

# THE AMERICAN NEWS MEDIA'S VOLATILE PERSPECTIVES ON CHINA

*Ted Galen Carpenter*

In the decades since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, wild swings have occurred in the way that American media outlets view that country. At most times, a herd mentality is evident, as a large percentage of news stories portray China in one particular fashion, although there always are some dissenters from the dominant narrative. The nature of that narrative sometimes shifts rapidly and dramatically, however. During some periods, the prevailing perspective has been extremely hostile, with nearly all accounts seeing the PRC as a monstrous oppressor domestically and an existential security threat to the United States. That was the case for more than two decades following the communist revolution, until Richard Nixon's administration suddenly altered U.S. policy in 1971–1972, and Washington no longer treated the PRC as a rogue state.

For the next three decades, the media tended to view China in a more benign fashion. During the 1970s and 1980s, China's image in the American press was that of a useful, *de facto* diplomatic and even military ally of the United States against the Soviet Union. A considerable number of news stories, editorials, and op-eds also noted that China was emerging as a significant U.S. trading partner. When the Cold War ended, the rationale for a strategic partnership

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no longer applied, but journalistic accounts emphasized the PRC's rising economic importance to America. Not even the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989 derailed either Washington's cooperative relationship with Beijing or the media's reasonably positive view of China, although there appeared to be a bump in wariness and skepticism within the journalistic community.

During George W. Bush's administration, the roster of dissenters favoring a more hawkish policy toward Beijing began to grow. One catalyst for the media's shift was the sense that the PRC was becoming more a serious economic competitor to the United States than an essential trading partner. Even though both countries were prospering greatly from the relationship, a greater number of stories appeared featuring allegations of "unfair" PRC trade practices, including cases of intellectual property theft and currency manipulation to make Chinese goods more competitive.

Negative media accounts were not confined to the economic arena. More journalists began to see the PRC not just as a worrisome trade competitor, but as an emerging U.S. military rival, if not an outright adversary. Beijing's surging defense budgets and increasingly assertive behavior in such arenas as the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea fed those concerns in the media. Press uneasiness about the PRC's behavior continued to rise throughout President Barack Obama's administration, although a majority of news stories and opinion pieces still presented the U.S.-China relationship as positive and mutually beneficial.

A more noticeable split in press coverage has developed over the past three years, with a hawkish perspective gaining strength and challenging the once-dominant pro-engagement view in the media. The Trump administration's hardline trade policies led primarily to a sharp (sometimes partisan) debate, with journalistic advocates of the status quo condemning the president's apparent willingness to wage a trade war, while economic nationalists saw the firmer stance as long overdue. However, it is Beijing's behavior outside of the economic arena that has sparked a surge in both public and media hostility.

Two events were especially important catalysts. One was the successful move by President Xi Jinping's regime in May 2020 to impose a new national security law that menaced Hong Kong's guaranteed political autonomy. That move reinforced already strong condemnation in the American press about Xi's growing repression within the PRC, including squelching even the mildest forms of political and

economic dissent. The other crucial catalyst for the increasingly negative portrayals of the PRC was Beijing's handling of the coronavirus pandemic in the spring of 2020. Complaints erupted throughout the American news media about the PRC's secrecy and duplicity regarding the spread of the virus, as well as attempts by Chinese officials to shift blame onto the United States for the pandemic. Public hostility toward Beijing has risen sharply—as confirmed in opinion polls—and media accounts reflect that shift.

Security hawks and economic nationalists have gone on the offensive in the media. Proponents of the overall U.S.-China relationship are still active and influential, but there is now a cautious, defensive, and at times almost apologetic tone to many of their news stories and editorials. They seek to prevent fatal damage to the relationship, even as they feel compelled to criticize PRC leaders for their conduct regarding both Hong Kong and the coronavirus.

Negative press views of China seem to be reaching their highest levels since the period immediately following the Tiananmen Square crackdown. In some ways, the extent of negativity may be higher than at any time since Nixon's outreach to the PRC. There certainly is less evidence of group think and a herd mentality throughout the media. For perhaps the first time since the communist revolution, there appears to be a vigorous debate between factions of roughly equal strength about how the United States should deal with China.

## The Early Years: Pervasive Anger and Hostility

China's communist revolution in 1949 came as an alarming shock to the American people in general and news outlets in particular. Americans could scarcely believe that a leader they regarded as an admirable figure and an important member of the free world, Chiang Kai-shek, had lost a civil war and been overthrown. Dean Rusk, who served as deputy undersecretary of state for far eastern affairs in the Truman administration, ruefully recalled that the press and public reaction to the fall of China, was akin to "that of a jilted lover" (Rusk 1990: 158).

Even before World War II, American news publications lionized Chiang. Historian Barbara Tuchman (1971: 187–88) noted that "Generalissimo and Mme. Chiang Kai-shek as 'Man and Wife of the Year' for 1937 gazed at Americans in sad nobility from the cover of *Time*, sober, steady, brave and true." *Time's* publisher,

Henry Luce, had been born in China of missionary parents, and not only did he take a great interest in China's affairs, he was a staunch anti-communist and admirer of Chiang. *Time* and the rest of Luce's vast magazine empire were important components of the powerful "China Lobby," which influenced public opinion and U.S. government policy to continue supporting Chiang and persist in an utterly uncompromising policy toward the new regime in Beijing (Koen 1960).

Media leaders were not pleased when a communist regime displaced their hero. Even moderate members of the mainstream media, such as the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe*, criticized the Truman administration for failing to prevent the communist takeover. Conservative publications were decidedly more strident than the *New York Times* or other liberal establishment types in condemning administration policies. Three right-of-center media platforms during that time, the *Washington Times-Herald*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Wall Street Journal* advocated an extremely hawkish stance regarding the overall threat that international communism posed to the "free world" (Chamberlin 1948). Those newspapers joined with the Luce magazines to excoriate the Truman administration for its handling of developments in China. Two of those newspapers, the *Times-Herald* and the *Tribune*, were owned by Col. Robert McCormick, a long-time conservative Republican stalwart, and members of his extended family (Smith 1997). Criticisms of the Truman administration's handling of China developments became ever more pointed and vitriolic in those publications.

Once Chiang's regime fell, it became utterly perilous for anyone in the media or government service to dispute the dominant conservative narrative that Washington's incompetence had "lost" China. The corollary was that a policy to isolate the PRC was essential along with vigorous U.S. diplomatic and military support for Chiang's exile regime on Taiwan (Carpenter and Innocent 2015: 48–61). Indeed, the prevailing narrative by the 1960s portrayed the PRC as an even more dangerous and repulsive threat than the Soviet Union to America's security and way of life. That view even penetrated popular culture. A best-selling novel and subsequent movie, *The Manchurian Candidate*, was based on a paranoid premise that Communist China was able to infiltrate and manipulate America's political system by utilizing a brainwashed prisoner of war. In Ian Fleming's book *Goldfinger*, the conspirators behind that

arch-nemesis of hero James Bond were Russians. But in the 1964 movie based on the book, the villains were changed to Chinese.

The assumption that China was an existential threat was especially strong among right-wing media outlets once it became apparent in the mid-1960s that Beijing was intent on building a nuclear arsenal. *National Review*, the flagship publication of the conservative movement, published two editorials in 1965 warning that China's communist leaders could not be deterred the way the United States deterred the Soviet Union. The second editorial appeared with the pro-war headline "Bomb the Bang." *National Review's* editors admonished U.S. officials not to sit passively "like a man who watches and waits while the guillotine is constructed to chop his head off" (Carpenter 2015).

Moderate and liberal publications did not go as far as recommending preemptive war against the PRC, but they saw no opportunity for a policy of peaceful coexistence with Mao Zedong's regime either. The onset of China's bizarre, fanatical Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s made the notion of a dialogue with that government seem even more farfetched. However, a major policy change was on the horizon, and that development would be the catalyst for a dramatic shift in the media's perception of China.

## Nixon's Policy Change Initiates Benign Media Illusions About China

Both U.S. policy and media attitudes toward China shifted abruptly in July 1971 when President Richard M. Nixon announced that he would travel to the PRC the following February to hold talks with that country's communist rulers. His visit culminated with the issuance of the Shanghai Communique, which began the profound transformation of U.S.-China relations. Nixon's initiative marked the abandonment of the U.S. campaign to isolate and demonize the PRC. Media accounts were mostly favorable, although many were still cautious about whether the rapprochement would achieve meaningful, substantive results. Other journalists were extremely supportive. Liberal *New York Times* columnist James Reston (1972) stated that the trip to China and the signing of the Shanghai Communique was Nixon's finest hour.

An Associated Press sampling of editorial comments in newspapers across the nation found far more support than criticism of the

president's policy (Associated Press 1972). That stance was particularly evident among liberal-leaning publications. The *Boston Globe* stated that "with this good start, it remains to be seen how far the two nations can proceed together on the road to peace." The *Chicago Sun Times* exuded pleasure: "If all this is not superior to trading insults mixed with myths, we'd like to know what is." The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* noted that "many Americans may be viewing Communist China in a positive light for the first time." Such a development, the editors concluded, was in itself "a notable advance in international amity and a heartening portent." Those and other newspapers expressed caution that much additional diplomatic labor was necessary before the bilateral relationship was fully transformed, but they gave the president high marks for his initial foray. Only a handful of right-wing publications expressed outright opposition to the notion of a U.S. rapprochement with the PRC (Buckley 1972).

*Los Angeles Times* diplomatic correspondent and long-time China observer James Mann noted that after Nixon's outreach to Beijing, "China was America's partner in fighting the Cold War," and that for America's policymaking elite, "China was considered a special relationship" (Mann 2000: 5). Most portions of the U.S. news media came to accept Washington's 180-degree policy turn regarding Beijing. Now that policymakers no longer viewed "Red China" as a grave threat and an ideological bogeyman, Mann observed, some journalistic accounts even went to the opposite extreme and minimized the Beijing regime's ongoing domestic repression.

Such kid-glove treatment built gradually, though. Conservatives especially were divided or ambivalent about the new U.S. relationship. When long-time anticommunist hawk Sen. Henry Jackson (D-WA) reversed course and called for normalization of relations with China to better combat the Soviet Union, William F. Buckley's *National Review*, accused Jackson of "moral blindness," pointing out that the PRC was "a far more totalitarian state than the Soviet Union" (*National Review* 1974). Other right-wing publications featured critics of Washington's growing military assistance to Beijing. Writing in the pages of *Commentary*, military analyst Edward Luttwak (1978: 43) posed some provocative and unpopular questions to policymakers. "Is it our true purpose to promote the rise of the People's Republic to superpower status?" he asked. "Should we become the artificers of a great power which our grandchildren may have to contend with?"

Most American journalists, though, adopted an increasingly benign view of the PRC in their coverage during the 1970s and 1980s. Harry Harding, a prominent scholar on China, states that by the mid and late 1980s “American euphoria about developments in China reached its zenith” (Harding 1992: 169). Press accounts reflected that view, and the attitude prevailed until China’s communist regime committed the massacre at Tiananmen Square in June 1989.

In a 2014 retrospective, the editors of the *New York Times* conceded that its reporters and columnists had been too upbeat about prospects for political reform in the PRC. “Before the violence of June 4, [*Times* reporter Nicholas D.] Kristof and others had been optimistic about the prospect of a more open, more democratic China.” Kristof agreed with that assessment. “Looking back at what I wrote 25 years ago, I’d say the tone was right but the timing way too optimistic,” Kristof said. “The Communist party indeed has diminishing control over people’s lives,” but he noted that despite economic and social pluralism, there is “still not a whisker of political pluralism” (*New York Times* 2014). Given the regime’s dramatic tightening of controls under Xi Jinping, Kristof was still too optimistic in 2014.

## Harsh Initial Post-Tiananmen Square Coverage Gradually Moderates

The PRC’s brutal Tiananmen Square crackdown produced a flurry of angry stories in the American press. *New York Times* reporter Sheryl Wudunn managed to disguise herself as a local and get close to the action on that fateful night. Her report provided a searing eyewitness account of the regime’s appalling behavior:

Tens of thousands of Chinese troops retook the center of the capital this morning from pro-democracy demonstrators, killing scores of students and workers and wounding hundreds more as they fired submachine guns at crowds of people who tried to resist. . . . Most of the dead had been shot, but some had been run over by armored personnel carriers that forced their way through barricades erected by local residents [in Timperlake and Triplett 1999: 26].

The initial press coverage was universally harsh. When information leaked that President George H. W. Bush had sent National

Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft on a secret fence-mending mission to Beijing, the media erupted with condemnations. A *Washington Post* editorial stated that the president “should not be making placatory gestures to a blood-stained Chinese government” (*Washington Post* 1989). A short time later, the *Post* published an op-ed by the recently retired U.S. ambassador to China, Winston Lord. Although a thoroughly moderate member of the U.S. foreign policy establishment, Lord was unsparingly caustic in his assessment of the president’s handling of the Tiananmen Square atrocity: “Let us conduct necessary business with the Beijing authorities in workmanlike fashion, not with fawning emissaries” (Lord 1989).

Yet as widespread as the negative press treatment of the PRC was immediately following the Tiananmen Square bloodletting, the intense outrage was relatively short-lived. The incident also had surprisingly little impact on U.S. government policy, especially with respect to the expanding bilateral economic ties, and that attitude of returning to business as usual subtly influenced the media coverage. Bill Clinton campaigned against the “butchers of Beijing” in 1992, but once in office, his policy differed little in substance for those of Reagan and Bush. And as bilateral relations gradually returned to normal, media coverage became calmer and focused increasingly on the beneficial economic ties. Even when the PRC fired missiles into the Taiwan Strait in 1995 in a futile effort to disrupt Taiwan’s first genuinely free election, and the United States sent an aircraft carrier task force to the area in a show of support for Taipei, press reports generally avoided hyperbole.

There were, to be sure, dissenters in the 1990s. Conservative hawks frequently attacked President Clinton’s policies toward China. An especially persistent and virulent critic was *Washington Times* defense and national security reporter Bill Gertz. He even impugned the loyalty of Clinton and other administration officials, saying that “highly effective Chinese political influence and intelligence operations against the United States had led the president and his advisers to try to fool the American people into believing that China poses no threat” (Gertz 1999: 81). Among his specific accusations, Gertz charged that the administration had accepted cash payments from the Chinese government and had assisted the PRC in developing its nuclear weapons.

There was very thin support for the latter allegation, but the former had at least some validity. In early 1997, the *Washington Post*



reported that Justice Department investigators had discovered evidence, including some based on electronic surveillance, indicating that Chinese officials had tried to steer campaign contributions to the Democratic National Committee and the Clinton campaign. Although only circumstantial evidence ultimately emerged, James Mann contended that “the swirl of accusations and news stories about the scandal had an impact. They put Clinton on the defensive concerning China and prompted the administration to hold temporarily in abeyance its plans for a far-reaching improvement in relations with Beijing” (Mann 2000: 351). Mann’s conclusion about the scandal’s impact on policy was a bit exaggerated. There was just a modest effect, and outside of right-wing press outlets, only a modest negative impact on the media’s perspective

Gertz’s broader complaint was that government and corporate ties to China were endangering America’s security. In 2000, Gertz published a book, partly based on his *Washington Times* articles, which provided a detailed presentation of the right-wing case for a more confrontational U.S. policy toward the PRC (Gertz 2000). Worries about the impact of extensive government and corporate ties to Beijing would reemerge with even greater virulence during the second decade of the 21st century, and Gertz was hardly the only analyst to voice them.

Mainstream media treatments at the time, though, adopted a markedly different approach. Nicholas Kristof was an especially vocal spokesman for a mild, conciliatory China policy. His arguments typified the views of journalists who defended and promoted maximum U.S. engagement with China. Such an approach, even after Tiananmen Square, he contended, maximized the likelihood of the PRC becoming less repressive domestically and being a responsible actor internationally (Kristof and Wudunn 1995). Despite some anger and concern surrounding the campaign contribution scandal, a moderately favorable and optimistic perspective regarding China generally characterized mainstream media coverage throughout the 1990s and into George W. Bush’s administration. There was some residual pessimism and skepticism about prospects for political reform in the PRC. After Vice President Al Gore’s trip to China in 1997, a *New York Times* editorial observed that “Mr. Gore seemed to go out of his way . . . to praise ‘a significant advance in democracy’ that few others have been able to detect” (*New York Times* 1997). But the views that *Times* columnist Thomas Friedman expressed

were more typical of the mainstream media's perspective. "China's going to have a free press," he predicted confidently. "Globalization will drive it" (Friedman 2000: 183). Former *New York Times* and *Washington Post* correspondent Patrick Tyler was more cautious about those prospects, but he warned nevertheless that a more confrontational U.S. policy "is profoundly against the interests of a stable international order" (Tyler 1999: 426).

## Press Criticism of China Slowly Rises Again During the Bush and Obama Years

A more negative tone began to creep into media analyses of PRC behavior during George W. Bush's administration. In a major campaign address in 1999, candidate Bush used the term "strategic competitor" to describe China (Lippman 1999). It was a term that evoked an image midpoint between friend and enemy, but even such a nuanced relationship got off to a very bad start in April 2001 when a PRC fighter plane and a U.S. surveillance aircraft collided near China's coast, killing the Chinese pilot and forcing the damaged American spy plane to land on Hainan Island. Public and press irritation at Beijing soared when Chinese authorities initially refused to release the plane or crew. Although a diplomatic compromise eventually resolved the spat, some U.S. publications vented their fury at the PRC government.

An article by prominent neoconservative writers, William Kristol and Robert Kagan, in the *Weekly Standard* was especially caustic. The authors described the conciliatory U.S. response as "a national humiliation." Kristol and Kagan saw much wider, dangerous ramifications from such conduct. "As the Chinese understand better than American leaders, President Bush has revealed weakness. And he has revealed fear: fear of the political, strategic, and economic consequences of meeting a Chinese challenge. Having exposed this weakness and fear, the Chinese will try to exploit it again and again, most likely in a future confrontation over Taiwan" (Kristol and Kagan 2001).

They also stressed a theme that would become increasingly visible in right-wing and economic nationalist articles about the U.S.-China relationship. "The Chinese believe, with good reason, that the American business community has a hammerlock on American policy toward China, and that Congress will never dare

cut off American business's access to the Chinese market. Congress has a chance to prove that when matters of fundamental national security are at stake, the United States can break this addiction." At the time of the 2001 incident, though, most portions of the news media expressed relief that sober diplomacy had resolved the crisis without doing serious damage to bilateral ties or escalating to a dangerous military confrontation.

Suspicious about China's behavior and motives appeared to tick up a notch in press coverage, but in the years following the spy plane incident, Bush was firmly committed to preserving and even expanding a cooperative relationship with Beijing. One very noticeable feature was that while the president frequently condemned various countries for their human rights abuses and lack of democracy, China was almost always left off the list. As the Beijing Olympics approached, Mann (2007: 89–93) found that the media treatments of China still were heavily laden with (mostly benign) simplistic clichés. Indeed, the bulk of the press coverage of the Olympics turned out to be friendly and positive.

Nevertheless, during both Bush's presidency and Barack Obama's, the number of negative articles on Beijing's distressing human rights record continued to grow. Media outlets skewered Obama in 2009 when he refused to meet with Tibet's Dalai Lama, apparently for fear of offending Beijing (*Wall Street Journal* 2009). Pressure in the press also contributed to the reversal of that decision the following year. In addition to the human rights issue, more news stories contended that economic globalization was not an unalloyed benefit—especially as it pertained to China. Complaints rose about American job losses in certain industries, and a litany of complaints about Beijing's "unfair" trade practices developed (Collins 2016). There also was a rising number of critical stories about the double-digit annual increases in the PRC's military budget, much of it used to build new, highly sophisticated weapons (Perlez 2012). The primary purpose of those weapons systems seemed especially unsettling. The development of anti-ship missiles and radars appeared to be focused on making a U.S. intervention to support Taiwan in a crisis prohibitively dangerous.

Still, even publications such as the *Wall Street Journal* that expressed growing concern about the PRC's implicit military challenge to U.S. primacy in the western Pacific defended the extensive and growing bilateral economic ties. Economic nationalists in the

media asserted that such a policy was internally contradictory, arguing that massive trade flows contributed to China's economic strength, thereby enabling Beijing to build an ever more capable military that utilized some of America's best technology (Kearns and Tonelson 2011). Such negative assessments became more visible during Barack Obama's presidency. Right-wing journalists such as Bill Gertz were especially alarmed about how the economic ties the Obama administration encouraged seemed to be aiding China's geostrategic challenge to the United States and its allies. Indeed, Gertz (2019: 34–41) accused the administration of outright appeasement on a host of issues.

Most media perspectives on bilateral relations, though, avoided discussing the possible contradiction between approving extensive technology transfers and limiting the PRC's military capabilities, as did most foreign policy scholars. Other analyses in the press tried to square the circle, using the term "conengagement" to describe the supposed optimal policy—one that took China's military rise seriously and sought to contain Beijing's geopolitical ambitions while still preserving maximum bilateral economic connections and seeking to find areas of diplomatic and strategic cooperation (Wang 2016). That somewhat hazy and ambivalent media treatment persisted through Obama's time in office, although criticism and warnings from conservative journalists were becoming more numerous and strident.

## China's Press Image Worsens in the Trump Years

As relations between Washington and Beijing have become more contentious during the Trump administration, media coverage exhibits some major divisions. Public opinion has turned more negative toward China because of intensifying trade disputes, the PRC government's rising authoritarianism at home under President Xi Jinping, Beijing's deteriorating human rights record—exemplified in its treatment of the Uighur minority in Xinjiang province—and its heavy-handed moves to reduce or abolish Hong Kong's political autonomy.

The PRC's attempt in the spring of 2019 to gain the power to extradite Hong Kong residents for trial in mainland courts created great suspicion among American journalists. When pro-democracy demonstrations erupted in Hong Kong in response to Beijing's extradition power play and other grievances, American media accounts

across the political spectrum were sympathetic to the demonstrators and hostile to the communist authorities (Allen-Ebrahiman 2020; Olney 2019). Conservative columnist George Will typified the reaction. “Just eight years after the Tiananmen massacre,” Will wrote in the pages of *National Review*, “there began what was supposed to be half a century of Hong Kong’s exceptionalism preserved, after which the city might be gracefully melded with a mellowed mainland. Just 22 years later, this hope has been as refuted as the 1989 hope that the massacre would be followed by a less authoritarian, because more secure, Beijing regime” (Will 2019).

American journalists have noticed the growing authoritarianism in China, and criticism of Xi Jinping’s regimentation policies are more frequent and pointed (Thayer and Han 2019). The criticism is especially vocal and emphatic about the tightening censorship measures (Lin 2018). But media discontent with the policies of Xi’s regime now go beyond that issue. Civil liberties advocates are deeply alarmed about the massive degree of surveillance and data collection associated with Beijing’s social credit system. Writing in *The Atlantic*, longtime promoters of global democracy Anna Mitchell and Larry Diamond unequivocally denounce that system (Mitchell and Diamond 2018).

Although Beijing’s tightening autocracy generated greater criticism in the American news media, a sizable portion of the corporate media community has still held back, according good relations—especially profitable economic relations—between the United States and China a higher priority. That approach has begun to enrage conservative media outlets. A more noticeable split in media coverage along political and ideological lines has become evident in 2020 than at any time in recent decades.

China’s handling of the coronavirus pandemic in the spring of 2020 has caused a surge of media criticism—especially among conservative journalists. Early on, anti-China agitation on the part of right-wing journalists went well beyond allegations that Beijing had withheld information that might have saved the lives of Americans and other victims throughout the world. Conservatives routinely referred to the coronavirus as the “Wuhan virus” or even the “Chinese virus” in an effort to whip-up greater public resentment against Beijing (Mastio 2020; Lowry 2020). Liberal journalists rejected such labels as not only inaccurate, but xenophobic and implicitly racist, and they blasted both President Trump and his

right-wing media allies for using them (Flipovic 2020; Scott 2020; Dickinson 2020). Members of the media taking a soft line on China's responsibility for the onset and spread of the coronavirus were increasingly on the defensive, however.

Most of China's conservative adversaries carefully draw a distinction between blaming the Chinese people and blaming the Chinese Communist Party. Some media members even use the term "CCP virus" rather than "Chinese virus"—in part to neutralize charges of racism. Helen Raleigh, a senior contributor to *The Federalist*, emphasizes that "it's important that in our quest for justice, we distinguish between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Chinese people. At fault for the spread of the Wuhan coronavirus is the CCP" (Raleigh 2020). Josh Rogin, a moderately conservative columnist for the *Washington Post*, had earlier promoted a similar view. "Our beef is not with the Chinese people; our problem is with the CCP—its internal repression, its external aggression, and its malign influence in free and open societies" (Rogin 2020). Writing in *National Review*, Hoover Institution scholar Michael Auslin (2020) states bluntly that "the CCP, which for years has claimed to be a responsible member of the global community, showed its true colors when this crisis hit. It can no longer be denied that Xi's regime is a danger to the world. Justice demands it be held morally culpable for its dangerous and callous behavior."

Some right-wing figures contend that lax containment standards at a virology research lab outside Wuhan may have allowed the virus to be released into the outside world. Liberal publications dismiss the accusation as crude right-wing conspiracy theories (Barclay 2020; Stellino 2020). Nevertheless, such suspicions persist, and journalists trying to promote a conciliatory perspective found it acutely difficult to do so when Beijing conducted a vigorous propaganda campaign to shift the blame for the global pandemic onto the United States.

There also has been an increase in allegations from conservative writers that some journalists and media outlets are subservient to Beijing. In a March 31, 2020 article, J. Arthur Bloom, managing editor of the *American Conservative*, laid out one important aspect of the case that some of the most prominent media organizations were inhibited from leveling justifiable criticism of Beijing on an array of issues. "The companies that own the major news networks, NBC, ABC, and CBS, all do significant business in China," he emphasizes,

creating an inherent conflict of interest (Bloom 2020a). In another article, Bloom documents the extensive financial connections that both the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* maintain with the PRC government-owned *China Daily*. “We now have a figure for how much the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* have taken from *China Daily* . . . since 2016. It’s \$4.6 million, and \$6 million, respectively.” He points out that the Chinese government undoubtedly seeks to promote its views on various issues with such large expenditures (Bloom 2020b).

Bloom is not the only conservative journalist to argue that the vast economic stakes that media outlets or their parent companies have in preserving a friendly relationship with China could be compromising the content of their news coverage. Barbara Boland, the *American Conservative*’s national security reporter, accused *Bloomberg News* of burying stories critical of China on other issues. She specifically cited the editors’ decision not to run a follow-up story on the accumulation of massive wealth by members of China’s political elite (Boland 2020).

Establishment journalists and analysts have sought to stem, or at least deflect, the public hostility toward China. Some of them even make an effort to turn the coronavirus issue to their advantage in terms of promoting the broader agenda of preserving international cooperation. Rather than defending the Chinese government outright (which was becoming increasingly difficult), they instead prefer to stress related themes. A key rationale is that the coronavirus constitutes an extraordinarily serious threat that requires enhanced, not reduced, bilateral and global cooperation (Flournoy and Monaco 2020).

China’s critics have little patience for the newest edition of pro-globalism arguments. Economic nationalist writer Alan Tonelson, editor of the *RealityChek* blog, pushed back hard on a *New York Times* story, which he described as an implicit editorial rather than a news story. Tonelson (2020) contended that “see-no-evil pre-Trump American science and tech collaboration and exchange programs were a one-way street that sent to Beijing cutting edge knowhow crucial both for defense and for national competitiveness. None of that made its way into the *Times*.” He charged further that the *Times* story was another example of the mainstream media making “no effort to conceal its free-trade, globalist, liberal biases, even if it means throwing in with China.”

Even as anger over Beijing's handling of the coronavirus pandemic continues to impact press coverage of China issues, another PRC action puts China's defenders in an even more awkward position. In May 2020, Xi Jinping's government imposed a national security law on ostensibly autonomous Hong Kong. The passage of that measure effectively negates the territory's autonomy, which was supposed to last until 2047—50 years after Britain's transfer of the territory to the PRC. PRC officials offer assurances that the security law is merely intended to deal with disruptive demonstrations and other manifestations of subversion and disorder (Zheng 2020). Comments in the American press are overwhelmingly skeptical, if not scornful, of such assurances. NPR's Emily Feng (2020) brands the new law as a "power grab" and points out that not only would Beijing decide who falls under the provisions of the law, but the PRC frequently refers to Hong Kong's democracy protests "as the work of 'terrorists.'"

Not surprisingly, conservatives in the press are especially categorical in denouncing Beijing's action. The editors of *National Review* not only praised the Trump administration for rescinding Hong Kong's special trade status, they called for a similar firm response on other issues:

We obviously also need a strategy to combat Chinese belligerence elsewhere. Control of Hong Kong is only one step in China's quest to "occupy a central position in the world," as Chinese president Xi Jinping has put it. The Hong Kong security law coincides with increasingly aggressive naval exercises in the South and East China Seas and a sudden military buildup on the Sino-Indian border. The Chinese have also made clear their intention to annex Taiwan, and show no signs of rolling back their programs of industrial espionage and anti-competitive trade practices. The White House must resist China on all fronts [*National Review* 2020].

Other right-wing publications echo that view (del Guidice 2020). *Fox News* contributor Marc Thiessen pointedly condemns the new national security law, stating that "the Chinese regime is going to be able to ban pro-democracy groups, arrest people for political crimes. They're going to allow the state security service, which is the Chinese secret police that terrorizes people all over mainland China, to operate openly in Hong Kong, which they have not been allowed to do" (Garcia 2020). But moderate and liberal commentators emphasize that there is little the United States and its democratic allies can do



in response, and most China policy specialists share their pessimism and sense of constraints (Wertme 2020).

It became evident in the spring of 2020 that U.S. policy toward China was going to be a major issue in the election—especially at the presidential level (Bandow 2020). The Trump and Biden camps soon traded accusations about which candidate was weaker regarding the PRC. A Biden campaign ad accused Trump of having “rolled over for the Chinese” during the early stages of the coronavirus outbreak. “Trump praised the Chinese 15 times in January and February as the coronavirus spread across the world,” the ad sneeringly concluded (Hain 2020).

That approach has alienated some of the Democratic Party’s usual media allies while drawing derision from right-of-center outlets. The approach created a noticeable rift with some left-leaning journalists (Toosi 2020). The *Nation*’s Jeet Heer accused Biden of succumbing to the type of xenophobia that Trump epitomized. Heer (2020) was especially upset about the “rolling over for the Chinese” terminology. He even accused the former vice president of dabbling “in ‘Yellow Peril’ rhetoric.” Some moderate Democrats reached a similar conclusion. Writing in *The Atlantic*, Peter Beinart (2020) blasted the “utter futility of Biden’s China rhetoric,” cautioning that trying to “out-hawk Trump” on China was “pointless, even dangerous.”

Beijing’s crackdown on Hong Kong, though, has made such sentiments even more out-of-step with the trend in American public opinion. Even before that episode, A Pew Research Center survey of Americans taken in late April 2020 indicated intense and growing hostility toward the PRC. The results showed that 66 percent of respondents had a negative opinion of China, while a mere 26 percent expressed a favorable attitude. It was the highest percentage of negative views toward China since Pew began asking the question in 2005 (Devlin, Silver, and Huang 2020).

## Conclusion

Given the state of American public opinion, it is not surprising that media accounts regarding the PRC are becoming increasingly hostile. Advocates of a cooperative relationship between the United States and China have not given up the fight, but a pronounced split has occurred in the journalistic community, and the pro-engagement faction is weakening. The trend in media perspectives toward more

extensive criticism of the PRC is apparent, and if Beijing's behavior, both domestically and internationally, does not improve, the number and influence of conciliatory stories likely will wane. Indeed, the emergence of hawkish group-think akin to that in the 1950s and 1960s is no longer out of the question.

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