China’s “peaceful rise/peaceful development”: A case study of media frames of the rise of China

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Abstract
This study examines English language legacy print media coverage of the rise of China. A critical analysis reveals that China is often cast as a threat to global peace and stability in news stories that focus on the pace of China’s economic development and military expansion. At the same time, much of this coverage also frames the United States as a superpower in decline. Many news articles describe the situation through the historical metaphor of “Thucydides trap”, a narrative frame that may serve to intensify tensions and increase the risk of conflict. While Beijing has sought to improve the country’s image abroad and to win greater support for its positions, this study found that the news narratives in English language publications might spark anxiety about China and its global ambitions.

Keywords
A rising China, China threat, peaceful development, peaceful rise, the Thucydides trap

The rapid economic rise of China has provoked a significant media interest in the problem of the transition of power between existing hegemons and aspiring powers. These media stories often pose questions regarding whether or not the emergence of China as a great power might challenge the United States, and possibly even alter the Westphalian system. This article argues that although a newly powerful China has an understandable desire to assert its influence and advance its strategic interests, it also has a strong stake in maintaining regional stability and developing cooperative relations in world affairs. In searching for a new equilibrium, however, China’s government must reconcile its need to manage and placate the interests of both domestic and international audiences as it clarifies its foreign policy intentions in speeches, through diplomatic actions, and as it shapes...
its public diplomacy narratives through media. In exploring China’s future, therefore, national and international variables should be taken into account. Whether the world accepts China’s view of its “peaceful development” or takes a more hardline and “realist” view of a “China threat” will determine how China engages with the other nations of the world.

China’s future growth is a very important issue for the world in the 21st century. Susan L. Shirk (2007), a scholar of international relations, argues that China is “stronger militarily and more secure internationally than it has been since the nineteenth century, but paradoxically, its communist leaders have a deep sense of domestic insecurity” (p. 6). She points to internal developments that might derail China’s rise on the world stage and entail unplanned wars in the regional sphere. Against her pessimistic view, another scholar, Zhiqin Zhu (2006), claims that a peaceful transition will occur when there are positive evaluations of the bilateral relationship by governments, the public and elites in the United States and China, operating within an open international system. This study explores how the rise of China has been reported by selected English language print media, for such media coverage will play a significant role in shaping public attitudes and ultimately governmental policies and diplomacy.

Over the past decade, China’s rise as an economic power and its increased investments in its military capabilities has increased the maritime tensions sharply in the South and the East China Seas. Three big players in the region, China, Japan, and the United States, have failed to resolve several sensitive territorial disputes, resulting in destabilizing changes in the regional balance of power. Naturally, these disputes have received significant media attention. To one degree or another, the news narratives reflect the concern of China’s neighbors in a media frame that may implicitly accuse Beijing of “flexing its muscles” and warn the world of the challenge and the risks of failing to learn from the lessons of history.

Henry Kissinger (2014), the former National Security Advisor and Secretary of State, discussed the dangers inherent in global power shifts:

> Potential tensions between an established and a rising power are not new. Inevitably, the rising power impinges on some spheres heretofore treated as the exclusive preserve of the established power. By the same token, the rising power suspects that its rival may seek to quash its growth before it is too late. A Harvard study has shown that in fifteen cases in history where a rising and an established power interacted, ten ended in war. (p. 228)

While advising Beijing and Washington on how to avoid conflict, Kissinger observed that China interprets the US military efforts in Asia not as the United States hedging against possible future Chinese actions, but rather as attempts by the United States to contain China. On the other hand, Kissinger acknowledges that the United States is afraid that China will systematically undermine the US presence in the region, and thus its security. Graham Allison (2013) points out that “China’s extraordinary rise and the discombobulation this inevitably poses to America (which has come to believe that it is naturally No. 1) constitute a historic challenge.” As an exemplar of the consequences that arise out of instability and security conflicts, the historian’s metaphor “Thucydides’ trap” reminds the world of the historical narrative of the Peloponnesian war wherein the growth of Athenian power necessarily engendered fear and insecurity in Sparta, compelling Sparta to initiate a war (Monten, 2006, p. 9).

As 2014 marked the one-hundredth anniversary of the beginning of the First World War, it seems especially appropriate for the world to return to that theme—“the rise of a risky rivalry”. In 1914, the world saw a similar confrontation between a ruling imperial power, Britain, and a rapidly rising
and developing power, Germany. On 22 January 2014, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Japan’s premier, Shinzo Abe, compared the heightened tensions in East Asia to the great power rivalry before the outbreak of World War I. Observing that “the increasing tensions between China and Japan were similar to the competition between Germany and Britain before World War I” (Perlezjan, 2014, p. A8). Several news outlets picked up on this theme and also framed the US–China relationship as a strategic rivalry between an emerging and an established power (“The Centenary Delusion”, 2015, p. 22; Perlezjan, 2014, p. A8; Rachman, 2014). China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi immediately responded in a Financial Times interview, criticizing Prime Minister Abe for “total disorder of time and space”. He further accused Japan of seeking to revive its militarist past (L. Zhang, 2014a, 2014b). Neither country could win this war of words. The “Thucydides trap” analogy suggests that the situation today is essentially the same as when the rise of Germany challenged imperial Britain. The danger is that the China–Germany parallel may shape public understanding and reveal individual, even societal, thought patterns that suggest war is inevitable.

It is worth noting that the metaphor, “Thucydides trap”, did not appear in media coverage in Japan, yet while the metaphor itself was not used, Prime Minister Abe’s statements were reported in the news coverage of the five Japanese national daily papers (Asahi, Yomiuri, Nikkei, Mainichi, and Sankei). Abe’s reference to 1914 emphasized the direct threat to Japan posed by China’s rise. Even with the absence of the explicit metaphor, the historical analogy had persuasive power. In fact, both Japanese and English-language periodicals in Japan expressed significant anxiety in recurring discussions of Chinese economic growth and increased military capabilities, especially regarding the rising tensions between China and Japan over the disputed “remote islands” (Denyer, 2014).

This study also explores how the diplomatic relations between China, Japan, and the United States are described in the news coverage of China’s rise. The study examines such leading English-language publications as The Christian Science Monitor, Los Angeles Times, New York Times, Washington Post, Economist, Financial Times, Guardian, and the Times (London). In order to explicate how Japanese and Chinese English-language papers recall similar threats of a rising power to an established power as a “trap”, it also takes into account the English-language editions of the Japan News, Japan Times, China Daily, Global Times, and the South China Morning Post. This study focuses on these English-language Asian newspapers because it is likely that English-speaking readers eager to learn how Japanese and Chinese governments or citizens were gaining and delivering information about China’s rise would turn to these outlets to supplement their Western news sources. This study discovers that while Beijing has sought to improve the country’s image abroad and to win over international public opinion to its position, media coverage in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan continues to frame China’s future negatively, frequently casting China as a threat to global peace and security.

The power of a historical analogy

Walter Fisher (1984) argued that humans are by nature storytellers and that they come to understand the world around them through narratives. Naturally these narratives draw upon the experiences of history in order to make sense of the current moment. There are also conventions of storytelling that shape the production, consumption, and understanding of competing narratives. Thus, for example, the news media makes use of comparisons to shape public evaluations, expectations, and predictions because this helps audiences to perceive and make sense of the world around them. The conventional, repetitive, and incidental patterns are likely to play on the appeal of an
associative structure (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, pp. 193–195, 350–410, and 411–450). In other words, the frames of media narratives can be examined from associative structures (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Richards, 1963, pp. 89–138). The structure can be also examined to determine how the audience will respond and whether the patterns are familiar and likely to lead them to an appropriate conclusion (Westen, 2007, pp. 94–97).

It is also through the principle of “terministic perfection” that images of political issues reach political solutions. According to Kenneth Burke (1966), the principle of “terministic perfection” is implicit in any symbolic action, which provides “a kind of ‘terministic compulsion’ to carry out the implications of one’s terminology” (p. 19). In the present example, if one describes the emergence of China in the analogy of “Thucydides trap” (rapidly rising powers, fearful ruling powers, and their tangle of alliances), that term “compels” the speaker to prescribe a solution compatible with the description. In other words, if audiences know the analogies with which a problem is described, they may be able to predict the nature of a solution even before they figure it out. In Burke’s (1966) words, “Every writer has some … favorite images … that are analogous to a psychological tic” (p. 101).

Just as ideas like global flows and the World Wide Web are images of interconnectedness, globalization makes our world seem to be smaller and more homogeneous (Harvey, 1989). An additional factor in the globalization of news has been the rise of English-language newspapers. Information flows between cultures through news agencies are not merely “translated” across linguistic borders, but reshaped, edited, synthesized, and transformed for the appeal of “facts”. Here, the question of global information flows is linked to the ways in which the media constitutes a news event (Bielsa & Bassnett, 2009). Even as global communication networks are acknowledged as vital to world economic development, however, there are signs of a revival of local interests, most notably through the proliferation of new nationalisms and regional conflicts. The current situation in Asia indeed reflects the new era in that a number of unresolved regional conflicts are now seen to have global implications.

Analyzing the frames of framing a rising China

The following analysis of the eight United States and British newspapers explores how China’s position on its rise and its attempts to seek recognition for its economic growth was cast as world disorder, how Japan’s distrust of a more powerful China and Japan’s looking to the United States for support were covered, and how the US view of China as a threat, but attempting to play down the threat was captured in their news coverage. Examining the ways in which those three actors were framed in the English-language media coverage will lead to a suggestion of how the United States, Japan, and China are clearly given their say within the borders of an issue.

A “peaceful rise of China”

China’s rapid economic and political development invites the interest and attention of the world. China enjoys the advantage of a massive population and an array of cultural resources including arts, literature, music, and philosophy. In spite of its economic and cultural power, however, the Chinese government, which has long prioritized domestic politics to diplomacy, at last realizes that it is unable to control the way in which the country is portrayed in the Western media. By accepting the fact that the world’s news is expressed within the framework of Western concepts and
ideologies and dominated by the English-speaking media, on 19 March 2004, Beijing established a new Division for Public Diplomacy under the Information Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At that time, this office was set-up more for managing the website and other coordination work. In releasing the news of this creation, Chinese assistant Foreign Minister Shen Guofang defined public diplomacy as “a very important field in diplomatic work” (Y. Wang, 2008, p. 260).

Zheng Bijian, a former vice-chair of the elite Central Party School, first introduced the theory of *jueqi*, that literally means “emerging precipitously in a peaceful way” at the Forum for Asia in Boao, a Davos-style World Economic Forum in 2003 (Chung, 2009, p. 6). After two years, the 9 July 2005 *Financial Times* article quoted his explanation about the Orwellian-sounding “peaceful rise of China”, designed to counter the talk of “China threat” and the US strategy of encircling China, as follows:

First, he calls for a national transcendence of old-style industrialization and a move to “high technology input, economic efficiency, low consumption of resources, low pollution to the environment, and full play of our advantage in human resources.” [sic] Second, transcending the old development strategies of rising powers, “China will not take the road of Germany in the first world war, or Germany and Japan in the second world war—using violence to pillage resources and seek world hegemony.” Third, China would “go beyond outdated social management modes” to develop a better balance between the rich and poor, and economic and social development in Chinese society. (Leonard, 2005, p. 16)

Consisting of three plans, the “peaceful rise” strategy was intended to counter the US strategy of containing China by deepening bilateral security relationships with Asia-Pacific powers. Turning the tables on those who expressed the “China threat theory”, Beijing emphasized that China would integrate with status quo powers, rather than challenge them through war or other means. After the official adoption of Zheng’s idea, however, the “term ‘peaceful rise’ has been quietly dropped, following bureaucratic in-fighting in the Communist party, and has been replaced with ‘peaceful development’ or ‘peaceful co-existence’” (Leonard, 2005, p. 16).

In an attempt to get the world to accept its rising power, China has sought to tell its stories through global media outlets. The public diplomacy goal has been to frame international public impressions through the deliberate selection of words or images that minimize the perception of the “China threat”. Nevertheless, Yiwei Wang (2008) noted the paradoxical relationship between others’ perceptions of a China threat and China’s own perception of China’s strength: “When China is weak and split, American’s [sic] China image usually is quite positive; when China gets strong and begins to have the potential to develop externally, American’s [sic] China image tends to be negative” (p. 268). Hence, Beijing uses public diplomacy to create a balance between Chinese and Western concepts.

“China’s peaceful rise” foreign policy initiative was announced during a period of relative decline in the US prestige and power in Asia (Chow, 2013, p. 4). On his tour of Southeast Asia, then Chinese President Hu Jintao introduced this new foreign policy to Asia by saying “We’re here to help”. His message sharply contrasted with the confrontational message offered by then President George W Bush following the 11 September 2001 attacks, “You’re either with us or against us”, in the war on terror (Radtke, 2003, p. 9). Hu called for a “positive, cooperative and comprehensive relationship” (Clinton, 2014, p. 73). In fact, Hu even agreed that the military-to-military relationship with the United States needed to be strengthened, and proposed a “strategic dialogue” to help the two countries better understand each other’s military intentions and programs (Gates, 2014, p. 195; See also Sanger, 2011, p. WK1). Strengthening regional engagement, Beijing intended to
reduce the deep apprehensions about China that were held by many of its Asian neighbors who were also competing for their share of global trade and investments. In a favorite official phrase, a “win-win” prospect, Chinese policy-makers reiterated the original formulation of China’s future, “peaceful rise”:

… the central goal of China’s diplomacy is to create a peaceful and stable international environment for its development. China could become strong in the future. Yet peace will remain critical for its development, and China has no reason to deviate from the path of peaceful development. (Ford, 2011)

With its call for a “constructive and creative approach to deepen mutual trust, expand cooperation, and properly handle differences” (“China, US should ensure”, 2016), Beijing delivered the key message that China did not intend to challenge the international order and that its rise would contribute to world peace. Despite such efforts, however, public audiences in the West witnessed the publication of new books with titles such as *Death by China* and *When China Rules the World*. These books demonstrated a deep-seated anxiety in the West that a rising China would inevitably challenge the United States and result in military confrontation (Ford, 2011).

After nearly a decade of describing its foreign policy as its commitment to “peaceful rise/peaceful development” in Asia (Phillips, 2015; Y. Zhang, 2015, p. 20), China has been in many ways a more confident nation since 2008:

China overtook Germany and Japan to become the world’s second largest economy; in terms of purchasing power parity, it has now passed the US. It grabbed the most golds at the 2008 Olympics, and opened scores of new airports, hundreds of museums and 7,500 miles of high-speed train track. Tycoon Wang Jianlin became the owner of the world’s largest cinema chain by acquiring 5,000 screens in the US. Internet firm Alibaba held the largest ever global IPO. Chinese firms took stakes in Thames Water, Heathrow Airport and Weetabix. (Branigan, 2015)

In advancing toward becoming the second-largest economy in the world, China became increasingly assertive in the international realm. Since the 1990s, China, the United States and other regional actors have deepened economic interdependence and increased multilateral diplomacy. Despite such interconnectedness, however, media outlets in the West continued to report that the increase in Chinese power represented a long-term danger to the national security, and economic interests of the United States and its allies (Calmes, 2011, p. A6; Christensen, 2006, pp. 103, 110; Dong, Kapp, & Loeffke, 2014). For example, the media emphasized that as Beijing asserted its maritime claims in the Asia-Pacific region more aggressively it contributed to rising tensions between the region’s two largest economies (Cheow, 2005; Clinton, 2014, pp. 74–75).

In recent years, China has demonstrated its growing power and ambitions. For example, Wu Jianmin, at the time an advisor to the Foreign Ministry, declared, “We’d like to be an equal partner on the world stage, and we want the Chinese people to enjoy prosperity” (Ford, 2011). President Xi Jinping has more frankly admitted that China intended to play a major role in Asia. One media report cited President Xi as he described China’s motivations:

China fully understands that we need a peaceful and stable internal and external environment to develop ourselves. We all need to work together to avoid the Thucydides trap—destructive tensions between an emerging power and established powers … Our aim is to foster a new model of major country relations. (Valencia, 2014b, p. 11)
The English-language media reported that China’s “assertiveness has pushed several South-East Asian countries closer to America, lending justification for the American ‘pivot’ to Asia. Countries alarmed at Chinese assertiveness have rushed to buy military equipment” (“Asian security”, 2015, p. 22). Such political and even military moves suggested that “America’s sea power … remains supreme—but no longer unchallenged” (“Sea power”, 2015, p. 56).

In reporting that emphasized that the expansion of Beijing’s political, diplomatic, and military might constitute a “China threat”, the English-language media implicitly or explicitly warned China that it could undermine the current friendly geopolitical environment through its rise as a sea power (“Sea power”, 2015, p. 57; Y. Wang, 2015, p. 9). In contrast, the Chinese English-language newspaper the Global Times reported that “China’s proactive actions to guard its territorial security have been misinterpreted as ‘being assertive’” (Li, 2014). In another Global Times column Chenghao Sun (2015) opined that “the ‘Thucydides’s Trap’ puts too much blame on the threat of the rising country, missing the possibility that the established country could be more comfortable in launching a preemptive war”. Most news outlets in the West conceded that war over the territorial disputes in the South China and East China Seas was unlikely, but that the tensions between China and its neighbors remained (“Sea power”, 2015, p. 58; Tisdall, 2014, p. 12). Mark Valencia (2014a) argued that “China and the US are already ‘clashing’—over regional dominance and political influence as well as interpretations or reinterpretations of the world order and international law. But a full-blown conflict is hardly written in stone” (p. 12). Here, “the expansion of Beijing’s political, diplomatic and military might have set alarm bells” warning that “the talk is not so much about how to ‘contain’ China … as how to appease it” (Tisdall, 2014, p. 12). “These cries for regional peace are getting louder as Asia perceives a weakening US role in the world and a stronger military presence by China” (“Editorial: Next up”, 2015).

In an attempt to mitigate these anxieties, President Obama “tried to allay concerns among allies about Washington’s security commitments in the region—without antagonizing Beijing. In a sense, Obama appeared to be making it clear that the United States would not risk jeopardizing its relations with China” (“Opinion”, 2014). Lee Kuan Yew, the late Singapore statesman, once said that “competition is inevitable between China and the US, but conflict is not” (Leung, 2014, p. 15). Hollihan (2014) argued that

the United States, if it wishes to preserve its role as a source of stability and as a hegemonic power in the region, must redefine its relationship with both China and Japan … and must also continue to press the point that it sees a strong China as a source of stability in the region. (p. 253)

Beijing has emphasized that it is not seeking dominance, but respect. At his summit with President Obama in June 2013, President Xi proposed a “new” type of “major power” relationship in order not to fall into the vicious circle of the China–US mistrust and rivalry. The concept of “great power relations” raised by Xi also shows China’s desire to be treated on equal terms as a great power.

**A “new type of great-power relationship”**

The Western media coverage acknowledged that both Obama and Xi have attempted to improve relations between their two countries. Exploring what Xi meant when he called for a “new type of great-power relationship” with the United States, Obama acknowledged that “inevitably there are areas of tension between our countries but
We also have a whole range of challenges on which we have to cooperate. … [we seek] an international economic order where nations are playing by the same rules, where trade is free and fair and where the United States and China work together to address issues like cybersecurity and protection of intellectual property. (Rucker & Nakashima, 2013, p. A9)

In contrast to the preceding leaders who had avoided using the phrase “great power” in official statements (Chow, 2013, p. 4), Xi reflected China’s increasing sense of its global power when he raise the question “How can our two nations join together to promote peace and development in the world?” (Calmes & Myers, 2013, p. A5).

Despite the improvement of the US–China bilateral ties, the Japanese English-language media coverage emphasized the uncertainties and even possible dangers that China’s rise represented to Japan. For example, one story claimed that “China has cherished its historically dominant position in Asia”, has long viewed itself as the indispensable center of Asian political and cultural identity, indeed as “the Middle Kingdom”, and thus “Beijing may seek to re-establish itself as regional hegemon” (Watanabe, 2008). Acknowledging the economic interdependence required in the age of globalization, the Japan Times suggested that “the Chinese leadership … will continue to take an assertive diplomatic posture to play to the growing nationalist sentiments of the Chinese public, they will also need to prioritize economic growth—and thereby seek stable international relations” (Kitazume, 2013). At a symposium in Tokyo, China watcher Tsugami also claimed that “China’s diplomatic outlook as an aggressive power intent on military buildup may in fact be a reflection of its internal fragility”, and then warned that the “very problem lies in the way Japanese people view China—and the way China issues are portrayed in the Japanese media” and “[a]n excessive focus on security issues in viewing the relations with China … could lead Japan—as well as China—to lose sight of their true national interests” (Kitazume, 2013).

A more wealthy, confident, and assertive China, a rising China makes a shrinking Japan uncomfortable. After the long bubble economy slide that began in 1986, and lingered until 1991, Japan lost its self-confidence. To a certain extent, the economic decline that eventually allowed China to surpass Japan and become the world’s second largest economy in 2010 resulted in a restive electorate giving Shinzo Abe a second chance to be premier and allowed him to call for an expanded military role for the Japanese “Self-Defense Force”. At the end of congressional debates, Prime Minister Abe began emphasizing this military’s expansive new role as a necessary rebalancing of power in a region bristling with nuclear weapons, such as in North Korea, and aggressive claims to remote islands” (“Editorial: Next up”, 2015). Abe’s indirect references to the “China threat” thus emphasized how the security environment had been altered due to China’s increased economic and military potential (Blair, 2015).

Acknowledging China as “a critical country not just to the region, but to the world” (“Opinion”, 2014), English-language media informed Western readers that China’s rise had provoked other nations to respond to counterbalance China’s rising influence. According to a survey published by the Pew Research Center, 8 out of the 11 Asian countries “see America as their greatest ally. (The exceptions, besides China itself, are Malaysia and Pakistan.)” (“Asian fears”, 2014, p. 28). Moreover, “[w]orldwide, one-half of Pew’s sample thought China is already or will one day be the world’s leading power. Only a diehard 32% believed that China would never replace America in that role” (“Asian fears”, 2014, p. 28).

The shifting power relationships in the Asia-Pacific region have impacted the role that the United States plays in its postwar commitment to the region (“Sea power”, 2015, pp. 56–58).
These tensions are especially evident in Western news coverage over the island disputes. For example, an article in the *Economist* described China’s “aggressive expansionism” and asserted that as a result China had become “even more isolated” (“Whose splendid”, 2015, p. 20). The same article continued,

America and its friends in Asia line up to criticise China for its alleged transgressions in the seas around its coast; China issues fierce, mendacious and unconvincing rebuttals … Last year, China’s crimes were its declaration of an Air-Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over an area including islands it disputes with Japan; and its dispatch of an oil-rig to drill in waters claimed by Vietnam. The row was vitriolic. This year, it has been building frantically in contested waters in the South China Sea. (“Whose splendid”, 2015, p. 20)

While media coverage in the West emphasizes that actions by China have increased tensions in the region, the same coverage tends to report that the United States takes no position on who owns what and merely wishes to preserve the right of free navigation by both air and sea.

A significant gap in media reporting is apparent. While President Xi Jinping emphasizes China’s “peaceful rise” and the pursuit of a new “great-power relationship”, that entails a more inclusive way to conduct diplomacy with small countries as well as great powers, the English-language media frequently mentions that China’s neighbors and the United States are deeply concerned about the increased risks of conflict. Gideon Rachman (2013a) points out Washington’s anxiety “that a government in Tokyo could drag them into a war with China” (p. 7). An *Economist* article titled “The perils of candour” (2014) emphasizes that “[a]ccommodating a rising China gets harder and harder”:

In November 2013 China unilaterally declared an Air-Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea. … Then, in May, China moved a massive oil rig, accompanied by a large flotilla, to drill in waters seen by Vietnam as part of its Exclusive Economic Zone; it started construction work at a shoal elsewhere in the South China Sea claimed by the Philippines; and it flew fighter jets dangerously close to Japanese surveillance planes near the Senkakus. (p. 28)

Just as the Athenian historian concluded that “what made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta”, the US fear of the growth of China might make war inevitable (Fackler, 2012, p. A1). President Xi acknowledged the power of the metaphorical frame of “Thucydides trap” when he addressed the 2015 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Manila. Xi declared “we all need to work together to avoid the Thucydides trap—destructive tensions between an emerging power and established powers” (Murphy, 2015). Despite these remarks, however, the *Christian Science Monitor* reported that Xi Jinping’s “Asia for Asians” security framework was intended to exclude the United States (Ford, 2015).

*The regional balance of power*

While China’s rise was made possible by globalization, other nations around the world were attempting to determine how to best integrate China into the international community in order to maintain the existing world order. On the foundation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in
1949, the Chinese Communist Party elite largely decided by consensus to close China in order to avert social instability. Deng Xiaoping seized on the precarious circumstances in the late 1970s to launch economic reforms and opened China to promote its development. China is now expected to become a responsible stakeholder in the international system. Nevertheless, the Chinese government has claimed, “foreign policy must be an extension of domestic policy and that diplomacy should serve domestic politics” (Y. Wang, 2008, p. 260). At the same time, just as the United States claimed an Asia-Pacific presence due to its defeat of Japan, China also claimed a right to regional leadership due to its role in that conflict—a “crucial role in confronting Asia’s monstrously aggressive imperial power” (“Xi’s history”, 2015, p. 11). President Xi, for example, pointedly noted that China was a “victor nation in World War II” (“China’s Xi”, 2015, p. 6).

As games like the Prisoner’s Dilemma demonstrate, the pursuit of individually rational choices can result in collectively unexpected outcomes. In the British news coverage, Mark Leonard (2004) uses an analogy to suggest a strategy for the West to accommodate China’s peaceful rise: “When a speeding freight train is heading towards you, you either get on board or you get out of the way. We want to get on board” (p. 22). As an example, the noted “soft power” theorist Joseph Nye (2011) also argues that the continuing rise of Chinese power can work to the advantage of the US. In fact, China’s rise as a sea power has driven its neighbors to rely more than ever on the US military forces to maintain the rules-based world order and the freedom of the seas (“America in Asia”, 2014, pp. 24–25). While feeling the threat of losing its own 70-year-old imperium in East Asia, on one hand, the United States reflects on Mahan’s (1898) writing: “Control of the sea by maritime commerce and naval supremacy, means predominant influence in the world; because, however great the wealth product of the land, nothing facilitates the necessary exchanges as does the sea” (p. 124). Many news stories in the West emphasized that the United States is obliged to challenge China’s territorial claims in the East and South China Seas, and that to fail to test them could lead to an escalation of provocative acts.4 Such coverage notes that Washington has played a substantial role in preventing antagonisms in East Asia from developing into war, and that it must stand strong to prevent future conflicts (“The decline”, 2014, pp. 31–34; “What would”, 2014, p. 9; see also “America’s foreign policy”, 2013, pp. 7–8). The Christian Science Monitor sought to allay anxieties about conflict in the region, however, when it coached both the United States and China to emphasize regional stability. In an editorial, the article urged that “China seek cooperative relationships with its neighbors” (“Editorial: Next up”, 2015).

Since it opened to the West, China has achieved significant economic growth and enhanced its global standing without moving to embrace liberal democracy. In so doing China has held on to “the China model”—in which authoritarian one-party rule is … justified because it produces the social order and wise leadership that get economic growth” (“Unnatural”, 2015, p. 37; see also Carrico, 2012). According to Guangbin Yang (2014), however, “[d]emocratic centralism is the core mechanism of the China model, the key to the China miracle … compared with other major developing countries” (p. 10). As China’s national strength grows, the Global Times has encouraged a “prediction that economic interdependence and shared international obligation can prevent the ‘Thucydides Trap’ from happening” (Liu, 2014). Yet the same news media also criticizes that “Washington has been stepping up efforts to encircle China in the Asia-Pacific region through its alliance and partnership system” (Liu, 2014; see also Shi, 2014). An English-language edition of the China Daily also emphasized that China and the United States both need to build “a new model for relations between major powers—a model that features coordination and cooperation instead of rivalry and confrontation” (“China, US can avoid”, 2013).
In highlighting a “new model of major country relationship with the United States that features non-conflict, non-confrontation, mutual respect and win-win cooperation” in China’s foreign policy (“Full text”, 2015), President Xi has argued that China sought “not leadership, but mutual respect”, specifically “the acknowledgement by the US that it is a great power” (Y. Wang, 2014, p. 8). For the future trajectory of such “a ‘cross-civilizational’ partnership” (Gardels, 2014), the “new type of major power relationship that China and the US want to build has no textbook to use or precedents to follow. Meanwhile, the two countries have to solve problems with pragmatic and foresighted attitudes” (Zhao, 2015). Garlick (2015) warned that the “Thucydides Trap” was “a self-fulfilling prophecy rather than a real testable theory”. Tan Su (2016) turned the tables on those who spoke of the trap and argued that “avoiding the trap is not merely the business of China. It requires the US and other countries to not be bound by the theory and not take inappropriate actions” (see also “Thucydides Trap not etched”, 2015). In fact, the “differences between China and the US mostly relate to sovereignty issues. They are politically sensitive and offer limited room for compromise”, and thus “China and the US can narrow their differences if they handle the regional disputes properly; otherwise, these issues may also lead to conflict” (“Sino-US relations”, 2015). In China’s perspective, thus the US “pivot to Asia” foreign policy took advantage of China’s territorial disputes with its neighbors and constituted “meddling in China’s internal affairs” (Liang, 2015).

Media coverage in Western English-language news outlets frequently emphasized what was at stake in the region. For example, the *Economist* explained,

What makes China’s rise as a sea power troubling for the countries that rely on America to maintain the rules-based international order and the freedom of the seas are its behavior and where it lies. The Indian Ocean, South China Sea and East China Sea are vital transit routes for the world economy. Eight out of ten of the world’s busiest container ports are in the region. Two-thirds of the world’s oil shipments travel across the Indian Ocean on their way to the Pacific, with 15m barrels passing through the Malacca Strait daily. Almost 30% of maritime trade goes across the South China Sea, $1.2 trillion of which is bound for America. That sea accounts for over 10% of world fisheries production and is thought to have oil and natural-gas deposits beneath its floor. (“Sea power”, 2015, p. 57)

These Western media outlets also noted that China sought to use its vast currency reserves to enhance its strategic and diplomatic power. The recently created Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) was explained as China’s attempt to challenge the influence of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, both of which had largely been controlled by the United States (see Holtz, 2016). The *China Daily* essentially confirmed these sentiments in reports that protested Washington’s unsuccessful efforts to discourage its close allies from accepting Beijing’s invitation to join the new Chinese bank (Yang, 2015, p. 9). President Obama was quoted as wondering as to whether the new development bank was more about expanding China’s regional influence than it was about founding a financial institution. Obama was also quoted as committed to the belief “that the Asia-Pacific region is absolutely critical to America’s economic growth” (Calmes, 2011, p. A6; Calmes & Myers, 2013, p. A5). Obama’s commitments to the region were also expressed in his remarks on the importance of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a new Asia-focused trade initiative intended to prevent China from “writing the rules in the fast-growing [Asia-Pacific] market” in which the United States might be locked out (“Editorial: A deal”, 2015, p. A14; “Seventy years”, 2015, p. 2).
The media coverage in these outlets also noted that it was in the interest of both the United States and China to avoid disruptive conflicts. For example, an American diplomat quoted about the outcome of the first Obama–Xi Summit held at Sunnylands and declared,

… both leaders have recognized that there is a danger that a rising power and an established power could come into conflict at some point, and that to avoid … this trap of rivalry … it’s important to put in place … patterns of interaction between the two, bilateral mechanisms that allow them to deal with the greatest sources of instability and competition that could take this relationship down the pathway toward rivalry. (Cited by LaFranchi, 2013)

While the English-language media reports favorably and sympathetically about the US commitments, engagements, and diplomatic objectives in the region, however, this same reporting is often less sympathetic to China’s actions and goals. For example, such coverage may accuse China of inconsistency, such as the declarations in a New York Times essay that “there are two Chinas on the world stage. One has 19th century notions of sovereignty and historical destiny. The other embraces 21st century notions of global integration” (Kahn, 2005, p. 1).

The New York Times also wrote that China’s neighbors wanted the assistance of the United States: “[s]maller Asian nations, [specifically, Vietnam and the Philippines] fearful of China’s rising economic and military strength, have welcomed Mr. Obama’s signals of greater engagement in their region as a counterbalance to China” (Calmes, 2011, p. A6). Other articles also report that “[m]any countries in the region … alarmed by what they see as an assertive, bullying China … welcome America’s military might, and its willingness to project it across Asia” (“The 70-year”, 2015, p. 23; “The world”, 2014, p. 30). Washington explained its “pivot to the Pacific”—a term later abandoned in favor of “rebalance”—as an effort “to reassert America as a Pacific power without sparking an unnecessary confrontation with China”. It further declared that its goal was “to promote political reform as well as economic growth” (Clinton, 2014, pp. 46, 60). On the other hand, the US “rebalance” was taken as “encirclement” and “containment” by Beijing.

Writing for the Guardian, Simon Tisdall (2014) observed that “nobody is talking openly about a third world war [between China and the West] not yet at least, but he also noted that the “lack of a regional security organization, the absence of a hotline between Beijing and Tokyo, and the menace represented by the nuclear-armed, Chinese-backed regime in North Korea” all represented “the dangers of the current situation” (p. 12). An essay in the Economist emphasized the urgency of the current conditions in Asia:

For all the alarmist commentary in the international press, it still seems incredible that China’s tiffs with its neighbours about mainly tiny, uninhabited rocks in the South and East China Seas might lead to conflict. But a survey published this week by the Pew Research Centre, an American polling organization, suggests that many of the people most directly affected, those living in Asia, fear just that. (“Asian fears”, 2014, p. 28)

President Obama declared in his State of Union Address before the United States Congress in 2014 that he intended to continue to press Beijing to follow international rules: “We will continue to focus on the Asia-Pacific, where we support our allies [and] shape a future of greater security and prosperity” (Obama, 2014). Insisting that the disputes over sovereignty claims should be resolved through international arbitration rather than force, he also repeated similar messages like “Our goal is not to counter China. Our goal is not to contain China” and “We have strong relations with China” (“Opinion”, 2014). Thus, Obama emphasized that US allies in Asia could be assured that the US security commitment to the region remained and that no country would be able to change relations in the region through coercion or intimidation.
Consequences and conclusion

Despite Beijing’s public diplomacy efforts to offer conciliatory messages to assuage international public opinion, fairly or not, it seems that a significant portion of coverage in the English-language media outlets analyzed in this study, served to increase anxieties about China’s economic growth and military expansion. In addition, as Wen Wang (2015) noted that “China’s political system and human rights were always raised by the US before high-level visits or dialogues”, such news media frequently focused on China’s human rights violations and cast China as a disruptive power that threatened to upset the global order and potentially destabilize the region and the global economy. Typical of such coverage was the question posed in the Christian Science Monitor: “Can China really want to overturn the US-led post–World War II international order—the very system that has allowed the country to flourish so remarkably?” (Ford, 2011). The same writer emphasized that China’s official phrase “peaceful rise/peaceful development” should be seen as a way to create a “win-win” outcome against the backdrop of ever-deepening economic globalization and interdependence. Taking into consideration China’s rise on the current global order, the legitimacy of China’s non-alignment policy, and China’s strategy to deal with its maritime geopolitics, an article in the Global Times said,

The existence of US influence is beneficial to China, and there is great potential for bilateral cooperation. Many political scientists would like to see the future Sino-US relationship as a competitive one. It is true in a way. But both sides must be reminded that too much competition will finally lead to a confrontation, and such a consequence is independent from the will of both nations. (“Scholar offers”, 2014)

In recent years, China has restructured its relations with the world. Nevertheless, it still confronts serious challenges in its attempts to improve how it is understood around the world as evidenced from the media coverage considered in this study. As already noted, media stories that emphasize a lack of human rights, democracy, press freedoms, and transparency in governance seem to place China at odds with most other developed nations (“Unnatural”, 2015, p. 37). Most of the reporting in these outlets casts China as a disruptive power that that is causing the disturbance in the global order, and this disturbance not surprisingly threatens others (Ching, 2013, p. 11). Such reporting often cites China’s assertive attitudes in its territorial disputes as having increased tensions between Beijing and Washington, and as also increasing the chance that the United States could be pulled into a conflict between China and Japan (“Sea power”, 2015, pp. 56–58; Tisdall, 2014, p. 12; “The U.S. balancing”, 2014).

While the United States, under President Obama, has sought to allay anxieties in the region by pledging to “rebalance” its foreign policy and shift more military resources to Asia, in China this is characterized as an effort to contain China and thwart its rise (Harner, 2013; Mufson & Nakamura, 2015, p. A3). Beijing also bristles at the notion that it should play by existing rules. As the Financial Times noted,

The US policy remains that China should become a “responsible stakeholder” in the current global system. In other words, the rise of China will be just fine so long as it plays by the established rules. China’s response, however, is that these rules were established during a period of US hegemony. In Beijing’s view, the system needs to change to acknowledge the rise of China. (Rachman, 2013b, p. 9)

In fact,
China faces uncertainties in its diplomacy. Its relations with the United States and some neighboring states are “locked” in strategic competition, territorial and other maritime disputes. … It is urgent for China to turn more neighbors into friends, partners, even allies. (Shi, 2014)

Overall, the world needs to build a more balanced and fair international political and economic order that promotes common development.

The critical analysis of media coverage shows public understandings are shaped at least in part by these media narratives. These conflicts are socially constructed and require a focus on how state identities, alliances, and strategic theories are rhetorically framed within existing structures (Desch, 1998). Instigated by political actors, the flare up of confrontations over the territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas was previously a regional, but is now a global, media construction. Thus, how the conflict is framed will have impact beyond the region and will become an international concern.

Differences in political systems, cultural traditions, and stages of development can easily contribute to misunderstanding. In an article of the Financial Times, Stanley Lubman argued that China and the United States are essentially engaged in a “clash of exceptionalism” (Anderlini, 2014, p. 12). Concerned with how they are perceived by their domestic audiences, he concludes that the two countries basically avoided facing the most important question “how will China and the US divide up the responsibilities in the Asia-Pacific region, what role will each side play and how willing are they really to co-operate?” (Anderlini, 2014, p. 12). Likewise, Gardels (2014) pointed out that “unlike the trans-Atlantic order now receding, which was bound together by common cultural and political foundations, the US and China come from very different civilization roots. A ‘cross-civilizational’ partnership is unprecedented.”

The world is keen to speculate on China’s future because China’s rapid ascent is without historical parallel. Naturally this rise has been somewhat unsettling. Ulrich Beck introduced the concept of a “world risk society”, and argued that “threats create society, and global threats create global society” (Beck, 2000, p. 38; see also Beck, 1986). In the current globalized world, it is no longer possible for any political regime to create alternative messages for different audiences (Riley & Hollihan, 2012). We are living in the age of a global information war—a struggle over encoding and decoding—no matter what public diplomacy is pursued (Manheim, 1994). Political communication in the world of international relations has become what Joseph Nye (2008) calls “a contest of competitive credibility” (p. 100). This study demonstrated that China–US relations have been framed through historical analogies. Although such analogies might be useful in helping audiences understand the present, they also may act as blinders that prevent them from seeing alternative and more desirable and sustainable futures. Francis Fukuyama has urged greater efforts to “incorporate China in a series of international organizations, norms and institutions in a [sic] hope that in the long run, China will buy into those standards and organizations” (“YIES/Fukuyama”, 2007, p. 1). Such a strategy will more likely assure greater stability and shared understanding in global affairs and as a result may permit nations to spend more of their resources on improving the living standards of their populations and confronting shared and wicked problems such as climate change and less on their military forces.

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Notes

1. It is worth noting that the media coverage of China was uneven. The most thorough and consistent coverage was offered by only a handful of media outlets and reporters. Thus, influential reporters came to have influence on the media frames that may have reached beyond the readership of their own publication because they also shaped the media agenda.

2. The South China Morning Post was recently sold to Alibaba group, a mainland technology company. It is, however, a Hong Kong based English-language newspaper. At the moment at least, its editorial policies are substantially different and it enjoys more independence than newspapers published in the People’s Republic of China under an arrangement known as “one country, two systems”. Moreover, Zhou (2015) has argued that Hong Kong functions as a “communication channel for China and the US to forge mutual political understanding” (p. 8). In contrast, both the China Daily established in 1981, the widest circulation of English-language newspaper in mainland China, and an English-language version of the Global Times launched in 2009, strongly focus on a broad, international audience by translating major Chinese newspaper articles in their editorials.

3. This study runs the keyword “Thucydides trap & China” search mainly on the basis of LexisNexis academic database archive except in the case of the Economist, where the author uses its own proprietary digital archive to search the news content. The “Thucydides trap” first appears in a 2009 Financial Times article. By 28 November 2015, among the eight United States and British newspapers, the “trap” metaphor appeared in the China Daily (twice in 2013, four times in 2014, and 25 times in 2015), Christian Science Monitor (once in 2015), Global Times (once in 2013, eight times in 2014, and 11 times in 2015), Los Angeles Times (0), New York Times (once in each year from 2011 to 2014), Washington Post (once in 2015), Economist (twice in 2015), Financial Times (once in 2009 and 2012, and twice in 2014), Guardian (once in 2015), and the South China Morning Post (three times in 2014 and once in 2015).

4. As the American naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan (1890) observed, the “history of sea power is largely, though by no means solely, a narrative of contests between nations, of mutual rivalries, of violence frequently culminating in war” (p. 1).

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