Contemporary representations of China and Russia in American media –
pushing past stereotypes

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Introduction

This policy paper addresses contemporary US representations of perceived threats from China and Russia, and means by which the accuracy and rigor of such representations could be enhanced. As Tatiana Dubrovskaya and Evgeniy Kozhemyakin have observed, “representations of international relations undergo recontextualisation in the media as compared to the representations in proper diplomatic discourse... [and] newspapers offer avenues for ideologically charged interpretations through chronotope representations and the strategy of emotionalisation.”¹ This, in turn, has substantive effects on public perceptions of international relationships, which can result in dramatic policy shifts when said ‘emotionalisation’ unleashes unforeseen, electorally-induced effects in the polity.

While depictions of China and Russia in the U.S. maintain substantively different framings, they retain some common elements. Insofar as national interests are presented in simplified ways outside non-specialist literature, China’s priorities and concerns still tend to be represented as overwhelmingly economic in nature – to the point that Chinese ownership of American debt has become a common trope and, even, a satirical punchline. In some ways, this representation marks a progressive evolution from the decades-old fears of ‘Japan Inc,’ with its associated concerns of a loss

of American economic potency and offshoring of manufacturing. However, while much of the discourse in that case revolved around the loss of jobs and the loss of American economic pre-eminence relative to a close ally, discussion around China’s economic rise is also accompanied by fears – either implicit or explicitly stated – around their burgeoning military capabilities and willingness to pursue more aggressive diplomatic strategies in areas such as the South China Sea. By contrast, representations of Russian national interests have recently tended to focus overwhelmingly on aspects of ‘Grand Strategy’, such as the sowing of discord and ongoing attempts to undermine Western democratic norms and institutions (especially in the context of meddling with American electoral processes), to the near-exclusion of other elements of overall geopolitical strategy and economic ties. However, both of these depictions are highly simplistic, and prone to misrepresentation and exploitation for the purposes of political expediency.

In this light, the memo will thus advocate for a less polarized and more historically-contingent framing of U.S.-Russian and Sino-U.S. interests than through traditional perspectives, in the interests of international order stability. It will do so proposing strategies for encouraging more sophisticated and nuanced depictions through an emphasis on greater contextualization and a broader effort to better locate geo-political strategies in forms of mainstream mass communication.

**Representations in recent historical memory**

The 2016 presidential election provided a focused channel through which to analyse the aforementioned differential interpretations. Donald Trump’s unconventional campaigning style brought existing representations of both states into play – strategically in China’s case, arguably unwillingly so in the instance of Russia – and his populist rhetoric tapped into and exploited existing perceptions of Chinese influence in the U.S. Hillary Clinton’s campaign, meanwhile, played on the spectre of Trump as a potential ‘Russian puppet’, attempting in part to leverage US citizens’
concerns over Russia as an untrustworthy global player and/or strategic threat to American interests.

Typical of Trump’s rhetoric on China were repeated accusations that the country was “stealing” US jobs and manipulating its currency,² thus competing on a playing field tilted in its favour. In a general sense, this sentiment feeds into a long-running narrative around Chinese ownership of U.S. Treasury debt, which in turn contributes to wider concerns around geopolitical positioning and relative power. A 2017 Pew Research survey revealed that 65 percent of Americans identified China as either an adversary or a ‘serious problem’, while fewer than a third said they did not consider China to be a problem. Balanced against this, however, should be Daniel Drezner’s 2013 assessment that “any poll of U.S. citizens would reveal that the public thinks we owe even more to China than we actually do. Similarly, much of the policy rhetoric coming from Washington focuses on fears of incipient inflation that have yet to pan out.”³

By contrast, Gallup polling in 2016 showed that while Americans’ impressions of Russia were negative overall (albeit rebounding from a low in 2015), the number of Americans who consider Russia’s military power a “critical threat to the US” reduced 10 percentage points from 2015, although it still remained at a higher level than it had registered in the preceding decade.⁴

However, it should be emphasized that these framings did not occur in a vacuum, but rather built on existing narratives amassed over the previous two decades. As Yang notes, “[c]ontemporary U.S. politicians and reporters describe China as a threat to the survival and supremacy of Western

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democratic ideals such as freedom of speech and Western views of human rights" — and indeed, Wang and Shoemaker’s 2011 study demonstrates that political freedom in China has a marked effect on American public opinion toward China.

The topic of perceived representational bias in American media against China has increased in prominence since the 1996 publication of Li Xiguang and Liu Kang’s *Yaomohua Zhongguo de beihou*, which argued “images of China have been demonized by the American media.” As Li Zhang has observed, within the growing literature on Western representations of China exists a general concern that “the international media, particularly the American media, is largely negative in reporting on China.” Such representations are typically styled through ‘us’ versus ‘other’ framing, in which “ideological differences and stereotypes play a key role.” Liss and Peng have also concluded that the image of China generally depicted in American media is negative overall, although it should be noted that much of the literature in this field is somewhat dated, with few surveys having been completed in the last five years.

**Methodology**

Taking the 2016 election campaign as a starting point, the memo considers the coverage of five major U.S. papers — *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The New York Post* — and uses a sampling method to consider how their coverage...
of Russia and China in the context of the 2016 election campaign conformed to the conventional frames outlined above, to what extent they broke outside of those frames, and analyze how those frames impacted the overall narratives and perpetuation of existing stereotypes. The five papers were chosen based on the breadth of their political coverage, readership, and to ensure a mixture of high-brow and populist publications across the political spectrum.

Key issues in the current political context are identified as the following:

- The reported role of Russian interests within the Trump Administration, and the import of this in contributing to a revived ‘Cold War footing’ in the presentation of Russia and Russia-related issues; and
- The administration’s rhetoric around trade barriers and ‘America First’, and the effect of this upon representations of China.

Analysis

The economic stereotypes that dominate American media representations of China are linked to fairly widespread, and long-standing, public awareness of China’s status as a rising geopolitical power. However, this awareness has manifested in different ways depending on region. Amongst the rustbelt and deindustrialised Midwest, for instance, there is greater receptivity to rhetoric from politicians and media alike that China should be brought to account for its supposedly anti-competitive economic practices.

A particularly interesting analysis of the current scenario is that outlined by Michelle Yang, who has argued that representation of China in the American media is defined by an ever-shifting blend of two frames – the ‘yellow peril’, and the ‘red peril’. In the case of the 2016 presidential campaign, she
notes, coverage from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* “largely avoided overt portrayals of China as the red peril.” According to Yang, several factors were responsible for this:

“While Trump decried Chinese currency manipulation, journalists accepted and reported that the nation was no longer devaluing its currency... [as well,] the weakening of the Chinese economy, the volatile swings in China’s stock market during the summer of 2015 and the winter of 2016, and warnings of catastrophic Chinese debt levels enervated representations of China as an economic red peril.”

Perhaps most importantly, it was Russia, not China, that “seemed the overbearing threat.” Ultimately, however, she argues that “yellow peril and red menace memory frames of China as an economic, political, and military threat still implicitly lingered. These memory frames were most noticeable in journalists’ discussion of the TPP. Although both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* endorsed Hillary Clinton, the newspapers critiqued Clinton and Trump for their opposition to the TPP.”

Drezner’s argument above also raises the prospect that the media contributes to generalized and widespread misunderstanding of the nature of the economic relationship between the U.S. and China. With the focus on an adversarial contest, it both encourages a tendency to conceive of the relationship in zero-sum or ‘sports team’ terms, but also distracts from the issue that there is a genuine co-dependency – illustrated by the significant contraction in China’s growth rate during the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, and more broadly by China’s keenly-stated interest in maintaining and encouraging American economic growth – that if the American economy slows, its consumption rate – and thus, China’s own economic prospects – are directly negatively impacted.

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12 Yang, op. cit.
13 Yang, op. cit.
14 Yang, op. cit.
Representations of Russia in recent memory, meanwhile, have been dominated by narratives around election interference, collusion with political campaigns and shady operatives, and an overriding notion that ‘Russia’ – nominally operating as a singular entity – was interested in breeding instability and attempting to undermine democratic norms. A key characteristic of this coverage was that such representations tended to be presented as the activities of the Russian state, actuated via the various means available to it – notwithstanding the Russian Government’s (somewhat ambiguous) denials. While to some extent this may be considered an accurate representation of the notably close links between Russia’s political elite and the country’s state security apparatus, it effectively portrayed Russia’s interests in the outcome as largely one-dimensional, with disruption the primary defining element of the Russo-U.S. relationship from the Russian perspective.

While this remains an ever-evolving scenario, a noteworthy element that has emerged as a consequence of the emerging links between Russian interests and 2016 campaign operatives is a narrative that there is no reason why the U.S. and Russia should not be allies. Indeed, this idea was briefly actively articulated within right-wing circles, with a small sampling of this narrative including L. Todd Wood’s column in The Washington Times in April,15 or Patrick Buchanan posing the question, “Is Russia an Enemy?” in The American Conservative in February,16 although it should be noted this idea has also received considerable pushback from commentators who adopt a more traditional view of the nature of the Russo-U.S. relationship, focusing in particular on the current Russian leadership’s authoritarian diktats and opposition to freedom of association and of the press.

Nonetheless, contemporary political developments in the U.S. have conspired to ensure that the frame of covert destabilization has continued to overshadow others, including more nuanced discussion around such subjects as the wealth of Putin and acolytes, the impact of the Magnitsky Act, and the ongoing impact of sanctions on the Russian political economy.

Conclusions

Overall, the impact of the 2016 presidential campaign on the American public’s perceptions of China was to subtly reinforce existing perceptions. Notwithstanding U.S. and Chinese leaders’ progress in securing a cyber agreement and climate change accord, which contributed to more positive portrayals,\(^\text{17}\) Trump’s rhetoric around China ‘winning’ against the U.S. successfully tapped into well-established popular sentiment in certain regions around fears that the U.S. was losing control of the ability to control its geopolitical destiny. While the underlying nature of the bilateral relationship has arguably remained fundamentally unchanged for many years, Trump’s victory has not led to a substantially greater sophistication in coverage of the nature of the economic relationship – although, with this said, there has been evidence of pushback on simplistic lines of winner-loser argumentation from the *Post* and the *Times*.\(^\text{18}\)

Drawing firm conclusions about the current state of perceptions vis-à-vis Russia is more difficult, given the cloudy nature of the evolving relationship between the current U.S. administration and Russia, which is presently dominating reportage. Nonetheless, an amplified media focus on the interests of the Russian state from a broader social and political-economic perspective would prove useful in contextualizing current events, as it would help flesh out the key interests of Putin’s administration, its priorities in relation to its relationship with the U.S. (most particularly in reference to the Magnitsky Act), and provide an improved frame of reference to better appreciate the way in

\(^{17}\) Yang, *op. cit.*
\(^{18}\) Neil Irwin, in Yang, *op. cit.*
which the current administration maintains support and control within the country, especially through its relationships with various oligarchs. In so doing, it could help overcome the rather simplistic narrative perpetuated by existing reportage that Russia’s motive in interfering with the U.S. election was primarily to do with the undermining of democratic norms.
Bibliography


