectiveness in promoting social and political change. Furthermore, the BLM coverage

remarks that the BLM-inspired “rioters” were responsible for billions of dollars’ worth of property damage to American cities (p. 54). Indeed, questions of race and racism seem to be at the forefront of Newsham’s argument: Newsham suggests that concentrating on what he portrays as minor—even imaginary—issues of critical race theory and white rage takes focus away from forming an effective strategy against China (p. 281). Moreover, Newsham views the election of Democratic Party representatives as beneficial to the PRC because the Democrat’s excessive concentration on issues such as climate change and social justice benefits the PRC by taking focus away from American defense against China (p. 281).

Newsham’s commentary about China’s influence on American domestic issues is not limited to questions of race. He also argues that China’s information warfare operations inside the US promote the limiting of free speech and the introduction of punishments on those having “wrong thoughts” (p. 39). The 2022 Canada trucker’s convoy is used as an example of this phenomena. According to Newsham, some of the participants experienced the seizing of trucks and were temporarily restricted from making transaction on their bank accounts (p. 39–40). Although China was not directly involved with the incident, Newsham suggests that the limiting of free speech and an intolerance for “people with wrong thoughts” have been promoted by China as a form of information warfare (p. 39). Newsham also uses fiction to stress the political and social harm that China is causing in regular American homes. He begins the second chapter of the book with a fictional story depicting “what is happening at a kitchen table in a typical home in America” as the PRC launches its attack on Taiwan. The story begins by introducing an American family of five who have grown distant to one another as a result of China’s political warfare operations. The parents have to work two service jobs each because factories of the town have left for China (p. 19). Newsham describes the family’s reactions to China’s attack on Taiwan, with the dad—a former U.S. Marine Corps—being baffled with the event while his 14-year-old Marxist, anti-capitalist daughter celebrates China’s ‘liberation’ of Taiwan (p. 19–25). The family is divided by politics and the society they live in is heavily controlled by a social credit system that bans criticism towards the PRC. Here, Newsham comments on the American domestic culture war debate and couples it with his dystopian vision of a future under China’s influence. What

attempted to glorify and legitimize the PRC by criticising the American political system and by diverting attention away from sensitive issues domestically (Ibid.). Similarly, *The Diplomat* reported that Beijing has invoked BLM to undermine support for the liberal democratic system and to stress the hypocrisy of the US in criticizing China’s human rights record (Kim, 2020).

Newsham appears to imply, is that confronting left-leaning political opinions and values domestically is part of an effort to counter the PRC's influencing operations. Indeed, in the narrative of *When China Attacks*, people who support right-wing views are often presented as victims of China's covert operations, while those promoting left-leaning opinions are portrayed as the agents behind China's infiltration into the American society. Both groups are thus harnessed to serve the narrative chosen by the author.

The strength of Newsham's argument can be scrutinized as the use of referencing is often lacking. Although Newsham compiles a lengthy list of sources at the end of the book, he continuously uses "personal correspondence" as a reference without providing the names of, or any adequate information on these people. Newsham directly quotes, sometimes in considerable length, these personal contacts who can be anyone from "one U.S official" (p. 108) or "a friend who knows about such things" (p. 220), to "one prominent academic of my acquaintance who is definitely not a proxy [of the PRC]" (p. 221). This ambiguity hinders the credibility of Newsham's sources which in turn affect the quality of the arguments presented in the book.

Newsham encourages the US to respond to the China threat with competition and containment-heavy approaches by focusing both on domestic and foreign policies. Let us first consider domestic issues. Newsham praises the governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis' legislation which requires public schools to teach about the brutalities of communist regimes, and suggests that the US should further concentrate on educating its pupils on communist governments (p. 294). Additionally, Newsham proposes limiting Chinese access to American universities, for example, by implementing restrictions on PRC-connected persons' eligibility for government jobs, and by closing down Confucius Institutes and Chinese Students and Scholars Associations on American university campuses (p. 296–297). Newsham also encourages the US to reestablish the Foreign Broadcast Information Service because it provided Mandarin-to-English translations of CCP material (p. 301). Interestingly, Newsham's stance on the domestic culture war discourse is also visible in his proposals for American China-policy: according to Newsham 'wokeness' should be terminated in the military (p. 324).¹⁹ In the field of foreign policy, Newsham proposes the US to back up

¹⁹ The second Trump administration appears to agree with Newsham. On October 1st, top US military leaders were abruptly called to gather in Quantico, Virginia to hear president Trump and Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth (Finley et al., 2025). In a speech at the gathering, Hegseth called for the end of woke culture in the military (Ibid.).

countries that experience difficulties paying their BRI-related debts to China and sanction the PRC for its human rights violations (p. 303–305). Additionally, Newsham argues that instead of financing ineffective organizations that are “acting as proxies for Beijing,” the US should establish alternatives (p. 319). Newsham also proposes the US to pursue military engagement with Taiwan (p. 312–313). Furthermore, he suggests that the US should modernize its nuclear weapons and implement additional missile defense systems (p. 330–331). On the economic front, Newsham supports the implementation of tariffs and trade restrictions and calls for decreased dependence on Chinese imports for essential products (p. 314–318). Lastly, Newsham stresses the significance of effective alliance networks (p. 316).

8.3 China as a Political Threat

In this threat category, the PRC is suspected to pursue a strategy where the current, rules-based international order is transformed to align with China’s values and interests. China’s disregard for established norms is anticipated to indicate a more illiberal world order. Unlike in the works belonging to the ideological threat category, the political threat books do not anticipate China to transform individual states’ systems of governance, although support for existing non-democratic governments is sometimes expected. The authors of the books emphasize the need for robust alliance networks for the US to counter the China threat.

8.3.1 *Bully of Asia: Why China’s Dream Is the New Threat to World Order* by Steven W. Mosher (2017)

Bully of Asia: Why China’s Dream Is the New Threat to World Order (hereafter *Bully of Asia*) is a book published in 2017, written by Steven W. Mosher. Mosher was the first American to conduct research in rural China as a part of his doctoral dissertation for Stanford University’s Department of Anthropology in 1979 (Sun, 1983, p. 692). The same year, however, Mosher was expelled by the department which reproached him for illegal and unethical behavior (Ibid. p. 692). The department reported that Mosher had violated the privacy of his research subjects (Ibid. p. 692). Mosher denied the accusations, stating instead that he was punished for exposing the sensitive issue of forced abortions and sterilizations taking place in China as part of the one-child policy (Mosher, 2017, p. 252). According to Mosher, the Chinese Communist Party officials pressured Stanford University to dismiss his doctorate (Ibid. p. 253). For this, Mosher describes the university administration as “cowardly and compromised” (Ibid. p. 253). Currently, Mosher holds the position of a president at the

Population Research Institute in the US. On the institute's website he is described as an expert on issues concerning world population, human rights abuses, and China (Population Research Institute, n.d.). The book *Bully of Asia* was published by the conservative Regnery Publishing company.²⁰

In *Bully of Asia*, Steven Mosher argues that China is a threat to the US and the rest of the world because of its hegemonic ambitions which have existed from its history until the present day. Therefore, Mosher's book belongs to the political threat category. It should be noted here, that Mosher does discuss other dimensions of the China threat as well. He expresses concern over China's offensive military doctrines and the PRC's tendency to claim ownership over sovereign territories, such as the Senkaku islands (p. 28–29). Moreover, Mosher discusses China's cyberespionage efforts (p. 237), currency manipulation (p. 240) and attempts to increase soft power through Confucius Institutes (p. 250), to name only a few additional themes. However, none of these issues are presented as a threat in and of itself, but rather they become threatening because of China's hegemonic attempts. Therefore, China is chiefly a political threat that has the potential to become military, technological, and economic threat, respectively. Throughout the book, Mosher demonstrates his argument by illustrating how hegemonic objectives were reflected during China's dynasties as well as each of the PRC leader's years in office. According to Mosher, to become a hegemon, the Chinese party-state has deployed legalism, communist ideology, and narcissistic nationalism.

Mosher begins the book by describing China's history as the powerful Middle Kingdom of Asia. He discusses how the Chinese perceive themselves through the concept of *tianxia* ("all under heaven") which depicts China as the center of the world (p. 10). Having controlled an extensive land mass during China's dynastical history (p. 10) while viewing themselves as superior to other races (an idea Mosher later refers to as "narcissistic nationalism"), the Chinese were shocked to be defeated by the foreign 'barbarians' as a result of the Opium Wars (p. 20). Because of this, Mosher explains, China believes that it is entitled to reclaim its position as the world's only superpower (p. 21). China's attempt to restore its past glory is viewed as especially concerning when taking into account its long traditions of totalitarianism.

²⁰ More about Regnery Publishing in the summary of *When China Attacks* by Grant Newsham.

Another central argument which Mosher offers, is that implementing the Leninist party system did not make China totalitarian—instead, the new ideology managed to foster the totalitarian traditions even more effectively into a society in which they had already been present for centuries (p. 73–74). Mosher describes how China’s early dynasties practiced totalitarianism with a noticeable intensity especially after the collapse of the Zhou dynasty. When the King of Zhou was defeated by one of his vassal dukes, a chaotic war between different domains and their respective leaders broke out (p. 35). Mosher argues that a strong hegemon was needed at the time to settle the chaos, and that Duke Huan emerged as the most prominent man for the job (p. 36). To aid Huan in preserving order, reforms were implemented which promoted the state’s power over the society (p. 36). In particular, the legalist school of thought contributed greatly to this mission of maximizing the ruler’s power (p. 36). Later on, during the Warring States period, the legalists counselors assisted the competing rulers in solidifying their own power by promoting policies such as mutual surveillance and suppression of voluntary organizations (p. 39). Mosher argues that the legalist doctrine continued to influence China also during the subsequent dynasties. According to Mosher, “the lesson China draws from its long history is that periods of division are times of disorder and chaos, whereas periods of unity are times of stability and order” (p.23). Mosher argues that for China, the current world order resembles the Warring States period and the only method to reclaim security is for China to become its sole hegemon (p. 52). According to Mosher, the PRC’s leaders have been keen to accomplish this objective.

A significant proportion of the book is dedicated for addressing how the PRC’s leaders have subscribed to China’s hegemonic ambitions. According to Mosher, the PRC’s leaders have utilized varying means to reach a common goal—for China to become a hegemon. For example, Mao Zedong only preached communism because it served his legalist purposes (p.75). Mao’s real objectives, according to Mosher, could be seen in his policies including the dissolution of the Tibetan government in 1959 (p. 86) and his support for Communist groups in Laos and in North Vietnam in the course of the 1950s (p. 90–91). During Deng Xiaoping’s years in office, in turn, economic strength was employed to harness hegemonic ambitions. Mosher argues that China’s economic openness during Deng’s leadership was “never an end in itself...but merely the means to an end: a wealthy and powerful Chinese state” (p. 105). Mosher demonstrates his argument by describing the events at Tiananmen Square in 1989 when demonstrations against the regime were forcibly put down, causing the

death of thousands of people (p. 106). Similar arguments are offered concerning Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and finally, the PRC's current leader Xi Jinping.

Mosher recommends American decision-makers to undertake containment-oriented approaches in order to respond to the emerging China threat. He appears unwavering in his realist take on the international order, according to which the world is an anarchic system where security can only be guaranteed by possessing enough power (p. 263). Mosher opposes international organizations, alliances, and treaties as solutions to insecurities and expects them all to fail eventually (p. 263). These considerations taken into account, Mosher proposes the US to “continue to follow its current strategy, which is to remain the regional hegemon of the Western Hemisphere while seeking to prevent China from dominating its own region in the same fashion” (p. 269). According to Mosher “once China become a regional hegemon, the path to global hegemony lies open before it” (p. 269). Therefore, to ensure that China is unable to dominate its own region, Mosher advises the US to assume two approaches. First, pressure China to keep North Korea in check (p. 280) by communicating clearly that the US interprets any aggressions by North Korea as China's responsibility (p. 282). This strategy would encourage the PRC to negotiate with Pyongyang to end its nuclear program and halt missile launches (p. 282). Mosher recommends robust confrontation and the implementation of sanctions against the PRC to carry out the strategy successfully (p. 282). He compliments President Trump for offering to ease trade restrictions if the PRC pressures North Korea to end its nuclear programs (p. 283). Second, Mosher views Taiwan as a central component in the strategy to prevent China from gaining regional and global supremacy. He suggests upgrading American alliance and strategic cooperation with Taiwan, increasing arms sales to the island, and conducting joint US-ROC military exercises (p. 286–287). In terms of diplomacy, Mosher advises the US to upgrade the American Institute in Taiwan into a formal consulate general (p. 288). Mosher also views the increase of China analysts in the US as beneficial in responding more effectively to the challenges that China poses (p. 273–276).

8.3.2 *China's Vision of Victory* by Jonathan D. T. Ward (2019)

China's Vision of Victory was published in 2019 and it is written by Jonathan D. T. Ward. Ward is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, a conservative think tank based in Washington D.C (Hudson Institute, n.d.). He is also the founder of the consultancy Atlas Organization which offers advisory services on US-China global competition and risk assessments for financial institutions, businesses, and governmental agencies (Atlas

Organization, n.d.). Ward has acted as an advisor on China's long-term strategy for the US Department of Defense and given briefings at the US Department of Commerce and the US Defense Intelligence Agency, to name only a few institutions (Ibid.). In addition to *China's Vision of Victory*, Ward is also the author of *The Decisive Decade: American Grand Strategy for Triumph Over China*, published in 2023 (Ibid.). Ward acquired his PhD at the University of Oxford (Ibid.). In his dissertation, Ward discussed China-India relations by using now-closed Chinese-language archives (Ibid.). *China's Vision of Victory* is self-published by Ward under The Atlas Publishing and Media Company.

In the beginning of his book, Ward establishes that the main focus of *China's Vision of Victory* is on the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (p. xxix). Themes discussed in the succeeding chapters (rather than being the main focus of the book) build onto this notion of the PRC attempting to restore its power and demonstrate how China is proceeding with its plans:

Technology is part of this [great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation]. Economic and military prowess are too. Geographical ambitions are central. The end of the current world order is planned. (p. xxix).

Ward's emphasis on the Chinese rejuvenation indicates that his work belongs to the political threat category: China is seen as dangerous because it is reshaping the current international order which, Ward maintains, has been build and maintained by the democracies of the world (p. xxxi). Throughout the book, Ward demonstrates how the PRC is moving closer to its objective and explains the implications of China reclaiming its lost power.

In the beginning of *China's Vision of Victory*, Ward examines China's past to trace the origins of its current strategy. Ward's discussion on China's history resembles that presented by Mosher in *Bully of Asia*. Similar to Mosher, Ward suggests that China's dream of national resurrection strives from its history as a great civilization that was overpowered by foreigners, most notably in the form of Opium Wars in the 1800s (p. 4) This period of subjugating to foreign influence is known in China as the 'One Hundred Years of National Humiliation' and, Ward explains, it is the guiding force behind the current rejuvenation attempts (p. 4). After introducing the origins of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, Ward moves on to discuss how the rejuvenation attempts have been present in the policies of the PRC's leaders—a narrative style again similar to that undertaken by Mosher. Ward argues that Mao utilized the rhetoric of restoration and aimed to increase China's power and global position by first lifting the country out of poverty (p. 10). Like Mosher, Ward observes that communism was

merely a tool to fulfill the underlying objective of expanding Chinese power, rather than an end goal in itself (p. 7). Lastly, Ward maintains that Mao's successors continued to pursue his mission of restoration (p. 11).

In the second part of the book, Ward demonstrates how the CCP's military strategy connects to China's rejuvenation ambitions. He stresses, however, that China's military power is not to be taken as the main focus of the book (p. xxx). Instead, Ward views China's military endeavors as a central part of the great rejuvenation (p. 42). For example, he describes how the control of the South China Sea could facilitate the PRC's annexation of Taiwan (p. 60). Interestingly, Ward cites Ian Easton's *The Chinese Invasion Threat* (2017) to explain how the control of Taiwan would allow China to better contain—and even annihilate—Japan by accessing its maritime lines of communication (p. 60). By controlling the sea lanes, China could deny imports to Japan and thereby cause a nationwide famine (p. 61). Additionally, Ward briefly discusses the CCP's policy of Civil Military Fusion which advises the private sector to share any new technologies it develops with the PLA (p. 69). He also expresses concern over China's expanding global military presence, from constructing its first military base in Djibouti, Africa, to opening ports that allow the PRC access to the Indian Ocean Region and facilitate a smooth flow of resources to China (p. 78).

Part three of *China's Vision of Victory* discusses both the economy and technology. However, Ward again emphasizes that “this book is not primarily focused on the Chinese economy...it [part three] is meant to demonstrate how China's splendid new economy is the foundation for something even larger” (p. xxx). According to Ward, China's eagerness to advance its economy and technological capabilities is a result of the ‘Century of Humiliation’ which the Chinese people and the party-state believe to have resulted from the country's stagnant economy and lacking technological know-how (p. 100). An example of China's efforts to advance its economy and technologies can be found in the Made in China 2025 strategic program, launched in 2015 (p. 96). The program lists several strategic industries where the PRC should make significant progress in to strengthen its economy and acquiring global influence (p. 96). Additionally, Ward explains how the CCP supports Chinese firms, for example by enabling them access to technology transfers and financing, and thereby distorts the competition among multinational companies (p. 98). According to Ward, entrepreneurs and state-owned enterprises are participating in the quest for rejuvenation “either because they believe in it or because it's the cost of doing business” (p. 118). Entrepreneurs either have connections to the Party (as a result of the CCP strategy to embed capitalists into its inner

circle) or they must otherwise subjugate to its will because of the Party's greater power, Ward explains (p. 116). These considerations taken into account, Ward highlights that international companies are not only competing with Chinese firms but with the party-state itself (p. 125). Ward suggests that China's efforts to grow its economy should be interpreted as attempts to build up its military, calling the PRC's economy "the engine of China's restoration" (p. 106). Economic might, therefore, increases both China's military presence and influence across the world (p. 122).

The last part of the book discusses China's governance and its ambitions for future world order. Ward discusses China's imperial past with mentions of its tributary system (p. 180), the concept of the Middle Kingdom (p. 180), and ideas of Chinese superiority in the form of Sinocentrism (p. 181). He explains:

...the Chinese system was markedly different from that of Western Europe, where (at least for the big players) international relations was a game of relatively equal states that led to a diplomatic tradition that aspired to a balance of power (p. 181).

Because of this, Ward views China's intentions for expansion as contradictory to the American-led, rules-based world order (p. 181). He maintains that the Chinese system of governance is based on the historic idea of China as the central world power around which vassal states revolve (p. 182). China's strategy for its future is presented as threatening because it is not limited within China's own borders: From expanding economic influence through the Belt and Road (p. 185) to potentially undertaking a comprehensive social management system that reaches outside of the PRC (p. 186), and promoting the narrative of a 'Community of Common Destiny for Mankind' (p. 189), Ward argues that China's vision for its future does not align with Western, liberal values of democracy (p. 192). He offers the treatment of Xinjiang's Uighurs (p. 198) as a concrete example of what the CCP's power looks like in practice. Ward assures the reader that although China's rhetoric is peaceful, its intentions are not (p. 201). In brief, for Ward, China is a threat because of its strategy for restoration in which China not only becomes the dominant superpower but returns to the position it once held as the superior empire in its known world (p.179). The CCP's plan for a new world order would signify the end of the current one, with the implication that China's rise would evidently lead to the US' decline (p. 222). According to Ward, this attempt toward restoration is threatening because it jeopardizes democratic, rights-based and American-led world order (p. 233).

Finally, Ward proposes the US to implement containment-focused policies to respond to the emerging China threat. According to Ward, China's strategy is dependent on its successful economic rise and because of this, the US should focus on the economy in order to win the competition (p. 229). In principle, China should be denied access to the sectors that enable its growth (p. 229). Additionally, Ward views American victory as inevitable if the US is able to maintain its leadership position among the democracies of the world and build strong alliances and friendships with other liberal, democratic nations (p. 229). In practice, this would include cooperation in sectors such as education, technology, and economy (p. 229). Lastly, the US, together with its allies, should maintain superior military capabilities (p. 229–230).

8.3.3 *The Great U.S.-China Tech War* by Gordon G. Chang (2020)

The next piece to be analyzed is a 52-page-pamphlet titled *The Great U.S.-China Tech War*, published in 2020 and written by Gordon G. Chang. In his first book *The Coming Collapse of China*, Chang (2001) famously predicted the CCP's decline from power by the year 2011. He has since remodeled the prediction, first delaying it by a year, thus anticipating the collapse to take place in 2012 (Chang, 2011). Chang has worked in Asia for nearly two decades in the Paul Weiss and Baker & McKenzie law firms (gordongchang.com, n.d.). He has written books on China and North Korea, given speeches at several prestigious universities and offered briefings, for example, at Pentagon and the National Intelligence Council (Ibid.). *The Great U.S.-China Tech War* is published by Encounter Books under the Encounter BroadSides series, a collection of pamphlets exploring diverse topics from the China threat to the American education system (Encounter Books, n.d.).²¹ The publisher, Encounter Books, has revived its name from the homonymous liberal, anti-Soviet magazine, founded in the 1950s (Encounter Books, n.d.). On its official website, Encounter Books describes itself as a book publisher which “continues to advance its love of liberty and the cultural achievements of the West against a rising tide of collectivist sentiment and the soft totalitarianism of intellectual conformity” (Ibid.). The collection of works published by Encounter Books reveals a bias for conservative, right-leaning, anti-progressive, and anti-woke titles (Encounter Books, n.d.).²²

²¹ Some of the pamphlets published as a part of the Encounter BroadSides series include *The New Face of Woke Education* by Priscilla West, *China Is Going to War* by Gordon G. Chang, *Communist China's War Inside America* by Briant T. Kennedy, and *Countdown to Socialism* by Devin Nunes (Encounter Books, n.d.).

²² Encounter Books' political bias is revealed by the amount of right-leaning and pro-Republican titles published by the company. Some examples include: *American Leviathan: The Birth of the Administrative State* and

In *The Great U.S.-China Tech War* Gordon Chang depicts China's technological advancement as threatening because of the PRC's ability to use critical technology to serve its political interests which jeopardize the contemporary, rules-based international order. Chang argues that the US and China are currently battling a "cold Tech war" in which the US is falling behind (p. 1). Chang maintains that catching up with China in critical technology industries should be a key objective for the US if it wishes to safeguard the rules-based world order. Therefore, *The Great U.S.-China Tech War* belongs to the political threat category. To demonstrate the nature of the contemporary technology race, Chang discusses three key sectors of the competition: 5G, artificial intelligence (AI), and quantum technology.

Chang begins the pamphlet by focusing on China's lead in the 5G. The wireless telecommunications networks, made possible by 5G, are an important component of the competition because they allow connectivity between devices around the globe (p. 4). Chang expresses his concern for China's domination in the 5G sector as the PRC's increased access to information allows it to use the data for purposes of spying (p. 4). Furthermore, Chang discusses the dangers of the Chinese tech-company Huawei becoming a channel for the government's spying operations as the company is de facto controlled by Beijing through the trade union committee (p. 4–5). Moreover, the founder of Huawei, Ren Zhengfei, is an ex-officer of PLA and a member of the CCP which further raises Chang's suspicion towards the firm (p. 6). Akin to the alarmist tone of Spalding in *Stealth War*, Chang notes that Chinese 5G is threatening because "with devices around the planet networked to China, Beijing could have the ability to drive cars off cliffs, unlock front doors, and turn off or speed up pacemakers" he continues by explaining that in case of war "Beijing could literally see into most corners of the world and paralyze critical infrastructure" (p. 7). For these reasons, Chang is concerned for American ally nations and the developing countries in the global South purchasing 5G from Huawei (p. 7–9). Lastly, Chang traces Huawei's success in 5G to the subsidies it has received from the Chinese government and the stealing of technology from American and other foreign companies (p. 9–11). However, similar to Spalding, Chang also extends critique for American companies' whose decisions to get out of low-margin manufacturing and secure profits have contributed to the current competitive advantage of Chinese firms (p. 12).

Another key technology discussed in *The Great U.S.-China Tech War* is artificial intelligence. According to Chang, leadership in AI is crucial because of its impact for the global economy and conventional military warfare (p. 17). Moreover, AI technologies can facilitate the PRC's surveillance of its minorities, such as the Uighurs, with the help of facial recognition systems (p. 18). Chang remarks, that the American tech-firm Google is conducting AI research in China despite the controversies around China's use of the technology (p. 19). Simultaneously, Google has been reluctant to renew its contract with Pentagon (p. 20). Chang views the cooperation between Chinese and American companies as potentially dangerous because the PLA has access to any AI research conducted in the mainland under the guidelines of the Civil Military Fusion (p. 21). However, Chang remarks that China's road to AI mastery has not come without trouble as the PRC's restrictive political environment suffocates creative thinking, the promotion of "Han nationalism" discourages experts from working in China, and the regime's tendency to disobey established standards makes Chinese AI development and research unattractive to international users and scholars (p. 23–25).

The last area of critical-technology competition explored by Chang is quantum. Since quantum's prospects in civil and military technologies appear promising, Beijing has dedicated significant amounts of resources to its development (p. 26). Chang remarks that China is currently deploying satellites and fiber-optic cables to build a quantum communications network (p. 26). He furthermore observes that the PRC has already managed to register over five hundred quantum communications and cryptography patents—a number far exceeding that of the US (p. 27). However, in terms of quantum computing the US still has the lead, although China is devoting considerable resources into quantum research to reverse the situation (p. 27–28). Establishing the National Laboratory for Quantum Information Sciences has been a significant step in Beijing's effort to advance China's quantum innovation (p. 28). The laboratory has reportedly attracted investments and interest from Google (p. 30). Chang expresses his concern for Google's possible cooperation with China in terms of quantum computing as the technology will be useful to the Chinese military (p. 29–30). However, to respond to these issues, Chang remarks that the US Department of Energy has forbidden employees and contractors from participating in China's Thousand Talents recruitment program (p. 31).

When analyzing Chang's narrative carefully, it becomes evident that the fundamental reason for Chang to depict China's technological rise as threatening is not only concerned with advanced technology in itself, but rather the use of that technology to serve China's political

and military objectives. At the end of *The Great U.S.-China Tech War*, Chang establishes that the US-China competition is not merely about the US selfishly trying to preserve its dominant position on the international arena, but rather about America trying to save the international system altogether (p. 32–33). Chang draws from China's imperial past, its use of tributary system and the concept of *tianxia*, to explain how Xi Jinping is attempting to cast aside the rules-based international order (p. 33). Furthermore, Chang states that Xi views China as “the world's only sovereign state,” reluctant to abide to the current Westphalian international system where competition is bound by norms and rules (p. 33). Indeed, Chang refers to the PRC as a “racist,” “militant,” and “totalitarian” state (p. 49). These changes in the narrative throughout the second half of the book indicate, that China is first and foremost a political threat rather than a technological one: because of China's suspicious objectives, Chang clearly argues, it become ever more crucial for the US to win China in the ongoing tech war—not only for the sake of America but to protect the very existence of the liberal international system (p. 34).

Chang proposes some practical, competition and containment-focused policy recommendations for the US to confront the technological threat posed by China. According to Chang, increasing competitiveness and supporting domestic high-tech manufacturing could foster the chances of the US emerging victorious from the Sino-US competition over key technology (p. 36–40). In this regard, Chang encourages the US to implement a nation-wide effort to advance education in science, technology, engineering, and math by increasing federal funding for basic research (p. 38). Additionally, Chang proposes the implementation of restrictions on sales and licenses to Huawei in order to cut the company's access to American semiconductors and software (p. 40–46). To ensure that Huawei cannot acquire these technologies elsewhere, the US should also sanction foreign businesses that sell technology or licenses to the company (p. 46). Additionally, Chang suggests implementing restrictions on technology sharing (p. 47). This would include closing down American operations, such as research facilities and labs, in China (p. 48). Indeed, Chang remarks that “the way to get American firms to stop working for China is to make it illegal” and suggests that the American leadership could use the Emergency Economic Powers Acts of 1977 to declare an emergency and raise awareness on these issues (p. 50). Without restrictions on American business operations in China, Chang remarks, the US will become a third-world economy that exports primary products and imports manufactured and high-tech goods (p. 51–52).

8.3.4 *The World According to China* by Elizabeth C. Economy (2023)

The World According to China was written by Elizabeth C. Economy in 2023. Economy currently holds the position of Hargrove Senior Fellow and co-chairs the Program on the US, China and the World at the Hoover Institution think tank (Hoover, Institution, n.d.).

Previously, Economy worked at the Department of Commerce as the senior advisor for China and as the C.V. Starr Senior Fellow and director for Asia Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) (Ibid.). *The World According to China* is a Council on Foreign Relations' book, published by Polity. The CFR is an American nonpartisan, independent membership organization, think tank and publisher of *Foreign Affairs* (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). The publishing house, Polity, in turn, focuses on titles related to social sciences and humanities targeted both for the general readership and students of post-secondary and higher education (Polity, n.d.). Polity's wide selection of books cover topics ranging from sociology and religious studies to psychoanalysis and political economy (Ibid.).

In *The World According to China*, Elizabeth Economy argues that China is a threat because it aims to radically reform the current, rules-based international system to better reflect its preferred values and norms. According to Economy, China dreams of a future where the hegemonic power of the US and the influence of its alliance system are diminished while the PRC emerges as a major power in a multipolar world (p. 208–209). As a part of this effort, China seeks to reclaim its centrality, reunify contested territories with the mainland, extent its influence through the use of infrastructure, export authoritarian models to other countries, and reform the institutions, norms and values of global governance (p. 5–8). In order to achieve its objectives, the PRC utilizes its centralized party-state to mobilize resources both from the public and private sectors (p. 209). Interestingly, Economy's book diverges from the majority of China threat titles analyzed for this research in two key ways. First, it approaches the topic of the China threat with a non-alarmist tone and discusses China-related challenges in a balanced and objective manner. In this regard, Economy's book resembles the works of Doshi, Brands and Beckley (discussed later in the chapter). Second, Economy continuously expresses pessimism towards China's prospects for accomplishing its objectives. Instead of promoting urgent responses to the threat of China, Economy appears to soothe the debate by considering the setbacks of China's strategy. In this summary of *The World According to China*, I will first discuss China's strategies to realign the international system to its liking. After that, I move on to consider the PRC's ability to deploy extensive amounts of resources

to obtain its strategic objectives. In the last section of the summary, I present Economy's policy recommendation to respond to the China threat.

Elizabeth Economy argues that China, with the leadership of President Xi Jinping, aims to "realign the international system to reflect Chinese values, norms, and policy preferences" (p. 171). Related to these efforts, China has been championing for a sovereignty-based, non-interference principle for handling international affairs, especially in the framework of the United Nations (p. 171). According to Economy, the Chinese leadership prefers a multipolar world where the US-led alliance system has been dismantled and diverse political systems are recognized as equally legitimate (p. 173). To achieve its objectives, the PRC has situated its officials to key positions in international organizations and placed Chinese experts into their technical bodies, invested heavily on science and research around strategically important areas, and used economic influence to promote Chinese interests (p. 169–206). To demonstrate how the approach works in practice, Economy explores various strategic areas important for China, including the Arctic. In order to benefit from access to the Arctic routes and resources, China has created a Polar Research Institute, acquired two icebreakers, and participated in international non-governmental research organizations around Arctic issues while also holding a seat as an Observer of the Arctic Council (p. 176–177). Although not an Arctic country, the PRC has referred to itself as a near-Arctic power to legitimize its involvement in matters centered around the region (p. 184). However, Economy notes that China's growing interest in Arctic issues and its investments in the region have contributed to national security considerations among Nordic countries and an unwillingness to deploy Chinese 5G technology (p. 179–184).

Another key argument in *The World According to China* is that the PRC is able to deploy massive amounts of resources to strategically important projects because of its centralized, state-led governance system. This becomes especially evident in the chapter discussing China's ambitions around the technology sector. Economy demonstrates China's strengthened technological reach by discussing its BeiDou satellite system, 5G networks, undersea fiber optic cables, and semiconductors while stressing the Chinese government's involvement in the development of these technologies (p. 128–168). Economy examines how Beijing has constrained foreign competition in China's domestic markets and offered state-backed financial support to help certain companies, such as Huawei, to grow (p. 134). Moreover, the Made In China 2025 initiative as well as the Thousand Talents Plan, are discussed to reflect how the PRC is attempting to invest in the research and development of future strategic

industries and recruit scientists from abroad to work for China (p. 142–152). Economy observes that despite significant efforts by the Chinese government to accelerate and support the development of critical technologies, breakthrough innovations have been lacking (p. 158–165).

What is noteworthy in *The World According to China*, is that Economy considers both the successes and challenges of the PRC's projects and strategies without undertaking an alarmist tone. As noted above, Economy's narrative deviates from the majority of the China threat books in its pessimism towards China's prospects to fulfill its ambitions. According to Economy, many of China's influencing operations have not bear fruit because of China's authoritarian regime type. Let us examine Economy's perceptions around China's Belt and Road Initiative to demonstrate this argument. Economy recognizes several threats related to the BRI, such as the risk of debt distress (p. 100–102), negative environmental implications (p. 102–104), and China's use of the BRI to develop its military presence in the Indian and Pacific Oceans (p. 106–110). She also explores how China has been selling its surveillance technology and providing support for non-democratic governments to spy on opposition groups and effectively control the internet (p. 113–114). However, Economy suggests that many of China's ambiguous practices around the initiative have actually contributed to negative conception about the project. For example, she remarks that China's "lack of transparency in deal-making, rapidly rising levels of debt in some host countries, and problems around Chinese environmental and labor practices have produced widespread dissatisfaction" (p. 98–99). These issues have led many countries to abandon their involvement with the BRI (p. 99 & 104). What is noteworthy in Economy's discussion on the BRI compared to other authors of the China threat books, is her balanced and contemplative analysis that discusses both the dangers of participating in the infrastructure projects as well as the overall positive implications of the BRI, for example, in modernizing infrastructure in less-developed countries and increasing global income levels (p. 126). Moreover, Economy does not present the BRI as a malicious master plan that has succeeded in casting aside the rules-based world order. Instead, she points to the steps that have already been taken to respond to the issues presented by the BRI. For example, in 2018 the US, Japan and Australia came forward with an infrastructure partnership in the Indo-Pacific region and later, in 2019, launched the Blue Dot Network to promote high-quality infrastructure by providing advisory services and certificates (p. 118).

In addition to the BRI, similar pessimism towards the success of China's strategies also arises in Economy's discussion around China's technological ambitions. For example, entrepreneurs of China's leading tech-firms, such as Jack Ma of Alibaba, have voiced their criticism towards the extensive government involvement with the business sector while citing the lack of innovation as a negative consequence of the close ties (p. 140–141). Indeed, Economy notes that Chinese companies' close relations to the government diminish their attractiveness in the eyes of foreign countries which in turn harms Chinese companies' competitiveness (p. 157). She further remarks that ambiguities and issues with data collection and privacy have led many, especially democratic countries, to restrict Chinese companies access to their markets (p. 141–142) while cyber-enabled intellectual property theft has resulted in countless reports by foreign companies, and even a lawsuit against Huawei by an American tech-firm (p. 135 & 154). Essentially, instead of painting a gloomy picture of China's unlawful behavior in the technology industry, Economy stresses that Chinese companies are actually being put at a disadvantage on the global market because of these government practices.

In the last chapter of her book, Economy provides policy recommendations for the US to counter the challenges posed by China. According to Economy, approaches undertaken by previous American administrations—namely those focused on engagement and hedging or competition and containment—have been inefficient in solving the issue of the China threat. Instead, Economy praises the policies of President Biden who continued some of the competitive and confrontational policies of his predecessor while also reestablishing the importance of allies and multilateral institutions (p. 214). Economy views the administration's emphasis on the importance of rules-based order as especially beneficial (p. 214). In order to undermine Xi's efforts to reform the global governance system, the US needs to be present in international institutions and join agreements to address issues around human rights, the rule of law, and sustainability (p. 216–217). Economy emphasizes the importance of collective action in responding to China's threats on liberal values and norms (p. 217). Additionally, Economy suggests that the US should widen its alliance networks and partner with emerging economies to provide ecologically sustainable and financially transparent alternatives to China's Belt and Road Initiative (p. 219). Similarly to Chang (2020), Economy also remarks the first Trump administration's efforts to support alternative 5G providers to promote better data security and transparency (p. 220). Lastly, she discusses the security of Indo-Pacific and the potential to use the existing alliance networks (such as Quad and NATO) to respond to China's military activity in the region (p. 220–222). Overall, Economy calls for “lowering the

temperature of these often inflamed debates” to be able to fully consider available policy options. For example, unlike Spalding (2019) who proposed the complete shutting down of Confucius Institutes on American campuses, Economy contemplates that American universities could have instead allowed the PRC to finance the institutions but reject its selection of teachers and curriculum (p. 223).

8.4 China as an Economic Threat

In the economic threat category, the growth of China’s low-cost manufacturing and the US’ increasing dependence on Chinese-produced goods for essential items is met with distrust and concern. The Sino-US rivalry is viewed primarily as an economic competition where the safeguarding of American markets through the implementation of protectionist trade policies becomes essential while the self-sufficiency of the US is emphasized.

8.4.1 *Pandemonium: China’s Global Strategy to Cripple America* by Curtis Ellis (2023)

The author of *Pandemonium: China’s Global Strategy to Cripple America* (hereafter *Pandemonium*), Curtis Ellis, was a fierce advocate for economic nationalism and a strong critique of China and its trade practices (Post Hill Press, n.d.). He was the founder of American Jobs Alliance, a nonprofit organization promoting the consumption of American products and advocating for companies to hire American workers (Ibid.). Ellis worked as a senior policy adviser for Donald Trump’s presidential campaign in 2016 and for the Presidential Transition Team (Ibid.). He also worked as a senior policy director for America First Policies and as a special advisor to the Secretary of Labor under the Trump administration (The American Conservative, n.d.). Indeed, White House’s former chief strategists under the first Trump administration, Steve Bannon, congratulates Ellis for his contributions to the ‘Make America Great Again’ movement in the preface of *Pandemonium*. The book is published by Post Hill Press. The collection of books published by the company presents a clear bias for conservative, anti-woke, pro-Republican and Christian titles (Post Hill Press, n.d.).²³

²³ Some examples of politically-charged titles published by Post Hill Press include *The Case to Impeach and Prison Joe Biden* by Mike McCormick, *Raising Conservative Kids in a Woke City: Teaching Historical, Economic and Biological Truth in a World of Lies* by Katy Faust and Stacy Manning, *Not Stolen: the Truth about European Colonialism in the New World* by Jeff Fynn-Paul and *Great Reset Christianity: How Woke Evangelicals Twist Scripture to Advance the Left’s Agenda* by Andrew N. Woodard (Post Hill Press, n.d.).

In *Pandemonium*, Curtis Ellis argues that China is a threat to the US because of its unfair trade practices that harm American workers and jeopardize the nation's security. China is seen as a hostile player in international trade because it steals American intellectual property and trade secrets, manipulates its own currency, cheats on trade commitments, participates in human trafficking, abuses religious minorities for labor and, finally, has failed to adhere to the international trade rules (p. xix). Ellis maintains that China's unfair trade practices have resulted in American blue-collar workers losing their jobs as manufacturing moves abroad (p. xix). This, in turn, has decreased the income of middle-class families (p. xx). However, the scale of the problem, according to Ellis, is even larger: the health of American people, the security of the nation, and even the very way of life practiced by Americans are all endangered as the manufacturing of critical products moves abroad (p. xx). *Pandemonium*, therefore, is a textbook example of the perception of China as an economic threat.

Interestingly, however, there is more to *Pandemonium*'s narrative that should be emphasized here. Ellis' book is as much a love letter to economic nationalism and protectionism as it is a warning call on China's unfair trade practices. Ellis compares the contemporary PRC to the 18th century Great Britain by arguing that just like in its early history, the current US should detach itself from an unprofitable relationship with a major state and instead promote self-sufficiency and independence (p. 57). A significant proportion of the book is dedicated to discussions on the virtues of economic ideologies that promote high tariffs and critique overt dependence on other nations. For Ellis, China is the 21st century threat to American economic prosperity and he promotes the implementation of protectionist economic policies to tackle that threat. I begin the summary by explaining how *Pandemonium* reflects Ellis' support for economic nationalism and protectionism. After that, I consider Ellis' mistrust for business executives, politicians, highly educated experts, and international institutions. I then move on to discuss Ellis' views on China's influencing operations. The last sections of the summary explore Ellis' emotionally-charged writing style, the similarities between *Pandemonium* and *Stealth War*, and Ellis' policy recommendations to tackle the China threat.

As mentioned above, Ellis was a keen advocate for economic nationalism, which is also a major theme of *Pandemonium*. Interestingly, in the sections discussing economic nationalism and protectionist policies, China is hardly mentioned. Instead, Ellis focuses on establishing his argument around the virtues of these practices. For example, while promoting economic independence and self-sufficiency, Ellis repeatedly expresses concern towards the 'globalist' agenda that promotes free, international trade (p. 29). Ellis explains that the US was founded

upon the ideals of self-governance and self-reliance, making free trade and globalism “foreign imports” (p. 45). He maintains, that the American Revolution fundamentally rejected globalism and was a de facto trade war in response to cheap British imports (p. 46). Furthermore, Ellis discusses Alexander Hamilton’s economic plan, known as the American System, which promoted domestic industries by placing tariffs on imports, advancing national infrastructure, and regulating credit (p. 47–49). Ellis’ discussion on the American System reflects nostalgia for the times when “Americans made what they bought and bought what they made” (p. 56). Indeed, Ellis views the promotion of free trade and the concept of global supply chains as the most central factors currently weakening American economy (p. 5–6). He criticizes free trade agreements for granting too much power for large corporations at the expense of independent, sovereign nations (p. 5). Additionally, Ellis stresses that American leaders have been too convinced that global trade would promote peaceful relations and advance liberal democracy (p. 9). By reviewing these major themes of *Pandemonium*, it becomes evident that Ellis’ intention is not merely to critique China; instead, the current economic challenges and dependency on Chinese-produced goods are viewed as part of a larger problem, stemming from international free trade and economic interconnectedness, which is why these concepts are discussed and criticized extensively.

Another major theme of *Pandemonium* relates to Ellis’ deep mistrust for business executives, politicians, and highly educated experts who serve the globalist agenda. Like Spalding, Ellis critiques corporate executives for prioritizing profit at the expense of their own communities and societies (p. 26). Ellis views these executives as stateless actors, uninterested in their own nation and lacking any sense of patriotism (p. 26). Washington’s trade negotiators, economists, and experts are presented as the villain of the story as they have stealthily grown their power in politics and thereby contribute to the increased dependence on nations such as China (p. 28). Ellis remarks that China is targeting these actors in varying ways: politicians are influenced through campaign donations and business-owners through commercial opportunities (p. 44). Indeed, in the first chapter of the book, Ellis stresses that the loss of American jobs and the outsourcing of production was a result of deliberate decision-making by politicians and corporate executives during the course of several decades (p. 2). For example, the decision to approve the North American Free Trade Agreement, the expansion of trade relations with China in 2001, and American companies’ eagerness to bypass domestic rules and safety standards, have all contributed to the current position of dependency on products manufactured abroad (p. 2). Moreover, Ellis critiques the policies that allow poor

countries to export products to the US duty-free and the government subsidies that have aided companies to move production overseas (p. 9–10).

In addition to skepticism towards business leaders, politicians and highly educated individuals, Ellis also expresses suspicion over international organizations. Ellis views international institutions as problematic because of their ability to dictate policies beyond domestically elected representatives (p. 30). He maintains that “outsourcing our political decision-making to transnational agencies, from WHO to the WTO puts us at the mercy of whoever controls those institutions” (p. 31). For Ellis, this is a crucial point as China is currently “using globalization as a Trojan horse to take over the world” by controlling important institutions (p. 30–31). Ellis argues that American companies profiting from business in China have become the enablers of China’s harmful trade practices as they refrain from critiquing the regime over concern for negative implications on their businesses (p. 35). Additionally, business-owners can act as pro-China lobbyists on the political front to secure profitable trade relations to the PRC (p. 20). Overall, Ellis appears to object any cooperation that leads to nation-states losing decision-making power. For example, Ellis uses the European Union as a cautionary tale to demonstrate how harmless cooperation in coal and steel trade expanded to form a “twenty-seven-nation superstate” where central bureaucracy holds power and “regulates everything” at the expense of national governments (p. 28).

As discussed above, Ellis expresses his suspicion over the growing influence of non-state actors such as powerful corporations and international institutions. These actors can become especially dangerous when subject to foreign influencing operations, such as those undertaken by the PRC. For example, Ellis discusses Bill Clinton who, despite initial promises to undertake a tougher line against China, redirected his policies as a result of the PRC’s influencing operation (p. 18). According to Ellis, China promised major American business owners lucrative deals which led them to lobby Clinton and abstain from funding his campaign (p. 18). Moreover, during Clinton’s presidency in 2000, Congress passed a bill granting permanent normal trade relations with China—a decision which Ellis views as a fatal mistake (p. 19). Additionally, Ellis remains skeptical towards think tank policy papers that do not have to disclose possible foreign funding (p. 38). He suspects that powerful individuals and institutions in the US are working under Beijing’s influence and publishing seemingly neutral policy recommendations and articles that promote China’s interests (p. 39). Here, Ellis’ argument resembles that made by Spalding in *Stealth War*: American elites are seen as the primary targets of China’s influencing operations.

Pandemonium stands out in the collection of primary sources with its excessively alarmist tone. In this regard, *Pandemonium*'s closest equivalent among the primary sources would be Newsham's *When China Attacks*. Ellis deploys emotionally-charged language in his references to China, for example, calling the PRC a "tyrant," (p. 82) "thief," (p. 86) "tormentor," (p. 90) and "destroyer" (p. 90). Ellis' repeatedly adopts informal and even inappropriate metaphors in his writing. For example, in discussing China's economic clout Ellis writes:

It's really not that hard to understand: China took our jobs, and all we got in exchange was a virus that cancelled Easter and killed grandma. Saying 'we need to collaborate with China' sounds a lot like 'let's keep on kissing Xi's ass' (p. 78).

Additionally, Ellis likens the restoring of trust between the US and China to "forgiving the rapist" (p. 91). What is noteworthy, is that Ellis repeatedly deploys Christian language in his writing. For example, he notes that the US is "blessed" with favorable climate and adequate resources to produce its own goods (p. 92). Additionally, Ellis compares engagement with China to a "dance with the devil" (p. 86) and refers to the Chinese government as "faithless" (p. 95). Moreover, China is referred to as a nation that "slaughters his own family and sleeps with their blood on his soul" (p. 88). The academic, political, and business elites of the US, in turn, are blamed for "sacrificing American jobs on the altar of globalism" (p. 11). Ellis' use of metaphors and his informal, emotionally-charged, and religiously attuned writing style can be understood as stylistic choices that add to the sense of urgency and emphasize the seriousness of the China threat.

Notably, the arguments presented by Ellis in *Pandemonium* are similar to those offered by Robert Spalding in *Stealth War*. This is perhaps no coincidence, as Ellis recommends Spalding's book at the end of *Pandemonium* as further reading. Both Spalding and Ellis criticize business leaders for their excessive interest in profits and portray American elites as the targets of China's influencing operations. Essentially, both of the authors suggest that American money has been used to build China's power and influence and propose cutting China's access to that money. However, the overall narratives of the books are still notably different. For, example, Spalding discusses China's intellectual property theft and cyber espionage efforts in detail by providing examples of American businesses suffering from China's covert operations. Although Ellis also refers to these issues, his book is more focused on criticizing globalism and international free trade, instead of detailing China's attacks on American corporations, technology, or intellectual property. Interestingly, the authors'

narratives also diverge in their take on the global world order. In *Stealth War*, Spalding stresses that China is threatening the rules-based world order and thus endangering the values of liberal democracies. Ellis, in contrast, is not concerned for the preservation of the rules-based order and instead views the current order as the enabler of globalism and international free trade, even calling it “euphemism for globalism” (p. 67).

According to Ellis, cooperation and collaboration with China are not the solutions to the current economic threat (p. 84–91). Instead, it is central that the US ensures its economic independence and self-sufficiency to respond to the challenge at hand (p. 83). Ellis’ proposals reflect competition and containment-oriented approaches to American China-policy. He suggests bringing global supply chains back to the US by first identifying which industries are lacking domestic alternatives (p. 95–96). Additionally, Ellis views the “boycotting” of China as an essential step in balancing trade dependency and defunding the Chinese state (p. 79). He suggests cutting American funding to organizations such as the World Bank, WHO (which Ellis refers to as “Beijing’s puppet”), and certain UN agencies that might be connected to, or contributing to the funding of the CCP (p. 80). He also suggests that Wall Street should be discouraged from investing in Chinese companies controlled by the Communist Party (p. 80). Additionally, Ellis encourages Americans to undertake a literal boycott towards products manufactured in China and to support those made in the US (p. 81). He proposes increasing import tariffs and offering incentives for businesses to encourage their moving away from China (p. 96). Government financing, Ellis argues, could also be used to encourage companies to invest primarily in the US (p. 102). Moreover, transparency in Chinese companies’ accounting practices and the equal enforcement of laws should be required (p. 102–103). Finally, Ellis addresses the issue of polarization and offers national unity as an important component for tackling the China threat (p. 96).

8.5 China as a Threat to the International System

Books belonging to this category place the Sino-US competition in a larger geopolitical perspective. China’ rise is understood in the context of international relations theories and the history of rising powers attempting to overtake reigning hegemons. The authors explain the behavior of the PRC based on its current position in the international system, therefore offering modes of argumentation that are applicable to any other state or international actor in a similar position. The US is encouraged to halt China’s rise by building strong alliances and dispersing American military assets in the Indo-Pacific.

8.5.1 *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* by Rush Doshi (2021)

The author of *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (hereafter *The Long Game*), Rush Doshi, serves at the Council on Foreign Relations as the C.V. Starr senior fellow for Asian studies and as the director of the China Strategy Initiative (Rush Doshi, n.d.). He also works as an assistant professor in the Security Studies Program at Georgetown's Walsh School of Foreign Service (Ibid.). Previously, he has worked as the deputy senior director for China and Taiwan (2021–2024) in Joe Biden's National Security Council, helping to shape the administration's China-strategy (Ibid.). His former work experience also includes servings as a fellow at the Brookings Institution and Yale Law School's Paul Tsai Chin center (Ibid.). Additionally, he was a member of the Asia policy working groups for the Biden and Clinton presidential campaigns (Ibid.). The book is published by Oxford University Press. The publishing house concentrates on releasing academic titles, educational resources and research, internationally (Oxford University Press, n.d.).

In *The Long Game* Rush Doshi argues that the current Sino-US competition over global order can be understood by examining the factors that make up a hegemon's power. Doshi perceives China as a rising power, the behavior of which can be explained by adequate theorizations. This line of argumentation positions *The Long Game* into the category of "China as a threat to the international system." According to Doshi, hegemonic power consists of three modes of control: "coercive capability (to force compliance), consensual inducements (to incentivize it), and legitimacy (to rightfully command it)" (p. 3). *The Long Game* focuses on discussing the strategies that China has implemented to gain power through these three forms of control, ultimately allowing it to displace the hegemonic position of the US (p. 3). According to Doshi, the rising power first has to blunt the established hegemon's ability to implement the three forms of control so that the rising power is better able to stand up against the current one (p. 3). The next strategy, then, is to build forms of control around other states to serve the rising power's interests (p. 3). Finally, to ultimately displace the established hegemon, the rising power needs to embark on global expansion (p. 4). The following summary discusses how China is using these displacement strategies (blunting, building, and global expansion) to replace the US as the global superpower.

According to Doshi, China began its first displacement strategy, blunting, in 1989. The strategy was triggered by what Doshi refers to as the “traumatic trifecta,” consisting of the Tiananmen Square Incident of 1989, the Gulf War from 1990 until 1991, and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (p. 45 & 48). Doshi argues that each of these incidents represented a certain form of threat to China by the US: the first one being ideological, the second one of military nature, and the last one geopolitical (p. 48). Concerned over these threats, China began to dull American influence over the People’s Republic in order to safeguard its ability to develop and maintain autonomy (p. 48). Doshi argues that Deng Xiaoping’s advice to “hide one’s capabilities and bide one’s time” was essentially a guideline to support these efforts and an important blunting strategy, also utilized by Deng’s successors (p. 48 & 61).

Doshi describes how the blunting strategy was implemented in several domains including the military, politics and the economy. In the military domain, the blunting strategy became apparent through several policy adjustments. For example, China shifted its military strategy favoring sea control with one emphasizing sea denial (p. 69) and focused on studying how to use inferior equipment to defeat high-tech adversaries (p. 79). Additionally, China pursued the advancement of military equipment suitable to confront the US (namely submarines, mines, and missiles) while halting the acquisition of aircraft carriers, seen as less crucial for the strategy to blunt American power (p. 82–100). Here, it was crucial for China to deny the US’ ability to control the nearby waters in order to maintain autonomy and blunt American influence in the region (p. 69). In terms of political blunting, China attempted to dull American influence by joining and consciously hindering regional organizations throughout the 1990s (p. 103). As part of these efforts, China stalled the institutionalization of organizations that included the US and supported the institutionalization of the ones excluding it, thus fostering the organizations that China had a major role in (p. 103). By utilizing this strategy of political blunting, China was able to either improve or hinder the decision-making effectiveness to serve its own interests (p. 103). According to Doshi, blunting regional organizations was important for China, because it hindered American attempts of encirclement and the possible formation of a counterbalancing alliance against the PRC (p. 108). Lastly, Doshi discusses economic blunting strategies that China implemented to weaken the economic power of the US and to guarantee Chinese access to American markets and technology (p. 136). For example, China pursued efforts to obtain a permanent most-favor-nation status and to gain admission to the WTO (p. 144–156). Doshi argues that China’s eagerness to join the WTO was principally about securing China’s MFN status and

guaranteeing favorable trade relations to the US that would not be subject to annual American evaluation (p. 152–153).²⁴ As part of these efforts, China, for example, tried to prevent the US from attaching China's trade status to its human rights records or arms sales by advocating for trade rules such as the non-discrimination principle through organizations like the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (p. 151).

China's second displacement strategy, building, took place from 2009 until 2016 (p. 157). According to Doshi, the global financial crisis, and more concretely, the 11th Ambassadorial Conference of the PRC, marked a shift from the strategy of blunting towards the strategy of building (p. 159). This shift had to do with the perceived decrease of American power as a result of the financial crisis and the subsequent changes in the international balance of power (p. 161). During the conference, President Hu Jintao declared that Deng's guideline of "hiding capabilities and biding time" would be replaced with a new strategy in which China sought to "actively accomplish something" (p. 160). Doshi also views the concept of a "Community of Common Destiny," launched two years after Hu's declaration, as a reflection of China's efforts to build its power in relation to the US (p. 169). Here, it was important to increase Asian countries' economic dependency on China and decrease their military engagement with the US (p. 169). Hu's successor, Xi Jinping, continued to pursue these goals and advocate for peripheral diplomacy to foster regional influence (p. 170).

Doshi demonstrates the implementation of this new strategy again in the domains of the military, politics, and the economy. China's military building strategy, Doshi argues, was now centered around establishing a new force structure, capable of serving the needs of regional order-building (p. 184–185). This strategy included acquiring aircraft carriers (p. 195–197), improving the capabilities of surface vessels (p. 197–203), and building overseas facilities (p. 205–207). Political building strategies, in turn, centered around China's attempt to establish and elevate Asian organizations that excluded the US to foster Chinese regional order-building (p. 209). Instead of blunting American power through existing organizations, China was now interested in crafting the rules of regional order by exhibiting coercion, consent, and legitimacy (p. 210 & 212). An important component of this strategy was to restrict China's neighbors' security alliances with the US (p. 214). In terms of economic building, China sought to gain geostrategic advantages by using economic influence and establishing

²⁴ Indeed Doshi's arguments seem accurate: on February 3, 2025, Beijing called out the Trump administration's increased tariffs by arguing that they violate the WTO's rules and pledged to bring the case before authorities ("China renews threat to retaliate against US tariffs," The Associated Press, 2025).

infrastructure (p. 236). This has been done by undertaking the Belt and Road Initiative (p. 241–246) and by offering alternatives for American financial hegemony (p. 246–258). The former, the BRI, allows China to increase connectivity and foster other countries' dependence on it by enabling indebtedness and bribery (p. 242–245). The latter relates to China's attempts to promote its own currency and weaken the status of dollar (p. 247–250), efforts to hinder Western interbank payment and messaging systems (p. 250–254), and China's aim to offer alternatives for American credit rating agencies (p. 254–258).

Doshi establishes global expansion as China's last displacement strategy. The purpose of the strategy is to mount China's position globally, and to eventually displace the US as the leading hegemon (p. 258–259). Doshi views the year 2016 as a turning point for China where the election of Donald Trump and the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union were interpreted as signs of fragmentation, signaling the increased weakness of the West (p. 262). In the CCP's 19th Party Congress, Xi Jinping declared the beginning of a "new era," anticipating China's rejuvenation by 2049 and a more central position in the global arena (p. 261–262). Here, Doshi stresses Xi Jinping's concept "great changes unseen in a century" which highlights China's attempt to shift the international order in its favor (p. 263). Politically, Doshi explains, China seeks to move towards global governance and promote its own system to an international audience (p. 280). This strategy includes strengthening China's influence in the UN to promote the legitimacy of its own principles at the expense of liberal values (p. 282), accelerating regional engagement through active participation in organizations (p. 283), building coalitions of like-minded states (p. 284), and promoting China's own governance practices and values (p. 284). On the economic front, China attempts to foster its global stance by investing heavily in advanced technologies such as AI and quantum computing (p. 286). According to Doshi, Beijing believes that technology's potential to foster financial capabilities and influence supply chains enables China to shift the balance of power to its benefit (p. 286). Lastly, Doshi discusses China's military ambitions. According to Doshi, China's objectives to build a world-class military and to advance Chinese interests abroad indicate a global military strategy (p. 292). Doshi argues that China's attempt to grow its global military posture is reflected in its establishment of a military base in Djibouti, the potential to upgrade the BRI ports to grant military access or function as bases, and finally, in China's interest in the Arctic region (p. 294–295).

According to Doshi, attempts to either accommodate or change China are unlikely to succeed and guarantee a desired outcome, in line with US interests (p. 303–313). Therefore, Doshi

suggest that the US should undertake an asymmetric approach that uses China's own displacement strategies, blunting and building, to respond to the PRC's rise (p. 313). This approach, therefore, promotes competition and containment. Military blunting strategies would involve pursuing anti-access and area-denial capabilities to make it harder for China to control strategically important waterways or islands, assisting US allies in developing similar capabilities and, finally, deteriorating China's efforts to establish overseas bases and facilities (p. 318). Economic blunting strategies, then, would include multilateralizing China's Belt and Road Initiative to increase other states' bargaining power in the infrastructure projects (e.g. through veto power), providing assistance for developing countries to better understand the risks associated with Chinese financing, funding local journalism to offer information on China's corruption abroad, financing alternative and strategically important projects to counter China's endeavors, and finally, responding to China's technologic acquisition and theft by, for example, improving visa screenings of Chinese nationals and informing investors of China's cyber theft and espionage efforts (p. 320–321). Finally, political blunting strategies would include joining Chinese-led international organizations to shape their development, strengthening alternative organizations, refocusing on the UN to undermine China's influence in the system, and promoting regulatory reforms to deny China from obtaining its information influencing objectives (p. 321–322). In addition to these blunting strategies, Doshi proposes the US to also focus on rebuilding its power in the abovementioned sectors: the economy, politics, and the military. Economically, the US should maintain the dominance of dollar by developing a digital currency, and by increasingly investing in science and innovation (p. 325–326). Political efforts, in turn, should include the building of democratic coalitions to challenge China's power in global forums (p. 328). Finally, in the realm of military power, Doshi suggests fostering information infrastructure and dispersing American military assets in the Indo-Pacific (p. 324).

8.5.2 *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China* by Hal Brands & Michael Beckley (2022)

Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China (hereafter *Danger Zone*) was written in 2022 by Hal Brands and Michael Beckley. Hal Brands works at the John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies as the Henry A. Kissinger Distinguished Professor focusing on global affairs (John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, n.d.). He also holds the position of a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and is a member of the State Department's Foreign Affairs Policy Board (Ibid.). Previously, Brands has acted as a

Special Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Strategic Planning (Ibid.). Michael Beckley, in turn, works at Tufts University as an Associate Professor of political science (michaelbeckley.org, n.d.). He is also a non-resident Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and holds a position of a director of the Asia Program at the Foreign Policy Research Institute (Ibid). Beckley's work has contributed to the ongoing debate on the Sino-US rivalry with arguments suggesting that rising powers, such as China, remain weaker than the United States (Ibid). The book is published by W.W Norton & Company, an independent, New York-based publishing house owned by its employees (W.W Norton & Company, n.d.). It publishes a range of genres from fiction to non-fiction, textbooks, and poetry (Ibid.).²⁵

In *Danger Zone*, Brands and Beckley set out to challenge the conventional notions according to which the Sino-US competition is a 100-year-long marathon that could last for a century (p. xi). Instead, they argue that the rivalry is more like a decade-long sprint—one in which China is at a disadvantage and therefore needs to act at the most opportune moment to prevent the window of opportunity from closing before it stumbles on its domestic problems such as economic decline and an ageing demographic (Ibid. p. xi–xiv). By presenting these arguments, Brands and Beckley defy the popular realist perception in the study of international relations that traces dangerous conflicts to the rise of a great power that threatens the position of an existing hegemon. Brands and Beckley instead argue:

...some of the bloodiest wars in history have been started not by rising, self-assured powers, but by countries—such as Germany in 1914 or Japan in 1941—that had peaked and begun to decline (Ibid. p. xiii).

Here, the authors view the “exhilarating rise” of a state coupled with “the prospect of a hard fall” as the most risky combination for the international balance of power, one that could potentially spark military confrontation (Ibid. p. xiii). In this summary I first outline *Danger Zone*'s take on China's objectives. After that, I move on to discuss the book's argument about China's decline, its reasons and implications. Finally, I consider the novelty of *Danger Zone*'s thesis and introduce the authors' proposals for a renewed American China-strategy.

In the beginning of *Danger Zone*, Brands and Beckley outline the objectives of the PRC. The authors argue, that the CCP has four main goals: to remain in power (p. 4–5), to regain lost territories (p. 5), to create a regional sphere of influence excluding outside actors (p. 5–6), and

²⁵ Some of the most well-known titles of W.W. Norton & Company include the *Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan (1963), *Guns, Germs, and Steel* by Jared Diamond (1997) and *Astrophysics for People in a Hurry* by Neil deGrasse Tyson (2017) (W.W. Norton & Company, 2025).

to gain global supremacy (p. 6–7). China’s actions, Brands and Beckley maintain, are aligned with these goals: from exercising coercion to achieve its objectives, to initiating the Belt and Road project and pursuing technological supremacy, institutional power, and ideological foothold, China is expanding its influence and moving closer to its ambitions (p. 9–12). Brands and Beckley remark that China’s objectives are in direct contradiction with those of the US: “America simply cannot cease threatening the CCP unless it somehow ceases to be what it is—a liberal democracy concerned with the faith of freedom in the world” (p. 14–15). The authors argue that China perceived the global financial crisis of 2008–2009 as evidence of the US’ decline and saw the post-9/11 wars in the Middle East as a window of opportunity to expand its own influence while Washington’s focus was elsewhere (p. 21). These arguments resemble those made by Doshi in *The Long Game*: all three of the authors view the election of Donald Trump, the United Kingdom’s exit from European Union, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the attack on the US Capitol, as important turning points which China interpreted as weaknesses in the existing, US-led international order (p. 21–22).

Brands and Beckley argue that many of the same assets that helped China’s rise have now become liabilities accelerating its decline (p. 34). For one, a demographic dividend that enhanced China’s economic growth has now turned into an aging society that the country’s working-age population is unable to support (p. 34–36). Additionally, China battles with the scarcity of resources that were unsustainably used during the years of swift economic growth: the devastation of arable land and drinkable water now make China dependent of foreign imports (p. 36–38). The authors furthermore stress that under Xi’s rule, China has moved closer to neo-totalitarianism which in turn has harmed the operation of private firms, discouraged innovation, and increased control over the society (p. 38–40). All of the above have resulted in economic stagnation which hinders the legitimacy of the CCP (p. 38–47). Lastly, Brands and Beckley argue that China’s rise has been enabled by a welcoming international environment which has recently shifted into a more hostile one: China’s maritime disputes, intellectual property theft, and strengthened authoritarianism have fueled its neighbors’ suspicions over the benevolence of the CCP’s intentions (p. 61–62). Brands and Beckley write:

Only by pushing outward can China secure its frontiers, protect its supply lines, and break the bonds a punishing environment imposes. Yet the same impulse will eventually fuel anxieties of other countries, tempting them to combine against Beijing (p. 57–58).

These challenges, the authors argue, have led China to the brink of paranoia where the regime's grip on power extends while tolerance for political dissidents weakens (p. 50).

The central argument of *Danger Zone* suggests that as China's challenges pile up, it becomes more eager to urgently use its current power to shape international order to its liking. In this theory, the declining state's remaining power is viewed as its last resort to leap towards an enhanced international position. Indeed, Brands and Beckley view a major, declining power as more dangerous than a rising one: "It is the resulting fear of decline—not the optimism created by perpetual ascent—that frequently incites risky, belligerent behavior" (p. 80). The authors demonstrate how this theory can be used to understand the war between Sparta and Athens in 431–405 BC (p. 81–83), the behavior of Germany at the brink of World War I (p. 89–96), Imperial Japan's motivations in the second World War (p. 96–104), and the contemporary actions of the PRC. To counter the ever-increasing challenges, Brands and Beckley explain, the PRC has been expanding its economic power, technological know-how, and digital influence, all the while undermining liberal societies and building up its military (p. 106–107). One of the most concerning aspects of China's response to its contemporary challenges is the prospect of violent conflicts: the authors argue that a weakened China is likely to initiate military attack (p. 126). In case of an attack, an anticipated target would be Taiwan (p. 129–137). To summarize, Brands and Beckley argue that "the greatest geopolitical catastrophes occur at the intersection of ambition and desperation" (p. 1). China is hence seen as threatening because of its current position at that intersection.

As a work of China threat literature, *Danger Zone* stands out from its counterparts: instead of painting a gloomy picture of China's accelerating rise, it ends up detailing all of the areas where the PRC is lagging behind or declining after previous growth. Although Brands and Beckley do express serious concern for what they refer to as "digital authoritarianism" and Beijing's support for anti-democratic forces (p. 117–125), the main focus of the book is on the expected downfall of the PRC and its alarming implications. Here, references to China's downfall do not indicate the collapse of the regime: rather the discussion is about China's decreased influence and power in the international system and in relation to other major states, especially the US. In Brands and Beckley's thesis, China's near-future decline is important because it likely affects the state's behavior in the international arena and potentially forces the regime to act urgently to obtain its goals while it is still capable of doing so.

Brands and Beckley strive lessons from American Cold War strategies to formulate a competition-oriented response to the current geopolitical situation. They argue that the US utilized four strategies to overcome the Soviet threat: 1) prioritization of resources, 2) the combination of clear objectives and tactical agility, 3) calculated risk-taking and 3) the building of long-term strategy (p. 143–159). These “danger zone strategies,” Brands and Beckley argue, are useful in the contemporary Sino-US competition. The authors view the following three matters as the most crucial ones to attend to in order to halt China’s rise: China’s attempt to dominate high-tech industries, the spread of digital authoritarianism, and the annexation of Taiwan (p. 161). To solve the first issue (preventing China from dominating critical technologies) Brands and Beckley suggest the US to establish an informal economic alliance to exclude the PRC and encourage American allies to decouple from Chinese technologies (p. 163–164). This strategy would include forging coalitions focusing on specific technologies such as semiconductors and quantum computing (p. 165). The purpose is to outcompete China by offering alternative products and supply chains (p. 169). The strategy to address the issue of digital authoritarianism, in turn, would consist of working together with American allies to hack digital authoritarian systems, hinder the spread of repression-enabling technologies, counter-sanction Beijing, and create an “Internet Freedom League” to bloc illiberal actors from accessing the Internet traffic of states aligning with the principles of freedom and privacy (p. 171–174). Lastly, the authors propose that protecting Taiwan could involve placing military installations on the Taiwan Strait, increasing and dispersing the US military presence in the region, donating military equipment and increasing cooperation with the ROC, disrupting the PRC’ military communications systems, and increasing the network of allies willing to aid the ROC or impose sanctions on the PRC in case of an attack (p. 177–183). In all of the above-mentioned strategies, the authors’ message stresses that “competing with Beijing requires rallying an international alliance of leading democracies” (p. 187).

9 Discussion

In the previous chapter, I introduced the main contents and theses of the China threat bestsellers. Additionally, I demonstrated how the books illustrate the distinct features of the threat categories into which they were distributed. The purpose of this chapter is to widen the scope of the analysis by jointly examining the entire collection of primary sources. Whereas the previous chapter zoomed in to study individual pieces of literature, this section zooms out to discover what the ten bestsellers books together disclose about the understanding of the China threat in the US. I begin the chapter by considering the diversities and similarities in the authors' assessments on the China threat with the help of Chengxin Pan's (2012) theorization on the capability/intention -focused discourses, presented in section 5.1. Next, I introduce two subgenres which emerged from the primary source analysis: popular books and expert manuals. Furthermore, I propose an alternative interpretation for these subgenres, informed by Weiqing Song's three modes of securitization, discussed in section 5.3. Finally, I scrutinize the authors' representation of the China threat by examining the biases in their narratives.

9.1 Capabilities vs. Intentions

The primary source analysis revealed that the portrayal of the China threat depends on the presumed intentions of the PRC. While there is relatively little debate between the authors on whether China poses a challenge regarding international political stability, American economic prosperity, technological superiority, or military competitiveness, there appears to be more dispersion concerning the rationalization of China's objectives. This finding correlates with Chengxin Pan's (2012) division of the China threat discourse into capability and intention -focused paradigms. By conducting narrative analysis and categorizing the primary sources into distinct groups, I was able to observe that the authors share similar ideas on China's growing capabilities in various domains but their assessments on China's intentions vary significantly. For example, in *The Great U.S.-China Tech War*, Gordon Chang discusses the Sino-US competition in the technology sector. According to Chang, the PRC is currently dominating the development of several future technologies. However, Chang perceives China's control of these technologies as threatening because the PRC's technological advancements undermine American ability to win the current Sino-US power struggle. Consequently, American defeat would have important implications for the state of the international order and whether it is led by a liberal or an illiberal state. Most of the books

address issues regarding the technology race between China and the US. However, authors like Chang are concerned that China might use the new technology to grow its influence globally and thus undermine the current world order. In contrast, authors such as Spalding propose that China might deploy advanced technologies to spread authoritarian systems to other countries. Therefore, China's intentions rather than its capabilities, become the defining nominator that sets the threat categories apart from one another.

The authors' understanding of China's intentions often explain why they recommend specific policy approaches for the US to respond to the threat of China. For example, Doshi analyzes the components that make up a hegemon's power to reassert American strength internationally and to dismantle China's ability to catch-up. This is because Doshi approaches the China threat issue from the perspective of power distribution and international relations. Newsham, in turn, suggests educating the American people of the brutalities of communist regimes because for him, the threat of China is closely related to its communist ideology. Interestingly, regardless of how the reasons behind China's strategies are interpreted, the authors sometimes present similar policy recommendations. For example, despite their vastly different narratives, Easton, Newsham, Mosher, Brands, and Beckley all stress the importance of American support for Taiwan in the current Sino-US power struggle. Similarly, many of the authors support containment-oriented policies where tariffs, investment embargos, sanctions, and restrictions are used to challenge the rise of China. Authors including Ward, Newsham, Economy, Brands, and Beckley all emphasize the need for robust alliance networks. However, differing, even contradictory opinions also exist. For example, authors such as Spalding, Newsham, and Ellis praise Trump's economic policies in countering China's growing financial influence while Economy views the Trump administration's decreased commitment to allies, international organizations, and agreements as a hindrance in the American strategy towards China. Moreover, while Ellis and Newsham suggest the US to cut funding for international organizations (which they perceive to be benefiting China), Doshi suggest that the US should instead join Chinese-led institutions and refocus on the existing ones to undermine China's influence. Sometimes both the authors' narratives and their policy recommendations resembled one another. This is especially evident in the works of Spalding and Newsham. For example, the authors' military backgrounds presumably contributed to their proposals on the use of ballistic missiles to achieve deterrence and the maintenance of American nuclear arsenal.

9.2 Subgenres and the Process of Securitization

The primary source analysis revealed that the China threat genre is remarkably vast: although a common denominator—the portrayal of China as a threat—exists, the books’ contents, style, and tone are often markedly different. However, as I analyzed the primary sources, traced reoccurring themes, and considered the authors’ intentions, I was able to identify two distinct subgenres into which the books can be categorized. These are 1) popular books and 2) expert manuals (see Figure 4).²⁶ In this section, I explain how these subgenres differ from one another and describe the common characteristics of the books categorized within them.

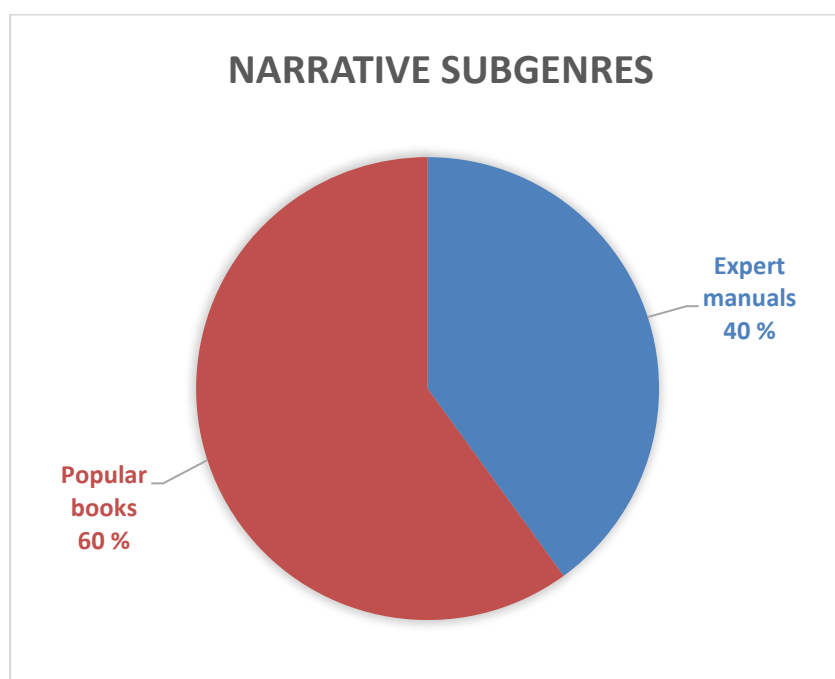


Figure 2. The China threat books based on their narrative subgenres.

A narrow majority of the primary sources (6 out of 10) belong to the popular books -subgenre in the China threat literature. These books are characterized by accessible language, conservative political ideology, and the comprehensive use of historical and personal anecdotes. In the popular books, China is portrayed as a political, ideological, and economic threat. The PRC often becomes described as a hostile or malicious state that jeopardizes political stability internationally and disregards human rights domestically. Overall, books belonging to this subgenre appear to function as cautionary manuals, or even alarmist

²⁶ The purpose of these expressions is not to suggest that the authors of the popular books are not distinguished professionals in their own era of expertise. Rather I use the expressions to highlight that the structure, writing style, and depth of analysis undertaken by the authors were noticeably different between the two subgenres. The authors might have made these choices out of a desire to appeal to a specific target audience such as the general readership, fellow experts, or decision-makers.

pamphlets, targeted for the general readership.²⁷ *Bully of Asia* by Steven Mosher (2017), *China's Vision of Victory* by Jonathan D. T. Ward (2019), *Stealth War* by Robert Spalding (2019), *The Great U.S.-China Tech War* by Gordon G. Chang (2020), *Pandemonium* by Curtis Ellis (2023), and *When China Attacks* by Grant Newsham (2023) all belong to the popular books -subgenre. The authors of these books have either worked in the Trump administration (Spalding and Ellis), hold a position in a conservative think tank (Ward and Newsham), or have been published by a right-leaning or conservative publishing house (Mosher, Chang, Ellis, and Newsham). Interestingly, even the covers of the books resemble each other (see Figure 2): they are mostly red-colored and feature stereotypical representations of China as a malicious dragon or a panda, akin to the imagery used at the time of the Yellow Peril. Ward's book, in turn, depicts the statue of liberty drowning in a sea resembling the flag of the PRC.



Figure 3. The covers of the popular China threat books

²⁷ In the beginning of *Stealth War*, Robert Spalding (2019) explicitly states this by expressing his desire to “alert the world to China’s stealth war and its strategy to dominate the planet” (p. xiii).

Although there are common features between all of the popular books regarding their contents, narratives, and physical appearances, certain books within the subgenre share numerous similarities with one another in a particularly visible way. For example, Mosher's *Bully of Asia* and Ward's *Vision of Victory* are especially similar in their use of China's history and references to past leaders in explaining the PRC's current hegemonic ambitions and rejuvenation attempts. Additionally, Spalding's *Stealth War* and Newsham's *When China Attacks* share several common characteristics. Both of the books adopt a premise that situates China into the realm of hostile, illiberal countries, the values and ideologies of which are in stark contrast with those of the US. While reading Spalding and Newsham's work, it appears that the PRC's maliciousness does not have to be explained (for example, with the help of history as Mosher and Ward do) because it is the general presumption onto which the narratives are constructed. What is noteworthy is that both of the authors have retired from the US military: Newsham served as a colonel in the US Marine while Spalding worked in the US Air Force as a brigadier general. Considering the authors' backgrounds, it appears that the books' contents, style, and tone might have been adopted for purposes of securitization: portraying the China threat as urgent and grave creates demand and builds legitimacy for swift policy responses while the authors' military expertise offers particular authority and credibility for their arguments. Spalding and Newsham's patriotic tone and, at times, informal writing style might also appeal to the general readership who are not too familiar with the topic and wish to read a book that is not overtly complex, and perhaps offers a little entertainment by its alarmist take on China. Alternatively, sensationalizing the China threat discourse by using emotionally-charged language and dramatic book covers can be interpermeated as a marketing strategy. Indeed, Spalding himself remarks that "some cynics will accuse me of being alarmist or sensationalist," and suggests that "these people are afflicted with the same blind spot I once had" (p. xvi). Here Spalding argues that his alarmist tone is not exaggeration but rather a pointed description of reality. Similarly, Newsham (2023) contemplates that his book might be accused of exaggeration:

Do they [the Chinese leadership] really intend to take over the world? Isn't this exaggerated apprehension at best, and an idea bordering on conspiracy theory at worst? Take them at their word. They do. The People's Republic of China may settle for dominance rather than occupation, but it does indeed aim to rule us all (p. 43).

The second subgroup, expert manuals, contains little less than half of the China threat books in my sample (4 out of 10). Included into the subgenre are Ian Easton's (2017) *The Chinese*

Invasion Threat, Rush Doshi's (2021) *The Long Game*, Brands and Beckley's (2022) *Danger Zone*, and Elizabeth E. Economy's (2023) *The World According to China*. These books, as the name of the subgenre suggests, are written by academic professionals: Beckley, Doshi and Economy all are political scientists, while Brands is a foreign policy scholar, and Easton a security policy analyst. The books are characterized by the use of academic principles which contribute to their clear structure, formal writing style, and comprehensive referencing.

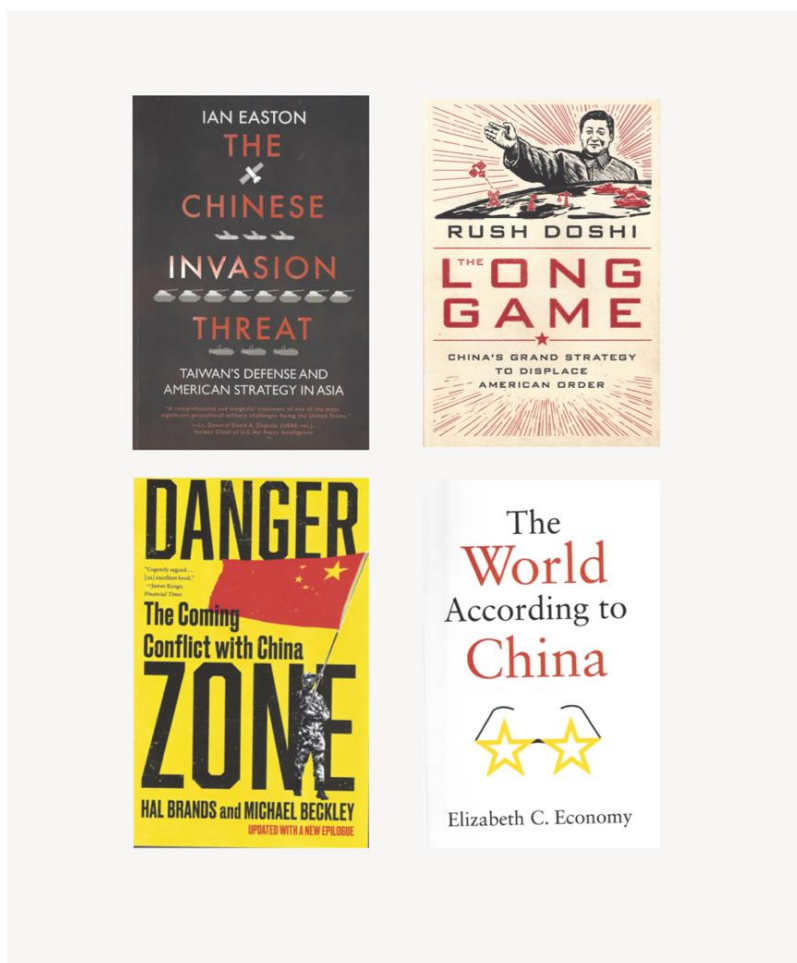


Figure 4. The covers of the expert manuals.

Despite structural similarities, the expert manuals do not share as many common characteristics, including book covers (see Figure 3), as the popular books discussed above. Instead, they each adopt a specific analytical lens through which the China threat is understood: Brands and Beckley propose a theory—heavily informed by the history and dynamics of international relations—according to which a declining power is likely to attempt to overtake an existing hegemon. Doshi, in turn, likens China to a rising power striving toward hegemony while Easton adopts a military-science-informed approach to the issues at the South China Sea. Among the expert manuals, only Economy's book stands out for lacking

a distinct theoretical framework or analytical perspective. Like many authors of the popular books, Economy explores topics ranging from the economy to the Belt and Road Initiative and China's technological advancements. However, unlike the authors of the popular books, Economy also contemplates China's strategic failures and setbacks in trying to realize its ambitions. This sets Economy's work apart from the other books discussing similar topics and contributes to a more balanced take on China's current influence while also avoiding an overly alarmist tone. Overall, in the context of the China threat literature, the expert manuals appear less commercial and more research-focused than their popular counterparts.

It should be noted that these two subgenres are the different poles of the same spectrum. Just like grouping the China threat books into different sets based on their threat category, dividing the books into subgenres can also appear artificial and problematic. This becomes especially clear with the titles that do not appear to belong to the far-end of either the popular books or expert manuals -subgenres. Indeed, some of the books are best positioned somewhere in the middle of that continuum. Jonathan Ward's *China's Vision of Victory* is a good example of such a book. While Ward's narrative shares many similarities with the other titles belonging to the popular books -subgenre, it refrains from their excessive alarmism. Moreover, Ward's use of references is much more comprehensive than that of Spalding and Newsham. Indeed, *China's Vision of Victory* resembles Elizabeth Economy's *The World According to China* in many aspects. Both of the books explore different dimension of Chinese power while also considering China's decades-long aspirations to reunify and rejuvenate the nation. However, Economy's repeated efforts to also introduce China's strategic setbacks and failures contributes to a more balanced and objective narrative. Indeed, in *The Long Game*, Rush Doshi (2021) refers to Ward' book when remarking that many titles exploring China's strategy "come to similar conclusions and get much right, but they are more intuitive than rigorously empirical and could have been more persuasive with a social scientific approach and a richer evidentiary base" (p. 8). Therefore, similarities between the narratives of the China threat books exist, but their use of language, referencing, and academic principles can guide our understanding on which of the two subgenres they belong to.

The two narrative subgenres of the China threat books display similarities to Weiqing Song's three modes of securitization. As discussed in chapter five, Song suggests that the securitization of the China threat issue has been done by deploying either scientific theories, normative analogies, or political myths. Song's categorization parallels with the findings of

this research and offers an alternative lens for the analysis of the China threat books. First, most of the expert manuals correspond with Song's scientific theory mode. Authors such as Doshi and Easton adopt academic principals and analyze primary sources to construct their narratives and make sense of China's behavior either regionally (Easton) or globally (Doshi). Brands and Beckley, in turn, offer a theory that positions China in the realm of declining powers to explain the contemporary China threat. Second, Song's construction of the normative analogy and political myth -modes can be used to understand the differences between the China threat bestsellers placed into the popular books -subgenre. As explained above, the works of Spalding and Newsham differ from the rest of the popular books in their sensationalism, lack of references, and distinct writing styles. Interestingly, these features parallel with Song's definition of the political myth mode in which evoking psychologically intuitive responses from the audience is prioritized over factuality. Similarly, Ellis' emotionally-attuned writing style aligns with the political myth mode. Song's understanding of the normative analogy mode for securitization, in turn, can be used to explain the similarities in Mosher and Ward's narratives. In normative analogy, events of the past and present are inductively connected to securitize China. This method was deployed by Mosher and Ward as both of the authors continually referred to China's history to make sense of its current strategy and to anticipate a future threat.

Song's three modes of securitization offer an alternative tool for analyzing the finding of this research. However, some of the bestsellers do not effortlessly fall into one of the three modes of securitization. For example, although Economy's book shares similarities with the works of Doshi, Easton, Brands, and Beckley, it does not explicitly offer a new theory or analyze primary sources in a way akin to the works of these authors, making its positioning into the scientific theory mode debatable. Similarly, the book by Chang does not clearly illustrate features of any of the three securitization modes. Overall, Song's modes of securitization offers a useful tool for the interpretation of the research findings (see Figure 5). It furthermore reveals that despite the different understandings of China's interests, the authors share one in common: securitization of the China threat.

Figure 5. The China threat books in Weiqing Song's three modes of securitization.

China Threat Books	Scientific theory	Normative analogy	Political myth	None
<i>Bully of Asia</i>		x		
<i>China's Vision of Victory</i>		x		
<i>Danger Zone</i>	x			
<i>Pandemonium</i>			x	
<i>Stealth War</i>			x	
<i>The Chinese Invasion Threat</i>	x			
<i>The Great U.S.-China Tech War</i>				x
<i>The Long Game</i>	x			
<i>The World According to China</i>				x
<i>When China Attacks</i>			x	

9.3 Biases in the Representation of the China Threat

The China threat books analyzed in this research can be scrutinized to observe biased representation of China in favor of the US and its history as a global hegemon. Evidently, criticizing China for its illiberal practices and consistent neglect for international rules and human rights cannot be deemed inappropriate. However, China's efforts to expand its influence are often cited as evidence for the regime's decades, even centuries long strategy to take over the world and subject other countries under its communist or authoritarian/totalitarian rule. Yet many of the strategies used by China temporarily have also been deployed by the US during American ascendance to the superior global position it currently enjoys. Most of the authors discuss China's use of international institutions to further its objectives and dismantle the rules-based order. It should not be overlooked that the US has also operated inside international institutions to promote its own interests, sometimes at the expense of others. Political scientist and editor of *The Great Wall of Money* Jonathan Kushner (2014) observes that "with the end of the Cold War, the United States embarked on a sharp-elbowed enterprise to force other countries to open up and deregulate their own financial sectors" (p. 210). For example, in 1996 the US demanded South Korea to accelerate financial deregulation and allow American companies access to its markets as a condition for entry into the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (Kushner, 2014, p. 211). Moreover, in *Super Imperialism: The Origin and Fundamentals of U.S. World*

Dominance economist Michael Hudson (2003) argues that the operation of institutions such as the IMF and World Bank have been attuned to maintain American political and financial supremacy. According to Hudson “it was recognized that American commercial strength would achieve the government’s underlying objective of turning foreign economies into satellites of the United States” (Ibid. p. 10). Similarly, the PRC’s Belt and Road infrastructure project is discussed widely in the China threat literature, yet the instances of the US deploying infrastructure for expansionist purposes are not considered. Historian Eric Rutkow’s (2019) *The Longest Line on the Map: the United States, the Pan-American Highway, and the Quest to Link the Americas* discusses the US’ involvement in the Pan-American railway and highway projects. According to Rutkow (2020), the US’ efforts to promote the infrastructure projects were related to its expansionist objectives to attain new markets (p. 3). Observing these biases in the representation of the China threat does not indicate that the authors’ assessments on China’s strategy are false. What the representations might indicate instead, is that objective considerations on the similarities between American and Chinese strategies might have been left out to serve the intentions of the narrative. For example, the authors can produce the China threat into a security issue to justify firm policy approaches. Additionally, depicting China as the enemy builds legitimacy for the continuation of American hegemony.

Some of the authors do recognize parallels between the American and Chinese attempts to accumulate power in the international system. Brands and Beckley (2022) discuss the aftermath of the long depression in the 1880s which led the US government to suffocate strikes domestically, impose tariffs, and undertake global expansion by seizing strategic locations in Puerto Rico, Philippines, and the Panama Canal route (p. 85–86). Although Brands and Beckley refer to these incidents as “mild cases of anxious aggrandizement” (p. 86) they nonetheless acknowledge controversies in American history. Similarly, in *The Long Game*, Doshi remarks that “the World Bank and IMF have allowed Washington to push economic norms in line with its interests” (p. 225). Additionally, while discussing the Belt and Road Initiative, Doshi points out that “China is not dissimilar from other great powers that came before it” (p. 246). Indeed, Doshi’s arguments on the rationale behind China’s strategy remain adaptable to any rising power regardless of its ideology. Furthermore, Doshi writes:

For China, and for *most objective observers*, the stakes of the competition have long been clear. US-China competition is primarily a competition over who will lead regional and global order and what kind of order they might create from that position of leadership (Ibid. p. 299–300) [*italics added for emphasis*].

Doshi does anticipate a more coercive, illiberal and authoritarian order as a result of China's rise because domestic and overseas order-building often parallel with one another (Ibid. p. 302). At the same time, he observes that American dominance over the international system, its overseas military bases, and the status of dollar as a reserve currency are not in line with the PRC's interests and remarks that, according to China, the international system is in fact experiencing a liberal bias (Ibid. p. 302).

10 Conclusion

When telling a story, we tend to have a certain message, perhaps a morale that we wish to convey to our audience. The contents of our story are carefully chosen to align with that message. What do we wish to tell? A fairy tale or perhaps a cautionary story? Do we intent to entertain, educate, or inform? Who is the villain of our story? Who become portrayed as the hero? Narratives always serve these specific intentions. Because of this, people and events are portrayed in a manner that supports the type of story that the author wishes to tell. Parts that do not fit the chosen narrative are left out. This is also the case in the China threat literature. Depending on the intentions of the author, the narrative can attempt to offer an informed, research-based perspective to China's rise and its current strategies or it can seek to produce China into a national security issue that demands a hasty response—perhaps both. Narratives are just as plentiful as are the authors' intentions. However, more often than not, the works of China threat literature assume a narrative in which China becomes depicted as the villain in a story taking place in the US-led, rules-based liberal world order.

The purpose of this research was to study how the China threat narrative is produced, structured, and described in American bestselling, non-fiction books. A central conclusion that we can draw from the primary source analysis is that the contents of the narratives were, for the most part, remarkably similar: China is practicing cyber espionage and intellectual property theft to access critical technologies; it is fostering its economic influence through currency manipulation, by limiting foreign companies access to its domestic markets, and by not adhering to the established trade rules; it is spreading its influence through the Belt and Road Initiative, strengthening its political stance by operating in international institutions, and undermining the rules-based, liberal international order all the while expanding its military capabilities and presence abroad. However, the reasons behind China's behavior are interpreted in varying ways—some authors assert that China is embarking on a mission to spread authoritarianism globally, while others view China's actions in the light of international relations theories where expansion of power and influence are the anticipated behavior of rising states, regardless of their ideology.

I have explored the history of Sino-US relations, Western representations of non-white peoples, and theories of international relations to contextualize my research. By exploring the countries bilateral history, we can observe that periods of enmity and partnership have alternated since the countries' first contact with one another. Similarly, American portrayals

of China and the Chinese reflect a fluctuating pattern between positive and negative representations. Studying international relations theories, in turn, allows us to position the current Sino-US rivalry into the context of a rising power attempting to overtake a reigning hegemon. This historical and theoretical framework suggests that the US' political stance towards China and the attitudes of its citizens have often paralleled with the interests of the state. For example, China becomes portrayed favorably when the two countries share an alliance but the images turn hostile again when China threatens the established position of the US. The primary sources analyzed for this research should be understood as a part of this continuum. The 21st century power struggle between China and the US therefore represents another peak in the negative China representation, only this time informed by the changes in the distribution of power among international actors which temporarily contradicts with the interests of the US. Placing the China threat discourse into the context of great power politics contributes to our understanding of why the China threat has become reproduced, amplified, and maintained at a specific time in history. In the present moment, China becomes imagined as a particular type of security threat that creates demand and builds legitimacy for the continuation of American hegemony.

Prospects for additional research are plentiful. The type of China threat, non-fiction books analyzed for this research are published regularly which makes a similar narrative analysis, based on a fresh stack of books, an interesting possibility for future research. An obvious shortcoming of this research has been the lack of Chinese-language sources. Therefore, future research could focus on the representation of the US in Chinese sources. Alternatively, using a similar research method but modifying the data to include sources beyond non-fiction books to assess whether the results and conclusions drawn from this research are applicable to different types of sources (such as TV series, movies, or documentaries) would offer an interesting premise for additional research.

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Appendix 1: List of Books Selected as the Primary Sources

Books Published During the Presidency of Donald Trump (2017–2021)

1. Cordon G. Chang (2020): *The Great U.S-China Tech War*
2. Ian Easton (2017): *The Chinese Invasion Threat: Taiwan's Defense and American Strategy in Asia*
3. Jonathan D. T. Ward (2019): *China's Vision of Victory*
4. Robert Spalding (2019): *Stealth War: How China Took Over While America's Elite Slept*
5. Steven W. Mosher (2017): *Bully of Asia: Why China's Dream Is the New Threat to World Order*

Books Published During the Presidency of Joe Biden (2021–2025)²⁸

6. Curtis Ellis (2023): *Pandemonium: China's Global Strategy to Cripple America*
7. Elizabeth E. Economy (2021): *The World According to China*
8. Grant Newsham (2023): *When China Attacks: A Warning to America*
9. Hal Brands & Michael Beckley (2022): *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China*
10. Rush Doshi (2021): *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*

²⁸ On the day the books were selected Martin Chorzempa's (2022) *The Cashless Revolution: China's Reinvention of Money and the End of America's Domination of Finance and Technology* was also present on the bestseller-list. However, it was not included into this set of data because it didn't feature themes of strategy, conflict or attack in the title or in the synopsis, unlike the rest of the books. Moreover, Jonathan D.T. Ward's (2023) *The Decisive Decade: American Grand Strategy for Triumph Over China* was left out of the data because it focuses more on the American strategy to overcome the challenges posed by China. In addition to that, another book by the same author was already included in the data. Lastly, the Bestseller-list also included promising books that could have been included into the research had they not been published outside of the timeframe of this research. These books were put out during Obama's presidency: *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* by Michale Pillsbury (2016) and *Red Star Over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy* by Toshi Yoshihara and James Holmes (2010).

Appendix 2: The China Threat Books Based on Threat Categories

- **Military threat:** China provokes military or armed conflict regionally or inter-continentially. China hinders American status as a military superpower. China provokes other states to increase their military capability.
 - *The Chinese Invasion Threat*, Ian Easton (2017)
- **Ideological threat:** China spreads communist and/or authoritarian political ideology to other states. China hinders development towards democracy in certain countries. China encourages or stabilizes authoritarian and/or communist ideologies outside its borders.
 - *Stealth War*, Robert Spalding (2019)
 - *When China Attacks*, Grant Newsham (2023)
- **Political threat:** China causes turmoil in international and/or East Asian regional political stability. China jeopardizes political order in liberal and democratic or soon-to-be-liberal/democratic states. China endangers US-led, liberal world order.
 - *Bully of Asia*, Steven Mosher (2017)
 - *China's Vision of Victory*, Jonathan D.T. Ward (2019)
 - *The Great U.S.-China Tech War*, Gordon G. Chang (2020)
 - *The World According to China*, Elizabeth C. Economy (2023)
- **Economic threat:** China takes the US' place as the economic superpower. China develops a global monopoly in certain industrial sectors. China jeopardizes economic stability globally. Inexpensive Chinese labor decreases American jobs as companies move their businesses abroad.
 - *Pandemonium*, Curtis Ellis (2023)
- **Threat to the international system:** China is/will be a threat to the international system because of its role as a rising power. The China threat issue is contextualized within the framework of global politics and explained through theories according to which changes in the international distribution of power lead to instability in the system. The perception of threat is based on theoretical concepts and frameworks that

can be adopted to any other state or international actor in a similar position within the system.

- *The Long Game*, Rush Doshi (2021)
- *Danger Zone*, Hal Brands and Michael Beckley (2022)