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Article

Narrative Framing and the United States' Threat Construction of Rivals

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Abstract

Constructing a credible foreign threat is a key activity in the US national security community. By adopting a narrative approach to threat formation, we attempt to delineate the contours of the Soviet Union, Japan, and China in the US threat discourse spectrum. The Soviet threat is constructed through a story of two ideologically opposed rivals competing for world domination and the Japan-bashing narrative is of victimisation due to Japan's unfair competition. China threat stories, however, are now more complex, conflating a story of US victimhood at the hands of China's unfair competition, advocated by President Trump, with a widely embedded but malleable epic tale of power competition between a rising power and the ruling power, and a new Cold War script propagated by the 'deep state' hawks. We have found that as long as a country may potentially threaten the United States' hegemonic identity, be it a formidable power with an antagonistic outlook like the Soviet Union, an ally from inside like Japan, or a rising peer competitor like China, the United States will invariably construct a diametrical self-other story in a zero-sum mindset and resort relentlessly to its superior Self while customising its threat story scripts in accordance with the rival's characteristics and dimensions of challenges.

Introduction

In December 2017, the United States officially classified China in its National Security Strategy as a 'revisionist power' that intends to 'shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests'. In January 2018, the US Department of Defense referred to China in its Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy as 'a strategic competitor', claiming that 'the central challenge to US prosperity and security is the reemergence of long-term, strategic competition' by revisionist powers like China. On 6 July, 2018, the Trump administration's first round of tariffs on

Chinese goods ensuing from the Section 301 allegations took effect, thus escalating the row over tariff sanctions into a full-blown trade war that remains unsolved.[1] Such new developments have intensified the debate in academic and foreign policy-making circles on the future of Sino–US relations that is fraught with warnings of 'Thucydides Trap' and 'a new Cold War'.[2] Clearly, relations between the two powers have slid into an extremely sensitive, delicate, and critical juncture.

The current mainstream debate on Sino–US relations has two distinctive features. First, it has adopted a predominantly rationalist materialist approach to explain the evolution and deterioration of bilateral relations that have been largely woven into 'a realist story about the rise and fall of great powers'.[3] To realists, the rising power China is destined to challenge the ruling power of the United States, which will try every means possible to maintain hegemony. Therefore, conflicts, or even wars, between them are inevitable. Such scenarios are famously portrayed in John Mearsheimer's prophecy of China's unpeaceful rise and Graham Allison's unavoidable Thucydides Trap.[4] Not surprisingly, the realist focal point is how to tackle the rival in a way that maximises US interests, something that many US foreign policy elites are currently debating.[5] Secondly, the research has unfolded primarily within the scope of bilateral relations in mainly

1 The White House, 'National Security Strategy of the United States of America', December 2017, p. 25, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf; The US Department of Defence, 'Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America', 19 January, 2018, pp. 1–2, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf.

2 Zbigniew Brzezinski, 'Can China Avoid the Thucydides Trap?', *New Perspectives Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (2014), pp. 31–3; Graham Allison, 'China vs. America: Managing the Next Clash of Civilizations', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 96, No. 5 (2017), pp. 80–9; David Shambaugh, 'U.S.-China Rivalry in Southeast Asia: Power Shift or Competitive Coexistence?', *International Security*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (2018), pp. 85–127; Michael Mandelbaum, 'The New Containment: Handling Russia, China, and Iran', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 2 (2019), pp. 123–31; Minghao Zhao, 'Is a New Cold War Inevitable? Chinese Perspectives on US-China Strategic Competition', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2019), pp. 371–94.

3 Linus Hagstrom and Karl Gustafsson, 'Narrative Power: How Storytelling Shapes East Asian International Politics', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (2019), pp. 387–406.

4 John Mearsheimer, 'Can China Rise Peacefully?', *The National Interest*, 25 October, 2014, https://nationalinterest.org/commentary/can-china-rise-peacefully-10204; Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

5 Nikki Haley, 'How to Confront an Advancing Threat from China', *Foreign Affairs*, 18 July, 2019, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-07-18/how-confront-advancing-threat-china; Odd Westad, 'The Sources of Chinese Conduct: Are Washington and Beijing Fighting a New Cold War?', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 5 (2019), pp. 86–95; Kurt Campbell and Jake Sullivan, 'Competition Without Catastrophe: How America Can Both Challenge and Coexist with China', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 5 (2019), pp. 96–110.

examining the changes, risks, and impacts on them and the subsequent coping strategies, from the angle of the two powers' bilateral history, Trump's personality and his foreign policy, or US domestic factors. This is fairly prevalent in China's International Relations (IR) circles.[6] While these studies have provided valuable insights into current US-China relations, they largely ignore the key question: How did the China threat come into being in the first place? In other words, how has the United States discursively constructed an impending competitor into a plausible and credible threat that provides the grounds to legitimise its policies and mobilise resources? Answering this question will afford us a better understanding of the nature and inner logic of the current Sino–US conflict and its trajectory, for whether according to realist logic or idealistic logic, what the United States does is 'tell a story to the American people that makes it look like what the United States is doing is completely consistent with its ideals'.[7]

It is worth noting that critical scholarship has offered great insight into this question in arguing that the China threat in the United States never was pure fact but rather the discursive product of identity politics. Chengxin Pan was the pioneer among these scholars in demonstrating that China as a threatening other was discursively constructed in relation to American self-imagination. He later further argued that Western representations of China's rise as either a threat or an opportunity are intrinsic to their imagined Self and search for certainty in an ever-changing world. Oliver Turner invoked a historical perspective to further this argument by tracing three cases of China threat discourses across the whole Sino–US history. Scholars like Nicola Nymalm and Elizabeth Dahl, meanwhile, brought in a comparative approach to demystifying the China threat constructed in the United States by examining the parallels between the Japan-bashing discourse in the 1980s and early 1990s and the China threat discourse before 2013.[8]

6 Niu Jun, 'Lunhui: ZhongMei guanxi yu yatai zhixu yanbian (1978–2018)' ('Cycle: China-U.S. Relations and the Evolution of the Asia-Pacific Order (1978-2018)'), *Meiguo yanjiu* (*The Chinese Journal of American Studies*), Vol. 32, No. 6 (2018), pp. 9–25 ; Wang Yiming and Shi Yinhong, 'Telangpu xingwei de genyuan: renge qizhi yu duiwai zhengce pianhao' (The Sources of Trump Conduct: Personality Traits and Foreign Policy Preferences), *Waijiao pinglun* (*Foreign Affairs Review*), Vol. 35, No. 1 (2018), pp. 98–127; Da Wei, 'Xuanze guoneizhanlüe, dingwei ZhongMeiguanxi' ('Choosing Domestic Strategies and Locating China-US Relations'), *Meiguo yanjiu* (*The Chinese Journal of American Studies*), Vol. 33, No. 2 (2019), pp. 20–31.

7 John Mearsheimer, 'Through the Realist Lens: Conversation with John Mearsheimer', 8 April, 2002, http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people2/Mearsheimer/mearsheimer-con4.html.

8 Chengxin Pan, 'The "China Threat" in American Self-Imagination: The Discursive Construction of other as Power Politics', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (2004), pp. 305–31; Chengxin Pan, *Knowledge, Desire and Power in Global Politics: Western Representations of China's Rise* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2012); Oliver Turner, '"Threatening" China and US Security: The International Politics of Identity', *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (2013), pp. 903–24; Elizabeth Dahl, 'US American "Japan Bashing" in the 1980s and Today's "China Threat": Is History Repeating Itself?', East Asia

Following this tradition, this article aims to advance the literature on US threat-making through a narrative approach to threat formation and by systematically comparing the narrative templates employed in the United States' construction of the Soviet threat, of Japan-bashing, and of the China threat after WWII. First, we argue that threats are narratively constructed, placing narrative at the analytical centre of unravelling the United States' national threat construction. As is demonstrated by the critical school, especially the post-structuralists, facts do not speak for themselves. It is discourse that imparts meaning to events and defines the nation's identity and interests, and threat is constituted through articulating otherness in identity politics.[9] Inheriting this self-other logic in threat construction, we further argue that narrative, as a discursive form, plays a central role in making the threatening Other come true, as self-other articulation entails a narrative form. In this othering process, narrative has both epistemological and ontological values. In other words, we make sense of the world through narratives, and through narratives, we constitute our social identity. A nation's perception of the Other depends on the story in which the Other is narrated, and the same Other can be emplotted in multiple ways. A threat arises only when the Other is narrated as antithetical to the Self. Thus, to decipher the storytelling logic of the US threat narrative activity, we need to examine the story's dominant narrative templates, which have often been used unreflectively, unanalytically, and uncritically to render the Other threatening.

Secondly, we locate the China threat in a broader historical-discursive context, juxtaposing it with both the Soviet threat and the 'Japan Problem' in US history. This comparison allows us a better appreciation of the spectrum of China threat in the United States than do previous studies, especially when taking into account that the China threat discourse is now comparatively full-blown, and that the new Cold War rhetoric is growing. Specifically, the Soviet Union, Japan, and China are the three principal rivals the United States has successively encountered since the end of WWII, and each possesses distinctive characteristics. The Soviet Union was a formidable power with an antagonistic outlook, which loomed immediately upon the end of WWII. Japan rose to challenge US hegemony economically in the 1980s and early 1990s from within the US alliance system. And

Security Symposium and Conference, January 2013, https://easc.scholasticahq.com/api/v1/articles/5707-us-american-japan-bashing-in-the-1980s-and-today-s-china-threat-is-history-repeating-itself-20-80.pdf; Nicola Nymalm, 'The Economics of Identity: Is China the New "Japan Problem" for the United States?', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (2019), pp. 909–33.

9 David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992); Jennifer Milliken, 'The Study of Discourse in International Relations: A Critique of Research and Methods', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1999), pp. 225–54; Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (London: Routledge, 2006); Charlotte Epstein, *The Power of Words in International Relations: Birth of an Anti-whaling Discourse* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008).

China has been increasingly perceived as a threat to US hegemony, largely catalysed by its economic rise. A peer competitor, China has been rising in the existing world order and is dedicated to rising still further within the existing system rather building a new one. Thus, a comparative analysis of how the United States has narratively conceived these rivals will offer us a unique vantage point to assess the nature, dimensions, and trajectory of the China threat in the United States, to appreciate the repertoire that the United States has employed in the threat-making process, and to reflect on what tactics might be employed to break the narratively made stalemate in Sino–US relations.

The article is organised into two sections. In the first section, we theorise a narrative analytical framework for a comparative analysis of threat construction. By briefly reviewing how narrative as a theoretical perspective has cut through the dominant rationalist security studies, we theorise threat formation as a narrative process through introducing the logic of storytelling. We then spell out the key factors with regard to shifting the dominant security narrative, the basic analytical unit for a comparative narrative analysis, and how to identify them. In the second section, we apply the narrative analytical framework to studying empirically the United States' threat construction of the Soviet Union, Japan, and China. In each case, we begin with a brief contrast of alternative narratives about the same Other at the critical juncture to illustrate the role of narrative in shaping people's perception. We then focus on dissecting the threat narrative process through analyses of the basic narrative templates of the threat story. We conclude the article by highlighting the differences and continuity of the three threat stories.

Narrative, Identity Formation, and Threat-Making

'Narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative'.[10] Since the emergence in the 1960s of narratology in Western literary studies, the concept of 'narrative' has incrementally permeated many other disciplines, such as history, psychology, economics, management, and political science, and has now become a buzzword in social sciences. Hayden White, an influential historian, played a key role in that process. He introduced 'narrative' into history studies, claiming that historical works are 'a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose', and that historical chronicles do not privilege one narrative over another on the same subject.[11] This has fundamentally shaken the long-held belief in historical truth and highlighted the role of narratives in shaping people's understanding of history. Psychologists like Burner, Polkinghorne, and Sarbin also played a key role in exploring the cognitive and constitutive value

10 Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p. 79.

11 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), p. 2.

of narrative in shaping people's perceptions.[12] These explorations of narrative also inspired IR studies, and some IR scholars began to adopt narrative as a core concept in their research.[13] In 2006, Geoffrey Roberts proposed a 'narrative turn in IR', arguing that narrative should be viewed as 'a theoretical perspective in its own right' rather than just 'an adjunct or empirical resource'.[14] Since then, the narrative approach has been increasingly used in studying issues, such as the Iraq War, rogue states, China's rise, national security policy change, ontological security, nationalism, international revisionism, among others.[15] Recently, Linus Hagstrom and Karl Gustafsson advocated exploring narrative power in East Asian international dynamics, Adam Breuer and Alastair Johnston analysed memes in the US rhetoric of US-China rivalry through both qualitative and quantitative text analyses, and Peter Gries and Jing Yiming explored the role of narrative in shaping people's perception of Sino–US dynamics using two randomised experiments.[16]

In accordance with the reflectivists, exiles, and dissidents in the 'Third Great Debate' of the mid-to-late 1980s and the later post-structuralists, narrative

12 Jerome Bruner, 'The Narrative Construction of Reality', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1991), pp. 1–21; Donald Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); Theodore Sarbin, *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct* (Connecticut: Praeger Publisher, 1986).

13 Sanjoy Banerjee, 'Narratives and Interaction: A Constitutive Theory of Interaction and the Case of the All India Muslim League', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1998), pp. 178–203; Hidemi Suganami, 'Agents, Structures, Narratives', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (1999), pp. 365–86.

14 Geoffrey Roberts, 'History, Theory and the Narrative Turn in IR', *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (2006), pp. 703–14.

15 Erik Ringmar, 'Inter-textual Relations: The Quarrel Over the Iraq War as a Conflict Between Narrative Types', *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (2006), pp. 403–21; Jisheng Sun, *Yuyan, yiyi yu guojizhengzhi: Yilakezhanzheng jiexi* (*Language, Meaning and International Politics: An Analysis of the Iraq War*)(Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2009); Alexandra Homolar, 'Rebels Without a Conscience: The Evolution of the Rogue States Narrative in US Security Policy', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (2010), pp. 705–27; Pan, *Knowledge, Desire and Power in Global Politics*, pp. 1–19; Ronald Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) Jelena Subotic, 'Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (2016), pp. 610–27; Adam Lerner, 'The Uses and Abuses of Victimhood Nationalism in International Politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2020), pp. 62–87

16 Linus Hagstrom and Karl Gustafsson, 'Narrative Power: How Storytelling Shapes East Asian International Politics', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (2019), pp. 387–406; Adam Breuer and Alastair Johnston, 'Memes, Narratives and the Emergent US-China Security', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (2019), pp. 429–55; Peter Gries and Jing Yiming, 'Are the US and China Fated to Fight? How Narratives of "Power Transition" Shape Great Power War or Peace', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (2019), pp. 456–82.

approaches to IR studies highlight the contingency of meaning by problematising the sense-making process. In other words, the meaning of things and events is constituted through narratives rather than a given, inborn, and objective one held by rationalists and thus potentially open to multiple interpretations. The interface between narrative and IR studies lies in identity formation. Originally borrowed from sociology, there are two broad categories of identity in IR scholarship: one is the pre-social and pre-political essentialist category, typified by 'the essential state' proposed by Alexander Wendt; the other, though much more diverse in form, is a discursive one.[17] The narrative approach to IR studies embraces the latter one, that is, the 'narrative identity' developed by Paul Ricoeur and Margaret Somers.[18] This narrative identity presupposes that narrative possesses both epistemological and ontological value. Specifically, we make sense of the world through narratives and in that process acquire our identity; that identity, in turn, serves as the premise for what to do, which further leads to new narratives and actions. Narrative, identity, and actions are hence in a constant, mutually constitutive process, and identity formation turns out to be a narrative construction process.

In this self-other articulation process, we argue that the construction of national threats follows the logic of storytelling. Above all, national threats are narratively constructed rather than having inborn, self-evident, and purely objective existences and are understood in a storied way. We rely on narratives to make sense of the world and create a sense of order, coherence, and certainty to anchor the Self by structuring objects and events in a temporal, spatial, and relational manner. National security narratives 'weave present challenges, past failures and triumphs, and potential futures into a coherent tale, with well-defined characters and plot lines'.[19] Meanwhile, as facts do not speak for themselves and their meaning is contingent, they can be emplotted into different stories, and it is difficult to conclude whether one narrative is more legitimate than another.[20] By highlighting certain facts and ruling out other irrelevant ones, narrative makes events meaningful and understandable through the emplotment devices and skills of a story like characterisation and causal explanations and their significance in the whole story.[21]

In this highly selective appropriation and suppression process, national security narratives are usually autobiographical, with the emplotted self as the hero

17 Margaret Somers, 'The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relation and Network Approach', *Theory and Society*, Vol. 23, No. 5 (1994), pp. 605–49; Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

18 Paul Ricoeur, 'Narrative Identity', *Philosophy Today*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (1991), pp. 73–81; Somers, 'The Narrative Constitution of Identity', pp. 605–49.

19 Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*, p. 3.

20 David Campbell, 'Meta Bosnia: Narratives of the Bosnian War', *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (1998), pp. 261–81.

21 Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 84; Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*, p. 18.

and the antagonistic one as the villain.[22] These narratives often present themselves as pure knowledge, claiming that the threat posed by the villain is real and objective. But their truthfulness cannot walk beyond the stories themselves, for it is just a temporal and spatial configuration of events. Their given meaning in one story can be opposite to that in another one. Just as Chengxin Pan illustrates, the China threat argument, which has typically presented itself as verifiable knowledge, is actually autobiographical in nature. It tells more about the US Self imagination than China itself and has different framings, as China's rise can be either an opportunity or a threat to the USA.[23] Thus, the perceived threats a rival poses largely depend on the rival's configuration in the national security story, and a national threat occurs when the other is narratively antithetical to the Self. Thus, the debate on national security is essentially a competition between security narratives competing for dominance of the social understanding.

Moreover, national security narratives frame both the way people perceive the world and how they should behave. Once we accept one storied way of representing the national security reality, we will automatically and often unconsciously depend on that cognitive path, and 'tailor reality' to meet the expectation of the story, as is shown in the misperception phenomena in international political psychology studies.[24] Such narrative representation, in turn, provides people with legitimacy as regards what to do. In fact, no matter the logic of consequence or the logic of appropriateness, both actually come under the umbrella of the logic of storytelling, as either the calculation of interests or the consideration of appropriateness makes sense only when it is emplotted in a security story. Meanwhile, the logic of storytelling does not, in contrast to other logics, directly prescribe specific policies or actions but mainly shapes and restricts the direction and legitimacy of the policy options at stake by providing decision-makers with a coherent understanding of the reality and a storied rationality. And because of this logic of storytelling, a national security story often turns out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Last but not least, the acceptability and dissemination of a threat story do not depend on its truthfulness. Narrative truth is determined by 'its verisimilitude rather than its verifiability', and the power of a story does not reside in the truth of its sentences.[25] Take, for example, the widespread Thucydides Trap narrative in Sino–US relations. Many critics challenged this narrative by criticising its misrepresentation, or misinterpretation, of history, namely, its disloyalty to real history. They, however, found that their efforts were not just in vain but possibly made it

22 Molly Patterson and Kristen Monroe, 'Narrative in Political Science', *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 1 (1998), pp. 315–6; Banerjee, 'Narratives and Interaction', p. 193.

23 Pan, 'The "China Threat' in American Self-Imagination', pp. 305–31; Pan, *Knowledge, Desire and Power in Global Politics*, pp. 20–41.

24 Somers, 'The Narrative Constitution of Identity', p. 618; Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

25 Bruner, 'The Narrative Construction of Reality', p. 13; Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 44.

even more popular. This is because as long as the Thucydides Trap story qualifies as narrative truth, it will be accepted and diffused, even though the actual historical facts may potentially allow different configurations of the reality.

Apart from the logic of storytelling, national security narratives also have a life cycle. Whether or not a new national threat story can rise to become a dominant one depends on multiple factors. First, the window of opportunity counts. Normally, the dominant narrative tries every means to marginalise other competing narratives, so most of the time alternatives are unlikely to replace the dominant one. It is only when the expectation of the dominant national security narrative sharply and repeatedly contradicts the reality, or when it cannot incorporate the new narrative into its construction of a coherent understanding of the reality, that the window of opportunity will open for a narrative shift, that is, the so-called 'critical juncture' of historical institutionalism.[26] The critical juncture usually occurs when big external shocks like terrorist attacks, financial crises, wars, etc. result in an uncertain environment, as is shown in Alexandra Homolar's research on 'rogue states' narrative and Jeffrey Legro's discussion on when decision-makers are open to embracing new ideas.[27] Even at the critical juncture, the exact timing with regard to releasing a new threat story script still matters. As George Kennan recalled in his memoirs, had the Long Telegram been sent either six months earlier or later, it would not have produced the same effects.[28]

Apart from the window of opportunity, the speakers' rhetorical modes and authority also carry weight. Ronald Krebs found that, in the four ways of combining two narrative situations (settled versus unsettled) and the two rhetorical modes (argument versus storytelling), only when adopting storytelling in the 'unsettled situation', which is similar to a 'critical juncture', are people more receptive to a new national security narrative.[29] As to the speakers' authority, the President of the United States represents the country and has natural and institutional advantages with regard to advancing the national security agenda. However, some studies show that the role of the bully pulpit has been exaggerated, and that the president cannot actually redirect the political agenda at will, while even those that are successful only take advantage of the opportunity to 'facilitate change'.[30]

26 Giovanni Capoccia and R. Daniel Kelemen, 'The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism', *World Politics*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (2007), pp. 341–69.

27 Alexandra Homolar, 'Rebels Without a Conscience: The Evolution of the Rogue States Narrative in US Security Policy', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (2010), pp. 705–27; Jeffrey Legro, *Rethinking the World: Great Power Strategies and International Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

28 George Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925–1950* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), p. 295.

29 Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*, pp. 41–8.

30 George Edwards III, *The Strategic President: Persuasion and Opportunity in Presidential Leadership* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 188.

It is also worth noting that the president's personal charisma and consequent status by virtue of it also affect his ability to promote a new security agenda. For example, the assault on the legitimacy of Donald Trump's presidency through repeated impeachment moves has severely hindered the public's reception of his national security narrative, upon whose construction congressmen also exert great influence through hearings and legislation. Other political and business elites, and intellectuals, too, have been playing an increasingly important role in setting the national security agenda, especially against the backdrop of the ascending role of new media. The influence of the cohort outside of core government policy-making circles is even more evident in the rise of the Japan-bashing narrative and China threat narrative.

Notable also is that such factors as content, narrative types, and choice of words all affect the acceptance and dissemination of new threat stories. In general, successful national security narratives not only weave past, present, and future domestic and foreign issues into a coherent story but more importantly, usually resonate with the nation's past experience and widely shared and repeatedly told mythologies and writings about the Self and the antithetical Other. Meanwhile, a simple and classical story of a hero and a villain is much more easily remembered and spread than a story with an overly complex plot and characters. Additionally, employing eye-catching and resonating metaphors, images, and symbols can also facilitate the rise of a new national security narrative, as shown in the use of disease metaphors in the Soviet threat story and the Thucydides Trap metaphor in China threat stories.

How, then, can we analyse these threat stories? Narrative templates can be employed to analyse and compare the construction of national threat narratives in different periods. In reality, narratives on national threats can be in diverse and multimodal forms; their producers also command different levels of authority and thus have different impacts on the national threat perception and agenda. We adopt James Wertsch's classification of narratives, namely, specific narratives and schematic narrative templates. The former refers to specific stories involving concrete events and characters, while the latter reflects 'a single general story line', functioning as 'generalised schema' that may produce specific narratives with various details and which is employed in an 'unreflective, unanalytical and unwitting' way in that process.[31] Thus, the schematic narrative templates are in essence cognitive lenses or frames. This article mainly concerns the construction of the general storyline, rather than specific threat episodes, so the schematic narrative templates (hereinafter referred to as 'narrative templates') are the focus of this research. These narrative templates collectively address the key structural elements of a national security story, namely, the setting that includes the backgrounds, arena, and theme of the story; the characterisation of actors, their purpose, psyche, and personality; and the emplotment that configures the scene, self and

31 James Wertsch, 'The Narrative Organization of Collective Memory', *Ethos*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2008), pp. 122–4.

others, behaviours and events, etc. in a logical and temporal fashion.[32] These narrative templates are core nodes of the threat discourse network and are widely, unreflectively, and effortlessly used in making specific threat stories, just like 'cognitive lenses' that instantly turn a complicated and fuzzy world into an understandable threat story. As cognitive frames, narrative templates can transcend time and space, which allows us to compare different threat stories in history.

Finally, how can we identify the basic narrative templates of national threat stories? The primary criterion for measuring a narrative template here is its salience in the threat discourse network. These templates are not necessarily created and promoted by decision-making circles. They may first be spawned and disseminated in the public domain before being officially adopted or possibly both ways and simultaneously. In fact, the narrative template generation of the Soviet threat, Japan threat, and China threat fully exhibit various possibilities. Therefore, what counts most in selecting narrative templates is how widely they are held and used and how important they are to the narrative structure of the threat story in question, rather than who actually creates them. This is especially true in the Japan-bashing story, most of whose templates were first invented by public intellectuals, especially the Gang of Four (Chalmers Johnson, Karel van Wolferen, Clyde Prestowitz, and James Fallows). Meanwhile, the activity of identifying the basic narrative templates unavoidably involves choosing texts. Frankly, it is a problem that almost all IR studies incorporating discourse analysis may have to face, one that has not been perfectly solved. Following Lene Hansen's 'basic discourses' and Christopher Browning's 'sedimentation of particular narrative structures', the texts we chose include extracts from presidents' speeches, government documents and reports, articles and books by typical threat discourse producers, leading newspapers, magazines, journals, and other mass media.[33] In addition, the narrative templates in this article are in essence more conceptual than the actual words we use to name them. In other words, employing a narrative template does not entail use of the words that we use to refer to it.

The Soviet Threat: A Bipolar Conflict

When WWII ended in 1945, the United States quickly drifted into an unsettled narrative situation, as the dominant WWII script against the Axis powers had lost its power to help the foreign policy establishment navigate an uncharted post-war world. How would the United States make sense of the new and puzzling world? How should the United States interpret the Soviet moves in Central and Eastern

32 Kai Oppermann and Alexander Spencer, 'Narrating Success and Failure: Congressional Debates on the "Iran Nuclear Deal"', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2018), pp. 268–92.

33 Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (London: Routledge, 2006); Christopher Browning, *Constructivism, Narrative and Foreign Policy Analysis: A Case Study of Finland* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008).

Europe? Would the Soviet Union be a new national threat? These questions tormented US policy-making circles, as ambiguous and contradictory information and ideas had been continuously circulated to Washington. On the one hand, confrontation with the Soviet Union was clearly not what Americans initially hoped for. Truman believed that 'an open world trading environment' was vital to US prosperity, and the majority of elites did not believe that the Soviet Union would cause 'the principal post-war problems' and favoured cooperation with Stalin.[34] Among them, Secretary of Commerce Henry Wallace was the most vocal and radical one. He argued that Soviet demands and actions were reasonable and justifiable, and that 'the tougher we get, the tougher the Russians will get'.[35] Instead of a Cold War, he offered a 'path to peace with Russia'; as the reconstruction of war-torn Russia would provide great opportunities for American businesses, the two countries could engage in 'mutually profitable trade', which would in turn cultivate 'mutual trust and confidence' in achieving 'lasting peace'.[36] On the other hand, officials like Truman's chief aide William Leahy and Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal supported a tough approach to the Soviet Union and had a much gloomier view of the two powers' future. For example, Forrestal was delighted with the conclusion reached by the study he commissioned in late 1945—that 'violence between Soviet Russia and the US would seem to be inevitable', while agencies from the intelligence community still sent mixed messages about the Soviet Union.[37] Bombarded day-by-day with mixed and ambiguous information, decision-makers in Washington searched anxiously for a master narrative that could give Truman a coherent story at this time of uncertainty.

It finally came on 22 February, 1946 when George Kennan, the then US Chargé d'Affaires in Moscow, sent to Washington his Long Telegram. Under this intense, unsettled narrative situation, he did not simply analyse why the Soviet Union was unwilling to join the World Bank and IMF as other intelligence analysts would have done. Instead, he provided a new overarching script in 'eighteenth-century Protestant sermon' style expounding the psyche and behaviours of the Soviet Union and the nature of their conflicts.[38] This storytelling strategy worked well. Unlike the usual return telegram, this Long Telegram instantly

34 Melvyn Leffler, 'The Emergence of an American Grand Strategy, 1945–1952', in Melvyn Leffler and Odd Westad, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Cold War: Volume I Origins* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 68; Paul Nitze, 'The Grand Strategy of NSC-68', in S. Nelson Drew, ed., *NSC-68: Forging the Strategy of Containment* (Washington DC: National Defense University Press, 1994), p. 7.

35 Daniel Yergin, *Shattered Peace: The Origins of the Cold War and the National Security State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977), pp. 245–56.

36 Alonzo Hamby, 'Henry A Wallace, the Liberals, and Soviet-American Relations', *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (1968), pp. 158–9; Henry Wallace, 'The Way to Peace', in Ralph Levering, et al., eds., *Debating the Origins of the Cold War* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), p. 78.

37 Yergin, *Shattered Peace*, p. 165.

38 Kennan, *Memoirs*, p. 293.

gained widespread circulation and resonance within Washington's decision-making circles. Shortly after, the State Department forwarded it to US diplomatic missions around the world, and Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal made and circulated hundreds of copies as required reading for senior officers in the armed forces.[39] The telegram turned out to be a miracle in US diplomatic history not only because of what it said but also, more importantly, because of the new schema it enshrined. It simplified the complicated interaction between the United States and the Soviet Union into a simple, bipolar, classic story of a capitalist hero and a communist evil. This telegram eventually merged with the sequent 'Iron Curtain Speech', 'The Truman Doctrine', 'The Sources of Soviet Conduct', and other important documents in the Cold War blueprint 'NSC 68', a script that has guided US foreign policy for nearly half a century.

Capitalism Versus Communism

The conflict between capitalism and communism is an overarching narrative template of the Soviet threat story. Just as the Cold War architect Paul Nitze wrote after the end of the Cold War, 'the contest was not one of competition over specific national interests', but 'had an absolute ideological quality'.[40] The Long Telegram established this template. Before the telegram, analysts from various US government agencies had closely monitored and analysed Soviet intentions, capabilities, and behaviours and churned out many 'mixed and ambiguous' reports. They found that the more closely they examined what the Soviet Union had done, the harder it was for them to give a definite and clear answer.[41] This ambivalent characterisation made it hard to form a new coherent and powerful national security narrative. Moreover, uncertainty about bilateral relations inevitably led to the United States' anxiety about the Self, especially its new role in the post-war world. Consequently, Kennan chose not to become entrapped in examining the details of Soviet behaviours, instead simplifying the issue into an ideological struggle of the most common hero-versus-villain narrative structure. In doing so, he quoted directly from a speech by Stalin in 1927 whereby the world would evolve into 'a socialist centre' and 'a capitalist centre' and the battle between them would 'decide fate of capitalism and of communism in entire world'.[42]

Owing to this polarising narrative, the face of the Soviet Union was no longer ambiguous or conflicting, and the two countries made their world-stage debut in the story as protagonist and antagonist, respectively, each with their own ideological face. Although Kennan clearly cashed in on American memory of the First Red Scare to institute this ideological frame, it should be noted that the fact that

39 *Ibid.*, pp. 294–5.

40 Nitze, 'The Grand Strategy of NSC-68', p. 16.

41 Charles Nathanson, 'The Social Construction of the Soviet Threat: A Study in the Politics of Representation', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (1988), p. 454.

42 'Telegram, George Kennan to George Marshall', 22 February, 1946, in Harry S. Truman Administration File, https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/coldwar/documents/pdf/6-6.pdf, p. 2.

they had ideological conflicts diverged radically from the fact that the fundamental nature of their conflict was ideological. It was Kennan who set the story's theme as an ideological struggle for world domination.

It is, moreover, worth noting that Kennan's quote from Stalin's speech allows alternative narratives. Stalin's purpose may have been mainly rooted in domestic politics rather than in a plan to wage an ideological war, even when taking into account his speech of 9 February, 1946.[43] However, what is most interesting here is not to do with the truthfulness of Kennan's arrangement of the facts, but the effects of the frame on the historical process. Once accepted, the frame became the master of cognition, and the story unfolded in its expected script. For example, soon after the circulation of the Long Telegram, US Defense officials increasingly believed that communist domination of the world was the goal of Soviet foreign policy, and Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal even argued that the Soviet communist threat was more acute even than the Nazi threat in the 1930s.[44] More importantly, there occurred two notable behaviour changes in policy-making circles: one was that military planners began placing less emphasis on assessing Soviet intentions and more on Soviet capabilities; the other that information contradicting the frame was either ignored or used as evidence of a shift of tactics, rather than as an ultimate goal.[45]

To reify the Soviet communist threat, illness and disease metaphors were employed rampantly in the discourse. For example, in the Long Telegram, the Soviet Union was portrayed as holding a 'neurotic view of world affairs' and suffering from an 'instinctive Russian sense of insecurity'; communism was 'like a malignant parasite which feeds only on diseased tissue'; the future of the United States depended on its own 'health and vigor', and the way to approach the Russia threat should be in the way 'a doctor studies an unruly and unreasonable individual'.[46] Truman accordingly implanted disease metaphors strategically in his Truman Doctrine speech. When drafting the speech, Undersecretary of United States Department of State Acheson instructed the working group that the speech should emphasise 'the spread of Communism' rather than straightforwardly denouncing the Soviet Union *per se*, and the specific rhetorical strategy later approved in cross-agency meetings was that which expressed the need to save a desperately ill patient from the ravages of world communism through US aid.[47] Such strategic use of disease metaphors achieved great success. Mainstream newspapers like *The New York Times* compared Truman's speech to Roosevelt's

43 Frank Costigliola, 'The Creation of Memory and Myth: Stalin's 1946 Election Speech and the Soviet Threat', in Martin J. Medhurst and H. W Brands, eds., *Critical Reflections on the Cold War: Linking Rhetoric and History* (Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2000), pp. 38–54.

44 Melvyn Leffler, 'The American Conception of National Security and the Beginnings of the Cold War, 1945–48', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 89, No. 2 (1984), pp. 346–81.

45 *Ibid.*, pp. 368–9.

46 'Telegram, George Kennan to George Marshall', pp. 5, 16–7.

47 Robert Ivie, 'Fire, Flood, and Red Fever: Motivating Metaphors of Global Emergency in the Truman Doctrine Speech', *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (1999), pp. 574–5.

Quarantine Speech in 1937, and even Senator Edwin Johnson, who at one time opposed the aid, admitted after the speech that the epidemic of communism was 'sweeping over Europe and Asia'.[48] Not surprisingly, the aid bill was passed in Congress with a majority vote, even though such a move had been unpopular both in Congress and among the public.

In addition to its expansive nature, communism was also portrayed as constituting a threat to US domestic security. In the Long Telegram, Kennan stated that many US civil groups, such as 'labor unions, youth leagues, women's organisation, racial societies, religious societies, social organisations, cultural groups, liberal magazines, publishing houses', could be influenced by communist penetration.[49] NSC 68 further stated that the United States' internal development would be seriously threatened by the Soviets' 'serious espionage, subversion and sabotage, particularly by concerted and well-directed communist activity'.[50]

Free Democracy Versus Totalitarian Dictatorship

The dichotomy between free democracy and totalitarian dictatorship is another basic narrative template. In this narrative structure, the nature of the conflict of ideas and values between the United States and the Soviet Union was characterised as that between 'the free society' led by the United States and the 'slavery under the grim oligarchy of the Kremlin', and the Soviet 'other' was contrasted starkly with the American Self. The Soviet autocracy employed secret police and suppressed and deprived the people of human rights while internationally coercing 'satellite states' and seeking to 'impose its absolute authority over the rest of world'. The United States' ultimate aim, therefore, was to 'assure the integrity and vitality' of its free society.[51]

The Iron Curtain speech and the Truman Doctrine speech played a key role in forging and diffusing this narrative frame. First, the Iron Curtain speech demarcated the world into two opposing political entities in the public mind. On 5 March, 1946, Winston Churchill declaimed in his Iron Curtain speech that it was 'a solemn moment for American Democracy' that '[f]rom Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent', and that all countries behind that curtain were subject to Soviet totalitarian control.[52] The iron curtain actually refers to the 19th-century fireproof safety curtains installed in theatres to protect people from the frequent fires that broke out. The

48 *Ibid.*, p. 583.

49 'Telegram, George Kennan to George Marshall', p. 12.

50 'United States Objectives and Programs for National Security (14 April, 1950)', *National Security Council Report*, NSC 68, p. 61, http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116191.

51 *Ibid.*, pp. 4–7.

52 Winston Churchill, 'The Sinews of Peace (Iron Curtain Speech)', 5 March, 1946, https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1946-1963-elder-statesman/the-sinews-of-peace.

metaphorical use of 'iron curtain' perfectly captured people's imagination in rolling the phrase up into 'a single image [of] all the fears that the Soviet state has invoked since the Russian Revolution almost thirty years ago'.[53] It should be noted that this cognitive lens arbitrarily and irreversibly split the European continent into two mental and geographical worlds: one controlled by Soviet totalitarianism, the other championed by free democracies like the United States and the UK. It simplified the complex interactions between nations as a single contradiction between dictatorships and free democracies, thus potentially ruling out other possible narratives, such as Russia's reasonable need for security in Eastern Europe.[54] Despite provoking harsh criticism from liberals in America, and rebuked by Stalin as 'a call to war', the frame soon gained ground and exercised its power. One poll carried out between 5 and 13 March that year shows that the Iron Curtain narrative successfully pivoted public attention to the Soviet threat.[55]

Truman's demarcation between 'two ways of life' is another powerful narrative frame in this connection. On 12 March, 1947, President Truman delivered a speech at a joint session of Congress on the Greece and Turkey issue, known as the Truman Doctrine. It outlined the US stance on Soviet Communism and on other countries that had succumbed to it. Having placed the issues of Greece and Turkey in the context of ideological struggle, he later put forward a widely circulated frame regarding 'two ways of life': one founded on 'the will of the majority' and 'distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression'; the other based on 'the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority', which fed on 'terror and oppression, a controlled press and radio, fixed elections, and the suppression of personal freedoms'.[56]

Truman's 'two ways of life' resonated well with American memories of the Soviet Union's repressive nature before WWII. In fact, soon after the 1917 Revolution, many Americans had already gained the impression that Russia's new system went against their Western values and democratic system.[57] In February, one month before the speech, a report by the State Department found

53 Max Lerner, 'The Iron Curtain and the Great Fear', *The Gazette and Daily*, 14 March, 1946, p. 19.

54 In fact, when WWII ended, the US Defense Department analysed Soviet aims from the angle of power politics, its reactions to other countries' moves, and many even deemed Soviet manoeuvres in Eastern Europe and the Far East as reasonable measures to ensure security needs. See Leffler, 'The American Conception of National Security and the Beginnings of the Cold War, 1945–48', p. 365.

55 Fraser J. Harbutt, *The Iron Curtain: Churchill, America, and the Origins of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 207.

56 Harry Truman, 'Recommendation for Assistance to Greece and Turkey', 12 March, 1947, https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/doctrine/large/documents/pdfs/5-9.pdf.

57 Donald Davis and Eugene Trani, *The First Cold War: The Legacy of Woodrow Wilson in US-Soviet Relations* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002).

that although 60% of the general public was critical of the Soviet Union, more than 70% opposed 'getting tough with Russia'; also that at that time the US domestic budget was tight, and the newly elected Republican-controlled Congress had voiced a strong demand for tax reductions.[58] But soon after the speech, a government intelligence agency report showed an 'exceedingly favourable' response from the press and public to the aid bill, which Congress passed without demur.[59]

The narrative template of a free society and Soviet dictatorship is often also associated with another metaphorical template based on the 'falling domino' principle. In order to visualise Greece and Turkey's prospects, Truman covertly embedded in his speech the frame of the Domino Theory by arguing that '[i]f Greece should fall under the control of an armed minority, the effect upon its neighbour, Turkey, would be immediate and serious ... have a profound effect upon those countries in Europe'.[60] President Eisenhower later crystallised this mode of thought, in 1954, as the 'falling domino' principle. As regards metaphors, that of 'falling dominoes' is a mechanical one simplifying the interactions between countries as a rigid physical process. It implied that any country that was friendly with the Soviet Union would be deemed as falling towards it, and that all nations would be seen as homogeneous and of equal importance to America's security. In a confrontation, such a scenario often leads to stalemate, not because of its importance in isolation but due to concerns over its consequences in relation to other events, even though these events are usually 'far removed in time, substance, and geography'.[61] One chilling effect of this cognitive lens is exemplified by the Vietnam War. As Stanley Karnow pointed out, it was US decision-makers' falling domino mentality that caused their naive disregard for 'the complex nationalistic diversity of Southeast Asia'.[62]

Military Threat

Framed as an ideologically and politically antagonistic Other, the Soviet Union was moreover portrayed as a serious and urgent military menace to the United States, a threat both global and multidimensional encompassing traditional and atomic military capabilities. It should be noted that although the Long Telegram mentioned the Soviet Union's great efforts towards strengthening its defence, between 1947 and 1950, American foreign policy-makers nevertheless paid scant

58 Yergin, *Shattered Peace*, p. 283; Leffler, 'The Emergence of an American Grand Strategy, 1945–1952', pp. 75–6.

59 'Editorial Reaction to Current Issues, Greek Situation, Parts I and II', 19 March, 1947, in Truman Papers, President's Secretary's Files, Greece, https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/doctrine/large/index.php?action=pdf&documentid=4-8.

60 Harry Truman, 'Recommendation for Assistance to Greece and Turkey', p.4.

61 Robert Jervis, 'Domino Beliefs and Strategic Behavior', in Robert Jervis and Jack Snyder, eds., *Dominoes and Bandwagons: Strategic Beliefs and Great Power Competition in the Eurasian Rimland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 22.

62 Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 43.

attention to the USSR or to any other countries' military capabilities.[63] Kennan, original designer of the Cold War script, believed that the Russians did not 'want war of any kind' with the United States.[64] However, the Soviets' successful development of nuclear weapons and the outbreak of the Korean War resulted in an adjustment to the story script in the newly released NSC 68. It concluded that the possibility now existed of the Soviet Union's waging major wars against the United States, and that it would be capable of delivering a surprise atomic strike in four to five years. This new military threat narrative thus became a basic narrative template in the Soviet threat story. The result was an upsurge in the United States' defence spending build-up of both traditional and atomic weapons and the transformation of NATO's largely loose and dormant political commitment to the defence of Europe into a military entity. Different from the conflict in the realm of ideas and values, the military threat was to some extent measurable, in the sense of how many missiles were involved, and was constantly updated in the press, which made it even more riveting, sensational, and consequently frightening. That for many Americans the Soviet threat story became a tale portending arms race and—horror of horrors—an impending Soviet atomic bombing, therefore, is no surprise.

Japan-Bashing: Unfair Play

The Japan-bashing narrative of the 1980s and early 1990s is all but forgotten in the current US mainstream discourse other than on rare occasions, when it is generally labelled as 'pointless' or 'hypocritical'.[65] But the fact is that from WWII through to the 1980s, the United States and Japan indeed experienced a period of enemy-to-friend/friend-to-enemy oscillation. A couple of surveys taken around 1990 showed that Japan had overtaken the Soviet Union as a principal threat to the United States.[66]

How did the Japan threat emerge? Japan's 'economic miracle' is clearly an important contributor. After WWII, the Japanese economy experienced decades of rapid growth. Meanwhile, starting from the 1970s, the American economy experienced stagflation. Many an American company lost its turf in competition with Japanese and other companies, and many Americans, especially in manufacturing industries, became jobless. Associated with micro-economic problems, the huge US trade deficit with Japan continued to break records and reach a new high. However, Japan's economic success does not fully explain why Japan became an

63 John Gaddis and Paul Nitze, 'NSC 68 and the Soviet Threat Reconsidered', *International Security*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (1980), pp. 164–76.

64 Kennan, *Memoirs*, p. 361.

65 Narrelle Morris, *Japan-Bashing: Anti-Japanism Since the 1980s* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 130–2.

66 Robert Neff, Paul Magnusson, and William Hostein, 'Rethinking Japan: The New, Harder Line toward Tokyo', *Business Week*, 7 August, 1989, p. 51; John Reilly, 'Public Opinion: The Pulse of the 90s', *Foreign Policy*, Vol. 70, No. 82 (1991), pp. 79–96.

American enemy. We find that Japan's most impressive economic growth in the 1960s and 1970s was viewed as 'a prophylactic against communism', and that the Japanese were regarded as 'the great emulators' of the West, as Americans regarded 'Japanese imitation as the sincerest form of flattery'.[67] Japan was even recommended as a model for the United States to follow.[68] It is also true that Japan was pressured to exercise 'voluntary export restraint', but until the early 1980s, these trade frictions were largely regarded as an economic issue rather than one of security, because Japan was an ally in the Cold War story.

How to interpret the facts of this transformation is more relevant than the facts themselves and, in this context, the US Self is more important than Japan itself. In contrast with Japan's success, in the 1980s, the United States witnessed 'one of the most difficult periods in the history of US trade policy'.[69] The collapse of the Bretton Woods system, the two oil crises in the 1970s, and the ensuing company bankruptcies and big job losses severely weakened the material base of the United States' hegemonic identity. As the American Self felt growingly anxious and threatened, so Japan unceremoniously morphed into 'the Japan Problem'.[70] Amid intense frustration and uncertainty, the United States again drifted into another situation of unsettled narrative. But in this instance, the main challenge the United States had to fight off was an economic rather than an ideological one, as had been the case with the Soviet Union. Americans demanded a coherent story that made sense of the United States' decline and Japan's economic success, which would, in turn, reaffirm and reassure the American Self.

Consequently, the US discourse on US–Japan relations rapidly divided into two opposing camps, namely, of 'traditionalists' (or the 'Japan lobby'), and 'revisionists' (or 'Japan-bashers'). How to understand Japan's economic success was the key divide between them. Each offered strikingly different pictures of Japan through different stories. The 'traditionalists' argued that Japan's economy was essentially no different from any Western market economy, and that its economic miracle could be explained according to the neoclassical market model. Although the role of the Japanese government could not be ignored, the private sector was the main driver of economic growth, and the problems between the countries

67 Stephen Krasner, 'Trade Conflicts and the Common Defense: The United States and Japan', *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 101, No. 5 (1986), pp. 787–806; Masao Miyoshi, *Off Center: Power and Culture Relations between Japan and the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 67; Andrew Schmookler, 'An Overview of Japan's Economic Success: Its Sources and Its Implications', *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1983), pp. 356–77.

68 Ezra Vogel, *Japan as Number One: Lessons from America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

69 Douglas Irwin, *Clashing Over Commerce: A History of US Trade Policy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 565.

70 Karel van Wolferen, 'The Japan Problem', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (1986), pp. 288–303.

were indeed economic or could at least be solved through negotiation and coordination.[71] Just as *Asia's New Giant*—'The Bible' of this camp, stated, 'Japanese growth was not miraculous; it can be reasonably well understood and explained by ordinary economic causes ... the main impetus to growth has been private'.[72] Overall, the traditionalist narratives fall under the umbrella of the US–Japan alliance story during the Cold War, whereby Japan still held the Western market identity. The revisionists, however, invented a new story of victimhood to construct Japan's Otherness. They held that Japan was essentially non-Western and intrinsically closed, and that its economic miracle was not a result of free market competition but of Japan's industrial policy and the partnership between public and private sectors—a system in stark contrast to the Western market model.[73] In other words, Japan's different political-economic system accounted for Japan's success in competition with the United States and the subsequent US decline. Thus, Japan's unfair play was threatening America's hegemonic identity. Clearly, the two camps were 'talking about the same events, but voicing diametrically opposed interpretations'.[74]

The revisionist story started gaining ground in the mid-1980s and was widely shared among public intellectuals, congressmen, and former government officials, as well as the business community and the US trade representative office and Department of Commerce cohort. Prominent figures in this camp included the 'Gang of Four' earlier mentioned, Peter Drucker, Pat Choate, Theodore White, and Michael Crichton, among others. Next, we will analyse what dominant narrative templates were employed to articulate Japan's threat in a story of US victimhood.

Western Market Economy Versus Developmental State

The revisionist story was founded on the premise that Japan represented a different kind of capitalism from that of the Western market economy—one that threatened the American-led liberal international system. The demarcation between a 'developmental state' and a Western market economy was the overarching narrative template employed to frame it. In these stories, Japan, as a developmental state, played an unfair game with America by virtue of its implementation of industrial policies that guided and supported its enterprises, resulting in the United States' enormous trade deficits with Japan, industrial decline, and the large numbers of jobless American workers.

This narrative template largely originated in Chalmers Johnson's influential monograph *MITI and the Japanese Miracle: The Growth of Industrial Policy,*

71 Krasner, 'Trade Conflicts and the Common Defense', pp. 790–2.

72 Hugh Patrick and Henry Rosovsky, 'Japan's Economic Performance: An Overview', in Hugh Patrick and Henry Rosovsky, eds., *Asia's New Giant: How the Japanese Economy Works* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 1976), pp. 6, 47.

73 Robert Uriu, *Clinton and Japan: The Impact of Revisionism on US Trade Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 27.

74 *Ibid.*, p. viii.

1925–1975.[75] Trade frictions had been a thorn in the side of US–Japan relations long before the 1980s, but Japan-bashing voices remained fragmented due to the absence of an overarching concept of Japan's exclusion from the Western market economy. If, as the traditionalists insisted, Japan was still deemed a market economy, it meant that Japan was identified with the American Self rather than with threatening it, which, in turn, made it difficult for the United States to justify its failure in economic competition with Japan other than by acknowledging Japan's superiority. Thus, the revisionists urgently needed to forge a narrative template that could expel Japan from the 'we' to become a different or threatening Other. Chalmers Johnson offered precisely what was needed in this regard. He coined for Japan a type of Otherness called a 'developmental state', which is neither a Western market economy nor one that has developed under a communist dictatorship. For the developmental state of Japan, a developmental orientation prevailed wherein the government set and developed economic development through its industrial policy. Conversely, the United States was a free market economy concerned only with the rules and procedures of the economy rather than with 'what industries ought to exist and what industries are no longer needed'.[76] Therefore, companies in the two countries did not compete on a level playing field. This helped to construct a coherent story about Japan's economic miracle and the United States' tremendous frustration in competing with Japan. Once introduced, the new narrative frame aroused widespread resonance, providing 'the intellectual anchor for the larger revisionist paradigm'.[77] Propelled by mass media propagation, it soon evolved into a consensus among Japan bashers and functioned as a primary rationale for both pressuring Japan and drafting policies against Japan. For example, during a Congress hearing on the Structural Impediments Initiative (SII), a new campaign launched in 1989 to fight Japan's unfair practices, an influential senator stated bluntly: 'The problem, as I see it, is that we mistake the type of economy that Japan is', and that it was what 'Chalmers Johnson has called them, a capitalist developmental state', wherein the Japanese government was an 'active player in the market'.[78]

What most alarmed Americans about these stories is Japan's shift of industry targeting from low-end traditional manufacturing to high-tech sectors. To Americans, technological superiority was an important facet of America's

75 Chalmers Johnson, *MITI and the Japanese Miracle: The Growth of Industrial Policy, 1925–1975* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982).

76 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

77 John Kunkel, *America's Trade Policy Towards Japan: Demanding Results* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 136.

78 Senate Committee on Finance Hearing, 'United States-Japan Structural Impediments Initiative (SII)', 20 July, 1989, p. 16, https://www.finance.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/hrg101-594.pdf.

hegemonic identity and of its role in economic prosperity, national security, and global leadership, and the distinction between commercial and military uses blurred when it came to high-technology industries.[79] In fact, even in the early 1980s, a CIA report ranked Japan as 'by far the more formidable challenger to US technological and economic leadership' than Western Europe.[80] With the rise of the Japan threat discourse, Americans increasingly feared that the shift of Japanese industrial policy from traditional manufacturing industries, like consumer electronics, to 'strategic, high-technology, high-value-added industries' would relentlessly erode US technological superiority and hence threaten the very foundation of American hegemony.[81] What is particularly striking here is the defence establishment's change of discourse. The US defence community was traditionally silent on, or even opposed to trade conflicts with Japan, because in the Cold War story Japan was regarded as a paramount political and military ally in East Asia. However, as America continued to lose its superiority in high-technology industries, such as machine tools, semi-conductors, and supercomputers, defence policy-makers adopted a new narrative that advocated protecting US high-tech industries and opening up the Japanese domestic high-tech market. The reason for this was that, for them, it was unimaginable that American weapon production should rely on Japanese high-tech industries. Not surprisingly, in 1986, the Department of Defense directly intervened in a Japanese company's acquisition of the US Fairchild Semiconductor company.[82]

The developmental state frame successfully extradited Japan from the Western free-market economy by drawing attention to Japan's industrial policy and at the same time bolstered people's understanding of Japan's success by excluding other possible narratives. For example, many competitive Japanese industries, like white goods, cameras, semiconductors, and autos, were much more a result of 'a determined focus on short-term, incremental gains' than of the government's industry policy, and since the 1960s, MITI had continuously 'opposed expansion of the Japanese automobile industry' rather than supporting it.[83]

79 Bobby Inman and Daniel Burton Jr., 'Technology and Competitiveness: The New Policy Frontier', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 69, No. 2 (1990), pp. 116–34.

80 CIA, 'The Threat of Foreign Competition to US High Technology Industries: National Security Considerations', p. iv, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP-85T00153R000300070005-7.pdf.

81 Samuel Huntington, 'Why International Primacy Matters', *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (1993), p. 73; Inman and Burton, 'Technology and Competitiveness', pp. 116–34.

82 Uriu, *Clinton and Japan*, pp. 49–50.

83 Kenichi Ohmae, 'Beyond the Myths: Moving toward Greater Understanding in US-Japan Business Relations', *Vital Speeches of the Day*, Vol. 48, No. 18 (1982), pp. 556–7; Peter Drucker, 'Behind Japan's Success', *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (1981), pp. 83–90.

Reciprocal Free Trade Versus Adversarial Trade

Trade problems most soured US–Japan relations. The differentiation between American reciprocal free trade and Japanese adversarial trade is another basic narrative template in the Japan-bashing story. In this self-other articulation, US markets were open and practised the free trade that diffuses reciprocity among trading partners. In contrast, Japan's domestic markets were inherently closed and protected, and in taking development as its number one priority, Japan adopted an adversarial approach to trade geared to gaining dominance over its competitors through such one-sided practices as manipulating exchange rates, erecting barriers, and offering biased loans and subsidies. In April 1986, Peter Drucker, so-called 'father of post-war management thinking', encapsulated the practice of this mentality as 'adversarial trade'.[84] He argued that, ensuing from the complementary trade of the 18th century, most Western countries practised competitive trade, wherein trading partners buy and sell similar goods from and to one another while at the same time competing, but overall everyone benefits. Such reciprocal trade accords with the US free trade spirit. But, according to Drucker, Japan created and practised a new model of international trade, called 'adversarial trade', and was indeed 'the only modern practitioner of adversarial trade'.[85] As a zero-sum game, adversarial trade negates trade's reciprocity principle because, having exported its own products to its trade partners, the seller does not buy from them. This trade model aims at 'dominating an industry', 'winning the war by destroying the enemy's army and its capacity to fight', and eventually driving 'the competitor out of the market altogether'.[86]

The concept of 'adversarial trade' aptly captured the United States' anger and frustration over its trade competition with Japan and was widely used as a basic narrative template in the Japan-bashing discourse network. Clearly, this narrative template became one of the basic rationales for the United States' tough policies against Japan, and the phrase 'adversarial trade' was often cited in Congress hearings and government documents. For example, in a Congress hearing on drafting the Omnibus Trade Competitiveness Act of 1988, a leading senator clearly stated that this act was specifically designed to deal with 'adversarial trade—the mercantilist practices of other nations that deny their trading partners equal access to their markets while they exploit access to our market to the fullest'.[87]

Agents of Influence and Economic and Industrial Espionage

Apart from Japan's industry policy and adversarial trade practices, there were also rampant narratives about Japan's waging of campaigns within the United States to gain the advantage over America. 'Agents of influence' is the dominant

84 Peter Drucker, 'Japan and Adversarial Trade', *The Wall Street Journal*, 1 April, 1986, http://search.proquest.com/docview/398060310?accountid=150587.

85 *Ibid.*

86 Peter Drucker, *The New Realities* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 123–4.

87 'Report of the Committee on Finance of United States Senate on S. 490 Together with Additional Views', 12 June, 1987, p. 274, https://www.finance.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/srpt100-71.pdf.

template justifying these narratives. In this frame, Japan took advantage of loopholes in the US political and social system to influence American views and economic policies towards Japan, activities to which the United States' successive retreats and failures in competition with Japan were largely attributed. In other words, the United States was a poor puppet manipulated by Japanese money. This narrative template was prevalent among revisionists to the extent that they labelled anyone holding the opposite view as the 'Japan Lobby'. In 1990, the American economist Pat Choate crystallised this narrative into the 'agents of influence' template and categorised Japan's buying of American domestic political influence as intelligence gathering, lobbying for favourable policy, politicking in local politics, spreading propaganda, and influencing US education about Japan.[88] Through this cognitive lens, as plainly stated in an issue of *The New Republic* in 1990, '[i]n think tanks, universities, corporations, and Washington law offices, Japanese money is reinforcing one side of the debate on trade, industry, and America's future'.[89] While effectively capturing public agitation against Japan, this template also automatically excluded other possible narratives on the facts. For example, local communities demanded, rather than Japan's active politicking in local politics, Japanese companies' participation in community service programmes, and those lobbyists 'may even understand and represent US interests even better'.[90]

Economic and industrial espionage is another main template. In such stories, the United States suffered relentless foreign economic and industrial espionage from growing numbers of foreign states and companies that actively gathered economic intelligence and stole private commercial information to gain competitive advantages, especially in high-tech industries. Japan was portrayed as an important player in these espionage activities, as the partnership between Japanese enterprises and their government helped these companies to establish a commercial intelligence system rivalling that of a medium-sized nation.[91] Criticism of Japan's economic and industrial espionage was constant in the US mass media and in Congress hearings. For example, Frank Horton, a high ranking member of what is now known as the United States House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, once said in a letter to a Congress hearing on foreign economic espionage that his main concern was the way in which Japan's economic espionage and other unfair trade practices had undermined the United States'

88 Pat Choate, *Agents of Influence: How Japan's Lobbyists in the United States Manipulate America's Political and Economic System* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990).

89 See the cover page: John Judis, 'The Japanese Megaphone', *The New Republic*, Vol. 202, No. 4 (1990), pp. 20–5.

90 Tomohito Shinoda and Michael Borrus, 'Is Japan "Buying" US Politics', *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 68, No. 6 (1990), pp. 190–2.

91 Peter Schweizer, 'The Growth of Economic Espionage: America Is the Target Number One', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 75, No. 1 (1996), pp. 9–14.

ability to compete with other economic powers and thus weakened the base for American prosperity and security.[92]

China Threat: A Rising Peer Rivalry

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, and Japan's slide into 'the lost decade', both the Soviet threat and the Japan threat gradually faded out of the US national security narrative. This disappearance of old threats inevitably implied the need for a new threatening 'other', because the United States has continuously relied on 'an undesirable "other"' to define its 'self'.[93] In its search for rivals, the United States found that China 'could become a new enemy' that can 'generate a new sense of national identity and purpose in the United States'.[94] Since Ross Munro initiated a new China threat rhetoric with his article 'Awakening Dragon: The Real Danger in Asia Is from China', the China threat has been an important topic in the US national security discourse, with variations between different administrations.[95] Chengxin Pan and Aaron Friedberg both aptly illustrated the various China threat perceptions nurtured by different IR schools.[96] Parallel to this threat discourse, the United States' dominant national security narrative from the end of the Cold War through till the Obama Administration portrayed China to a large extent as a different but promising 'other' whose trajectory the United States could mould in its desired direction. As Pan observed, the United States has seen through 'a bifocal lens' two seemingly conflicting pictures of China, neither of which is purely objective fact but rather a discursive construct in the 'American self-imagination'.[97]

The dominant story about engaging with China started to crack around 2008, when the Financial Crisis generated great uncertainty and anxiety about the American Self. As US President Barack Obama observed in his 2010 National Security Strategy, Americans were once more in 'moments of transition'.[98] Amid the increasing rhetoric on China's increasing assertiveness, his policy of engagement with China was soon adjusted through the 'Pivot to Asia' while, at least

92 Committee on the Judiciary of House of Representatives Hearing, 'The Threat of Foreign Economic Espionage to U.S. Corporations', No. 65 (1992) p. 96, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=pst.000019990781&view=1up&seq=1.

93 Samuel Huntington, 'The Erosion of American National Interests', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 5 (1997), pp. 28–49.

94 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

95 Ross Munro, 'Awakening Dragon: The Real Danger in Asia Is from China', *Policy Review*, No. 62 (1992), pp. 10–6.

96 Pan, 'The "China Threat" in American Self-Imagination', pp. 305–31; Aaron Friedberg, 'The Future of US-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?', *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2005), pp. 7–45.

97 Pan, *Knowledge, Desire and Power in Global Politics*, pp. 20–65.

98 The White House, 'National Security Strategy of the United States of America', May 2010, p. i.

officially, he welcomed China's rise. As the debate on China Policy went on, Americans found themselves trapped once more in an unsettled narrative situation. The tectonic shift occurred with Donald Trump's accession to the presidency and the subsequent fall of the liberal international order discourse. Disappointment and frustration over engagement with China were rampant among the elite, as reflected in US Vice President Pence's special speech on his administration's policy towards China in 2018. He stated that the United States' hope that a free, open, and democratic China would come 'has gone unfulfilled'.[99] Thus, the failure of China policy is believed to be 'the biggest US policy deficiency over the past seven decades'.[100]

This unceremonious end of engagement policy with China left Americans desperately in search of a new overarching narrative that could provide a coherent understanding of the new reality, especially the interactions between the hegemonic Self and the rising China. We find that a notable shift has occurred in the China threat discourse; that the discourse on the failure of the United States' engagement with China and the already-existent and simmering China threat discourse have swiftly coalesced into a new dominant, but loosely connected, narrative in the US national security debate that has elevated China to peer competitor of the United States, and hence an existential threat to its national security. An article in *The New York Times* in July 2019 succinctly captured the change: '[f]ear of China has spread across the government, from the White House to Congress to federal agencies, where Beijing's rise is unquestionably viewed as an economic and national security threat and the defining challenge of the twenty-first century.'[101]

This new dominant narrative is a combination of those expressing hatred, dissatisfaction, and disappointment with China, rather than a well-designed coherent single story like the Long Telegram of the Cold War. Continuously evolving, it, moreover, still faces challenges from supporters of the old dominant narrative.[102] The only consensus in the new dominant one, if any exists, is that

99 Mike Pence, 'Remarks by Vice President Pence on the Administration's Policy Toward China', 4 October, 2018, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-pence-administrations-policy-toward-china/.

100 Robert Blackwill, 'Trump's Foreign Policies Are Better Than They Seem', Council on Foreign Relations, April 2019, p.10, https://cfrd8-files.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/CSR%2084_Blackwill_Trump_0.pdf.

101 Ana Swanson, 'A New Red Scare Is Reshaping Washington', *The New York Times*, 20 July, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/20/us/politics/china-red-scare-washington.html.

102 For example, a group leading experts from academic, foreign policy, defence, and business circles sent an open letter to President Trump and Congressmen saying that they opposed viewing China as an enemy and believed that the current government policy towards China is counterproductive on 3 July, 2019. See M. Taylor Fravel, et al., 'China Is Not An Enemy', *The Washington Post*, 3 June, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/making-china-a-us-enemy-is-counterproductive/2019/07/02/647d49d0-9bfa-11e9-b27f-ed2942f73d70_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.8071fba9204e.

China is now a rising peer competitor, which the United States must deal with, but there is no consensus on the general storyline, especially that regarding exactly what type of rival China is, its theme, and how China is to be dealt with. Broadly speaking, this new China threat discourse conflates three stories, namely, a story of victimhood advocated by President Trump, a malleable epic tale of power competition between a rising power and the ruling power, and a renewed Cold War script. Given that these three stories overlap in their deep structure, we will analyse the basic narrative templates in light of their significance with regard to the threat discourse as a whole, rather than examine them story by story. In other words, one narrative frame might be applied to the making of any of the stories.

Ruling Power Versus Rising Power

The interaction between China and the United States is often recast as an epic story of power competition between a rising power and the ruling power. Arguably the most widely spread and deeply rooted narrative template in the China threat discourse, it is enshrined in the National Security Strategy released in late 2017 which states '[a] central continuity in history is the contest for power', '[t]he contests over influence are timeless', and 'great power competition returned.'[103] This schema is more a product of the sedimentation of the debate on Sino–US relations over the last two decades than an individual enterprise like Graham Allison's Thucydides Trap.

What is interesting to note, first and foremost, is the role of the widespread use of the metaphor 'rise'. The frame of power competition between a rising power and a hegemonic power entails the conceptual network of power politics, especially the power transition theory originally developed by A. Organski.[104] But this theory has lost popularity in the post-Cold War liberal international order discourse and requires the entailments of its discursive network to activate the 'neural circuits'.[105] It is worth noting that China's rapid economic growth has been increasingly referred to as 'China's rise', 'rising China', or the 'rise of China' in US elite narratives on China since 2000. At first glance, use of the 'rise' metaphor seems natural and benign, but we find that references to Japan's rapid economic growth as a 'rise' are far less frequent than those in relation to China's.[106] In fact, Americans, even Japan-bashers, rather tended to use such expressions as

103 The White House, 'National Security Strategy of the United States of America', December 2017, pp. 25–7, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf.

104 A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958).

105 George Lakoff, 'The Neural Theory of Metaphor', in Raymond Gibbs, ed., *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 21–3.

106 Qiang Fu, *Weixie de huayu jiangou: Meiguo dui Sulian, Riben he Zhongguo de weixiejiangou* (*Threat as Discursive Construction: The US Threat Making of the Soviet Union, Japan and China*), Ph.D. dissertation, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2017, p. 164.

'miracle' and 'economic success', even though economic challenge is the trigger and central rationale for the threat discourse on both countries. More importantly, as metaphors frame how we perceive things by both highlighting and hiding features, the 'rise' metaphor institutes a structural way of understanding the world. In other words, a power's rise often implies the relative fall of other powers and danger to the existing hegemonic order. Therefore, the habitual use of 'rise' metaphors has automatically embedded a structural realist frame that subconsciously activates the story's characterisation of China as the rising power and the United States as the ruling power.

Having been socially activated, this schema took off with the upsurge of the new assertiveness meme and the Thucydides Trap metaphor. Starting from late 2009, the discourse wherein China was becoming more assertive than before, citing such examples as China's criticism of the US dollar hegemony in March 2009, China's rudeness and arrogance during the Copenhagen climate talks in late 2009, and China's increasingly aggressive posture in the South China Sea in 2009 and 2010, quickly dominated the US mainstream media and foreign policy circles. This narrative successfully kick-started the power conflicts drama between a rising power and the ruling power that had lingered in people's minds through use of the 'rise' metaphor. Although later studies found that the argument regarding China's greater assertiveness is flawed, this in no way affected either the story's power or acceptance, because truthfulness is not the touchstone for people to embrace a story.[107] On the contrary, China's greater assertiveness has been naturalised as 'common sense'. In such a social and discursive environment, Harvard professor Graham Allison neatly refined this schema into an arresting, though slightly sensational historical metaphor—the Thucydides Trap—in 2012. Not surprisingly, it immediately went viral and has become one of the most frequently used frames in the debate on Sino–US relations.

However, it should be noted that, in the original Greek text, Thucydides himself does not explain the war as a structural mindset. It is Allison who inserts a structural frame when emplotting the war, one that perfectly captures in people's minds the schema of a rising power and the ruling power, thus contributing to its popularity.[108] This structural interpretation of Sino–US relations and the world arena is, at best, just one of the possible ways of narrating the reality. Other alternatives, like 'a new model of major-power relationship' or 'a community of shared future for mankind', can also tell a coherent story with the same facts. For example, through the lens of 'a community of shared future for mankind', the AIIB and the Belt and Road Initiative can be seen as evidence of the public goods

107 Alastair Iain Johnston, 'How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertive?', *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (2013), pp. 7–48; Björn Jerdén, 'The Assertive China Narrative: Why It Is Wrong and How So Many Still Bought into It', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2014), pp. 47–88.

108 James Lee, 'Did Thucydides Believe in Thucydides' Trap? The History of the Peloponnesian War and Its Relevance to U.S.-China Relations', *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2019), pp. 67–86.

China offers towards achieving with the world common prosperity, whereas through the lens of the Thucydides Trap, they would be rendered as evidence of China's move to replace American hegemony. As is explained in the theoretical section, threat stories can be self-fulfilling. Once the story of power competition between a rising power and a ruling power is accepted, people will depend on it to make sense of the world and take actions. In other words, the focus of US policy towards China turns from engaging with China to preparing for the worst.

Economic Threat

China is first and foremost perceived as an economic threat that presents a global challenge. Most of this discourse falls under two kinds of narrative template: one where China challenges US economic hegemony; the other story of victimhood in which the United States has suffered huge job losses, a serious decline in its manufacturing industries, and an enormous trade deficit due to China's unfair trade practices and competition. These two modes of narration are two sides of the same coin which differ only in their emphases.

One the one hand, China is an economic challenger. China's challenge in high-tech sectors is a salient node of the threat discourse network. Traditionally, the United States has taken technological leadership to be an indispensable feature of its hegemonic identity, as it signifies both cultural superiority and a guarantee of US economic prosperity and military superiority.[109] But now the United States increasingly believes that its economic competitiveness is under serious threat from China's advance in high-tech industries. What most alarms Americans is China's high-tech initiatives, especially the 'Made in China 2025'. A 2019 senate committee report chaired by Senator Marco Rubio articulates that China's 'Made in China 2025' seeks to be 'the global leader in innovation and manufacturing', and that such a goal 'would be an unacceptable outcome for American workers'.[110] Another significant node of China's economic challenge discourse network is that of China's challenge to the world economic order dominated by the United States. According to these stories, as China's economy continues to grow, China will rewrite the existing rules of the world economy and reshape the international political economy in a way that favours its interests. For example, China's proposal to reform the current international monetary system is perceived as challenging dollar hegemony, and the newly established Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank is interpreted as a move to replace the US-led World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

109 Chengxin Pan and Oliver Turner, 'Neoconservatism as Discourse: Virtue, Power and US Foreign Policy', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2017), pp. 74–96.

110 Marco Rubio, 'Made in China 2025 and the Future of American Industry', US Senate Committee on Small Business & Entrepreneurship, 12 February, 2019, https://www.rubio.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/0acec42a-d4a8-43bd-8608-a3482371f494/262B39A37119D9DCFE023B907F54BF03.02.12.19-final-sbc-project-mic-2025-report.pdf.

On the other hand, the discourse tells the story of US victimhood. Similar to what the revisionists did in 1980s, proponents of China threats also invoke a victim story to make sense of China's economic rise and the United States' underperformance in competition with China. President Trump is a major advocate of this story. In his State of the Union address in 2019, he said: 'We are now making it clear to China that, after years of targeting our industries and stealing our intellectual property, the theft of American jobs and wealth has come to an end'.[111] In crafting this story, many negative images and memories of China, in American novels and movies, have been cashed in on, and 'China the thief' and 'China the manipulator' are now two widely used narrative templates. Within the metaphorical frame of 'thief', Chinese government agencies and companies have proactively engaged in economic and industrial espionage that has caused huge economic losses for American corporations and great harm to their economic competitiveness. For example, an investigation report by the Office of the United States Trade Representative in 2018 states that China is the most active actor in economic espionage, having gained 'unauthorised access to a wide range of commercially-valuable business information'.[112] Notably, cyber theft and intellectual property theft are the most common memes in the discourse. In the manipulator narrative, meanwhile, China exercises unfair trade practices through manipulating exchange rates, monetary policy, subsidies, etc. to promote exports and restrict imports, resulting in the failure of American companies, an enormous trade deficit, and immense job losses; and at the same time, China manipulates its economy through such measures as industry policy, market access restriction, forced technology transfers, and government procurement, among others. A 2018 White House report states that, in order to dominate high-tech industries, the Chinese government has carried out industrial policy though state-sponsored theft, forced technology transfers, economic coercion, information harvesting, and state-backed investment in high technologies.[113]

As to the 'thief' and 'manipulator' tales about China, such stories can also blind people. For example, the allegations of China's currency manipulation and forced technology transfers may to a large extent be apocryphal or at least exaggerated, and rather than being made victims, US companies benefit from China,

111 Donald Trump, 'Remarks by President Trump in State of the Union Address', 6 February, 2019, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-state-union-address-2/.

112 Office of the US Trade Representative, 'Findings of the Investigation into China's Acts, Policies, and Practices Related to Technology Transfer, Intellectual Property, and Innovation Under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974', 22 March, 2018, p. 153, https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/Section%20301%20FINAL.PDF.

113 The White House, 'How China's Economic Aggression Threatens the Technologies and Intellectual Property of the United States and the World', 19 June, 2018, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/FINAL-China-Technology-Report-6.18.18-PDF.pdf.

as even certain hawks have noticed that 'Americans are investing more in China' amid the trade war.[114]

Political Threat

American hawks, especially those of the 'deep state' intelligence and defence community, advocate a new Cold War script where China constitutes a progressively serious political threat. This rhetoric has been on the rise over the last couple of years. In the first place, an existential threat is the ideologically and politically antithetical Other. To American hawks, China is an authoritarian regime under Communist one-party rule, which in itself constitutes an existential threat to the free democracy of the United States. For example, the 2017 US National Security Strategy states that China 'spreads features of its authoritarian system'.[115] This mindset is even more apparent in an open letter from former military officials, scholars, and other conservative China watchers to President Trump in 2019, in which they emphasise that China and its Communist party are an existential threat to US values and the US-led world order.[116] Meanwhile, it should be noted that although there is a rising rhetoric on ideological differences, it is more about China's political system itself than the expansive nature of communism so often promoted in the Soviet threat story.

In the second place, there is the China Model. In this frame, China represents an authoritarian capitalism, and its great economic success offers other countries an alternative model. This constitutes a challenge to the United States' free democratic market economy model in the global order. The Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community released by the Director of National Intelligence Daniel Coats in 2019 bluntly points out that China will more actively 'seek to assert China's model of authoritarian capitalism as an alternative' for other countries to the Washington Consensus, which may 'threaten international support for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law'; also that

114 Richard Katz, 'The Myth of Currency Manipulation', *The International Economy*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (2015), pp. 40–3, 63–4; Daniel Gros, 'The Myth of China's Forced Technology Transfer', *Project Syndicate*, 8 November, 2018, https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/myth-of-forced-technology-transfer-china-by-daniel-gros-2018-11; Steven Schoenfeld, 'Americans Are Investing More in China-and They Don't Even Know It', *Foreign Policy*, 14 January, 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/14/americans-investment-china-emerging-markets-united-states-trade-war/.

115 The White House, 'National Security Strategy of the United States of America', December 2017, p. 25, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf.

116 James Fanell, et al, 'Stay the Course on China', An Open Letter to President Trump, 17 July, 2019, *The Washington Free Beacon*, https://freebeacon.com/national-security/open-letter-to-president-trump-urges-him-to-stay-the-course-on-china/.

China's Belt and Road Initiative is a platform to expand China's 'global economic, political, and military reach' and 'diminish US influence'.[117]

In the third place is the whole-of-society threat. In this hawkish portrayal, China is taking advantage of the United States' open environment and political loopholes to gain economic, political, and military benefits, thus threatening US security from the inside. Although this mode of thought has long existed in the China threat discourse, the 'whole-of-society threat' concept was coined by FBI Director Christopher Wray during a Senate hearing in February 2018. He said that, in order to replace the United States' global leadership, China employs not only state institutions but also non-traditional collectors like students and professors to amass intelligence and steal intellectual property rights, so this is 'not just a whole-of-government threat, but a whole-of-society threat'.[118] This narrative template was reinforced in Vice President Pence's China policy speech in October 2018, in which he said China was attempting to 'shift American public opinion and public policy', influence US elections, and fragment domestic interest groups by 'rewarding or coercing' agents of influence, such as students, scholars, journalists, and think tanks in the United States.[119] One month after the Pence speech, a report from the Hoover Institution echoed this frame by detailing how China has employed agents of influence to influence American domestic politics and policies towards China.[120] This narrative was rapidly transposed into government policy. Over the last two years, the visas of certain Chinese scholars have been withdrawn, a number of Chinese Confucius Institutes closed, and the enrolment of Chinese students in certain key areas has also clearly been affected.

Military Threat

While both China and the Soviet Union are narrated as a military threat, China is largely framed as a regional one rather than a global one. Admiral Philip. S. Davidson, the Commander of US Indo-Pacific Command said in his statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee on US Command Posture on 12 February, 2019: 'The PLA is the principal threat to US interests, US citizens, and our allies inside the First Island Chain'.[121] It should be noted that China's

117 Daniel Coats, 'Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community', 29 January, 2019, p. 25, https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/2019-ATA-SFR—SSCI.pdf.

118 Michal Kranz, 'The Director of the FBI Says the Whole of Chinese Society is a Threat to the US—and that Americans Must Step up to Defend Themselves', *Business Insider*, 14 February, 2018, https://www.businessinsider.com/china-threat-to-america-fbi-director-warns-2018-2.

119 'Vice President Mike Pence's Remarks on the Administration's Policy Toward China'.

120 Larry Diamond and Orville Schell, 'Chinese Influence & American Interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance', 2019, https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/chineseinfluence_americaninterests_fullreport_web.pdf.

121 David Axe, 'US Pacific Command Boss: the Chinese Military Is the "Principle Threat"', *The National Interest*, 14 February, 2019, https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/us-pacific-command-boss-chinese-military-principal-threat-44497.

so-called military threat does not signify that China's forces have surpassed or actively challenged US military power but rather that China's military threat arises as long as China can potentially pose a challenge to US military predominance. In this narrative logic, China's increased military spending, upgrading and expanding of weapons systems and technologies, and overseas deployments to protect its commercial interests, or even the limited access to information on China's military planning are taken as evidence of China's rising military threat. This kind of hawkish rhetoric is widespread in annual Department of Defense reports to Congress on China's military power and in US Defense Intelligence Agency reports on China's Military Power. One notable feature of the evolving discourse is the growing attention the United States is paying to the PLA's cyber and nuclear warfare capabilities.

Conclusion

Rather than the rationalist approach to national security, we adopt a narrative approach to unravelling the narrative process whereby national threats are constructed. Having encountered three successive national rivals since WWII, the United States has constructed three distinctive threat stories to safeguard its hegemonic identity. The Soviet threat consists in the story of two ideologically opposed rivals competing for world domination; the Japan-bashing narrative tells a victimhood story stemming from Japan's unfair competition. China threat stories, however, are now more complex,conflating a story of US victimhood at the hands of China's unfair competition, advocated by President Trump,with a widely embedded but malleable epic tale of power competition between a rising power and the ruling power, and a new, 'deep state' defence community-propagated Cold War script. All these threat stories have framed what is perceived and what should be done, but they are merely those from among other alternative narratives that eventually gained a dominant position at critical junctures. These so-called national threats are hence no more than narrative constructs in a self-other manner of articulation rather than one of objective existence.

Upon examining the narrative templates of US threat stories, we find striking differences among them. The Soviet threat spectrum ranges from the ideological to the political and military domains, and economic challenge is the focus of the Japan threat. But China represents the full spectrum of threats that previously featured in both the Soviet threat story and the Japan-bashing narrative. Upon zooming in, we further find that an ideological conflict constitutes the main thread of the Soviet threat storyline, but that the economic challenge of the China threat outweighs the ideological and political ones. On the political front, the Soviet Union's totalitarian dictatorship is the polar opposite of liberal democracy, while China is often styled as an authoritarian state—a far less antagonistic wording. As to military threats, the Soviet threat is urgent and global, but the China threat is only a rising and regional one. To counter the economic challenge emanating first from Japan and then from China, the United States adopted different

strategies to construct its victimhood story, namely, coining new concepts for Japan, and cashing in on stereotypes for China.

In spite of the above-marked differences, however, we can also clearly discern continuity in the United States' national threat stories. This is reflected not only in the United States' consistently resorting to the victimhood narrative to counter economic challenges from both Japan and China, and unremittingly cashing in on its widely-shared mythologies and images regarding the Self and Others to achieve resonance, but also, more revealingly, in the underlying logic of US national threat-making. The United States will invariably adopt a zero-sum mindset in making a diametrical self-other story for any country—be it a formidable power with an antagonistic ideology like the Soviet Union, an ally like Japan, or a rising peer competitor like China—that might threaten its hegemonic identity. According to this logic, the American Self is always superior to Others, and articulating the threat confirms its superiority. Not surprisingly, when Others, like Japan or China, challenge its economic primacy, the United States, rather than examining its own problems, will always blame such others for playing an 'unfair game'.

This paper also provides us with a vantage point to appreciate the current debate on Sino–US relations. Clearly, we are in the second half of the critical juncture wherein the question is not whether the United States and China will compete with each other but in which way the competition will unfold, for the bankruptcy of the liberal international order discourse makes it unlikely to revert to yesteryear's policy of engagement. As the three narrative threads of the China threat stories all point to competition and conflict, and can be self-fulfilling, we may witness increasing tensions between them. Specifically, the Japan-bashing victimhood story can shed considerable light on our understanding of Trump's China policy. We find that the story President Trump advocates to a large extent matches the victimhood story that the revisionists concocted to deal with Japan in the 1980s. Trump's rhetoric regarding unfair trade and industry targeting, slapping of trade tariffs amounting to blackmail on both China and US allies, results-oriented approach to trade negotiation, and the US high-tech stranglehold that curbs or bars investment in the industry by US competitors can all be found in the Japan threat story toolbox. Having pivoted China policy towards conflict, however, there are few indications that Trump wants to act out a Cold War script. In accordance with the storytelling logic, should Trump retain his presidency in the coming election, the trade war will probably not end in a 'fair' trade agreement until such time as the US economy far outperforms China's, because US superiority entails outperformance, failing which the blame must go on unfair play. That is what happened to Japan, that is to say, successive rounds of sanctions and negotiations until Japan drifted into the Lost Decade. China may, moreover, face even greater US hostility to its high-tech industry and investment, as happened in 1980s. These are issues that China's political nature and growing military may further complicate. But it should be noted that China is

not Japan and will neither give in easily as Japan did nor pose a solely economic challenge to the United States.

The Soviet threat story also offers insight. Indeed, a new Cold War rhetoric is rising in Sino–US relations narratives in the United States. Hawks in the US defence community, among them congressman like Senators Rick Scott and Marco Rubio, former officials like John Bolton, and to some extent even Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, have all contributed to the rise of a Cold War mentality. The effect of this Cold War rhetoric is apparent in government policy, such as the barring of visits from certain Chinese scholars and treating Chinese news media as 'foreign missions'. Although this new Cold War script may sensationalise and aggravate the already deteriorated Sino–US relations, unless major events or crises occur, it seems unlikely to become a grand dominant narrative in the near future. This is partly due to the fact that China, unlike the Soviet Union, does not export Communism, so what Americans are agonising most about now is China's catching up and the United States' relatively underperforming economy. Moreover, quite apart from China's refusal to accept and act on such a script, China has become deeply embedded in the world economy, and its trading partners have little incentive to contain China. The future dominant threat story is hence likely to be a hybrid one that allows cooperation while being open to confrontation.