Framing China: Discourses of othering in US news and political rhetoric

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Abstract
China has emerged in the early 21st century as arguably the most important partner and rival to the United States. Increasingly, the United States perceives China’s rise on the world stage as a threat to US global hegemony. US national discourse has constructed China, we argue, as a potential enemy Other—an ever-present threat with whom we cautiously partner with. This article situates this flexible construction within the history of Orientalism in US national discourse—China as exotic other, yellow peril, red peril, and little brother—and considers the cultural work that the trope of China as potential enemy other performs to justify US actions to keep China in line. Specifically, the article traces Orientalist tropes that emerge in US political rhetoric and news media pertaining to three areas of significance in US–China relations—China’s national currency valuation, cyber espionage, and maritime disputes in the East China Sea and South China Sea.

Keywords
China, cultural imperialism, discourse analysis, economics, international relations, media, newspapers, political communication, US foreign policy

Introduction
The relationship of the United States and People’s Republic of China (China) is arguably one of the most important in this century. The ability of the United States and China to maintain a cooperative
relationship will shape, to a large extent, outcomes on key global issues such as the stability and growth of the global economy, resource scarcity, climate change, and the nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Since President Nixon’s policy of constructive engagement over four decades ago, the strategic partnership of the two has grown to an extent unimaginable back in 1972. The alignment of strategic interests between the two has led to policies of undeniable mutual benefit to date—on one hand, China’s access to world markets has allowed its economy to grow at impressive rates; on the other hand, this growth has helped to sustain US spending and thus, its maintenance of global hegemony. In recent years, however, sharp disagreements have surfaced on numerous fronts, and the United States has sought to maintain dominance in the partnership. One of the mechanisms that have facilitated this, we argue, is the construction of China via long-standing Orientalist tropes that, at once flexible and durable, are easily mobilized and adapted for strategic political ends. As formulated by foremost scholar Edward Said (2014), depictions of the “Orient” have served as ideological tools aiding empires since the late 18th century—first the British and French, subsequently, the United States. The role of knowledge production in the colonial project, which Said termed “Orientalism,” has relied primarily on producing images of the “Orient” in dualistic terms that serve to affirm Western cultural superiority—for example, in depicting the “Orient” as backward, the West becomes civilized; in casting the former as superstitious, the latter becomes scientific; in describing the former as irrational, the latter becomes rational; in representing the former as archaic, the latter becomes modern; in fashioning the former as evil, the latter becomes good; in painting a picture of the former as violent, the latter becomes peaceful. The affirmation of Western superiority and concomitantly, the cultural and moral inferiority of the “Orient,” have served to justify Western expansion and global control over lands, peoples, and resources.

Western construction of the cultural and moral inferiority of China has had a long history and includes an array of portrayals that can be read in light of specific European and US colonial aims. These include images of China as exotic and immoral in the 1700s, as a cunning and diabolical “Yellow Peril” in the late 1800s, as a freedom-loving and democracy-loving “China Mystique” during World War II, and as an ideological, economic, and military “Red Peril” during the Cold War (Kim, 2010; Leong, 2005). Since the end of the Cold War and the definitive establishment of US global hegemony, China has vacillated in the US imaginary between the latter two positions, viewed at times as a little brother following imperfectly the path toward modernity, at times imperiling the world order (Kim, 2010; Vukovich, 2012). This ambiguity continues to occur through the present day and, in light of China’s rise as a global power since the late 1990s, China is increasingly portrayed, not necessarily an enemy, but always a potential one. This construction of China as a potential enemy Other reflects the relationship of mutual interdependence carefully cultivated by many US administrations at the same time that it functions to justify the paternalistic monitoring and policing of China to ensure that China never overtakes the United States on the world stage. With this frame in mind, we examine the recapitulation of Orientalist tropes in the post-Cold War context, focusing, in particular, on representations and language used in US news media and political rhetoric.

We examine three highly charged economic and security issue areas where the othering of China is perceptible: (1) China’s currency valuation, (2) cyber intrusions that target commercial and military information, and (3) maritime territorial and exclusive economic zone (EEZ) disputes. We focus on three tropes that emerged in our analysis of each of these areas: China as cheat, thief, and lawless bully, respectively. Each trope can be situated in relation to Orientalism, and thereby, we argue, recapitulates (or attempts to recapitulate) US dominance. As these Orientalist tropes are
likely to detract from the ability of the US public to make fair assessments of US China policy, we also counter these Orientalist depictions with a more nuanced picture of China’s policies and actions, in the process demonstrating how one might come to better understand these specific issue areas in the US–China bilateral relationship. Before doing so, we turn to a brief discussion of our data sources and methods.

Sources and methods

Our study draws not only on the theoretical framework of Orientalism but also on the literature that demonstrates the role of images in US policy-making—both to articulate and to generate support for US foreign policy. Most notably, US foreign policy expert Oliver Turner has shown that “American images of China are inextricable from the formulation and enactment of Washington’s foreign policies toward China,” a significant contribution to literatures that provide only materialist accounts of US China policy (2014). For instance, US involvement in the Opium War with China was ostensibly incompatible with its anti-Imperialist identity, which makes a solely materialist account of the policy choice inadequate. Turner argues that policy consensus could only have been reached by a certain representation of China—China was backward and anachronistic, and her people were in need of Western intervention—which helped to justify an Imperialist war (Turner, 2014). Indeed, we follow in the wake of numerous Critical International Relations scholars who, drawing on insights gained through Edward Said’s work on Orientalism, have established the role that othering plays in shaping and justifying US domestic and foreign policies (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; de Buitrago, 2012; Steuter & Wills, 2010; Turner, 2014).

Our analysis focuses on two key sites of US national discourse on China—the news media and political rhetoric (or strategic communicative action that could be taken by a range of actors, including political leaders and pundits, in order to persuade the public on a given political issue) culled from publicly circulated official documents and reported statements from various online media sources. Public statements made by political leaders and official documents were chosen because the political rhetoric employed there shapes public opinion of China, US–China relations and US China policy. The news media was also chosen as a primary site for discourse analysis because it constitutes an important means through which the US public garners information and ideas about US foreign policy. Political rhetoric and news media texts were examined to establish the presence of Orientalist themes identified in the literature, particularly as delineated by Asian American Studies scholars Jodi Kim (2010) and Karen Leong (2005).

We identified Orientalist themes through a preliminary perusal of publicly available official policy documents, statistics, analyses, and recommendations from political and economic think tanks and published academic articles. By triangulating data gathered from these various sources, we identified prominent Orientalist themes within the issue areas of China’s national currency valuation, cyber activities, and maritime disputes in the East China Sea and South China Sea; these characterizations were China as cheat, thief, and lawless bully, respectively. Each theme was a manifestation, we theorize, of the construction of China as potential enemy, drawing on older discourses of China as the Red Peril, and at times even the Yellow Peril, as well as newer discourses of the “sleeping giant”—a post–Cold War version of the “little brother” who threatens to overtake his elder. Our analysis (in subsequent sections) describes in more detail the way that each trope manifests the discourse of Orientalism.

News media texts were selected using progressive theoretical sampling (Altheide, 1996). For our initial search, we selected key terms that we thought would best identify our themes.
Global Media and China 2(3–4)

(noted above) and adjusted accordingly to collect all relevant texts containing Orientalist discourse. The starting point chosen for the initial news media search was 1990, since China’s geopolitical and geoeconomic significance rose significantly with the fall of the Soviet Union. However, many of the significant Orientalist themes emerged well after 1990, as is described in each of the three thematic sections to follow. ProQuest Newsstand, a robust database, was used, and we limited our search to news venues that were of high impact in terms of public circulation (the top five most widely circulated newspapers in the United States are The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, USA Today, and Los Angeles Times, and a focus on these elite newspapers has been a well-established method to identify influential public narratives (see, for example, Merskin, 2004; Steuter & Wills, 2010). In each of the three issue areas, our search yielded approximately 1000 articles; theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990: 188) was reached after examination of approximately 100 articles in each area. Representative texts containing prominent Orientalist themes (ones that emerged with sufficient frequency in these news venues) were then selected for interpretive textual analysis. Political rhetoric within the last 5 years was examined, and we focused particularly on key moments in the electoral cycle, as our preliminary perusal had demonstrated that the polarizing debates of presidential campaigns provided the most fertile conditions for Orientalist tropes on China to emerge. Here, we present representative official statements that cast China in an Orientalist vein.

**China as cheat: currency squabbles**

The merchandise trade deficit that the US maintains with China—which grew to a total of US$365.7 billion in 2015 before falling to US$308.9 billion in 2017—has been a long-standing issue of concern for the United States (United States Census Bureau, 2016, 2017). The trade deficit is often attributed to unfair trade practices and the artificial undervaluation of China’s currency. The United States has registered numerous trade disputes with China over the years via the World Trade Organization (WTO) dispute settlement mechanism with success. Up to 2010, China has, moreover, kept its national currency undervalued to drive exports. This dimension of US–China trade relations is of interest here because China has, since 2005, adopted a more flexible exchange rate regime and gradually revalued the yuan—not least because of political pressure from the United States. Indeed, in May 2015, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) stated that the Chinese yuan was no longer undervalued (The Wall Street Journal, 2015). The Bank for International Settlements (BIS) estimated that the yuan had, in fact, been most recently overvalued about 32% compared to its trading partners, and the most expensive among 60 countries (Forbes, 2015).

US political rhetoric has so far been out of step with these changes and has failed to explain the reasons for which previous motivations to undervalue the yuan no longer hold. In a charged exchange between candidate Mitt Romney and President Obama in the 2012 presidential debate, for example, the former accused the latter for failing to call out China as cheat: “China has been a currency manipulator for years and years and years … and the president has a regular opportunity to label them as a currency manipulator, but refuses to do so” (Paletta & Davis, 2012a). Romney went on to build on this image of China to shore up his credentials: “On day one, I will label China a currency manipulator, which will allow me as president to be able to put in place, if necessary, tariffs where I believe that they are taking unfair advantage of our manufacturers” (Paletta & Davis, 2012b). At the time, the yuan had already increased by 11% since 2008.
The trope of China as cheat can be read in light of historical constructions of China as the Yellow Peril, a notion that continues to shape depictions of the Chinese as cunning, sneaky, and immoral in US political rhetoric today. These stereotypes emerged in the late 1880s to fuel anti-Chinese sentiment, when United Statesians responded to the influx of Chinese labor and settlement as a threat to White wages, White social dominance, and family structure. These depictions helped to justify harsh immigration laws barring Chinese settlement. In the current context, depictions of China reinvoke this older Orientalist trope to paint not only a similarly suspicious figure but also a tenuous economic partner with the potential to turn into the Red Peril that refuses to abide by the rules of the capitalist market.

This was again perceptible when the yuan was devalued by 2.3% to bring it more in line with a market-determined rate in the Fall of 2015 (US Treasury, Oct 2015). That markets and politicians are sensitized to the slightest downward movement in China’s currency value was underlined by the agitation with which Congressional representatives reacted to the devaluation of the yuan. The US Treasury, which played a key role in pressuring China for a market-determined currency, was cautious in its initial response; however, Congressional critics such as Senator Charles Schumer (NY-D) went on the record saying that this move was indicative of China’s attempt to “double down” on currency manipulation and that the yuan “should be barred from consideration as a global reserve currency by the IMF” unless China “stops artificially devaluing” it. Indeed, he is quoted as saying that “China has rigged the rules” for years in “play[ing] games with its currency” (Bradsher, 2015). Furthermore, Republican Senator Rob Portman said that the devaluation was yet another “harsh reminder” that China “refuses to play by the rules” (Portman, 2015). Republican Senator Lindsey Graham joined the chorus by stating that “today’s provocative act by the Chinese government to lower the value of the yuan is just the latest in a long history of cheating” (Graham, 2015).

The timing of the 2015 devaluation of the yuan did palpably advantage China at a time when exports were slowing, but there remains a discrepancy between the depiction of China as cheat and the complex economic reality of today. As growth rates slow and capital outflow takes place, undervaluing the yuan is no longer in China’s best interest. In the longer term, China is also likely to avoid a policy of undervaluation as it attempts to rebalance the economy toward domestic-driven growth, as a stronger Chinese yuan increases the purchasing power of its population. Importantly, its (now successful) bid to have the IMF recognize the yuan as an official reserve currency on par with the US Dollar, Euro, British Pound, and Japanese Yen constrains significant devaluations. In this regard, pro-business newspapers such as The Wall Street Journal have gone some way in providing the counterweight to the image of China as currency manipulator through more objective economic analysis. Yet, conclusions such as “China likely isn’t regressing” suggests that only tentative conclusions are drawn about China’s ability to conform to fair rules of play (“China’s Currency Policies Win Cautious Praise Abroad,” 2015). While some journalists have underlined the economic interdependence between the United States and China (Mallaby, 2005; “Paulson’s China Victory” 2006) and pointed out that China has become a “punching bag” since the 2012 partisan presidential electoral politics (Paletta & Davis, 2012a), space has also been given to presidential hopefuls to perpetuate the image of China as cheat by framing the yuan’s recent downward slide as “foreign currency cheating” (Trump, 2016).

The long-standing Orientalist narrative of China’s cheating behavior, its destabilizing effect on the global rules of the liberal trade regime and the negative impact on US corporate interests and job security, remains easy to invoke after being the predominant theme in US public discourse on US–China economic relations. This narrative helps to bridge the gap between reality and fiction and turns an economic partner into an enemy. Enemy-making in the economic realm is particularly
problematic, moreover, because polls indicate that the US public tends to pay significant attention to the economic relationship with China precisely because it most directly affects them. Gallup’s 2014 annual world affairs poll indicated that more Americans perceive China as an economic threat than a military one, unsurprising since China’s impact on the US job market feels more immediate to Americans than military developments in Asia (see Figure 1).

**China as thief: cyber battles**

The construction of China as potential enemy Other takes on an additional hue when we look at the depictions of China’s cyber activities—China moves from cheat to a more malicious cousin, the thief. The United States first focused on issues of “cyber warfare” in the mid-2000s to late 2000s, but at the time, the trope associated with China was not necessarily that of thief. In the mass news media, a militaristic lens framed much of the discussion, depicting China as a rule breaker flouting international norms and thus posing a security threat. For example, a *Los Angeles Times* article highlighted that “China in the last year has developed ways to infiltrate and manipulate computer networks around the world in what U.S. defense officials conclude is a new and potentially dangerous military capability, according to a Pentagon report” (Barnes, 2008). China is even placed in relation to al-Qaeda: “Cyber-attacks and cyber-espionage pose a greater...
potential danger to U.S. national security than Al Qaeda and other militants that have dominated America’s global focus since Sept. 11, 2001, the nation’s top intelligence officials said Tuesday” (Dilanian, 2013). This juxtaposition with al-Qaeda only served to heighten the military valence of China’s cyber activities, and a push to prepare for such a threat. Indeed, in the words of Senator Bill Nelson (D-FL): “The threat, to be sure, is real—and, we cannot allow ourselves to grow complacent …” (Nelson 2008).

Snowden’s revelations of US spying on China in June of 2013 drastically changed the shape of the discussion however. Snowden demonstrated that the NSA (1) had two data centers in China from which it had been inserting spy software into vulnerable computers; (2) targeted the Chinese University of Hong Kong, public officials, businesses, and students; (3) hacked mobile phones; and (4) in 2009, hacked the Pacnet headquarters in Hong Kong, which runs one of the biggest regional fibre-optic networks. In response to Snowden’s revelations, a spate of articles compared the United States’ and China’s hacking, displaying a range of attitudes from journalists—some espoused that both countries demonstrate equivalent transgressive behavior, while others argued that China has crossed the line into more aggressive hacking that goes beyond the United States’ more benign “preemptive” hacking.

The latter attitude indicates the resilience of tropes of the Yellow and Red Perils, a China whose inherent ideological and cultural differences with the West makes it a threat. The different lenses through which journalists and pundits viewed China’s spying in comparison with that of the United States further invoke this Orientalist demarcation. An article in The Washington Post thus contrasts China’s behavior against that of the United States, which merely seeks “to examine huge amounts of communication metadata around the world to look for trends” and “to preempt some threat against the U.S.” China’s spying is described, however, as “infiltrating almost every powerful institution in Washington, D.C.,” “breaking into major news organizations,” “stealing sensitive military technology,” and “stealing so much intellectual property that China’s hacking has been called the ‘greatest transfer of wealth in history’” (Fisher, 2013). Drawing in particular on incendiary words like “stealing” and “infiltrating,” this article distinguishes China as a sneaky thief.

US journalists and pundits, in charging China with stealing economic resources, have further solidified the demarcation of China as an inferior and dangerous Other. A well-circulated quote by national security pundit Adam Segal stated, “The problem is we’re not talking about the same things … We’re trying to make a distinction between cyber economic espionage and normal political-military espionage. The Chinese don’t make that same distinction” (Bengali & Dilanian, 2015). By portraying China as unable to grasp the fundamental distinction between economics and national security, Segal suggests China’s thievery is connected to a more fundamental character flaw—China is unable to grasp proper civilized norms. Similarly, US official response has been that China’s view of data collection as a sovereign right has rendered them essentially different from the United States and by implication, the civilized world. That Chinese governmental espionage involves the collection of economic intelligence that is shared with Chinese companies further departs from civilized norms. Michael Rogers, Director of the National Security Agency thus explained that “they clearly don’t have the same lines in the sand, if you will, with that regard” (Bennett, 2015).

Historically, US depictions of China as uncivilized have occurred whenever China has gained power or threatened US interests. The narrative of China as a sort of child following in the United States’ footsteps on the path to modernity has proven exceedingly popular since World War II and frames the US approach to China as a potential ally and resource who at the same time may never be civilizable (Kim, 2010; Vukovich, 2012). In this Orientalist narrative, China’s journey to
modernity is always understood as precarious and, moreover, subject to US vigilance as to whether it meets the appropriate benchmarks. The title of an editorial in The Washington Post epitomizes current iterations of this sentiment and the ease with which Orientalist imagery can be invoked to portray China’s path to modernity as needing US guidance when China falls out of line: “The US Needs to Tame the Cyber-Dragon: Stronger Measures are Needed to Block China’s Economic Espionage [emphasis mine]” (“The U.S. Needs to Tame,” 2013). In reality, US vigilance can be attributed to the concern since the end of the Cold War, that a “sleeping giant” able to challenge US global hegemony is awakening (Kim, 2010).

Thus, the cultural work done by portrayals of China as unable to adhere to civilized norms serve to bolster the image of China as perpetually unprepared to be a responsible member of the international community. In fact, this narrative of China’s thievery serves to persuade the American public that China is a threat to the international community. One Wall Street Journal journalist perfectly echoes this sentiment:

A China that leads the world in the theft of intellectual property, computer hacking and resource nationalism will prove extremely destabilizing. If it continues on this course, Beijing should not be surprised if other countries begin to band together to collectively counter some of the more harmful implications of China’s rise. A better outcome for all will be for China to embrace its responsibilities to help lead the world … (Metz, 2011)

This article, although hopeful that China may at some future point become a responsible global actor, even leader, ultimately reifies the notion that an increase in China’s global power is always suspect.

China as lawless bully: maritime disputes

To cheat and thief, we can layer the trope of lawlessness, readily employed in media representations and political rhetoric over maritime territorial and EEZ disputes involving China and its neighbors in the Western Pacific. China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea are largely historical in nature and do encroach on the 200 nautical miles EEZ of neighboring countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) does not expressly prohibit land reclamation in the sea as long as due notice is given to other concerned states and due regard to the rights of other states (Art. 60.3, 56.2, and 56.3) is taken into account, while the obligation to protect and preserve the marine environment is observed (Art. 192). Parties to a dispute are also obligated to refrain from acting in a manner that would jeopardize or hamper a final agreement resolving the dispute (Art. 74.3 and 83.3). The frantic building of artificial islands to enhance the legality of China’s claims, unilateral installations, and skirmishes in the disputed areas are thus amenable to interpretation as lawless bullying. An editorial in the Wall Street Journal titled “Calling Out China’s Lawlessness; The US Points Out that Beijing’s Claims to the South China Sea Don’t Stand Up,” describes the “sketchy legality of its [Beijing’s] actions” and claims that “China is changing the status quo in the South China Sea with force and the threat of force” (“Calling Out,” 2014). This characterization in the media is consistent with political rhetoric. US Secretary of State John Kerry was reported to have said in May 2014 that China’s “introduction of an oil rig and numerous government vessels in waters disputed with Vietnam was provocative” (Ives & Fuller, 2014). Eliot Engel of the House of Representatives
Foreign Affairs Committee framed China’s actions in skirmishes with Vietnam as “needless provocations” (Engel, 2014).

At the same time, media representations and political rhetoric have tended to obscure the fact that China’s regional neighbors all built airstrips and outposts on the claimed islands long before China ever did. China also displays inconsistent behavior in that it has reached agreements with Vietnam in the Gulf of Tonkin and South Korea in the Yellow Sea to divide fisheries equally and carry out joint enforcement patrols in keeping with international law. Indeed, China has in land disputes signed “fair and balanced” treaties with 13 out of 14 neighbors in keeping with international legal principles (Kraska, 2015). These instances have not, however, drawn any significant media attention. Instead, the emphasis on China’s non-compliance with international law in the South China Sea disputes has served to recapitulate China in Orientalist terms as uncivilized and, moreover, as a fully awakened “sleeping giant” that bullies its neighbors and is unsuited to replace the US as regional leader.

US political rhetoric and media representation has also obscured the vagueness of international law when applied to the East China Sea dispute as it would be inconsistent with the image of China as a lawless bully in the South China Sea. The UNCLOS appears to have a straightforward framework that gives states maritime jurisdiction over resources 200 nautical miles from their coastal baseline, but it says nothing about how overlapping maritime jurisdictions are to be resolved. In the case of the East China Sea, the area of dispute is only 360 miles across at its widest point. At the heart of the territorial dispute between China and Japan is the “territorial acquisition” of the Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands, but there is no convention on how states acquire sovereignty over disputed territories. The flexibility of applicable principles in international customary law have instead allowed both China and Japan to invoke the law to justify their claims to sovereignty (Ramos-Mrosovsky, 2008). China’s refusal to have the dispute adjudicated by an international body reflects the unpredictability of outcomes and not necessarily China’s lawlessness, especially when viewed, in light of a similar disinterest on the part of the Japanese.

The essentialization of China as lawless, despite the malleability of international law and dissimilar behavior in other disputes, has the potential to drive a wedge between China and her neighbors, thus “containing” China’s growing influence in the region. Indeed, the depiction of China as a lawless bully plays up the insecurities of its immediate—and in many cases, much weaker—neighbors, whose heavy reliance on international law to constrain hegemonic behavior is palpable. The breaking of norms has been identified as a crucial signal that heightens threat perception (Farnham, 2003). In the context of long-standing maritime territorial disputes, playing up an image of China as a lawless bully also suggests that the United States continues to be a necessary power broker in the region. The notion that there is an overbearing bully in the neighborhood that could care less about the rules of the game returns the United States to the role of protector in the post–Cold War period—its ostensible “manifest destiny.”

Since the late 1990s, titles such as “Spratly Spat Heats up over Chinese ‘Bullying’” (Lamb, 1998) or “Asian Nations Support US Silently” (Wiseman, 2001) demonstrate how constructing China as a lawless bully serves to reinforce this purpose. Indeed, a recent editorial in The Wall Street Journal makes this link explicit in the text:

Washington’s hesitant response has allowed controversy to build around freedom-of-navigation missions that should be routine. Beijing’s strategy in the South China Sea is to bully its neighbors and achieve regional hegemony through coercive means short of war. Turning peaceful naval patrols into diplomatic hot potatoes is exactly the sort of change Beijing seeks. (“A 12-Mile,” 2015)
Here, China’s behavior is portrayed as incorrigibly belligerent, in distinct contrast to genteel US diplomacy. One Wall Street Journal article makes this point clear in its title alone: “Chinese Diplomacy Off Course; By Overreaching in the South China Sea, Beijing has Drawn the US Irrevocably into the Debate” (Wain, 2000). This article embodies the dominant narrative that assumes implicitly the rightful role of the United States to dole out proper diplomacy and take on any transgressors to maintain world peace. A Wall Street Journal article describing China’s “increasingly powerful—but highly opaque—military and its more assertive stance [towards the South China Sea]” emphasize China’s military as an inherent threat to world order but construct the US military according to a different standard, again assuming the righteousness of US military intervention (Page, 2011).

In this regard, it is important to note that US grand strategy consists of preventing the development of any regional power capable of obstructing US access to Eurasia—where most of the world’s resources and economic activity are located. This long-term security goal has informed the Obama administration’s much-touted Pacific Pivot policy, which many have viewed as a “China containment policy.” A Congressional Report notes that although U.S. policymakers have not often stated this key national strategic goal explicitly in public, U.S. military (and diplomatic) operations in recent decades—both wartime operations and day-to-day operations—can be viewed as having been carried out in no small part in support of this key goal. (O’Rourke, 2014)

China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea cover about 90% of the area that could potentially allow China to deny the United States such access. As China continues with the modernization of its naval and air capabilities, US apprehension has increased that the disputed land features in the South China Sea are being used to bolster military and coast guard forces that can monitor and respond to the activities of US allies, deny the US navy access to these waters, and ultimately check US naval dominance in the region.

It is for this reason that the United States has insisted on freedom of navigation and innocent passage—protected by UNCLOS—through these contested waters, although tensions with China have ratcheted up considerably as a result. As direct conflict between the United States and China has become a real possibility, and as the United States has not ratified the UNCLOS, the United States has attempted to base its actions on firm legal principles, and in turn, to frame China’s behavior in the region as lawlessness. Through US portrayals of China as a lawless bully, China incurs reputational costs in the global and regional community that have the potential to exert pressure on China to stand down. The guided-missile destroyer USS Lassen was thus sent in October 2015 on a “freedom of navigation” patrol within 12 nautical miles of islands artificially built by China in the Spratly chain, which the United States insists is in compliance with international law.5 The United States revealed this aim in another dispute on whether China has an international legal right to regulate foreign military actors operating within China’s 200-nautical-mile EEZ. The United States’ view, which China disagrees with, is that China has a right to restrict military and surveillance activities only within 12 nautical miles of its territorial waters. Tensions reached new heights when China announced in November 2013 an East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) that not only covered her territorial waters but extended into its EEZ and thus, the contested areas in the East China Sea. US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel responded in a press statement that “We view this development as a destabilizing attempt to alter the status quo in the region. This unilateral action increases the risk of misunderstanding and
miscalculations,” yet the United States followed shortly by flying two B-52 bombers through the zone (Harlan, 2013).

Certainly, there have been media analyses that characterize China’s behavior as motivated by normal national self-interest or that point out that US actions to curtail China are “hypocritical” and “hegemonic” (see, for example, Denyer, 2015; Wu, 2005). However, many more choose to reprise long-standing debates about whether China is a military threat or not, with titles such as “US Starting to View China as Potential Enemy” (Mann, 1995) and “Weakening Yet Still Aggressive, China Poses Test for U.S. Presidential Candidates” (Sanger, 2015). None take seriously China’s claims that its actions in the region have been defensive in nature. Even with a wide range of opinions on the matter, by focusing on the issue of China’s military buildup, these news articles only serve to heighten this perceived threat by inferring threatening intent from growing military capabilities.

Political rhetoric tends to contain far less ambiguity, however, some even going so far as to suggest that the United States has been unnecessarily patient toward China. Senator John McCain (2016), Chairman of the Committee of Armed Services, thus commended and encouraged the continuance of the freedom-of-navigation operation of October 2015, adding that “this decision is long overdue.” In a keynote speech delivered at the Fourth Annual CSIS South China Sea Conference in 2014, Representative Mike Rogers (R-MI), Chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence further advised that the United States should stop being “def-erential” to China’s “naked aggression” as it continues to “bully” and “intimidate” its neighbors. Indeed, political rhetoric appears to take China’s image as lawless to its logical conclusion—China as the full-fledged threat to regional stability legitimizes any force that the United States might be compelled to take in the future to contain such a threat. Unpacking the great power rivalry in the maritime disputes thus helps us to understand the cultural work that the trope of lawless bully does to bolster the long-term security objectives of the United States in the region.

Conclusion

Peter Hays Gries once suggested that the way Americans view China is most likely motivated by “cold calculations of their own self-interest … intertwined with deep-seated ‘gut feelings’ about China” (Hays Gries, 2006, p. 209). And while we “frequently infer Chinese intentions from Chinese capabilities,” admitting to these features in US policy is something that we are often unwilling to do (Gries, 2006). China has, since the end of the Cold War, occupied a space in the US imaginary as the potential enemy Other, and the areas of contention highlighted above have become ample context for the reification of negative images of China as an imminent source of threat. These images have been drawn from older tropes of the Yellow and Red Perils and also newer incarnations of the “sleeping” or “awakened” giant. As previous work has shown, such tropes have the ability to do the cultural work that shapes and justifies US policies (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; de Buitrago, 2012; Steuter & Wills, 2010; Turner, 2014). In the present moment, negative images of China have enabled the justification of an increasingly hardline approach to China. The latest National Security Strategy articulated by the Trump administration has unequivocally named China a challenger to “American power, influence and interests” who has attempted to “erode American security and prosperity” (Landler & Sanger, 2017; U.S. White House Office, 2017), and the United States’ hardline tack toward China has been further reflected in the areas of contention in the US–China Comprehensive Dialogue.
We have aimed to interrupt post–Cold War representations of China as a potential enemy. Other that encourage a reductive attitude toward a “rising China.” We have been particularly concerned with how this may disable the US public from fairly evaluating China’s actions as a rising power, as well as the US government’s policies toward China. Indeed, if China is essentially a lawless bully, a thief, and a cheat incapable of learning international norms of acceptable behavior, what options besides the exercise of hard power does the United States have to meet its long-term security objectives? A treatise on the aims and modes of US national security is beyond the scope of this article, but we hope to at least foreground the way othering frames the “truths” about China, so that the wider public may view US China policy with a more critical filter. The ability of the US public to do so could become increasingly important—diversionary wars have been used as a tactic to shore up public support for unpopular leaders threatened by domestic discontent, after all (Sobek, 2007). Although China’s longtime position has been to maintain a strong partnership with the US based on mutual interest, benefit, and respect, it is imperative that the US public understands when US policy encourages China to retreat from that position, and the potential that holds for conflict.

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Notes
1. China is the largest foreign holder of US Treasury securities (US$1.26 trillion as of September 2015).
2. Search terms in relation to China’s currency policy: (trade OR currency) AND China AND (US or United States) AND (cheat* OR “by rules”). Search terms in relation to China’s cyber intrusions: cyber AND China AND (US OR United States) AND (offensive OR threat OR hacking). Search terms in relation to maritime territorial disputes: “South china sea” AND threat.
3. See Note 2.
4. Under United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), islands generate the same maritime jurisdictional zones as mainland territories as long as they are not rocks which cannot sustain human habitation or economic life of their own.
5. Under the UNCLOS, a state’s territorial waters, over which it has sovereign rights, extends to 12 nautical miles from the coastal baseline. The exclusive economic zone (EEZ), within which a state has rights to exploit resources, extends beyond this to no more than 200 nautical miles from the coastal baseline. Under UNCLOS, artificial islands do not extend the territorial waters or EEZ of a state.
6. For videos of these statements, see http://csis.org/event/recent-trends-south-china-sea-and-us-policy.

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