



Chinese Leaders' Perceptions of the United States and the Impact on Cross-Strait Relations

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Annotation: This paper asks two questions. First, how do Chinese leaders perceive the United States as a major power, and second, how might such perception affect the cross-strait relations involving the US? To answer the two questions, this author adopts the key concepts provided by Andrew Scobell (2014), who argued that two faces of strategic culture affect Chinese leaders' perception, including a country's self-image and strategic culture involving the image of other countries. Chinese leaders describe other states as more focused on aggressive and disreputable intentions toward China. This author employs a pattern-matching research methodology and compares the theoretical and observed patterns. The result shows that Chinese leaders tend to have negative images of the US. Next, this author examines a specific case in the cross-strait relations involving the US after October 1, 2021, during which China sent warplanes entering the southwestern part of Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ) to showcase their determination to protect its territorial integrity and sovereignty. The study confirmed that Chinese leaders tend to deal with cross-strait relations based on the perception that the US is an aggressive and offensive competitor that would impede China's agenda to unify Taiwan.

Keywords: Chinese leaders' perception, US-China relations, Cross-strait relations.

1. INTRODUCTION

The United States and China (People's Republic of China, PRC) are the two major powers in the Indo-Pacific region, and their relationship is one of the most important bilateral relationships in the world. Many issues flared the tensions between the US and China in recent years, which deteriorated their relations from 2020 onwards. One of the most important issues is Taiwan (Republic of China, ROC). Thomas Christensen describes US-China relations as "a potential tragedy for the world" (Christensen 2020). Ryan Hass argues that the US and China are "in search of a new equilibrium" (Hass 2020). Boylan et al. argue that Chinese political leaders resented the lack of global political status equal to rapid economic growth and rising military might. They strived to uphold their international reputation and demanded more respect for the sphere of influence, and they mobilized against US threats to Chinese sovereignty (Boylan, McBeath, and Wang 2020). Therefore, a key issue in research is how Chinese leaders perceive the United States and how such perception affects China's handling of territorial and sovereignty issues, such as the long-standing cross-strait relations between China and Taiwan.

The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, this paper aims to examine the empirical pattern of Chinese leaders' images toward the United States. This author compares the empirical results with the theoretical perspective to draw theoretical implications using pattern-matching analysis. Second, an analysis of cross-strait relations based on the findings above was conducted, which offers implications for future triangular relations involving the US, China, and Taiwan. The arrangement of this paper is as follows: First, this paper will state its methodology, providing details of how this study is designed.

Next, this paper presents the pattern-matching analysis of Chinese leaders' images and strategic culture by comparing the theoretical and observed patterns. Finally, this paper examines a case of Chinese warplanes incursions in October 2021 and the dynamics of the US-China-Taiwan triangle relationship. It discusses how Chinese leaders' perceptions may affect cross-strait relations and the broader Indo-Pacific region.

2. METHODOLOGY

Two research questions of this paper are, first, how Chinese leaders perceive the United States as a major power, and second, how such perception might affect the cross-strait relations involving the US. The hypotheses are that Chinese political leaders tend to depict their self-image as peaceful and defensive, while they tend to perceive that the US has hostile, offensive, and aggressive attitudes toward China; thus, the US might impede the Cross-Strait relations and the Chinese effort to unify Taiwan. This author conducted qualitative single-case study research and used pattern matching analysis to analyze the case. Pattern matching involves linking two patterns where one is a theoretical pattern and the other is an observed or operational one (Trochim 1989). In other words, pattern matching is a logic that compares an empirically based pattern with a predicted one made before you collected your data (Yin 2009, 143). A theoretical pattern is a hypothesis about what is expected in the data. The observed pattern consists of the data used to examine the theoretical model (Trochim and Donnelly 2001). The author has conceptualized the concepts in the above section and translated them into a specifiable theoretical pattern. The author collects and measures the empirical data and translates them into an observed pattern. The inferential task involves relating, linking, or matching these two patterns. To the extent that the patterns match, one can conclude that the theory and any other theories which might predict the same observed pattern receive support (Trochim and Donnelly 2001).

The data were collected from original texts, Chinese Communist Party official publications, and other secondary data on the internet. For the pattern-matching analysis, the author used a keyword search from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs website. The searched time range is from January 1, 2020, to December 31, 2020. The author carefully selected relevant official statements and interviews for analysis. The author collected fifteen official statements/interviews regarding US-China relations. Next, this author coded and analyzed the data using MAXQDA software. In qualitative research, coding is "how you define what the data you are analyzing is about" (Gibbs 2007). MAXQDA is a software program for computer-assisted qualitative data and text analysis methods. Finally, the author analyzed the codes and organized the results as an observed pattern to compare with the theoretical pattern. Finally, the author used the findings to draw implications for the cross-strait relations involving the US in 2021.

There are some research limitations. First, although the author searched and selected the most relevant data for analysis, the small sample size may affect the validity. Second, the theoretical argument would be simplified and lack a thorough theoretical explanation. Third, the coding process and results interpretation could be biased.

3. PATTERN MATCHING ON CHINESE LEADERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE US

3.1 Chinese Leaders' Images and Strategic Culture: Theoretical Pattern

Strategic culture is an important approach to examining political leaders' perceptions. Strategic culture can severely influence elites' ability to undertake strategic adjustments to systemic changes (Lin 2019, 211). Specifically, as Kupchan observes, decision-making elites can become trapped by strategic culture, preventing them from reorienting grand strategy to meet international imperatives and avoid self-defeating behavior (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016). Scholars often debate what Chinese strategic culture entails (Lin 2020, 66). Chinese traditional strategic culture tends to describe that China's Confucian tradition was a key determinant, and therefore, China's foreign policy favors harmony over conflict and defense over offense (Kierman and Fairbank 1974). Other literature focuses on Realpolitik, for example, the work of Sun Tzu's Art of War, which stresses its offensive nature and the Chinese predisposition for stratagem over combat. Johnston (1995) identifies the existence of two

strands of Chinese strategic culture: a “Parabellum” (or Realpolitik) and a “Confucian-Mencian”; although two strands existed, only one - the Parabellum strand - was operative, and the other was purely for ‘idealized discourse.’ Johnston argues that Chinese realism stems from ideational sources rather than structural factors (Johnston 1995).

Andrew Scobell (2014) argues that strategic culture has a major effect on national leaders’ decision-making and how they perceive themselves, their actions, and others. Therefore, there are two faces of Chinese strategic culture. The first face of strategic culture concerns a country’s self-image (the perceptions and realities of its dominant strategic traditions and the policy outcome they produce). The second face of strategic culture involves the image constructed by the Chinese leaders toward other countries (Scobell 2014, 52). Based on this logic, Scobell posits that Chinese leaders view their strategic culture as peaceful and defensive. In the meantime, they tend to focus on other states’ aggressive and nefarious intentions concerning China (Scobell 2014, 53). Scobell argues that Chinese leaders tend to view their strategic tradition as the “Great Wall” strand of strategic culture, which shows “active defense” in nature. Regarding the United States, Chinese leaders tend to characterize the US as “possessing a warlike and offensive-minded military disposition that is part of a broader expansionist, maritime, and materialist strategic culture,” and Chinese leaders tend to define their own strategic culture as “pacifistic and defensive-minded” (Scobell 2002, 17, 2014, 54).

Based on Scobell’s work, this paper argues that four indicators can be used to capture Chinese leaders’ self-image and image towards others: peaceful, aggressive, defensive, and offensive. Those four indicators refer to the patterns of state leaders’ interpretation of their own country and other countries. This author defines a peaceful image as the image that a state’s political, economic, and military power would not threaten international peace or other states. An aggressive image is defined as the image that a state’s political, economic, and military power would threaten international peace or other states. A defensive image is an image of a state’s behavior that aims to maintain moderate policies to attain the necessary security. An offensive image shows that a state’s behavior seeks excessive power to reach regional or global hegemony. Those indicators are not mutually exclusive and could exist in a leader’s perception at different times.

Applying Scobell’s theoretical concept and the typology of images that this paper develops, the theoretical argument of Chinese image patterns is: that China’s self-image tends to be “peaceful” and “defensive,” and its image towards the US tends to be “aggressive” and “offensive.” The theoretical patterns can be visualized in the figure below:

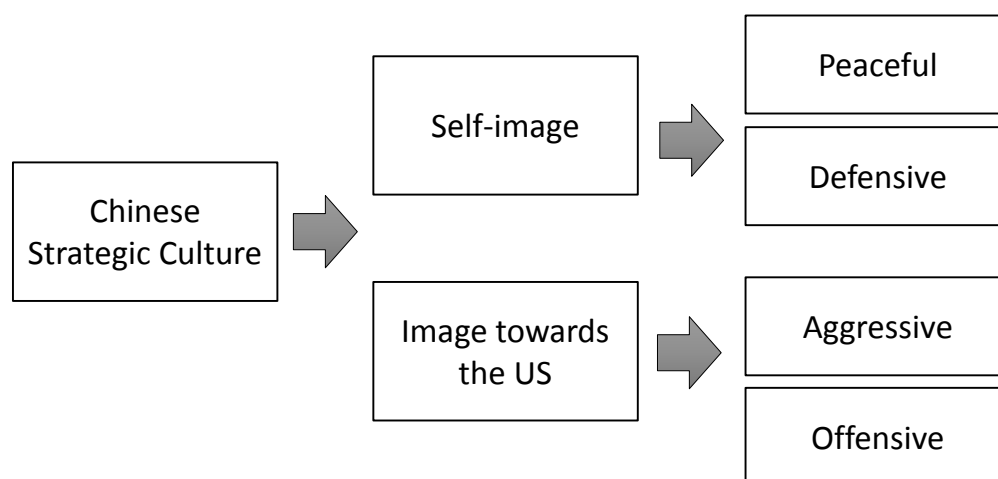


Figure 1: Theoretical Patterns of Chinese Leaders’ Images

(Made by the author, based on Scobell 2014)

3.2 Results: Observed Pattern

The author observed and evaluated the data and paid attention to their contents and accuracy. The researcher has determined whether the data is suitable for analysis. This researcher analyzed the

collected documents, which were determined as pieces of evidence. This researcher used the analysis tools provided by MAXQDA to analyze the coded segments. This researcher has produced a total of 93 codes from the fifteen documents, in which 55 codes associating the key patterns are used for analysis.

Table 1: Number of codes in each pattern

Image patterns	Self-image	Image towards the US
Peaceful	11	2
Aggressive	0	15
Defensive	16	1
Offensive	0	10

Made by the author

The above table provides an overview of the codes. The table shows that Chinese leaders do not see China as an aggressive and offensive country. Instead, they perceive themselves as a peaceful and defensive country. On the other hand, Chinese leaders tend to perceive the United States as offensive and aggressive, and the US takes unfriendly actions against China.

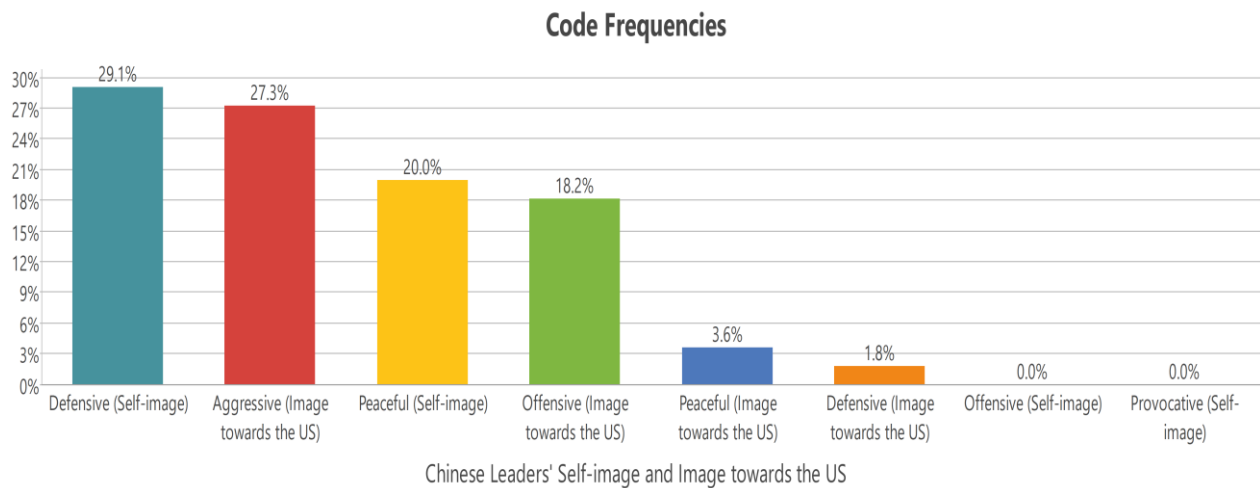


Figure 2: Code Frequencies

Figure 2 indicates the code frequencies of the observed evidence. The result shows that Chinese leaders stress the defensive pattern of self-image (29.1%), followed by the aggressive image toward the US (27.3%), the peaceful pattern of self-image (20%), and the offensive image toward the US (18.2%). The rest of the codes are below 10%. Based on the result, the empirical pattern of Chinese leaders' images can be drawn as follows:

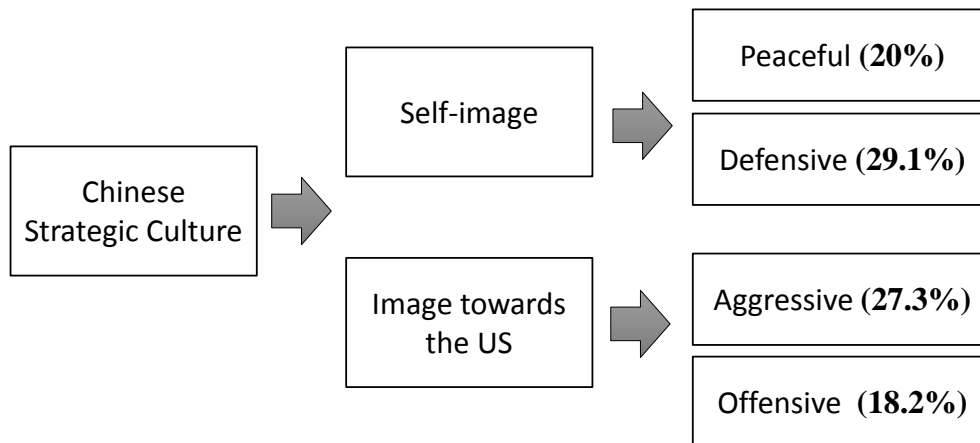


Figure 3: Observed Pattern of Chinese Leaders' Images

(Made by the author)

The above result shows that the empirical evidence confirms the conceptual model based on Scobell's work. In 2020, Chinese leaders had a higher self-image of defensive patterns and tend to portray the US as an aggressive country against China. Chinese leaders always state that China is peaceful and has a defensive foreign policy. At the beginning of the pandemic, the State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi stressed the cultural tradition of Chinese philosophy that "sees the world as one big family," which prevents China from being an aggressive and offensive country. He stated:

*"Given its cultural traditions, China will not seek hegemony even when it grows in strength. We have chosen the peaceful development of our own country and mutually beneficial cooperation with the world. The path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, which has underpinned China's remarkable success, is brimming with vitality and leading to an even more promising future."*¹

Based on this logic, Wang states that China will never intend to challenge or replace the US but to grow US-China relations with consistent and stable foreign policy. China will act defensively and "uphold its sovereignty, security, and development interests, safeguard the achievements that the Chinese people have made through hard work, and reject any bullying and injustice imposed on it."² Therefore, China would not swallow any arbitrary and unscrupulous US moves. China's countermeasure is "legitimate, justified and lawful, and fully conforms to diplomatic norms."³

Regarding image toward the US, Chinese leaders tend to believe that the US takes an offensive and aggressive stance against China. At the beginning of the pandemic in February, the State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated in an interview, "I am afraid that the United States has its own dark intentions sometimes. It does not want to see other countries develop. It does not want to see other countries' businesses grow and succeed. It has been spreading rumors to smear other countries' businesses."⁴ In the same interview, Wang further gives examples of how the US has been showing its offensive and aggressive postures:

*"China's National People's Congress has never introduced any bill on the internal affairs of the United States. However, the US Congress has reviewed and adopted one bill after another that blatantly interferes with China's internal affairs. China has never sent its military vessels and aircraft to the neighborhood of the United States to flex muscles. Yet, the US naval ships and airplanes have been flexing muscles at China's doorsteps...So talking about the threat, it is not that China is threatening the US, but the US is threatening China. And the issue is how to address the US threat to China..."*⁵

Wang even refers to the US's aggressive attitudes as a "political virus" with "ideological biases" that has been "spreading in the US and jumping at any opportunity to attack and slander China. Some politicians ignore the basic facts and make up countless lies and conspiracy theories concerning China..."⁶ Wang emphasizes that some politicians in the US portray China as an adversary and even an enemy. The US needs to "develop more objective and cool-headed perceptions about China, and a more rational and pragmatic China policy."⁷ Wang believes that the US's current China policy is based on ill-informed strategic miscalculations and is fraught with emotions, whims, and McCarthyist bigotry.⁸ If the US continues to do so, it will damage US credibility and jeopardize world peace and stability.⁹

¹ See https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1745384.shtml

² See https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1796538.shtml

³ See https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1804328.shtml

⁴ See https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1745264.shtml

⁵ See https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1745264.shtml

⁶ See <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zgyw/t1782262.htm>

⁷ See https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1796538.shtml

⁸ See https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1796302.shtml

⁹ See https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1839532.shtml

Unlike the State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who usually speaks explicitly about US-China relations, President Xi Jinping uses a softer voice over the same issues. In the phone calls with President Donald Trump, Xi stresses cooperation and joint efforts. The US and China should maintain communication and strengthen cooperation on various issues, especially the Covid-19 pandemic.¹⁰ Xi underscores that the year 2020 is an important juncture for US-China relations. Xi hopes the US will take substantive steps to improve the relationship and work with China. This will contribute to building a relationship based on non-conflict or confrontation, mutual respect, and win-win cooperation.¹¹ After Joe Biden was elected as the president, Xi reiterated his stance that the two sides should uphold the spirit of non-conflict, non-confrontation, and focus on cooperation, manage differences, and advance the healthy and stable development of China-US ties.¹²

4. CHINESE LEADERS' PERCEPTION AND THE CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS INVOLVING THE US: A CASE STUDY

This section examines the dynamics of the US-China-Taiwan triangle relationship in 2021. In particular, the case focuses on the case of China's military actions after its national day on October 1, 2021, when China sent warplanes to enter the southwestern part of Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ) to showcase its determination to unify Taiwan and deter the US influence in the Indo-Pacific region.

4.1 THE INCIDENT: CHINESE WARPLANES ENTERING TAIWAN'S ADIZ

On October 1 and 10, China and Taiwan celebrated their national days. During the same period, a total of 150 People's Liberation Army (PLA) warplanes entered the southwestern part of Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ) from Oct.1-5.¹³ Taiwan's Minister of the National Defense, Chiu Kuo-cheng, states that Taiwan is facing "the worse situation in 40 years."¹⁴ In China, Chinese leaders continue to reinforce their nationalistic sentiments and take actual military coercion over Taiwan instead of reiterating their vow to use force to unify Taiwan. The Indo-Pacific is dealing with increasing military pressure by a much more capable PLA. that impacts the cross-strait military balance and challenges the US dominance in the region. Between 2010 and 2020, China ramped up its military spending, which rose by 76%, advancing PLA's war-fighting capability.¹⁵ Since President Joe Biden took office, the U.S.-China-Taiwan Triangle Relationship has been developed around three concepts of Taiwan that explain the political and security dynamics across the Taiwan Strait and the Indo-Pacific region.

4.2 THE US PERSPECTIVE

For Biden Administration, it is crucial to maintain military balance in the region and reset the tone for US-China relations towards a less-confrontational atmosphere to avoid accidents. Biden Administration believes engaging in conversation with Chinese leaders is essential despite the US-China competition. The US continues to fulfill its security commitment to assist Taiwan's self-defense capabilities based on the Taiwan Relations Act and Six Assurances. To respond to the recent Chinese military cohesion, on October 6, the US Secretary of State Tony Blinken said the US was "very concerned by the People's Republic of China's provocative military activity near Taiwan...We strongly urge Beijing to cease its military, diplomatic, and economic pressure and coercion directed at

¹⁰ See https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1741970.shtml

¹¹ See https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zzjg_663340/bmdyzs_664814/xwlb_664816/t1763044.shtml

¹² See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/26/xi-jinping-calls-to-congratulate-joe-biden-on-election-win>

¹³ Chen Yun and Jonathan Chin, "Taipei-Beijing dialogue mechanism needed: legislators," *Taipei Times*, 9 October, 2021, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2021/10/09/2003765792>.

¹⁴ Lo Tien-pin, Aron Tu, Jake Chung, "Military tensions worst in 40 years: Chiu," *Taipei Times*, 7 October, 2021, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2021/10/07/2003765671>.

¹⁵ William A. Galston, "Will America Come to Taiwan's Defense?," *Wall Street Journal*, 12 October, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/will-america-come-to-taiwan-defense-china-xi-navy-11634053378>.

Taiwan.”¹⁶ He added that China’s recent military postures could lead to miscalculations and undermine regional peace and stability. On the same day, the US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met with his counterpart, Yang Jiechi, Chinese Communist Party Politburo Member and Director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission, in Zurich, Switzerland. Both agreed that “maintaining open lines of communication” is important to manage their competition. Ensuring a “responsible competition” is a crucial point for the US to engage with China.¹⁷ On October 7, American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) Chairman James Moriarty also stated that “Washington’s support for the peaceful resolution of cross-strait disputes and it is abiding by the promises made in the Taiwan Relations Act to provide Taipei with the necessary means to help it defend itself.”¹⁸

4.3 THE CHINESE PERSPECTIVE

the Chinese PLA has become more active in the Taiwan strait at the tactical level. The overall goal for China is to reinforce the nationalistic sentiments for strengthening the Chinese Communist Party leadership in the post-pandemic era by taking real military postures across the Taiwan strait as a bargaining chip to counter the US assistance to Taiwan. For Chinese leaders, reunification with Taiwan has been a “must” and a “historical mission” (*lishi renwu*) since the formation of the PRC, President Xi is also determined to achieve this under his leadership. President Xi has been utilizing nationalistic sentiments and military postures on the Taiwan issue. On October 9, Xi said on the anniversary of the revolution that ended imperial China, “Taiwan independence separatism is... the most serious hidden danger to national rejuvenation.” China will protect its sovereignty from reunifying Taiwan, and “the historical mission of the complete reunification of the motherland must be fulfilled and will definitely be fulfilled.”¹⁹

Internally, Chinese leaders pursue the goals of “strengthening the country and the people” (*quo qiang min fu*) and “Common prosperity” (*gongtong fuyu*). Chinese leaders continue strengthening the CCP leadership by reinforcing national sentiments and internal control to fulfill the historical mission of unifying Taiwan. Externally, China still requires a peaceful and stable international environment without abandoning its historical missions, such as reunification with Taiwan, which, if failed, will threaten the legitimacy of the CCP. Apart from the military posture to counter the US, China expands its political and economic tentacles across the Indo-Pacific region through various programs, including the Belt-and-Road Initiative. China does not believe in an international economic order led by the United States. Therefore, China is actively involved in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), of which the U.S. is not a member. Those moves would likely undermine the US geopolitical and regional military influence in the region. Also, China strongly bars Taiwan’s international expansion through applications such as joining the CPTPP because of its One-China Principle.

5 CONCLUSION

By using the pattern-matching analysis, the findings prove that the Chinese leaders’ images’ theoretical pattern matches the observed pattern. Chinese leaders view themselves as peaceful and defensive based on traditional cultural philosophy. On the contrary, Chinese leaders tend to characterize the United States as more focused on aggressive and offensive intentions concerning China. The evidence can be found in Chinese leaders’ speeches and statements and the warplanes incursion incident in October 2021. The result shows that Chinese leaders tend to have negative images of the United States.

¹⁶ Joseph Choi, “US 'very concerned' about China's 'provocative military activity near Taiwan',” *The Hill*, 3 October, 2021, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/575054-us-very-concerned-about-chinas-provocative-military>.

¹⁷ Statements and Releases, “Readout of National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan’s Meeting with Politburo Member Yang Jiechi,” *The White House*, 6 October, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/10/06/readout-of-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivans-meeting-with-politburo-member-yang-jiechi/>.

¹⁸ Matthew Strong, “American Institute in Taiwan chairman calls Chinese threat real and imminent,” *Taiwan News*, 7 October, 2021, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/4308607>

¹⁹ XinhuaNet, “Xi Jinping attended the 110th Anniversary of the Revolution of 1911 and delivered an important speech,” *Xinhua News*, 9 October, 2021, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/zb/xhgm110/index.htm>. (in Chinese)

Therefore, although Chinese leaders call for cooperation and joint efforts to strengthen cooperation on various issues, they also stress that China will uphold its sovereignty, security, and development interests and reject any bullying and injustice the US imposes on it.

Regarding the cross-strait relations involving the US, without a doubt, Taiwan takes the most crucial role in the stability and security of the Indo-Pacific region amid US-China competition. Taiwan is one of the most viable democracies and shares the values of democracy and freedom with its like-minded countries. Despite the US continuing to provide arms sales for Taiwan, the military imbalance across the strait is a big concern in the region. Therefore, the Chinese leaders' perception of the US will largely impact the future development of cross-strait relations. The US will also continue to ensure the Indo-Pacific region is free and open and the US national interests are protected. The US will also work with its democratic allies under various frameworks such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and the "AUKUS" security partnership to counter China and avoid military incidents in the region. The worst-case scenario would be a direct military confrontation across the Taiwan Strait due to the spiral competition and misperception between China and the US leaders.

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The author report there is no competing interests to declare.

DISCLAIMER

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any governmental agencies or affiliations.

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