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Memes, narratives and the emergent US–China security dilemma

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Abstract   *All major theoretical approaches that explain the growing rivalry between the United States (US) and China share a common prediction: as tensions develop, the US and China will each construct a master narrative emphasizing zero-sum interests, the efficacy of coercion, and the perceived blamelessness of the Self for the Other's aggressions. However, the concrete process by which these narratives emerge has been neither explicitly theorized nor measured in practice. We theorize that in the digital media age, narratives emerge when 'memes'—discrete, widely circulated images/ descriptions of the Self or Other—are connected into coherent stories that eventually coalesce into a master narrative of rivalry. We therefore argue that tracking the speed and spread of memes provides a useful indicator of security dilemma dynamics. To this end, we note that in the United States the US–China rivalry is associated with a prominent meme that describes China as 'challenging the international rules-based order' (RBO). We use qualitative and quantitative text analysis, including network and plagiarism analysis, to track the spread of this meme. We provide preliminary evidence that the RBO meme and the 'revisionist China' narrative may be crowding out other, less malign narratives about China's rise.*

Introduction

Within recent years, Sino-American relations have become more conflictual across a number of domains: trade disputes are intensifying; disputes over the purpose and effect of Chinese and United States (US) military activities in the South China Sea have sharpened; both sides have signalled a greater determination to challenge the other side's position on the Taiwan issue; both sides appear to believe that ideological competition, absent since the two sides began anti-Soviet cooperation in the 1970s, is now a part of the competitive relationship. Both sides claim that the other side is interfering in its internal affairs, and indeed on both sides one increasingly hears the claim that the Other poses an existential threat to the Self.

Despite differences in their assumptions and causal arguments, all major theoretical approaches applied to these developments share a common prediction: as conflict continues, the US and China will develop images of the other that stress zero-sum interests, the efficacy of coercion in resolving disputes, and the perceived blamelessness of one side for the aggressive behaviour of the other. These three clusters of images constitute the shared central paradigm of inter-state rivalry across explanations based on power transitions (Allison 2017), the incompatibilities of political systems (Friedberg 2011), competition

for hegemony (Mearsheimer 2014), security dilemmas (Steinberg and O'Hanlon 2014), and differences in national worldviews (Wu 2000), among other things.

The concrete process by which this central paradigm and its associated images emerge from narratives and stories about Self and Other, however, has been heretofore undertheorized. While all these approaches predict greater rivalry and conflict, they tend to be vague about the form and pace by which conflict emerges. We propose that theorizing the deterioration in the US–China relationship needs to take into account the role of social and online news media, where the construction of images of Self and Other is taking place on myriad digital platforms. The speed and intensity of emerging inter-state rivalries may be influenced by the rapid creation and spread of memes and their associated narratives on these platforms.

To make this conjecture a little more concrete, we have recently seen the emergence of a master narrative in the US that characterizes China as a revisionist power. This characterization was explicitly embedded in the US National Security Strategy (NSS) and National Defense Strategy in late 2017 and early 2018 respectively, and since then has been widely accepted and reproduced in US media, government, and think tank discourse about China. The master narrative is constituted in part by a sub-narrative that China is increasingly challenging the US-dominated liberal international order. This sub-narrative has circulated within US government, media, and think tank worlds since 2016. This sub-narrative, in turn, has been constituted by a number of memes, one in particular being especially prominent, namely the notion that there is a 'rules-based order' (RBO) which China threatens. This meme first appeared in US policy discourse in 2011. It spread rapidly from there into think tank and media discourse, and later became a building block in the master narrative about China as a revisionist power.

The purpose of this article is to track the emergence of the RBO meme and to see whether it helps constitute the revisionist power narrative within the US about China's rise. What is the content of this meme? With what kinds of policy preferences has it become associated? How did this meme spread and how pervasive is it? If, or as, it spread, did it legitimize certain understandings of the US–China relationship while delegitimizing others? These questions constitute the core of this article. By exploring the genealogy of the RBO meme, we develop a concrete approach to studying the form and pace of a key undertheorized step that is common to many international relations (IR) theories that apply to the US–China relationship—namely, the emergence and consolidation of each side's views of the other as an aggressor that must be dealt with via the exercise of coercion.

Why study the RBO meme? In the course of following another popular meme about China which emerged in 2010 —namely, the casting of China as newly 'assertive'—we noticed, quite inductively, that the RBO term seemed to be appearing frequently in commentary about the implications of China's rise. As we show below, our conjecture was correct: the RBO meme is almost uniquely tied to analyses of China, in contrast to other synonyms for the RBO such as the 'liberal international order' or the 'liberal order' which are less commonly used in reference to China.

In this article, we hope to make three contributions: one empirical, one theoretical, and one methodological. Empirically, we construct a genealogy of the RBO meme in recent US discourse about China's challenge to US interests and values. We track the meme from 'ground zero' in US policy discourse and its spread into the media and pundit worlds. We show how the content of the RBO meme has changed over time and how it now helps constitute a larger narrative of China as a revisionist state challenging a dominant liberal international order that the US claims to have built over the last 70 years. One cannot posit the existence of a revisionist state without first positing the existence of an order that said state wants to revise.

To better understand the policy relevance of the RBO meme, we make a theoretical argument: in the social and online media era, memes are components of narratives. Much of the theorizing about narratives has tended to focus on the story arc of a complete narrative. But in the digital media age, we propose, the story arc itself is composed of short discrete items (text and/or images) that users of the meme connect to make a coherent story (or sub-narrative). Mutually consistent combinations of these sub-narratives help create a master narrative. As we will argue, the RBO meme is connected to a story-line—China challenges the RBO—which in turn is connected to a master narrative that, because China challenges the RBO, China is therefore a revisionist state, and as a revisionist state it is a major strategic rival of the US. The meme, the sub-narrative, and the master narrative need not emerge simultaneously. They may be sequential—a meme may 'find' a sub-narrative that then enables a master narrative.

The master narrative of a revisionist China is relatively new[1] and thus far only embodied in two recent (though important) US government documents. We are therefore not yet able to fully answer a critical question—what does the RBO meme actually do to levels of conflict in the US–China relationship? We conclude with several hypotheses and their implications, noting that of particular interest is whether the revisionist China narrative will begin to crowd out more benign narratives. However, at this stage our research focuses mainly on what memes do in the production of narratives.[2]

Methodologically, we argue that tracking the speed and spread of benign memes about the Self and malign memes about the Other within and across two or more states may provide a useful indicator of security dilemma and

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[1] To be sure, early in the post-Cold-War period, some commentary on China's foreign policy noted or implied revisionist characteristics. But this narrative was not so much about China challenging the 'international order' as it was about China being outside this order. Bringing China inside the 'order' was a goal of the engagement strategy of the Clinton and Bush administrations. But even this narrative of China being outside the order was challenged in 2005 by the Bush administration in a major foreign policy speech by Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick. He claimed that China was already a stakeholder in this order, but that it needed to be more proactive in supporting it—China needed to be a 'responsible stakeholder'. Thus, the recent official declaration that China is a revisionist state challenging the liberal order is a relatively new master narrative.

[2] This paper is part of a larger project that will next examine similar processes in China, focused mainly on the meme of the US 'containing' or 'blocking' the rise of Chinese power. By focusing on the US side in this article we do not mean to imply that the role of social media in security dilemma dynamics is solely a US phenomenon.

rivalry dynamics.[3] In particular, a focus on the emergence, speed, and spread of malign memes about the Other could also be a useful way of observing the crowding out of alternative, more benign memes (and thus narratives) as a security dilemma progresses. Specifically, one would look for a tipping point in a security dilemma and its associated narratives from uncertainty about the intentions of the Other (and thus the prudence of preparing for worst case possibilities) to certainty about the malign intentions of the Other (and thus the necessity of coercion to deal with the worst case reality). Thus, meme tracking could be a valid and reliable indicator of the intensification of insecurity spirals.

Our article is organized as follows. In the first section we theorize about how memes relate to the construction of narratives in an era of social media. We suggest that memes are the constitutive parts of narratives—the discrete, observable but naturalized items that provide the building blocks of a narrative arc. In the second section we look at the evolution and content of the RBO meme and in particular its relationship to the emergence of the 'revisionist China' master narrative in US policy discourse. We rely mainly on quantitative text analysis, including network and plagiarism analysis, to track the development and spread of the RBO meme, and draw on metaphor analysis to understand the content of the meme and its related sub-narratives. Finally, we provide preliminary evidence for how the RBO meme and the 'revisionist China' master narrative appear to be crowding out other, less malign narratives about China's rise.

Memes and narratives in the era of social media

There is no shortage of definitions of 'memes'. Blackmore refers to 'memes' as 'stories, songs, habits, skills, inventions and ways of doing things that we copy from person to person by imitation' (Blackmore 2000, 65). Seiffert-Brockmann, Diehl and Dobusch simply define memes as 'short bits of information that are easily reproduced and shared by large audiences' (Seiffert-Brockmann et al 2018, 2863).

We use Shifman's definition of 'memes' as 'a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance' that were 'created with awareness of each other' and 'were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users' (Shifman 2014, 7–8). This definition fits

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[3] We posit that the US–China relationships can be essentially characterized as a security dilemma. Detailed analysis of Chinese foreign policy across a range of domains (or orders), for example, suggest a complicated mix of basic support for norms and institutions in some domains or orders (general support for reducing trade and investment barriers, support for institutions based on sovereignty and territorial integrity such as the United Nations, support for major nonproliferation and arms control agreements and reducing greenhouse gas emissions) with opposition or ambivalence towards others (the protection of civil and political human rights, responsibility to protect, elements of maritime law). The US approach to different domains or orders is similarly complicated. Neither case can be reduced to a facile binary of revisionist versus status quo state (for more on revisionism and the status quo, see Turner and Nymalm [2019] and Gries and Jing [2019]). That both sides perceive the other as challenging their core or vital interests is separate from whether they are challenging an international order. On the theoretical and empirical incoherence of the idea of a cross-domain Chinese challenge to a single liberal order, see Foot and Walter (2011), Zhang (2016), Katzenstein (2018), Feigenbaum (2018), Johnston (2019) and Mazarr et al (2018).

our focus on tracking a discrete, identical substructure repeated through the internet and social media across time and space—'rules-based order'—rather than tracking a latent theme that is inferred across texts.[4]

As far as we are aware, there has not been much work on the relationship between memes and narratives, this despite similar elements in them (taken-for-grantedness and transmission via imitation). The introduction to this special issue borrows from Hinchman and Hinchman's (2001, xvi) definition of 'narratives' as 'discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way … and thus offer insights about the world and/or people's experiences of it' (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019). Or, as articulated by Krebs, narratives 'establish the common-sense givens of a debate, set the boundaries of the legitimate, limit what political actors inside and outside the halls of power can publicly justify, and resist efforts to remake the landscape of legitimation' (Krebs 2015, 3). Indeed, Krebs argues, narratives can be understood as storytelling, having scenes, characters, sequences, or story arcs. In national security affairs, threat assessments are often expressed as narratives (Krebs 2015, 16).

One might think of memes as among the constituent parts of narratives. Krebs hints at this possibility. He refers to the Nazi concept of 'living space' and the Iranian revolutionaries' concept of the US as 'Great Satan', among others, as 'shorthand expressions' that 'encapsulate rich narratives' (Krebs 2015, 6–7). We would call these 'shorthand expressions' memes. They are not narratives in and of themselves because no distinct storyline is embodied in a meme. By itself—that is, outside the social context in which it is given meaning—a meme is merely an image of a discrete entity. Thus, as we explore below, a common meme linked to Chinese foreign policy of late is the RBO. The political meaning of this meme comes from its connection to metaphors about cheating in domains where rules are assumed to be universal and clear. Thus, the RBO meme is an element in a broader narrative about China's dissatisfaction with, and challenge to, international rules and norms that are assumed to regulate inter-state relations.

The RBO meme may be a key component in the eventual constitution of a master narrative that underscores a fundamental illegitimacy of Chinese foreign policy thought and behaviour, particularly in US policy discourse. In other words, it may help constitute—along with other memes and narratives—a traditional folk realist master narrative about world politics in which China is a revisionist state in a world of status quo and revisionist actors competing for power (Kertzer and McGraw 2012, Tingley 2017).[5] Figure 1 reflects our conjecture: memes constitute sub-narratives, and sub-narratives constitute master narratives. Memes are the elements that ensure narratives propagate and spread.

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[4] There are, of course, commonalities between Shifman's definition and that of others. An important one is that memes are copied and imitated, often with minimal cognition (Seiffert-Brockmann et al 2018). Imitation can, of course, be rationally motivated. Mimicking what others do is a useful starting point for novices in a social situation to figure out what is socially acceptable and what is utility maximizing. But often imitation and transmission of memes can occur without much self-reflection.

[5] Or perhaps a folk 'power transition' argument about how dissatisfied states invariably challenge the dominant rule-maker.
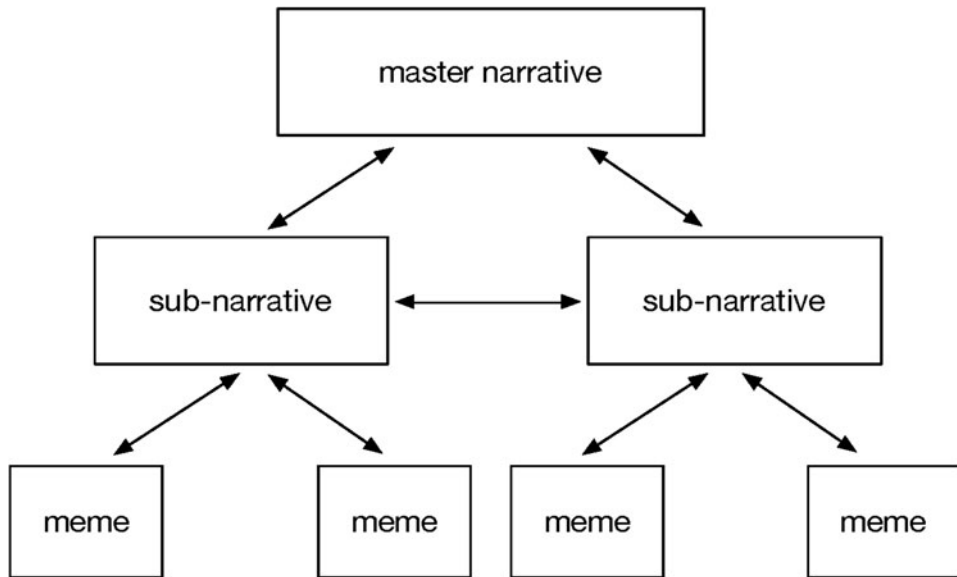
Figure 1. Memes, sub-narratives and master narratives (arrows reflect constitutive relationships).

We do not posit that narratives are only constituted by memes. Other elements might include historical events or even geographic places that are part of a historicized story that is revealed when people unpack their narratives. However, even these events and places may become memes insofar as over time they become shorthand keywords, are abstracted away from complicated events, come to embody some sort of taken-for-granted claim, and are copied and repeated across multiple platforms.

The emergence of Web 2.0 (social media) dramatically increased the speed and breadth with which memes spread in the policy world. Research in the field of American politics suggests that with Web 2.0 certain topics—and to some degree the content of political discourse—can emerge rapidly (for example, go viral) and come to dominate public discussion in a matter of days. One early study by Wallsten (2007) found, for instance, that on some American public policy issues, the blogosphere and the traditional media interacted in setting the agenda for each other's coverage, the peak effect occurring within four days. The media, too, increasingly refer to blogs as source material. The result is 'a news source cycle, in which news content can be passed back and forth from media to media' (Messner and DiStaso 2008, 447). Additional research suggests that the thematic agendas for political campaigns and politicians themselves are increasingly influenced by blogosphere–media interaction (Wallsten 2009, 43–44; Walgrave et al 2008).

Moreover, other research in American politics suggests that, contrary to the initial hopes for an online democratic habitus, the targeting capacity of social media enables it to be very effective in developing horizontal in-group identities within societies, which accentuates perceptions of identity difference across groups (Warren 2015). In addition, social media can act as a biased filter, limiting the spread of some kinds of memes while promoting others (Wallsten 2011; Himelboim 2011). Much of the research suggests that social media tend

to contribute to political polarization as people are drawn to sites that confirm and reinforce their political and ideological biases (Lelkes et al 2017). Some work suggests that language on social media that portrays 'nonviolent politics' as battlegrounds or domains of metaphorical violence can interact with aggressive personality types to produce partisan polarization online (Kalmoe et al 2017).[6] Del Vicario et al (2016) note that in politics 'conspiracy theories simplify causation, reduce the complexity of reality, and are formulated in a way that is able to tolerate a certain level of uncertainty'. Social media appear to be particularly inefficient in clarifying the empirical validity of conspiracy theories and partisan claims (Meadows 2011; 2014). All of these characteristics of social media reinforce homogeneous clustering online, that is, echo chambers.

As more and more people adopt a particular meme, there are also less social and psychological incentives to counter it. In the policy process, challenging the dominant meme may lead to marginalization, whereas endorsing or using the meme bestows authoritativeness and a licence to comment. And, in the policy world that attempts to influence policy processes (for example, media and think tanks), pressure to conform in order to participate may be reinforced by the time-urgent competition to have an impact as measured, for instance, by blog hits or retweets. Blog and Twitter authors have less time and incentive to investigate the empirical validity of certain memes. The effect, contrary to the claims of some of the boosters of Web 2.0, may be to narrow rather than expand the range of ideas in policy debates and increase the error rate of empirical claims. In addition, time constraints, confirmation bias and motivated reasoning may have particularly powerful effects in social media (Del Vicario et al 2016; Nyhan and Reifler 2010), placing severe limits on the complexity of ideas and information that can be quickly transmitted within think tank and pundit worlds. In short, policy echo chambers can be quickly created by a relatively small number of influential nodes in a social media network.

Thus, for IR scholarship, a critical question is whether the polarization and echo chamber effects posited by the emerging literature on social media can also be found in the creation and expression of inter-state partisanship (for example, nationalism and adversarial images of other countries). Do social media help narrow interpretations of the Other's intentions and behaviour and lead to more frequent and consequential empirical errors in assessing these factors? These effects are at the heart of security dilemma dynamics in international politics. In security dilemmas, certain descriptions and characterizations of the nature and behaviour of Self and Other come to dominate public policy discourse in ways that are more or less independent of the intentional behaviour of the Other. Attribution errors and memes about Self and Other are mutually constitutive.

Below we track the transmission of the RBO meme and suggest a number of narratives that it might help constitute. We focus on the RBO for a couple of reasons. First, the RBO is a very common meme in the narrative about China's relationship to the so-called US-dominated liberal international order. In recent years we have seen in the US media, think tank and policy worlds a dramatic increase in the link between the RBO and China (Figure 2). This

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[6] These findings might extend to the effects of violent or conflictual memes on nationally based partisanship, for example, nationalism, and thus on international polarization.

meme is not being used to characterize any and all states whose behaviour the US has opposed. For example, China's diplomacy is more likely to be described as challenging the RBO than Russian diplomacy is (Figure 3).

Moreover, China is more likely to be connected to the RBO meme than to synonym memes such as 'liberal international order' or 'liberal order'. As Figure 4 shows, the number of articles in Factiva that contain both 'rules based order AND China' is overwhelmingly larger than the number that contain 'rules based order' but not 'China'. Figures 5–7 show the relative frequency of articles using 'liberal order', 'liberal international order' and 'international order' with 'China' and 'without China'. As seems evident, the connection between these memes and China is not as strong.

In short, from its first appearance in US government statements in 2010, the RBO meme has been mostly identified with China. It seems plausible to argue, then, that this particular meme has become one of the 'common-sense givens' used to understand the purposes and effects of China as a country. The empirical validity of a China that is challenging a single and identifiable liberal RBO is taken for granted or considered self-evident (or, to be more precise, the discourse has uncritically over-generalized from a more limited number of examples of coercive diplomacy). Thus, as we note below, this meme may constrain the nature of the discourse and, by some indications, has also affected internal policy debates.

Second, unlike, say, the 'newly assertive' China meme, the RBO meme connotes a concrete vision of how international relations allegedly
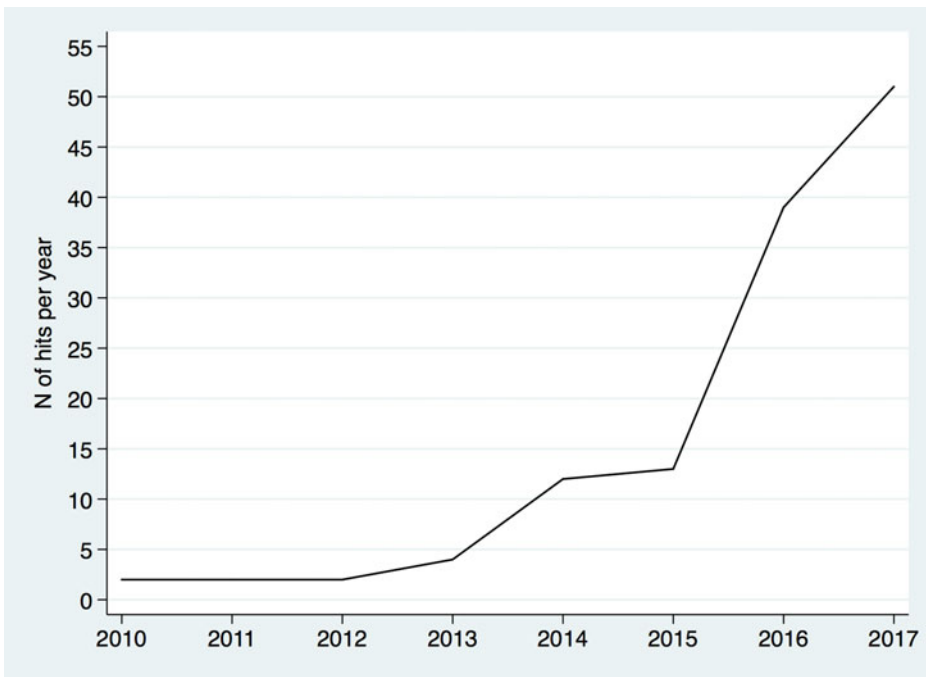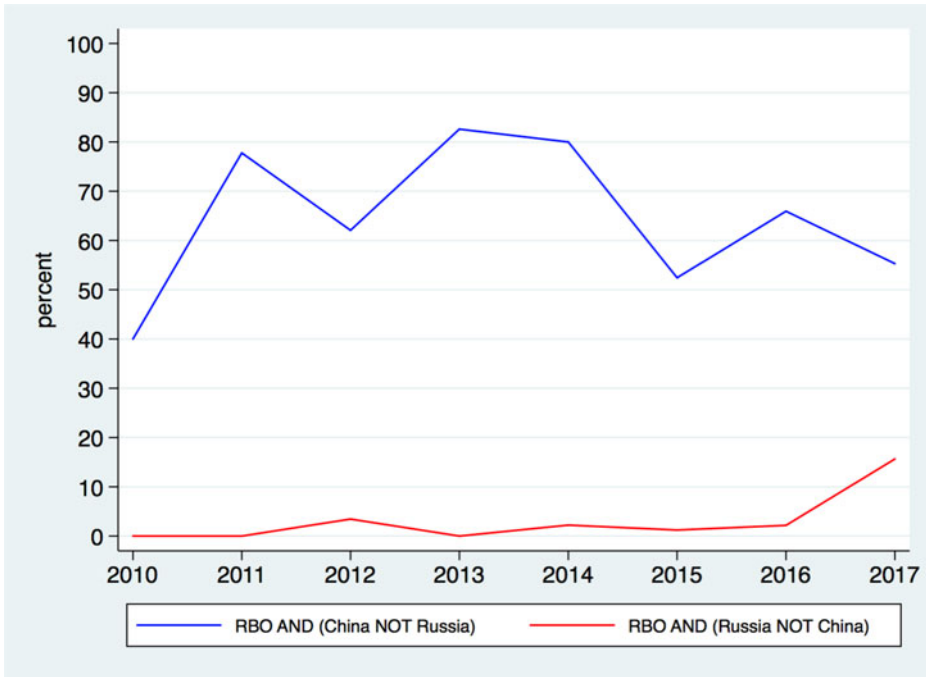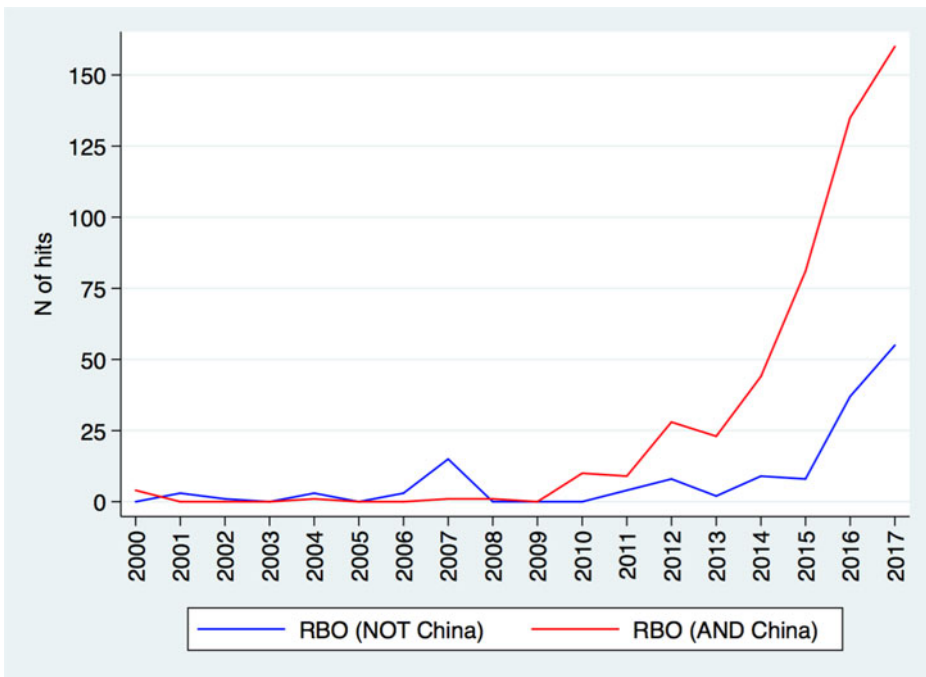

Figure 2. Yearly *N* of articles (US sources) that refer to 'China' and 'rules-based order' within ten words of each other. *Source*: Factiva.

Figure 3. Percentage of hits that include 'rules-based order' (RBO) AND 'China' (NOT 'Russia') and that include 'RBO' AND 'Russia' (NOT 'China'). *Source*: Factiva.
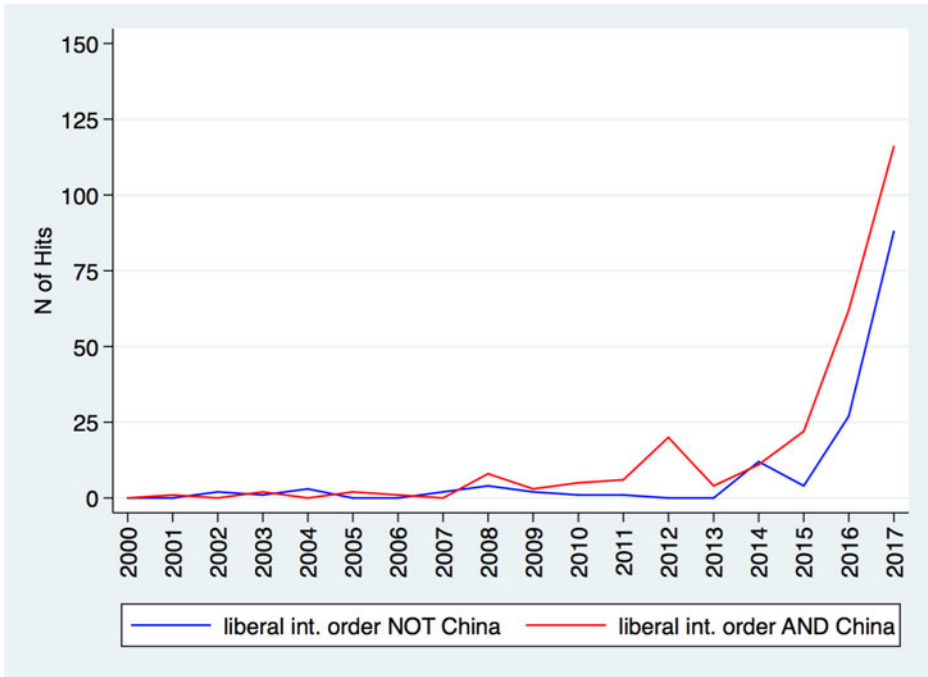

Figure 4. Rules-based order.

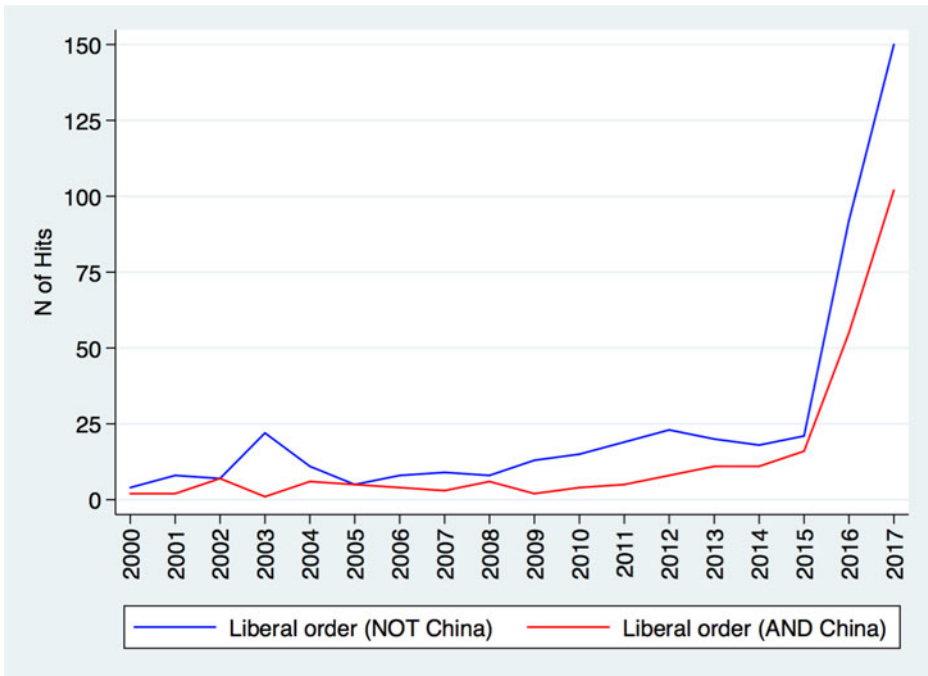**Figure 5.** Liberal international order.
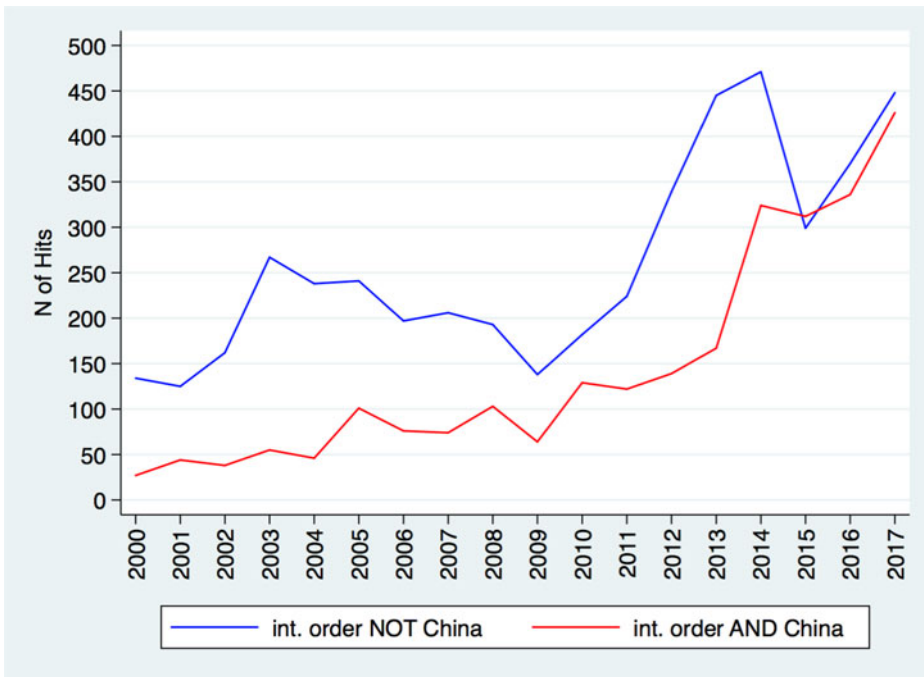

Figure 6. Liberal order.

Figure 7. International order.

work.[7] Given the concreteness of the RBO meme, people are more likely to agree on its meaning and its implications for understanding Chinese foreign policy than memes such as 'newly assertive'. Meme tracking, as labour intensive as it is (see below), may nonetheless be an efficient methodology for analysing the presence and relative influence of narratives. The advantage here is that, unlike with narratives, ground zero (for example, first use by discrete actors) for memes in social media and online media is relatively easy to find. One can also track which nodes in a social media network are particularly important to the spread of the memes and thus in the construction of the narrative. Thus, as discrete units of text/images, memes can be observed when they appear and spread or disappear. Narratives are collections of memes (or meme complexes) but the boundaries of the narrative can be somewhat vaguer, and the point at which multiple memes coalesce into a narrative can be harder to discern (Hagström et al 2017, 2).

The origins and spread of the RBO meme

Where did the RBO meme originate? What does it mean to those who use it? Ground zero for the RBO meme in US–China policy discourse appears to be

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[7] The 'assertive' meme was not so much about China's challenge to the so-called liberal order as much as it was a critique of in-your-face behaviour that challenged specific US policies. Interestingly, according to Factiva searches, there are very few instances where 'China', 'assertive' and 'rules-based order' all appear in the same text relative to instances where either 'assertive' or 'rules-based order' appears (See Johnston 2013 and Jerdén 2014).

within the Australian government.[8] In November 2010, Australian Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd employed 'RBO' in a meeting with US Secretary of State Clinton.[9] After the meeting they issued the Melbourne Statement, which laid out shared US–Australian interests on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of US–Australian diplomatic relations. That statement included a reference to the RBO, and it appears to be the first use of the term by a senior US government official (Clinton 2010). The statement was mainly aspirational and called for 'The enhancement of an international rules-based order, both within our region and for the world' (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [DFAT] 2010).

American officials began to use the term thereafter. Clinton next used it in November 2011 at the APEC meetings in Hawaii. In the aspirational spirit of the Melbourne Statement, she described the RBO as a work in progress: 'we have to create a rules-based order, one that is open, free, transparent, and fair … A rules-based order will also be critical to meeting APEC's [Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation] goal of eventually creating a free trade area of the Asia Pacific' (US Department of State 2011). There was some inconsistency in her characterization of the RBO. In July 2012, she suggested that it had existed for some time: 'For decades, the United States has promoted a rules-based order in the Asia–Pacific. We remain firmly committed to the security of the region and to the principles upon which its remarkable progress has been built' (US Department of State 2012). But later in the year she referred to it again in somewhat aspirational terms. In reference to the US pivot to Asia she noted, 'None of this is about containment. It's all aimed at advancing a rules-based order in the Asia–Pacific [region] that will drive peace and prosperity for decades to come' (Clinton 2012).[10]

Others in the Obama administration tended to claim the RBO already existed. In 2012, US Secretary of Defense Panetta commented at the Shangri-La Dialogue that 'China also has a critical role to play in advancing security and prosperity by respecting the rules-based order that has served the region for six decades' (Panetta 2012).

By 2013, members of Congress were also referring to a decades-old RBO. Around this time, China was redefined by some outside the administration as proactively 'challenging' the RBO. In July 2013, Congressman Randy Forbes noted in reference to including Chinese nuclear forces in any future arms control processes, 'we cannot give them a pass—not only is China continuing to modernize and expand its nuclear forces, but it also poses the most direct challenge to the global rules-based order' (Forbes 2013). Senator John McCain (2016) picked up the meme in April 2016, in a *Financial Times* op-ed and in a major speech in Singapore in June. He cast the issue in binary terms—one was either for an RBO or one was against it. China appeared to be against it. By 2017, McCain was certain China was challenging the RBO (McCain 2017).

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[8] The phrase was in use by in the late 1990s, though often in reference to trade and the global economy (see Hart 2003; Elek 2004).

[9] Rudd's first use of the term appears to have been in 2004 when he was the Labour Party's shadow foreign minister (see Boey 2004).

[10] For other official references to the RBO as aspirational see Campbell (2012) and Clinton (2014).

China's challenge to the RBO is now the accepted characterization endorsed by US Pacific Command (Harris 2016) and the US State Department (Tillerson 2017) and is embodied in the NSS of 2017 and National Defense Strategy of 2018.[11]

In the US media and think tanks worlds the RBO meme also spread rapidly after it was introduced in 2010. Among the earliest adopters were analysts with the American Enterprise Institute in early 2012, followed by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and the Atlantic Council in 2013.

While it might appear a daunting task to determine the exact source that influenced a particular journalist or pundit to adopt the RBO meme, contemporary practices in the production of online media nonetheless offer a solution. Namely, it is relatively commonplace for online news media articles to borrow sentences and/or entire paragraphs verbatim (or with minor edits) from other news articles. In cases where two articles contain the RBO meme and also share such verbatim passages, we have strong evidence that the first to press of the two articles was the specific source that influenced the later article to adopt the meme.

Therefore, to show how the RBO meme spread, we used a database of nearly four million articles on the web that contain the word 'China' and determined the subset that contain the RBO meme.[12] We then applied a plagiarism detection algorithm to this subset to find all instances where pairs of articles share any verbatim or near-verbatim content. In fact, roughly half of the articles that contain the RBO meme also contain between five and 90 per cent plagiarized material, and many contain such material from multiple prior sources. The appendix plots the network of pairwise copying between articles that contain the RBO meme. We use this network to determine the specific sources and dynamics that were most important to this meme's rapid spread.

In particular, we note that the plagiarism network is composed of 83 distinct connected components (clusters) of articles, such that articles in each cluster share verbatim content only with others articles in their cluster. We analysed each cluster to determine both the original (seminal) article and its respective journal/website as well as its count of non-seminal (derivative/plagiarizing) articles. We then aggregated these counts by publication/website to determine the total number of articles that each publication/website influenced

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[11] This evolution of the content of the RBO underscores that memes do not necessarily take on an unchanging meaning from the outset.

[12] Our database contains the full text and raw html of 3.85 million unique articles on the web that contain the word 'China', which constitutes all articles containing this word that were crawled before July 2016 by an industrial crawler performing a multi-year exhaustive crawl of the web (similar to Google's indexing). By subsetting articles based on whether or not they contain this word, we hoped to avoid the fraught process of determining whether a source or an article constitutes foreign policy news and instead focus on all possible sources of web-based meme transmission. While the data span back to the early days of the internet, more recent publication dates appear with higher frequency in the dataset, which corresponds both to the fact that earlier articles are more likely to have been taken down and also to the fact that the daily volume of online articles in general and the volume of articles on China in particular have both increased markedly in the last few years. For the RBO analysis, given the relative infrequency of the term in this four-million-item dataset, we relied on almost 900 texts that contained 'RBO' and 'China' in the same sentence(s) appearing between 2010 and mid 2016.
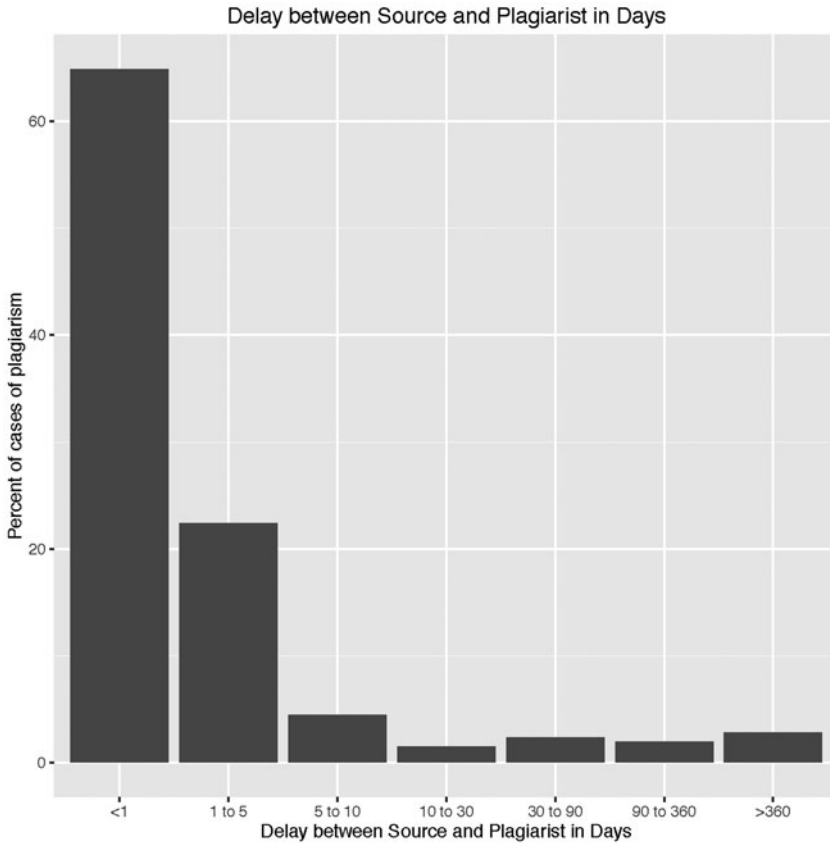
Figure 8. Seminal sources of plagiarized articles that contain 'RBO and China' meme.

to adopt the RBO meme. Figure 8 shows these aggregated values. The relative height of each bar in the figure can be read as a measure of the relative influence of the respective publication in spreading the RBO meme to subsequent articles. In fact, however, a look at the articles plagiarized from these top sources shows that they originally came from the Associated Press (AP). In other words, the AP news agency is an important source for the spread of the RBO meme, with local news outlets and aggregators (such as mail.com) being the main conduits for AP articles. One of the more widely reproduced AP articles, for example, is entitled 'Strongmen to predominate at Obama's SE Asia summit'. It was plagiarized in part at least 47 times (*not* counting additional cases where it was reposted in full) and distributed by a wide variety of local media outlets, including everything from the *Boston Herald* to SFGate.com to timesunion.com to yahoo.com to tampabay.com to the *Durango Herald* to the *Epoch Times* and to the *Killeen TX Daily News*.

As one would expect in an era of social media, the average time between the posting of the original source and the plagiarized version appears to be very short. Figure 9 shows that the overwhelming majority of plagiarism (or spread) of the meme occurred within less than a day of the appearance of the original text.

In short, in the space of about five to six years, the RBO meme moved from being non-existent to being an aspiration for all countries (in, but not exclusive to, the Asia–Pacific region) to being an established entity that was six or seven decades old and finally to being an established entity that China was

Delay between Source and Plagiarist in Days

Figure 9. Delay between source and plagiarist (days).

challenging. It spread quickly within the media, government and pundit worlds, often through copying. This is not the plagiarism of someone who deliberately copies a better argument. Rather, it is the less deliberative process of passing along the most common phrases and terms because they are assumed to be correct, or, perhaps just as often, because they are not questioned as the correct way of characterizing a phenomenon.[13]

Memes do not always float freely, of course. China's rapid development of military bases on land features in the South China Sea both fed and allegedly confirmed the validity of the meme. But base building came well after the emergence of the meme, and the meme is increasingly connected to descriptions of China's global, not just regional, behaviour.

Memes and metaphors: the content and meaning of RBO

What is the content of the RBO meme? And what is the 'master narrative' that this meme and its related sub-narratives have helped create? Our analysis of

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[13] In some cases, the short time available to produce online output may play a role as well.

the meaning of the RBO comes from quantitative and qualitative reading of media, think tank, and elite discourse about Chinese foreign policy, and from informal discussions with former senior policy and intelligence elites, some of whom played central roles in US–China policymaking. For the analysis of documents, speeches, and elite views, in addition to close readings of texts, we also used metaphor analysis as a tool to explore possible meaning(s) of RBO and what challenging the RBO entails. Metaphors 'play a central role … in abstract thought … [O]ur most fundamental ideas—not just time, but events, causation, morality, the self, and so on—were structured by elaborate systems of conceptual metaphor' (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 245, 249).[14] We would argue that often memes trigger metaphorical thinking. Metaphors can be used in texts to link a meme to a narrative, and will likely be drawn from a repertoire already available to the user of the meme.

What sub-narratives, then, may the meme of challenging RBO help constitute? One such sub-narrative may be associated with metaphors about the morality of sports and games. The central element of moral behaviour (rules-based) in sports is fair play. This means eschewing cheating, avoiding unnecessary hurt (playing humanely according to rules of fair play) and cheering for high-quality play regardless whose side is demonstrating it (d'Arripe-Longueville et al 2010; Renson 2009; Loland 2001). Challenging this order, then, implies the actor is playing unfairly, cheating, or perhaps playing in a cunning fashion (if able to get away with it), and even deliberately trying to harm members of the other team.

Fair play is an element in American exceptionalism: it is at once a universal value and also a trait many Americans believe is particularly characteristic of the US. As one op-ed in the *Baltimore Sun* elaborated in 2011, '[F]ree trade is great stuff—but those words have a very different meaning in China, India and even in most of Europe. The world is not going to wholly acclimate itself to American notions of fair play without more tangible demonstrations of American resolve' (Morici 2011). The influential Republican politician and consultant Newt Gingrich has identified the 'Rule of Law' and its component 'Honoring Principles of Fair Play and Justice' as central to American exceptionalism (Gingrich 2011). Thus, for some, challenging an RBO means challenging the American exceptionalist trait of fair play.

Perhaps as a consequence, 'cunning' and its synonyms have been used by Americans when stereotyping Chinese. In the midst of a scare about possible People's Republic of China (PRC) access to US nuclear weapons designs through penetration of the US nuclear labs in the late 1990s, Senator Richard Shelby remarked on NBC in March 1999, 'We've got to remember the Chinese are everywhere, as far as our weapons systems, not only in our labs that make our nuclear weapons in development, also in the technology to deliver them.

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[14] For a critique of metaphor analysis for relying too heavily on linguistic analysis and not enough on behavioural response data (how do people actually deploy and react to the use of metaphor?), see Steen (2011) and Steen et al (2014). We are sensitive to this critique. Often the ordinary use of certain terms does not mean that these terms are read the way cognitive linguistic analysts might read them. But we present here some metaphors that elite officials in the US have used in thinking about certain memes in US–China relations.

We've seen some of that. They're real, they're here, and probably in some ways, very crafty people' (Shelby 1999). Trump has blamed the US trade deficit on the intelligence and 'cunning' of the Chinese (Nyhan 2015).[15] Senator Marco Rubio has referred to Chinese 'trickery' in the transfer of dual-use technology to China.[16]

Another related sub-narrative refers to breaking the law—that is, the challenger to the RBO is violating law. As such the violator has to be disciplined, constrained, or taught a lesson. To some lawyers, RBO means impartiality, equality of treatment, and freedom from arbitrariness (Höffe 2007, 67). Thus, to oppose or challenge the RBO means to support partiality and preferential (self-serving) treatment and to impose arbitrary solutions to disputes. Arbitrary solutions undermine the principle of *pacta sunt servanda*. This leads to a world that is unpredictable and chaotic. At the extreme, the challenger is an outlaw.

Another sub-narrative is primarily normative. Some uses of 'RBO' within the US stress that world order 'implies accord on basic principles and standards of (and some self-restraint in) state conduct. Indeed, the very concept suggests the existence not just of a "system" but of a "society" of states' (Patrick 2016, 7). That is, supporters of order constitute an in-group or community, bound together by shared norms (self-restraint). Challenging order therefore means displaying the traits of an out-group, demonstrating one's 'Otherness'. It is perhaps no coincidence that 'RBO' is used by people who also believe there is such a thing as the 'international community'. Challengers to the RBO would be, first and foremost, threatening the coherence of the community and its traditions, that is, its identity.

To say that a single RBO exists is also to close off the possibility that order and community are illusionary or highly factionalized, that there are contradictions within the order or that there are multiple orders. To believe in the existence of an international order is to rule out the possibility that it is actually inherently contradictory. This prevents people from perceiving (let alone accepting) the absence of an order (they ignore the reality of internal contradictions in the so-called order) or the presence of other orders (they ignore the reality of external contradictions with other orders).[17]

Together these sub-narratives now appear to help constitute and empower a master narrative about China's revisionism. Specifically, notwithstanding their differences, the various sub-narratives rigorously affirm that there exists a single dominant and legitimate international order. In the absence of such a single international order, a state's independent actions might remain just that—independent actions, as an order cannot be revised where it has not yet been established. However, in the context of the single legitimate order affirmed by these narratives, China's independent actions are tantamount to the rejection of this order.

It took a while for the RBO meme to be linked directly with the revisionist master narrative. In part this may have been because the term 'revisionism' has

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[15] As one example of media affirming Trump's characterization of Chinese cunning see the editorial in a local Colorado newspaper: 'The Chinese state has a cunning way of taking the best US ideas and processes to drive its corporate prowess, violating World Trade Organization practices in the process' (*The Daily Sentinel* 2017).

[16] Marco Rubio tweet, 7:42, 19 May 2018.

[17] Perhaps this is why the overwhelming majority of academic and policy discussions of international order assumes there is only one order.

generally been an IR theory term, not a US policy term. Until recently, in the post-1945 era, US policymakers have tended not to use the term 'revisionist' to describe the approach a major power takes to international order.

For the most part, the use of RBO as a constitutive element of the Chinese revisionist master narrative began as early as 2014 in work by US think tank analysts with training in IR theory (Flournoy and Ratner 2014).[18] By 2016 and 2017, IR experts were making the link between the meme and the master narrative in congressional testimony, and by 2018 it was found in major policy documents, such as the NSS and the National Defense Strategy as well as in statements by US officials (Kraska 2016; Hoffman 2017; Harris 2018; Ford 2018).

The emergence of the revisionist master narrative has been rapid. Figure 10 shows the average monthly hits in Factiva sources where 'China' can be found within five and within ten words of the stem for revisionist/revisionism (and vice versa).[19] As is clear from the graph, the characterization of China as a revisionist state takes off in 2018, largely due to its appearance in the US NSS and National Defense Strategy.

Conclusion

This article has focused on the emergence, spread and content of the RBO meme as it has become associated with a revisionist China master narrative in the US within the last few years. We have not examined how powerful this meme and associated narrative are in determining US policy towards China. As of this writing it is perhaps too early to tell.

We hypothesize, however, that policy impact depends on 'crowding out'. Crowding out reflects a reduction in the overall uncertainty about the intentions (and capabilities) of the Other, while signalling the start or intensification of the security dilemma itself. In other words, even though uncertainty may start a security dilemma, we should expect to see a decline in uncertainty about the malign intentions of the Other as the dilemma develops further. Crowding out means that other memes associated with alternative characterizations are excluded or are disappearing as descriptions of the entity. In a security dilemma, these alternative characterizations of the Other's behaviour may include explicit recognition of security dilemma dynamics between Self and Other, or views of the Other's behaviour as defensive reactions or as cooperative in some major domains while competitive in others, or views of competitive dynamics as a function of the Self's ideologically driven but inaccurate or incomplete descriptions of the Other's motivations and behaviour, among other possibilities that challenge the revisionist master narrative.

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[18] The conclusion that China's challenge to RBO is constitutive of its identity as a revisionist state currently cuts across think tanks with different ideological orientations (see Center for a New American Security [CNAS] 2018; Heritage Foundation 2018; Hudson Institute 2018; Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments 2017).

[19] The difference between hits for 'China within *n* words of revisionis*' and 'revisionis* within *n* words of China' is that in the former the first reference to China comes before 'revisionist*', while in the latter it is the reverse. Of course, there may be some overlap in hits between the two, as it is possible (albeit relatively rare) for a phrase to meet both of these conditions.
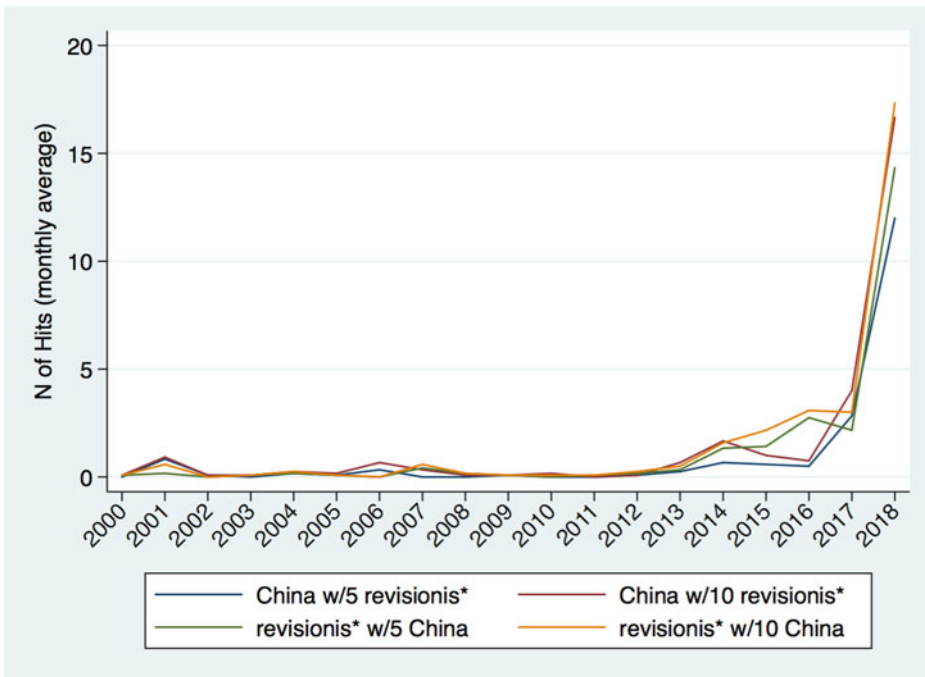
**Figure 10.** Frequency of articles containing references to China as a revisionist power.

Crowding out at the meme level is a mechanism by which a single 'storyline' or narrative eventually dominates policy discourse and becomes 'regnant common sense' (Krebs 2015, 33). This constricts the range of legitimate discussion about policy.

So, even if we have more or less captured the content and constitutive effects the rules-based order meme has had on the sub-narratives of China as a challenger to this order, and thus on the master narrative of China as a revisionist state, is there evidence that the meme and associated narratives are increasingly crowding out alternatives and thus constraining policy discourse?

The best evidence, of course, of crowding out at the master narrative level in the policy process is the official US government use in late 2017 of 'revisionist' to describe China's approach to international 'order'. This term sends a signal to the rest of the US government that challenges to this narrative are illegitimate.

But additional evidence of crowding out might also include the subsequent spread of the master narrative in ways that no longer directly reference its original expression. To what extent are subsequent references to China's revisionism in public discourse no longer referencing the key US government statements? To frame it differently, to what extent is the master narrative taking on a life of its own?

As we noted above, there was a remarkable spike between 2017 and 2018 in the public media coverage of China's revisionism. The jump started in December 2017 after the release of the NSS (see Figure 11). In the year prior to the NSS, 'China' and 'revisionism' or 'revisionist' within ten words of each
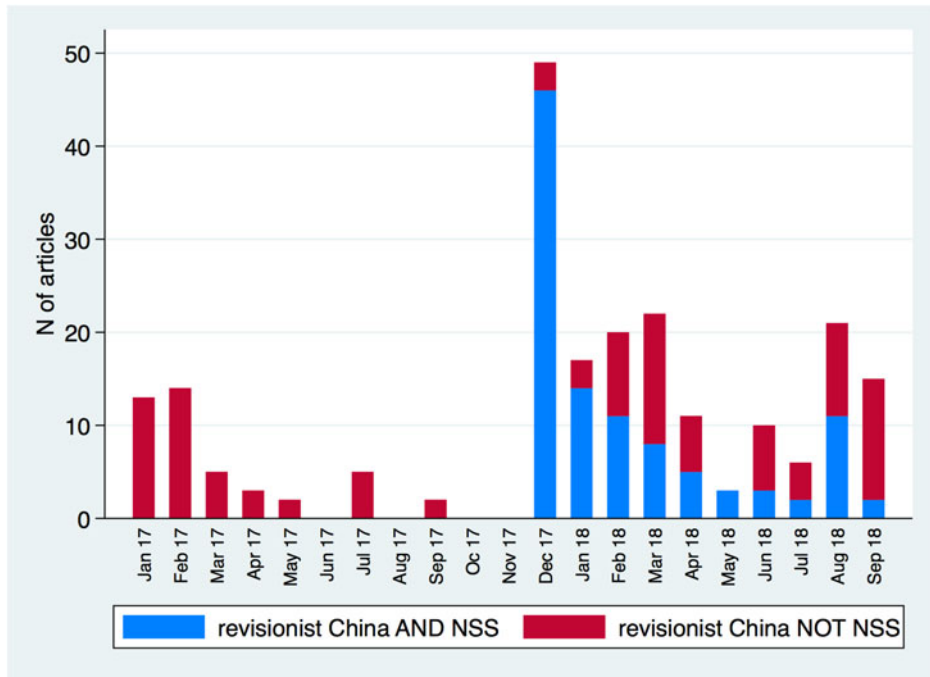
Figure 11. Relative frequency of references to the NSS in articles referencing revisionist China, 2017–2018.

other appeared four times per month on average in US sources, according to the Factiva database. The appearance of the NSS primed the revisionist narrative. Including the month the NSS came out, articles referencing revisionist China jumped to over 17 per month on average through to the end of September 2018, four times the frequency of the pre-NSS period. Excluding the month the NSS appeared, the average number of articles per month in 2018 was 14, still more than three times higher than in the year prior to the NSS. Moreover, as Figure 11 also shows, references to China's revisionism in December 2017 were largely citing the NSS. However, over the next several months into 2018, the narrative took on a degree of autonomy or inertia. With a couple of exceptions, by the end of September 2018 the proportion of articles that mentioned the NSS had dropped substantially as the narrative spread. The average number of articles per month that did not mention the NSS (7.3 per month), however, was still almost twice as many as before the NSS came out. In other words, the NSS not only boosted the prevalence of the revisionist China narrative, but over time this narrative became more independent of references to the NSS.

The critical evidence for crowding out, of course, is the delegitimization of an alternative master narrative and its associated memes. In a future project, we will examine changes in the distribution of primary descriptors (memes) linked to China in social media and government discourse across time. In essence, the alternative master narrative would simply be the null: China is *not* a revisionist state (because of either insufficient evidence, or poor conceptualization, or the persistence of status quo elements in Chinese foreign policy). Thus, in addition to the emergence of a revisionist China narrative, evidence

of crowding out would include more automatic dismissal of the alternatives. We are still too early into the ascension of the revisionist narrative to tell how dissident voices will be treated within the US government or the media and pundit communities. Anecdotal evidence both from discussions with the critics of the revisionist master narrative and from comments by proponents of this narrative suggests that such voices are already being dismissed as at best naive and incorrect or at worst as acting as unwitting agents of the PRC (see Gustafsson et al 2019). We may also be seeing a perfect storm of sub-narratives—China as a challenger to the RBO, China as an exporter of illiberalism, China's information operations influencing American attitudes toward China, and the failure of US engagement strategy to change China—that all buttress the revisionist China master narrative.

Acknowledgements

Funding

Notes on Contributors

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix
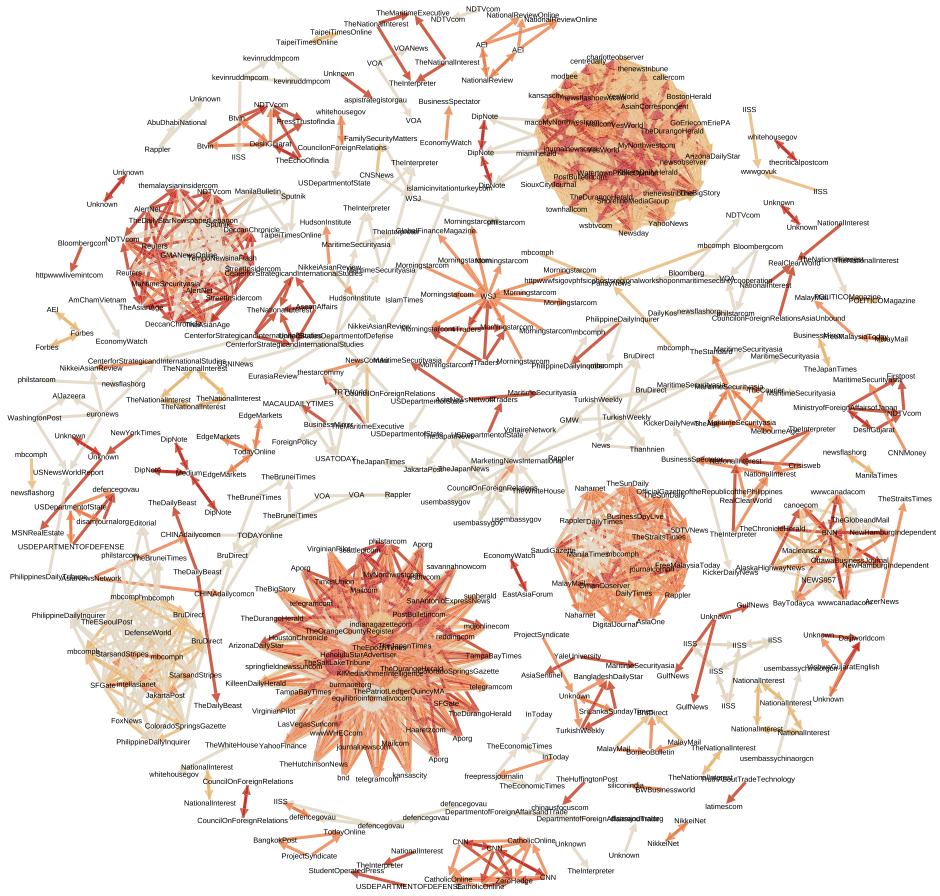
This figure plots the 'plagiarism network' of RBO articles—that is, articles that contain both the word 'China' and the phrase 'rules-based order' or one of its minor variants (for example, 'rule based order') and share verbatim content with one another. Specifically, nodes in this network are articles. Each arrow from article i to article j represents a directed edge, where an edge ($i \rightarrow j$) indicates that (1) articles i and j share between five and 90 percent verbatim text content in their respective article bodies, and (2) that i was published before j. Undirected edges represent the less common case where both i and j appeared on the same day. We note that the 5–90 percent range of plagiarism conservatively excludes articles that may share a turn of phrase (sub-5 percent verbatim content) and articles that are complete reposts of the original article with minor formatting changes (over 90 percent verbatim content), such that articles included in this range are composed of some (but not all) verbatim content. Four hues are applied to network edges to represent the percentage of the later article that is plagiarized verbatim from the earlier article: light (<25 per cent plagiarized); medium (between 25 and 50 per cent); semi-dark (between 50 and 75 per cent); dark (>75 per cent). This means that, for example, if we observe a dark edge, then the article this edge points to plagiarized the article the edge points away from, and the plagiarizing article

contains more than 75 percent plagiarized content from this source (since the edge is dark). The network contains 473 nodes (articles). This represents the fact that, of the 871 China articles that contain the phrase 'rules-based order', 473 either plagiarized 5–90 percent of their content or were plagiarized by another article (or both). Specifically, 110 articles plagiarized previous articles but were not themselves plagiarized; 85 articles contained only original content but were plagiarized by subsequent articles; and 278 articles both plagiarized previous articles and were plagiarized by subsequent ones. Note that the 473 nodes are arranged into 83 distinct clusters, each representing a distinct set of articles that share verbatim content. However, note that, in general, clusters are not fully connected. For example, if we observe $(i \rightarrow j)$ and $(i \rightarrow k)$ but not $(j \rightarrow k)$ or $(k \rightarrow j)$, then we can conclude that both articles j and k contain different verbatim sentences and/or paragraphs from i (as plagiarizing the same material from i would have resulted in an additional edge representing content shared between j and k).