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Understanding the Chinese Government's Growing Use of Anti-American Propaganda

Christopher Carothers¹ is an Associated Scholar at the University of Pennsylvania's Center for the Study of Contemporary China and a 2023-24 Wilson China Fellow



Abstract

Since US-China relations began deteriorating around 2018, Chinese state media has become increasingly critical of the United States. What are the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s main messages to its citizens about America? How should the United States respond, if at all, to Chinese anti-American propaganda? This study addresses these questions by analyzing 1,776 *People's Daily* editorials about America published between 2004 and 2023. I find that Chinese state media promotes three distinct anti-American narratives, all of which have been deployed more aggressively since around 2018–2019. First, America is a dangerous hegemon that seeks to harm China and other countries. Second, America has poor moral and social values. And third, America is in decline—increasingly incapable of addressing problems at home or abroad. These narratives serve not just to highlight that America is a threat, as past research suggests, but also that China's system under the CCP is better. US policymakers should understand the role that anti-Americanism plays in Chinese politics, avoid playing into its narratives when possible, and take measures to counter the CCP's spread of anti-American messages globally.

Implications and Recommendations for Policymakers

- Under Xi Jinping, the CCP is deeply invested in the notion that the United States is not only a threat to China, but also its benchmark competitor—the power against which China's performance in many areas will be measured. US policymakers should understand that Chinese state media's growing use of anti-Americanism does not just reflect worsening US-China relations, but also serves domestic purposes for the regime. For this reason, some degree of anti-American rhetoric is inevitable and will persist even if bilateral relations improve.
- US policymakers should not dismiss the PRC's anti-Americanism as empty words or “just propaganda.” This study shows that substantial efforts have been taken to create sophisticated narratives about America that draw on real events and attempt to tap into pre-existing negative feelings about America among many Chinese people. Although we do

not know how persuasive anti-American propaganda is to ordinary PRC citizens, it is notable that many of its themes and tropes are repeated widely by private, commercial media and on social media.

- When possible, US policymakers should avoid taking actions that play into the CCP's anti-American narratives. Despite the CCP's strict domestic censorship, American actions and high-level rhetoric still matter to the perceptions and beliefs of Chinese citizens. When US actions and messages align with the CCP's negative narratives about it, they render those narratives more credible, handing Chinese state media a propaganda victory. If US policymakers announce that the goal of US policy is to defeat or contain the PRC for the sake of American hegemony, then they play into and strengthen the narrative that the United States is a bully and an aggressor. By contrast, if US policymakers couch their criticisms of China as demands that the PRC adhere to international laws and norms and act as the "responsible great power" that it claims to be, the onus shifts back to Beijing to explain why this is a bad thing.
- Despite the instrumental uses of the CCP's anti-American propaganda, the CCP can be incentivized to moderate it. This study finds that the production of anti-American messaging is at least somewhat responsive to US actions. State media ramped it up after President Trump's anti-China policies and rhetoric, but has curbed it in periods leading up to high-level negotiations or dialogue, such as before the Biden-Xi summit in November 2023. Thus, reducing harmful anti-Americanism should not be overlooked as one of the benefits of positive diplomatic engagement with the PRC, as long as this engagement is not pursued at the expense of standing up for American interests and values.
- Through official, unofficial, and covert channels, the CCP promotes many of the same anti-American narratives around the world as it does at home, as an integral part of its overall global media offensive to influence foreign governments and publics. Without infringing on principles of free speech in other societies, the United States should nonetheless draw attention to the PRC's role in promoting false or misleading narratives about the

United States and create locality-specific messaging that challenges them. This strategy would build on existing lines of government effort in public diplomacy and in countering PRC disinformation, including by the State Department's Global Engagement Center. Concretely, it would entail embedding the defense of America's image in our national China strategy and training US diplomats and other international affairs professionals on how to identify and counter PRC information operations anywhere.

Introduction

China's state-controlled media has become highly critical of the United States since around 2018–2019, reflecting increased tensions in the US-China relationship. America is a superpower on the decline. The COVID-19 pandemic was a “big test” for countries, and America failed it. American politics are marred by dysfunction and division. Citizens are distrustful of elites and America's supposedly free media. America's foreign aggression provoked Russia's invasion of Ukraine and it has blood on its hands in Gaza. Washington fears China's peaceful rise and is lashing out with self-defeating tariffs and sanctions. Anti-American narratives such as these are of course nothing new for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Criticism of American actions in the world has featured in the party's propaganda since before 1949. However, the current situation represents an escalation. The CCP's anti-American messaging has not been this forceful since Deng Xiaoping ushered in a new era of US-China relations.

That Chinese state media portrays the United States negatively is well known, but scholars have yet to systematically analyze this recent wave of propaganda and its implications. What are the CCP's key messages to its citizens about America? What role does anti-Americanism play in the regime's overall propaganda strategy? And what, if anything, should the United States do about it? The CCP's portrayal of America is important to examine because it reveals how the regime wishes Chinese citizens and international audiences to perceive China's primary strategic competitor and the relationship between the two powers. Moreover, understanding how the CCP seeks to benefit from anti-Americanism sheds light on its evolving strategy to bolster the regime's domestic legitimacy.

Existing research on anti-Americanism in China focuses on how the CCP has long sought to garner public support by depicting America as a threatening hegemon determined to block China's economic and political rise. In her book-length study of propaganda in China, Anne-Marie Brady argues that anti-American rhetoric has been a “constant theme” since the events in Tiananmen Square in 1989, and that the CCP emphasizes “a hostile Other to unite the population.”² In the same vein, Iain Johnston and Daniela Stockmann argue that “hegemonism” has been the main theme in Chinese propaganda about America since the 1990s; in particular, the United States

has sought to contain China (遏制中国) and prevent its rise.³ As Rush Doshi notes, the CCP was triply shocked by American rhetorical support for the Tiananmen Square protesters, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the US military's effective intervention in the First Gulf War.⁴

Of course, the theme of American threat is not new and was particularly prominent in Mao Zedong-era propaganda. Historians note that, after 1949, emphasizing America as an enemy helped the newly-in-power CCP to build patriotic nationalism, such as through the “resist America, aid Korea” campaign launched during the Korean War.⁵ Until US-China rapprochement in the 1970s, Mao and other CCP leaders routinely portrayed their regime as a bulwark against US imperialism, as in Mao's well-known speeches labeling US imperialism a “paper tiger.”⁶

The CCP's use of the American threat narrative to rally public support fits a global pattern and aligns with what social science teaches about the political benefits of facing an external threat. Many other authoritarian regimes that have contentious relations with the United States—Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Russia, and Venezuela, among others—deploy anti-American messaging in precisely this way. Russian state media has for decades portrayed America as hellbent on interfering in Russia, and it argues that this may be the reason behind any social problem or protest Moscow faces.⁷

This is not to say that anti-American sentiment around the world is simply a product of authoritarian propaganda; substantial grassroots opposition to US policies and values exists in both authoritarian and democratic societies, often for understandable reasons. Yet it is still worth examining how authoritarian propaganda embraces and shapes anti-American sentiment for political ends. That highlighting American threat could boost public support for a regime makes sense given the well-studied logic that external attacks can increase internal cohesion. In international relations, foreign attacks or threats can produce more domestic political cooperation, bipartisanship, or a rally-around-the-flag effect, all to the benefit of political incumbents.

However, this study argues that Chinese state media's anti-Americanism is more complex than existing scholarship suggests. Specifically, I find that Chinese state media promotes three distinct anti-American narratives: (1) America is a dangerous hegemon that seeks to harm China and other countries; (2) America has poor moral and social values; and (3) America is in

decline—increasingly incapable of addressing problems at home or abroad. None of these three narratives is new, but all three have been advanced more frequently and more forcefully since 2018–2019. The first narrative directly relates to what existing scholarship has identified as the main theme of CCP messaging on America, but the other two narratives do not. Previous studies have sometimes noted that topics such as American racism or gun violence are themes in anti-American messaging, but this study makes a contribution by providing an empirically-based typology of high-level narratives. Each of these narratives runs through state media coverage of a wide range of topics related to America. The three narratives that I identify are distinct, but they can also be combined and promoted together, such as when Chinese state media argues that American decline is at base a result of its poor moral and social values.

This study further argues that the CCP is promoting anti-Americanism not only to rally the public against a foreign threat, as per existing scholarship, but also to contrast the United States and China and to argue that China's system is better. All three anti-American narratives that have been boosted since 2018–2019 help the CCP make the case that China outperforms America in a wide range of areas, not least COVID-19 mitigation. The narrative that America is a dangerous hegemon highlights the threat of American intervention, but it also demonstrates the superiority of China's own foreign policies. Unlike the United States, China is a “responsible big country” and friend to the international community. Criticizing America's moral and social failings—racism, gun violence, inequality, and so on—serves to highlight the CCP's superior performance in creating a harmonious society. And discussion of America's decline, of course, reinforces the fact that China is continuing to rise. Thus, anti-Americanism should be understood as positive as well as negative propaganda. It is part of a strategy to boost the CCP's domestic public legitimacy at a time when the regime is facing various policy challenges.

This study's findings are based on a systematic analysis of editorials about America published in the *People's Daily*, the CCP's preminent general-focus daily newspaper and carefully vetted mouthpiece. As explained in the methodology section, I read and hand-coded 1,776 editorials about America published between 2004 and 2023. This analysis allows me to trace trends in the use of anti-Americanism, such as its rapid rise around 2018–2019, and the

promotion of different narratives over time. The study's qualitative methodology draws on a long scholarly tradition of close reading of official discourse in Chinese media.

The study makes contributions to academic research and policy thinking on anti-Americanism and propaganda in the PRC. First, it advances a typology of anti-American narratives that captures the main messages Chinese state media is promoting about America in this period of increased bilateral tensions. Second, the study shows that the CCP is using anti-Americanism to bolster its domestic legitimacy, including through three distinct propaganda narratives. And third, it discusses what can and should be done for the United States to avoid playing into the CCP's narratives, to disincentivize Beijing's use of anti-Americanism when possible, and to identify and challenge anti-American propaganda's spread to third countries.

The plan for this study is as follows. The next section briefly explains the methods used. In the main section of the paper, I present the empirical findings about the CCP's use of anti-Americanism: that it has increased, that it advances three main narratives, and that it is framed comparatively to show off the positives of China's own performance. The paper then turns to discussing the study's implications for US policymakers. I discuss what is necessary to understand about PRC propaganda and why, and what if anything the United States can do about authoritarian state-backed anti-Americanism in China and globally.

Methodology

To undertake this analysis, I selected, read, and categorized *People's Daily* editorials about America published between 2004 and 2023. These editorial pieces are the most concentrated form of the worldview that the CCP seeks to disseminate to party members and, indirectly, to citizens—more so than straight news. Critics might point out that most Chinese people are not daily readers of the *People's Daily*. Yet the paper sets the party line on key topics and its articles are widely copied throughout China's state media and on many private platforms. Many previous studies of Chinese propaganda have also used the *People's Daily* as a key source. Beginning the study in 2004 aligns it with the contemporary era of anti-American sentiment,

which studies show began after the US invasion of Iraq,⁸ and allows us to observe trends in anti-American messaging over a relatively long and complex period in US-China relations.

I began the analysis by selecting four *People's Daily's* editorial columns that focus primarily on international affairs and have been prominent since 2004: Guojiping (国纪平), Zhongsheng (钟声), International Forum (国际论坛), and Global Writing (环球走笔). The first two are understood to be the most authoritative regarding the views of the CCP leadership. (The name Zhongsheng is a homophone for “voice of the Central Committee,” while the name Goujiping implies that this is important commentary on international affairs.) I identified all of the editorials in these columns between 2004 and 2023 that discuss the United States at least four times, yielding 1,776 editorials (out of a total of nearly 7,000). I then read each editorial to assess whether it contained an anti-American message, and, if so, what that message was. This process allowed me to inductively identify three overarching anti-American narratives and trace their rise over time.

Some readers might question what this study means by the terms anti-American and propaganda. In this study, anti-American refers to any broadly framed criticism of the United States, its government, or its society. Thus, my use of this term does not suggest that anti-Americanism is necessarily malicious, unfair, or factually inaccurate—simply that it is broadly critical. Many past studies of the CCP have construed anti-Americanism similarly. For example, Alvin Rubinstein and Donald Smith define anti-Americanism as “any hostile action or expression that becomes part and parcel of an undifferentiated attack on the foreign policy, society, culture, and values of the United States.”⁹ David Shambaugh defines it simply as “the negative dimension of... ambivalent Chinese images of America.”¹⁰ And Katzenstein and Keohane define it as “a psychological tendency to hold negative views of the USA and the US society in general.”¹¹ What about the term propaganda? This study refers to opinion pieces about America published in CCP-controlled state media as propaganda. The use of this term does not suggest that opinions about America in Chinese state media are necessarily invalid or lack intellectual merit. Instead, the designation of propaganda means that state media controls and selectively deploys information on behalf of a self-interested political organization—in this case, the CCP. This is a common framing in many studies

of government-produced anti-Americanism in China. For example, Anne-Marie Brady analyzes anti-American rhetoric in state media as part of “the propaganda system.”¹² Similarly, Andrew Kuech examines the CCP’s “patriotic anti-Americanism” within the framework of “propaganda.”¹³

The CCP’s Anti-American Narratives: Empirical Findings

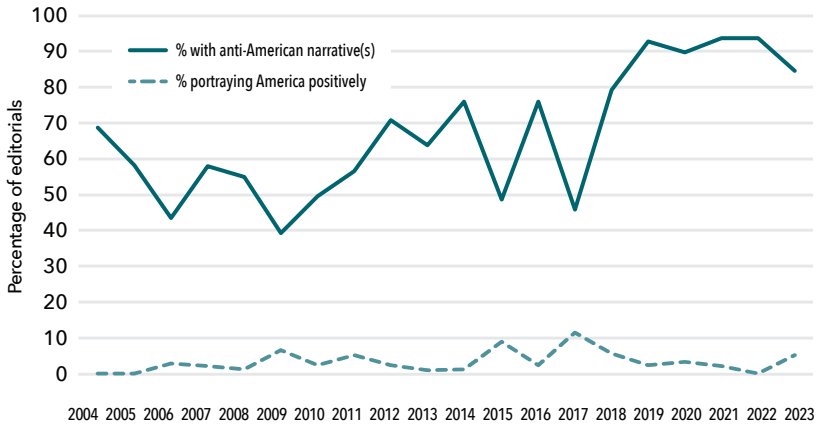
This main section of the study presents three findings about state media’s editorial coverage of the United States. First, I confirm the common perception that state media’s promotion of anti-Americanism has escalated since 2018–2019. Second, there are three distinct anti-American narratives that pervade the editorial coverage, only one of which is focused on US threats to China. And third, anti-American propaganda is often framed comparatively and serves to highlight the CCP’s achievements.

Rising Anti-Americanism

Since 2018–2019, there has been a substantial rise in the number of *People’s Daily* editorials featuring anti-American narratives, as well as an increase in the proportion of all editorials about America that promote at least one such narrative. In 2019 and 2020, an editorial highlighting American hegemony, bad values, or national decline was published on average once every 3.4 days—roughly twice a week. Many recent editorials promote more than one anti-American narrative. For example, they may combine the narrative of American hegemony and American decline to argue that America’s fears about its decline are the main cause of its growing efforts to contain China.

As Figure 1 shows, state media’s editorial coverage of America has varied over the last two decades. The high proportion of anti-American editorials in 2004 largely reflects criticism of the United States’ war in Iraq. The dips in 2015 and 2017 correspond to short periods in which Beijing reined in criticism of the United States as part of efforts to reset US-China relations. Similarly, the small dip in 2023 is due to the publication of a series of editorials focusing on bilateral cooperation during and after the Biden-Xi summit in November. Meanwhile, the proportion of editorials that portray the United

FIGURE 1. Rising Anti-Americanism in *People's Daily* Editorials



States positively has remained low throughout the last two decades, providing a counterpoint to Beijing’s frequent complaint that American media rarely publishes positive articles about China.

Beyond the change in numbers, the tone of editorials about America has also markedly shifted, becoming more strident and confrontational since 2018–2019. An editorial in May 2021 argued that “American-style democracy is nothing more than a game of empty promises.” The “stench of money compels its politicians to deceive the public with lies, which further leads to degeneration.”¹⁴ “The United States has absolutely no intention of engaging in reasonable competition,” began an editorial in September 2023. Rather, the hegemon “wields the big stick of sanctions and pushes for ‘decoupling and chain breaking’ and the so-called ‘de-risking’; out of ideological prejudice, it generalizes the concept of national security, abuses control and censorship, and builds ‘small courtyards with high walls’; it concocts a false narrative of ‘democracy against authoritarianism,’ forms cliques and factions to create ‘encirclement’ of our country, forces other countries to choose sides, incites confrontation, and undermines peace.”¹⁵ Few editorials published between 2004 and 2018 were this antagonistic.

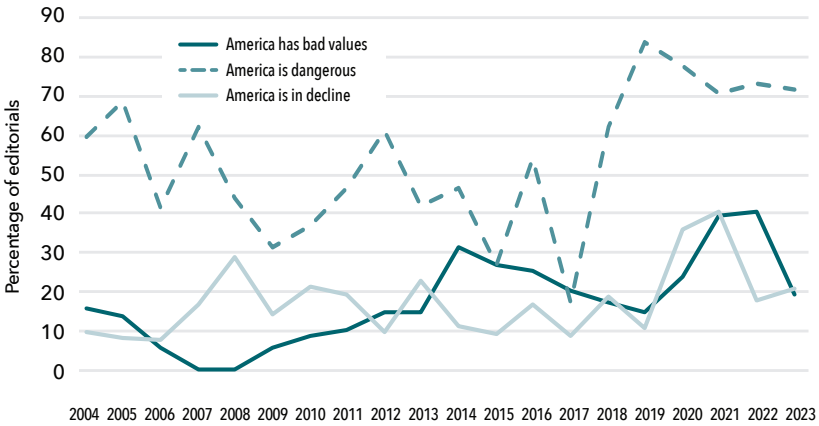
What explains the rise of anti-Americanism in state media since 2018–2019? The deterioration of US-China relations, some analysts reasonably suggest.¹⁶ Without casting blame on one side or the other, we can observe that several trends and events damaging to bilateral relations came together in the mid-to-late 2010s. China's foreign policy, which many analysts note became more assertive after around 2009, shifted again after Xi began his second term in office in 2017. New moves in military, diplomatic, and economic domains signaled global—rather than simply regional—ambitions.¹⁷ Beijing and others point the finger squarely at the Trump administration. Indeed, its attacks on China—both in rhetoric and policy action—contributed to the major rethink Washington undertook on China policy.

But there were also structural reasons for this shift. According to Pew Research surveys, public opinion among both Republicans and Democrats shifted negatively on China around 2018.¹⁸ New evidence of Chinese competitiveness in cutting-edge technologies, widespread theft of US intellectual property, Beijing's increasingly aggressive use of economic statecraft and coercion abroad, the emergence of "wolf warrior" diplomacy, the opening of China's first overseas naval base, and revelations about mass internment and human rights abuses in Xinjiang all contributed to the new China consensus—the bipartisan view that the PRC has both the intention and capabilities to challenge American global leadership.¹⁹

However, Xi's desire for stronger negative propaganda about China's top foreign competitor also flows from recent challenges in the country's domestic conditions. State media often criticizes America to redirect attention from China's own problems. For example, in February 2020, state media criticized the United States for its poor handling of infectious diseases *even before* the United States' failure to contain COVID-19 was known. As the Xi administration was coming under fire for mismanaging the disease, state media suddenly began to write about how terrible the flu was in the United States and how many Americans die each year of the flu, falsely suggesting that this problem was on the rise.²⁰

Domestic discontent on issues besides COVID-19 has also motivated the use of anti-American propaganda. While attempts to measure public support for the regime are fraught, there is survey evidence from 2020 suggesting that public approval is lower than previously thought.²¹ Xi's removal of presidential

FIGURE 2. America According to the *People's Daily*



term limits in early 2018 did not lead to protests, but many Chinese quietly opposed the move. China's economy entered a historic slowdown in part due to the trade war. The PRC's response to the pandemic would of course make this worse. In late 2022, the regime faced rare anti-Xi, anti-party demonstrations known as the White Paper Protests. Although triggered by restrictive COVID-19 policies, the protests also reflected broader discontent.

Three Narratives of Anti-Americanism

The CCP's recent wave of anti-American propaganda has promoted three overarching narratives. These narratives are meta-stories about America's national identity that both inform and are reinforced in state media's coverage of specific events and trends. Each narrative is multifaceted and captures some fraction of the reality of America and its government's actions. Yet the narratives are also exaggerated, one-sided, and present America in a way that is strategically useful for the CCP. Figure 2 breaks down the post-2018 rise in anti-Americanism by different narratives. It shows that each narratives rose and reached its peak at some point between 2019 and 2022 before subsiding somewhat in 2023.

The first narrative centers on America's foreign policies, especially its policies toward China. Essentially, the narrative is that America acts as a threatening hegemon, leveraging its power to detrimentally impact other nations. This narrative has a long history in CCP propaganda and encompasses various themes and recurring motifs, including that the United States uses its military might recklessly, that it imposes its values and institutions on others, that it bullies weaker countries, and that it misuses international organizations and agreements to advance only its own interests. "Numerous disgraceful incidents of hegemonic interference in other countries have piled up over America's more than two centuries of history...it is the most warlike country" the *People's Daily* has editorialized.²² America's "fully proven 'war addiction' is the greatest source of risk to peace and stability throughout the world" another editorial argues.²³ "Looking back at history, the United States has launched many wars 'at will,' causing disasters to many countries and regions," another editorial argued, citing the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as prime examples.²⁴ Even if the United States does not send its own troops to war, it is guilty of often stirring up trouble overseas and then leaving a disaster that other parties must clean up. Under President Barack Obama, "the United States has left nothing off the table to consolidate its hegemony, blatantly violating basic principles of international law; its pattern is to disrupt a country or region before withdrawing."²⁵

Since the early 1990s, state media has consistently emphasized that the United States has engaged in aggressive actions targeted specifically at China.²⁶ Editorials have accused the United States of meddling in China's internal affairs, displaying unfair treatment toward Chinese companies, adopting a "Cold War, zero-sum mentality," and forming "cliques" with China's neighbors to its detriment. The *People's Daily* frequently contends that American leaders and political elites propagate false narratives about China as a strategy to suppress its growth and legitimate interests, including the narratives that China is a threat, that China is free-riding on American technology and innovation, that America loses when China gains, and that China is in political "regression" under Xi. The latter two of these theories—the American Loss Theory and the China Regression Theory—surfaced in 2019 at the height of the trade war when, state media alleges, America repeatedly misrepresented the Chinese stance on trade issues to mislead both Americans and the global public.

The second narrative focuses on America's poor moral and social values, which make its promotion of human rights and democracy hypocritical. The racism embedded in American politics and culture has been a perennial point of attack—a tradition originating in Soviet anti-Americanism. “Racism has always been a systemic feature of American society and all institutions,” in which ethnic minorities still face the “nightmare of discrimination,” editorials argued in 2021.²⁷ The *People's Daily* extensively covered the George Floyd protests in 2020 and discussed the pandemic's disparate impact on minorities in the United States. The focus on African Americans, as scholars have noted, follows a Soviet propaganda tradition that served to counter American criticism of the USSR's repression of minorities. Moreover, the United States has a “deformed gun culture” that “places individual rights above social security.” The problem of child labor in America is “shocking.” Hundreds of thousands of people engage in “forced labor.” And America's human rights situation has “deteriorated further in recent years,” an editorial in 2021 claimed.²⁸ America's own troubled record on human rights shows “hypocrisy” and makes it “not qualified to lecture others or make accusations.”²⁹

A major subtheme in the narrative critiquing America's values is that greed and disunity undermine the country's so-called democracy. “When money rules politics, there is no real democracy.”³⁰ Citing the high costs of elections, “secret funds,” so-called dark money and the US Supreme Court's 2010 Citizens United ruling, the *People's Daily* concludes that American “elections have become a money game...for the wealthy.”³¹ This system “deprives people of their democratic rights, suppresses the expression of voters' true will.”³² America's democratic system can also be considered a form of institutionalized corruption, many editorials argue.³³ Trump's unusual campaign and surprising election in 2016 provided ample fodder for broader critiques of America's political system. “All kinds of strange phenomena highlight the embarrassment of American politics,” an editorial noted as the 2016 presidential election neared.³⁴ “The chaos exposed by this election reflects the deep-seated shortcomings of the American political system,” argued another.³⁵ Nor does the American government adhere to its own democratic principles when it comes to governing society. Although the United States claims to embrace the freedom of the press, “selective reporting is common”

and the government and corporate media behemoths regularly engage in the “suppression of domestic public opinion.” “Some editors and reporters with integrity...have been either deleted or banned, or imprisoned,” editorials in the *People’s Daily* have argued.³⁶

The third narrative centers on America’s decline, which has political, economic, and social dimensions. Over the last decade, the *People’s Daily* has linked polarization and “chaos syndrome” in American politics, the “powerlessness” of politicians to solve problems, and economic and social crises to argue that America is “deteriorating” or coming undone.³⁷ The “chaos” in the 2016 presidential election highlights that America’s “structural contradictions” have gone unresolved since the 1990s and “metastasized” into a “severe illness,” the *People’s Daily* argued.³⁸ “A series of data exposes the failure of the US government in social development and national governance, and the root cause of the problem lies in the institutional decline of ‘American democracy,’” explained an article in 2022. The headline was “America is Sick: Uncovering America’s Structural Decline.”³⁹

In early 2020, Chinese state media became fixated on the United States’ mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic, viewing it as proof of systemic failure within America. The party line has been that the pandemic both demonstrated and exacerbated America’s decline—COVID-19 revealed how poorly America was prepared and how little its political class seems to care, and made political divisions and social problems worse. The United States was “selfish, short-sighted, willfully inefficient and irresponsible in responding to the epidemic.” This not only caused immense death and illness, “but also fully exposed and continued to worsen the long-standing social divisions, polarization between the rich and the poor, racial discrimination, and inadequate protection of the rights and interests of vulnerable groups.” The result is that “the American people have fallen into a deep human rights disaster,” the *People’s Daily* editorialized in June 2020.⁴⁰ Other editorials highlighted the irony of this tragedy occurring in the country with the most advanced medical knowledge and the world’s largest economy.⁴¹

As the pandemic continued, Chinese state media coalesced around a narrative that America had handled COVID-19 the worst of any country. This was explicitly used to subvert and reverse America’s frequent portrayal of itself as “No.1” in the world in many fields. For example, the *People’s Daily* argued

in 2021 that the United States was indeed the “world leader” in new fields, including countries that spread COVID-19 to others, countries that blame China for their own failures, and countries that allow disinformation.⁴² Furthermore, America did not fix its initial mistakes. “The repeated failures of the United States in fighting the epidemic highlight the reality of its serious failure in social governance,” an editorial argued in late 2022. The United States seemingly learned nothing from the monkeypox epidemic. The editorial went on to approvingly quote an editorial in the *Washington Post* as saying that America had “seemingly fallen into a mode of panic and neglect.”⁴³

American decline begins at home, but also has an international dimension. The United States is less and less able to coerce other countries and unilaterally mold the global landscape, state media argue. Evidence editorials have cited for this claim include: America’s chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, the Trump administration’s withdrawal from numerous international agreements and bickering with US allies, developing countries rejecting US calls to ban Chinese technology, and, most recently, America’s internationally isolating support for Israel’s war in Gaza. There is “increasingly strong criticism and opposition from the international community” against the hegemonic and bullying behavior of the United States,” a typical editorial argues.⁴⁴ State media often cites famous foreign analysts who argue that American foreign policy must change to accommodate the rise of China and other powers or reflect the limitations imposed by America’s growing domestic crises, such as Fareed Zakaria.⁴⁵ Before COVID-19, the narrative of American decline has been deployed by the CCP in response to the 2008 financial crisis, military failures in the Middle East during the late 2000s and 2010s, and the tumultuous 2016 presidential election.

Against the above points, a critic might argue that Chinese state media is simply reporting true signs of America’s decline. After all, America’s political and social dysfunction are being discussed and debated by Americans daily. However, the argument here is not about whether America is or is not in decline. The point is that state media’s full-throated promotion of the narrative of American decline, often one-sidedly and at the expense of alternative narratives, should be understood as a strategic choice.

How Anti-Americanism Makes China Look Good

The third empirical finding of this study is that anti-American narratives in state media are presented in a comparative frame, showing China's superiority to the United States. Criticism of America in state media is often part of an explicit US-China comparison. But even when it is not, anti-American messaging is being promoted in a media environment saturated with comparisons between China and its foremost international rival on every aspect of foreign and domestic policy. Even before 2018–2019, the *People's Daily* editorialized about the United States far more than about any other foreign country. That China's accomplishments and practices should be measured against America's is an unstated yet ubiquitous assumption in both official and unofficial discourse.

All three anti-American narratives in state media are used to highlight China's outperformance of the United States, potentially boosting public support for the CCP. The narrative that America is a threatening hegemon certainly aims to rally citizens in defense of their country, as existing scholarship on anti-Americanism suggests. But this narrative also benefits the regime by showing the superiority of China's own foreign policies under Xi. For example, the CCP's portrayal of the United States as internationally isolated is consistently juxtaposed with the notion that China is a friend to the world and has good relations with the vast majority of states. The United States has long bullied other countries into compliance with its vision of international order, but its demands on others are increasingly being rebuffed. Instead, the international community is looking to China—not as a new hegemon, but rather as a “great power that acts responsibly.” The Trump administration's attack on Huawei was skillfully rebuffed; with the assistance of the CCP, the Chinese company is stronger and more globally influential than ever. The developing world is particularly sick of American meddling and is ready for partnerships with China; Latin Americans show a “natural distrust” toward American investments and “enthusiastic responses” to Chinese investments, one editorial explains, because Chinese companies treat the region with respect.⁴⁶

The narrative that America has bad moral and social values is used to demonstrate the superiority of societal harmony in China under the CCP's guiding hand. America is awash in racism, whereas China's 56 official ethnic groups live in harmony as “the big family of the Chinese nation” (中华

民族大家庭). America's ethos of personal freedom allows for the spread of drugs, gun violence, and other social problems. By contrast, the Chinese government's approach of restricting personal freedoms and surveilling the public promotes public safety. Given its own problems, America does not have the right to criticize China's human rights record. America's political system fails to live up to its own standards of democracy. The *People's Daily* routinely describes America's political system as "chaotic"—a charge with deep resonance in China's political culture. The CCP has long promised to deliver China from political chaos and strives to present an orderly political system with established norms, even as Xi has rewritten those rules to take a third term in power. American politicians are often described as unable to address social and economic problems because of the constraints of "political and legal shackles."⁴⁷ This naturally leads readers to consider China's political system, in which the central leadership is unconstrained by public opinion or the letter of the law.

The narrative of American decline serves to emphasize that China is rising, leading, and tackling difficult challenges. For example, the *People's Daily's* extensive coverage of America's failed response to COVID-19 has been a critical component of its narrative about China's allegedly successful response. "The 'big test' of the COVID-19 epidemic has once again verified the strong governance capacity of the Chinese Communist Party and the superiority of the Chinese system, which is the general consensus of the international community," crowed one editorial column in July 2020.⁴⁸ As the United States struggled with COVID-19, China was "the only major economy in the world to achieve positive economic growth" and "became an important engine for the recovery and development of the world economy."⁴⁹ Chinese state media had initially been put on the defensive in early 2020 over reports that the government suppressed information about the virus. Yet state media editorialists recovered their swagger as news began to emerge about America's inability to contain the virus. State media was able to capitalize on organic shifts in public sentiment brought on by Covid news from outside China.

Moreover, CCP messaging has often used the narrative that America is in decline to explain why US-China relations have deteriorated since 2018–2019. In numerous editorials, the *People's Daily* has argued that Americans' frustration with their country's weakness and fear of further decline explains

the United States' hostility towards China under the Trump and Biden administrations. As one editorial argued in 2021:

In the face of the reality of America's declining soft power and hard power, both the previous administration and the current one see China as a strategic competitor and a major threat. They grab on to all opportunities to politicize the pandemic, trade, education, technology, and cybersecurity, continue producing the 'China threat theory', try to suppress, isolate, and contain China's development.⁵⁰

The ultimate goal of the United States' suppression and containment of China is to preserve its own hegemonic status. "If China were still poor and backward today, then the attitude of the United States toward China would be much better," a Guojiping column explained in 2019.⁵¹ "The root of slandering China is that some Americans cannot accept the reality of China's strong development," argued another editorial.⁵² Try as it might, the United States "will be unable to restore its [global] leadership by suppressing China," noted a third.⁵³

In sum, my examination of the framing of anti-American propaganda reveals carefully crafted narratives that aim to both bolster the domestic legitimacy of the CCP and rally the public against a troubled but still dangerous foreign power.

What Should US Policymakers Do?

Several takeaways and recommendations relevant for US policymakers follow from the above analysis. US policymakers should understand the role that anti-Americanism plays in Chinese politics, avoid playing into its narratives when possible, and take measures to counter the CCP's spread of anti-American messages globally.

First, this study underscores the significance of rising anti-Americanism in the CCP's propaganda strategy. US policymakers should understand both its domestic uses and the sophistication of its content. The Xi administration has shown that it is deeply invested in the notion that the United States is both a threat to China and also China's leading rival—the state against

which national performance in many areas will be measured. What this means for the United States is that some degree of anti-Americanism is inevitable within China's current political framework.

Washington certainly can and should continue taking steps to improve bilateral relations, but it should not expect that America-bashing can be eliminated; anti-Americanism is simply too useful a tool in the CCP's hands. Moreover, PRC rhetoric critical of America should not be dismissed as empty talk or "just propaganda." This study shows that anti-American propaganda narratives are sophisticated and are intended to be believed by CCP officials and the public. Elaborate efforts have been taken to create narratives that draw from real events and tap into pre-existing negative feelings about America among many Chinese people. Although we do not know to what extent the CCP's anti-Americanism is persuasive to the Chinese public, many of the same criticisms of America are raised in private media and in popular online fora. For example, a recent Tsinghua University survey found that 80 percent of Chinese people blame "the US and Western countries" for Russia's war in Ukraine, showing public opinion aligning with the government preferred narrative.⁵⁴

Second, US policymakers should—when possible—avoid playing into the PRC's negative narratives about American behavior and values. US rhetoric and actions that align with CCP narratives hand Xi a propaganda victory and strengthen the credibility of Chinese state media at home and around the world. While the United States can do little to disrupt Chinese state media's promotion of anti-American messages in the PRC, it can still try to reduce the persuasiveness of those narratives by not playing into them. Certainly, US officials and policymakers should not stop criticizing the PRC's bad behaviors ranging from IP theft to human rights abuses. But such criticisms are more likely to find an audience among Chinese citizens and even officials if they are framed as requests for the PRC to adhere to international law, norms, and its own stated principles.

By contrast, if US policymakers portray the PRC as an enemy or argue that the United States must contain China to sustain US hegemony, then it directly plays into the narrative that the United States is a bully and is lashing out because its status is threatened. For example, Matt Pottinger and Mike Gallagher lend credence to the PRC's narrative of American threat when they argue, as they did in *Foreign Affairs* recently, that America's desired end state in the relationship

should be “a China that is able to chart its own course free from communist dictatorship.”⁵⁵ Pottinger and Gallagher may believe that Chinese state media being able to credibly portray the United States as the aggressor in this relationship does not matter. Regardless, US policymakers must at least recognize and weigh the potential impacts of their statements both in China and globally. As critics of the Pottinger-Gallagher argument have noted, such a framing of US goals risks alienating American allies and partners.⁵⁶ Pottinger and Gallagher might argue that their thesis grants the Chinese people agency, which is true and a useful corrective to the CCP’s narrative that the interests of the regime and the populace are one and the same. However, to assume that most Chinese people want to throw off CCP rule and build a new system more to America’s liking is wishful thinking. Moreover, it plays into another PRC narrative about America in the world: its arrogance.

Third, US policymakers should understand that anti-American propaganda exacerbates problems in the US-China relationship, but also that Beijing can be incentivized to moderate it. State media’s current promotion of anti-Americanism, whether persuasive to the Chinese public or not, risks creating a nationalistic atmosphere that undermines people-to-people relations and makes future cooperation between the two countries more difficult. Chinese state media has often argued that the United States is lashing out at China because it knows it is in decline and feels threatened—a useful line because it exonerates Beijing from any actions that might have undermined US-China relations.

Yet, by disseminating this story to the public, the CCP may also be spreading the idea that there is little China can do to improve US-China relations because the sources of American hostility are domestic and structural. Chinese officials and state media have repeatedly argued against the popular idea that the United States and China are caught in a “Thucydides Trap,” in which the tensions created by China’s rise and the United States’ relative decline lead to increased conflict and potentially war. Yet propaganda blaming poor bilateral relations on American insecurity is advancing a logic not unlike that of the “Thucydides Trap.” The risk is that this messaging itself will make the trap, and therefore serious conflict, more difficult to avoid.

Although the Xi administration will not give up anti-Americanism, this study suggests that US actions affect how strongly it is promoted. Most obvi-

ously, President Trump's anti-China rhetoric and trade war spurred the CCP to hit back rhetorically as well as with policy shifts. But there have also been periods in which the CCP has reduced anti-American messaging, especially in response to the prospect of fruitful or high-level bilateral negotiations. The most recent such period was the second half of 2023 in the lead-up to the Biden-Xi summit on the sidelines of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meetings. For several months, the *People's Daily* sharply reduced the number of editorials with anti-American narratives, published multiple editorials in support of dialogue, and published more editorials than usual portraying the United States positively.

Thus, US policymakers should understand that Chinese state media is still willing to deescalate its attacks in order to encourage bilateral efforts to improve relations. If it seeks to avoid a fatalistic "Thucydides Trap" spiral, the United States should pursue opportunities to showcase and increase cooperation—and reward even small PRC concessions—to the extent that this can be done while standing up for American interests and values. An example of this that is already being implemented is American officials expressing appreciation for the PRC's past actions to reduce the flow of fentanyl precursor chemicals to the United States while pushing for further action on the issue, as President Biden did during his meeting with Xi in November.

Fourth and most ambitiously, I propose that the United States needs a comprehensive strategy to identify and counter anti-American narratives spread internationally by the PRC. Anti-Americanism is a key feature, not a byproduct, of the PRC's global media offensive. Through official, unofficial, and covert channels, the CCP promotes the same anti-American narratives abroad that it does domestically to influence foreign governments and publics. Such propaganda efforts are an important part of Xi's strategy to undermine American influence in the world while strengthening China's. Anti-American propaganda has the power to disrupt American alliance-building and sow distrust of the United States among third country elites, business communities, and the general public. Certainly, US government agencies have analyzed and combatted many PRC disinformation and propaganda campaigns in recent years. In September 2023, the Department of State's Global Engagement Center published its report on "How the People's Republic of China Seeks to Reshape the Global Information Environment."⁵⁷ Yet, both in this report and

more generally, discussion of anti-American propaganda is limited to specific false rumors, such as that COVID-19 originated as an American bioweapon. There has been little focus on the systematic spread of broader narratives aimed at shaping how people think about American government, society, and foreign policy as a whole. It is these PRC narratives that likely pose a long-term danger to American interests in other countries. For example, analysts inside and outside the US government have argued that a coordinated PRC campaign “to promote US hatred” has “landed punches” in Thailand in recent years; numerous “anti-America” and “Hate Americans” videos with distorted or false content have gone viral in the country, spreading the message that Americans are racist against Asians and responsible for the rise of anti-Asian hate since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵⁸

A US strategy against anti-American propaganda can only succeed if it accurately defines the problem. The goal cannot be to oppose all anti-American sentiment or to suppress organic criticism of US actions globally, which would betray our values and likely be counterproductive. Instead, the strategy should focus on authoritarian state-backed campaigns that rely on covert influence or disinformation. The goal should be first to identify and call out PRC propaganda narratives and second to craft counternarratives that address what might be persuasive in these anti-American narratives in different national contexts. Institutionally, the US strategy on global anti-Americanism could be based in the State Department and extend existing lines of effort on public diplomacy and combatting disinformation. Concretely, it would require not only a high-level strategic plan but also training for US diplomats and others stationed abroad on how to identify and report up the PRC’s local information operations. The implementation of this strategy should be decentralized and country-specific, reflecting the broad but differentiated nature of the PRC’s global media offensive. In sum, the CCP’s anti-American messaging has become too prominent within China and too insidious globally for US policymakers not to elevate their concern and strengthen measures that respond to the challenge.

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Notes

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