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The Promise and Peril of Threat Politics

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Introduction

In early 1947, president Harry Truman faced a conundrum. He desperately wished to send funds to Greece and Türkiye to stave off communist movements there and to protect the strategically important Dardanelles, but he saw a public eager to limit U.S. involvement in Europe following the end of the Second World War. To persuade a war-weary America, Truman and his close advisers adopted a strategy encouraged by Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chair Arthur Vandenberg: the Republican senator purportedly told them to "scare the hell out of the American people."[1] The president announced what would become known as the Truman Doctrine and embarked on a mission to sell the American people on the dangers of global communism, which secretary of state Dean Acheson later acknowledged sometimes required rhetoric that was "clearer than truth."[2]

Over five decades later, secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld was frustrated by headwinds in public opinion when it came to the Iraq War and the Global War on Terror. He dashed off a memo encouraging his staff to "keep elevating the threat." When a group of retired generals began a public campaign to call for his resignation, Rumsfeld was unequivocal in another note: "Make the American people realize they are surrounded in the world by violent extremists."[3]

There is no policy change without politics and no politics without persuasion. As policymakers and politicians seek to win support, rational arguments abound, but motivating their peers and the public often requires tapping into what moves people, what makes them feel. Consequently, there has been a long bipartisan tradition of seeking to persuade through fear appeals. Instrumentally invoking threats—and, sometimes, inflating them—to persuade people to act has been employed at different times and toward audiences ranging from the public to Congress, foreign partners, and adversaries.

These tactics often worked. Truman and Acheson got their funding, not just for Greece and Türkiye but also for massive European reconstruction under the Marshall Plan. The George W. Bush administration garnered bipartisan support for the Iraq War and reframed U.S. foreign policy around prosecuting the Global War on Terror.

But instrumentalizing threats can also be costly. Focusing on the global nature of the communist threat fueled the rise of senator Joseph McCarthy and the Red Scare, leading to lives being ruined across the country and members of Truman's administration being unfairly targeted by political opponents. Pumping up fears of terrorism stoked Islamophobia in America and embroiled it in a range of conflicts that needlessly cost funds and lives.

This paper considers the role of persuasion via threat politics regarding two very different contemporary issues: China and climate change. It places these issues in historical context and explains the pros and cons of recourse to threat politics in each case, considering examples of deliberate threat inflation and genuine threat emphasis to motivate political action (see below for more on this distinction). The China case suggests that the utility and risks of threat politics alike are growing. With climate change, emphasizing the threat has too often failed to motivate desired action; a rethink is now starting that instead emphasizes the opportunities to be seized through climate action. The paper concludes by discussing how politicians and policymakers should evaluate the benefits and costs of persuasion through threat politics and how to manage inevitable trade-offs, where possible.

The focus of this paper is not the magnitude of these threats themselves, but rather the use of threat politics to motivate political action around them. In their own way, China and climate change present immense challenges to U.S. national security and prosperity. But the historical record suggests that threat politics may not always be the best way to meet these challenges.

The many different definitions of "threat politics," "fear politics," "threat inflation," and related terms often conflate a variety of distinct phenomena. These include misperception, where actors misjudge the level of a threat and consequently present it in a disproportionate manner; fear of a threat spreading through a population without elite manipulation; and the inflation of a threat beyond its genuinely perceived magnitude to achieve persuasion.[4]

This paper focuses on cases where politicians and policymakers inflate, emphasize, link to, or generally appeal to a threat for purposes of persuasion. In doing so, "threat politics" encompasses two distinct phenomena, which can be hard to parse without knowing an actor's intentions: "threat inflation," defined as knowingly exaggerating the magnitude of a threat to achieve a persuasive goal, and "threat emphasis" or "threat invocation," defined as genuinely believing the threat to be massive and seeking to appeal to fear to elevate it in the public consciousness to motivate necessary action. In looking at these uses of threat politics, it becomes clear that, while deliberate threat inflation should be avoided at all costs, good-faith threat emphasis can still present significant perils as its dynamics can quickly spiral out of control.

Five Potential Benefits of Threat Politics

Different actors have long appealed to threat politics to smooth the path to major policy or political wins. Five main benefits from this approach can be identified to explain why.

Unifying the Polity

Among the most given reasons for emphasizing an external threat is to unify the public and focus policy attention on it. In doing so, those who employ fear appeals often seek to produce national cohesion, defining a "them" so as to more closely bind together the "us." The goal is to activate a common social identity that transcends political polarization and disagreement and thereby produce consensus to enable the government to act. Some have argued further that focusing on external enemies is not only beneficial to building national cohesion but also necessary to strengthen (or even to create[5]) national identity. This is why some scholars have identified a "case against peace," noting that "prolonged periods of peace . . . allow divisions within different societies to grow and deepen," whereas the presence of an external enemy (such as the "perfect" threat of the Soviet Union) can be useful for "generating national unity."[6] Through this framing, some scholars present a form of historical seesawing: the threats of the late eighteenth century defined the American nation, but internal divisions appeared when they gave way to external safety in the early nineteenth century, which eventually exploded into the Civil War. This pattern continued through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as the United States moved between "eras of threat," when "Americans rally around the president and put more trust in national institutions," and "eras of safety," when "social cohesion may be replaced by a mood of fractiousness."[7] Recent studies have challenged and complicated this view (see below), but it is frequently invoked as a reason for emphasizing an external enemy, especially for presidents with the power of the national bully pulpit at their disposal.

Securing Measures to Address a Threat

Politicians and policymakers may use an external threat to build public support for tackling it and to try to spur congressional or executive action. This can take the form of threat inflation or threat emphasis—or even a mix of the two. Truman, Acheson, and Vandenberg sought to widen the view of the threat posed to Greece and Türkiye in order to win public support for Congress to act in the face of anti-interventionist sentiment. The Bush administration cast the 9/11 attacks as part of a larger matrix of threat posed by "terror," as opposed to by al-Qaeda specifically; doing so smoothed the way not only for the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) to address the immediate threat in Afghanistan, but also for the 2002 AUMF and the accretion of domestic powers to tackle terrorism in ways that might otherwise have encountered more resistance for their threats to civil liberties.

The Bush administration example also shows the ways in which threat politics can have a securitizing logic, prompting the accrual of power to the executive branch and making it easier for a president to act without requiring Congress's permission.[8]

Achieving Linked Policy Victories

Politicians and policymakers may also use an external threat to promote priorities that are tangentially related to it and build a broader coalition to support their cause. The Eisenhower administration and its congressional allies took this route when they used the Soviet Union's successful launch of Sputnik to pass a massive domestic education bill, which they not so subtly named the National Defense Education Act. By emphasizing the extent to which the bill was aimed at meeting the Soviet threat, the administration was able to assemble a bipartisan coalition whose members—while they shared a commitment to strengthening the United States' research base, including for reasons of competing with the Soviet Union—had different domestic aims when it came to revolutionizing the federal funding of education.[9] Civil rights advocates similarly used this tactic to link their domestic struggle for equality to the Cold War, arguing that the United States' shameful racist policies were hindering its international standing in the competition with the Soviet Union, thereby weakening national security.[10] This argument proved convincing to the Truman and Eisenhower administrations; in 1952, in the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education,* the Department of Justice filed an amicus brief in favor of school desegregation that stated, "racial discrimination furnishes grist for the Communist propaganda mills, and it raises doubts even among friendly nations as to the intensity of our devotion to the democratic field."[11] By linking their other aims to national security threats, different actors were able to push for more progress on these aims and to build wider bases of support than they might have otherwise been able to do.

Seeking Political Gain or Minimizing Political Costs

Beyond policy gains, politicians may also seek to secure electoral gains by emphasizing or inflating an external threat and then claiming that they are the ones strong enough to meet it—and/or accusing their opponents of being too weak to do so. Being seen as "tough on communism" during the Cold War or being "tough on terror" in the 2000s and 2010s was a necessity for politicians, while being seen as "soft" on these enemies was a huge liability. Presidential candidates had to respond to allegations of weakness, as in the case of senator John Kerry, who issued a statement that he had "always said that terrorism is the No. 1 threat to the U.S."[12] There can be a far higher political cost in appearing to underestimate a threat than to overestimate it, especially in the public's eye. But this is not always the case. For example, in 2012, president Barack Obama mocked Mitt Romney in a presidential debate for calling Russia the biggest geopolitical threat facing the United States. In this instance, Romney was criticized and paid a price for overestimating a threat—largely due to its implication of underestimating what was then widely seen as the greatest threat facing the United States, namely terrorism and al-Qaeda.[13]

Another related way in which politicians and policymakers might seek to minimize political costs to themselves through threat politics is by emphasizing external threats to distract from domestic dysfunction or scandal. By focusing the public's attention on the former, they may shift focus from their problems. President Donald Trump frequently employed this approach in 2020 by repeatedly seeking to cast COVID-19 as the "Chinese Virus" or the "Wuhan Virus" to divert attention from his administration's handling of the pandemic.[14] The most extreme version of this tactic would be launching a "diversionary war."

Signaling to Foreign Partners and Adversaries

Leaders might emphasize or inflate external threats to rally allies or to deter adversaries, to demonstrate resolve, or to persuade others to make costly commitments. An administration might communicate that a threat to the United States is also a threat to others, thereby aiming to tighten relationships and to encourage partners and allies to contribute toward shared policy objectives. The Bush administration extending its rhetoric of the Global War on Terror as relevant to other NATO members too is one example of seeking to persuade allies into supporting U.S. policies through threat politics.

In one example of signaling to adversaries that the threat they pose is taken seriously, the Bush administration's "axis of evil" rhetoric sent a message not only to domestic constituencies but also to Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. For instance, in his 2022 State of the Union address, the president broadcast a stark signal: "America will do what is necessary to ensure our nation's security. . . . The United States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons."[15]

While foreign counterparts—adversaries and partners alike—may be difficult to sway by rhetoric alone, especially due to the high potential for misperceptions around the threat posed by the United States and its credibility,[16] threatening rhetoric can still have an enabling or deterrent effect, especially when adversaries can also see the material impacts of the domestic threat discourse (e.g. through successful legislation, etc.).[17]

Five Potential Costs in Threat Politics

While politicians and policymakers can receive clear benefits from threat politics, it can also carry a variety of costs. Cost-benefit trade-offs frequently arise from the difficulty of tamping down the effects of threat politics once unleashed in the public arena.

Creating Short-Lived or Counterproductive Unity

Recent scholarship shows that the impact of threat politics on national unity may be more limited than popularly understood, and that where it does work the impact could potentially be destructive. One study showed that, throughout U.S. history, the reactions to external threats have not decreased domestic polarization but rather reflected what was already present—and that a boost to presidential approval ratings related to an external threat can be short-lived, sometimes lasting as short as a week or two.[18] One scholar argued that the "Cold War consensus" was much narrower than popularly presented, and that it did not span generations, only coalescing in the 1950s and breaking down following the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.[19] Another study found that external threats can reduce polarization under particular circumstances, namely when the threat is made vivid and when actors agree across political lines on how to characterize it—but also that, when these circumstances arise and polarization decreases, the public is more likely to support dealing with these external threats in ways that violate international law.[20] It thus seems that decreasing polarization through threat politics is far harder than usually thought, and that the consequences of doing so through a "them against us" prism can run counter to the goal of unification.

Fueling Racism, Xenophobia, and Civil Liberties Violations

Politicians and policymakers may find themselves fueling xenophobia or racism when they seek the benefits of exploiting an external threat. Once a "them against us" frame has been created, people who perceive themselves as part of the "us" often start to target those who are part of, or even close to, the "them." During the Second World War, Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor and the subsequent demonization of Japanese people paved the way for internment camps in America. During the Cold War, fear of communists abroad fueled McCarthyism at home. The Bush administration's rhetoric of a terrorist threat, even when accompanied by pacifying language from the president that "Islam is peace" and "the face of terror is not the true faith of Islam," led to a 500 percent rise in hate crimes against Muslims between 2000 and 2009.[21] The reverberations of threat politics cannot be controlled by those who initiate them, and other politicians, policymakers, or public figures may seek to use the rhetoric to advance their different aims.

Creating Spillover and Entrapment

From mass media to social media to individual social interactions, there are innumerable chances for an administration's threat messaging to be warped and its fear appeals to spill over into new domains. Such spillovers are often encouraged by politicians and policymakers who seek to use the dynamics of a particular instance of threat politics to advance their own, sometimes opposite, ends. While threat politics might help an administration break through a particular logjam, its opponents can also use this to stymie other elements of its agenda.

Once politicians and policymakers have emphasized or inflated a threat, it is a lot harder for them to dial it back down or to keep it confined to the areas they apply it to. This can produce a vicious cycle where it appears to them that the only politically acceptable way out is to keep emphasizing or inflating the threat as they have created the conditions where they will lose political credibility if they are then seen to downplay the issue. For example, after Truman delivered his speech expanding the notion of the global communist threat, Republicans used its logic to bash his administration for not doing more to aid the Kuomintang (KMT) against the communists in China. Truman paid a political price for this linkage by his opponents. In 1948, to preserve his European reconstruction agenda, he had to approve funding to the KMT though he had warned this would be "pouring money down a rat hole" as it was undermined by internal corruption and unlikely to succeed in its fight.[22] The Policy Planning Staff at the Department of State concluded that "the United States should extend the minimum aid necessary to satisfy American public opinion."[23] And, when the KMT lost the civil war in 1949, the drumbeat of criticism of the administration's failure to address global communism became stronger, despite the administration's earlier acknowledgment that this would be a likely outcome that would not pose an undue threat to U.S. security. This dynamic would compound over time: the "who lost China?" political catastrophe of the 1940s weighed heavily on president Lyndon B. Johnson's decision to maintain the U.S. commitment in Vietnam in the 1960s.[24]

While entrapment by threat politics is frequently rhetorical, it can also take a bureaucratic form, including within an administration. Since, as two authors wrote, "incentives to inflate the threat are numerous and the dividends gained by narrow interests are tangible, no one has such strong incentives to work to deflate threats."[25] Bureaucracies in general have incentives to secure funding and maintain their credibility, and those set up to deal with a specific threat—for example, the National Counter-Terrorism Center—have a particular incentive to keep it seen as serious enough to justify their existence. Relatedly, just as politicians and policymakers may pay a greater price for publicly understating a threat than for overstating it, officials can pay a much higher one for putting too few resources rather than too many into combatting a threat. Thus, for example, during the Global War on Terror, "incumbents and bureaucrats . . . work[ed] hard to attend to the terrorist threat in order to be sure that they could not be criticized by opponents or blamed should something actually happen."[26]

Limiting Policy Possibilities

Threat politics can help different actors push their domestic priorities through linkage to national security issues, but it can also exclude some priorities from benefiting from that securitization. For example, while the Cold War provided a clear argument that civil rights activists in the United States were able to capitalize on, it also led to the prioritization of addressing images of segregation over deeper structural issues that could not easily be tied to the global ideological struggle. One scholar has argued that such tactics led to clear victories for opponents of legal segregation, but progress on other aims of the civil rights

movement—such as economic equity, social democratic priorities, and building cross-national movements with oppressed peoples—was foreclosed as they could be painted as bordering on communism.[27] Another scholar has argued similarly that "civil rights look less like a product of the Cold War and more like a casualty."[28]

Rattling Partners and Adversaries

By emphasizing an external threat, U.S. leaders might seek common ground with and assistance from their foreign peers. But this can instead drive the United States and its partners apart if those foreign leaders do not share Washington's conception of that threat. For example, Bush was able to rally NATO partners around the United States following the 9/11 attacks, but the same partners pushed back when he tried to do the same around the invasion of Iraq, leading to ruptured relationships and a major crisis within the alliance.[29]

Similarly, while emphasizing an external threat might deter an adversary, it might also contribute to a security dilemma in which each side feels the need to increase its security in response to the other's moves, even if those moves were intended as defensive. In a security dilemma, the "vicious circle of security and power accumulation"[30] is traditionally thought of as arising from material moves—for example, changes in force posture, which can lead to arms races—but rhetorical saber-rattling and discursive moves can also contribute, especially by motivating or shaping the interpretation of material moves.

Two Contemporary Cases: China and Climate Change

The historical examples above suggest that threat politics can bring benefits to politicians and policymakers, largely as a shortcut for persuasion or as the only apparent way for them to achieve their policy or political ends. However, they also show that threat politics can unleash counterproductive dynamics that are far harder to control than they are to stoke.

The challenges posed to the United States today by China and climate change are cases that illustrate this dilemma. They share features that make threat politics tempting for policymakers and politicians, but also very different dynamics when it comes to the nature of the antagonist and to related partisan dynamics.

China

Alarm bells have been ringing within the foreign policy community since President Xi Jinping began consolidating his power and China became a major force across economic, technological, diplomatic, and military domains. There is now rough bipartisan political agreement that the country is the major geopolitical threat to the United States. While the approach of the second Trump administration has shaken any notions of a solid bipartisan policy consensus,[31] politicians and policymakers of all stripes still largely agree that one of the dominant paradigms for foreign policy in the decades ahead will be strategic competition with China. Even as the characterization and desired end goals of that competition remain hotly contested, the political consensus of China being a major threat and adversary is becoming increasingly cemented.

As one analyst notes, there has been in recent years a remarkable "'dual convergence' in views about China between (1) the executive and congressional branches of government and (2) the main two political parties in Congress."[32] The first Trump administration's National Security Strategy (NSS) in 2017 labeled China and Russia as states that "challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity,"[33] while the Biden administration's 2022 NSS said that China was "the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it."[34] The attention paid in Congress to China in recent years has also intensified. As a Carnegie Endowment for International Peace analysis by Christopher Chivvis and Hannah Miller has shown, representatives introduced six times as many bills about China in 2021 as they did in 2013, and China bills have outnumbered those about the Middle East since 2019.[35]

Public opinion has been trending in a similar direction. Views of China have deteriorated precipitously in the last five years after decades of relative stability. In Pew Research Center surveys, 82 percent of respondents had an unfavorable view of China in 2022, compared to 35 percent in 2005, with variations in line with geopolitical events between those years.[36] Gallup polling paints a similar picture: unfavorable views of China fluctuated between 45 percent and 59 percent from 1989 to 2018, and then rose sharply to a high of 84 percent in 2023.[37]

All of this suggests that opinion at all levels is moving toward a shared political understanding of China as a major threat. As there is increasing convergence between executive, congressional, and public opinion—with the business community, a long-standing champion for good relations, also becoming more skeptical[38]—politicians and policymakers will likely see increasing potential in using the China threat to achieve their goals. Different politicians may seek to wield it in different ways in different contexts, but they may seek to reap all five of the benefits outlined above.

First, they may seek to produce with the China threat a "rally round the flag" dynamic to overcome historically high polarization. A president, for example, may see few other ways to bring together a divided population. As one observer put it in 2019: "I've always thought Americans would come together when we realized that we faced a dangerous foreign foe. And lo and behold, now we have one: China. . . . And sure enough, beneath the TV bluster of daily politics, Americans are beginning to join together."[39] As discussed above, whether politicians and policymakers can use an external threat for depolarization is debatable. But if there were to emerge a more clearly defined bipartisan consensus over the nature of the threat, rather than just over the fact of it, and if there were incidents that made that threat particularly vivid—such as an invasion of Taiwan or a more threatening version of the 2023 balloon incident—they might seek to use any ensuing period of greater unanimity not only to achieve policy goals, but to attempt to build broader consensus.

Politicians and policymakers are also likely to seek to make vivid the China threat in order motivate action in the face of perceived complacency. As deputy secretary of defense Kathleen Hicks said in 2024,

> the pacing challenge of the PRC is really hard to demonstrate because . . . people can turn on the news and they see, of course, the war in Ukraine. . . . They see the challenges in the Middle East. . . . And people can see why those national-security issues are forward in their minds. But I think the PRC challenge is much harder for folks to see.[40]

The bipartisan 2024 Commission on the National Defense Strategy called for making that challenge much easier to see:

> The U.S. public are largely unaware of the dangers the United States faces or the costs (financial and otherwise) required to adequately prepare. They do not appreciate the strength of China and its partnerships or the ramifications to daily life if a conflict were to erupt. They have not internalized the costs of the United States losing its position as a world superpower. A bipartisan 'call to arms' is urgently needed so that the United States can make the major changes and significant investments now rather than wait for the next Pearl Harbor or 9/11. The support and resolve of the American public are indispensable.[41]

An example of the power of making stark the threat posed by China in order to meet it was in securing bipartisan passage of the CHIPS and Science Act.[42] As Senator Todd Young, who introduced the bill in 2020, stated in 2022,

> we are in the middle of a great power competition with an authoritarian regime in Beijing that seeks global primacy and rejects democracy. . . . America is at risk of falling behind economically and technologically to a world power that does not value liberty or even respect human life. . . . It's time to go on the offensive.[43]

In these examples, the threat posed by China was used to try to pass legislation or introduce policies to better meet the threat. While some will inflate the threat to be more persuasive, others will seek to present it without exaggeration, seeing the reality of the threat as persuasive enough on its own terms. But, if political dynamics push in the direction of a more confrontational posture toward China, it is likely that more will be tempted to inflate the threat in the near future.

Politicians and policymakers may also seek to use the China threat to produce bipartisan agreement on linked, but not directly related, legislation that might not otherwise attract a successful coalition. Those working toward the passage of the 2018 BUILD Act to create the International Development Finance Corporation took this approach. Representative Ted Yoho acknowledged that the broad coalition behind this legislation was able to come together because of the China angle:

> I've changed, and I think [Trump]'s changed, and it is all about China. . . . My whole impetus in running for Congress in the first place was to get rid of foreign aid. . . . But if we can reformulate and modernize that, yeah, I have no problem with that. There are people who want to do this for humanitarian aid, fine. There are people like me who want to do this for national security, like me, fine.[44]

During the first Trump administration, some analysts called on progressives to take this approach to wide-ranging priorities like increasing immigration opportunities for individuals qualified in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields or boosting investment in research and development.[45] Such tactics are likely to be used by different politicians, especially if they see it as the only route to make progress on issues they care about.

Politicians may also seek to reap political and electoral benefits by emphasizing or inflating the China threat, and to impose greater political costs on their opponents by accusing them of underestimating it. Thus far, there have been few political costs to being "tough on China." The 2020 presidential election showcased this dynamic. Donald Trump accused Joe Biden of having been "weak on China his whole career," and Biden accused Trump of being the weak one, claiming he was being manipulated by China. This was repeated to a lesser extent in the 2024 election with Trump accusing Biden of being a "Manchurian candidate" and Republicans attacking the Democratic vice-presidential candidate Tim Walz for once living in China and visiting it some thirty times.[46] Since the start of the second Trump administration, Democrats have sought to deal political blows to the president by invoking China, including in connection to the administration's efforts to shut down the U.S. Agency for International Development. Members of Congress have repeatedly emphasized that cuts to foreign aid benefit China; for example. Senator Chris Murphy has said: "We are weaker today than we were yesterday. China sees that, Russia sees that, and they will take advantage."[47] As those seen as tough reap benefits and criticism piles up for those seen as weak, politicians could emphasize or inflate the threat posed by China to attack an opponent's record or to argue that only they themselves are capable of keeping the American people safe and preserving American competitiveness or power.

These tactics may well be successful politically and electorally, but there may be limits to their effectiveness. While public opinion has coalesced around negative views toward China, it is equally definitive in rejecting confrontational approaches that might lead to war. In one 2023 poll, nearly three-quarters of Democratic and Republican respondents said avoiding war with China was "very important," and 78 percent said that they wanted leaders to "focus more on working to avoid a military conflict with China" compared to 22 percent saying leaders should "focus more on preparing for one."[48] Thus, there may be a political dividend from using the threat from China but this may be blunted if they go too far.

The United States' leaders are also likely to use the China threat to attempt to signal to and to shape the behavior of partners and adversaries. The Biden administration did so and secured the support of allies to meet the China challenge across a wide range of economic, military, technological, and diplomatic domains—while being careful in its rhetoric and framing in order to keep allies on side and to prevent unintended escalation into conflict with China. The Trump administration or certain congressional actors could push the envelope much further, which could prove persuasive in some cases (though as of the writing of this piece, the administration's trade escalations have not produced these desired effects). Public opinion and political dynamics in some partner countries are moving closer to those in the United States. In a 2023 Pew Research Center poll in twenty-four countries, a median of two-thirds of respondents expressed unfavorable views of China, though this varied between Asia, Europe, and North America on one hand, and Africa and Latin America on the other.[49] Should those trends deepen—whether due to investments not working out, sovereignty concerns, or a range of other factors—certain partners are likely to be more receptive to U.S. leaders emphasizing the China threat. However, this will also likely continue to alienate some countries that do not want to be forced to choose between China and the United States (see more below).

Securing new means to address the China threat, making progress on linked priorities, winning elections or scoring political wins, decreasing polarization, and attempting to shape the behavior of partners and adversaries are all potentially significant benefits for those actors opting for threat politics, whether by inflating or emphasizing the threat. What is more, political dynamics will likely encourage more to do so. At the same time, risks will likely come into play as threat politics are increasingly used, notably entrapment, growing xenophobia and other domestic impacts, diminished credibility with allies and partners, and increased risk of conflict.

As discussed above, politicians and policymakers can become entrapped as their rhetoric or actions are used to box them in. A president's threat inflation could later be used to push them to take more aggressive policies, and to attack them for being weak if they do not. Since it is much easier to exaggerate a threat than it is to tamp it back down, this could produce a "race to the bottom" in which "there is pressure for policymakers to prioritize posturing for domestic audiences with inflated projections of strength, even when doing so undermines other foreign policy objectives."[50] That entrapment could become entrenched in

bureaucracies as well; in Congress, the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party was designed, as its founding chairperson, Representative Mike Gallagher said, to "win this new Cold War with Communist China,"[51] and while the executive branch has not undertaken with regard to China any bureaucratic reorganization similar to the creation of the homeland security apparatus after 9/11, there have been modest but important reconfigurations, including the creation of the Office of China Coordination (also known as China House) within the Department of State and the China Mission Center within the Central Intelligence Agency.[52] The Department of Defense has already shifted from planning for having to fight two regional wars to anticipating one major great-power war, and it has undertaken measures to address China as the pacing threat.[53]

Similarly, efforts to link domestic objectives to the China threat could spill over into domains the originating politician finds counterproductive. For example, while a Democratic member of Congress might seek to invoke the threat posed by China to try to get legislation passed on increasing the number of H1B visas, Republican members and perhaps other Democrats with conflicting agendas are likely to use that same inflated threat to try to pass legislation counter to the initial policymaker's own agenda—for example, to impose limits on non-STEM immigration.

Overheating politics on China, which could occur even if a political actor is careful to avoid threat inflation, will likely lead to a further spike in xenophobia and racism. As the post-9/11 example shows, even when a president explicitly urges the public not to engage in bigoted behavior, other forces are likely to trigger it. After Trump began blaming China for COVID-19 in his first term, anti-Asian sentiment and hate crimes rose. According to the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, anti-Asian hate crimes increased by 339 percent in 2021.[54] In a 2023 Pew Research Center survey, nearly a third of Asian respondents said they knew another Asian person who had been threatened or attacked since the start of the pandemic.[55] If a president inflates or emphasizes the China threat to achieve benefits, even while cautioning against the spread of racism, they are unlikely to prevent extremists from further fanning the flames of hate. As one commentator said, "When America China-bashes, then Chinese get bashed, and so do those who look Chinese. American foreign policy in Asia is American domestic policy for Asians."[56]

Similarly, the domestic benefits from China threat politics may come at the cost of alienating foreign audiences. As noted above, many U.S. allies and partners are seeking to move away from overreliance on China and were responsive to the Biden administration's careful approach to alliance cohesion. However, these countries may see danger and balk should the Trump administration or a future one stoke anti-China sentiment or inflate the threat to appeal to a domestic audience. This is likely to be alienating to countries around the world that are seeking to balance their relationships with China and the United States and do not want to choose one over the other.

Threat politics could also be counterproductive in relations with China itself, where views of the United States have also taken a negative turn. While there is a debate over the extent to which conflict between the two countries is overdetermined,[57] there is little doubt that it would be harder to maintain even a modicum of cooperation between them and could risk overt or covert conflict should a president or congressional leaders choose to inflate the China threat.

In short, the prevailing political conditions in the United States—from rough bipartisan political agreement to the few current costs for appearing to be "tough on China"—suggest that politicians and policymakers are likely to engage in threat politics to secure different benefits, or to avoid being attacked by their opponents as "soft" on China. While many of these actors will be acting in good faith, identifying what they see as a massive threat requiring massive policy responses, some will be increasingly tempted to inflate the threat to secure the range of benefits available. As these benefits are realized, the costs of threat politics are likely to come into play as well, many of which stem from the fundamentally contested nature of American politics. Regardless of how much politicians and policymakers try to place guardrails around their use of threat politics to make progress on China policy or linked issues, their opponents are still likely to use the issue as evidence of unfitness for office, as a cudgel in an election, or perhaps to enact a xenophobic agenda. Even those faithfully presenting the scope of the threat as accurately as possible in order to motivate necessary policy measures may still have to reckon with these trade-offs, recognizing that the benefits and costs stem from the same source.

Climate Change

This paper has identified two forms of threat politics: threat inflation and threat emphasis/invocation. In the China case, different actors are likely to engage in both forms, as some opportunistically seek to exaggerate the threat to advance a variety of policy and political aims, while many seek to make the genuinely perceived threat more vivid to raise the salience of the issue and spur action. When it comes to climate change, most actors are seeking to emphasize the threat to raise its salience on the policy agenda. As in the China case, emphasizing and invoking the threat may produce successes, especially in national security–related legislative scenarios. Contrary to what is often assumed, however, using threat politics regarding climate change may be less effective at prompting major action, and it could incur costs in the form of additional lost time and by potentially even discouraging badly needed measures.

The limits of using threat politics to bring about climate-change policies are increasingly clear. Decades-long efforts to scare the public into action through emphasizing the devastating impacts of a warming planet—or, more recently, trying to reframe climate change as "the climate crisis" or "climate emergency"—have not been met with commensurate

legislative action. In fact, recent research has found such framing changes to be counter-productive when it came to communicating urgency.[58] The linkage between the causes and consequences of climate change is complex, making it difficult to sell to the public easily understood problems and solutions. Not only is there is no one antagonist involved, but no one actor can fix the problem. Further, the problem is so enormous that it can breed apathy. As Colin Jost quipped on *Saturday Night Live* after the United Nations released its 2018 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report:

> We don't really worry about climate change because it's too overwhelming and we're already in too deep. It's like if you owe your bookie $1,000, you're like, 'OK, I've got to pay this dude back.' But if you owe your bookie $1 million dollars, you're like, 'I guess I'm just going to die.'[59]

Similarly, researchers found that fear framings are ineffective in spurring individual action, suggesting that "nonthreatening imagery and icons that link to individuals' everyday emotions and concerns in the context of this macro-environmental issue tend to be the most engaging."[60] Persuading the public does not translate perfectly into policy action, but it may be key to producing movement given that politicians and policymakers are more polarized on this issue than the public.

Beyond these general limits, the partisan dynamics of the climate change issue makes it very different from the China issue. Above all, the partisan nature of the climate-change debate makes it difficult to unify the nation through threat politics. Climate policy has whiplashed around in recent years, depending on which party controlled the White House. These shifts are reflected also in Congress, where climate change is a partisan issue, notwithstanding some variations within the parties.[61] Nationally, citizens are not as rigidly segmented as the dynamics in government might suggest, but partisan affiliation still tends to be one of the best predictors of views on climate change[62]—though generational changes may change these dynamics as younger Americans across parties are more supportive of taking action on climate change than older voters.[63] Seeking to use a major natural disaster to unify the nation around the need for climate action might therefore backfire, as the partisan responses to the recent wildfires in Los Angeles and the hurricane in North Carolina have demonstrated.[64] Even if the public is open to a less strictly partisan interpretation of the problem, entrenched positions among political leaders opposed to climate action will likely obstruct any form of unifying narrative. Democratic policymakers' attempts to bring the public together around a push for climate action by emphasizing the threat—as Biden did in his 2023 State of the Union address when he said that "the climate crisis doesn't care if your state is red or blue. It is an existential threat"—were met with opposing threat politics from the Republicans, for example when Trump accused Biden's policies on electric vehicles of being "environmental extremism" and "heartless and disloyal and horrible for the American worker."[65] The partisan nature of the issue makes it incredibly difficult for a president or policymaker to reap any unifying benefits from invoking the climate change threat, even in the aftermath of a disaster.

Some types of threat politics may nevertheless help to move the climate agenda in other ways. For example, Democrats may frame climate change as a national security issue to try to unlock progress in a polarized Congress. This is not exactly threat politics, but could veer into it should politicians seek to raise public fear as a persuasion tactic. In framing climate change as a national security issue, Democrats may provide political cover for Republicans ready to cast climate action as fighting for national security.[66] This approach was effective in a 2017 letter to Trump by 106 members of Congress, including eleven Republicans, demanding the president recognize climate change as a national security threat, and the Republican-controlled House of Representatives voting to keep an amendment to the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act that required the Pentagon to produce a report on which defense installations would be impacted by climate change.[67] The main risk here is that while leaning into the national security dimensions of climate change could bring necessary action on the national security front, it could also inadvertently crowd out efforts to make needed progress on other dimensions of the challenge, such as health and labor considerations around extreme heat and building resilience in individual communities.

As the national security framing of climate can be employed to build new coalitions, politicians and policymakers are also exploring other non-threat politics framings to form coalitions for broader projects. For example, the Biden administration used arguments around the varied threats posed by climate change not only to argue for the necessity of security-based solutions, but also for a robust industrial policy aimed at increasing competitiveness vis-à-vis China and at increasing economic opportunities for American workers and businesses.[68] In another example, progressive lawmakers and activists have presented the Green New Deal as an opportunity to remake society in a more just, equitable way as well as to meet the climate change threat.[69]

The electoral and political benefits from using threat politics around climate change will be different for different actors and audiences. As Democratic voters increasingly worry about climate change, Democratic politicians may be more likely to emphasize the threat and to argue that Republicans' failure to deal with it endangers American security (though the politics of gas prices could complicate the dynamics, as they did in the 2024 presidential election).[70] Republicans will be more likely to accuse Democrats of posing a threat through their attempts to deal with climate change, as speaker of the House of Representatives Kevin McCarthy did after Hamas attacked Israel in 2023, when he said: "President Biden has said previously that he believes the number one threat America is facing is climate change. That is not true. . . . Rather [than] focus on his Green New Deal, he should focus on protecting the American people."[71] Thus, rather than seeing national political dividends, as in the case of China, climate-change threat politics may be more likely to provide these electoral dividends in primary campaigns—though, as noted above, these trends may shift generationally.

Emphasizing the threat from climate change can also play a role in signaling intentions to foreign actors. Policymakers may thus successfully emphasize the threat to show that the United States is taking the issue seriously and acting in lockstep with its foreign counterparts—including adversaries—thereby encouraging them to do their part on lowering

emissions and in other areas. The Trump administration is highly unlikely to take these steps but Democrats in Congress and state and local governments may do so, especially to signal that not all Americans support the president's approach.

The costs and benefits of climate change threat politics thus differ from the case of China. While the risks from employing these tactics with regard to China stem from the difficulty in controlling threat dynamics once unleashed, those posed by doing so around climate change stem from the difficulty in mobilizing action in response to a complex threat in a polarized environment, as well as from potentially demotivating supporters for such action by emphasizing the threat's enormity. In contrast with China, the emphasis of the unembodied climate change threat will not produce xenophobia, and similarly there is a low risk of an actor being too tough on climate change and becoming entrapped into more action than they would have wanted.

At the international level, trade-offs are most likely to come with the linkage of the climate change threat with the China one. The risks here are the same as in the China case on its own: potential (in this case, likely economic) escalation with China and potential alienation of prospective partners that wish to separate climate efforts from China ones. Threat politics could also alienate partners that may appreciate the rhetoric of certain U.S. politicians and policymakers but are disappointed by the United States' lack of corresponding action and inability to deliver.

Conclusion

This paper began by outlining the ways in which American politicians and policymakers have sought to use threat politics since the Second World War through inflating or emphasizing/invoking threats to try to achieve a variety of goals. It also showed that there are risks, costs, and trade-offs in doing so.

Is it therefore possible to perfectly calibrate the use of threat politics to reap the benefits while avoiding the risks? The answer is likely no. The political and psychological phenomena that create the benefits—securitization, vividness, emotional salience, and so on—can also create the risks. Opponents can exploit threat politics to encourage counteractions and different audiences can interpret the same messages in different ways. The larger questions for politicians and policymakers, then, are how to message around threats responsibly and when does it make sense to engage in threat politics—especially as responsible leadership requires communicating threats to the public.

China is perhaps the most enticing issue for seeking the benefits of threat politics, especially due to the relative bipartisan political agreement around it at a time of otherwise extreme political polarization. The United States requires investments and policies to meet China's

challenge, and the politics of the moment also mean that linkage to the China threat may be the most likely route for other priorities (including climate change) to gain a hearing. At the same time, it is also an issue subject to severe costs, from the harming of Asian Americans to overheating politics that could lead to misappropriated resources, alienated allies and partners, or, at the most catastrophic, war. To reap as many benefits of threat politics as possible while limiting the risks, politicians and policymakers should recognize that inflating the China threat is dangerous and should be avoided. At the same time, domestic and foreign policy actions are required to meet the challenges posed by China, and being straightforward when invoking the threat is warranted.

Politicians and policymakers should therefore describe the threat posed by China as accurately and narrowly as possible. And, even if meeting the challenge requires action across the military, economic, diplomatic, and technological domains, they should avoid tying the China threat to a wide array of disparately linked policy priorities. No political or policy actor can control how their words may be used as fuel for escalation; by engaging in hyperbole or invoking the threat in an unrelated area—even in support of what they see as necessary measures for other priorities—they could unwittingly spark a conflagration. Due to the contested nature of U.S. politics, even responsible leaders unwittingly may also produce uncontrollable counterproductive dynamics while taking a careful approach, but they are far more likely to do so if they deliberately stoke fear.

Experts as well as politicians and policymakers have spent decades emphasizing the existential threat posed by climate change, only to see the issue become increasingly polarized and necessary action harder to come by. Nevertheless, in Congress Democrats may gain some Republican support by stressing the national interest dimensions of climate change in terms of its impacts on national security and of competition with China over clean energy industries. However, the threat politics approach is not likely to be the most effective outside of certain legislative contexts, especially if the public feels it is being asked to sacrifice to address the threat. Unlike with the China issue, where overheated politics could prove detrimental to foreign and domestic policy priorities, the greatest trade-offs from threat politics when it comes to climate change are more time lost in dealing with it, or with making the public and political actors feel that the crisis is too overwhelming to bother mustering the effort and resources to deal with.

Since it is impossible to eliminate the costs of threat politics, politicians and policymakers should stay attuned to how their words can fuel unwanted actions by their opponents and foreign actors or spark public fears that cannot easily be managed. Political actors should be clear about threats but should avoid deliberate inflation. Even without inflation—that is, when they message about an issue they genuinely believe to be threatening, thereby exhibiting responsible leadership—many of the consequences could come into play regardless.

This paradox—that even when engaging in good-faith messaging around real threats, fears can spiral out of control—suggests that politicians and policymakers should explore other motivating logics than those of fear and threat for persuasion. Recent efforts in the climate movement to employ an economic opportunity frame is one example, which could be further used with regard to China as well, as some have already done. Others may seek other frames, from invoking the ways in which foreign policy or national security threats might spur Americans to greater innovation or greater civic investment, or even a version of the American Dream that is more accessible to all. No frame will fit all cases, but alternatives should be explored to see if they can motivate action better than threat politics, or at least do so equally well while risking fewer costs.

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