

China's Territory (Disputes) and the China Threat: An Empirical Analysis from the Perspective of the English-Speaking Public

Kerry Liu

Structured Abstract

Article Type: Research Paper

Purpose—The China threat has risen significantly since 2020. This study examines the roles of China's territory-related issues, including Senkaku Islands, Xinjiang's Uyghurs, the South China Sea, a threat of war across the Taiwan Strait, China-India border conflicts, and Hong Kong national security law, in contributing to the China threat narrative.

Design, Methodology, Approach—Based on weekly Google Trends search results from May 2020 to July 2022, this study created a series of time series variables to measure these narratives. This study adopts an Autoregressive Distributed Lag (ARDL) model.

Findings: In particular, this study finds that, except for the South China Sea, all other issues are connected to the China threat by the English-speaking public. Also, the Uyghur issue has attracted the most lasting attention. These conclusions are supported by survey results and fundamental analysis.

Originality, Value—This study contributes to knowledge of the China threat and to academia as well by presenting a (still) new quantitative method for international relations.

Keywords: China threat, Google Trends, South China Sea, Taiwan Strait, Uyghur

I. Introduction

The China threat has risen significantly recently. For example, according to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Centre (Sliver, Huang, and Clancy, 2022), negative views of

Independent scholar: kerry.luke@gmail.com



Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies / Volume 11, Number 1 / Winter/Spring 2024 / pp. 87–113 /
ISSN 2288-6834 (Print) / DOI: 10.2307/JTMS.11.1.87 / © 2024

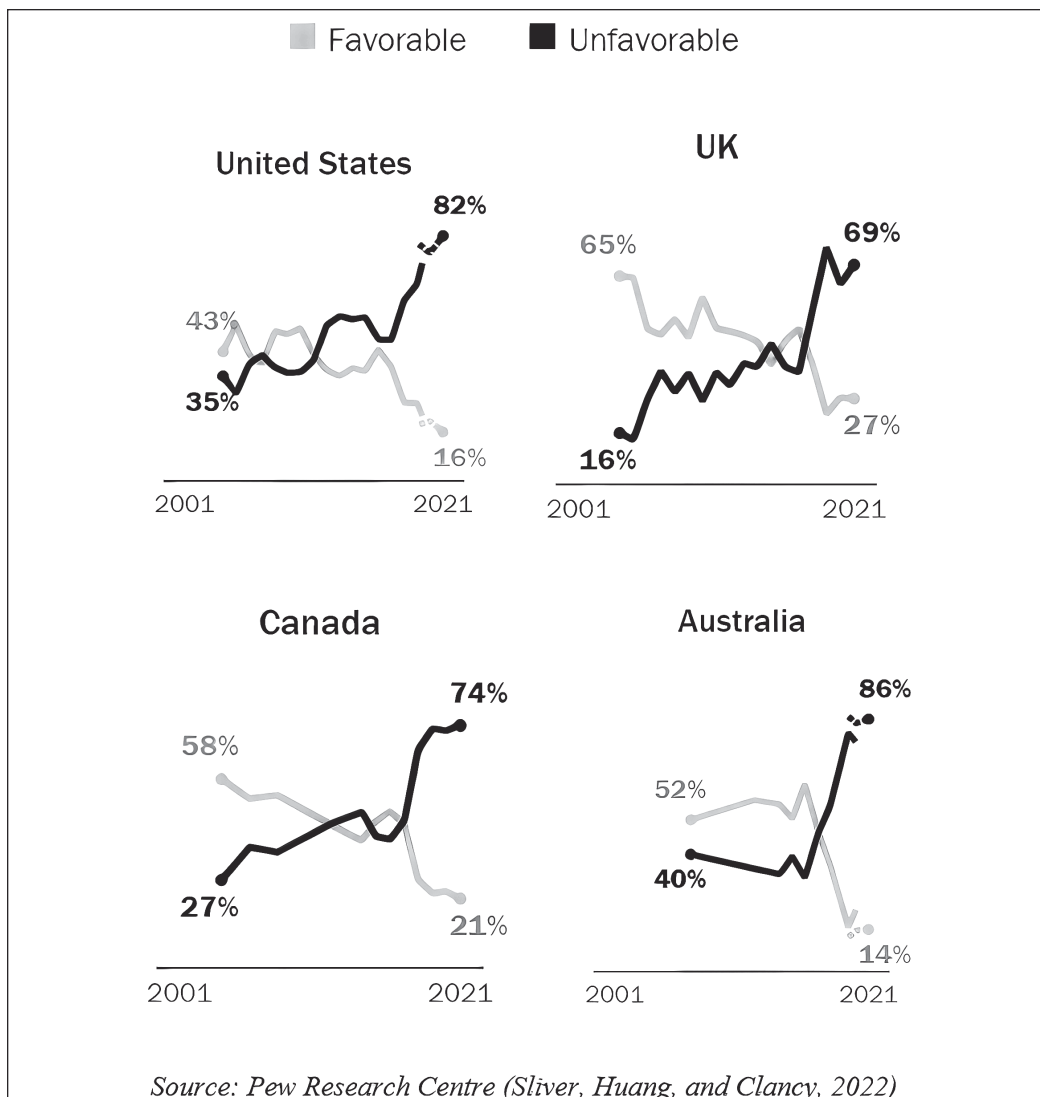


Figure 1. Percent with a(n) _ view of China in the US, the UK, Canada, and Australia.

China remain at or near historic highs in many countries. Figure 1 shows the trend of global public opinion of China in four core English-speaking countries, i.e., the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), Canada, and Australia, during 2001 to 2021.

Figure 1 shows that negative views of China shot up in 2020. Besides these four (native) English-speaking countries, unfavorable views are at or near their historic highs in many of the developed countries and even in some developing countries (see Sliver, Huang, and Clancy, 2022, for more details). For example, Turcsányi et al., (2020)¹ examined Czech public opinion on China during the Covid-19 pandemic and found that it has a predominantly negative view of China and the Czech Republic is one of the most China-negative countries in Europe.

As Goodman (2021)² argued, the most recent public discourse in many countries, especially in the US, the UK, Australia, and across Western Europe, has shifted to concerns

that China represents a threat to the world. The contents of the new China threat have also changed. While previously, China mainly represented an economic challenge to the world by distorting labor and capital costs, China is now considered a strategic and military threat to the peace of the world.

The definition of “China threat” refers to a perception or narrative that is based on negative emotions, concerns, or uncertainties about China’s rise as a global power (see Section I for details). The unfavorable views of China, such as concerns about geopolitical factors, economic competition, human rights concerns, ideological differences, and diplomatic and military considerations, could be considered contributing factors to the perception of the China threat. These factors may shape how some individuals view China’s rise and perceive it as a potential threat or challenge to various interests, values, or norms.

Besides the survey studies discussed before, some scholars have also examined various aspects of the China threat (see Section II: Literature Review for more details). This study examines the roles of China’s territory-related issues in contributing to the China threat narrative during May 2020–July 2022 and provides some fundamental explanations.

The structure of this paper is as follows. Section II reviews relevant literature on the China threat. Section III introduces Google Trends as the data source, including its nature and its role in measuring a narrative. Section IV introduces the research design. Section V presents the variables, including the dependent variable, China threat, and a series of independent variables. Section VI presents the modeling and the results. Section VII concludes this paper.

II. Literature Review

The term “China threat,” according to Vangeli (2018),³ refers to fatalistic narratives and reflections about the future of the world that are motivated by apprehension, uncertainty, and fear in response to China’s ascent. Although the “China threat” theory can be examined from multiple levels of analysis, the focus of the debate often revolves around power politics and the future of China’s intentions and capabilities as a rising global power.⁴

There is a long history of the China threat. As China’s economy expanded quickly in the early 1990s, the possibility of a China threat was already a passionately debated subject in the US.⁵ The China threat issue can be categorized as ideological, economic, and military.⁶ Yang and Liu (2016)⁷ further detailed the contents of these three thematic dimensions into sixteen subcategories. Goodman (2021)⁸ examined the most recent China threat since 2017. One new dimension is that China conducts extensive overseas influence operations in other nations.

From the perspective of China, Yan Xuetong, a Chinese professor of international relations at Tsinghua University, has argued that the “China threat,” especially the ideology dimension, is driven by factors such as China’s rising self-confidence and the diminishing strength gap between China and the US.⁹ Zhu (2020)¹⁰ argued that due to domestic political polarization, the left, center, and right factions in the US are unanimously calling for a hard-line stance against China. They are framing China as the biggest external threat and using it as a scapegoat for the country’s internal political turmoil. Additionally, by emphasizing the “China threat,” they are emotionally trying to increase social and political cohesion within the US.

Previous research on the China threat has primarily concentrated on qualitative, conceptual, and descriptive studies. For example, Song (2015)¹¹ used three models, i.e., incorporation setting, episteme domain, and significant modality, to perform a discursive securitization of China's threat. Song (2005)¹² concluded that the securitization process primarily aims to provoke a reaction from the audience rather than genuinely identifying the cause of the "China threat." Consequently, this approach may inadvertently transform the perceived threat from China into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Rogelja and Tsimonis (2020)¹³ examined the discursive creation of a China threat narrative by European think tanks. The authors criticized this approach, arguing that it hampers factual analysis, blurring the line between genuine concerns and exaggerated threats, ultimately undermining nuanced discussions about China-European interactions and Chinese investments in Europe. Vangeli (2018)¹⁴ and Pavlievi (2018)¹⁵ examined the resurgence of the China threat theory in Europe, using the 16+1 mechanism as an example but no empirical evidence was found. Pavlievi and Kratz (2018)¹⁶ examined the China threat theory by using China's high-speed railway diplomacy in Southeast Asia as an example and concluded that this initiative lacks the intent and capability to support such a hostile and extensive agenda towards the region. Goodman (2017)¹⁷ looked at the China threat narrative in Australia through social, economic, and foreign posture lenses and concluded that it could serve as a strategic tool during elections, but China's significant role in the Australian economy has compelled Australian leaders to adjust their stance once in office.

A few empirical studies have used cross-sectional survey data to examine the China threat. For example, Miller and Taylor (2017)¹⁸ used spatial economic data and survey analysis to examine the relations between trade and peace in relation to the China threat narrative in Australia and found that outgroup hostility, not economic interdependence, is the key factor in shaping voters' fears of a Chinese security threat. Jung and Jeong (2016) used survey data to examine the factors affecting South Koreans' China threat perception and found that South Koreans' attitudes toward China are primarily shaped by bilateral relations rather than broader security considerations. As discussed in the introduction section, Silver, Devlin, and Huang (2020)¹⁹ and Silver, Huang, and Clancy (2022)²⁰ conducted surveys on the China threat. But the latter two studies only provide descriptive analysis without conducting regressions.

Most recently, a few of the author's studies (not cited but available upon request) have also used time series data to examine the China threat.

The contributions of this study are threefold. First, this study examines the roles of China's territory-related issues in formulating the China threat narrative. These issues may be classified as military or ideological ones. While there are certainly other factors, such as Chinese inference in other countries' domestic affairs or economic coercion,²¹ the territory-related nature means that, from the viewpoint of econometric modeling, the omitted variable bias may be greatly reduced or even become insignificant. Second, while previous studies on these topics, such as a threat of war across the Taiwan Strait or the China-India border dispute, focus on the policy side, this study focuses on the narrative (measurement) perspective. Third, this study adopts weekly time series data and modeling. While survey data such as Silver, Devlin, and Huang (2020)²² and Silver, Huang, and Clancy (2022)²³ also examined these issues, the survey questions are fixed. That is to say, we cannot conduct a survey on historical opinions. Also, these survey results are of low frequency,

usually on a yearly basis. As a continuation of the author's work, this study further contributes to academia by exploring the implementation of time series modeling in international relations.

III. Data

Google Trends and its uses in international relations were thoroughly introduced in several the author's articles (not cited but available upon request). Since this data source and method are still new, in this section, Google Trends is further introduced.

3.1 Introduction

Google Trends (<https://trends.google.com/>) is a Google product that looks at the popularity of Google search queries across various regions and languages. Its attributes include anonymity, topic categorization, and aggregation. Google Trends offers real-time data for the last 7 days, daily data for the past 8 months, weekly data for the past 5 years, as well as monthly data for a longer period. Data with a higher frequency could indicate that the relations between variables are more sensitive. While Google Trends just uses samples of Google searches, this is sufficient because Google processes a lot of queries every day. Additionally, Google Trends search results are normalized to a query's time and location and displayed on a scale of 0–100, with each point on the graph divided by the highest point, or 100. As a result, regions with similar levels of interest in a phrase can have radically different total search volumes. After normalizing the data, it is possible to compare queries across time periods and regions. In a nutshell, the data show search interest in relation to the highest point on the map for the specific region and time period. A score of 100 indicates that the term is the most popular, a score of 50 indicates that it is half as popular, and a score of 0 indicates that there are insufficient data to assess the term's popularity.

3.2 Studies on Google Trends

Google Trends started in 2004 and was made public in 2006. It has been applied in various fields by many studies. In a review article, Jun, Yoo, and Choi (2018)²⁴ conducted a network analysis of 657 research papers that used Google Trends between 2006 and 2017. They came to the conclusion that Google Trends has been applied in fields such as information systems or computer science, health care, and economics and finance. Its applications in political science, however, are relatively limited. Google Trends has been employed in political science to gauge issue salience or attention.²⁵ Google Trends was also utilized in several studies for forecasting, with varying degrees of success.^{26, 27}

From the viewpoint of communications, Google Trends is considered a gauge of the public agenda, i.e., those issues that the public believes are most important.²⁸ They did not, however, look at the informational content of Google Trends queries. Based on empirical evidence, Maurer and Holbach (2016)²⁹ further concluded that media coverage is closely correlated with Google Trends. Ripberger (2011)³⁰ also validated this link using a variety of policy topics like health care, global warming, and terrorism covered by the *New York*

Times as examples. Oehl, Schaffer, and Bernauer (2017)³¹ also discovered, based on empirical evidence, that Google Trends (and survey data) and the empirical metrics of media salience and politicization are closely matched. According to Dearing, Rogers, and Rogers (1996),³² the agenda-setting effect “is not the result of receiving one or a few messages but is due to the aggregated impact of a very large number of messages, each of which has a different content but all of which deal with the same issue.” So, in essence, Google Trends can be interpreted as a measurement of the aggregated effects of agenda-setting, i.e., policy, media coverage, and individuals’ issue attentiveness, on the general public.

3.3 Narrative Measurement

Narratives are “discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way ... and ... offer insights about the world and/or people’s experiences of it.”³³ Being different from arguments, which “have premises and conclusions,” narratives contain “beginnings, middles, and ends.”³⁴ A thorough evaluation of research on theoretical and methodological issues relating to narratives in international relations was undertaken by Hagström and Gustafsson in 2021.

However, the topic of how to measure a narrative was not addressed by the previous studies. The effect of the narrative on the general public, including how big, is a crucial topic, even though the construction of a narrative has been the subject of numerous research. The media is one of the primary sources of information about foreign affairs for non-specialists, according to the media system dependency theory.³⁵ For instance, media coverage has mostly made us aware of the China threat. A greater intensity of China’s aggressive policies or actions may lead to more publications or analysis of the China threat. Furthermore, more reports or studies might lead to more people searching online. There is a strong positive correlation between the degree of issue salience (as measured by the intensity of media coverage) and the level of attention it will receive from the general public and the policy makers.³⁶ This is the justification behind utilizing Google search activity to gauge a narrative. While a narrative and the caliber and/or frequency of articles and perspectives are strongly related, they are not entirely correlated. Google Trends may be able to measure the true and aggregated impact of international events on the general public.

The “China threat” as a constructed image or narrative is based on fundamental assumptions about what China is and wants. It may be driven by certain perceptions or interpretations of China’s rise, which are shaped by various factors and motivations. It may be different from the “China threat” as measurable negative public perceptions or search results for the term. In this study, the use of Google Trends results for the term “China threat” serves as a proxy variable to assess public perception on this topic.

IV. Research Design

In this section, the research design is explored, encompassing the countries covered, the issues examined, the methodology employed, and the diagnostic methods utilized.

Regarding the countries covered, this study focuses on English-speaking countries (public).³⁷ This choice has three reasons. First, while the (core) English-speaking countries,

more broadly, the Western world, made and are committed to the rules-based international order, China has been frequently accused of not following these rules. As a result, China is more likely to be considered a threat to these countries, including by their governments and the public. Second, these countries have the fewest data availability issues. While China's public relations in the Global South have also partially deteriorated, survey-based public opinions in many of these countries are not available due to the changes caused by the Covid-19 pandemic (Silver, Huang, and Clancy, 2022), thus making it difficult to validate against Google Trends results. Also, these (core) English-speaking countries have the highest internet penetration rate. As a result, Google Trends can measure the public agendas to the greatest extent. Third, English is the most-spoken language in the world. From the viewpoint of research, the choices of key phrases are less challenging than non-English ones.

This study examines the roles of China's territory-related issues in contributing to the China threat narrative during May 2020 to July 2022. In particular, these issues include the Senkaku Islands dispute between China and Japan, the issue of Uyghurs in China's Xinjiang region, the South China Sea issue, a threat of war across the Taiwan Strait, the China-India border conflicts, and the implementation of Hong Kong National Security Law. It is noted that it is certain that additional factors also contribute to the formulation of the China threat narrative. Since all these issues are territory-related, from the viewpoint of econometric modeling, the omitted variable bias may be greatly reduced or even become insignificant. The choice of the time period from May 2020 to July 2022 echoes the recently rising China threat since 2020. The justification of the time caesura can be found at the beginning of Section 4. The novel contribution of this study is the use of weekly Google Trends data to measure a narrative, and as a result, time series modelling is adopted in this study.

In terms of modelling, the ARDL (autoregressive distributed lag) model is adopted to examine the roles of China's territory-related issues in contributing to the China threat narrative. ARDL models are standard least-squares regressions with lags of both the dependent variable and explanatory variables as regressors. That is to say, the dependent variable is a function of its own lagged past values as well as current and past values of the other explanatory variables. ARDL models are applicable for both non-stationary time series and times series with mixed order of integration. They are helpful in separating short-run dynamics from long-run relationships.

Various tests, as outlined in Section 5 and detailed in Appendix 8, must be conducted to demonstrate the acceptability of the model specification. These tests include coefficient diagnostics, residual diagnostics, and stability diagnostics.

V. Variables

In this section, the dependent variable, i.e., the China threat, and the independent variables, including the Senkaku Islands, Uyghurs, South China Sea, a threat of war across the Taiwan Strait, the China-India border conflict, and Hong Kong National Security Law, are introduced. The time period is from the week of 3 May 2020 to the week of 31 July 2022. There are two reasons for choosing the starting date. First, as discussed at the beginning

of this paper, the China threat rose significantly in 2020. Second, two of the six independent variables started in June 2020. In particular, the Hong Kong National Security Law was enacted in June 2020 after the discussion on it heated up in May 2020. Also, several skirmishes happened between China and India in May and June 2020. Google Trends peak checks fulfill the dual purpose of validating the chosen key phrases and providing background information.

5.1 Dependent Variable

Besides “China threat,” “China rivalry” is another possible key phrase. In addition, the Trump-Pence administration during 2017 to 2021 described China as a competitor, a challenger, and a threat.³⁸ The Biden-Harris administration has since 2021 defined China as a competitor.³⁹ However, from the viewpoint of the public, “China threat” is the most popular (see Appendix 1).

The dependent variable is the worldwide narrative on the China threat. It is noted that China can also be narrated as a threat in other ways, such as Chinese influence. This study only examines the direct narrative of the China threat. Future studies can further examine the relations between the China threat narrative and the Chinese influence narrative, including similarities, differences, and causalities. Below, Figure 2 shows the search results, which are defined as the (normalized) volume of the China threat narrative worldwide.

Figure 2 shows that the largest peak in the China threat narrative happened in the week of 3 July 2022. The surge of search interest in China threat was driven by multiple events. First, on 7 July 2022, the heads of the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) and MI5

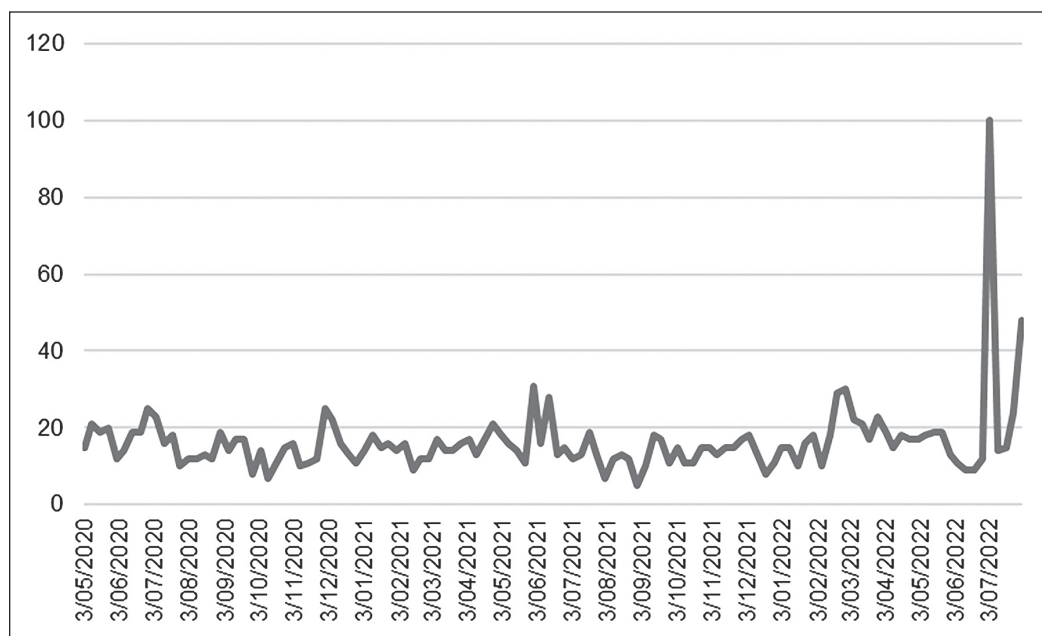


Figure 2. Search results for “China threat,” Google Trends weekly data, 3 May 2020–31 July 2022, worldwide.

(Military Intelligence, Section 5) jointly warned that China poses the biggest long-term threat to the security of the US, the UK, and their allies. This news was extensively covered by the media.^{40, 41, 42, 43, 44} Second, NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), a 30-country security grouping, approved a new blueprint for the next decade, condemning China for the first time in its more than 70-year history⁴⁵ (7 News, 2022). Third, according to a poll, a vast majority of Australians see China as a military threat to their country.⁴⁶

5.2 Independent Variable

In this part, six independent variables are introduced, including the issues of the Senkaku Islands, Uyghurs, the South China Sea, a threat of war across the Taiwan Strait, the China-India border conflict, and the Hong Kong National Security Law.

5.2.1 SENKAKU ISLANDS

The Senkaku Islands are a group of uninhabited islands in the East China Sea under the administration of Japan. They are named in mainland China as the Diaoyu Islands. Since the 1970s, China has regularly made diplomatic and militarized threats against the disputed islands.⁴⁷ As the status quo is that this territory is under Japan's control, China's actions, if any, may draw close international scrutiny because of the danger of arousing the China threat perception.⁴⁸

Regarding the choice of key phrases, both “senkaku islands” and “Diaoyu islands” were tried. As the former is more popular (see Appendix 2), “senkaku islands” was chosen as the key phrase. In addition, since this study looks at the China threat narrative mainly

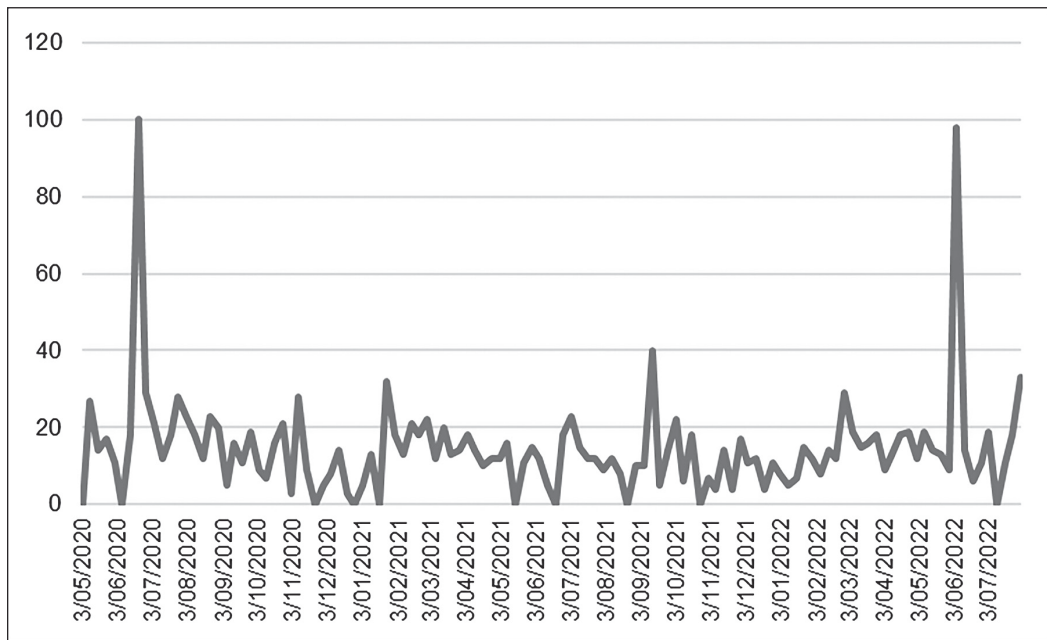


Figure 3. Search results for “Senkaku Islands,” Google Trends weekly data, 3 May 2020–31 July 2022, worldwide.

from the perspective outside of China geographically, the key phrase “senkaku islands” is assumed to be more appropriate than “Diaoyu islands,” which is mainly used by mainland Chinese. Figure 3 shows the search results, which are defined as the (normalized) volume of the worldwide narrative on the Senkaku Islands.

Figure 3 shows that the largest peak of the narrative on the Senkaku Islands happened in the week of 21 June 2020. The surge of search interest was primarily driven by a local Japanese government’s renaming of an administrative area that includes the Senkaku Islands. For example, the Japan Times (2020)⁴⁹ covered this news. Aspinwall (2020)⁵⁰ reported the response from the Taiwanese authority. SCMP (2020)⁵¹ focused on the response from mainland China. According to a report, Murukesh (2020)⁵² mentioned that China sent 67 ships to the Senkaku Islands during April-June 2020. Lendon (2020)⁵³ argued that this Japan-China island dispute could be Asia’s next military flash point.

5.2.2 UYGHURS

The Uyghurs are natives of China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Since 2017, it is argued that Xinjiang “has witnessed the largest forced incarceration of an ethno-religious minority anywhere in the world since the Second World War: upwards of one million Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims have been forced into internment camps for ‘re-education’ and ‘thought transformation,’ or into high-security prisons, or situations of forced labour.”⁵⁴ It is further argued that China is conducting a genocide^{55,56} through a population optimization strategy.⁵⁷ The United Nations Human Rights Office concluded that “the extent of arbitrary and discriminatory detention of members of Uyghur and other predominantly Muslim groups” “may constitute international crimes, in particular crimes against humanity.”⁵⁸ At the same time, “China justified them as a sort of vocational training program to assist Uyghurs in participating in the Chinese economy.”⁵⁹

Please note that Xinjiang can hardly be treated as a territorial dispute or conflict. It is more an issue of a defined territory. Muslims in the camps are not necessarily separatists, and there are no claims or disputes about Xinjiang being under China, but there is wide-scale human rights abuse. Since this factor is statistically significant in contributing to the China threat narrative (see Section 4 for details), the inclusion of this variable can reduce the omitted variable bias, if any.

Uyghur can also be spelled as Uygur. While “Uyghur” is slightly more popular than “Uygur” (see Appendix 3), the results using “Uyghur” as the key phrase are dominantly from China. At the same time, the results using “Uygur” as the key phrase are dominantly from Turkey and other Central, Western Asian, and neighbouring countries such as Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Cyprus, and Kyrgyzstan. Since this study looks at the China threat narrative mainly from the perspective outside of China geographically, the key phrase “Uygur” was chosen. If “Uyghur” was chosen, preliminary results show that its relations with the China threat narrative are insignificant. This may reflect the different opinions regarding the Chinese government’s policy toward Uyghurs between mainland Chinese and non-mainland Chinese. Future studies may further examine this issue on a regional basis. Figure 4 shows the search results, which are defined as the (normalized) volume of the worldwide narrative on Uyghurs.

Figure 4 shows that the largest peak of the narrative on Uyghur happened in the week of 18 April 2021. The surge of search interest was primarily driven by two events. First, on 22

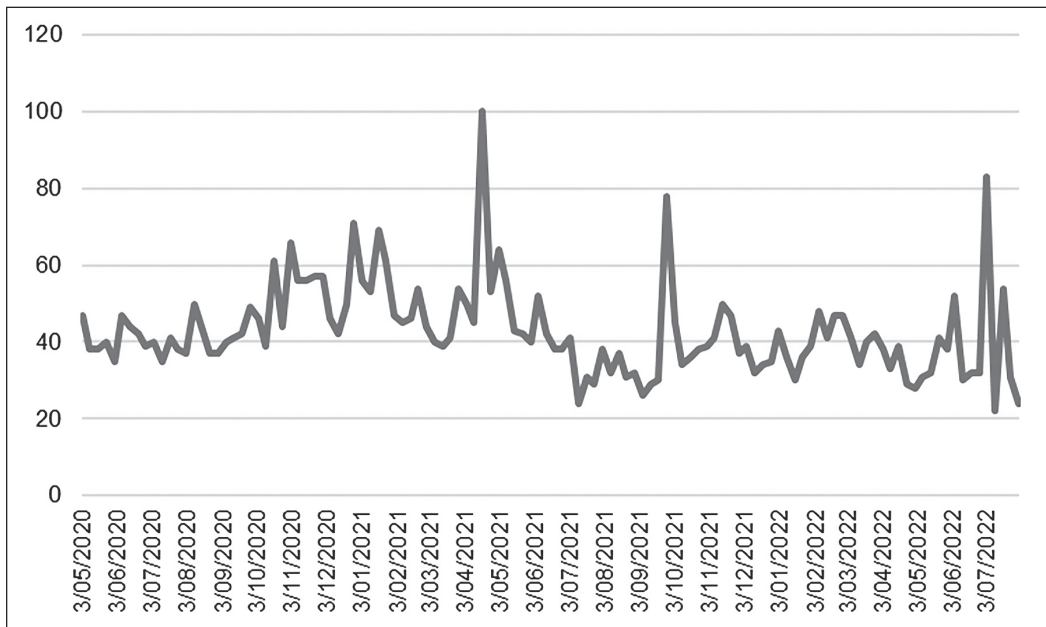


Figure 4. Search results for “Uyghur,” Google Trends weekly data, 3 May 2020–31 July 2022, worldwide.

April 2021, the British parliament described the situation in Xinjiang as genocide, calling for the government to take action.⁶⁰ Second, according to a report jointly released by Stanford Law School’s Human Rights & Conflict Resolution Clinic and Human Rights Watch, the Chinese government has committed—and continues to commit—crimes against humanity against Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims.⁶¹

5.2.3 SOUTH CHINA SEA

The South China Sea is a region of enormous geopolitical and economic significance. According to an estimate conducted by the Centre for Strategy and International Studies, around \$3.4 trillion in trade passed through the South China Sea in 2016. These estimates accounted for 21 percent of global trade in 2016.⁶² The South China Sea is also rich in natural resources, including about 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 11 billion barrels of oil.⁶³ Also, there are fishing rights in this region. At the same time, Mainland China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines have competing territorial and jurisdictional claims over this region.⁶⁴ Glaser (2012)⁶⁵ concluded that the risk of conflict in the South China Sea is significant. In particular, China has become more assertive in the South China Sea, resulting from the growth of its outsized military power⁶⁶ and its heightened nationalism.⁶⁷ Morton (2016)⁶⁸ argued that China’s rising presence in the South China Sea is becoming a key source of escalating tensions, leading to a spiral of conflict with the US and other neighboring Asian countries. As argued by Storey (2020), since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, as a result of China’s assertion of its jurisdictional claims, the US has escalated its condemnation of Beijing’s activities and military build-up in the South China Sea.

An alternative to the South China Sea is the Spratly Islands. However, the latter is far less popular. As a result, the “South China Sea” was chosen as the key phrase. Figure 5

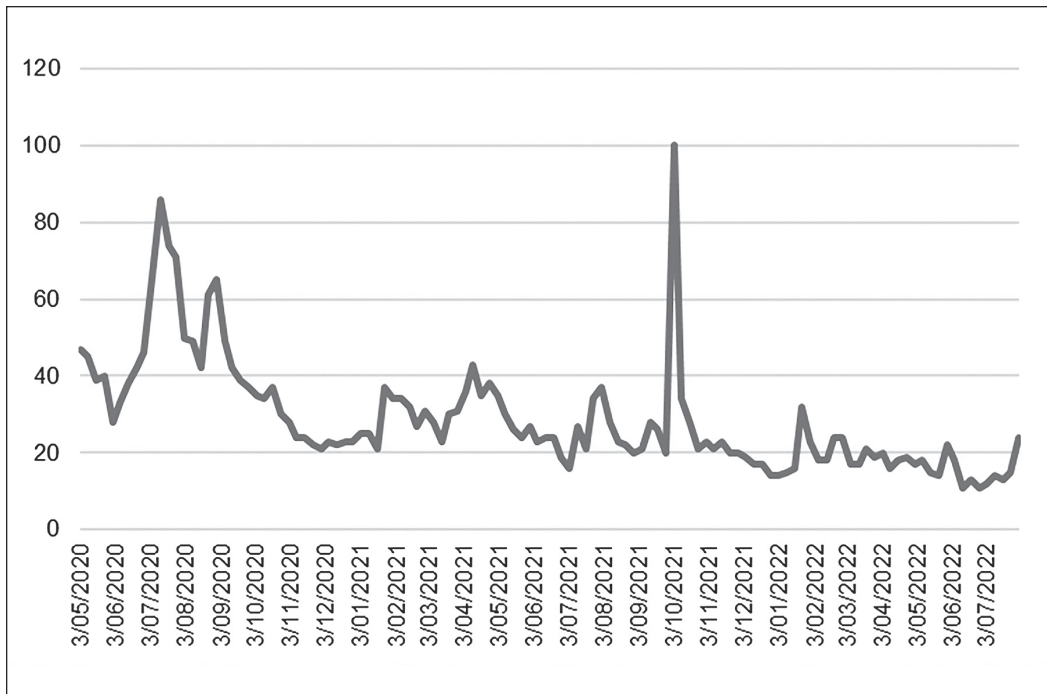


Figure 5. Search results for “South China Sea,” Google Trends weekly data, 3 May 2020–31 July 2022, worldwide.

shows the search results, which are defined as the (normalized) volume of the worldwide narrative on the South China Sea.

Figure 5 shows that the largest peak in the narrative on the South China Sea happened in the week of 3 October 2021. The surge of search interest was primarily driven by two events. One is that on 2 October 2021, a US nuclear submarine hit an “unknown object” while submerged in the South China Sea, injuring a number of sailors. This story was extensively covered by international media.^{69, 70, 71, 72} The other news is that Malaysia said it summoned China’s ambassador to protest against the “presence and activities” of Chinese vessels in Kuala Lumpur’s exclusive economic zone in the South China Sea.⁷³ The second largest peak in the narrative on the South China Sea occurred during the week of 12 July 2020. The surge of search interest was mainly driven by a report on US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s saying that China’s pursuit of offshore resources in parts of the South China Sea is “completely unlawful.”⁷⁴ The US has been opposing China’s claims, but it was the first time it called them illegal.

5.2.4 TAIWAN STRAIT

“Taiwan has been governed independently of China since 1949, but Beijing views the island as part of its territory. Beijing has vowed to eventually ‘unify’ Taiwan with the mainland, using force if necessary.”⁷⁵ Since Taiwan’s President Tsai Ing-wen came into power in 2016, tensions across the Taiwan Strait have risen. China has ramped up political and military pressure on Taiwan. While some analysts believe that the US and China could go to

war over Taiwan,⁷⁶ many do not. The restraining factors include economic interdependence between the People’s Republic of China and the US, domestic pressures in both countries, and a strong military deterrence from the US in the region.

In terms of the choice of key phrases, while “taiwan strait” is more general than “Taiwan war,” the results generated by the former are fewer than those by the latter (see Appendix 5). The term “Taiwan war” is assumed to more accurately reflect war sentiment across the Taiwan Strait and is more directly related to any China threat. Below, Figure 6 shows the search results, which are defined as the (normalized) volume of the worldwide narrative on a threat of war across the Taiwan Strait.

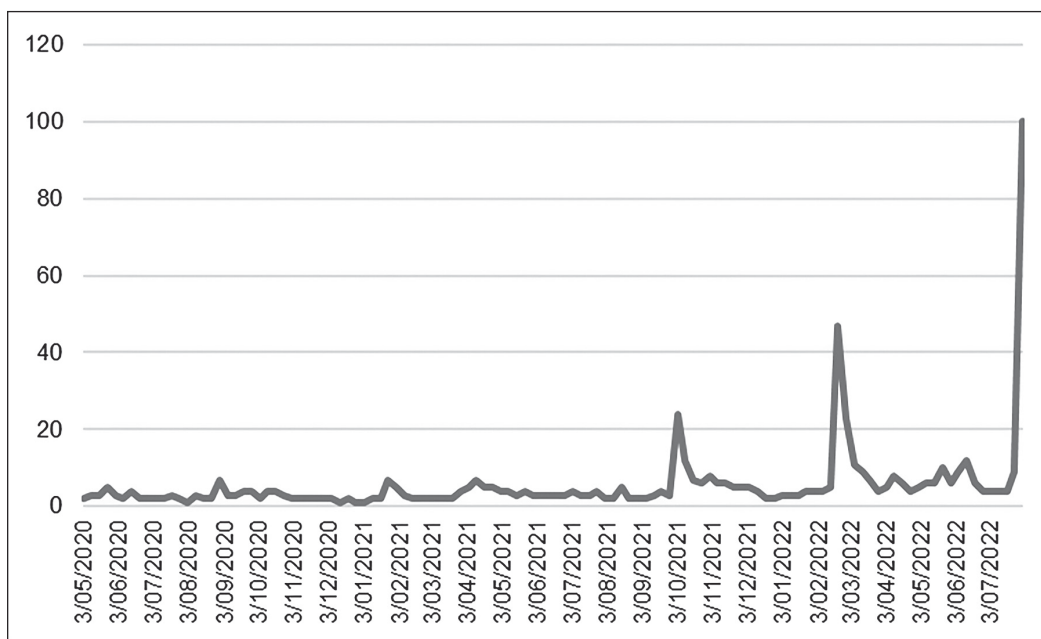


Figure 6. Search results for “Taiwan war” Google Trends weekly data, 3 May 2020–31 July 2022, worldwide.

Figure 6 shows that the largest peak in the narrative about a threat of war across the Taiwan Strait happened in the week of 31 July 2022. The surge of search interest was primarily driven by the event that US politician Nancy Pelosi, who formerly served as the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, visited Taiwan on 2 August 2022. After Pelosi’s departure, Mainland China commenced military exercises encircling Taiwan from 4 to 7 August 2022. The visit and military exercise were extensively covered by international media.^{77, 78} This was later called “the fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis.”⁷⁹

5.2.5 CHINA-INDIA BORDER CONFLICT

China and India have a border dispute over the sovereignty of several pieces of territory. In 1962, a war broke out between China and India in disputed areas. The war ended when China declared a ceasefire in November 1962 and announced its retreat to its alleged “Line of Actual Control.” There was a brief border clash in 1967 and several potential

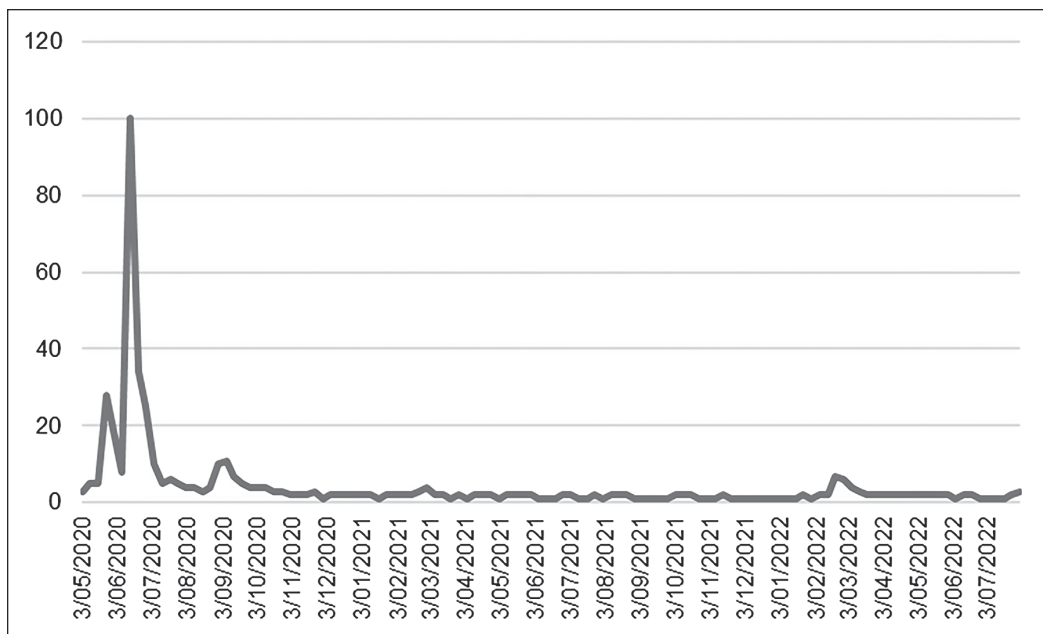


Figure 7. Search results for “China India war” Google Trends weekly data, 3 May 2020–31 July 2022, worldwide.

conflicts in 1987 and 2013. In June 2020, several skirmishes happened between China and India, resulting in dozens of deaths on both sides. As argued by Sharma (2020),⁸⁰ while all these border conflicts can be seen in the context of enduring China-Indian strategic rivalry and differing perceptions of the border, the 2020 clash is “China’s desperate attempt to use the humanitarian crisis of Covid-19 to advance its geopolitical goals in the Indo-Pacific region,” and “the deadly clash has shattered India’s illusions of a friendly China.”

Various key phrases, including “China India skirmish,” “China India conflict,” “China India dispute,” “China-India clash,” and “China India war,” were tried. While the pattern of results is generally consistent, suggesting that they may describe something very similar, the last key phrase, i.e., “China India war,” generates the most results. As a result, it was chosen as the key phrase. Figure 7 shows the search results, which are defined as the (normalized) volume of the worldwide narrative on the China-India war.

Figure 7 shows that the narrative on the China-India war peaked during the week of 14 June 2020. The surge of search interest was primarily driven by a China-India skirmish that happened in June 2020. In particular, starting on 5 May 2020, Chinese and Indian troops engaged in skirmishes at locations along the China-Indian border. The fighting on 15–16 June 2020 resulted in the deaths and captives of both Chinese and Indian soldiers. This conflict attracted extensive media coverage.^{81, 82}

5.2.6 HONG KONG NATIONAL SECURITY LAW

The Hong Kong National Security Law, officially the Law of the People’s Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative

Region, is national security legislation concerning Hong Kong enacted by the Chinese Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress in June 2020. It is argued that this law, together with “electoral reforms” in 2021, means the abandonment of the city’s liberal-democratic constitutional model and the independence of the city’s courts, law enforcement, and legislative process was compromised,⁸³ and it is part of the process of “mainlandization” of Hong Kong. As a result, some local political activists have either escaped or been arrested and imprisoned.⁸⁴

When a centralizing state penetrates a new area, it will pose threats to the existing local culture, customs, and interests of the people living there.⁸⁵ Specifically, “Chinese mainlandization is an ongoing threat that targets a marginalized group in Hong Kong: those who identify as Hong Kongers as opposed to Chinese.”⁸⁶ It “represents the greatest threat to human rights in the city’s recent history.”⁸⁷

It is noted that Hong Kong is legally a part of China, just like the Uyghurs issue. Since this factor is statistically significant in contributing to the China threat narrative (see Section 5.2.4 for details), the inclusion of this variable can reduce any omitted variable bias, if present.

Below, Figure 8 shows the search results, which are defined as the (normalized) volume of the worldwide narrative on Hong Kong National Security Law.

Figure 8 shows that the largest peak in the narrative on Hong Kong National Security Law happened in the week of 28 June 2020. This timing is consistent with the date of the legislation and implementation of this law. In particular, on 30 June 2020, this law was passed by China’s Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress and came into force the same day. It has been extensively covered by international media.^{88, 89, 90}

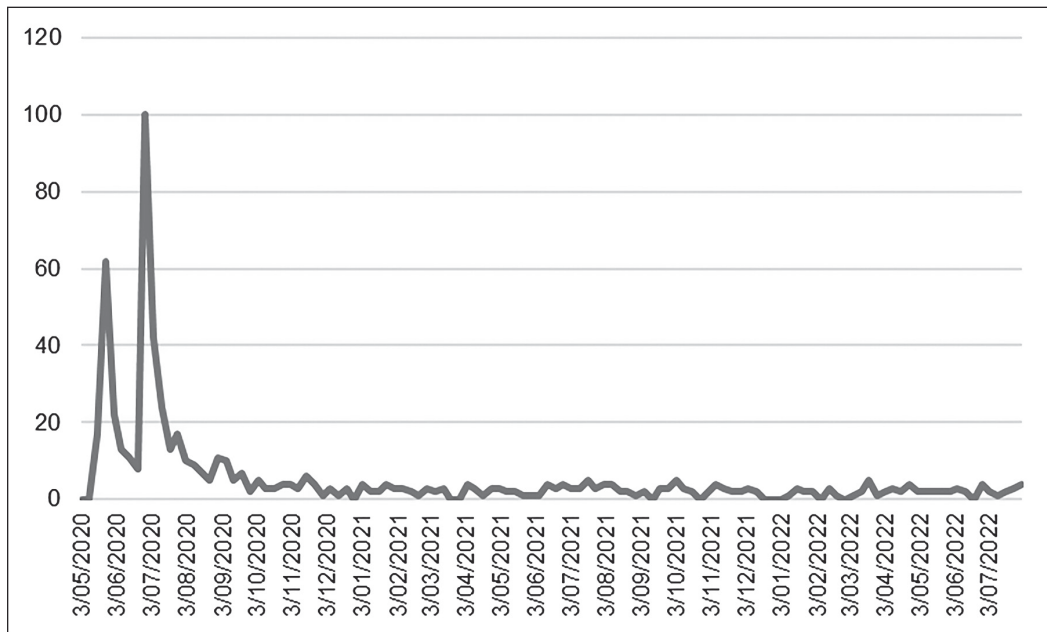


Figure 8. Search results for “Hong Kong national security law” Google Trends weekly data, 3 May 2020–31 July 2022, worldwide.

VI. Results

The China threat can take different forms, including military and ideological (and economic) ones. Specifically, China has regularly made militarized threats against the Senkaku Islands. China has become more assertive in the South China Sea as a result of its growing military power. China has ramped up military pressure on Taiwan, including an aggressive response to Pelosi's Taiwan visit. China used the humanitarian crisis of Covid-19 to advance its geopolitical advantages in its border conflict with India. Thus, it is hypothesized that the narratives on these issues within the English-speaking world can cause military threats from China to be perceived by the public. Also, the Hong Kong National Security Law means the abandonment of the city's liberal-democratic constitutional model and the compromising independence of the city's courts, law enforcement, and legislative process. There is wide-scale human rights abuse in Xinjiang. Thus, it is hypothesized that these issues cause ideological threats from China to be perceived by the English-speaking public.

In this section, the ARDL model is adopted. Unit root tests (Augmented Dickey–Fuller tests) show all data are stationary (see Appendix 8). Several variables are taken in the natural log forms, aiming to reduce the issues of residual normality and non-linearity. There are also potential multicollinearity issues. One way is to standardize the variables by subtracting the mean. Below, Table 1 shows the results of the ARDL modeling.

Table 1. The Roles of China's Territory-related Issues in Contributing to the China Threat Narrative

Dependent Variable: China Threat (the natural log of the normalized volume of the China threat narrative. See part 5.1 for details). Independent variables: Senkaku Islands (the natural log of the normalized volume of the Senkaku Islands narrative; see part 5.2.1 for details), Uyghurs (the normalized volume of the narrative on Uyghurs; see part 5.2.2 for details), South China Sea (the normalized volume of the narrative on the South China Sea; see part 5.2.3 for details), Taiwan Strait (the normalized volume of the narrative on a threat of war across the Taiwan Strait; see part 5.2.4 for details), China-India border war (the normalized volume of the narrative on China-India border war; see part 5.2.5 for details), and Hong Kong National Security Law (the natural log of the normalized volume of the narrative on Hong Kong National Security Law; see part 5.2.6 for details).

A. Short-Run Coefficients

Sample period: 3 May 2020–31 July 2022. Included observations: 112 after adjustments. Maximum dependent lags: 8 (Automatic selection). Model selection method: Akaike info criterion (AIC). Dynamic regressors (8 lags, automatic): JP XJ SCS TW IN HK. Fixed regressors: C @TREND. Selected Model: ARDL(3, 0, 0, 6, 0, 0, 0). White heteroskedasticity-consistent standard errors & covariance

Variable	Coefficient	p-values
China Threat(-1)	0.199	0.014
China Threat(-2)	-0.149	0.244

Variable	Coefficient	p-values
China Threat(-3)	-0.133	0.193
Senkaku Islands	0.063	0.095
Uyghurs	0.010	0.078
Uyghurs(-1)	-0.001	0.715
Uyghurs(-2)	-0.003	0.180
Uyghurs(-3)	0.003	0.239
Uyghurs(-4)	0.007	0.060
Uyghurs(-5)	0.0002	0.942
Uyghurs(-6)	0.009	0.018
South China Sea	0.003	0.393
Taiwan Strait	0.008	0.015
China-India border war	0.006	0.018
Hong Kong National Security Law	0.189	0.019
C	-0.511	0.004
@TREND	0.007	0.020
Adjusted R-squared	0.340	

B. Long-Run Coefficients

Variable	Coefficient	p-values
Senkaku Islands	0.058	0.100
Uyghurs	0.023	0.000
South China Sea	0.002	0.366
Taiwan Strait	0.008	0.055
China-India border war	0.005	0.013
Hong Kong National Security Law	0.175	0.004
C	-0.472	0.000
@TREND	0.007	0.001

Various tests (see Appendix 2) show that the model specification is acceptable. For example, coefficient diagnostics show that the variance inflation factors for major variables' coefficients are generally smaller than 5, except for two, being 6.3 and 7.7. As the rule of thumb for big variance inflation factors is 5 or 10, it means that the multilinearity issue can be generally ignored. Residual tests, including correlogram of standardized residuals and correlogram of standardized residuals squared, show no existence of serial correlation. The Kurtosis value is 4.18, showing a slight normality issue. The White heteroskedasticity-consistent standard errors & covariance are adopted to deal with the presence of heteroskedasticity. The Ramsey RESET test shows no existence of a non-linear functional form. The ARDL bounds test shows the existence of long-run relations (it is noted that the differences are that short-run relations include lag information, which is largely noise). The Adjusted R-squared is 34 percent, indicating a relatively large explanatory power.

As discussed in part 2.2, Google Trends results can be interpreted as the effects of agenda-setting on the general public. The results presented in Table 1 show that the English-speaking world believes that these territory-related issues, including Xinjiang's Uyghurs, HK National Security, China-India border disputes, China-Japan Senkaku disputes, and a threat of war across the Taiwan Strait, can cause the China threat. These conclusions are supported by fundamental analysis. For example, in terms of policy agenda, according to Goodman (2021),⁹¹ in the US, the bipartisan Strategic Competition Act 2021, the Endless Frontier Act, and the Meeting the China Challenge Act, which were then combined as the newly named United States Innovation and Competition Act 2021, were passed to provide policy and funding in this new cold war against China. The first two paragraphs of the Strategic Competition Act clearly indicate the nature of the China threat. In the UK, some Members of Parliament (MPs) formed the China Research Group, advocating the China threat.⁹² In Australia, some bipartisan MPs grouped themselves as the "Wolverines," working to highlight the China threat.⁹³ In terms of the media agenda, the English-speaking media may also play a significant role. For example, regarding Western media, Singaporean scholar and diplomat Kishore Mahbubani said that "(Don't look at) this region through the lenses of the Anglo-Saxon media (or) you will completely misunderstand what's happening in East Asia because they have a very jaundiced, black and white view."⁹⁴ From the perspective of China, it is possible that (China's) "own actions often undermine the narratives it seeks to promote. Its domestic human rights abuses and aggressive foreign policy stances undercut the positive story that Chinese diplomats and state media are trying to tell...."⁹⁵ It may also be helpful for China to review its policies toward these issues and/or China's story-telling practice for the English-speaking audience.

In particular, among all China's territory-related issues, the Uyghur issue has attracted the most lasting attention (up to six lag orders, i.e., the effect of one particular Uyghur-related issue on the China threat can last as long as six weeks). According to a survey by Silver, Huang, and Clancy (2022),⁹⁶ more respondents rated China's human rights policies as a very serious problem than they did the other three issues, which were China's military power, economic competition with China, and China's involvement in each country's domestic politics. In particular, a median of 79 percent considers China's policies on human rights very or somewhat serious. Seventy-two percent say that China's military power is a serious problem. Also, 66 percent and 59 percent consider economic competition with China and China's involvement in politics in their own countries very or somewhat serious. The Uyghur case may have been covered more extensively and frequently than others. This may help explain why the Uyghur issue performs differently from others.

Also, the coefficient of *Senkaku Islands* is marginally significantly positive within a 10 percent confidence level. In the long run (no lag orders), this effect has become marginally insignificant. As discussed in part 5.2.1, as the Senaku Islands are under the control of Japan, China's actions may be considered as intending to change the status quo. However, the largest peak of the search interest was driven by a policy initialized by Japan. During the sample period, no major confrontational activities from China were reported. This may help explain why it is only marginally significant.

Also, the threat of war across the Taiwan Strait is significantly associated with the China threat. This conclusion is also supported by the survey results. For example, according to the Gallup Survey (2022),⁹⁷ in 2004, around 23 percent of the American public

believed that the conflict between mainland China and Taiwan was a critical threat to the vital interests of the US. In 2021, this fraction has increased to 30 percent.

Table 1 shows the coefficient of *South China Sea* is insignificant within a 10 percent confidence level for both short-run and long-run relations. In fact, in terms of the role of contributing to the China threat narrative, the South China Sea issue is the only exception. These insignificant relations may be the result of the significance of other variables. In order to test this hypothesis, univariate Granger causality tests (see Appendix 6) were conducted. The results show that the relations between the China threat narrative and the South China Sea narrative are always insignificant. If an alternative key phrase “Spratly Islands” was used, although it is much less popular than “South China Sea” (see Appendix 4) and is mainly used by the Southeast Asian public, Granger Causality tests show that these relations are still insignificant (see Appendix 7). It is noted that these insignificant relations happened during this specific sample period, i.e., May 2020–July 2022. As Goodman (2021)⁹⁸ stated, there have been no military engagements in the South China Sea since 1988. While it is true that China developed military bases, naval facilities, and airstrips, and built artificial islands in the Paracels and Spratly Islands, it also made efforts to develop the Scarborough Shoal off the Philippine coast. They all happened during 2013–2018. No major similar events were reported during the sample period. Furthermore, on one hand, there may be genuine (legal or practical) concerns over the threat posed to freedom of navigation by China,⁹⁹ or this threat may be overstated.¹⁰⁰ On the other hand, from the viewpoint of the general public, it may be difficult to consider China’s actions (if any) a threat when the Western powers sent their naval ships to China’s neighboring waters, which are probably thousands of miles away from their home country. For example, as discussed in part 5.2.3, the largest peak of the narrative on the South China Sea is related to an accident of a US submarine in the South China Sea. It may be hardly connected to the China threat. It is also possible that the South China Sea issue is so well known and discussed by the media for so long, that it no longer correlates with the search for China threat.

VII. Concluding Remarks

The China threat has risen significantly since 2020. This study examines the roles of China’s territory-related issues, including Senkaku Islands, Xinjiang’s Uyghurs, the South China Sea, a threat of war across the Taiwan Strait, China-India border conflicts, and Hong Kong national security law, in contributing to the China threat. The reason why only these issues are chosen is that, while other factors may also potentially contribute to the China threat, these factors may be of low correlation with these territory-related issues, and as a result, the omitted variable bias may be mitigated or disappear. Based on weekly Google Trends search results from May 2020 to July 2022, this study created a series of time series variables to measure the narratives. This study contributes to knowledge of the China threat and to academia as well by presenting a (still) new quantitative method for international relations.

In particular, this study finds that, except for the South China Sea, all other issues are connected to the China threat by the English-speaking public. This conclusion is supported by fundamental analysis, including an intensifying confrontational policy stance from Western countries such as the US, the UK, and Australia, and the media agenda. The

exception of the South China Sea may only be applied to the specific sample period. Also, the Uyghur issue has attracted the most enduring attention among the English-speaking public, which is consistent with survey results. From the perspective of China, the conclusions may show that it may be helpful to either review China's relevant policies and/or re-evaluate China's story-telling practice in the English-speaking world.

From the viewpoint of academia, this study contributes to the literature by introducing a (still) new data source that has the potential to generate rich time series data, and as a result, univariate or multivariate time series modeling with high-frequency (monthly, weekly, or daily) data in international relations becomes feasible. This study can be considered as another example of how Google Trends is used in international relations, along with a number of the author's works (not cited but available upon request).

This study also has limitations. First, this study mainly covers the English-speaking public around the world who can access the Internet and Google. Second, the conclusions may be restricted to this particular time period, i.e., from May 2020 to July 2022. As shown in Figures 6 and 7, the public's interests in the China-India conflict and Hong Kong national security law have gradually diminished. Their roles in contributing to the China threat narrative may become insignificant in the future. At the same time, the Taiwan issue may become more prominent. Third, there are also spatial constraints. For example, it makes more sense if the Indian public is more interested in the China-India conflict than the Senkaku Islands issue. Some new variables may also emerge for different regions. Applying these conclusions, which are based on the whole English-speaking world, to individual regions or countries should be taken cautiously.

There are plenty of other issues that can be conducted in the future. For example, the time series pattern of the China threat may be an interesting issue. The rise and fall of the China threat narrative may be the combined result of China's domestic and foreign policies, media coverage, as well as changes in the geopolitical environment. A variety of variables need to be figured out. Also, while this study only examines the English-speaking world, the non-English-speaking world can be further examined. Goodman (2017)¹⁰¹ conducted some comprehensive analyses of the China threat in Australia. Future studies can also focus on a specific region. Factors such as the context, practices, norms, cultures, social identities, and so on, which may hardly change in a short time frame, may be important variables in a cross-sectional analysis.

Declarations

- Funding: This research did not receive any specific grants from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.
- Conflicts of interest: none
- Availability of data and material: The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request

Appendix 1: Granger Causality Tests

The Granger causality test is a method used to determine how much of the present y can be explained by past values of y , and then whether including lagged values of x can

improve the explanation’s accuracy. Because all variables are time series data, they must be examined for stationarity. Augmented Dickey-Fuller tests (not reported, but available upon request) show that all variables are stationary.

China Threat represents the normalized volume of the “China Threat” narrative worldwide (see Figure 1). *South China Sea* is the normalized volume of the South China Sea narrative worldwide (see Figure 2). *Spratly Islands* represents the normalized volume of the Spratly Islands narrative worldwide using the key phrase “Spratly Islands.”

Time period: 3 May 2020–31 July 2022. Frequency of data: weekly. Obs: 112–117

Null Hypothesis	Lag Order 1	Lag Order 2	Lag Order 3	Lag Order 4	Lag Order 5	Lag Order 6
<i>South China Sea</i> does not Granger Cause <i>China Threat</i>	13.2%	18.6%	26.5%	41.6%	59.9%	71.7%
<i>Spratly Islands</i> does not Granger Cause <i>China Threat</i>	94.9%	99.0%	81.7%	95.8%	96.3%	97.2%

Appendix 2: Variable and Model Fit Tests

A. Unit Root Tests (Augmented Dickey-Fuller test)

Null Hypothesis: Variable has a unit root.

	t-Statistic	p-values
China Threat	-9.432	0.000
Senkaku Islands	-10.060	0.000
Uyghurs	-4.690	0.000
South China Sea	-3.339	0.015
Taiwan Strait	-3.921	0.003
China-India border war	-3.977	0.002
Hong Kong National Security Law	-12.518	0.000

B. variance inflation factors (VIFs)

Variable	VIF
China Threat (-1)	1.636
China Threat (-2)	3.790
China Threat (-3)	1.600
Senkaku Islands	2.260
Uyghurs	7.714
Uyghurs (-1)	2.016
Uyghurs (-2)	3.032
Uyghurs (-3)	1.826
Uyghurs (-4)	3.672

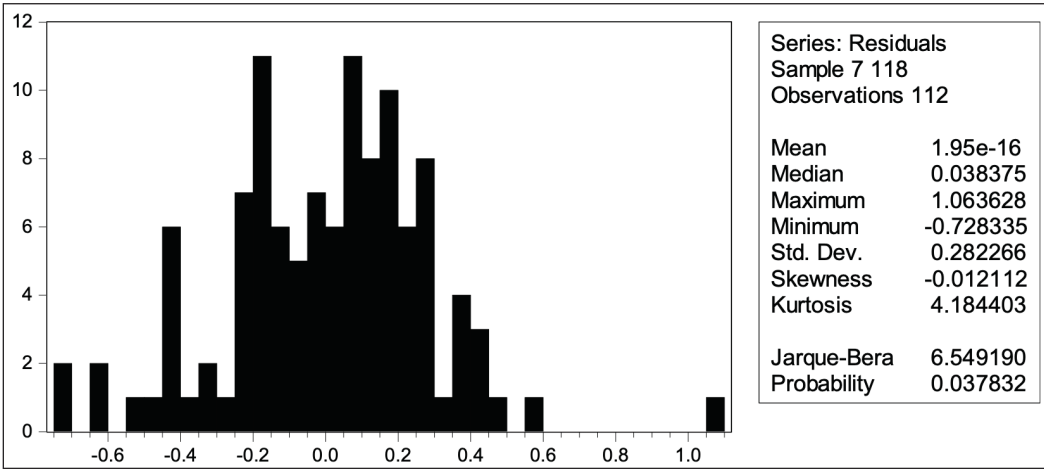
Variable	VIF
Uyghurs (-5)	1.673
Uyghurs (-6)	1.889
South China Sea	3.713
Taiwan Strait	5.118
China-India border war	1.813
Hong Kong National Security Law	6.264

C. ARDL Bounds Test

Included observations: 112. Null Hypothesis: No long-run relationships exist

Test Statistic	Value	k
F-statistic	5.460	6
Critical Value Bounds		
Significance	I(0) Bound	I(1) Bound
10%	2.53	3.59
5%	2.871	4
2.5%	3.19	4.38
1%	3.6	4.9

D. Residual Tests—Normality Test



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Biographical Statement

Kerry Liu is an independent scholar in Australia. He holds a PhD in finance from the University of Melbourne, Australia. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0581-4049>.

Submitted: 07-31-2023 • Sent for Review: 08-08-2023 • Initial Decision: 10-27-2023 •

Resubmission: 11-04-2023 • Decision: 11-09-2023