Fear the fear: the historical analogies of COVID-19 in US–China relations

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Abstract
The impacts of the novel coronavirus (hereafter COVID-19) pose one of the greatest crises of our generation. The policy decisions that the US and Chinese governments take will shape the current order of international relations, the global supply chain of medical supplies, and US–China relations. The COVID-19 crisis leads to the empirical puzzles: how do the two great world powers construct their narratives on the global pandemic and toward each other? What are the meanings, if any, of fear in US–China relations? This study explores the narrative of fear that is constituted in the US and China discourse. The historical analogies, such as the Boxer Indemnity, sick man of Asia, and Pearl Harbor attack, offer great examples to the political construction of the “fearful” other through specific representations amid the outbreak of COVID-19. Specifically, they have become the “cultural scripts” that define how they interact and who they are. The article proceeds as follows. First, this study examines the current literature of realism, constructivism, and discourse analysis. Second, it proposes a comparative framework for understanding the expressions of fear and threat perceptions for both countries. Specifically, the “Pearl Harbor Moment” from the US, and “the Boxer Indemnity” from the Chinese government substantially shape the landscape of US–China relations. Third, it highlights how the political elites appropriate these historical analogies in constructing their political identities and offers insights into the future of US–China relations. Finally, this article concludes with thoughts on the studies on the struggle of great powers and implications for pandemic politics.

Keywords Fear · Discourse analysis · Pandemic · US–China relations

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It was under the compulsion of circumstances that we were driven at first to advance our empire to its present state, influenced chiefly by fear, then by honor, and lastly by self-interest.

Thucydides

**Introduction**

The novel coronavirus (hereafter COVID-19 or pandemic) has not only brought about challenges for global public health, but has also significantly altered our modern lifestyles. Prior to the global pandemic, US–China relations were considered to be at their lowest, with political friction resulting from unfair trade practices, the governance over Hong Kong, and the maritime disputes in the South China Sea. The policy decisions that the US and Chinese governments take in the next few years will shape the current and future order of international relations, the global supply chain of medical supplies, and US–China relations. The COVID-19 crisis and the possible shift in the world order lead to some empirical puzzles: how do two great world powers construct their narratives on the global pandemic and toward each other? What are the meanings, if any, of fear in US–China relations?

In a top-level meeting between the USA and China held in Alaska in March 2021, Yang Jiechi, a member of the Political Bureau of China, openly asked that “the United States stop its interference in China’s internal affairs,” and avoid confrontation in US–China relations.1 Right after Yang’s assertive statement, China’s state-run media posted a collage made up of a picture of the Alaska meeting and the Qing dynasty signing the Boxer Protocol in 1901.2 This image reminded the general public of both the bitter memory when China was weak and suffered from unequal treaties, and a sense of pride that a stronger China can advance its national interests. Such comparisons point to the essential role of analogy in political discourse.

Based on official statements, media coverage, and policy reports from both sides, this article proposes a constructivist approach to identifying the emotion of fear inherent in American and Chinese discourse on COVID-19. Specifically, it points out that what they fear and how the government officials express their fears is constitutive of US and China identities in their great power relations.3 The case studies from both countries unpack the mechanism through which the power of fear operates and the constraints it places on Chinese and American foreign policies.

In the Peloponnesian War, the Greek historian Thucydides indicated that the fear of the change of power distribution was the driving factor for the war between Athens and Sparta.4 In the twenty-first century, how do China and the USA navigate their relations as a rising power and a current hegemon in a world gripped by the

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1 “Senior Chinese official tells US to stop interference, avoid confrontation,” March 19th, 2021.
2 “China marks 120-year comeback with fireworks in Alaska” Nikkei Asia, March 21st, 2021.
3 Sparks et al. (2001).
4 Melian Dialogue, the History of the Peloponnesian War, BOOK I. lxv. 3-Lxxvi. 2.
impacts of a pandemic? Answering this puzzle requires drawing on non-material forms of power and paying careful attention to the discourse between these two countries.

An in-depth analysis of fear may lead to a deeper understanding of foreign discourse and great power politics. More importantly, such an analysis takes the emotion of fear seriously in its own right in US–China relations. The empirical sections address how political actors talk about the global pandemic and how they apply framing strategies when confronting fear in their bilateral relations.

For example, several state governments and private firms in the USA have filed lawsuits against the Chinese government, demanding significant compensation for China’s missteps in handling the pandemic crisis.\(^5\) Missouri Attorney General Eric Schmitt claimed that, “the Chinese Communist Party is liable for an appalling campaign of deceit, concealment, misfeasance, and inaction by Chinese authorities that unleashed the pandemic.”\(^6\) Such legal measures reminded many in China of the bitter memories of the Boxer Rebellion, in which the Qing dynasty surrendered its sovereign control to the Western powers. Meanwhile, President Trump explicitly claimed that in the history of the USA, the outbreak of the virus was worse than Pearl Harbor and the terrorist attacks of 9/11. His statements blur the distinction between China and the virus itself, insinuating that they both pose security threats to US national interests.

This study contributes to the study of international relations (IR) in three ways. First, it engages the IR theory of realism and constructivism, and argues that the dynamics of Sino–US relations cannot be fully captured without a deeper understanding of analogies. Second, it explores the construction of fear that constitutes the US and China discourse. The analogies, such as the Boxer Indemnity, the sick man of Asia, and the attack on Pearl Harbor, offer great insights into the political construction of the “fearful” other through specific representations amid the outbreak of COVID-19. Finally, it offers a new way to consider the connections between IR theories, studies on emotions, and discourse analysis.

The top leadership from both sides has developed a narrative of fear, and analogies are often applied to express this emotion that is difficult to articulate. More specifically, the association between international lawsuits and the Boxer Protocol in the Chinese discourse, and the comparison between the attack on Pearl Harbor and China’s handling of COVID-19 in US official statements present two case studies in this article. Their rhetoric of fear certainly has encouraged stronger allegiance from the public, as people need greater solidarity during the pandemic. Nevertheless, such constructions of historical analogies carry much greater impacts on current and future bilateral relations, in that they become the “cultural scripts” that define how they interact and who they are.\(^7\)

The article proceeds as follows. First, this study examines the current literature of realism, constructivism, and discourse analysis in international relations. Second,

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\(^5\) “China’s Daunting Post-Covid Challenges,” *The Diplomat*, May 8th, 2020.

\(^6\) “Coronavirus lawsuits against China will fail, experts say,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 15th, 2020.

\(^7\) Furedi (2007, p. 2).
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it proposes a comparative framework in understanding the expressions of fear and threat perception for both the current hegemon and rising power. Specifically, the framing strategies of the COVID-19 pandemic—in terms of the “Pearl Harbor Moment” from the US and “the Boxer Indemnity” from the Chinese government—substantially shape the landscape of US–China relations. Third, it highlights how the political elites appropriate the two historical analogies in constructing their political identities and offers insights into the future of US–China relations. Finally, this article concludes with thoughts on the studies of struggles between great powers and implications for pandemic politics.

Fear in international relations

The study of emotions has encountered two conceptual and theoretical challenges in international relations. First, researchers find it difficult to differentiate private and public emotions in certain issue areas or political settings. It may be even harder to make clear distinctions when there are multiple kinds of emotions expressed at the same time. Second, identifying the level of analysis (international, state, individual, etc.) poses another problem for research design, as there could be both “top-down” and “bottom-up” dynamics that shape collective emotional representations.8 Luckily, starting in the 2000s, scholars have developed sophisticated and well-reasoned works addressing these issues, making significant contributions to conceptual clarity and hypothesis testing.9 Their recent works have been considered as an “emotional turn” in international relations theory.

This study focuses on the fear and enmity in the narrative of the power struggle between China and the USA in the initial state of the COVID-19 outbreak. Specifically, when the feeling of fear embedded in historical analogies is directed at one another, the narrative of enmity helps build a sense of community for their respective domestic audiences.10 The identity construction of the self and other from both sides provides insight into how the discourse of fear impacts current and future US–China relations.

Throughout history, political leaders often evoke fear in gaining popular support that serves their specific interests. According to Thomas Hobbes, fear not only promotes a sense of community among the general public, but also provides an important source for the policy-making process.11 In New Pandemic, Old Politics, Alex de Waal offers a careful examination of the history of the pandemic, and he highlights the “war metaphor” deployed by the political actors in mobilizing domestic support. It casts the virus as the invisible enemy, and doctors and nurses as the front-line solders. Specifically, the military script embedded during the respective outbreaks

8 Clement and Sangar (2018).
9 Bleiker and Hutchison (2008), Mattern (2014), Ling (2014), Lebow (2005), McDermott (2004), Ahäll and Gregory (2015) and Van Rythoven (2015).
10 Ahmed (2013).
11 Robin (2004).
of cholera, influenza, and AIDS shaped how people think of pandemics and the emergency measures from the nineteenth century till now.\textsuperscript{12} Amid the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, fear has worked discursively, through historical analogies, official statements from the top leadership, and the rivalry between China and the USA.

That said, fear is rarely considered as a crucial concept in its own right in political science. Although the concept of fear is often examined in philosophy, sociology, and mass communications, it has not received considerable attention in international relations.\textsuperscript{13} Building on the existing literature on emotions and policy analysis in international relations, this study examines the extent to which the concept of fear has discursive effects in great power politics.\textsuperscript{14}

The existing literature in realism has considered the concept of insecurity and nationalism, but has not systematically examined the emotion of fear in international relations.\textsuperscript{15} For example, Waltz argued that “a self-help system is one in which those who do not help themselves… will fail to prosper, will lay themselves open to dangers, will suffer. Fear of such unwanted consequences stimulates states to behave in ways that tend toward the creation of balances of power.”\textsuperscript{16} Realists have indicated that fear is the driving factor for the security dilemma, but their focus on the distribution of capabilities and military deployment prevents them from fully examining the dynamics of such emotions.\textsuperscript{17} On the other hand, liberalists emphasize rational thinking of human beings, without addressing the micro-foundations of other “irrational” feelings like fear, anger, and pride.\textsuperscript{18} In this regard, Simon Koschut proposed a framework on emotion discourse analysis to address some key issues in international relations. Specifically, this approach explores how verbal utterance and framing strategy impact the social relations or meaning-making process between sovereign states and international organizations.\textsuperscript{19}

A closer examination of how fear was framed in China and the USA toward the other can enhance a better understanding of realism and constructivism. For example, the uncertainty of the other’s intentions would exacerbate the security dilemma, intensifying the military arms race (Lebow 2006; Hall 2021). Moreover, the changing power distribution and status ranking easily lead to fear for other countries, as the perceived weakness provides incentives for conquering and domination from the neighboring countries.

The outbreak of major wars or regional conflicts can be attributed not only to power disparity, but also to fear toward the foreign adversaries that affect their foreign policies. The concept of anarchy can also benefit greatly from an in-depth

\textsuperscript{12} de Waal (2021).
\textsuperscript{13} Giddens (1991).
\textsuperscript{14} Callahan (2004) and Goh (2004).
\textsuperscript{15} Sherman (1998), Blight (1992) and White (1984).
\textsuperscript{16} Waltz (2010, p. 118).
\textsuperscript{17} D’Aoust (2014).
\textsuperscript{18} Gries (2004), Mercer (2005) and Lindmann (2014).
\textsuperscript{19} Koschut (2018, pp. 278–279).
study of fear, because it serves an essential role in shaping states’ threat perceptions toward each other (Mercer 1995).

Recent works on constructivism contribute greatly to the field of political psychology and affective politics, as scholars of international relations look into how collective emotions shape national identity and impact foreign policy (Kertzer and Tingley 2018). As China’s economy and military capabilities continue to increase rapidly, it might become a revisionist state that will challenge US primacy and the liberal world order in the near future. Therefore, the “perceived” US decline from the Chinese government leads to the fear of weakness by the top US leaders (Hagstrom 2021).

For example, right after the 9/11 attacks, former US President Bush publicly refuted the image of US weakness. He claimed: “our enemies believed America was weak, that we would splinter in fear. They were as wrong as they were evil.20” In 2019, President Trump promised to “make American great again,” because it is “by far” the world’s most powerful nation.21

Similarly, Beijing also actively constructs its great power identity. Chinese President Xi repeatedly asks for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and China’s dream.22 At the same time, the official rhetoric indicates that China was weak and victimized by the colonial powers, and therefore needed to experience significant reforms.23 For them, the USA’s desire to maintain hegemony and China’s ambition to replace US leadership point to the fear related to weakness of one another. Namely, pride and fear are two important markers for their identity construction.

This article bridges a gap between realist and constructivist scholarship in international relations.

This article offers a discursive analysis of fear, and it argues that this emotion is not given but must be constructed through historical analogies.24 States’ perceptions toward each other, whether positive or negative, depend on how political elites apply the existing cultural and historical materials in shaping their foreign policy. The ongoing trade wars, power competitions in Asia, and the global pandemic have increasingly made the USA and China see each other as a “fearful” one over the last few years.25

Amid their political quarrels over the origin of the pandemic in the USA and China, the expressions of fear lead to reinforced threat perceptions.26 Current literature on securitization theory also contributes to the study of historical analogies and foreign policy discourse.27 Specifically, the ways in which the “other” and the potential of threats are represented can be observed through the speech and actions

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20 “Address for a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” January 29th, 2002.
21 “Remarks on the 74th Session of the UN General Assembly,” September 24, 2019.
22 “Celebration of the 70th Anniversary of the Founding of the People Republic of China,” September 30th, 2019.
23 Deng (2008).
24 Diez (2001) and Epstein (2008).
25 “Trump announces unprecedented action against China,” CNN, May 29th, 2020.
26 Wendt (1995) and Ohman (1993).
27 Buzan et al. (1995, 1998).
of the political elites. What “fear” means is elaborated through official statements and media coverage from the USA and China.

**Fear and discourse analysis**

Even though scholars of political science have proposed several methodologies in measuring emotions, such as cross-national surveys, focus groups, or survey experiments, fear has not been so easily quantified or categorized. This approach shows that US and China’s understanding of the pandemic is embedded in geopolitical and historical contexts, and the analogies they adopted also need to be interpreted through this lens.

Analogical reasoning refers to the use of comparison by the political leaders in justifying their policy objectives (Khong 2020). The historical analogies during the COVID-19 pandemic have helped the policymakers in the USA and China define the nature of the situation and provide warnings about the dangers associated with their policies.

In the case of China, Beijing’s rhetoric on China’s humiliation in the past presents a sharp contrast between Chinese victimhood and Western hegemony (Lerner 2020). The war-like analogy frames COVID-19 as the enemy, not only for the US citizens, but also for President Trump’s tough stance on China’s policy. It often provides close associations for the US policy options.

In addition, the stereotype of Sinophobia was already present in the US political discourse even before the pandemic. An opinion piece entitled “China is the Real Sick Man of Asia” was published in the *Wall Street Journal*, leading to heated debates in China over China’s subjugation by Western colonial powers.

In terms of US–China relations, discourse analysis offers a normative perspective in understanding how the China threat is constructed in the US domestic discourse, and how Beijing deployed historical analogies to evoke patriotism and solidarity (Song 2015). Therefore, the rhetoric adopted by the high-level politicians from the USA and China serves as an important indicator, because they signal their commitment to certain policy stances in the bilateral relations.

**Fear and great power competitions in US–China relations**

US–China relations present a tough case for a discursive form of power politics, as the current IR theories often focus on material calculations and alliance formations that are considered to offer strong explanations for great power competitions. However, in our everyday lives under the global pandemic, we associate fear with a common set of threats: the fear of illness, the fear of death, and the fear of financial loss. In international relations, scholars have focused on the strategic intentions of rising powers and finding better measurements for national capabilities. The

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28 Fravel (2008), Shamabaugh (2002), Friedberg and Ross 2009).
29 Wohlforth 2009), Monteiro 2012).
role of fear has been acknowledged, but without elaboration, and scholars in security studies would then move on to specific discussions on substantive topics, such as military deterrence, arms control, and nuclear weapons development. Few have carefully addressed the expressions of fear, threat perceptions, and foreign discourse in great power politics.30

To be clear, fear and humiliation often exist at the same time in political discourse, and therefore it is quite difficult to differentiate these two emotions.31 However, this does not mean that one cannot isolate the effect of fear, or at least point out the key elements of how fear operates in international relations. Specifically, identifying the “cultural scripts” inherent in the current US and China discourse offers significant insight into how these great powers define themselves and interact with each other. For example, Frank Furedi points out that fear is the product of social construction, and the “cultural scripts” underlying the mainstream discourse instruct people on how to respond to threats to their security.32 In this sense, fear is not only constructed by oneself, but also the interaction with others.

The external threat was often described as the object of fear. In the context of current US–China relations, the “things” that are feared in the USA and China are quite common: the loss of political prestige, the shift of national capabilities, the possibility of military conflicts, etc. The expressions of fear, through historical analogies, have received far less attention, however, than national capabilities and institutional power. That is to say, the power dynamics between the USA and China, where previously analysts have focused on the distribution of material capabilities and political alliance, provide an excellent venue in which to explore the use of analogies in great power competitions.

This study presents another aspect of the current debate by examining the political discourse from both sides. In particular, China has sought to define its role amid the pandemic as a victim, through the frame of “the Boxer Indemnity,” as it suffered from the unfair treatment of the West and others. On the other hand, the Trump administration tried to depict China as the culprit in the outbreak of the virus, applying the term “Pearl Harbor” attack while claiming Beijing was responsible for the loss of lives of US citizens. The finding of this article also carries great implications for policymakers, as it investigates how the narrative of fear works in US–China relations. The case studies presented in this article do not indicate any causal relations in a strict sense, but rather stress the social–linguistic impacts in their respective foreign discourse.

Admittedly, the construction of “the other” in US–China relations might take quite a long time, as their self-identities have also been undergoing transformations at the same time. Nevertheless, certain dramatic events, such as WWII, the 9/11 attacks, and the impacts of COVID-19, might create new images or connotations, for which how one perceives toward the other. A constructivist approach helps shed light on how the USA and China have shaped the narrative of the pandemic and

30 Buzan (1991) and Pashakhanlou (2017).
31 Cohen (2002).
32 Furedi (2018).
how this may affect their bilateral relations in the future. Specifically, the cultural scripts inherent in the US–China discourse indicate the pattern of amity and enmity in the international community.

This article aims at examining the analogies attached to fear and the official discourse in which fear is expressed. Instead of treating fear as a self-evident concept, this study approaches fear as a social–political construction, in which the USA and China shape the ways of interaction through their historical analogies. In this regard, discourse analysis of their official statements provides a promising way of integrating emotional studies into international relations. Oftentimes, a higher-order of emotion(s) is a mix of basic ones; for example, the feeling of anxiety is made up of fear and uncertainty at the same. Fear is a fundamental element that leads to other feelings like resentment, anger, and frustration. That is to say, the crucial task for scholars of international relations is to identify the dominant emotional meanings (i.e., fear) that underpin relative to others in the respective political identities of the USA and China.

Arousal of fear may have analogous effects, as the political elites remind the general public and diplomats how to “imagine” current events by remembering what happened in the past. The ways in which China and the USA discursively frame the other in their preferred analogies would grow in salience, because the power struggle between the USA and China still continues in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic. More importantly, official rhetoric constructed by the USA and China has brought back the memories of these past events and led to the emotion of fear toward the other.

The responses of the USA and China to the pandemic and the threat perceptions toward each other are mediated through the narrative of fear in global and local contexts (see Table 1). The first column refers to the fear of being infected, or the loss of lives in the global pandemic, which is a “common” emotion throughout the world. The second column points to the “localized” fear, in which it is politically constructed through the historical analogies in the USA and China. The expressions of fear are found in historical analogies and memories of specific cultural contexts. This comparative study helps to identify the power of “fear” in both countries and therefore provides justification for focusing on them.

33 Zehfuss and Maja (2002), Hansen (2013) and Fattah and Fierke (2009).
34 Jepperson et al. (1996, p. 34).
35 Crowford (2000).
36 Coicaud (2016, p. 27).
37 Keys (2011).
38 Lampton (2019).
39 Strong (1990).
Historical analogies in US–China relations during the pandemic

Since the end of the Cold War, the USA has attempted to assign “social roles” to China, attempting to make this rising power become more integrated into the US-led world. US efforts to engage China are characterized as a meaning-making process through the use of political terms. For example, the USA has employed different terms to refer to China in recent decades. The first Bush administration generally considered China as a “strategic competitor” in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square protests. Later on, former President Bill Clinton considered China as a “strategic partner,” in keeping up with his engagement policies. In 2005, Robert Zoellick, former US deputy secretary of state, encouraged China to be a “responsible stakeholder,” in taking up more responsibility in nuclear non-proliferation, intellectual property rights, and climate change. These terms provide a shared narrative in US–China relations, as scholars and policymakers from both sides could actively interpret, contest, and even transform the meanings of these concepts.

With this overview of several frames in understanding US–China relations, this section focuses on issue-specific efforts in shaping US and China role identities amid the outbreak of COVID-19. The discourse of analogy serves as a “cognitive framework” in which the political elites understand the nature of the situation. Specifically, they apply the lessons of the past to address the present crisis. Such use of analogies might not be rational or suitable, as they are often driven by fear under great pressure. However, if used properly to connect the current event to ones in the past, these analogies may be emotionally persuasive in the making of foreign policy statements.

This article unpacks the narrative of fear in US–China relations, and it highlights two crucial events in Chinese and US diplomatic history: the Boxer Protocol in which Beijing paid an enormous amount of indemnity to the West, and the attack on Pearl Harbor in which the USA suffered significant losses to its naval forces prior to its entry into WWII. The analogies of these two historical events are certainly emotionally loaded, as they bring back the emotions of fear, hatred, shame, and humiliation in these two countries. However, this study emphasizes the “fear” instead of humiliation in the current US–China discourse. As the USA and China have already undergone tense interactions in Asia–Pacific and beyond, fear is more salient than other emotions, and serves as a basic element underpinning their foreign policies toward each other.

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40 Lynch (2002), Rosseau (2006) and Dreyer 2008).
41 “Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?” Remarks to National Committee on US-China Relations in New York City, September 21st, 2005. Full text available through http://state.gov/s/d/rem/53682.htm.
42 Peterson (1997).
The subtext of China’s rise discourse

As China’s capabilities have grown rapidly over the past few decades, the top leaders are acutely aware of their country’s role and status, particularly to the perceptions of whether China is considered as a peaceful rising country, a revisionist state, or a threat to regional order. Specifically, they have responded carefully to “China threat theory” (Zhongguo weixian lun), and Beijing assumes several political identities to ease the concerns in the international community. For example, it is still a developing country, a peace-loving country in Asia, and a responsible great power. Aside from these official statements, China also possesses a victim mentality, which is emphasized by the teaching of the “Century of Humiliation” in China’s patriotic education.

To be clear, highlighting China’s victimhood narrative does not mean that the suffering of the Chinese people in the late Qing dynasty did not exist. Western imperialism did impose unequal treaties, and ordinary citizens experienced great losses in repeated conflicts. Instead, the goal of this study is to highlight China’s legitimation strategy in applying “a stronger U.S. and a weaker China” analogy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Boxer Rebellion, which took place in the late Qing era, was anti-West in essence, and militias attacked Christian churches and killed many missionaries. In 1900, an eight-country alliance, including the USA, sent troops to Beijing to protect their citizens. China and the Boxers were soon defeated by these Western powers, which demanded that the Qing dynasty pay compensation for their losses (hereafter the Boxer Indemnity). It also agreed to sign the Boxer Protocol, accepting foreign presence on China’s soil.

During the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, the attorney general for the state of Missouri filed a lawsuit in US federal court, seeking to hold Beijing responsible for the public health crisis. Moreover, President Trump claimed that the USA

Table 1 Fear in US–China Relations. (Color figure online)

|               | Covid-19 (Global) | Pearl Harbor attack (China’s threat theory) |
|---------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| U.S. fear     | =                 | +                                          |
| China’s fear  | =                 | +                                          |
|               | Deaths, economic downturns, etc. | Boxer Indemnity (Western Imperialism)       |

43 Deng (2008).
44 “In a first, Missouri sues China over coronavirus economic loss,” Reuters, April 22nd, 2020.
would seek “substantial reparations” from China for the financial losses and deaths of its citizens.\textsuperscript{45} Even though legal experts consider that the efforts to sue Beijing in US courts are unlikely to succeed, US calls for China’s retribution for the losses inflicted by the virus have encountered a very strong backlash in China’s political discourse.\textsuperscript{46}

From Beijing’s perspective, these legal claims for compensation are equivalent to the amount of money that China had to pay after the Boxer Rebellion. Therefore, the analogy of a new “Boxer Indemnity” evoked nationalistic sentiments in defending China’s national interests among the general public and reminded them of this bitter memory of Western imperialism.\textsuperscript{47} For example, China’s state-owned newspaper claimed that these legal moves are typical buck-passing strategies employed to divert attention from their own countries’ inabilities to address the COVID-19 crisis.\textsuperscript{48}

As tensions between the USA and China continue to rise, the year 2020 marks the 120th anniversary of the Boxer Rebellion. “America” is now perceived differently in these two moments. In fact, the USA played a different role in the signing of the Boxer Protocol. During the early 1900s, The US government was more sympathetic toward China, as it allocated the compensation for cultural exchanges between the USA and China, establishing Tsinghua College, a predecessor of Tsinghua University.\textsuperscript{49} Even to this day, students and alumni are grateful to the USA for this act of goodwill, as it was the only Western country to waive the reparations and establish an educational institution.\textsuperscript{50}

The feelings of blame and hostility toward the Chinese government, which is considered by some in the previous US administration to be the cause of the pandemic, reinforced the pre-existing perceptions of the “China threat” theory. More importantly, a contrasting image of a “strong and weak” China reflects the expressions of fear in the US media coverage. For example, the Wall Street Journal (WSJ) published an opinion piece entitled “China is the Real Sick Man of Asia,” which led to Beijing’s strong displeasure.\textsuperscript{51} China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs soon revoked the press visas of three WSJ journalists, as it considered this analogy derogatory and full of racial discrimination.\textsuperscript{52} The term “sick man of Asia” was intended as a double pun, as it not only referred to COVID-19 that was spreading across China at the

\textsuperscript{45} “Trump’s Demand that China Pay Coronavirus Reparations Evoke an Ugly History,” Forbes, May 7th, 2020.
\textsuperscript{46} “Don’t count on suing China for coronavirus compensation,” the Brookings Institute, May 18th, 2020.
\textsuperscript{47} “US practice to claim compensation for Covid-19 outbreak a shame for human civilization,” People’s Daily, May 3rd, 2020.
\textsuperscript{48} “Who is Scheming for Another Boxer Indemnity,” Global Times, April 7th, 2020.
\textsuperscript{49} “West’s Pandemic Falsehood Debunked,” Global Times, April 16th, 2020. “Lawsuits a U.S. conspiracy against China,” China Daily, June 1st, 2020.
\textsuperscript{50} “Beijing Diary: ‘humiliation’ of the past, black swans of the future,” Nikkei Asian Review, April 14th, 2020. “The ‘sick man of Asia’ headline is indefensible. But China’s expulsion of reporters is the wrong answer,” South China Morning Post, March 5th, 2020.
\textsuperscript{51} “U.S.-China ties: Echoes from the Boxer Rebellion,” The Strait Times, April 14th, 2020.
\textsuperscript{52} “China is the Real Sick Man of Asia,” The Wall Street Journal, February 3rd, 2020.
\textsuperscript{52} “Inside The Wall Street Journal, Tensions Rise Over ‘Sick Man’ China Headline,” The New York Times, February 22nd, 2020.
time of publication, but also reminded the general public of China’s bitter memory following its defeat in the Opium War in the nineteenth century.

In China’s patriotic education, the Boxer Indemnity is considered as an unequal treaty that significantly undermines China’s sovereignty. This event not only led to shameful memories under foreign aggressions, but also created fearful thoughts toward the West in subjugating a weak China. Similarly, the “sick man of Asia” analogy fits into Beijing’s “Century of Humiliation” narrative, in which the Qing government had the real fear of being split up by the Western powers.

By appropriating the Boxer Indemnity, Beijing has effectively associated China’s possible liabilities concerning the lawsuit with the bitter memory of the “Century of Humiliation” narrative, in which the Qing dynasty surrendered sovereignty following the West’s intervention. Such political language has been a common framing strategy used by the Chinese Communist Party, especially since China’s capabilities have increased greatly in the 1990s. In the 1990s, China’s nationalism was shaped by the pride in its recent status as a rising power and its resentment of being subjugated by the West. Meanwhile, China’s propaganda in highlighting its superiority for the responses to COVID-19 and revealing the institutional weakness of some Western countries could be considered a tactical move for gaining support for China’s nationalism at home. In the international arena, however, Beijing’s approach to the global pandemic has received mixed reviews. More importantly, in responding to the pandemic-related lawsuits and the “sick man” metaphor” fear has been the main driver of China’s assertiveness to the USA.

To be clear, the term “sick man of Asia” was first translated by Liang Qichao, a public intellectual in the late Qing dynasty, from English to Chinese (dongya bingfu). In such historical contexts, Liang highlighted the corrupting and ineffective control of the Qing government, which fell victim to the Western powers. In addition, this analogy was closely related to the “sickening” images of opium addicts among the general public in that era. More than one hundred years have passed, and China is no longer a weak country suffering from Western imperialism and opium addiction. In 2020, China has risen to become arguably the second strongest power in the world, and it is no longer weak or subjugated from Western invasions. Nevertheless, Beijing still possesses a deep-seated fear of legal retribution from the West, and a “weak and sick” image among the international community might undermine China’s political status and reputation abroad.

China’s victimhood identity demonstrated by the Boxer Rebellion points to its painful past of national humiliation, and it can also be used by the Chinese

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53 For the box-like mentality of China’s patriotic education and political propaganda, see the following in-depth report: “Global Backlash Builds Against China Over Coronavirus,” The New York Times, May 3rd, 2020.
54 “Nationalism in China,” Council on Foreign Relations, April 23rd, 2008.
55 “Clouded Thinking in Washington and Beijing on Covid-19 Crisis,” Brookings Institute, May 4th, 2020.
56 “China Enraged by ‘Sick Man of Asia’ headline, But Its Origin may Surprise Many,” South China Morning Post, February 27th, 2020.
government to mobilize solidarity against an external enemy. For example, this analogy was identified in an official statement. Hua Chunying, a spokeswoman of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, responded strongly to the US blame game over China’s handling of COVID-19. She stated that US enmity toward China was similar to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, in which China suffered from the loss of political prestige in international affairs. However, Chinese people nowadays will never concede to bullying anymore.

Following this logic, the spread of the virus globally has also led to a more assertive stance from China’s diplomats overseas. For example, the so-called wolf warrior diplomacy has been described as consistent efforts to counter accusations that COVID-19 originated in China. More importantly, the sense of fear in Beijing turned its official stances from defensive to more aggressive ones. As one German official indicates, “[the Chinese diplomats] have started talking to us in a tone that would have only been used toward countries they considered small and weak.”

In sum, China’s fear of the West and the USA can be observed through the analogy of the Boxer Protocol, and a “weak” China in US media coverage. This construction of fear has created significant consequences for China’s discursive power on the international stage. Specifically, Beijing tends to overreact, or be assertive in its foreign policy stances, as analogies like the “sick man of Asia” and the “Boxer Indemnity” would easily evoke the fear of its past, when maintaining China’s great power in the present.

**Symbolic presentations of the “Pearl Harbor” attack**

In December 1941 during the Second World War, Japan launched a surprise attack on the US naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Hundreds of US airplanes and vessels were destroyed, and over two thousand US military personnel lost their lives in the bombings by Japanese fighter planes. Soon after Japan’s attack, US President Franklin Roosevelt officially declared war against Japan and in so doing, entered the wain the Asia–Pacific region.

The bitter memory of this surprise attack was brought back in 2000, as the comparison was frequently applied in arguing that the US response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks should be similar to how it responded to Pearl Harbor. In particular, the Bush administration officially announced the US War on Terror, and sent troops to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Since the attacks on 9/11, the fear of terrorism has expanded to almost all aspects of American life, and scholars have analyzed how this crucial event in US history

57 Zhang (2022).
58 “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on May 6, 2020.” Full text available through: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cesi//eng/fyrth/t1776657.htm.
59 For the origin of the term, see “China is embracing a new brand of foreign policy. Here is what wolf warrior means,” CNN, November 9th, 2017.
60 “‘Wolf warrior’ diplomats reveal China’s ambitions,” Financial Times, May 29th, 2020.
has been framed.\textsuperscript{61} For example, labeling it as a predatory attack in challenging US supremacy and considering the US War on Terror as an effort to wipe out the “viper nests” in the Middle East were popular arguments in the US media and political discourse.\textsuperscript{62} Among all these terms, the analogy of the Pearl Harbor attack gained perhaps the most attention in the US political discourse.\textsuperscript{63} Henry Kissinger urged that the Bush administration take a systematic response that will “end the way that the attack on Pearl Harbor ended”—with the destruction of the system that is responsible for it.\textsuperscript{64} With this comparison, the analogy became a “crystallization of memories” and public emotions conducive to a US militaristic response to the 9/11 attacks.\textsuperscript{65}

From a long-term perspective, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in 2000 and China’s mismanagement of COVID-19 in 2020 have created a layered memory for the “Pearl Harbor” analogy. For example, in April 2020, US Surgeon General Jerome Adams openly stated: “this is going to be our ‘Pearl Harbor moment’, our 9/11 moment.”\textsuperscript{66} In his statement, Adams only indicated that the general public should prepare to embrace the “hardest and saddest” moment for the country. He employed a rather neutral tone and urged citizens to stay home for the next few weeks.

One month later, US President Trump changed the surgeon general’s meaning of this analogy, and pointed the finger directly at China. More importantly, he said:

We went through the worst attack we’ve ever had on our country...This is worse than Pearl Harbor, this is worse than the World Trade Center. There’s never been an attack like this.\textsuperscript{67}

The usage of “attack” implies negative connotations, as if the pandemic were intentionally orchestrated by the Chinese government. His public statement shifted the “object” of the narrative from the virus to China, steering it from the US surgeon general’s story of fighting against the illness, to one of a US struggle following an attack by its enemy. More importantly, the Trump administration implied there was a conspiracy theory, suggesting that the virus might have been developed in a bio-weapon lab in Wuhan. Even though the US intelligence community remains skeptical of such claims, President Trump believed that China might have “encouraged” the intentional spread of the novel coronavirus as a way to destabilize other countries.\textsuperscript{68}

\textsuperscript{61} Holland (2015) and Holland and Solomon (2014).
\textsuperscript{62} Lowenheim (2009) and Deborah (2009).
\textsuperscript{63} Griffin (2004).
\textsuperscript{64} “Destroy the Network,” The Washington Post, September 11th, 2001.
\textsuperscript{65} Ross (2006). Specifically, US public support for military action was at levels that parallel the public’s reaction after the Pearl Harbor attack. See “Maintaining Public Support for Military Operations” in Defeating Terrorism: Strategic Issues Analysis, (Institute of Strategic Studies: U.S. Army War College Press, 2001).
\textsuperscript{66} “U.S. surgeon general warns of ‘Pearl Harbor moment’ as American face ‘hardest week’,” The Guardian, April 6th, 2020.
\textsuperscript{67} “Trump Claimed Coronavirus ‘attack’ Worse than Pearl Harbor, 9/11,” Aljazeera, May 7th, 2020.
\textsuperscript{68} “Trump Talks Juneteenth, John Bolton, Economy in WSJ Interview,” The Wall Street Journal, June 19th, 2020.
The president’s statement during the outbreak of the pandemic has successfully “fixed the meaning” of the Pearl Harbor attack, as the framing strategy provides strong justifications for preserving US primacy and pre-empting China’s revisionist ambitions. Such transformations, departing from the urgent need to improve public health management, imply a more strategic focus on China’s military rise and projecting a stronger US presence in Asia and beyond.

In the 2000s, US foreign policy rhetoric has constructed its own “image of China,” representing it in turn as a strategic partner, peer competitor, or a stakeholder. However, the symbol of “Pearl Harbor”—a hapless great power suffering tremendous loss from the virus—presents a sharp contrast to President Trump’s vow to “make American great again.” At the time of writing, another surge of confirmed cases of COVID-19 has hit American soil, and the crisis has significantly undermined the US national interests as the world’s greatest economy and a country with an advanced health care system. Responding to the impact of the coronavirus, Trump’s appropriation of “China’s Pearl Harbor attack” presents a crucial statement in US political history, as he treated China as a threat to US security and well-being. In addition, he explicitly referred to the global pandemic as the “Chinese virus,” making the threatening images of China more vivid amid the rising tensions in US–China relations. His statement provides a powerful association between the Chinese virus in 2020 and the Pearl Harbor attack of WWII, and the US government is now considering punitive measures against China over its handling of the global pandemic. In particular, the Sinophobic sentiment, along with the fear of the global pandemic, has constituted vested meanings in this analogy. The expressions of fear point to a crucial link between US political identities and the construction of US–China relations.

The Pearl Harbor analogy, used after the attacks of September 11th established the morality of the use of force against a threat to US national security. It was brought out once again linking COVID-19 and the Chinese government by the Trump administration. As the pandemic swept the globe, 79% of US adults considered the spread of COVID-19 as a major threat to the country. At the same time, 62% of US respondents also named China’s rising capabilities as a major threat as well. The fear of the pandemic and China’s threat are closely associated in both US political rhetoric and public opinion.

A domestic politics perspective seems to explain President Trump’s provocative statement over the COVID-19 crisis. That is, the Trump administration encountered political pressure for re-election in November, and therefore the Chinese government became a scapegoat for the death toll and financial losses suffered by the US. However, such a China-bashing strategy is not new in the US domestic discourse.
More often than not, it only serves as a short-term calculation for the presidential campaign, and does not represent significant changes in US policy toward China. From a long-term perspective, although President Trump did not win the re-election, the Biden administration might still follow the outgoing stance toward China. President Biden might likely pursue a less confrontational strategy than Trump’s, but the US pursuit of discursive power and political solidarity against China will be a common goal for both the Republican and Democratic parties, especially when a sudden threat challenges the well-being of US citizens.

This study identifies the narrative framework within which China’s COVID-19 crisis was handled in the USA, and it also highlights the political and cultural factors that contribute to the growing hostility between China and the USA. For example, a recent survey conducted during the pandemic shows that many Americans see China’s power and influence as a major threat to the USA. In 2018, 48% of Americans saw China as a threat, but this increased to 62% in 2020.

The finding of this article stresses how two crucial elements of constructivism, historical analogy and political discourse, can illuminate important aspects of bilateral relations. In the 2000s, the use of analogy was popular after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and the term “Pearl Harbor” became an emotionally charged concept. Similarly, the “Pearl Harbor” analogy in 2020 represents US perceptions of its vulnerability and exaggerates estimates of China's capability to manufacture the virus as a bio-weapon. Both the Bush and Trump administrations have successfully drawn political attention from elusive enemies (hidden terrorist organizations in 9/11 and the invisible virus in 2020) to sovereign states (Afghanistan and China, respectively) in their foreign rhetoric.

Under the impact of the pandemic, President Trump gained strong support in US Congress in holding the Chinese government responsible. Deterring China has reached a bipartisan consensus, and this is especially the case following the outbreak of COVID-19, as the American public supports greater projections of US power throughout the world. Drawing on the US discourse on the 9/11 attacks and the COVID-19 pandemic, this article demonstrates the usefulness of discourse analysis that uncovers temporal similarities in the emotional representation of fear in US political elites.

**The vividness of fear in these analogies**

Historical analogies could be persuasive if the political elites were able to successfully highlight the similarities between one situation and another. Namely, the lessons learned in the past ought to be applied to the current crisis. These analogies, associating the fearful memories, have been brought back to life again due to the outbreak of the pandemic.

74 “How Americans envision a post-pandemic world order,” Pew Research Center, June 2nd, 2020.

75 Hall and Ross (2015) and Solomon (2012).
The collective memory of the Qing’s tragedy has persisted in China’s political discourse up to the present day. When China and the USA held the high-level meeting in 2021, Yang Jiechi, Chinese foreign affairs chief, made a provocative remark. He forcefully claimed: “let me say that the USA does not have the qualification to say what it wants to speak to China from a position of strength. The US side was not even qualified to say such things even 20 years ago.”

Yang’s emotional remarks resonated with the Chinese audience and were widely diffused with hundreds of thousands of views and shares on China’s social media. Although his statement was mostly directed toward the domestic audience in China, the underlying feeling of inferiority exhibited Beijing’s deep-seated fear that China was once a weak and backward country in Asia. A recent survey conducted in China indicated that 62% of Chinese respondents hold an unfavorable view of the USA. Meanwhile, two-thirds of Americans have a negative opinion of China’s reputation, which marks an all-time low in the cross-year survey. The unfavorable views of one another that have persisted over the past few years points to a worrisome trend in US–China relations.

The transition from the fear of the pandemic to the overall fearfulness of China’s rise is of great significance for US–China relations. The “othering” of COVID-19 as a Chinese virus points to a growing fear of China’s rising power and influence among US officials as well as the general public. For example, to go deeper than a percentage of respondents expressing their views toward China, the Pew Research Center asked American an open-ended question on China. Many replied that China is the biggest threat to world peace, and also a major threat to the USA. And the COVID-19 pandemic might have deepened the fear of the US respondents in this survey.

The words and phrases used to describe fear are politically constructed through historical analogies. Specifically, the Boxer Indemnity and the attack on Pearl Harbor are two essential events that will always be remembered in China and the USA, respectively. These two analogies amid the global pandemic not only brought back painful memories, but also created the emotion of “fear” in US–China relations. Specifically, the former incident marks the arrival of the Western powers and their imperial domination of China, which ushered in a “Century of Humiliation” and the signing of the unequal treaties represented China’s fear and weakness. Therefore, in recent years, the term “rejuvenation of China” (zhenxing zhonghua) has been popular in official documents, serving as a strong rebuttal to the “sick man of Asia.”

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76 “US and China publicly rebuke each other in first major talks of Biden era,” the Guardian, March 19th, 2021.
77 “How it happened: transcript of the U.S.-China opening remarks in Alaska,” Nikkei Asia, March 19th, 2021.
78 Fang et al. (2022).
79 “The Pulse: U.S.-China relations,” U.S.-China Perception Monitor, September 2021.
80 “Americans are critical of China’s handling of Covid-19, distrust information about it from Beijing,” Pew Research Center, May 26th, 2020.
81 For the full report, see “Most Americans have cold views of China. Here’s what they think about China, in their own words,” Pew Research Center, June 30th, 2021.
| Event                        | What happened in the past?                                                                 | Analogy in U.S.–China relations (2020)                                      |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| U.S. Pearl Harbor moment     | Japan ambushed Hawaii, drawing the U.S. into WWII in the Pacific Theatre                   | China’s Assertiveness + Covid-19 = threat to U.S. national security           |
| China’s Boxer Indemnity      | The U.S. promoted cultural exchanges, Tsinghua University                                  | U.S. sought retributions for its losses amid the great power competition       |
The attack on Pearl Harbor plays an essential role in contemporary US history, as it has become a symbolic representation of the “external” threat that attacks the USA without warning. President Trump shifted the original meaning of the US surgeon general, delivering a stark warning to the general public. By using the rather provocative term “attack,” he held the Chinese government responsible for the deaths of US citizens. He framed the COVID-19 crisis as China’s “virus attack” and a new “Pearl Harbor” attack on US soil.

This comparative study of political discourse in the USA and China highlights to what extent Washington and Beijing share a social reality amid the outbreak of a pandemic. Specifically, the cultural scripts, demonstrated by the Boxer Indemnity and the Pearl Harbor attack, shape how fear is displayed in US–China relations. More importantly, “China’s image” as perceived by these two narratives is very different: China in the Boxer Rebellion is vulnerable, while the one in the Pearl Harbor attack represents a rising power in Asia.

A summary of these events and their current interpretations during the coronavirus crisis shows how the USA and China reconstruct each other as a “threat” to their political identity and security (see Table 2). This finding of the comparative study demonstrates how the analogy of fear reveals the political motives from the top leaders, shapes their official responses to the global pandemic, and the social–political construction of their relations.

**Alternative explanations**

Both the US and Chinese governments have devoted much effort and resources in justifying their public health policies, and they also compete for narrative power in understanding the nature of the pandemic. To be clear, there are multiple emotional registries embedded in the discursive practices of COVID-19. For example, grief was a common feeling during the initial outbreak of the pandemic, as many people in China and the USA experienced the loss of their loved ones. Later on, both solidarity and patriotism were discernable in the two countries, as the political leaders justified their emergency measures during the height of the outbreak. Therefore, the fear of the COVID-19 outbreak reflects the anxiety of the USA and China concerning their political status and ambition.

In this sense, the China threat narrative is co-constructed through the fear of the pandemic in the USA in mutually reinforcing ways. Meanwhile, China’s pandemic discourse on the Boxer Rebellion and national humiliation reflects a sustained fear of oppression by the West in the nineteenth century. Following this logic, fear is the primary emotional response to an external threat, and it is a crucial driver that enables the elaboration and execution of security strategy (Degerman et al. 2020). More

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82 “U.S. surgeon general warns of ‘Pearl Harbor moment’ as Americans face ‘hardest week’,” The Guardian, April 6th, 2020.
83 Yang (2021) and Jawoesky and Qiaoan (2021).
84 Sun (2021).
importantly, it serves as a crucial element of the master narrative in US–China relations. The attack on Pearl Harbor and the Boxer Indemnity analogy that they have adopted reflected the pre-existing power dynamics of the hegemon and the rising power. Namely, the perceptions of China’s threat to US security, and China’s victimhood nationalism are the two essential components for the master narrative of fear underlying US–China relations.

The empirical section of this article shows that the public statements and official narrative of COVID-19 build upon the pre-existing power competition between the two countries. It demonstrates both empirically and conceptually the roles fear has played in the power competition between China and the USA.

The future of US–China relations

Even though the USA and China had already been experiencing tense relations prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, it is still possible to identify the “pandemic effects” that have shaped one of the most important bilateral relations in the world. This section aims at answering the “so what” questions. Namely, it demonstrates how the expressions of fear through the analogies have substantive impacts on US–China relations. For example, a Chinese think tank affiliated with the Ministry of State Security has warned Beijing that global anti-China sentiment is at its highest level since the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. Increasing hostility from the USA and the West has prompted China to prepare more readily for a worst-case scenario of military confrontations between the two global powers.

The analogies of the “Boxer Indemnity” and “Pearl Harbor” attack certainly contain specific cultural scripts that resonated strongly with their domestic audiences. In particular, how these analogies and others frame the roles the USA and China are adopting awaits more careful assessment amid their great power competition in Asia–Pacific and beyond. Only when the USA and China overcome the fear toward each other and move beyond the blame game of the pandemic, can they start to rebuild trust and fight against the outbreak of the virus together.

The COVID-19 crisis also invites heated debate among pundits and commentators over whether liberal democracies or authoritarian countries have responded more efficiently to this global health challenge. The final results remain to be seen, as it would certainly seem to be a long-running battle against this pandemic. So far, both regime types have experienced mixed results. The study of fear and historical analogies provide insights for both scholars and policymakers in addressing social and political challenges inherent in US–China relations. Looking into the future, the challenges will still be pronounced, as new variants of COVID-19 have become
highly transmissible throughout the world. Both the US and Chinese governments need to hold constructive conversations to address their fear toward each other and seek common ground in promoting better global health governance.

What is more important, as the finding of the article suggests, is the “non-mater- rial” contest over discourse. How countries, regardless of their regime types, jus- tify their responses to the global pandemic given their style of governance remains another essential task for rising powers in gaining a better reputation in the interna- tional community.

The study of the politics of emotions, such as fear, humiliation, and pride, can also engage other important issues in international relations, such as conflict resolution, alliance formation, and public diplomacy. More specifically, the grievance resulting from the virus might prompt the USA to seek revenge on the Chinese government. The fear of foreign invasion inherent in the Boxer Indemnity analogy might encourage Beijing to “overreact” to the US policies. Future studies on US–China relations and foreign policy can examine to what extent these two analogies “stick” in their following discourse, or the narrative of fear becomes their common frame- work of interaction amid the outbreak of the pandemic.

Conclusion

Both Beijing and Washington have to confront several political and economic chal- lenges amid the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, government officials also spend a significant amount of time and effort in constructing the narrative for their domestic audiences and each other. Understanding the complexity of fear requires greater attention to narrative and metaphor in their political discourse.

This study investigates how the historical analogies and their memories of fear impact current US–China relations. The comparative analysis shows that the narrative on COVID-19 is more than just a blame game or an escalation of empty words. The prominent role of fear highlights that it serves as a conceptual framework in which policy circles and the academic community understand power politics.

The roles played by China and the USA in each other’s political discourse have become a central topic over the last few years, and US–China relations might worsen if both sides keep using such analogies. However, there is still a silver lining hiding in the study of power politics. If both sides would share, at least partially, a narrative of compassion, humanity, or modernity amid the global pandemic, then such a rhetorical framework might encourage the USA and China to embed themselves in a shared cultural context. Namely, scholars and policymakers in security studies and

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88 “The Covid-19 Pandemic and China’s Global Health Leadership,” Council Foreign Relations, January 2022.
89 Bleiker and Hutchison (2018).
90 “How Has the Coronavirus Crisis Affected Xi’ Power: A Preliminary Assessment,” China Leadership Monitor, June 1st, 2020. “A Clarifying Moment: The Covid-19 Pandemic and the Future of the U.S.-China Rivalry,” The National Bureau of Asian Research, May 29th, 2020.
foreign policy analysis could focus on managing the construction of discourse and the emotion of fear, in order to induce positive developments in US–China relations.

**Policy implications**

The study of fear in the US and China’s narratives on COVID-19 helps shed light on their processes of foreign policy making throughout the world. The analogy of history still shapes how the Chinese government understands its rising capability and how it interacts with the USA. For example, the Chinese state-owned newspaper posted an image contrasting the signing of the Boxer Protocol between the Qing and the West with the recent US–China meeting in Alaska. This collage soon went viral on Chinese social media. Therefore, a systematic analysis of emotions inherent in the political discourse may have important implications for the practices of diplomacy, negotiation, and conflict resolution.

In combating the spread of the virus at home, Beijing has also worked hard to preserve its national interests abroad. For example, Beijing threatened to impose sanctions on Australian produce if Canberra decided to initiate an investigation into the origin of the virus. Such coercive measures, driven by China’s fear of a negative reputation, might have already undermined the “peace-loving” image that Beijing has managed to uphold for years.

Emotions of fear, pride, and compassion impact how the political elites, government officials, and public intellectuals make sense of the world, and how they respond to threats. The construction of analogy and metaphor goes both ways. They can contribute to bilateral relations and regional politics in positive and negative trends.

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