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Claremont McKenna College

Playing Mastermind: The Manipulation of Ideological
Criticism in the Quest for Global Hegemony

Submitted to
Professor Jennifer Taw

By
Katherine Beinkampen

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Abstract

When assessing conflict between great powers, the focus is often on hard power threats, like military and economic action. Yet, because great power competition focuses on expanding a given country's powers of influence and persuasion, soft power is both an effective and common weapon in the battle for hegemony. This paper analyzes the ways great powers highlight social issues linked to national identity in the opponent's state. By examining how the United States and Soviet Union criticized each other during the Cold War and how the United States and China criticize each other currently, certain trends emerge. A state can manipulate ideology to show its citizens its superiority, show the international community its superiority, or create destabilization in the opponent's state. Yet, when manipulating ideology in the opponent's state, there may be unintended impacts through resonance or policy response.

Introduction

When watching a boxing match, viewers assess the competition based on certain assumptions. First, they assume the competitors will fight with all their strength, since both want to win. Based on this, viewers can conclude that the matches between bigger, stronger, heavier fighters will be the most intense, since they can punch hard and sustain impact. Viewers also consider other aspects of physicality when assessing the match, like speed, agility, and stamina, since these tangible components also impact a boxer's ability to win. Intangible components of the fight, like mind games, trash talk, or the crowd's reactions, are often an afterthought - despite their ability to shift the outcome.

The same is true for countries. When most people think of conflict between two adversarial states, they first assume both sides want to win. As such, they will fight with the full extent of their force. Because the biggest, strongest countries typically have effective hard power - big militaries and strong economic leverage - it could be assumed that they would fight using hard power. Yet, big countries often choose to fight their adversaries through soft power, leveraging influence and perception. Just as mind games can alter the outcome of a boxing match, they too can shift the way a powerful state demonstrates and enforces its role as a global leader.

Some of the reliance on soft power as a weapon is rooted in the unique goals shared by influential countries. Smaller countries typically have goals that require hard power. Regional goals, like territorial gain or political upheaval, can be achieved through military power while punitive goals, like punishing an opponent or harming an adversary's economy, can be achieved through economic sanctions. Yet, a goal like international respect and influence cannot be achieved solely through demonstrations of military or economic strength since it does not rely on

physical strength or the capacity to punish. Rather, respect and influence must be systematically built up through the diffusion of reputation. This battle between powerful countries to be *the* dominant state, also called the fight for global hegemony, determines which country has the most power of persuasion, which country others will turn to for guidance, and which country gets to call the shots.

These countries that can exert extensive influence and project power on a global scale are called “great powers” or “superpowers.” While there are sometimes criteria associated with achieving superpower status, like being able to assist other countries with humanitarian and military aid or being a top grossing economic country, the classification for superpowers is fairly subjective - as is that for being a hegemonic power. Despite the inherent subjectivity, the status matters because states believe that it does. Thus, the quest for superpower or hegemon status shapes strategic goals and informs foreign policy.

This battle over hegemony was seen clearly throughout the Cold War, which lasted from 1947-1991. The conflict was fundamentally a power struggle between economic systems as the Soviets sought to establish the superiority of state-run communism while the Americans tried to do the same for democratic capitalism. Yet, because of nuclear restraint, there were no direct military encounters between the adversaries. Instead, the direct fighting was confined to soft power conflict. Each side attempted to demonstrate the superiority of its system while exposing flaws in its opponent’s identity including its ruling ideology, domestic institutions, leaders, and moral codes. By rooting the conflict in morality and identity, each side hoped to demonstrate their capacity for leadership and their opponent’s lack thereof.

Because the opponents framed the conflict as one between good and evil, they both sought to prove the intrinsic good in their system, or at least the bad in their opponent’s. Thus,

the Americans sought to demonstrate their intrinsic morality by building upon Christian nationalism and intensifying American religiosity. Simultaneously, American leaders critiqued Soviet atheism as amoral, thereby depicting their adversary as evil. This critique was mostly aimed at American citizens to deepen nationalism, but leaders also amplified the US's heightened religious image into the international community in an attempt to create an international multireligious anti-Soviet movement. The Soviets leveraged soft power too, building upon the existing affiliation between Black Americans and communism by coitizing American race-based inequality. Initially, the critique targeted Black Americans in an attempt to deepen dissent and spark a US-based communist movement. But, as the Cold War intensified, the Soviets redirected the critique towards their domestic population to antagonize the US and affirm the principle of equality entrenched in communism. These critiques broke down the opponent's national identity and exposed these flaws to sway the international community, deepen domestic nationalism, and create instability in the opponent's state.

Similarities have emerged between the Cold War and the current conflict between the United States and China, which some even call the "New Cold War." Like the Cold War, the new conflict is fundamentally rooted in a power struggle as China attempts to expand its global influence and the US tries to assert its own. Yet, globalization created deep economic and trade ties between the two states, constraining the use of hard power. So, the adversaries rely on soft power to critique fundamental social issues in the other's country, thereby condemning the opponent's moral code and questioning its capacity for global leadership.

Since the US and China fight over hegemony, or influence and status, they both attempt to prove the validity of their status while undermining their opponent's self-constructed image. China sought to highlight American hypocrisy and question its legitimacy as a global leader,

thereby creating space for Chinese leadership to emerge. Therefore, China launched an international campaign denouncing American gun violence and classifying the government's subsequent inaction as a human rights violation. In response, the US attempted to undermine China's rising international influence by exposing its human rights violations against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. This criticism aimed to mobilize anti-China, pro-trade war sentiments domestically and anti-China, pro-human rights sentiments internationally.

In both cases- the US vs USSR and the US vs China - ideological criticism was used to highlight a flaw in the other society. This attempted to undermine the opponent's soft power internationally while invigorating nationalism and anti-opponent sentiment domestically. Yet, when critiques are aimed at the international community, they can reach the target population and, if certain conditions are met, they can have the unintended effect of creating domestic resonance and response. When the Soviet Union criticized American racism and attempted to position its system as a more equal alternative, it aimed to dispel narratives about the US being free. The US government identified this criticism as a legitimate security threat and worked towards creating civil rights legislation to overcome the attack on American identity. Simultaneously, civil rights interest groups restructured their strategies to fit within a nationalist narrative, making effective interest groups anti-communist. Because of similar conditions between the Cold War and the conflict between China and the US, it might be assumed that China's critiques would create a similar type of top-down resonance. Yet, its critique of gun violence has failed to create institutionalized social change, mostly because of the target audience, the distance between gun rights and American identity, and the different sense of existentialism. US criticisms did not resonate when attacking the USSR or China, mostly

because they are authoritarian states with little room for bottom-up social change or disagreements within the government.

Each country attempts to undermine its opponent by demonstrating its superiority to its domestic population, the international community, and, when possible, the opponent. This is typically done through soft power manipulation whereby countries target and expose flaws within their opponent's society. These critiques become even more salient - and damaging - when they touch on a core aspect of national identity, since identity shapes domestic and international norms surrounding patriotism, leadership, and hegemony.

Literature Review

Norm Diffusion

Norms are the unwritten rules of social behavior. People act in ways they think are appropriate, yet these standards of appropriate behavior are conditional. Take our willingness to form a line when waiting for a cashier at a store. There is no rule mandating a line be formed and most stores lack signs indicating that customers should form one, yet people do because it is the societal standard. Norms govern our daily habits, ethical standards, and even amoral behavior. Consider the prevalence of white supremacy in the US. This idea became a norm because a powerful, influential group “normalized” it, reinforcing it through academia, churches, government policies, and other means. The norm then became reified whereby many people internalized it to the point of acceptance rather than critical consideration. In this case, white supremacy justified, in the eyes of many white Americans, slavery, segregation, and other racist policies. Moreover, norms are tenacious once internalized. Even after these racist practices were deemed unacceptable by many Americans as competing normative narratives arose, swaths of people in the US continue to believe in white supremacy.

Norms emerge organically, but they can be promoted or seized upon opportunistically. Because norms cannot be materially measured, their dominance and shifts can be difficult to track. To solve this issue, Finnemore (1998) devised a three-step “norm life cycle” to explain social change through norm diffusion, or the process that transforms an idea into a norm. First, norm emergence occurs. In this stage, “norm entrepreneurs,” or those promoting a norm shift, use existing norms and institutions to convince a critical mass of stakeholders to embrace their norm. If this happens, a tipping point is reached whereby the norm moves onto the next stage.

Second, the norm cascades. Norm entrepreneurs persuade and socialize other actors to follow the norm. People might accept the norm because they are pressured to conform, hopeful to enhance their international legitimacy, or want to enhance their self-esteem. Third, the norm is internalized. In this final stage, norms are taken for granted, cease to be debated, and come to influence new ideas. While the norm is never universally held, it is held by enough people with enough power to influence society. This cycle transforms an idea into a norm.

Another component of the norm cycle is the interaction between ideas, events, and actors. As momentous events occur, people question their pre-existing beliefs and seek new ideas that help them make sense of the world they live in. As these new ideas emerge, groups rally around them in support or opposition. This creates a cycle whereby events organically produce new ideas that can then be leveraged to create greater change. Take colonization as an example. Among certain European countries, a norm arose justifying colonization rooted in the ideas that they were meant to civilize the “savage” non-Europeans, that these “less civilized” actors would benefit from Europeanization, and that European competition and national interests justified adventurism. This mentality lasted for over a century, so the act of colonization persevered. However, people began to push back against the norms used to justify colonialism in the colonized countries and in the colonizing states. They offered competing ideas and ethical stances, moving people to revolution, protest, and mobilization against colonial governments. Simultaneously, those European governments, after warring with one another in World War I and World War II, found themselves unable to hold their colonial territories. Moreover, they were unable to justify colonization in the light of new ideas about self-determination and independence, particularly for the states that had already been delegitimized at home and abroad by their war losses. States that prolonged their colonial presence as the international community

shifted away from it risked becoming pariahs. Thus, in the midst of shifting norms, states must consider whether their domestic interests, like power and resources, outweigh their international standing. Moreover, they must weigh whether current practices that have been deemed beneficial can survive both internal and international disapprobation.

An actor's ability to leverage events to create social change largely rests on norms. An actor must understand the social, political, and cultural norms that circulate in a society to anticipate the reaction to a new idea or the willingness of other actors to support the idea. However, norms can be used to create change as domestic actors leverage international norms to persuade their state to adopt a new policy. Finnemore uses the example of women's suffrage to demonstrate this idea. She argues that women's suffrage was initially a domestic issue with groups of state actors advocating on behalf of women's right to vote. However, as more states expanded voting rights, domestic groups leveraged the issue as an evolving international norm, rather than just a domestic issue. Reliance on international norms to strengthen domestic debates has become even more common in recent years because of globalization. The interdependence of states homogenizes global norms, thus providing even more leverage for actors to persuade government actors.

While norms can be promoted through the norm life cycle, they can also be spoiled. In norm spoiling, actors directly challenge existing norms to weaken their influence. While long-term success requires widespread support from the community, short-term success can be measured by the extent to which the advocacy meant to disrupt the norm limits its development and dispersion. Oftentimes, actors spoil norms because they want to create space for competing norms to emerge. This happens frequently with international human rights because they have been at the center of the UN's norm-building initiatives for decades. Sanders (2018) explores the

ways organizations with seemingly no political overlap can coalesce to spoil a norm. She looks at attacks on international women's rights by organizations as disparate as the Vatican, the UN Africa Group, and the United States and concludes that incremental assaults on a normative agenda are effective in stalling the development of international norms. While norm spoiling is used to stunt development in the context of international women's rights, it can also be used to halt a progressive norm, like efforts to overturn the norm of white supremacy.

Norms in international relations are often juxtaposed against material interests. The material approach observes actions through the rational logic of weighing consequences and asks whether the actor has enough information and resources to cooperate. Socially constructed ideas, on the other hand, rest on the logic of appropriateness and question the ways that social action might change an actors' desires.¹ This does not mean that actors no longer seek to optimize outcomes, rather, that material interests are not the only thing actors seek to optimize; they might also want intangible interests like prestige, status, or esteem.² A normative understanding of underlying intent does not replace the material context, but adds another dimension. This addition makes the understanding of actions between two actors messier, but also more accurate. Thus, when examining an actor's motives, we are not only looking for foreign policy outputs, but at whether there are changes in structure, identity, and interests that we can attribute to the relationship with a foreign power.

There are two key ways foreign powers influence domestic spheres: persuasion and social influence. Because influence is inherently social, the desire to diffuse reputation can generate

¹ Alastair Iain Johnston, "The Social Effects of International Institutions on Domestic (Foreign Policy) Actors," *Locating the Proper Authorities*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI, 2003, 146

² Alastair Iain Johnston, "The Social Effects of International Institutions on Domestic (Foreign Policy) Actors," 146

incentives for specific forms of social behavior. This behavior is rarely inherently altruistic, but is often motivated by status maximization or back-patting incentives.³

Persuasion is a micro tool of socialization. It is used to change actors' minds about causality and effect. Thus, actors can use their social influence to persuade external actors that they are competing or cooperating with another force. According to Habermas's theory of effective communication, all interaction is not strategic bargaining. Instead, it involves coming to a shared understanding of the structure of an interaction including the key players, their key interests, and the value of whatever is being bargained over.⁴ Actors typically use argument and deliberation to motivate external parties to behave in accordance with their expectations.

There are two main ways an actor can be persuaded. The first is by engaging in the process of thinking about and reflecting upon the content of new information. In this process, the persuading actor will systematically present their arguments so that the persuaded actor must weigh evidence from various perspectives and come to a new conclusion.⁵ The second method happens when an actor is persuaded because of their relationship to the other actor. Amongst cooperative countries, this typically involves the building up of trust using confidence measures and the dissolution of threats through diplomacy and conflict management.⁶ Because states are more willing to accept suggestions from liked sources, persuasion is usually easier amongst friends. However, it can still happen amongst competitors, as the persuade examines the nature of their relationship with the persuader to judge the legitimacy of their actions or suggestions.

³ Alastair Iain Johnston, "The Social Effects of International Institutions on Domestic (Foreign Policy) Actors," 196

⁴ Alastair Iain Johnston, "The Social Effects of International Institutions on Domestic (Foreign Policy) Actors," 153

⁵ Alastair Iain Johnston, "The Social Effects of International Institutions on Domestic (Foreign Policy) Actors," 154

⁶ Ibid.

The persuader's stance is then strengthened if the policy is already accepted by a majority or upheld by other friendly countries.

The second tool countries use to sway domestic spheres is social influence, which is a micro process that evokes normative behavior through social rewards and punishments.⁷

Successful social influence is measured by the actors' degree of conformity to the position advocated by another group. While they are often entangled, social influence differs from persuasion. Summarized by Festinger, social influence is "public conformity without private acceptance," while persuasion entails conformity and acceptance.⁸

Johnston outlines four main ways in which social influence can urge actors to conform to or abandon a policy. 1) Self-categorization as a member of a group creates internal pressure to conform to that group's norms.⁹ Disjuncture, whether real or imagined, can pressure an actor to reduce the discrepancy through conformity. The desire to conform is often born out of self-esteem measures. 2) Social liking creates pressure to create similarities amongst members of a group. Actors often have a sense of comfort when interacting with those who share similar traits.¹⁰ This can be why actors comply better with requests from friends than those from strangers. 3) Consistency theory suggests that actors loathe to be perceived as inconsistent with public behavior or publicly stated beliefs.¹¹ This desire to be consistent is supported by Cialdini (1984) who found that people are more likely to conform to certain norms after they have taken a public action that reflects those norms. 4) Actors want to maximize their status and diffuse a prestigious image. Or, the opposite can also be true: actors want to avoid shame, humiliation, or

⁷ Alastair Iain Johnston, "The Social Effects of International Institutions on Domestic (Foreign Policy) Actors," 165

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

the loss of status. This condition rests on reputation and status maximization. While high status is often linked to conditions like power and wealth, status markers are not always tied to materials (think medals or public recognition).¹² High status may just be good in and of itself because of the psychological benefits like dignity and recognition. All states are sensitive to praise and shame, yet they can use a good reputation as an instrument to build trust and cooperation.

While the social nature of influence makes it difficult to track, Johnston lists a few indicators of effective social influence in international institutions. These include: 1) commitments to participate in and join power-constraining institutions without material payments or sanctions; 2) participatory states are incentivized by back-patting and image benefits; 3) states make commitments to socialize when it is clear that noncommitment is isolating or harmful.

The Second-Image Reversed

In International Relations theory, most scholars agree that international structures and domestic politics affect each other. Kenneth Waltz, in *Man, the State, and War*, examines other scholars' arguments that the state impacts foreign relations, describing such interactions as the "second image," the first image being the effects of individuals' actions and human nature on foreign relations and the third image being the effects of international system's structure on foreign relations. The second image hinges on the idea that the structure, culture, and ideologies within a state impact the way it interacts with the global order. For example, authoritarian states often try to expand their power or democratic states rely on a liberal order, so are likely to cooperate with other democracies. While the second image – also known as the domestic level of

¹² Alastair Iain Johnston, "The Social Effects of International Institutions on Domestic (Foreign Policy) Actors," 166

analysis - focuses on how a state's nature affects its foreign policy, some analysts reverse the causality, highlighting the ways that the international system can impact a state's domestic social movements and political agenda.

When analysis on the relationship between state structures and the international system only focuses on the flow of ideas *from* domestic structures *towards* the international community, it suggests that domestic politics are the independent variable. However, this is not the case, given that domestic politics are partially dependent on international forces, as argued by Gourevitch (1978). He states that the international system is not just an expression of domestic structures, but a cause of them. In a theory he calls the "second image reversed," Gourevitch explores the effect of "transnational, international and multi-national actors, and global, non-military forces such as technology, trade, communications, and culture" on domestic policy. He concludes that international forces control both the international state system and the international economy, both of which can influence individual states through power, resources, and access. Thus, foreign powers must have significant influence on domestic action because they control these two critical systems.

Gourevitch's theory builds upon decades of work by researchers and historians that link domestic events with international actions. A prominent example of this is the Zinoviev letter, which was a forged document published by British newspapers four days before the 1924 election. The Conservative party forged the letter to look like a member of the Communist International in Moscow was writing orders to the Communist Party of Great Britain instructing them to radicalize the working class. The letter prompted outrage from the British public and fear surrounding foreign interference, bringing about a landslide victory for the conservative party. This example demonstrates the potential leverage held by foreign actors in domestic politics; the

mere perception of foreign intervention mobilized support towards a common goal. While the Zinoviev letter was a domestic actor using a fake foreign effort, it certainly sparked fear in the population and had a severe influence on domestic politics.

Constructivism

Consistent with “second-image reversed” theory is the idea that international pressures can shape state behavior through ideological dispersion. This observation is rooted in constructivism, or the belief that ideas shape action, which then shapes domestic and international conditions. The spread of ideas is critical to constructivism, as constructivists suppose that people’s interpretations of the world around them shape their actions. Constructivist approaches examine the role of complex ideas in human behavior, which is very different from positivist approaches that presuppose rationality.

Constructivism is a social theory that seeks to explain the identity and interests of institutions, including states. Wendt (1992) argues that states’ identities and interests are endogenous (internally derived) rather than exogenous (driven by the system). He uses this theory to examine anarchy and demonstrate that anarchy has no roots in power or structure without the systems that create and sustain identities and interests.¹³ In his own words, “Self-help and power politics are institutions, not essential features of anarchy. Anarchy is what states make of it.”¹⁴

Relationships between states cannot be explained by only looking at power. State leaders must be able to predict whether states will be friends, recognize each other as sovereign, or have

¹³ Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics,” *International Organization*, vol. 46, no. 2, 1992, pp. 391–425. *JSTOR*, 394

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

dynastic ties because these factors affect their interactions because it affects their security interests. As Stephen Walt argues, it is the balance of threats, not the balance of power, that determines state action.¹⁵ This is because states already must have assumptions about the competing identities and interests that will impact their own. In this way, states act towards others based on the assumptions they have towards them. In other words, states act differently towards enemies than friends because enemies present a threat and friends do not. This dynamic cannot be explained merely by understanding power. For example, British missiles mean something different to the United States than Russian missiles.¹⁶ Thus, the distribution of power affects a state's calculations, but how it does so depends on its perception of itself and others.

Identity Building

Constructivism can be used to understand the narratives state's leaders try to create about themselves, their state, and the rationale behind a states' projection of a certain image abroad. These perceptions of identity shape both domestic action and engagement in the international community. A state's ability to effectively communicate an image then shapes national identity and provides critical insight into a state's ability and willingness to act domestically and internationally. The constructivist view of national identity-building emphasizes that actors' perception of themselves and their surroundings are socially constructed through relationships. In other words, what a state is shaped by what it is not.

Identities are inherently relational. People have many identities linked to their many roles: brother, son, student, and citizen are all identities one person might hold depending on

¹⁵ Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," 396

¹⁶ Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," 397

which relationship they are explaining.¹⁷ Similarly, a state has many identities: secular vs religious, democratic vs authoritarian, capitalist vs communist, etc. Each of these identities is social, grounded in the perceptions actors hold about themselves and one another.

Identity forms the basis of interests and states continuously define their interests as they assess situations. As relationships between states change, their interests change, as they often transition from enemies to neutral to friends. Take the US and the USSR following the Cold War for example. The two states spent about 50 years positioning themselves in direct opposition to the other. Many of their policies, global interests, and narratives were spun to antagonize the other. Yet, when the Cold War was over in the mid-1990s, they were no longer direct enemies and seemed unsure of their interests.¹⁸ In this case, the two states encountered an unprecedented situation and had to reconstruct their interpretations of the other to create meaning in their relationship.

The relationship between state identity and foreign policy is further explored by Adler (2004), who argues that actors attach meaning to the world and frame their experiences in a way they know, experience, and understand. Thus, actors ranging from civil society members, state officials, and global leaders act in ways that reflect their experiences in relation to the state, or at least their perception of the state. Thus, national identity is largely based on collective understandings of who we are and how we should act.

States' domestic actions are driven not just by the domestic sense of self, but also as domestic actors recognize and resonate with international pressures. These pressures may be the aforementioned kinds of positive soft power, but they also can be positioned in ways that might

¹⁷ Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," 398

¹⁸ Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," 399

humiliate the state or challenge its systems. A state is ideologically vulnerable, or susceptible to humiliation, when a foreign power can justifiably challenge the state's pillars of national pride. For example, in the United States, some leaders see American foreign policy as a function of Wilsonian liberal capitalism while others understand America's global role as one influenced by party politics, geographic isolation, and race prejudice. Both perceptions of the state impact its ability to act, as leaders typically act in accordance with their understanding of the state's role on the global stage. If the concept of Wilsonian liberal capitalism is intrinsic to a certain leaders' vision of the state, an external group can provoke the state by challenging the notion of the United States as a free market state. This challenge is particularly salient if the attack is rooted in some truth. For example, attacks on the US rooted in party politics, geographic isolation, and racism contradict the Wilsonian vision, but are effective because of their salience. Thus, understanding how states' leaders perceive national values and international competition provides insight into their decision-making. The state's desire to protect itself, or the perceived image of itself, can lead to domestic actions that target the challenge and reaffirm the desired image.

Civil Society

Constructivism can also explain how norms shape civil society, which is the sphere of collective action surrounding shared interests, purposes, and values. In other words, civil society is the relationship between independent, organized, autonomous groups of people and the government. It is an interactive, interdependent relationship with the state whereby the state must create opportunities for civil society to develop. This is a winner-take-all relationship where the state gets stronger as civil society gets weaker and vice versa. Typically, a strong civil society is

beneficial to the state, as it can make up for the state's weaknesses in terms of public goods like education and health. However, this also means that most authoritarian states have under-developed civil societies, as the state guards its power. In either case, the development of civil society leads to opportunities for mobilization around issues that impact citizens.

As civil society actors rationally interpret the world around them, they convert their experiences into structures and patterns. For example, an individual who perceives danger on a certain street might systematically avoid that street, transforming an idea into an action. As groups of actors experience the same environments and share their ideas, they transition into collective beliefs that inform the actions of a group. This process creates norms, which shape standards of appropriateness for actors with a given identity. These norms then manifest in people's relationships with other individuals, their community, their nation, and the global community.

Civil society can leverage external actors' actions and the state's anticipated reaction to motivate government leaders to action. Lynch (1994) explores this dynamic through the social forces that create peace movements and come to influence international war laws. Various peace movements have used domestic leverage and global reasoning to advocate for constraints on states' ability to wage war and the promotion of peaceful alternatives. She uses Anglo-American peace movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to demonstrate their leverage in advocating for peaceful conflict resolution. Lynch's research illustrates the power of small groups of motivated actors in influencing domestic and international policy, particularly when the entire international community is watching.

Gourevitch argues that foreign influence is even more common with globalization. Historically, few individuals have wielded global influence. Time, money, and technology

restricted global interaction to politicians, ambassadors, and uber-wealthy families. Yet, the accessibility and far reach of modern technology means that a significant number of global actors can interact with one another regardless of geographic constraints. Technology eases the logistics of moving people and goods and media creates interconnectedness between borders. In the modern era, actors can influence and be influenced by millions of circulating ideas.

The rise of globalization has ushered in an era that Morse (1970) calls “complex interdependence.” He argues that the prominence of global ideologies creates uniformity amongst modern societies. As systems like bureaucracy and welfare prove to be effective in some countries and thus garner respect amongst the international community, more states adopt these systems instead of developing unique governance structures. By looking to other states for legitimization and guidance, successful governance norms across nations are strengthened. As globalization increases, international pressures on the state affect its independence of action. Downward pressure from international organizations and peer pressure from other states push a state to conform to international standards. Simultaneously, transnational actors, like corporations competing on a global scale, force unanticipated adjustments on national governments. These external pressures on the state push it to both respond to international norms and create demands to be a leader in developing new norms. This does not just happen with international actors, but with populism too, where its success in some areas leads other areas to adopt a norm. Populism, however, acts more like negative norm diffusion, whereby ideas are born and diffused throughout society before acceptance by the elite. Regardless, both ideas require the leverage of multiple strategies.

Multilevel Models

Second image reversed, constructivism, and norm diffusion are all essential components of the external manipulation of wedge issues. When layered on top of each other, the three theories paint a comprehensive picture of the dynamics between international and domestic actors and how these can influence governments' policies, particularly on sensitive issues. And each show how complex these dynamics are leveraging state and non-state actors as well as international actors and ideas.

A multilevel model allows a thorough exploration of these complicated relationships. Multilevel models are typically used in data collection and technology to demonstrate that parameters vary at different levels. Yet these contextual models can also be used in the social sciences, where they are used to show that several factors impact a given outcome. In the realm of international relations, this means domestic, institutional, and social events; international pressures and opportunities; and technological and social innovation influence, react to, and shape each other.

In the social sciences, DiPrete (1994) uses multilevel models to link macro and micro social phenomena. Relatively little research has attempted to explain micro level data (like domestic social movements) through a macro level lens (like key international players), so DiPrete looks at individual exchanges to characterize the relationships within a system. He shows the micro level outcomes in two ways: 1) by demonstrating that the framework of micro level models is a function of their greater context and 2) by showing that micro-macro level relationships can be expressed through the characteristics of the greater context. This might look like demonstrating that domestic movements are a function of the international context or showing that the relationship between domestic and international movements can only be

explained when looking at the holistic picture. Thus, DiPrete argues that individuals respond to both their social contexts and their visions of responsibility (i.e., their micro world) as a function of their understanding of macro-phenomena.

Viewing norm theory, constructivism, and second image reversed through a multilevel model serves as a lens through which soft power can be understood as a tool of hegemonic manipulation. Because norms shape identity, they are a tool that states can leverage to construct an image of itself. This image is important because, as constructivism explains, power is rooted in perception. Therefore, a state's ability to construct a clear image can help it distinguish allies from enemies, form relationships, and assert its power. Yet, just as a national image can be built up, it can be torn down. By exposing flaws or hypocrisy within a state's identity, an opponent can shift the international perception of a given state, thereby dismantling some of its power. Second image reversed theory shows that international phenomena can also have domestic implications, so attempts at dismantling a national identity can also have effects in a state's civil society. This multilevel analysis provides greater context for looking at ideological manipulation in the Cold War and in the conflict between the US and China.

Case 1: Cold War Ideological Manipulation between the United States and Soviet Union

Following the end of World War I in 1945, the wartime alliance between the United States and Soviet Union collapsed as the two superpowers entered into a hostile political rivalry. The Soviet Union had installed left-wing communist governments throughout eastern Europe as its Red Army liberated the Eastern Front from Axis powers. This sparked fear amongst the Americans that Soviet domination would expand westwards and threaten the existing democracies throughout western Europe. As the USSR sought to maintain control in the East, the US attempted the same in the West by providing aid under the Marshall Plan to rebuild western Europe. This left the European continent split with half under US influence and half under USSR influence. Tensions between the US and USSR only escalated as left-leaning leaders emerged throughout Asia and South America, confirming the Soviets' expansionist goals.

While conflict between great powers was historically fought through conventional war, both the US and USSR were reluctant to engage in a typical military standoff since, by 1949, they both had atomic bombs and feared mutually assured destruction. Instead, they fought ideologically, both attempting to prove the superiority of their economic system. The two were often compared using material economic outcomes, like annual production, GDP, or technological advances, but they were also positioned to win over populations because of the perceived moral superiority rooted in the identity of their respective state and its systems.

Highlighting the morality of western capitalism required the antagonization of Soviet communism and vice versa. In Washington's eyes, the US was the democratic, capitalist "leader of the free world" fighting against the Godless, brainwashed, constrained Soviets. Moscow, on the other hand, characterized itself as a progressive, forward-looking utopia attempting to defeat an elitist, unequal system. These labels characterized each state, pushing the two nations to adopt

or reject policies that fit within their self-constructed narrative. The maintenance of these narratives required constant ideological combat and incentivized the manipulation of policies, interests, and overall identities to antagonize the other.

Moral and religious claims are powerful because they speak to people's lives in ways they can understand and articulate. While the primary Cold War competition was economic, leveraging religion allowed the US to connect a high-level competition to a ground-level one, since religious oppression threatens people's feeling of security and freedom in a society. Thus, when fighting the Cold War, both states found ways to tie social issues to economic ideology in a way that made them fundamentally related. This invigorated people across the globe in cementing their allegiance to one side and strengthened domestic resistance to the "evil" opposing system.

US Critique of Soviet Atheism

Orthodox religion is deeply entrenched in Russian identity. The Russian Empire entered the 20th century as the biggest Orthodox state globally with 90 million citizens or 72% of the population identifying as Orthodox.¹⁹ Yet, by the end of the 1930s, the Orthodox church stood on the brink of destruction. Russian citizens were not turning away from religion because of a culture shift, but because the state decided that religion was a hindrance to the newly formed Soviet Union and its broader goals of modernization and progress. As Vladimir Lenin said to

¹⁹ Oleg Yegorov, "How Did the Russian Orthodox Church Survive 70 Years of Atheism in the USSR?" *Russia Beyond*, 25 Oct. 1, 1

Maxim Gorky in a letter, “worshipping any god is ideological necrophilia.”²⁰ Thus, the Soviet government embarked on a campaign to eradicate religion from the state using a series of policies that aggressively restricted public displays of faith and limited the church’s power.

Ridding the nation of faith necessitated the state-led discrediting of religion using two key tactics: fear and scarcity. Those who openly practiced their faith were at risk of violence from the state. Punishments included imprisonment, decades of manual labor, or even execution.²¹ When faced with a decision between their religion and their life, most people chose to abandon the church. Not only did church attendance drop, but churches struggled to recruit priests because of the associated dangers. By 1935, the church had no ecclesiastical governing body, called the Holy Synod, because it struggled to attract representatives. Meanwhile, the church was in financial limbo because the communist party ordered all the church’s property and financial investments be nationalized. The decline in attendance, inability to recruit priests, and worsening financial status took a toll on the church. By 1939, there was only one functioning church in most regions and several regions were even declared “churchless.”²²

The USSR loosened its oppressive religious policies briefly during World War II, in part thanks to President Roosevelt, who threatened to withdraw economic and military support if Stalin did not grant Soviet citizens more religious freedoms.²³ Sacrificing state atheism for victory seemed like a fair deal, and some even argue Stalin thought more peaceful relationships between the government and the church could give the Soviet Union more leverage amongst the

²⁰ Oleg Yegorov, “How Did the Russian Orthodox Church Survive 70 Years of Atheism in the USSR?” 3

²¹ Paul Froese, “Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why an Atheistic Monopoly Failed,” *JSSR*, vol. 43, Mar. 2004, 5

²² Tatiana A. Chumachenko, *Church and State in Soviet Russia: Russian Orthodoxy from World War II to the Khrushchev Years*, Edited by Edward E. Roslof, Routledge, 2015, 4

²³ Oleg Yegorov, “How Did the Russian Orthodox Church Survive 70 Years of Atheism in the USSR?” *Russia Beyond*, 25 Oct. 2018, 9

Allied powers. Not only did he relax punishments for churchgoers, but worked to strengthen the church. He met with Orthodox bishops and began assisting them in improving the church's financial situation. The government allowed church leaflets to be printed on government printers and the Red Army Soldiers even received sermons from clergymen.²⁴ Stalin seemed somewhat optimistic about his program of strengthening religion, albeit under the state's control, explaining, "We shall prove that the most devoted Orthodox follower can be a loyal citizen of the USSR."²⁵ The period of positive, or at least neutral, relations between the church and state lasted throughout Stalin's rule but ended in the late 1950s with Khrushchev's revival of state-run atheism. The USSR was focused on progress, not tradition, and wanted to put its full strength behind measurable progress in science, technology, and the global traction of a new economic system. It assumed a truly modern society could not be rooted in something so traditional as religion.

The US was also looking toward progress but had a different idea of what progress looked like. It sought free markets across the globe and democratically controlled states. Rather than rallying pro-US, anti-Soviet sentiments by using dry economic models explaining the failures of communism, the US instead sought to highlight for the American public the fundamental differences between the US and Soviet systems in more relatable terms, focusing specifically on issues of religious freedom. This allowed the US to create clear distinctions between the two systems in ways that spoke to people's lives in ways they could understand.

²⁴ Tatiana A. Chumachenko, *Church and State in Soviet Russia: Russian Orthodoxy from World War II to the Khrushchev Years*, 5

²⁵ Oleg Yegorov, "How Did the Russian Orthodox Church Survive 70 Years of Atheism in the USSR?" 9

American Propaganda

As the Soviet Union persecuted religion in the pursuit of power, the United States saw an opportunity to antagonize its enemy. Much of the conflict between the two states was already rooted in the construction of good-vs-evil narratives: the US was good because it was free and democratic while the USSR was evil because it was rigid and oppressive. Not only did Soviet persecution of religion feed into its image as a repressive state, but created an opportunity for Americans to characterize communism as a godless system. Given inherent American religiosity and the personal quality of faith, this characterization intended to muster waves of support for Western systems. Moreover, it presented an opportunity for American leaders to connect with international religious organizations. However, in characterizing the Soviets as godless, the US had to meticulously craft its own national identity as one with god-fearing leadership and religiosity at its core.

Characterizing America as a fundamentally religious nation was not too far from reality. Christianity had been essential to US internationalism for decades. America was founded with Christian ideals and these quickly intertwined with the concept of American exceptionalism, which shaped the US's vision of its role in the international system. After the Civil War, the concept of manifest destiny gave Americans the will to spread their ideas and systems across the globe. After World War I, Christian missionaries began traveling more than ever before, bringing their religion to communities with different faiths. The defeat of the Nazis in the Second World War further cemented the idea of America as a divine nation, since it defeated a horrific evil.²⁶ Not only was religion important to the US's international image, but it also shaped domestic identity. The relative "success" of Christianity in foreign policy had roots in the demographics of

²⁶ Dianne Kirby, "The Cold War and American Religion," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2017, 3

the US, with more than 95% of Americans identifying as Christian in 1950.²⁷ Religion, particularly Christianity, was something Americans identified with on a personal, national, and international level. Thus, it made an effective weapon to invigorate nationalism against a foreign threat.

Religion was a clear divergent point in the two countries' identities. The Soviet government's reliance on secularism fit into the Western narrative of the Soviets as oppressive and godless. Yet, if they were evil because of their godlessness, some of America's good had to be tied to its Godliness. Thus, America's religious resurgence during the Cold War was a top-down infusion of faith to rally support for Western systems.

At the beginning of the Cold War, the US and USSR were fighting for international influence; therefore, they aimed their efforts towards pulling countries to their side, or at least away from the opponent. American leaders leveraged the religiosity entrenched in existing national identity to demonstrate the moral supremacy of Western systems. Few countries had economic or political stake in the Cold War, but US leaders recognized that they might have social or moral interests in the conflict. Especially given the dozens of countries that tie religious leadership with political leadership, the US leadership identified an opportunity to market Western systems as supportive of religion. In doing so, it could also expose Soviet systems as inherently anti-religious, dangerous, and destructive to personal faith. Thus, the US presented two options to the international community: the god-fearing US or the godless USSR.

When Truman assumed the presidency in 1945, he immediately sought alliances with religious institutions, most notably Pope Pius XII, who characterized the Soviet communists as

²⁷ Frank Newport, "Percentage of Christians in U.S. Drifting Down, but Still High," *Gallup*, Gallup, 24 Mar. 2022, 6

“enemies of God.”²⁸ The two engaged in a public letter exchange, which, given the Pope’s disdain for secularism, signaled the end of the wartime alliance between the USSR and the US.²⁹ Moreover, it gave Truman a heightened sense of religious and moral obligation, thereby granting the US grounds for its intensification of religious values. Truman made strides to further the association between his administration and religious institutions, demonstrated by his attempts to recruit the World Council of Churches (WCC) to join him, the Pope and other world leaders to create a united, faith-driven front against the USSR. While turned down by the WCC, bringing religious figures like the Pope into the Western alliance was a strong signal. It demonstrated a willingness to cut ties with the Soviets on moral grounds, rather than political ones. The association with the church also reflected Truman’s initial critiques of the USSR, which were based in their amorality and disruption to free will, explaining that they would “thwart the hopes and ideals of mankind.”³⁰ The Truman Administration clearly expressed the turn to religion as a national security tactic, as clearly stated in NSC 68, which discusses defeating the faith of communism through the mobilization of a “spiritual counter force.”³¹ Creating an alliance with an institution like the church, which is revered as inherently good, was both intended to associate the US with a heightened ethical stance and create deeper divisions between the US and USSR.

Despite a primary focus on invigorating domestic religion, Eisenhower maintained Truman’s strategy of leveraging international religious ties. He instilled the same fear of godless communists in the minds of religious leaders across the globe with the hope they would ally with the West, or at least refuse to ally with the Soviets. In the Middle East, Eisenhower sought

²⁸ Dianne Kirby, “The Cold War and American Religion,” 4

²⁹ Dianne Kirby, “The Cold War and American Religion,” 3

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Dianne Kirby, “The Cold War and American Religion,” 5

relationships with Islamic leaders by emphasizing commonalities between the two religions with the same God. The group of religious allies distributed a brochure throughout the Middle East called “The Voices of God,” which contained quotations from sources as disparate as the Qur’an, Muslim poetry, Jesus Christ, Chinese philosophy, the Bhagavad Gita, Abraham Lincoln, and Mahatma Gandhi and was meant to present a common moral front against a global enemy.³² The Department of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and CIA devised a plan to provide funds and arms to anti-Soviet Arab leaders.³³ In Southeast Asia, Eisenhower sought relationships with Muslim and Buddhist leaders, particularly because he feared the governments would be susceptible to the communist Chinese. In Soviet-bloc countries, the American National Security Council had a program to support the Orthodox Church by undermining communist influence and encouraging defiance amongst the clergy.³⁴ Eisenhower’s programs demonstrated a willingness to protect and promote the interests of global religious institutions and starkly contrasted his acceptance of religion to the Soviets’ denial of it.

Still, Eisenhower’s primary focus was reaffirming American morality to American citizens. As the Cold War escalated and the world became distinctly bifurcated, there was less need to focus criticism on the international community since most countries were clearly aligned or firmly neutral. Thus, the religious invigoration shifted from a mechanism to prove moral superiority internationally to a mechanism to reaffirm American supremacy domestically. US leaders fanned the flames of existing religious values as a way to differentiate the God-fearing Americans from the godless Soviets. This distinction quickly became an important one, as it justified the vigor with which leaders wanted to squash the communist system. As Eisenhower

³² Dianne Kirby, “The Cold War and American Religion,” 8

³³ James C. Wallace, “Review: A Religious War?” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2013, 168

³⁴ James C. Wallace, “Review: A Religious War?” 169

articulated when campaigning for president in 1952, “What is our battle against communism if it is not a fight between anti-God and a belief in the Almighty? Communists know this. They have to eliminate God from their system. When God comes in, communism has to go.”³⁵ His critique of communism was obvious: Americans hold moral superiority above the Soviets because religious morals make people better. Eisenhower’s embodiment of religion stayed strong throughout his presidency, initiating a top-down resurgence of religious performance into daily life.

Eisenhower meshed Christian values with American values. While the USSR was deepening the chasm between its citizens and religion, the US was building a bridge between the two. Eisenhower appointed deeply religious people to top roles in his administration. Perhaps most notably, his Secretary of State was Christian statesman John Foster Dulles, who had said things like, “Without God, there could be no American form of government, nor an American way of life.”³⁶ In 1954, Congress voted to have Americans pledge allegiance “under God.”³⁷ That same year, they passed a bill requiring all coins and paper currency to read “In God we trust.” Two years later, this phrase was voted the official US motto without a single dissenter.³⁸ Religious citizens’ groups bandwagoned with the administration’s efforts and flooded the nation with demonstrations of Christian faith. American leaders were constantly on television, radio, and in newspapers encouraging prayer; the Advertising Council plastered large billboards everywhere with the slogan “true Americans have faith;” veterans’ clubs created “Back to God” campaigns and fundraised for memorials to the commandments; Hollywood produced movies

³⁵ James C. Wallace, “A Religious War? The Cold War and Religion.” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2013, 168

³⁶ Dianne Kirby, “The Cold War and American Religion,” 8

³⁷ Herzog, 5

³⁸ Dianne Kirby, “The Cold War and American Religion,” 8

like *The Ten Commandments* and *Quo Vadis*.³⁹ Not only was this everywhere, but it was also effective. Bible sales reached all-time highs, church attendance skyrocketed, and Billy Graham, an evangelical minister, filled Madison Square Garden.⁴⁰



Figure 1: Advertisement for Billy Graham's Madison Square Garden Crusade.⁴¹

American leaders have long advocated for prayer and been God-loving, but these speeches, movies, and movements were part of a deliberate effort by the government - amplified by Christian groups - to invigorate religion in America and to dig a deeper divide between the American public and the Soviets. These programs reminded many Americans what religion

³⁹ Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America's Religious Battle against Communism in the Early Cold War*, Oxford University Press, 2011, 5

⁴⁰ Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America's Religious Battle against Communism in the Early Cold War*, 7

⁴¹ "Advertisement for Billy Graham's Madison Square Garden Campaign," *The Gospel Coalition*, 15 May 2017.

meant to them while simultaneously instilling a fear that their belief system could be taken away under communism. The propaganda created a genuine and omnipresent religious revival, thereby invigorating American nationalism and, more importantly, anti-Soviet sentiment. The addition of religion into American ontological identity cemented its “goodness,” and affirmed the “evils” of the Soviet Union.

While US propaganda first aimed to create international anti-Soviet unity, then anti-Soviet domestic sentiment, it never directly targeted the Soviet population. This was not an oversight by US leaders, but an understanding that attempts to create resonance or promote uprising within the Soviet Union would be stifled quickly. Given the authoritarian state structure with controls on media, public opinion, and freedom of expression, there were few avenues for American propaganda to infiltrate the state. Rather than leveraging US propaganda in creating social change, Soviet citizens rebelled privately by maintaining personal faith.

Soviet Union’s Response

Despite the US associating Soviet secularism with evil and leveraging its religious foothold, the USSR spent little time or resources responding to these critiques. Instead, it focused on maintaining a tight grip on religion domestically and projecting some of its domestic propaganda into the international community. By controlling the media, instilling fear in the public, and reminding citizens of secularist policies, the Soviet government did not have to respond. Even individuals in government could not critique secularist policies, as criticism often led to removal from office. Instead, the USSR remained committed to suppressing religion and infusing atheism into society.

Reminders of religion’s inherent flaws were omnipresent in Soviet Russia. As much as the US poured into religious propaganda, the USSR poured its resources into atheist propaganda.

The government sponsored the “Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism” in Leningrad, which was host to exhibits like the scientific rejection of the story of Noah’s Ark. Movies like *End of the World*, which is about a con man falsely claiming to be a saint, were advertised on street corners. In school, students were assigned essays like “why is it necessary to combat religion?” or see activities in their grammar textbook like:

Q: What does the mullah do?

A: Mullah reads the Koran and when someone dies, he reads prayers.

Q: What does he read about in the Koran?

A: We do not know.

Q: Does he himself understand what he reads?

A: No.

Q: Does he read the prayers for nothing?

A: No, he gets money for this.⁴²

While these policies were meant to infuse secularism into society, they also served as propaganda against the West. Because the US tied its identity to religion, disproving religion through science sent a message that the Americans and its allies were antiquated. Moreover, they were unintelligent, as they believed in a God that the Soviets so easily disproved. This anti-religious propaganda was mostly focused on the domestic population, since it aimed to suppress remaining religious sentiment by a top-down infusion of atheism.

The Soviet government also prioritized a type of nationalism that was, in many ways, a pseudo-religion. Scientific atheism was marketed as an alternative to religion. Both relied on faith in a great power (Marx vs God) and encouraged followers to work towards a goal (modern society vs. heaven) that could only be achieved by following certain rules. The Soviets drew upon these commonalities by infusing ritualistic nationalism. Instead of celebrating Christmas, families could celebrate “Days of Industrialization” on December 25 and 26. Rather than being

⁴² Paul Froese, “Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why an Atheistic Monopoly Failed,” 11

baptized, children could become “Little Octobrists” and deaths could be honored with a “Red Funeral.” The new system of state-run atheism was essentially a religion without spirituality. It replaced faith with science and worship with work.

While the government’s infusion of atheism was pervasive, its true power lay in its ability to stifle dissent. The post-WWII tactics included less state-sanctioned violence, but the persecution of religion was no less aggressive. Therefore, a culture of fear surrounding religious persecution persisted. One way the state controlled religion was through “group sessions,” which were required for all working members of society (essentially all adults in the worker-oriented Soviet Union). In these group sessions, attendees discussed the anti-social behavior of religious believers, so attending church or wearing a cross was deemed shameful by society.⁴³ There were also some sanctions on religion. Worshipping in a government-licensed church could cost a promotion at work or even land someone in state-mandated psychiatric treatment.⁴⁴ The costs and consequences also largely depended on a person’s identity. For example, a communist party leader could be removed from office if a distant relative sang in church.⁴⁵ State control meant association with the church was costly and, for most Soviets, it was not worth it.

The USSR’s ability to control religion reflects its ability to control its population. Even as the US strengthened its position as a spiritual counterforce and invigorated critiques of atheism, the USSR did not directly respond to the US. Instead, it continued its top-down assault on religion. It kept a tight grip on institutions, disenfranchised the church, and made religion unappealing. Moreover, it made atheism central to its national identity, just as the US tied

⁴³ Paul Froese, “Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why an Atheistic Monopoly Failed,” 24

⁴⁴ Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America's Religious Battle against Communism in the Early Cold War*, 4

⁴⁵ Paul Froese, “Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why an Atheistic Monopoly Failed,” 24

religiosity to its identity. The Soviet government weaved secularism into communism, hoping it would cement the ideas of progress and modernity in Soviet nationalism.

As the USSR maintained a firm grip on religion domestically, it worked against the US's narrative internationally by tying atheism to progress and modernity. Moreover, the USSR attempted to root its atheism in science and education, working to disprove religion through scientific atheism. The assumption that science and religion could not coexist drove Soviet commitment to secularism and shaped their national identity. However, this assumption misjudged religious intent and meaning. For example, Yuri Gagarin (the first person in space) was asked if he saw God in the sky following his space mission, to which he responded no. The government turned this response into a scientific "proof," explaining that there was no God in the sky, and therefore religion had been disproved.⁴⁶ This clearly misjudges religious belief. As one young girl protested eloquently, "but only those with faith can see God."⁴⁷ Professional scientists had little to say about religion and rarely accepted the opportunity to work on the science of atheism. Meanwhile, scientific atheists (state-sponsored researchers focused on disproving religion) had little to no understanding of religious doctrine, so those tasked with creating anti-religious propaganda had little information about religion or science. As noted by Peris, "the background, training, and work experiences of the League [of atheists]'s cadres made the successful delivery of the regime's message of atheism highly problematic."⁴⁸ Still, the Soviet government used this justification to promote atheism domestically, promote its rational basis internationally, and depict American moral codes as being rooted in a false god.

⁴⁶ Paul Froese, "Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why an Atheistic Monopoly Failed," 20

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Paul Froese, "Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why an Atheistic Monopoly Failed," 21

Domestic Manipulation

It is difficult to track how the Soviet population responded to the US's critiques of religious suppression. While Khrushchev loosened media controls, meaning some American news could flow into the state and Soviet journalists were "free" to critique (limited) aspects of the state, the records from the 1950s and 1960s are poorly kept. Thus, we cannot be entirely sure to what extent Western support for religion impacted a grassroots resistance. However, we can track certain indicators of religious belief to see if the Soviet suppression was effective or if there are signs that Western critiques infused hope in the USSR.

As previously mentioned, the Russian empire entered the 20th century as the biggest Orthodox state in the world. In 1900, 76% of the population identified as Russian Orthodox and 11% identified as another Christian denomination, making 87% of the state Christian.⁴⁹ The large number of Christians naturally led to lots of churches, with 54,000 official churches registered throughout the state in 1914.⁵⁰ Yet, a crackdown on religion and the state-run destruction of churches meant that there were only 7,500 churches by 1966 with a significant drop between 1958 and 1966. A similar trend is shown in Figure 1, which shows retrospective church attendance rates between 1925 and 1985. The survey was completed in 1990 by asking Russians questions about childhood memories of personal and familial church attendance, then reconstructing expected attendance rates. While about 50% of parents attended church in 1920, only 4% attended by 1970 and only half those parents brought their children with them. These figures demonstrate that organized religion was deeply affected by atheist policies, leading to fewer churches and less church attendance.

⁴⁹ Paul Froese, "Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why an Atheistic Monopoly Failed," 39

⁵⁰ Paul Froese, "Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why an Atheistic Monopoly Failed," 42

Year	Number of Russian Orthodox Churches
1914	54,000
1928	39,000
1941	4,200
1945	16,000
1948	15,000
1958	17,500
1966	7,500

Table 1: Church Closures⁵¹

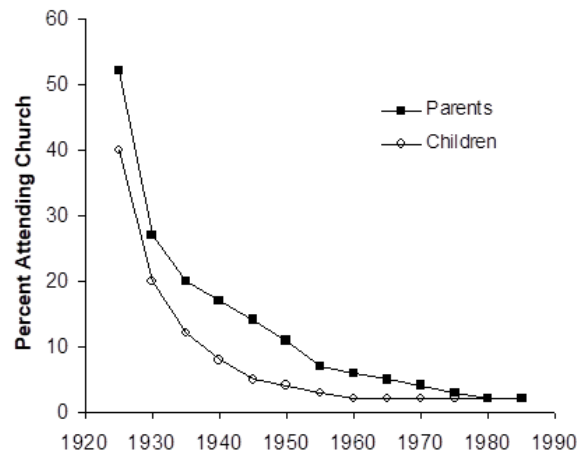


Figure 2: Retrospective Church Attendance Rates in Russia⁵²

Yet, church closures and declining church rates are indicative of a fear of associating with the church, not necessarily a decline in personal faith. While organized religion was stifled by the state, individual faith could not be suppressed in the same systematic way. Independently collected data from religious groups indicates that religious believers comprised about 52% of

⁵¹ Paul Froese, "Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why an Atheistic Monopoly Failed," 42

⁵² Paul Froese, "Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why an Atheistic Monopoly Failed," 41.

the Soviet population in the late 1960s.⁵³ Notably, the errors of self-reporting were present in religious identification given the risks associated with religion. Moreover, the Soviet government did not simply aim for a nonreligious population, but a population of staunch atheists. While atheism certainly became more popular during the Cold War, even the most generous estimates place the number of atheists at less than 25% during the height of secularism.⁵⁴ After the fall of communism, the number of atheists quickly dropped to less than 5%.⁵⁵ The rapid decline of atheism indicates that even self-proclaimed atheists were not, in fact, devout. While civil society did not rebel through public dissent, there was certainly personal faith-based resistance in the hearts and minds of the Soviet population.

Despite the state's best attempts to eradicate religion, the USSR was unable to destroy faith. Yet, this is mostly rooted in the personal nature of faith rather than the US's propaganda. Because of the tight restrictions on media, most American propaganda was filtered out of the Soviet sphere. Thus, there were few opportunities for the US to target domestic actors and create dissatisfaction or resistance within the USSR. Since the Americans knew their attempts to ideologically infiltrate the Soviet sphere would fall flat, they focused criticism towards the international community and their own citizens.

United States' Gain

Initially, incorporating religion into the Cold War was a strategy to create an international, multireligious, anti-Soviet movement. The US sought alliances with other religious leaders to remind the international community that it valued and promoted religion. Moreover, it

⁵³ Paul Froese, "Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why an Atheistic Monopoly Failed," 44.

⁵⁴ Paul Froese, "Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why an Atheistic Monopoly Failed," 48.

⁵⁵ Paul Froese, "Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why an Atheistic Monopoly Failed," 48.

embodied religion as a symbol of its ethical leadership as opposed to the Godless, amoral Soviets. In the struggle for the soul of the world, the US wanted to demonstrate that it could be responsible for that soul. American leaders further tied these international critiques to communism as a whole, implying that communism required control over its institutions and its people and was therefore incompatible with religion.

As the world became distinctly bifurcated and the US had succeeded in winning over most potential allies, it redirected this propaganda internally to invigorate patriotism and deepen the divide between the Americans and Soviets. Religion was already a core part of national identity, so American leaders simply intensified its religious revival to invigorate a new sense of nationalism. The US understood that its citizens were not willing to give up their religion. Leveraging something so personal made the Cold War matter to ordinary citizens. Moreover, this religious revival further deepened the sense of the Soviets as the ideological “other.” As the US promoted religion as the ultimate good, atheism was seen as evil, making the USSR an evil state in the eyes of many Americans. This sense of irreconcilable conflict invigorated nationalist sentiment that the US must defeat its evil counterpart.

USSR Critique of American Racism

As the US poked holes in the USSR’s identity, the Soviets directed attacks back at the US by identifying and subsequently propagating information about America’s race issues. The US was the self-proclaimed “leader of the free world,” but the Soviets were quick to point out that this phrase was incompatible with a nation with such deep inequality. More specifically, Black

Americans were systematically repressed and oppressed through violence, segregation, discrimination, and disenfranchisement. The Soviets openly questioned how the US could lead the “free” movement when it could not even promise freedom to its own citizens, or how it could claim to fight oppression abroad while actively discriminating against millions of Black Americans at home. Thus, race discrimination became the United States’ Achilles heel – and something that threatened its national identity and international standing throughout the Cold War.

Soviet Propaganda

While the USSR’s critiques of the United States’ race policy were amplified throughout the 1950s and 60s, its manipulation of American race issues predated the Cold War. The identification of potential communists was essential to the Soviet system from its inception in 1918. Since the longevity and power of communism relied on its expansion, Soviet communists attempted to recruit those who were marginalized in their own societies – people who wanted equality, progress, and social change. These qualities were inherent to many Black Americans given the systematic oppression and violence against them. Moreover, advocacy groups had formed within Black America that cried for equality, economic inclusion, and a political voice – problems that communism claimed to solve. Thus, a plan was formed to advance the Soviet economy by 1) sparking a communist movement throughout the Black Belt of the American South and 2) luring Black American workers to the USSR.

The plan to recruit southern Black Americans began in 1928 by the Communist International, or Comintern, a Soviet political party advocating for global communism.⁵⁶ Given

⁵⁶ Julia Ioffe, “The History of Russian Involvement in America's Race Wars,” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 25 May 2019, 4

the systematic inequality, poor financial conditions, general discrimination, and popularity of workers' rights organizations, Comintern identified Black Americans as the most likely sector of the American population to accept communism since it provided a solution.⁵⁷ The organization advocated the idea that capitalism was to blame for inequality and poor treatment, while communism universally defended the rights of the oppressed. Moreover, Stalin believed in Marx's theory of social change, or the idea that the inequalities within Western capitalism would inevitably push countries to revolution and, eventually, communism. Therefore, he believed that highlighting the flaws and contradictions within capitalism would sow natural discord in the US and push it to collapse on itself. By targeting an oppressed minority group, leveraging real racist occurrences, and exposing flaws in capitalist identity, Stalin aimed to plant the natural seeds of a communist revolution.

There were many similarities between early Civil Rights groups and communist groups, from their use of propaganda to their equality-based agenda. Both groups used agitation and propaganda to highlight instances of discrimination, terror, and violence. However, their intentions diverged. Comintern hoped the demonstration of wrongdoings would expose failings in the capitalist system, while most civil rights groups advocated for representation and rights within the existing democratic system. Despite fighting for different outcomes, their similar use of tactics increased the American government's suspicion of civil rights organizations, even before the US declared a war against communism. The FBI investigated most Black-led labor organizations and found links between Comintern, the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) and organizations including the African Blood Brotherhood, the American Negro Labor Congress,

⁵⁷ Wojnowski, 21

the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, and the National Negro Congress.⁵⁸ The initial link between Communism and civil rights groups often made it more difficult for Black leaders to advance their cause, as local White leaders could dismiss the cause as Communist-led. Comintern only benefited from the US government's dismissal of civil rights groups, as it furthered the argument that a capitalist democracy would not and could not advance the rights of its minority citizens.

As Comintern continued targeting Black southern Americans, the plan to create a network of communist sympathizers in the West escalated as the organization shifted its focus towards the establishment of a separate communist Black state in the South. This would give communism a true home in the West and hopefully spread the revolution throughout North America.⁵⁹ Comintern hoped its propaganda highlighting systematic Black oppression and the innate equality of Communism would inspire the creation of such a state.

The second part of the plan similarly exploited the oppression of southern Black Americans. The USSR needed workers to boost its economy and expand its industries. More specifically, it wanted to become a top cotton producer in central Asia.⁶⁰ Thus, it sought experienced laborers and hoped to poach them from the American south. Soviet leaders claimed that immigrating to Russia would be beneficial to Black Americans, since they could live and work in a place without deep ethnic, national, and religious divisions. By depicting the US as a reactive, racist, backwards state, the USSR positioned itself as the progressive and modern alternative.

⁵⁸ Wojnowski, 30

⁵⁹ Julia Ioffe, "The History of Russian Involvement in America's Race Wars," 4

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Before the Cold War, Soviet propaganda targeted Black Americans' existing dissatisfaction with the US to further the two goals of a communist uprising and communist mobilization. Russian newspapers published statistics on racial violence and the Communist party wrote articles in American media. Mostly, this propaganda highlighted the most alarming examples of racial inequality. For example, Soviet media capitalized on the case of the Scottsboro Boys, as a group of nine Black teenagers were falsely accused of raping two White women in 1931. There was no evidence against the teenagers; nevertheless, they were convicted of the crime by all White juries and eight of the boys were sentenced to death. For most in the US, the USSR, and across the globe, this was a horrifying example of race-based violence, bias, and injustice in the Jim Crow South.⁶¹ While the event was covered in the US, Russian media exploited the story for months. It produced propaganda pieces like *Freedom to the Prisoners of Scottsboro!* which depict the nine teenagers awaiting their lynching at the hand of a greedy, power-hungry, capitalist. The image was spread throughout Russia and made its way to the US, becoming particularly popular amongst Communist sympathizers, labor rights organizations, and civil rights groups. While images like this provided powerful social commentary throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the instance and severity of Soviet critique on American race relations only intensified throughout the Cold War.

⁶¹ Ibid.



Figure 3: *Freedom to the Prisoners of Scottsboro!* By Dmitry Moor.⁶²

The Cold War's inception aligned with the end of World War II, when even more racial violence swept the United States. As Black soldiers returned home, they were not met with the praise of their White counterparts. They had just laid their lives on the line for their nation, and felt just as American as any other citizen. However, their sacrifices largely failed to generate respect or recognition. Instead, lynching and beatings, often involving local law enforcement officers, once again became commonplace in the South. In one instance in the summer of 1946, Sergeant Isaac Woodard, a Black World War II veteran, was on his way home and was beaten by the Aiken, South Carolina Police Chief.⁶³ Woodard was left blind in both eyes, while the Police

⁶² Dmitry Moor, "Freedom to the Prisoners of Scottsboro!" *Brown Digital Repository*, 1932.

⁶³ Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, Princeton University Press, 2011, 27.

Chief went unscathed. He kept his job and never faced a trial. While this occurrence gained some attention, it was mostly swept under the rug, as were many other instances of violence against Black Americans. Soviet media worked this instance into its existing propaganda and continued working to amplify existing divisions on the ground to recruit communist sympathizers.

Yet, as the Cold War progressed and divisions between the USSR and US deepened, the world became more distinctly bifurcated between the communists and capitalists. The USSR's American audience had picked up some of its criticisms, bringing the US government to perceive greater danger from the ideological attacks. Thus, the US tightened its grip on potential communists, making it less likely that Soviet interference would spark a communist revolution in America. Senators like Kevin McCarthy invigorated a "Red Scare" with a campaign to repress and persecute left-wing Americans. The media restricted left-wing voices and the government targeted leftist government employees, politicians, and labor union activists. As this fear crept throughout the US in the late 1940s and early 1950s, there was less space for Soviet propaganda and less likelihood of invigorating a communist revolution. So, Soviet leaders redirected their criticisms internally to discredit democratic capitalism and keep their population loyal to the Soviet system.

To prevent Soviet citizens from longing Western-style democracy, the government amplified stories of racial injustice, dismantling the image of the US and its democracy as free and fair. In 1957, the governor of Arkansas deployed the National Guard to prevent nine Black children from integrating a high school. As the US boasted its values of freedom and democracy, the story of the "Little Rock Nine" painted another picture of America as unjust and violent. While the media in many left-leaning countries noted the discrepancy in the values American leaders promoted versus the way they implemented them at home, no nation exploited this story

to the extent of the Soviet Union, with it running in virtually every major newspaper. The postcard below depicts one of the Little Rock Nine on their first day of school in a Soviet cartoon that was popular amongst anti-capitalists:



Figure 4: Soviet postcard depicting a child in Little Rock on their first-day of integrated school.⁶⁴

In *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, the newspaper run by Soviet communist youth, a story ran called “Troops Advance Against Children!”⁶⁵ *Izvestia*, another popular daily newspaper, extensively covered the crisis, writing:

“Right now, behind the facade of the so-called ‘American democracy,’ a tragedy is unfolding which cannot but arouse ire and indignation in the heart of every honest man... The patrons of Governor Faubus ... who dream of nooses and dynamite for persons with different-colored skins, advocates of hooliganism who throw rocks at defenseless Negro children—these gentlemen have the audacity to talk about “democracy” and speak as supporters of “freedom.” In fact, it is impossible to imagine a greater insult to democracy and freedom than an

⁶⁴ Bidstrup, Herluf. “First Day at School,” *Nabb Research Center Online Exhibits*, accessed April 19, 2023.

⁶⁵ Julia Ioffe, “The History of Russian Involvement in America's Race Wars,” 6.

American diplomat's speech from the tribunal of the U.S. General Assembly, a speech in which Washington was pictured as the "champion" of the rights of the Hungarian people."⁶⁶

Following the Red Scare, the cartoons, articles, and other media sources highlighting the horror of American racial violence were mostly targeted at the domestic Soviet population. The government wanted to undermine the image of democracy as free, so it propagated stories of violence, oppression, and injustice. While instances of racial violence were sometimes amplified, Ioffe explains, "Sometimes, in *Pravda*, all they needed to do was reprint something that appeared in Time Magazine. Just the facts would themselves inflame international opinion. On top of that, the Soviets would push the envelope."⁶⁷ By simply acknowledging the horror of American racism, the Soviets placed themselves on the side of equality, thereby promoting the communist system that promotes racial equality.

The USSR also spread the message of American racism to the global community by printing articles in multiple languages and using media like cartoons, which defy language barriers. Internationally, the propaganda served to juxtapose the US's racist wrongdoings against the USSR's focus on equality and progress. By highlighting this division, the USSR implied that Western-style capitalism and democracy were neither free nor equal, thereby harming the image the US tried to build for itself and its system. Exposing democratic capitalism's flaws to the international community is ultimately what pressured the US to respond.

⁶⁶ Julia Ioffe, "The History of Russian Involvement in America's Race Wars," 6.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

United States' Response

The US government did not take Soviet critiques of racial strife seriously until the Cold War. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, US leaders took more issue with Black Americans' association with an external global power, launching FBI investigations into Black-led organizations with the justification that they were influenced by the Soviets (though some organizations undoubtedly were). Once the Cold War set the stage for an ideological battle between the US and the USSR, American leadership started to take the criticism seriously. The US leveraged its identity as the champion of the free world and a land of opportunity in its pitch about capitalist supremacy. Yet, Soviet propaganda highlighting the treatment of people of color and the lack of civil rights legislation threatened that vision. Moreover, it challenged the United States' ability to sell potential allies on that vision, thereby threatening its international standing.

As America's racism was amplified from the USSR to the international community and back to the US, American leaders feared Soviet criticism might undermine the appeal of democratic capitalism at a time when its preservation was a foreign policy priority. Moreover, they feared the criticism might dismantle America's image as a free and equal country, thereby harming the appeal of democratic capitalism. President Truman recognized that he must protect this image, so he launched a Committee on Civil Rights in 1946. One year later, the committee produced a report on the consequences of racial discrimination and found three key effects: 1) discrimination is morally wrong, 2) discrimination harms the economy, 3) discrimination damages foreign relations.⁶⁸ Of these, the committee identified the third effect as the most harmful and urgent.⁶⁹ The first effect had been present since America's inception, and the second

⁶⁸ Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, 79.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

since the abolition of slavery. Yet, these two alone had not inspired the US government to pass any civil rights reforms of significance. The damage to foreign relations, however, was a new consequence, and one the American government was unwilling to accept. As Michael Sherry, an American historian, writes about civil rights reform: “Civil rights leaders, and Truman himself on occasion, did invoke morality and justice, but national security was the dominant rationale.”⁷⁰

President Truman affirmed the importance of civil rights reform in the advancement of foreign affairs. His commitment to reform was not rooted in the first or second consequence of racial discrimination, which focused on progress for the sake of the domestic good, but in the third rationale, which focused on the international community’s perception of America. While he used racist language in private, he remained politically committed to racial progress. Truman urged Congress to enact legislation to outlaw lynching and protect the right to vote, though neither of these policies passed while he was in office. His commitment to civil rights mostly rested in his Cold War philosophy. First, Truman understood that waging the Cold War would require military strength in proxy wars. He questioned Black soldiers’ willingness to shoulder a gun to fight for democracy while being denied democratic rights in the US.⁷¹ Second, and more importantly, Truman believed that any act, action, or law that undermined the image of American democracy was a threat to world peace and the global order.⁷²

The Cold War hinged on both material and ideological outcomes. While the material outcomes were easy to measure, the best measurement of ideological supremacy was the ability to create international allies and friends. Thus, anything that challenged America’s democratic image threatened its ability to recruit unaligned countries and maintain existing alliances. The

⁷⁰ Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, 87.

⁷¹ Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, 83.

⁷² Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, 27.

US government understood that America's race issue was, at its core, a national security issue. A report from the state department explains,

*"The hostile reaction among normally friendly peoples, many of whom are particularly sensitive in regard to the status of non-European races, is growing in alarming proportions. In such countries the view is expressed more and more vocally that the United States is hypocritical in claiming to be the champion of democracy while permitting practices of racial discrimination here in this country."*⁷³

American diplomats across the globe echoed the idea that race-based hypocrisy threatened the US's international standing. They reported the difficulty of preaching democracy when violence against Black Americans seemed to constantly headline foreign newspapers. Moreover, they struggled to defend American democracy's promise of free speech, free assembly, and free expression when stories of civil rights leaders being silenced circulated the streets.

The US realized that it was losing control of its civil rights narrative. Even worse, the USSR was controlling it. As the Soviets painted democracy as inherently unequal, they challenged the legitimacy of the US, its democracy, and democracies across the world. However, the US also recognized that it could work to combat the propaganda by actually pushing through civil rights victories, uplifting the voices of certain Black leaders, and broadcasting these steps towards progress to the world. So, the United States launched a counter propaganda campaign to fight the image of America promoted by the Soviets.

The rehabilitation of America's moral character through the inclusion of Black Americans became an important part of Cold War diplomacy. One clear example of this is the Brown vs Board Decision in 1954. The weight of the decision was not just important domestically, but demonstrated globally that democracy eventually works on the side of justice.

⁷³ Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, 101.

The impact of the decision must be understood in this global context, particularly since individuals within the justice department viewed it as such. This sentiment is shown in a quotation from a Justice Department brief on school segregation:

*“During the past six years, the damage to our foreign relations attributable to [race discrimination] has become progressively greater. The United States is under constant attack in the foreign press, over the foreign radio, and in such international bodies as the United Nations because of various practices of discrimination against minority groups in this country. As might be expected, Soviet spokesmen regularly exploit this situation in propaganda against the United States, both within the United Nations and through radio broadcasts and the press, which reaches all corners of the world. Some of these attacks against us are not based on falsehood or distortion, but the undeniable existence of racial discrimination gives unfriendly governments the most effective kind of ammunition for their propaganda warfare.”*⁷⁴

Leaders across the US knew that the policies and lack thereof surrounding civil rights generated massive criticism from the international community. These critiques were particularly harmful given that the existence and future power of the nation required a critical mass of support. Thus, Civil Rights advancements became a tool; they allowed the US to counter criticism and show that the democratic process works. Within an hour of the Brown v Board decision, the news was broadcasted to Eastern Europe and quickly made headlines across the globe.⁷⁵ Shortly thereafter, the Republican National Convention released a statement on the decision, stating that the decision “falls appropriately within the Eisenhower Administration’s many-frontal attack on global communism. Human equality at home is a weapon of freedom... it helps guarantee the Free World’s cause.”⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, 100.

⁷⁵ Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, 107.

⁷⁶ Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, 110.

Domestic Manipulation

As the government became increasingly responsive to Soviet propaganda, civil rights activists realized they could leverage international criticism to benefit their cause. Attempts to suppress Black voices were internationally broadcasted, thereby threatening the US's image as free and democratic. The need to placate foreign critics and safeguard the image of American democracy restricted the government's ability to stifle the cries for equality. They could no longer overtly silence the civil rights movement. Instead, they sought ways to reframe the narrative, like through policy change.

Because the USSR initially directed its propaganda directly at Black Americans, some civil rights leaders acutely recognized that pressure from the Soviets created a small window of opportunity that might allow for some social change. Moreover, civil rights leaders had time to examine the ways the US government reacted to various Soviet narratives, thereby providing strategic direction in civil rights narrative crafting and the respective leaders' ideological positioning. On the government's quest to present a progressive, racially inclusive image of America, some Black voices would inevitably be heard. The leaders could not be too progressive, as the government could quickly link their beliefs to communist ones, thereby invalidating the cause. Rather, it would be the palatable voices who could show that democracy responds to the needs of its people. Ironically, Soviet critiques of American racial issues created the exact conditions needed to create reform: international pressure, domestic mobilization, and government willingness to change.

White Americans' response to various civil rights leaders largely relied on which narrative they fell into. Those who called for Black liberation or reparations were characterized as radical. If they spoke to an international audience, they would undoubtedly be silenced

domestically, as the US viewed global engagement as a form of treason: it fed international perceptions of inequality, which could inadvertently help the communists in the Cold War. Malcom X, for example, refused to confine himself to Cold War liberal discourse. He leveraged his position in the international community, traveling throughout the African continent in 1964 hoping his popularity there would give him leverage in the US.⁷⁷ He wanted to impress the international community by speaking about injustices at home - influencing and being influenced by anti-colonial movements. He openly criticized the Civil Rights Bill, characterizing it as a propaganda piece to restore the US global image.⁷⁸ He took a “by any means necessary” approach to civil rights reform, engaged the international community, and relied on international perspectives, further isolating him from the government’s agenda and shielding him from large segments of the American public.

On the other end of the spectrum, those who championed gradual reform or sympathized with the government’s struggle were characterized as palatable, reasonable, and broadcast-worthy. Martin Luther King Jr took on these attributes with an emphasis on nonviolence, making him progressive but not too progressive. However, his success in amplifying his beliefs can also be attributed to his keen understanding of the Cold War context. He understood that criticizing American foreign policy could alienate policymakers from his main cause, which was ending segregation and enshrining rights for Black Americans in law. Thus, King was intentional about clarifying his anti-communist sentiment. When serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, he claimed to ban anyone from the organization who had communist ties.⁷⁹ He knew that other predominantly Black organizations were prone to federal investigation

⁷⁷ Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, 222.

⁷⁸ Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, 222.

⁷⁹ Noer, 112

and delegitimization, so he intentionally distanced his fight for equality from a vision of communist equality. Moreover, he leveraged his devout faith in his stance against communism. He explained, “Communism and Christianity are fundamentally incompatible... A true Christian cannot be a true Communist for the two philosophies are antithetical and all the dialectics of the logicians cannot reconcile them.”⁸⁰ This incompatibility was rooted in what King saw as communism’s inherent denial of God, since it embraced a value system whereby “almost anything—love, violence, murder, lying—is a justifiable means to the ‘millennial’ end.”⁸¹ Throughout all his critiques of American policy, foreign policy, and discrimination, there was never a question that King was an anticommunist. He infused anticommunism in his speeches and ethos, making his stance more palatable to the government.

King became invaluable to the US’s fight against the USSR. He represented free speech, respectful discourse, and the efficacy of democracy. King and the SCLC’s fight for equality was not depicted as a group fighting against centuries of injustice, but as a government listening to its citizens and taking action to combat the issue. During the March on Washington in 1963, a film was created called *The March*. The film was touted by the US government as an authentic demonstration of free speech and freedom of assembly, though it omitted scenes of conflict between march organizers and the Kennedy administration and all speeches by civil rights leaders.⁸² The only speech that remained was a heavily-edited version of King’s speech, and it only included the forward-looking dream segment rather than the critique of civil rights.⁸³ While the film depicted the march through rose-colored glasses, its creation and distribution was a sign

⁸⁰ Noer, 112

⁸¹ Noer, 112

⁸² Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, 216.

⁸³ Ibid.

that Black and Brown voices could be heard, though they still had to be palatable to White American and critical foreign audiences. *The March* was widely distributed across the globe, indicating that the US knew it had created an effective piece of propaganda that might combat Soviet narratives.

The US government's embrace of King and rejection of Malcom X demonstrates a trend whereby US countermeasures reduced the power of communist-sympathizing or communist-affiliated Black Civil Rights groups and organizers. Thus, it also reduced the power of Black Americans more generally to create radical change. In this way, the Soviet criticisms led the US to take measures that weakened the USSR's toe-hold in American politics and led to more performative reforms.

While the US's response to the Civil Rights movement did not resolve many of the race-related issues in the country, the international community largely accepted the newfound equality boasted by the US. Over time, it seemed like America became increasingly immune to international racial criticism and the idea of American progress became salient. Whether through propaganda or not, the foreign audience seemed to believe there was a significant improvement in the treatment of Black Americans. There was a huge decrease in the foreign press's interest after the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964. Even Bloody Sunday, which happened in Selma only one year later, received much less attention than Little Rock.⁸⁴ There was limited coverage of Selma in Africa and a much less prominent interest in it in the Soviet press, though this is not to say it was not present.⁸⁵ It is unclear why the Soviets did not press forward with its criticisms

⁸⁴ Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, 235.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

following Selma: perhaps they felt like the US countermeasure was too effective or maybe they feared creating more progressive social change.

Regardless, Civil Rights issues no longer challenged American prestige and influence, but became an opportunity to show that the federal government was on the side of progress, democracy was embedded with social change, and racism was not characteristic of American society. This concept of embedded democracy was furthered with the state's quick response to Selma, as it passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 within six months of Bloody Sunday.⁸⁶ It shifted the blame from the government to a White supremacist minority. The problem of prejudice shifted to an issue of clarity: American values always embraced equality, but simply lacked a clear statement of such in the law.

Soviet Union's Gain

Before the Cold War, the Soviets targeted Black Americans in an attempt to create a communist uprising and mobilize Black workers to move to Russia, thereby boosting the Soviet economy. By amplifying existing racial divisions and positioning the USSR as a racial utopia, the communist government hoped these goals would be met. After the inception of the Cold War, the USSR maintained these policies to undermine Western-style democracy from the inside out, aiming to spark a domestic uprising.

Yet, as the Cold War distinctly bifurcated the globe and the US cracked down on communist sympathizers, it became less important and less plausible to destroy the US through domestic unrest. So, the Soviets redirected their critiques internally and worked to deepen dissatisfaction with the US by depicting it as unfree, unjust, and violent. In doing so, it

⁸⁶ Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, 236.

positioned the USSR as equal and progressive, deepening the sense of Soviet nationalism and the image of Americans as victims of capitalism. The USSR also amplified these critiques to an international left-leaning audience to invigorate their appreciation for the Soviet system and Soviet protection, as it saved them from the racist, evil Americans.

The Soviets did not anticipate the US's reaction. The USSR hoped to plant seeds of revolution amongst Black Americans and expose a crack in American identity to Soviet citizens and the broader left-leaning community. Yet, because the critique was initially aimed at the US, it sparked resonance amongst civil society. Then, because it also targeted a pinnacle of national pride (at a time when national pride was essential to maintaining the US's global role), the critique drove a response from the government. The targeted audience and the relevance of the critique created conditions whereby the US had to enact real social change or risk harming the identity of democratic capitalism as a free and equal system.

Case 2: Escalatory Ideological Manipulation between the United States and China

Over the past 40 years, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has transformed from an emerging market to an economic powerhouse, a key military force, and a global superpower. This rapid transformation altered the relationship between the US and China as each state reckoned with the PRC's newfound power. While the two states worked towards cooperation through normalized trade relations and strategic collaboration, they remained skeptical of the other. This skepticism only grew in 2007 as China increased military spending by 18%, in 2010 when it got on track to outgrow the US economy, and again in 2012 when it installed new leadership with about 70% government turnover under President Xi Jinping.⁸⁷ Tensions have since soared, leading some to characterize the conflict as a "New Cold War" given the heightened political, social, and military stress between the two countries.

Part of the tension between the United States and China is rooted in their divergent political systems. The US is democratic, so it views China's one-party communist system as authoritarian, restrictive, and oppressive. In the eyes of the US, these factors then allow China to ignore its constituents and deny them basic representation, thereby enabling the government to commit other human rights abuses through restrictive laws and the denial of individual freedoms. In China's eyes, it has a duty to create tangible social progress, like poverty reduction and less homelessness, which are inherently human rights issues. It sees the US's classification of authoritarianism as antithetical to human rights as a self-indulgent stance that reinforces a US-led global order.

These viewpoints inform tensions as the two states compete for political, economic, and

⁸⁷ "Timeline: U.S.-China Relations." *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council on Foreign Relations, 2023, 27-34.

strategic power. One clear example is the competition for control of the South China Sea (SCS) and Taiwan. Both the US and China have strategic interests staked on maintaining a grip on the region - the US as global hegemon and China as global and regional hegemon. As China acts to assert its claim over the region and builds islands in the SCS, some of which are militarized, the US worries its security commitments with partner states, particularly Taiwan, are at risk. Meanwhile, the PRC views the US's concern as overreach and urges its opponent to stay out of the way.

Amidst their conflict, the two states are tied together economically. Much of China's economic growth was spurred by American investment as the US pursued profits and commercial opportunities in China. In return, China relies on American technology and holds the most US foreign currency reserves of any country, though it is trying to sell dollars in favor of local currencies. This interdependence is furthered by the countries' trade relationship, as China is the United States' biggest trading partner and the United States is China's second biggest trading partner, only after ASEAN. The fraught relationship was criticized by President Trump, prompting him to apply tariffs to additional Chinese imports in July 2018, effectively starting a trade war between the two countries. The Biden administration has maintained many Trump-era sanctions and implemented other tough measures, like blacklisting some Chinese companies and expanding a ban on American investment in Chinese companies with military ties. The trade war and dumping of currency reserves are efforts to decouple, meaning both states alter policies to reduce their economic interdependence. This mutual desire to widen the distance in their relations indicates potential conflict acceleration, as diminished reliance lowers the costs of future escalation.

Because the conflict is still escalating through international positioning and targeted

sanctions, the two states' strategies largely align with their goals. The PRC hopes to increase its global power, mostly by seizing power from the US. Doing so requires a shift in the international order whereby countries that uphold the US as the hegemon willingly turn to new leadership. While traditional warfare has historically created pathways for upcoming powers to defeat old ones, economic intertwinement and the possession of nuclear weapons poses obstacles to war. Thus, an ideological shift is necessary, which can be accomplished by showing the world that the US is unfit to be the hegemon. The PRC aims to do this by exposing the US as hypocritical, hoping that other countries turn their backs on a leader that dodges accountability and grabs excessive power. Moreover, by exposing social issues within the US, the PRC shows that the American way of life is not as "good" as it projects. The United States, on the other hand, simply wants to maintain its power - a much simpler feat. In doing so, it must dissuade peers from shifting their allegiance to China by discrediting the PRC's critiques while simultaneously homing in on social issues that magnify China's unfitness to lead the world.

PRC Critique of American Gun Violence

No country protects the right to bear arms with the same vigor as the United States. It is one of three countries that still enumerates gun rights in the constitution. It has more guns than any other country (300 million) and more guns per capita than any other country (9 guns for every 10 people).⁸⁸ In 2020, firearms were the leading cause of death for children and teens in

⁸⁸ Ty McCormick, "How Many Countries Have Gun Rights Enshrined in Their Constitutions?" *Foreign Policy*, Foreign Policy Magazine, 5 Apr. 2013, 1.

the United States.⁸⁹ Including accidental deaths, homicides, and suicides, guns killed 4,357 children, meaning guns were the cause of death for 5.6 out of every 100,000 children.⁹⁰ For comparison, the US's peers have an average of 0.3 firearm-related deaths for every 100,000 children. The number of gun deaths in the US has increased for both children and adults in the last two decades, once again, making the US an outlier amongst its peers, which all have declining gun violence rates. Since 2013, mass shootings in the US have nearly tripled with nearly 550 mass shootings in 2022.⁹¹ To many Americans, guns are a central freedom, yet this right is alien to many international allies and opponents. As gun violence climbs in the US, countries with restrictions on firearms question the US government's inability to address the issue.

Gun violence is particularly foreign to Chinese citizens, where private gun ownership is illegal. In the PRC, guns kill about 1.6 people in 1,000,000 annually.⁹² That means the likelihood of being killed by a gun in China is roughly the same likelihood as dying from a plane crash in the US.⁹³ Because the US promotes itself as a virtuous state, exposing gun violence as a prevalent issue highlights flaws lying below the surface. Moreover, China identifies hypocrisy in a US-led international order when the US is unable to solve a domestic issue like gun violence.

⁸⁹ Palosky, Craig. "Firearms Are the Leading Cause of Death for Children in the United States but Rank No Higher than Fifth in Other Industrialized Nations." *KFF*, 8 July 2022, 1.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Maggie Green et al., "Mass Shootings in the U.S. Have Nearly Tripled Since 2013, Gun Violence Archive Data Shows," *ABC7 Los Angeles*, KABC Television, 2 June 2022, 2.

⁹² Mike Ives, "China Warns Its Tourists: Beware Gun Violence in America," *New York Times*, 2 July 2018, 1.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

Chinese Propaganda

American gun violence came to the forefront of Chinese consciousness in April 2012 when two 23-year-old Chinese graduate students at the University of Southern California were shot to death. They were sitting in a parked car one mile outside USC's campus when they were approached by two gunmen. Ming Qu was shot in the passenger seat and Ying Wu was shot in the head as he ran to a nearby home to get help.⁹⁴ That same year, a gunman opened fire on Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, killing 20 children and 6 staff members. These events became international news, confirming to the world that America has a serious gun problem.

As the US Congress failed to pass gun reform (the Bipartisan Background Checks Act) in the aftermath of these shootings, the PRC watched and judged. Chinese commentators took to Weibo, a Twitter-like microblog platform, to share their thoughts. Some users argued that the American government does not listen to its constituents. With 90% of the American public supporting extended background checks, the users claimed the government was more focused on politics than conscience. Others blamed American inequality, making bold statements like, "American people strongly demand gun control, but then the bill doesn't pass. Why, you ask? Because it would negatively impact the interests of the one per cent."⁹⁵ While the claim is unsupported, it represents a common view amongst critics of the US - that elitism and inequality guide politics. Another user stated, "All the Senate of that country ever does is spend taxpayers' money on sacrificing the interests of the American people in order to protect the interests of the guys in charge.... What did you expect?"⁹⁶ Since roughly 80% of Weibo's users are Chinese,

⁹⁴ "Arrests Made in Connection with Murder of 2 USC Students." *CBS*, CBS, 2.

⁹⁵ Kevin Osnos, "China Responds to Gun Control's Failure," *New Yorker*, 18 Apr. 2013, 1.

⁹⁶ Kevin Osnos, "China Responds to Gun Control's Failure," 1.

these comments mostly circulated within the PRC. Yet, it demonstrated outrage and confusion around a uniquely American problem and its lack of solution.

As competition between the US and China escalated, so did US gun violence. These tensions were complicated and wrapped up in the economy, the military, territory, and international institutions, which typically fail to invigorate outrage from the domestic or international community. Yet, if not motivated by economic or political reasons, people are certainly motivated by social or moral ones. Thus, the PRC antagonized the US as a violent, unsafe, gun-riddled country. In 2016, the PRC issued a gun-related warning to tourists traveling to the United States and the Chinese Embassy in Arizona warned against traveling to “crime scenes and tough neighborhoods” in the US.⁹⁷ One year later, the Chinese Consulate in Los Angeles published a translated guide with instructions on responding to shooters.⁹⁸ These warnings spread to social media in 2018 with a notification sent by the Foreign Ministry warning its citizens that gun violence is frequent in the US.⁹⁹ Many Chinese citizens took these messages seriously, with one Weibo user writing, “Just a gentle reminder to everyone: the U.S. is not safe. Domestic destinations are best for your summer vacation, especially Xinjiang, which is a paradise on earth.”¹⁰⁰ These warnings effectively antagonized the US, spreading the image of an unsafe country and an unresponsive government.

Beyond domestic travel warnings, the PRC elevated American gun violence to an institutionalized issue requiring a global response. It launched a top-down movement questioning the US’s capacity for global leadership with gun violence at the center. In 2017, the Chinese

⁹⁷ Mike Ives, “China Warns Its Tourists: Beware Gun Violence in America,” *New York Times*, 2 July 2018, 1.

⁹⁸ Mike Ives, “China Warns Its Tourists: Beware Gun Violence in America,” *New York Times*, 2 July 2018, 1.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

government published its first Human Rights Record of the United States report, which was developed in direct response to the US State Department's annual country reports on human rights, which, perhaps obviously, ignore the US's own human rights issues. The Chinese document explains that its purpose is to identify hypocrisy and hold the United States accountable for its human rights violations:

Wielding "the baton of human rights," [the US government] pointed fingers and cast blame on the human rights situation in many countries while paying no attention to its own terrible human rights problems... With the gunshots lingering in people's ears behind the Statue of Liberty, worsening racial discrimination and the election farce dominated by money politics, the self-proclaimed human rights defender has exposed its human rights "myth" with its own deeds.¹⁰¹

The report goes on to cite statistics from the FBI and the Gun Violence Archive that show the prevalence of guns and their connection to violence, like that guns are used in more than 7 out of every ten murders and guns killed an estimated 15,039 people in the US in 2016.¹⁰²

The report was published by the national government and by Xinhua news agency, which is the official state news agency of the PRC, printing online in multiple languages. Thus, the report was aimed at the international community where it served two key purposes. First, it intended to dismantle the United States' self-imposed role as the judge of human rights. One of the ways the US demonstrates hegemonic leadership is by pointing out flaws in other countries and creating policies in the name of protecting human rights. Since a negative review can impact the international perception of a country, states that want positive reports are incentivized to suck up to the US, thereby reaffirming its leadership. By highlighting hypocrisy with the US-dominated system, China began to undermine the self-reinforcing cycle of American hegemony.

¹⁰¹ Xiang Bo, editor. 2017, *Full Text: Human Rights Record of the United States in 2016*, 1.

¹⁰² Ibid.

Second, the report promoted the PRC's role as the judge of American human rights violations. Many states are unhappy with the human rights reports that paint them in a negative light, but few are powerful enough to resist. With inflammatory claims throughout the report like, "The United States repeatedly trampled on human rights in other countries and willfully slaughtered innocent victims," and "The United States refused to approve core international conventions on human rights and did not accept UN draft resolutions related to human rights," China clearly depicts US leadership as irresponsible.¹⁰³ Moreover, it positions itself as the state strong enough to stand up against the US, thereby affirming its own power on the international stage.

FAN JIANPING



Figure 5: Political Cartoon published in *China Daily*, an English-language newspaper run by the CCP.¹⁰⁴

In 2018, a gunman killed 17 and injured another 17 at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. A few days later, the *Global Times*, a hawkish newspaper run by the Chinese Communist Party, published a series of articles written in English that amplified the

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Fan Jianping, "US Gun Control," *China Daily*, 24 Sept. 2013.

connection between human rights abuses and gun violence. Yu Ning, a Global Times reporter, called upon US leadership to look to China as an example of a peaceful, gunless society. She wrote, “Gun ownership in China is strictly regulated, which helps reduce gun-related crimes and deaths. The U.S. should learn from China and genuinely protect human rights.”¹⁰⁵ She also emphasized American hypocrisy, explaining that Washington is so busy pointing fingers at other countries' human rights violations that it neglects violence within its own borders.¹⁰⁶ This narrative promotes the superiority of relatively gun-free China and explicitly states that the lack of gun control in the US violates basic human rights. Working against the Western narrative of the US as humanitarian and the PRC as oppressive requires effective propaganda infiltration, which the PRC achieves by publishing articles like Ning's in English. This ensures inflammatory articles condemning the US's human rights violations reach the international community, thereby urging leaders around the globe to reconsider the US's ability to lead.

Running through China's criticism is the idea that the US is incapable of addressing a critical issue domestically, so how could it address issues internationally? Moreover, if the US commits its own human rights abuses, it is clearly not a universal defender of human rights, so why do countries blindly accept its identity as such? Putting a magnifying glass to gun violence exposes inherent hypocrisy within the US. This message of a failing democracy and unstable leadership is rarely subtle, with journalists making claims like the “US government's inability to address the ‘mission impossible’ has laid bare the decline of US government capacity.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Reuters Staff, “Chinese Paper Says U.S. Should Learn from China, Restrict Guns, Protect Rights,” *Reuters*, 22 Feb. 2018, 1.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Zhao Yusha, “Report Reveals Facts, Truth of US Gun Violence: Mission Impossible Exposes Country's Declining Governance Capacity,” *Global Times*, 16 Feb. 2023, 1.

In addressing American gun violence, China asserts itself as the US's moral opponent. PRC media asserts the belief that "the right to life is the most fundamental human right. The right to bear arms cannot overpower the individual's right to live."¹⁰⁸ Moreover, by pointing out the US's flaws, the PRC positions itself as strong enough to stand up against a hegemon, demonstrating its capacity for strong leadership. This strategy positions Chinese hegemony as an alternative to existing American hegemony.

While some of China's criticisms may infiltrate the US's borders, they are not directed at the American people. Unlike the USSR which aimed to destabilize the US from the inside-out, the PRC does not aim to do the same, mostly because it can achieve its goal of global leadership without sparking a rebellion in the US. Instead, China works to persuade unaligned countries to rely on it for guidance, both by demonstrating its capacity for leadership and the US's incapacity.

United States' Response

Despite China's constant critiques of gun violence, the US has done little to directly respond. While democracies are uniquely positioned to address criticism, US policy, rhetoric, and strategy have largely ignored China's criticism. The only significant piece of federal gun control legislation was passed in 2016 after a shooting in a nightclub that was, at the time, the deadliest in history. The bill restricted bump stocks, which are commercially available gun accessories that allow semi-automatic weapons to be fired like fully automatic weapons at about 9 rounds per second and which were used in several mass shootings.¹⁰⁹ Other laws to increase the extent of background checks have passed in the House of Representatives, but have not been

¹⁰⁸ Yu Ning, "China Can Offer Lessons to US in Protecting Human Rights," *Global Times*, 22 Feb. 2018, 1.

¹⁰⁹ Robert Longley, "See a Timeline of Gun Control in the U.S. from 1791 to the Present," *ThoughtCo*, ThoughtCo, 8 Jan. 2023, 8.

passed in the Senate.¹¹⁰ This trend seems to characterize all federal gun laws, as dozens of gun control bills have been introduced, but struggle to make it through both houses of Congress.

The lack of federal response leaves gun reform up to state legislatures, which are far less swayed by international opinion. Instead, they are beholden to local voices, few of whom follow the Chinese news cycle and even fewer who are influenced by China's critiques. These regional responses lead to disunified actions from local governments, some that implement bills to ban assault weapons and expand background checks while others introduce bills to arm teachers, waive handgun permit fees, and lighten penalties for carrying without a permit.¹¹¹ The uncoordinated reforms demonstrate a lack of top-down guidance, unlike the coordinated federal response which emerged as the USSR critiqued US race policy.

Given the commonalities between the Cold War and the current conflict between China and the United States, one might expect similar outcomes in response to similar ideological criticisms. In both cases, an external adversary targeted American national identity by pointing out flaws in the US. Yet, these strategies differ in two key ways. First, China's criticisms are aimed at an international audience, not an American one. Because the US and China are competing for hegemony in a yet-to-be bifurcated world, there is still a sense that the PRC can incentivize unaligned countries to join its emerging sphere of influence. Conversely, the Soviets and Americans competed in a distinctly bifurcated world and therefore focused their critiques at all three targets: the opponent, the international community, and the domestic population. The multiple levels of criticism combined with the sense of existentialism made the Soviet's critiques

¹¹⁰ Robert Longley, "See a Timeline of Gun Control in the U.S. from 1791 to the Present," 12.

¹¹¹ Matt Vasilogambros, "NRA Has Backed Most State Gun Laws Passed Since Sandy Hook," 1.

existential, which forced the US to respond. China still focuses its criticisms outwards, creating less room for domestic resonance and less urgency with which the US government must respond.

Second, the PRC's gun violence criticism does not target an inherent contradiction in the framework of the US's national identity. Unlike the Soviets, who tied their social critiques to entrenched American systems and identities, China's gun violence critique neglects to target values tied to national identity. In fact, it's the opposite: gun *rights* (not gun *control*) are tied to the US constitution itself via the second amendment and to the American idea of individual rights. These conditions position the critique as less of an existential threat, granting the US government space in ignoring it.

Domestic Manipulation

The government's inaction is not reflective of an inactive civil society. There are dozens of interest groups focused on guns, some that advocate for gun control and some that advocate against it. The NRA is the leading interest group that works to prevent gun reform, donating \$3.22 million to political campaigns in 2019 and \$2.2 million in 2020.¹¹² With vigorous supporters who are willing to punish their representatives for impeding their second amendment rights, the NRA wields massive power in pushing beyond the status quo and advocating for even looser gun laws. On the other side, thousands of Americans affected by gun violence have tried to lobby the government to enact reform. A surge of teenage activists emerged after the Parkland shooting in 2018, leading to the creation of March for Our Lives - a series of nationwide protests calling for common sense gun laws. There is significant overlap in the messaging from US interest groups and the PRC, like how both call upon the US government to look beyond

¹¹² "Which Senators Have Benefitted the Most from NRA Money?" *Brady United*, The Brady Campaign, 2020, 1.

partisanship, expand background checks, and ban assault weapons. Both also leverage the idea that protecting guns fails to protect people. Yet, unlike civil rights activists, who positioned themselves in the context of the nation's broader foreign policy goals, gun control activists do not leverage these same international pressures.

Chinese propaganda does not give gun control advocates enough leverage to counterbalance the resource and mobilization advantages of the gun rights advocates. Because gun rights are perceived as constitutionally-protected, the PRC's arguments that democracy is failing because of gun violence falls flat, even though the point that the government inadequately captures the interests of its constituents should resonate. Still, China's critiques are more focused on painting the US as a hypocritical leader than the failures of democracy as a whole. Thus, interest groups have a tougher time linking gun violence to a collapsing democracy and claims of poor democratic representation are too easily undercut by federalist and constitutional narratives.

China's Gain

Because China sees the US as its biggest threat in its quest for hegemony, it will go to great lengths to reduce the US's ability to threaten its core interests like expanded international leadership. Functioning within this zero-sum perception of power, China constantly seeks ways to gain an advantage. This involves both advocating for a PRC-led international order and dismantling the US's image as a moral leader. Thus, by exposing American hypocrisy and flaws within its borders, the PRC creates space for broader Chinese leadership to emerge, particularly in international institutions and amongst countries looking for guidance. By labeling American gun violence a human rights crisis, the PRC provides grounds for other nations to join in their dissatisfaction with US leadership.

The PRC aims its critiques at the international community, looking to shift individual countries' perceptions of the US and its capacity for leadership. Yet these critiques also filter into Chinese media, which likely impact Chinese citizens' perceptions of the US. In a 2022 study, 54.6% of Chinese citizens aged 18-35 said they “look down” on the West.¹¹³ Though this view is likely informed by the gun violence narrative, it is probably more indicative of heightened general tensions between the US and PRC.

US Critique of Chinese Uyghur Persecution

As the PRC chipped away at the US's role as the protector of human rights, it was digging itself into its own human rights crisis. In 2019, the New York Times published a series of leaked files revealing the extent of China's crackdown on the Uyghur population, an ethnic minority that speaks Turkish and practices a form of Sunni Islam. The documents reported that roughly one million Uyghurs were living in mass internment camps, prisons, and reeducation centers.¹¹⁴ The government has built hundreds of detention centers - mostly prisonlike complexes bordered by high walls. Under the national policy of Sinicization, inmates undergo hours a day of indoctrination and interrogation to transform them into full CCP members. An account from Kayrat Samarkand, a detainee for three months, was published in the Washington Post and describes his experience in the camp:

The 30-year-old stayed in a dormitory with 14 other men. After the room was

¹¹³ Kelly Tang, “Official Poll Finds Young Chinese Look Down on US, West,” *VOA News*, Voice of America, 27 Oct. 2022, 2.

¹¹⁴ Austin Ramzy and Chris Buckley, “‘Absolutely No Mercy’: Leaked Files Expose How China Organized Mass Detentions of Muslims,” 8.

*searched every morning, he said, the day began with two hours of study on subjects including “the spirit of the 19th Party Congress,” where Xi expounded his political dogma in a three-hour speech, and China’s policies on minorities and religion. Inmates would sing communist songs, chant “Long live Xi Jinping” and do military-style training in the afternoon before writing accounts of their day... Those who disobeyed the rules, refused to be on duty, engaged in fights or were late for studies were placed in handcuffs and ankle cuffs for up to 12 hours.*¹¹⁵

Survivors of the camps report experiencing or witnessing abuse including torture, rape, and forced sterilization.¹¹⁶ Children are not protected from indoctrination, with nearly 500,000 Uyghur and other minority children in Xinjiang enrolled in state-run boarding schools with a ban on teaching non-Han Chinese language or customs.¹¹⁷ Beyond indoctrination, the state also aims to control population growth amongst the Uyghur population. The state subjects women to mandatory pregnancy checks and forces methods of birth control, sterilization, and abortion.¹¹⁸ Sinicization also aims to reduce the impact of Uyghur, Islamic, and Arabic cultures and languages in the region through restrictions on dress, customs, and even diet. Thousands of mosques have been closed or stripped of Arab writings and a 2017 law bans people from growing long beards or wearing veils in public.¹¹⁹

These measures are justified by the government because it has identified the Uyghur population as a security threat. The PRC leaders call their security concerns “the three evils:” terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism.¹²⁰ While the assault on Uyghurs began over two

¹¹⁵ Jen Kirby, “Concentration Camps and Forced Labor: China’s Repression of the Uighurs, Explained,” *Vox*, Vox, 25 Sept. 2020, 9-10.

¹¹⁶ James Griffiths, “From Cover-Up to Propaganda Blitz: China’s Attempts to Control the Narrative on Xinjiang,” *CNN*, CNN, 17 Apr. 2021, 3.

¹¹⁷ CRS Reports, 2023, *China Primer: Uyghurs*, 1.

¹¹⁸ Jen Kirby, “Concentration Camps and Forced Labor: China’s Repression of the Uighurs, Explained,” 6

¹¹⁹ Lindsay Maizland, “China’s Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang,” 5.

¹²⁰ CRS Reports, 2023, *China Primer: Uyghurs*, 1.

decades ago, three incidents in 2014 (an attack on a local government office, an attack at an open-air market, and an attack in Tiananmen Square), supposedly all carried out by Uyghur extremists, led the government to classify the entire Uyghur population as potential terrorists.¹²¹ Uyghurs have posed a separatist threat since 1949 when the CCP took power and claimed Xinjiang as China. Some Uyghurs still refer to the region as East Turkestan and believe it should be independent from China.¹²² Given Xinjiang's size (it takes up about 1/6 of mainland China) and geographic location (it borders eight countries and is referred to as a hub for the BRI), it is an essential region for China. The fear of separatism is furthered by what PRC leaders identify as religious extremism, as they fear foreigners could use religion to spur anti-China sentiment. Instead, they want the Uyghur population to conform to national atheist policies and suppress any expression of Islam in public. President Xi has advocated for the use of "dictatorship" to eliminate Islamist extremism, a statement which laid the groundwork for the policy of Sinicization.¹²³

American Propaganda

The United States' conflict with China is abstract by nature. There have been no declarations of war nor deployment of military. Similar to the Cold War, this makes it difficult for the American population to grasp the evolving conflict between the two countries. Still, the two states are certainly engaged in a power struggle, mostly on economic grounds, and positioned as existential threats, mostly on hegemonic grounds. Just as the US characterized

¹²¹ CRS Reports, 2023, *China Primer: Uyghurs*, 1.

¹²² Lindsay Maizland, "China's Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang," *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council on Foreign Relations, 22 Sept. 2022, 4.

¹²³ Ibid.

itself as the moral high ground in the Cold War, it attempts to do the same in its conflict with China, especially as the PRC attacks the US on human rights grounds.

The New York Times' report revealed the severity of Uyghur persecution, which was previously unknown to the American public. It was estimated that one million Uyghurs, ethnic Kazakhs, Hui Chinese, and other ethnic minorities were detained and held in internment camps since 2017. The whereabouts of hundreds of prominent Uyghur scholars, cultural figures, doctors, and journalists remain unknown. Reports of people dying of medical neglect, injuries during interrogation, or torture flooded into public consciousness.¹²⁴ Researchers estimated roughly 900,000 children were separated from their families and 16,000 mosques in the region were destroyed.¹²⁵ Revealing the atrocities in Xinjiang exposed a horrific human rights record and chipped away at China's legitimacy when critiquing other states' human rights issues.

Since anti-China sentiment already ran high because of economic, military, and political tensions, the US Senate almost immediately introduced a bill stating that the atrocities in Xinjiang constituted genocide and urging China to release people from detention centers and forced labor programs.¹²⁶ Uyghur activists supported the action. Dixit Raxit, spokesman for the World Uyghur Congress Organization of Exiled Uyghur Groups stated,

Paying particular attention to the humanitarian crisis in East Turkestan [Xinjiang] is in America's national interest and in line with American values and tradition to call to action whenever genocide and crimes against humanity occur, such as the case of Uyghurs... Much like the other countries in liberal democracies, Americans have this vow of 'never again' to allow vulnerable

¹²⁴ United States, Congress, Office of International Religious Freedom, *2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: China (Includes Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Macau)*, US Department of State, 2021, 85.

¹²⁵ United States, Congress, Office of International Religious Freedom, *2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: China (Includes Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Macau)*, US Department of State, 2021, 85.

¹²⁶ Priyanka Boghani, "How the U.S. Has Reacted to China's Treatment of Uyghurs," *PBS*, PBS, 24 Aug. 2022, 2.

*religious and ethnic groups subject to atrocity crimes like the Holocaust, and now the Uyghurs.*¹²⁷

Ultimately the bill went no further than its introduction, since some thought such a declaration might compel American intervention, thereby escalating an already tense relationship.¹²⁸ Still, the label “genocide” stuck with the American people and press.

While Congress was unsuccessful in labeling the persecution of Uyghurs a genocide, it effectively passed other bipartisan indictments of China. The Tariff Act outlawed the import of any goods linked to forced labor. In particular, Section 307 banned “[a]ll goods, wares, articles, and merchandise mined, produced, or manufactured wholly or in part in any foreign country by convict labor or/and forced labor or/and indentured labor.”¹²⁹ Since the PRC worked to ensure products sourced from forced labor are untraceable, the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act served “to ensure that goods made with forced labor in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of the [PRC] do not enter the United States market.”¹³⁰ The bill, which was passed unanimously in the Senate, strengthened section 307 by presuming that all goods coming from Xinjiang were made with forced labor unless the importer can prove otherwise, thereby blocking massive amounts of Chinese goods from entering the US.¹³¹

To the domestic population, the bill demonstrated a human-rights incentive, since it refused to support companies that use forced labor. Yet, it also gave the US economy an excuse to delink from the Chinese economy. The trade war that started in 2018 had very real

¹²⁷ Ralph Jennings, “Why US Is Raising Pressure on China Over Treatment of Tibetans, Uyghurs,” *VOA, Voice of America*, 2 Jan. 2022, 1.

¹²⁸ Priyanka Boghani, “How the U.S. Has Reacted to China's Treatment of Uyghurs,” 2.

¹²⁹ Brady Worthington, “What Is the U.S. Government Doing About Uyghur Forced Labor?” *Lawfare*, 27 Jan. 2022, 1.

¹³⁰ US Dept State 47

¹³¹ Brady Worthington, “What Is the U.S. Government Doing About Uyghur Forced Labor?” 2.

implications for American companies, particularly those that sourced heavily from China. While the US had mildly reduced US imports from China, this came with costs like higher prices and diminished competitiveness of some American companies. Moreover, as China rid its exchange reserves of American currency, the potential for conflict rose since there is less economic interdependence. The US did not want to maintain reliance on China if the relationship was not two-sided, as the implications of conflict then rested more heavily on Washington. Tying a human rights issue to an economic one made Xinjiang something of a litmus test - those who wanted to do business with China must choose between standing with Beijing as it commits human rights atrocities or face the consequences. Thus, the bill created an excuse, albeit a valid one, to chip away at the economic interdependence between the two countries.

The bill also painted a clear image of China as bad, deepening American nationalism and anti-China sentiment. Despite the partisanship that dominates the US Senate, the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act passed unanimously. Government officials struggle to agree upon what constitutes a “good” state, but agree upon certain qualities of a “bad” one, like genocide. This sentiment is not only held at the highest levels of government, but permeates the ideology of most American citizens. A state that is identified as “bad” must be held accountable, especially as the omnipresent media demands action. With claims of a Uyghur genocide splashed across news sites and circulating on Twitter, people were quick to denounce China. Celebrities and people of interest often use their platforms to promote social causes, including the protection of Uyghurs. NBA player Enes Kanter was especially motivated by the Uyghur cause and utilized his platform to spread the word and try to enact change. In October 2021, he led a rally in front

of Capitol Hill urging Congress to pass the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act.¹³² He also took to Twitter to spread the message, tweeting:

*Heartless Dictator of China,
XI JINPING and the Communist Party of China.
I am calling you out in front of the whole world.
Close down the SLAVE labor camps and free the UYGHUR people!
Stop the GENOCIDE, now!*¹³³

Hundreds of thousands of people saw the tweet, about 45 thousand people liked it, and thousands replied in the comments section. Many celebrities are expected to and do use their platforms to advocate for social change, meaning that knowledge about human rights atrocities is further infused into civilian consciousness. The comments under Kanter's tweet are also telling, as they demonstrate the information being spread. One user noted:

*It seems the comments section here is full of bot accounts, would be interesting to check the dates of the creation of each account, their former posts. I know China steals old accounts that are no longer active, find any switch in posting patterns.*¹³⁴

And another thread reads:

*Bruh, USA got more prisoners in jail than China...*¹³⁵

To which a user responded:

*Jails in America have many horrible problems and we need to change them... However, none of this has to do with a genocide being committed in a totalitarian, nationalistic, racist country.*¹³⁶

¹³² Asim Kashgarian, "NBA Player Enes Kanter Leads Rally Against Uyghur Forced Labor," VOA, Voice of America, 31 Oct. 2021, 1.

¹³³ @Enesfreedom, "Heartless Dictator of China," Twitter, 22 Oct. 2021, 9:08 a.m.

¹³⁴ @nuckynucker, "It seems the comments section here is full of bot accounts," Twitter, 22 Oct. 2021, 11:38 a.m.

¹³⁵ @RamonaNkrumah, "Bruh, USA got more prisoners in jail than China," Twitter, 22 Oct. 2021, 9:56 a.m.

¹³⁶ @nuckynucker, "Jails in America have many horrible problems and we need to change them," Twitter, 22 Oct. 2021, 10:56 p.m.

These tweets are not government-led initiatives, but ordinary people using a platform to demand action from the government, spread awareness, and propagate their ideas about China. Most comments are similar to the ones above: either indicting China or arguing about which country commits more human rights atrocities. Most often, the pro-US side gets the last word. This form of activism combined with government propaganda creates media noise which hardens domestic support against China and spreads anger and awareness to anyone with a social media account, whether it be fellow US citizens, the international community, or Chinese who manage to get through the firewall.

Internationally, the US considered ways to amass disapproval for China's actions through bold statements and institutional criticism. In December 2020, President Trump said the United States would refrain from sending official representation to the 2022 Beijing winter Olympics because of human rights abuses.¹³⁷ While over 200 athletes ended up attending the games, the statement was effective in garnering international attention and making states consider their relationship with China. The US, with Germany and the UK, also organized an event about the treatment of Uyghurs at a UN conference in 2021. Attendance or the lack thereof at the UN event became a signal of how much a certain state cared about human rights issues. As one American lawyer said of a non-attendee, "I'm sure she's busy. You know we all are. But I have a similar global mandate to defend human rights and I couldn't think of anything more important to do than to join you here today."¹³⁸ The conference led to a 2022 UN report stating that China's treatment of Uyghurs may amount to crimes against humanity, though the wording is

¹³⁷ United States, Congress, Office of International Religious Freedom, *2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: China (Includes Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Macau)*, US Department of State, 2021, 2.

¹³⁸ Michelle Nichols, "U.S., UK, Germany Clash with China at U.N. over Xinjiang," *Reuters*, Reuters, 12 May 2021, 3.

intentionally vague to prevent necessary punitive action from international institutions.¹³⁹

While the severity of China's actions require criticism from the international community, the US's role as the leader of such an indictment is no coincidence. First, as China tries to undermine US leadership, the US aims to demonstrate that it is more equipped to lead. Second, in depicting the PRC as an authoritarian state, the US questions its ability to be a receptive, responsive global leader. Third, villainizing China makes it easier to move away from trade relations, especially when the PRC economy is depicted as functioning on forced labor.

The US government has also leveraged modern technology to contact Uyghurs in China and other minorities affected by Sinicization. Mike Pompeo, former Secretary of State, met virtually with Uyghur families and Xinjiang internment camp survivors to express America's will and commitment to ending the atrocities.¹⁴⁰ US embassy officials also met with Chinese government officials to advocate for greater religious freedom and tolerance, then met directly with members of unregistered religious groups to reinforce US support for religious freedoms.¹⁴¹ As stated by the US State Department, "The embassy continued to amplify Department of State religious freedom initiatives and advocacy directly to Chinese citizens through outreach programs and social media."¹⁴² Not only does this reaffirm the US's commitment to human rights, but creates an important distinction between the US and PRC: the US reaffirms our right to live, the PRC does not. Moreover, it plants more distress and unrest in the Uyghur population, as the American government affirms its stance that China's actions are unjustifiable. Reaching

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ United States, Congress, Office of International Religious Freedom, *2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: China (Includes Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Macau)*, US Department of State, 2021, 43.

¹⁴¹ United States, Congress, Office of International Religious Freedom, *2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: China (Includes Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Macau)*, US Department of State, 2021, 3.

¹⁴² United States, Congress, Office of International Religious Freedom, *2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: China (Includes Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Macau)*, US Department of State, 2021, 3.

out to those most affected by Sinicization plants the seeds of unrest and disapproval.

China's Response

Restrictions on media and free expression created space for President Xi to shift the narrative. He systematically reaffirmed the necessity of maintaining a tight grip on Xinjiang for security reasons, claimed Uyghurs and other minorities live well, and criticized the West for antagonizing China. While Sinicization has been a national policy since 2014 and amped up in 2017, few Chinese citizens knew about the camps, family separation, forced labor, and deaths. However, after the New York Times leaked documents demonstrating the extent of the persecution, including the President's personal involvement in the oppressive policies, Xi was forced to address the controversy. Rather than addressing the horrors in Xinjiang, he spun Sinicization as a win for China. News outlets immediately antagonized the US, stating that their claims and subsequent sanctions were "nothing but another desperate attempt to interfere in China's internal affairs through 'long-arm jurisdiction.'" ¹⁴³ While Xi initially denied the existence of any internment camps, he later admitted to their existence, but claimed they were "reeducation centers" to combat extremism through the promotion of a shared national identity. According to a state paper published by the State Council Information Office,

Xinjiang is a key battlefield in the fight against terrorism and extremism in China... (The government) has established vocational education and training centers in accordance with the law to prevent the breeding and spread of terrorism and religious extremism, effectively curbing the frequent terrorist incidents and protecting the rights to life, health, and development of the people of all ethnic groups... worthwhile results have been achieved. ¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Ralph Jennings, "Why US Is Raising Pressure on China Over Treatment of Tibetans, Uyghurs," 3.

¹⁴⁴ James Griffiths, "From Cover-Up to Propaganda Blitz: China's Attempts to Control the Narrative on Xinjiang," CNN, CNN, 17 Apr. 2021, 10.

The PRC's tight grip on the media also allows Xi to spread false information about the realities of Xinjiang. The Foreign Ministry called accusations of genocide "the lie of the century"¹⁴⁵ and Xi claimed that Xinjiang "is enjoying a favorable setting of social stability with the people living in peace and contentment... The facts have abundantly demonstrated that our national minority work has been a success."¹⁴⁶

In controlling the domestic narrative, the PRC also worked to discredit victims of Sinicization who attempt to speak out. Xi unleashed an aggressive pushback campaign focused on smearing the reputation of female victims. Since the initial premise of re-education camps in Xinjiang was combating terrorism, the government had to silence women whose testimonies undermined that premise. The PRC made it dangerous to come forward, as it released the women's names, their medical history, and sometimes even information on their fertility to the public.¹⁴⁷ The Ministry spokesman, Wang Wenbin, systematically discredited testimonies of women who reported sexual abuse in the camps. He discredited one because she had not previously recounted the experience, then published medical details about her fertility.¹⁴⁸ Another woman, who spoke to foreign media, was accused of having syphilis and images of her medical records were published.¹⁴⁹ A Xinjiang government official said of another woman, "everyone knows about her inferior character. She's lazy and likes comfort, her private life is chaotic, her neighbors say that she committed adultery while in China."¹⁵⁰ Accusations of infertility, sexually transmitted disease, and adultery are meant to invalidate women's claims of

¹⁴⁵ James Griffiths, "From Cover-Up to Propaganda Blitz: China's Attempts to Control the Narrative on Xinjiang," 11.

¹⁴⁶ Buckley, 2

¹⁴⁷ Cate Cadell, "China Counters Uighur Criticism with Explicit Attacks on Women Witnesses," 3.

¹⁴⁸ Cate Cadell, "China Counters Uighur Criticism with Explicit Attacks on Women Witnesses," 5.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

abuse in the camps and plant uncertainty in the minds of Chinese citizens about the validity of their claims.

Internationally, Xi affirmed the success of Sinicization. He called upon the press to “tell the story of Xinjiang in a multi-level, all-round, and three-dimensional manner, and confidently propagate the excellent social stability of Xinjiang.”¹⁵¹ Thus, the Chinese media launched a full-scale propaganda campaign to rebuke Western accusations. The PRC scrubbed the internet of early evidence of the camp system, expelled foreign journalists reporting on Xinjiang, denounced foreign activists speaking out against Sinicization, and silenced or detained critical domestic actors.¹⁵² The government hosts invitation-only media events in Xinjiang to demonstrate the harmony in the region. The events include pre-recorded videos and prepared testimonies from former camp inmates.¹⁵³ Testimonies include quotations like, “Through the training, I realized that my past beliefs were completely wrong and religious extremism was our enemy. It’s a disease which poisons our body and a drug which leads us to death.” and “I must stay away from religious extremism and lead a normal life.”¹⁵⁴ PRC-led reporting has been packaged into two volumes called “The Truth about Xinjiang: Exposing the US-Led Lies and Slanders about Xinjiang.”¹⁵⁵ In 2021 the government produced a musical film set in Xinjiang (likened to a

¹⁵¹ James Griffiths, “From Cover-Up to Propaganda Blitz: China's Attempts to Control the Narrative on Xinjiang,” 13.

¹⁵² United States, Congress, Office of International Religious Freedom, *2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: China (Includes Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Macau)*, US Department of State, 2021, 45.

¹⁵³ Cate Cadell, “China Counters Uighur Criticism with Explicit Attacks on Women Witnesses,” *Reuters*, Reuters, 28 Feb. 2021, 5.

¹⁵⁴ James Griffiths, “From Cover-Up to Propaganda Blitz: China's Attempts to Control the Narrative on Xinjiang,” 15.

¹⁵⁵ Cate Cadell, “China Counters Uighur Criticism with Explicit Attacks on Women Witnesses,” 5.

Xinjiang-based *La La Land*) called *The Wings of Song* that shows the ethnic harmony in modern Xinjiang.¹⁵⁶



Figure 6: Movie poster for *The Wings of Song*.¹⁵⁷

China's response demonstrates an inability to entirely suppress Western media or the spread of information. Thus, Xi addressed domestic critics by maintaining Sinicization as an anti-terrorist policy and controlling former camp inmates. He then addressed international critics using a controlled propaganda campaign. While Xi gave no clear sign of a shift in his will to suppress Uyghurs, his policies have become less aggressive. This likely reflects a sentiment

¹⁵⁶ James Griffiths, "From Cover-Up to Propaganda Blitz: China's Attempts to Control the Narrative on Xinjiang," 14.

¹⁵⁷ Tian Shan Film Studio, "A 'The Wings of Songs' Poster," *CGTN*, 28 Mar. 2021.

amongst PRC leadership that they already have a firm grip on Xinjiang and have successfully implemented Sinicization, though international pressures may have played an additional role.

Domestic Manipulation

Despite Xi's desire to disguise the realities of Uyghur persecution, the landscape of Xinjiang has changed dramatically from early 2020 to February 2023. In three years, authorities scaled back many of the most visible aspects of the police state: razor wire surrounding the camp, armored police, surveillance cameras, and camp-sanctioned uniforms are gone.¹⁵⁸ Nevertheless, evidence of the terror persists. Many historic centers are destroyed beyond repair, mosques now function as cafes, and the Xinjiang countryside is almost entirely dominated by Han Chinese.¹⁵⁹ Beijing markets Xinjiang as a tourist destination in what scholar James Leibold calls the "museumification" of Uyghur culture and what the PRC calls "progress." Rather than allow Uyghurs to actually practice their religion and cultural practices, they are forced to present them for observation to other tourists. Han Chinese culture and CCP propaganda have seeped into Xinjiang in subtle ways, like Lunar New Year banners lining the streets with slogans like "The Chinese Communist Party is good," despite the fact that Uyghurs celebrate Islamic holidays, not the Lunar New Year. While some of the obvious tools of oppression have disappeared, the erasure of culture persists. Practices that shape authentic Uyghur culture like gatherings, Islamic habits, and prayer have largely disappeared from Xinjiang.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Dake Kang, "Terror & Tourism: Xinjiang Eases Its Grip, but Fear Remains," *AP NEWS*, Associated Press, 10 Oct. 2021, 3.

¹⁵⁹ Dake Kang, "Terror & Tourism: Xinjiang Eases Its Grip, but Fear Remains," 3.

¹⁶⁰ Dake Kang, "Terror & Tourism: Xinjiang Eases Its Grip, but Fear Remains," 7.

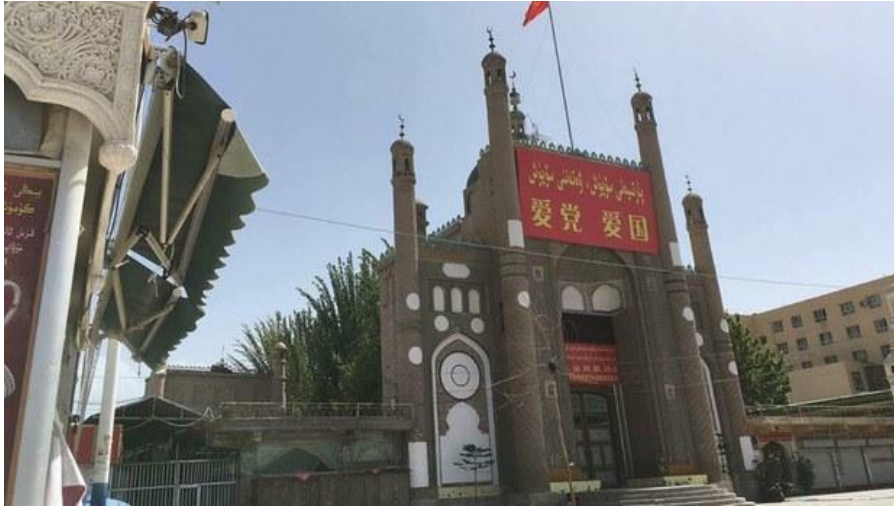


Figure 7: Jama Mosque in Xinjiang adorned with China's state flag and banners that read "Love the Party, Love the Country."¹⁶¹



Figure 8: Tourists rest and relax in what was once a prayer room in a mosque in Kashgar, Xinjiang.¹⁶²

Beyond physical terror, a culture of fear persists in the region. Dake Kang, an American reporter with the Associated Press, was invited to a controlled Xinjiang tour and encountered a

¹⁶¹ RFA Listener. "Jama Mosque Adorned with China's Flag and Propaganda Banners That Read 'Love the Party, Love the Country' in Kashgar Prefecture's Kargilik County, in an Undated Photo." *Radio Free Asia*, 29 Apr. 2021.

¹⁶² Okudera, Atsushi. "Visitors Rest and Relax in What Was Once a Prayer Room of a Mosque in Kashgar in the Western Part of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region." *Turkistan Times*, 15 Oct. 2020.

society filled with suspicion and anxiety. Being a foreigner, Kang was tailed by a group of “shadowy men” for the entirety of his visit.¹⁶³ He interviewed one woman - a convenience store cashier - who talked about declining sales. After Kang left, the woman was visited by the man tailing them and, when Kang returned later in the day, she refused to speak to him. Another man - a bike seller - became alarmed when he discovered Kang was a foreigner and started dialing the police. Kang was acutely aware that his conversations were subject to eavesdropping by authorities and citizens.

While terror and fear still infiltrate Xinjiang, policies seem to be less oppressive than they were from 2017 to 2019. It is unlikely that domestic Uyghur activist groups were effective in advocating for the loosening of Sinicization given the lack of mobilization. Since the policy shifts are unlikely to be a result of domestic manipulation, two other explanations are more plausible. First, western criticism may have put pressure on China to ease its treatment of Uyghurs. From sanctions to UN criticism to being labeled a genocide, the PRC may have realized that continuing the persecution of the Uyghurs would only harm its international reputation and bar it from being an active participant in the global community. Second, the government may have simply accomplished its goal of subduing the Uyghur culture. Since 2017, it has infiltrated Xinjiang with Han culture, stripped the region of its Islamic attributes, and instilled fear in the population. Thus, the government has partially succeeded in stripping Uyghurs and other minorities of their culture and practices.

¹⁶³ Dake Kang, “Terror & Tourism: Xinjiang Eases Its Grip, but Fear Remains,” 6.

United States' Gain

The conflict between the US and China is surrounded by uncertainty. While many Americans agree that China is a problem, few have a simple rationale behind this sentiment. Some fear its authoritarian government, others maintain a disdain for communism, others perceive an economic threat, and the list goes on. Thus, many Americans, particularly those who do not engage with current events, remain uncertain in understanding exactly why tensions with China continue to rise. Yet, most Americans are unified in identifying human rights abuses and expressing outrage at blatant discrimination amounting to genocide.

Most Americans see China unfavorably, with about 82% expressing a negative view.¹⁶⁴ This trend has been increasing consistently since 2018 when the US-China trade war began.

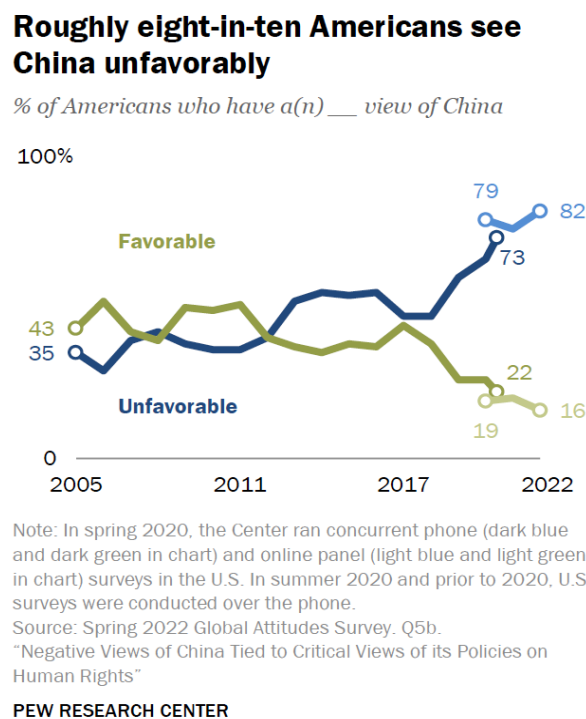


Figure 9. Source: Pew Research Center¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Laura Silver, et al. "Negative Views of China Tied to Critical Views of Its Policies on Human Rights," *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 29 June 2022, 9.

¹⁶⁵ Laura Silver, et al. "Negative Views of China Tied to Critical Views of Its Policies on Human Rights," *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 29 June 2022, 8.

When asked to rate their feelings towards China on a scale from 1-100, 1 being negative and 100 being positive, 61% of Americans selected a number under 50 and 47% selected one under 24.¹⁶⁶ While these trends are indicative of rising tensions in general, they are certainly influenced by the US's exposition of abuses in Xinjiang. When asked the first thing they think of when they hear the word "China," human rights abuses were the most common answer with one in five respondents referencing it.¹⁶⁷ Some responses included statements such as:

I've been concerned with China's response to the citizens of Hong Kong and their demands for democracy, as well as China's treatment of the Uyghur population. Human rights and transparency are not high on China's list of priorities.

China seems to be the best in the world when it comes to oppressing minorities, even better than the United States, which is very difficult. What they are doing to the Uyghur population, what they've done to Hong Kong and Taiwan, it's obvious that the power they wield isn't done for the good of the world.

Uyghur Muslim persecution, detention and 'reeducation' = ethnic cleansing and a thorough disregard for basic human rights. A lack of freedom of speech, freedom of press, and freedom of movement. The systematic dismantling of Hong Kong's democracy and the unlawful detention of those activists.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ "Most Americans Have 'Cold' Views of China. Here's What They Think About China, in Their Own Words." *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 30 June 2021, 2.

¹⁶⁷ "Most Americans Have 'Cold' Views of China. Here's What They Think About China, in Their Own Words." *Pew Research Center*, 2.

¹⁶⁸ "Most Americans Have 'Cold' Views of China. Here's What They Think About China, in Their Own Words." *Pew Research Center*, 5.

These responses demonstrate an understanding of the severity of China’s human rights abuses and a shift in public opinion rooted in its oppression of groups like the Uyghurs. Interestingly, when asked to rank four issues related to China as very serious problems - China’s policies on human rights, China’s military power, economic competition with China, and China’s involvement with domestic politics in their own country - Americans ranked human rights issues as their third greatest concern after China’s military power and China’s involvement in domestic politics. This indicates that Americans perceive greater threats from China’s military and ability to meddle, but when they hear the *word* “China,” they think of human rights abuses. This shows that the US’s propaganda is relatively effective. Despite perceiving greater threats, the mistreatment of Uyghurs heavily circulates media and public consciousness. Persecution is easy to understand and highly inflammatory, making it an effective tool of generating domestic dissent.

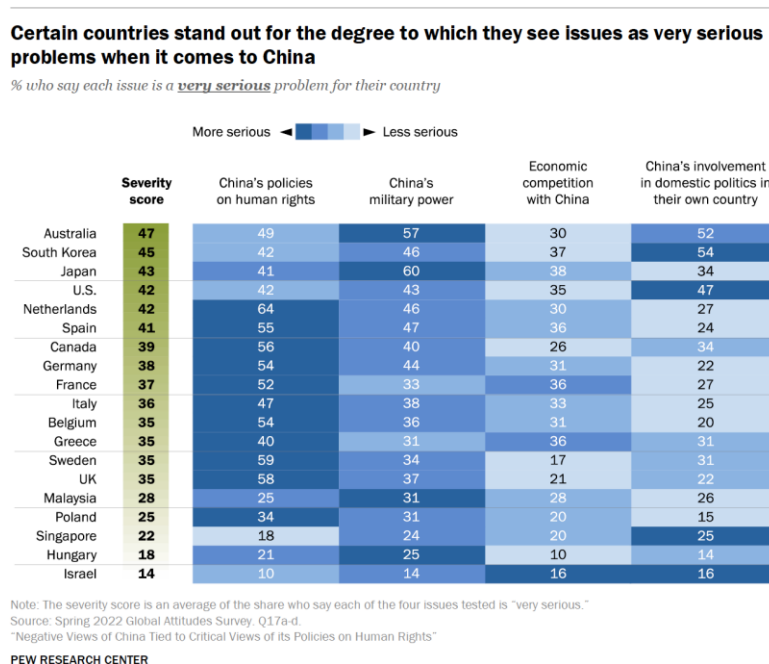


Figure 10. Source: Pew Research Center.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁹ Laura Silver, et al. “Negative Views of China Tied to Critical Views of Its Policies on Human Rights,” 2.

Internationally, the United States' allies are unified in their horror regarding China's treatment of Uyghurs. In the same survey asking citizens to rank four issues as very serious to less serious, every European country (except Hungary) said China's human rights policies were the most serious issue. Moreover, of the 19 (mostly Western) countries included, a median of 79% of people in each country said China's human rights policies are a serious problem and a median of 47% said they are a very serious problem.¹⁷⁰ While the study was conducted in 2022, meaning the responses are a reflection of abuses in Xinjiang *and* China's Zero-Covid policy, human rights abuses are clearly on people's mind.

These reports show that, while highlighting human rights violations in Xinjiang certainly invigorated the American population against the PRC, it also resonated deeply with the US's allies. This shift in dissatisfaction is at least somewhat attributable to the US's propaganda, given its whistleblowing article exposing the abuses in Xinjiang, its unified congressional response, and pressures it puts on international institutions to hold China accountable.

PRC's Rebuttal

Following the US's exposition of China's abuses in Xinjiang, the PRC launched a retaliatory propaganda campaign that intensified its critiques of US leadership. Four months after the New York Times published the leaked documents exposing the extent of the Uyghur treatment, China's State Council Information Office published its fourth annual Record of Human Rights Violations in the US. The Foreword reads:

¹⁷⁰ Laura Silver, et al. "Negative Views of China Tied to Critical Views of Its Policies on Human Rights," 2.

*“We lied, we cheated, we stole... It reminds you of the glory of the American experiment,” said US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in a speech on April 15, 2019...The remarks of US politicians have completely exposed their hypocrisy of adopting double standards on human rights issues and using them to maintain hegemony.*¹⁷¹

While China’s 2017 report touched on an array of social issues amounting to human rights abuses, it mostly focused on gun violence. Yet, the 2019 report deepened and expanded its indictment of the US. It examined issues like race inequality, economic inequality, and the prison industrial complex, which were previously secondary issues following gun violence. In demonstrating the broad scope of the US’s human rights violations, the PRC aims to further undermine the legitimacy of the US’s leadership in the human rights realm. As the report explains, the United States human rights reports “wantonly distorted and belittled human rights situations in countries and regions that did not conform to US strategic interests” while turning “a deaf ear and a blind eye to the systematic and large-scale human rights violations in the United States.”¹⁷²

Chinese Propaganda

China’s response to the US was multi-pronged while mostly focusing on identifying issues where it can identify hypocrisy. Rather than characterizing Washington’s reports as legitimate, the Information Council questioned a biased country’s ability to police human rights. As Yang Sheng and Zhang Han write, the US’s human rights card is an “old and pointless trick

¹⁷¹ Xinhua, “Full Text: Record of Human Rights Violations in US in 2019,” *China Daily*, 13 Mar. 2020, 1.

¹⁷² Xinhua, “Full Text: Record of Human Rights Violations in US in 2019,” 1.

by the US to attack the countries who disagree with Washington's policies or those who refuse to submit to US hegemony.”¹⁷³

To further expose American hypocrisy, the PRC focused its human rights reports on abuses that the US has accused others of, despite having the same issues within its own borders. For example, American leadership explained Uyghur abuse partly through the lens of racism, since Uyghurs are an ethnic minority in China. In response, the PRC invigorated its critique of racism in the US, amplifying stories of race-based hate crimes, shootings of Black Americans, and racial bias in the workplace to demonstrate that the US also has a race issue. After 2019, The State Council Information Office's annual reports mostly focused on discrimination and violence against racial and ethnic minorities. In *The Report on Human Rights Violations in the United States in 2020*, racial violence and racial discrimination make up the bulk of the text. It touched on the economic divide between white Americans non-white Americans, gerrymandering and the political manipulation of race, and structural issues like generational poverty and employment discrimination. It also explained that racism in the US is violent and oppressive, exemplified through the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. These issues demonstrate systemic flaws in the US including racism, inequality, and bias - all flaws that the US accuses the PRC of harboring.

Similarly, the US's critiques of Uyghur treatment partially rested on the amorality of “reeducation centers” in Xinjiang, which are essentially prisons meant to indoctrinate ethnic and linguistic minorities into Han Chinese culture. In response, the PRC identified a similar phenomenon in the US - mass incarceration. Since 2019, China's Information Council has highlighted the discrimination, violence, and abuse baked into the American prison system. Not

¹⁷³ Yang Sheng and Zhang Han, “China Lists US Human Rights Abuses Worldwide, Rebuts Washington's Report,” *Global Times*, 13 Apr. 2022, 1.

only does the US have the highest incarceration rate and the highest number of incarcerated people in the world, but people of color make up two thirds of all the country's imprisoned minors despite only comprising roughly one third of all minors in the US.¹⁷⁴ The report also highlights the abusive treatment many prisoners endure - a direct response to the US's claims that the Uyghur population is abused in the "reeducation centers." The 2020 report told the story of one prisoner, Mumia Abu-Jamal, a social activist and member of the Black Panther Party, who was shackled to his hospital bed and denied visitors when he contracted COVID-19 in 2021.¹⁷⁵ Through these stories, the PRC identified areas that the US weaponizes against its opponents without critically addressing the same issues domestically.

In addressing hypocrisy, the PRC's annual reports and Chinese media identify characteristics of American life that mimic its critiques of China. While the US calls the PRC unequal, harsh, and ineffective, the PRC fires back with similar claims. As the US attempts to characterize itself as a global leader promoting democratic values like freedom and equality, the PRC pokes holes in this identity by highlighting systemic issues like racism, mass incarceration, and gun violence. As Washington judges other countries' human rights issues, it fails to address its own. China predicts that as the US's international strength diminishes, its human rights record will continue to worsen, and promises to work to expose this hypocrisy.¹⁷⁶

The PRC's reports the past few years serve two key goals: to discredit the US's supposed humanitarian leadership and to highlight its hypocrisy. They are published in multiple languages, easily accessible online, and highly critical of the US's human rights reports. In describing the

¹⁷⁴ The State Council Information Office: The People's Republic of China, 2021, *Full Text: The Report on Human Rights Violations in the United States in 2020*, 1.

¹⁷⁵ The State Council Information Office: The People's Republic of China, 2022, *Full Text: The Report on Human Rights Violations in the United States in 2021*, 6.

¹⁷⁶ Yang Sheng and Zhang Han, "China Lists US Human Rights Abuses Worldwide, Rebuts Washington's Report," 1.

US's 2022 human rights reports, Zhao Lijian, a spokesperson of the Chinese foreign ministry, said American Secretary of State Blinken's remarks "neglect the facts, call white black, and are full of political lies and ideological bias."¹⁷⁷ Lijian goes on to explain that Washington's reports are sympathetic to US allies, but harsh towards its adversaries, which indicates that the reports have nothing to do with human rights and everything to do with hegemonic diplomacy.¹⁷⁸ Yet, by exposing American hypocrisy and demonstrating will to shift global leadership, China positions itself as a suitable alternative.

United States' Response

Since China's critiques have only intensified in the past few years, the US has had limited time to respond. Domestic interest groups have certainly mobilized around the same issues China identifies: race, guns, and incarceration. Black Lives Matter and Stop AAPI Hate work to uplift Black and Asian voices and challenge the United States on its systemic racism; roughly 30 national and hundreds of local groups and have mobilized to advocate for gun reform; dozens of organizations like The Justice Project and The New Jim Crow work to end mass incarceration and exonerate innocent prisoners. These groups have made some strides at the state and local levels, but thus far, have failed to create long-lasting federal legislation. These groups also seem to lack a relationship with China. They rarely leverage Chinese narratives in their advocacy or place their respective issues in a broader international context.

¹⁷⁷ Yang Sheng and Zhang Han, "China Lists US Human Rights Abuses Worldwide, Rebuts Washington's Report," 2.

¹⁷⁸ Yang Sheng and Zhang Han, "China Lists US Human Rights Abuses Worldwide, Rebuts Washington's Report," 1.

Conclusion

In examining the ways the US, the USSR, and the PRC use ideological criticism in their battle for hegemony, the multilevel relationship between norm theory, the second image reversed, and constructivism emerges. Each theory provides an essential piece in understanding the ways states critique each other for some gain and the ways these criticisms affect domestic politics. Understanding the ways these theories interact with each other provides a more holistic view of ideological manipulation between international opponents.

Norms explain how a state diffuses the ideas that shape its identity. It slowly ingrains society with policies, leaders, and rhetoric that mirror an ideal national identity. For example, the US promotes legislation and elects representatives that embody freedom, claiming that freedom is a patriotic value. As this idea circulates domestic society, it is lifted into the international realm, international institutions, and media. Slowly, the globe comes to see America as a beacon of freedom, regardless whether this image remains accurate.

These norms then contribute to a state's reputation. As it promotes norms relating to its identity, its reputation becomes intrinsically intertwined with such ideas. Continuing the example of the United States promoting itself as a beacon of freedom, part of the US's prestige and social influence is tied to its claims that its people are free. Yet, just as a state can build up its reputation through norm diffusion, an opponent can tear it down using the same techniques. All states are sensitive to praise and shame, so by slowly spreading a narrative that counteracts the image a state has carefully constructed, a state can undermine an opponent's reputation. Yet, this reputation has real implications in the international realm, since prestige and social influence contribute to a state's relative power. This undermining of reputation through identity

deconstruction is precisely what the US and USSR attempted to do to each other during the Cold War and what the US and PRC are doing to each other now.

Constructivism provides greater context in understanding the importance of national identity in foreign policy. A state's identity is not a given, nor is it static. States with labels like "leader" or "progressive" must constantly work to affirm these identities, just as states with labels like "oppressive" or "evil" work against these claims. Thus, in understanding the global order, it is important to look at relationships in conjunction with the notion of power, since power is largely vested in reputation and upheld by allies or dismantled by enemies. Following the same logic, challenges to a state's national pride are only as valid as agreed upon by the international community since its reputation is based on perception.

Chipping away at an opponent's identity can be an effective way to diminishing its international persuasion and influence, which are important forms of power. Look at the US, for example, which has consolidated some of its global power in its identity as a global police officer. This identity grants the US authority to publish de-facto country reports on human rights abuses without a challenge from another major power. Yet, China aims to shift this norm by identifying human rights abuses in the US and simultaneously positioning itself as the state willing to challenge a flawed norm. The perception of the US as a global police officer is ingrained in public consciousness, so it is difficult to destroy. When states critique each other on social issues, they aim to shake these societally ingrained perceptions of national identity to undermine an opponent's soft power.

The "second image reversed" theory confirms that states opportunistically meddle in their opponents' domestic affairs. This mechanism can be used to spread unrest amongst the population, thereby undermining national identity, unity, and security. Consider the USSR's

motives in crafting a narrative of the US as inherently unequal because of the racism baked into society. While this propaganda campaign had several intended outcomes, one was invigorating further dissatisfaction amongst Black Americans so they might undermine democracy from the inside. The USSR hoped that spreading messages about the perils of democratic capitalism and the benefits of socialism would create enough unrest that Black Americans might undermine the American system themselves.

Moreover, the “second image reversed” demonstrates how these critiques can be diffused from the international realm into domestic consciousness and thereby affect domestic policy making and advocacy. Because people recognize that the international state system - including allies, enemies, and international institutions - and the international economy impact their daily life, they are adept at recognizing and responding to criticisms. This is especially true when looking at domestic leaders and interest groups. Leaders are not only concerned with domestic issues but also foreign policy, so are acutely aware of the ways international reputation might influence the state. In the Cold War, this meant American leadership shifting policy priorities to address a flaw identified by an enemy. Interest groups that are tapped into the international system can look at critiques and consider ways to further these narratives for political or social change. When advocating for Civil Rights, effective leaders worked within the narratives that the USSR created while positioning themselves as striving towards progress.

Applying constructivist theory to the “second image reversed” can provide a clear picture of the international community’s impact on civil society. As globalization increases, states look to each other for legitimization. Simultaneously, civil societies look to their counterparts across the globe for guidance as they seek social change. For example, groups advocating for gun control in the US look to similar advocacy groups in the UK and New Zealand that effectively

pushed gun control following incidents of gun violence. As civil society looks to its allies, downward international pressures push a state to conform to certain norms agreed upon by the international community.

Viewing the ideological manipulation of social issues through a multilevel model allows a broader understanding of the factors at play. It validates macro-level phenomena like global power struggles and cold wars while showing that micro-level phenomena like domestic politics and civil society play a role in responding to criticism. Moreover, by viewing the macro and micro levels, the greater context remains salient, since individuals, states, and international systems do not function in a vacuum. Therefore, states choose to critique an opponent based on both domestic and international considerations.

Norm theory, constructivism, second image reversed, and multilevel models provide the framework for viewing the back-and-forth between the US and USSR and the US and PRC respectively. First, Americans criticized the Soviets on their oppressive religious policies, intending to create a strong Christian nationalist movement in the US, which happened successfully, and a strong multi religious movement internationally, which happened a little. Within the USSR, however, there was no resonance because of controls enacted by the authoritarian government. In response, the Soviets critiqued the US on racism, building on existing Black affiliation with communism. The USSR intended to mobilize Americans against their state, the community against the US, and invigorate anti-West Soviet nationalism, but the US responded with relatively weak civil rights legislation and propaganda. In doing so, American leaders elevated more palatable Black Christians and cut the legs out from under Black radical groups while simultaneously disproving the Soviets and winning back foreign support.

In the current conflict between the US and China, the PRC criticized the US on guns, which intended to demonstrate US hypocrisy and an inability to lead both within China and, more importantly, internationally. While it invigorated some anti-US sentiment in China, the international community put little pressure on the US to create tangible change. This outward-looking focus and the complex relationship between guns and national identity enabled the US to respond weakly. In response, the US criticized China for its abuses in Xinjiang, intending to mobilize anti-China, pro-trade war sentiments in the US, which it does, and anti-China, pro-human rights sentiments internationally, which it also does. There is little effect in China because of its authoritarian government. Still, some media and VPN leakage may have led China to roll back its most oppressive policies. These criticisms, their audiences, and their respective effects can also be visualized through a chart:

Criticism	Target Audience	Effect
US → USSR Religious Criticism	International, then domestic (US)	<i>Domestic (US):</i> strong Christian nationalism <i>International:</i> multireligious anti-Soviet sentiment <i>Target (USSR):</i> more religious suppression
USSR → US Race Criticism	Target (US), then domestic	<i>Domestic (USSR):</i> anti-West sentiment <i>International:</i> some condemnation of racism <i>Target (US):</i> civil rights legislation
US → PRC Xinjiang Criticism	Mostly international	<i>Domestic (US):</i> strong anti-China, pro-trade war fervor <i>International:</i> some anti-China, pro-human rights unity <i>Target (PRC):</i> slight policy rollback
PRC → US Gun Criticism	Mostly international	<i>Domestic (PRC):</i> maybe some anti-US sentiment <i>International:</i> little resonance <i>Target (US):</i> no resonance

Domestic Benefits

Ideological criticism has three key domestic benefits. First, it can be used to explain a state's rationale behind an otherwise painful or unpopular action. Intra-state relationships are inherently complex given the web of political, economic, social, historical, and institutional dynamics tying states together. These connections become even more complicated when conflict is introduced, especially since conflict between great powers is often rooted in power-grabbing and ideological expansionism. Yet, citizens want to understand why their state is engaged in conflict and states want their citizens to cheer them on in the fight. By invigorating social critiques of its enemy, states can provide an alternative to the often-complex rationale behind conflict. As explained by Stephen Walt:

*Focusing on the internal characteristics of other states is also tempting because it absolves us of responsibility for conflict and allows us to pin the blame on others. If we are on the side of the angels and our own political system is based on sound and just principles, then when trouble arises, it must be because Bad States or Bad Leaders are out there doing Bad Things.*¹⁷⁹

This creates political wiggle room, since citizens are less likely to question otherwise unpopular actions like war or sanctions when it is presented as a human rights abuse committed by an evil adversary.

In the case of the Cold War, the root of the conflict was the supposed incompatibility of socialism and capitalism. Yet, the economic foundation of this issue means it was incomprehensible to many citizens that do not have a solid understanding of economic and financial systems. So, instead of presenting the conflict as an economic one, both sides rooted it as a struggle for the soul of the world - a battle between good and evil - thereby mobilizing broad

¹⁷⁹ Stephen M. Walt, "Everyone Misunderstands the Reason for the U.S.-China Cold War," *Foreign Policy*, 30 June 2020, 3.

support based on morality. Citizens can understand and empathize with religious suppression or racial discrimination, so connecting the conflict to a social issue invigorates the population on moral grounds. A similar rationale presents itself in the current battle between the US and PRC as both countries strategically position themselves to escalate conflict through decoupling: China rids its banks of US foreign reserves and the US cuts ties with Chinese manufacturers and technology producers. The ongoing trade war has painful effects for American and Chinese businesses, like price increases and reduced business partners. Thus, rather than explaining the complex, worrisome rationale behind decoupling, the states can justify their decisions by explaining that it no longer wishes to conduct business with a state that commits human rights abuses. This rationale is easier to understand, easier to explain, and elicits more popular support than justifying short-term financial pains using political or economic reasoning.

Second, ideological criticisms deepen the sense of the opponent as the “other.” This process of “othering” has two main outputs. First, it characterizes the opponent as a force that willingly commits evil, like religious suppression or racial persecution. This invigorates domestic disapproval of the opponent while characterizing the opponent’s leadership as a threat. Second, once leadership has been identified as a threat, citizens living under the oppressive opponent state become victims who need saving. This allows the domestic government to put itself on the side of moral superiority. By “othering” an opponent, a state can deepen preexisting divides between itself and its opponent and create a sense of moral superiority.

This strategy was leveraged by the US, USSR, and PRC. During the Cold War, the US identified religion as a fundamental human right that the Soviets were suppressing while simultaneously invigorating domestic religiosity. The Soviets deepened the moral chasm between the two by criticizing American racism while promoting itself and its socialist system as

inherently equal. Similarly, the PRC leveraged gun violence to promote an image of a violent, irresponsible America as opposed to relatively gun-free China. Meanwhile, the US characterized the PRC as oppressive because of the violence it used to control the Uyghurs and other minorities in Xinjiang, thereby identifying the PRC government as a threat and the Uyghurs as the victims. This process of “othering” deepens divisions by characterizing a given state and its opponent as fundamentally opposed on critical social issues like human rights and human dignity.

Third, if the critiques are done well, they can also shield a state from the opponent’s future ideological attacks. States often propagate narratives of their opponent as evil by using examples of leaders exhibiting oppressive, violent, or unjust policies. So, when an opponent is already classified as amoral, its accusations hold less weight. This dynamic was seen throughout the Cold War, as the USSR sometimes responded to accusations of restricted freedoms by claiming the US was exhibiting more oppressive behavior against racial minorities. A similar dynamic emerges between the US and PRC whereby China intensified its criticism of the US’s human rights violations after the US identified Uyghur abuse in Xinjiang. This weaponization of social issues is meant to deflect criticisms by pointing a finger back at the accuser or by undermining the accuser’s legitimacy.

International Benefits

Looking beyond the ways criticism can invigorate the domestic population, it is also used to rally the international community against an opponent. Norms and constructivism explain the importance of projecting a coherent national identity and the obstacles states can face when that image is challenged. They also demonstrate that a state’s power is not just vested in its military, economic, or political prowess, but in the vision and values it promotes. This soft power is held

in the narratives a state constructs for itself and is reinforced by the perceptions of the international community. Yet, many states see influence, or soft power, as a zero-sum game, whereby an enemy's loss is its gain and vice versa.

While a zero-sum perception of power is often inaccurate, it informs the views of some state leaders and thereby shapes international action. This was especially true during the Cold War when the world was seen as bifurcated with the USSR dominating one sphere and the US dominating the other. As such, the USSR thought the spread of capitalism would harm its long-term interests and the US thought the spread of communism would diminish its international standing. By depicting each other as "evil," each state hoped to shift the international community's perception of the other and turn allegiance towards the "good" state. The two states saw destruction of the opponent's system as the ultimate "win" and sought to outperform the opponent economically, politically, and socially, demonstrating a core principle of zero-sum ideology. China's understanding of power can be similarly framed within a zero-sum lens, as it attempts to increase its international power by demonstrating failures of US leadership, thereby creating space for PRC leadership to emerge. Because the PRC aims to dismantle US power, the US then must hold onto its power - both to protect its own and ensure China does not seize it. Thus, both the US and PRC aim to influence the international community's perception of the other by emphasizing its flaws, its hypocrisy, and questioning its capacity to lead. The perception of power as zero-sum informs states' desire to push down an opponent so it might lose power, freeing it up for the accusatory state to claim as its own.

Zero-sum ideology informs some of the international goals states seek when critiquing each other. First, states know that depicting its opponent as fraudulent, hypocritical, or unethical can undermine its soft power status. Great powers do not operate in a vacuum, but in a complex

international system. Thus, their power must be recognized and upheld by networks of smaller states. Oftentimes, the relationship begins as smaller states look to their larger neighbors for guidance and support. Sometimes, when these states are convinced that a given state is, in fact, a superpower, they become inclined to deepen their alliance with the so-called superpower, since it might help the smaller state gain power or influence by association. Once webs of smaller states become dependent on a superpower, they become more inclined to uphold and defend their respective superpower since they understand their power as a function of their superpower ally. This dynamic can pose a threat to an opponent superpower that wants to ensure its power is not undermined by the network of states dependent on maintaining or expanding the status quo. Yet, since power is largely vested in perception, critiques can dismantle an image a state crafted for itself, thereby challenging the perception other states hold of a given superpower. This can spark dissatisfaction and cause smaller states to become disillusioned by said superpower.

Soft power is essential in geopolitical conflicts between superpowers, since influence largely relies on international perception. In the Cold War, this was evident as the US and USSR leveraged criticism to dissuade the international community from engaging with the opponent, whether through ideological support, political similarities, or trade. With each new country that transitioned to communism, the US's perception of the USSR as an existential threat deepened. Even if the US could not manage to pull every state in the global order to the side of capitalism, it perceived neutral states as less threatening than Soviet-aligned states. By characterizing the Soviet system as oppressive and unjust, it sought to dissuade communist sympathizers from fully aligning with the USSR, thereby reducing Soviet influence. The USSR acted under similar rationale, leveraging US inequality to dissuade unaligned countries from siding with the capitalist powers. This pattern also rings true for the US and the PRC, as various smaller states

are economically and politically intertwined with the two superpowers. Many states that rely on the US seek a maintenance of the status quo with the US as hegemon, given the increased influence they gain by association. On the other hand, some states integrated into China's realm of influence seek an expansion of PRC power, since more power often leads to more influence. Yet, by critiquing each other, the US and PRC challenge the image of the other as a benevolent global leader in an attempt to undermine its networks of support.

Beyond state-level considerations, states aim to dismantle their opponent's web of influence in international institutions. In a globalized world, superpowers seek respect and authority through solidified alliances, treaties, and organizations. Yet, if a state can credibly claim its opponent committed an evil act, most often in the form of human rights abuse, it can create moral hurdles to the perception of increased power. This is mostly because states are less willing to work with a power that is known for human rights abuses or social disruption since it risks implicating itself through association. This rings most true in the case of the US and China, as the United States was integral in attempting to use the UN's governing body to hold China accountable for its crimes in Xinjiang. Though the attempt ultimately failed, it was successful in elevating the issue to international consciousness and binding China's image with a human rights scandal. Thus, by highlighting an opponent's flaws, states raise the stakes in aligning with an otherwise powerful nation.

Ultimately, states leverage systematic social critiques to taint an opponent's image. Ideological attacks typically seek to create destabilizing effects like reducing international reliance and respect. While these attacks may appear as altruistic given the underlying human rights components, they rarely serve the sole purpose of persuading an opponent to halt harmful

or violent actions. However, domestic resonance and subsequent social change can be an unintended consequence of pointed social critiques.

Domestic Resonance

Superpowers typically leverage critiques to antagonize threats to their international standing, but this can inadvertently create room for interest groups or, in extreme cases, the government to address the criticism through tangible action. The domestic resonance that occurred as a result of the USSR critiquing American racial inequality and the lack of resonance in the midst of Soviet religious suppression, American gun violence, and Chinese persecution of Uyghurs shows that certain conditions must exist for social change to occur.

Perhaps the most obvious obstacle to social change is the presence of an autocratic leader and repressive government. An autocracy imposes controls at almost every level of society. Government officials are often unable to speak out against the opinions and policies of the leader, who typically controls the government through promotions, pay raises, and the threat of imprisonment. Civil society is often silenced through fear and disinformation. With the threat of dissent leading to increased suppression, censorship, or imprisonment, there is not much room to promote social change. Simultaneously, restrictions on media can prevent certain information from entering public consciousness, lessening the threat of civil society on the existing government's power. Government control over the media also means national leadership can shape the narrative about domestic issues and international threats.

Autocratic structures prevented domestic resonance in the USSR and the PRC through the multiple levels of top-down control. During the Cold War, Soviet leaders silenced opponents of religious suppression through fear and suppression. They controlled media narratives, ingrained society with secularism, and boasted harsh consequences against churchgoers. Thus,

the government was not receptive to international criticism and domestic citizens were afraid to challenge government authority. In the PRC, somewhat similar trends emerge where the government's tight grip on speech, assembly, and media make it difficult for citizens to advocate for social change without severe punishment. Meanwhile, the government-operated media allows the PRC to control narratives about Xinjiang, creating a barrier between the Chinese media and the accusatory Western media. The Chinese government is not worried about domestic judgement over abuses in Xinjiang, mostly because it does not perceive judgement as a legitimate threat. With authority over civil society, authoritarian governments face less overt domestic pressure to enact social change, especially when calls for change come from an opponent.

In a democracy, there is more room for international critiques to create domestic resonance since the government is structured to listen to the wants and needs of its constituents. While even democratic states often ignore criticism from their opponents, the USSR's critiques of racial inequality motivated American government leaders to push through Civil Rights reform. Given the similarities between the conditions in the Cold War and in the current conflict between the US and PRC, including the perception of an existential threat and the presence of an attentive international community, it seems like similar critiques would spark similar reactions from the American government. Yet, China's indictment of US gun violence has proven unsuccessful in uniting leaders to create reactionary social change. The disparate reactions can be attributed to two key factors: the audience and the root of the criticism.

During the Cold War, the USSR was perceived as an existential threat because it controlled the other half of a bifurcated world. The USSR had a network of supporters and, while the US wanted to control the spread of communism, it understood that communist countries were

committed to Soviet survival. So, while the US hoped its criticisms might gain some traction in the international realm amongst unaligned countries, its primary target when critiquing Soviet religious suppression was domestic citizens, since it wanted to affirm its own morality by proving the USSR's immorality. This created conditions where the US not only identified with democracy and freedom, but also with a heightened moral code. Confirming morality at home meant that attacks against that morality were felt even more deeply, especially when Soviet critiques targeted identity *and* ethics.

As the Soviets projected its criticism to Black Americans to create unrest, the international community to create dissatisfaction, and its own citizens to invigorate Soviet nationalism, the critique gained traction. With the eyes of the world looking to the US - as it was projecting an image of democratic freedom - the criticism became an existential threat. A lack of response would prove that the Soviets were right, thereby affirming their morality. Moreover, a lack of response could shift allied countries away from the West for fear of associating with an amoral power. Because the US government felt the audience's judgement could be the US's downfall, it was forced to respond.

In the conflict between the US and China, American leaders and media are certainly positioning the PRC as an existential threat. Chinese technology and military capability demonstrate strength and China's aggression in the South China Sea, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia reflect expansionist goals. As more countries in Asia come to rely on the PRC economically and infrastructurally, its international power and characterization as a threat will grow. Yet, since China is an *emerging* existential threat (while the USSR was an *existing* existential threat), the US and PRC still assume they have time to sway international opinion. There is no sense that the

world is already bifurcated, so both states are working to pitch themselves to dozens of unaligned countries.

Because the world is not yet split, the PRC still targets the international community with most of its propaganda, hoping to create a narrative of China as a more responsible leader. These outward-looking attacks do not yet pose an existential threat for two main reasons. First, the US is fairly secure in some of its long-standing alliances like NATO and does not have to worry about losing these countries to China. Because of this, the international community puts minimal pressure on the US to create change. Second, the lack of critiques targeted at American civil society creates less sense of existentialism from the domestic population, unlike the Red Scare during the Cold War. The sense that China is an existential threat, but is still vying for its half of the globe, means the US government is less threatened by attacks on its domestic policies and is therefore less inclined to respond through policy changes or top-down social change.

In terms of identity, the Soviets masterfully crafted a critique that both served their goals and hurt a pinnacle of American nationalism. The US used narratives of freedom and equality to boast the superiority of democratic capitalism over Soviet socialism. Moreover, it tied its national identity to freedom and leveraged this value to persuade the international community and domestic citizens that its system was morally superior. Yet, the USSR's claims that the US systematically suppressed and oppressed Black Americans ideologically disarmed American claims of morality. The critique was both true and targeted at a critical flaw in the framework of a supposedly free democracy.

Because the attack so clearly targeted American identity, US leadership had two choices. They could ignore the criticism, thereby ceding valuable influence to the Soviets. Or, they could address the criticism, demonstrating the adaptability of democratic systems and reaffirming that

American identity was rooted in freedom, equality, and morality. Therefore, the saliency of the Soviet critique and the way it targeted national identity forced the US to respond.

On the other hand, the PRC's critique of gun violence targets a critical issue in the US, but not one that attacks national identity in the same way. The US still crafts and projects narratives about national identity, like freedom, liberty, and individualism. Yet, none of these values are challenged by criticizing American gun violence. In fact, guns are seen as constitutionally protected, therefore shaping an aspect of national identity to some, and gun culture feeds into the American notion of individual rights. Moreover, the US does not claim to be a leader in gun policy, and actually stays relatively silent on the issue internationally. The US also still attempts to project itself as a moral leader but, unlike with civil rights reform, American leaders are deeply divided over the morality of gun control. Advocates on both sides claim their position is moral while the other is amoral and, with so much infighting, there is little room for international persuasion. Because the critique does not target identity and is mostly targeted at an international audience rather than the US population, there is little room for change.

Certain additional conditions impacted the lack of domestic resonance with China's gun violence criticisms. The dispersion of media means that the media is partially fixated on China as a threat, but it is also focused on Russia and Iran and North Korea. In the same vein, some media cover gun control as a salient issue, but some promote gun rights and individual freedoms. Not only does the dispersion of media expand Americans' focus internationally, but it deeply divides Americans on domestic issues like gun control. Moreover, gun-focused interest groups are fairly disjointed. The anti-gun lobby is much more fragmented than the pro-gun lobby, which makes it harder to advocate for change. Gun control is also a hugely partisan issue in a partisan-split government, making reform even more difficult.

Broader Implications

The critiques states propagate against their opponents are almost always warranted. While their intent may not be entirely altruistic, these criticisms can bring critical issues to the forefront of the international community or the opponents' domestic population. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union oppressed organized religion and attacked personal faith and the United States absolutely had a race issue that needed to be reckoned. Today, the United States continues to struggle with systemic racism, gun violence, and mass incarceration and China persecutes and indoctrinates racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. All these issues deserve criticism, whether by the international community, the government, or a unified civil society. Yet, because critiques come from an adversary and are typically intended to cause social damage, they are dismissed and rebutted through intensified contempt against the opponent.

The popularity of ideological criticisms between international adversaries shows that identity can be effectively weaponized. States construct their national identities based on seemingly shared moral values, but rarely consider the ways these identities can be turned against them. Thus, states must look inwards and consider if the image they root their hegemony in is consistent with their domestic policies, their citizens' daily experiences, and their international role. If not, states risk their international image and subsequent power.

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