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**CHINA'S DOMESTIC POLITICS
AND EDITORIAL CONTROL OVER
FOREIGN NEWS COVERAGE IN THE
PEOPLE'S DAILY, 1993-2022**

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the evolving dynamics of foreign coverage in China’s official media as the country becomes a more active player on the global stage. Many scholars have noted that under Xi Jinping, China has markedly shifted toward greater assertiveness in its foreign policy and has begun to position itself as a champion of globalization. To the contrary, we find that there has been a notable decline in foreign news coverage in China’s official media during Xi’s administration compared to his predecessors’ administrations. We analyzed foreign coverage in over 1 million news articles from the *People’s Daily* from 1993 to 2022. Our analysis suggests that the volume of foreign coverage is driven by domestic politics as well as by China’s growing international interests. As leaders consolidate their power in their second term, they consistently exert greater editorial control of the *People’s Daily*, and foreign coverage is replaced by the leader’s commentary on foreign affairs. This dynamic is not unique to Xi Jinping, but it is particularly pronounced under him.

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China's Domestic Politics and Editorial Control over Foreign News Coverage in the *People's Daily*, 1993–2022

1. Introduction

The scholarly consensus increasingly recognizes that with Xi Jinping's ascent to power, China has adopted a more ambitious foreign policy. Yan Xuetong has characterized this shift as moving from a strategy of "keeping a low profile" to one of "striving for achievement."¹ Other scholars note that China has increased its efforts to reshape norms of global governance through "major country diplomacy."² Under Xi, China has launched ambitious projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)³ and, more recently, the Global Development, Security, and Civilization Initiatives, aimed at playing a greater international role. At the same time, China has increasingly adopted an assertive stance on territorial disputes with its neighbors, including Japan, Taiwan, Southeast Asian countries, and India.⁴ Collectively, these studies indicate that under Xi Jinping's leadership, China has deliberately positioned itself to exert substantial influence on international affairs, thereby elevating foreign policy to a position of increased significance within its overarching agenda.

However, by analyzing language data in China's official media, we establish a contrary and intriguing stylized fact: During Xi's administration, the volume of foreign news coverage, in fact, has experienced a dramatic decrease in comparison with his predecessors. Figure 1 plots the annual number of articles devoted to foreign coverage in the *People's Daily* (*PD*), represented by the light blue line, and the annual overseas state visits by the Chinese president or premier, represented by the dark blue line.

The dark blue line shows an increase in the frequency of foreign visits, from an average of 10 per year in the 1990s to over 20 annual visits in the 2000s. The light blue line, meanwhile, shows a steady decline in foreign coverage that becomes more pronounced after 2013, when the annual number of articles on foreign affairs declined from more than 14,000 to fewer than 7,000. This decline in foreign news coverage in the *PD* presents a puzzle: Why does China appear less international in its official propaganda even as it pursues a more active role in shaping world affairs?

The puzzle is nontrivial for two reasons. First, the *PD*, often called the party's mouthpiece, is the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It conveys the policy intention of top leaders to political elites across the country through its rhetoric and jargon. What topics are covered, on what page, and how they are talked about reflect an unobserved political process in which decisions are made at the politburo level or above and transmitted to the rank-and-file officials. Top leaders' focus on international affairs, however, has not translated into more foreign news coverage.⁵

¹ Yan, "From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement."

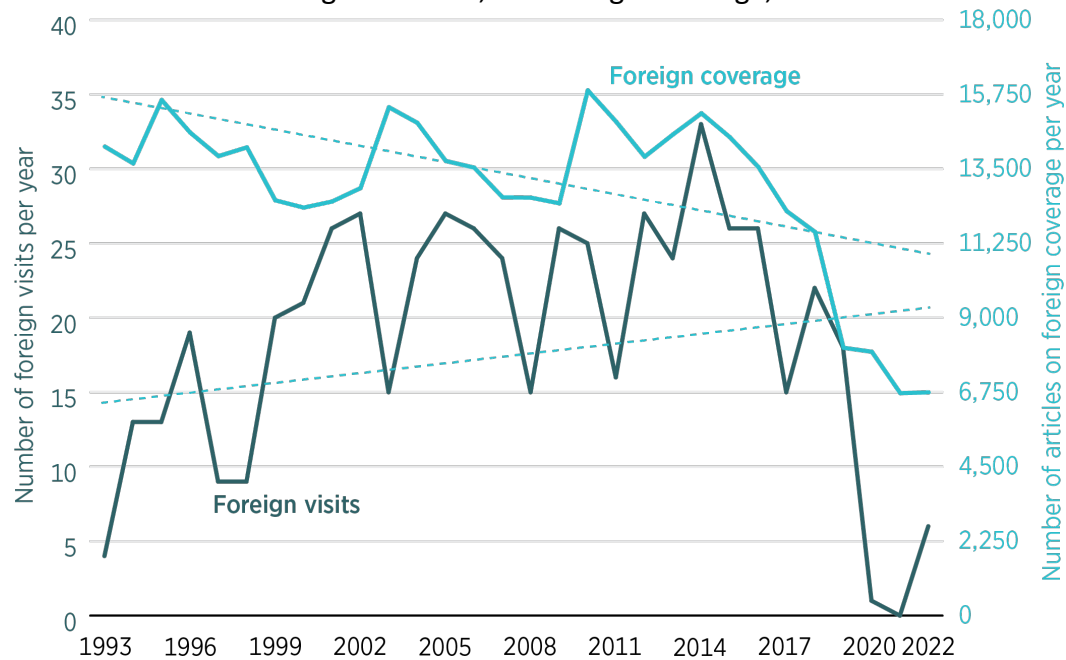
² Lin, "Xi Jinping's 'Major Country Diplomacy'"; Smith, "China's 'Major Country Diplomacy.'"

³ Zhao, *China's New Global Strategy*; Zhou and Esteban, "Beyond Balancing"; Beeson, "Geeconomics with Chinese Characteristics."

⁴ Chubb, "PRC Assertiveness in the South China Sea"; Rajagopalan, "Did India Lose China?"; Chang-Liao, "China's New Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping."

⁵ Wu, "Command Communication."

FIGURE 1. Puzzle: More global China, less foreign coverage, 1993–2022



Note: The drastic decline in Chinese leaders’ foreign visits in 2020 and 2021 was largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Second, previous literature on political communications has found that official Chinese media give more favorable news coverage to countries with stronger economic ties, thereby serving the regime’s goals of deepening international economic engagement.⁶ However, although China’s economic interdependence with the rest of the world has deepened, the trend of recorded foreign coverage in its newspaper has moved in the opposite direction.

The authors posit that the dynamics of domestic politics, particularly the consolidation of power among political leaders, play a pivotal role in explaining this decrease in foreign coverage. This perspective suggests that the shifts in propaganda strategies are less about external interests and more about the internal machinations of power within the leadership structure. The *PD* combines functions of the news and editorial (opinion) departments, functions that are traditionally separated in Western media outlets. Chinese leaders exert greater editorial control as they consolidate power, thus resulting in a reduction of objective “news” and an increase in subjective “editorial” content. The decline in foreign coverage under Xi Jinping is part of a broader phenomenon in the amount of editorial control the top leader exerts over the newspaper of record.

To test this hypothesis, the authors analyzed foreign coverage in over 1 million news articles published in the *PD* from 1993 to 2022, covering the tenures of three political leaders: Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping.⁷ Utilizing advanced natural language processing techniques,

⁶ Ji and Liu, “State as Salesman.”

⁷ We begin our analysis in 1993 because this marks the start of Jiang Zemin’s term during which he acquired all other positions of the supreme leader, including the national president and the chairman of the Central Military Commission. Given that most of the institutionalization was established at the end of Deng Xiaoping’s tenure, we believe 1993 serves as an appropriate starting point for cross-leadership comparisons.

the authors filtered and categorized each article according to its focus on foreign countries within specific years. The authors then counted the number of articles devoted to foreign coverage each year. This dataset was then augmented with country-level data encompassing aspects of China's economic interactions, territorial disputes, diplomatic activities, and geographical proximity to the mentioned nations. By employing a negative binomial regression model within this panel dataset, we were able to estimate the relationship between power consolidation and the propensity for foreign news coverage.

The findings of this paper lend robust support to the thesis that the consolidation of a leader's power inversely correlates with the volume of foreign news coverage, with the era under Xi Jinping marked by a particularly pronounced decline in such reporting. To elucidate the underlying mechanisms, the authors conducted a detailed content analysis of *PD* articles covering Hu Jintao's state visits to the United States. This case study reinforces the argument of this paper, demonstrating that as a leader's power increases, a strategic shift occurs in the propaganda apparatus to allocate more editorial space to articulating the leader's foreign policy visions, thereby squeezing out space for traditional foreign news coverage. Furthermore, this paper's analysis of the length and frequency of leaders' commentary on diplomatic events, as reported in the *PD*, aligns with the authors' primary findings. Taken together, these results underscore the significant role of internal political dynamics in shaping the trajectory of foreign news coverage, emphasizing the role of state media as a conduit for the leadership's foreign policy narratives. The results also suggest that the view of the outside world that Chinese elites obtain from official media becomes less objective as power is consolidated, creating more opportunities for misperceptions and miscalculations in China's foreign policy behavior.

This study contributes to the field of Chinese foreign policy in two important ways: First, in comparison with previous studies that focus on content analysis of one or two countries or events, this paper provides a comprehensive dataset of Chinese foreign coverage across 62 major countries and over 35 years. Second, this paper advances domestic politics as an important driver of Chinese foreign coverage in addition to external factors such as economic interests.

2. Literature Review: Persuasion vs. Signaling in Authoritarian Propaganda

Authoritarian governments have long understood the profound role media play in molding public opinion and ensuring alignment with state objectives, a dynamic underscored by scholars of communication since at least the 1956 classic *Four Theories of the Press*.⁸ Official media serve as propaganda when they seek to shape public perceptions or coordinate elite opinion on a given political issue. Through the careful selection and propagation of narratives that resonate with national sentiments, the regimes not only bolster their legitimacy but also foster a citizenry that shows a marked preference for and trust in state-sanctioned media outlets.⁹ Official media coverage is also used to selectively narrow the information gap between leaders and the public.¹⁰

In China, the CCP has always placed official propaganda in a central position in facilitating the country's policies.¹¹ In 1944, Mao Zedong described propaganda as the "weapon" which should "organize, reflect and guide all of the work."¹² His successors inherited this principle and

⁸ Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm, *Four Theories of the Press*.

⁹ Shirikov, "Rethinking Propaganda."

¹⁰ Carter and Carter, *Propaganda in Autocracies*.

¹¹ Carter and Carter, *Propaganda in Autocracies*.

¹² Mao, *Collected Works*.

treated it as their political manual. Current Chinese president Xi Jinping has declared that official media should “have the party as its surname” (xing dang), which shows that the leadership expects the state-controlled media to reflect the party’s will.¹³ For the CCP, media is the “weapon” of propaganda, an instrument that must be strictly controlled by the party and that mirrors the leader’s policy intentions. As such, media also provides a means for analyzing shifts in Chinese policies.¹⁴

A rich literature has emerged on how China’s propaganda apparatus sustains one-party rule.¹⁵ Recent academic research on Chinese propaganda has tended to focus on the effect of propaganda on public opinion and political behavior¹⁶ or on new forms of censorship and coercion in social media.¹⁷ International relations scholars have explored how propaganda can be used to mobilize public opinion during foreign policy crises.¹⁸ These papers make great contributions in clarifying how authoritarian governments use media control to influence public opinion and, as a result, to consolidate support toward the regime. However, the papers focus on the effects of propaganda in specific crises rather than examining the long-term drivers of foreign coverage.

Ji and Liu, using the news events reported by Chinese official media broadcasts from 2003 to 2018, show that when a country’s economic engagement with China increases, Chinese official media tend to increase positive coverage of that country and decrease coverage of negative events surrounding the country.¹⁹ This finding lends support to the argument that there exists a pattern in the Chinese official media’s framing of foreign countries that is distorted by China’s national interests abroad. The authors build on this body of research on the relationship between foreign policies and official media in China, with propaganda as the outcome variable.

Huang offers an alternative view, suggesting that rather than merely indoctrinating the public, state media serve as a signal of the government’s strength and its ability to maintain political order and control.²⁰ Statistical analysis indicates that people’s exposure to propaganda correlates not with their approval of the government but with their perception of the government’s ability to uphold social stability. In his subsequent research,²¹ Huang discovers that overt and aggressive propaganda can have the opposite effect, reducing public approval of the regime even though it successfully conveys the government’s authoritative stance. This series of studies introduces the idea that media can function primarily as a signal transmitter rather than as a tool of persuasion.²² The studies also note that Chinese officials skillfully use media to promote ideological campaigns, such as Jiang Zemin’s “Three Represents,” to demonstrate loyalty to political leadership. This form of political propaganda, closely tied to the political leaders’ rhetoric and constrained by formal structures, may not seek to persuade but rather to uniformly highlight a given leader’s significance. As Esarey’s research presents, there exists a notable increase in references to Xi

¹³ As quoted in Zeng, “How to Grasp the Three Key Points of ‘Party Media Surnamed the Party.’”

¹⁴ Chan and Zhong, “Reading China.”

¹⁵ Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship*; Stockmann and Gallagher, “Remote Control”; Huang, “Propaganda as Signaling.”

¹⁶ Creemers, “Cyber China.”

¹⁷ Han, “Manufacturing Consent in Cyberspace”; Lu and Pan, “Capturing Clicks”; Chen, *Making of a Neo-Propaganda State*.

¹⁸ Weiss and Dafoe, “Authoritarian Audiences, Rhetoric, and Propaganda in International Crises”; Wang and Womack, “Jawing through Crises”; Wang, “Barking without Biting”; Chubb and Wang, “Authoritarian Propaganda Campaigns on Foreign Affairs.”

¹⁹ Ji and Liu, “State as Salesman.”

²⁰ Huang, “Propaganda as Signaling.”

²¹ Huang, “Pathology of Hard Propaganda.”

²² Shih, “‘Nauseating’ Displays of Loyalty.”

Jinping in the *PD* compared to other leaders, indicating the use of propaganda to reinforce Xi's authority.²³ The surge in mentions of Xi does not necessarily aim to tell a compelling narrative, but this increased visibility of the leader signals his paramount importance to the audience.

The authors of this paper apply these insights to understand foreign coverage in the *PD*, focusing on propaganda as signaling rather than as persuading. The content of propaganda is shaped by the logic of signaling, underscoring the political pronouncements of leaders as their power solidifies. So, the analytical focus shifts from the need to shape public opinion in response to international crises to the effect of domestic politics on the propaganda apparatus, an area that remains relatively understudied in existing literature. To explore the signaling effect of media, the authors will further delineate the dual function of official propaganda, especially that of the *PD*, the nerve center of China's propaganda system.

3. Duality of Official Media in Authoritarian Context: Reporting vs. Signaling

In the realm of foreign policy, media outlets in authoritarian states serve a dual function. On the one hand, they play the role of traditional newspapers in reporting on foreign news events to provide information to the reader. The reporting of news can be biased to favor the government's agenda, but its purpose is to narrow the information gap between government policy and public opinion about real-world events.²⁴ Leaders can be selective about what stories to cover or can spin the news in strategic ways,²⁵ but the goal of this type of coverage is to persuade the reader to see the world as leaders would like them to see it and to praise or criticize specific foreign countries or leaders. On the other hand, authoritarian media play a more political role in propagating ideology, signaling regime strength, and coordinating elite behavior. This latter function does not involve the reporting of news; it is more akin to the role of the editorial desk in Western media. But whereas Western editorials try to persuade readers, this type of content signals the boundaries of political orthodoxy.

The dual role of official media is especially pronounced in China after Reform and Opening, when the distinct political landscape intertwined with China's policy of opening up and engaging globally. On the one hand, China's opening to the world necessitated a greater consumer demand for foreign news coverage. Esarey elucidates the transformative wave of media commercialization alongside the progression of propaganda methodologies, compelling the *PD* to undertake a strategic recalibration.²⁶ This recalibration entails maneuvering through the dichotomy of the *PD*'s conventional propagandistic functions and the exigencies posited by a media domain progressively influenced by market dynamics. The commercialization of media following the economic reforms of the 1980s has also fostered a more assertive and nationalistic tenor in the discourse on foreign policy.²⁷ This shift is fueled by the competitive nature of media outlets vying for audience engagement. Coverage of issues related to Japan, Taiwan, and the United States, which stirs up nationalist sentiment among the Chinese populace, is particularly extensive. The *PD* is insulated from this more competitive media landscape both because it enjoys the largest circulation and because it has the direct political backing of the party's top leadership. The *PD*

²³ Esarey, "Propaganda as a Lens for Assessing Xi Jinping's Leadership."

²⁴ Powlick, "Sources of Public Opinion for American Foreign Policy Officials"; Baum and Potter, "Relationships between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy."

²⁵ Ji and Liu, "State as Salesman."

²⁶ Esarey, "Marketing Dictatorship."

²⁷ Shirk, *Changing Media, Changing China*; Stockmann, "Race to the Bottom."

remains more staid and measured in its tone than nationalist tabloids like the *Global Times*. The *PD*'s staff traditionally does not participate in news-gathering expeditions or maintain foreign correspondents; instead, the staff relies on interviewing relevant officials.²⁸ But since the 1990s, the newspaper has added overseas bureaus to enhance its foreign coverage, even though its audience is primarily domestic elites. This move indicates a bottom-up, market-driven demand for foreign coverage.

On the other hand, the unaltered hierarchical structure of China's political system increased the need for a singular, unified voice to consolidate support around the leadership. China's opening up gave a wider array of interest groups a stake in foreign policy making and allowed for a greater range of opinions. However, one of the lessons the CCP drew from the collapse of the Soviet Union—particularly Mikhail Gorbachev's sanctioning of media freedom under glasnost—was the need for intensive media guidance amid partial political liberalization.²⁹ This necessity becomes more pressing in the face of the diverse domestic interests that stem from globalization, thus requiring a strategic reduction in foreign news coverage to prioritize content that reinforces the central authority and cohesion around the party's leadership. In this context, foreign coverage in the *PD* is not meant to engage in a public debate about the merits of the leader's foreign policy but to shut down debate and assert orthodoxy in foreign affairs. So, while the bottom-up demand for foreign coverage might increase over time, the top-down need for media oversight and narrative control grows concurrently.

Which of these two tendencies prevails at any given time depends on the political strength of the leader. This observation is especially true in foreign policy because every general secretary since Jiang Zemin has also served as the head of state. As Ban and colleagues posit, the extent of newspaper coverage dedicated to political figures and institutions robustly signifies their political clout.³⁰ Ban and colleagues delineate that, as a political leader accrues power, the volume of newspaper articles featuring that leader correspondingly increases. While the investigation by Ban and colleagues primarily dissects the American media landscape, this framework can plausibly be extrapolated to authoritarian regimes, potentially with greater magnitude. The framework is predicated on the notion that the media in such contexts are explicitly tasked with elevating the profile of leaders, a mandate that extends across both domestic and international news spectrums.³¹ The *PD* is directly administered by the Central Committee of the CCP, which is chaired by the general secretary of the party. The *PD* is considered more authoritative than other state-run media, such as *Xinhua News*, the *Global Times*, or *Guangzhou Daily*, and it is less responsible for soft-power projection to foreign audiences than the English-language *China Daily* or China Global Television Network (CGTN). The editor of the *PD* holds ministerial rank and has discretion over how much space is given to coverage of foreign affairs and what the balance is between reporting and editorializing. As Shih has noted, fawning coverage in official media serves to signal political loyalty in Chinese politics.³² Consequently, the balance of coverage in the *PD* is most apt to reflect transitions in the power and influence of the general secretary. Bottom-up and more pluralistic foreign news coverage is likely to give way to the signaling of authority and prominence of the political leader.

²⁸ MacFarquhar, "Visit to the Chinese Press."

²⁹ Repnikova, "Media Openings and Political Transitions."

³⁰ Ban et al., "How Newspapers Reveal Political Power."

³¹ Suong, "Authoritarian Media Coverage of International News."

³² Shih, "'Nauseating' Displays of Loyalty."

To delve into how this type of propagandistic signaling is implemented, this study examines foreign news coverage. Central to the analysis is the *PD*, distinguished by its pivotal role as the CCP's mouthpiece. Positioned at the heart of the CCP's propaganda apparatus and operating directly under the Central Committee of the CCP, the *PD* serves as a crucial instrument for conveying the party's official narratives and policy directions. The newspaper's content is consistently viewed as a direct manifestation of the party's strategic priorities and ideological perspectives, and the *PD* is tasked with bolstering the CCP's ideological and narrative dominion.³³ The singular stature of the *PD* within the CCP's informational strategy renders a highly revealing exploration into its pattern of news presentation, offering a window into the party's strategic orientations and the political logic veiled within the black box.

The *PD* has limited page space but an endless array of potential foreign and domestic news to cover. What its editor chooses to cover is driven less by external events and more by power politics. Recontextualizing this perspective within the dual nature of the *PD* reveals a clear reason for the reduction in foreign news coverage: As a leader's political stature increases, the newspaper must devote more space to fulfilling its propagandistic duties, a task which inevitably limits its ability to report on international events. This shift suggests that the decrease in foreign news coverage does not indicate the reduced importance of foreign policy. Instead, it reflects the redirection of the editorial focus toward supporting political propaganda to enhance the leader's power and present the leader's worldview.

3.1. Hypotheses

Drawing on the theoretical insights gleaned from extant literature, the authors argue that the *PD* modulates its foreign news coverage in reaction to fluctuations in the political power structure. This strategic adjustment serves to align the newspaper's content more closely with the top leader's perspective on foreign policy as the leader consolidates power and exercises greater control over personnel. To empirically explore this framework, the authors delineate three hypotheses.

The first hypothesis addresses the overarching influence of power consolidation on the allocation of editorial space within the *PD* across different leadership eras. There is a well-established trajectory within Chinese politics: Leaders come into office surrounded by personnel appointed by the previous leader and gradually consolidate power during their first term through the strategic placement of loyal subordinates in key positions. By their second term, leaders are surrounded by personnel they elevated themselves and thus exercise greater control over the apparatus of state. The consolidation of power through personnel change also applies to control of the propaganda apparatus and results in greater editorial control over the *PD*. This pattern of power consolidation would imply that the *PD*'s coverage of foreign policy will have less reporting and more signaling in the leader's second term. This forms the first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Chinese political leaders in their second term exert a more pronounced editorial influence on the *People's Daily* than first-term leaders do, leading to a reduction in foreign news coverage.

The second hypothesis specifically examines the tenure of Xi Jinping, taking into account both the comparative and temporal dimensions of his leadership. Scholars have noted Xi's

³³ Shambaugh, "China's Propaganda System."

unparalleled authority in modern Chinese politics³⁴ and his rapid consolidation of power. Notably, Xi was able to achieve significant power consolidation during his first term.³⁵

The decline in foreign news coverage in the *PD* and the consolidation of political power under Xi Jinping can be understood by recognizing how domestic politics shapes the newspaper's content. This dynamic highlights the interplay between expanding political power and media prioritization, leading to a shift away from coverage of international affairs. There should be less coverage of international news precisely because Xi is personally invested in controlling the foreign policy narrative. Coverage of Western countries, in particular, has declined dramatically since 2013, even as Chinese foreign policy has become more assertive under Xi. This version of a more "global" China actually reduces room for nuanced discussions about foreign countries. It is also noteworthy that the dramatic decline in foreign coverage began well before the external shocks of the US–China Trade War in 2018 or the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 further strained China's relationship with the West. Before these shocks, the *PD* was already much more focused on justifying China's actions abroad than on reporting on what other countries were doing. This observation informs the second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: In comparison with all terms of political leaders, Xi Jinping exerts the most pronounced editorial influence on the *People's Daily*, leading to the least foreign news coverage. However, this effect should be even more pronounced in his second term than in his first term.

The third hypothesis focuses on the dual function of the *PD*, differentiating between its editorial pieces and news reports. While news articles can be employed as propaganda through biased reporting, editorial articles fulfill this function in a more direct and ideologically driven manner. Multiple studies have demonstrated that, in comparison with news reports, the editorial articles of the *PD* are more explicit conveyors of the party's opinions and narrative.³⁶ Therefore, if the hypothesized dominance of political power over the *PD*'s editorial content holds true, it should be observed that even as the volume of news reports declines, the number of editorial articles—serving a purely propagandistic function—remains constant or even increases. The third hypothesis of this paper, based on this expectation, is formulated as follows:

Hypothesis 3: The reduction in foreign news coverage in the *People's Daily* is greater in news pieces than in editorial pieces.

Building on the theoretical underpinnings and empirical evidence outlined in this paper's research hypotheses, the authors aim to rigorously test the dynamics of editorial influence within the *PD*, particularly as they pertain to foreign news coverage. These hypotheses serve as a foundational component of the inquiry into how political power consolidation under Chinese leadership has potentially reshaped the newspaper's approach to reporting on international affairs, with a specific focus on Xi's tenure.

4. Research Design

As previously introduced, the authors operationalize the primary dependent variable, foreign news coverage in the *PD*, by tallying the annual count of articles that feature content related to different countries. To accurately identify articles relevant to each country, the authors use a

³⁴ Shan, "Xi Jinping's Leadership Style"; Zhao, *Dragon Roars Back*.

³⁵ Gueorguiev, "Dictator's Shadow."

³⁶ Wu, "Command Communication"; Wang, "Ideology Is Blowing in the Wind."

comprehensive dictionary of country-specific keywords. This dictionary includes the Chinese names of countries, their capitals, and heads of state (e.g., United States, Washington, Obama).³⁷ To ensure that all countries have the same probability of being counted, the authors excluded keywords that are unique to a particular country but do not have parallels in other countries (e.g., White House, Uncle Sam). An article is attributed to a particular country if it contains two or more of these designated keywords. It is important to note that an article may be classified under several countries if it meets the keyword criteria for each. Because the *PD*'s format and length changes over the years, the authors also developed for robustness alternative measures that report foreign coverage as a proportion of the annual article total as well as the number of foreign keywords per 1,000 words.³⁸

The authors hypothesize that the extent of coverage a country receives in the *PD* is directly correlated with its economic stature and trade volume with China. Consequently, the dataset comprises news reports from a total of 62 major countries. This selection encompasses nations that are geographically adjacent to China and those that are among its principal trading partners, both in terms of imports and exports, as detailed in the appendix. Table 1 illustrates how the volume of coverage is heavily concentrated, with the top five countries accounting for 40 percent of all foreign coverage. Countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Democratic Republic of the Congo each account for less than 0.1 percent of all foreign coverage, and so the authors are confident that these 62 major countries should account for nearly all foreign countries mentioned in the *PD*.

TABLE 1. *People's Daily* foreign coverage by country, 1993–2022

| Country or jurisdiction | Total count | Total share | Articles per year |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------------|
| 1. United States | 67,207 | 17.368 | 2,240.23 |
| 2. Japan | 32,422 | 8.379 | 1,080.73 |
| 3. Russia | 23,401 | 6.047 | 780.03 |
| 4. United Kingdom | 17,891 | 4.623 | 596.37 |
| 5. France | 16,382 | 4.233 | 546.07 |
| 6. Germany | 15,130 | 3.910 | 504.33 |
| 7. Taiwan | 15,032 | 3.885 | 501.07 |
| 8. South Korea | 14,129 | 3.651 | 470.97 |
| 9. India | 9,976 | 2.578 | 332.53 |
| 10. Vietnam | 8,117 | 2.098 | 270.57 |
| ... | ... | ... | ... |
| 61. United Arab Emirates | 320 | 0.083 | 10.67 |
| 62. Democratic Republic of the Congo | 189 | 0.049 | 6.30 |

³⁷ In Chinese: 美国 [United States], 华盛顿 [Washington], 奥巴马 [Obama].

³⁸ See appendix for a measure of the ratio of foreign coverage as a percentage of all articles. The ratio of foreign coverage declines from 45 percent to below 30 percent. This number is likely slightly inflated because articles that mention two foreign countries would be double counted. By comparison, the volume of foreign coverage in the *New York Times* ranges from 40.5 to 46.5 percent. See Jones, Van Aelst, and Vliegthart, "Foreign Nation Visibility."

The primary independent variable of interest is the political tenure of the supreme leaders of the CCP. Since the data spanned from 1993 to 2022, the authors categorize the years into six leadership tenures: Jiang Zemin's first term (1993–1997), Jiang Zemin's second term (1998–2002), Hu Jintao's first term (2003–2007), Hu Jintao's second term (2008–2012), Xi Jinping's first term (2013–2017), and Xi Jinping's second term (2018–2022). The division of these terms adheres to the chronological markers set by the sessions of the National Congress of the CCP, the critical assembly tasked with the election of the party's central leadership. Accordingly, years that fall within a leader's specific term are coded as 1 in the dataset, signifying active leadership tenure, while all other years are coded as 0, indicating the absence of that specific leader's tenure.

Given the nature of the dependent variable as count data and the propensity for overdispersion, the authors opted for a negative binomial regression approach.³⁹ This methodological choice is apt, considering the characteristics of the data, and it is bolstered by clustering robust standard errors at the country level. Such clustering accounts for within-country variance, solidifying the validity of the paper's statistical conclusions. Since the tenure system for bureaucrats, which forms the basis of the comparative analysis, was established and formulated after Deng Xiaoping's period, the paper designated the tenure of Jiang Zemin, the first leader after Deng, as the reference category.⁴⁰ This decision facilitates a more coherent analysis across the tenures of subsequent leaders, whose political periods have been influenced by the institutional framework in the post-reform era.

To rigorously ascertain the impact of internal power variations within the CCP's leadership on the *PD*'s foreign news coverage, one must control for external influences that could confound this relationship, as highlighted by previous research. Accordingly, the paper's methodology incorporates 13 country-level variables, capturing national characteristics that might influence the dependent variable and obscure the effect of internal power dynamics that the paper aims to examine.

4.1. Chinese diplomacy

International news coverage in the *PD* is driven by China's diplomatic activities. To control for the dimensions of international diplomacy and strategic engagements, as examined in Wang's research,⁴¹ the paper incorporates Presidential Visit, Premier Visit, Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID), Threat and Imposition of Economic Sanctions (TIES), Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP), and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) membership as controls. These binary variables respectively capture the occurrences of visits by China's president and premier to a given country, involvement in militarized disputes as per the MID dataset, economic sanctions based on the China TIES dataset,⁴² establishment of a comprehensive strategic partnership, and BRI membership within the study period.⁴³

³⁹ An ordinary least squares model is also included in the appendix.

⁴⁰ Zhang, "On the Deng Xiaoping's Contribution to Conversion of Contemporary Chinese Political Authority."

⁴¹ Wang, "Barking without Biting."

⁴² Zhang and Shanks, "Measuring Chinese Economic Sanctions 1949–2020."

⁴³ These political data come from the Chinese Foreign Policy Dataset.

4.2. Economic linkages

Echoing Ji and Liu's findings,⁴⁴ the authors expect economic linkages to play a pivotal role in shaping the volume and favorability of foreign news coverage. To mitigate the impact of economic factors, the paper incorporates gross domestic product (GDP), import and export volumes, and the presence of free trade agreements (FTAs) with China into the analysis. Specifically, GDP is assessed through annual figures, whereas import and export variables reflect the trade volume between China and the respective countries. The FTA variable, coded binarily, denotes the existence of a signed trade agreement with China, with 1 indicating the presence of an FTA in a given year. The distance variable quantifies the population-weighted distance from the country's capital city to Beijing. Additionally, considering the significant national effort and propaganda surrounding the Beijing Olympics in 2008 and 2022, the variable "Olympic" is included to account for news coverage on foreign countries with the keyword "Olympic." This binary variable is set to 1 for relevant coverage and 0 otherwise, acknowledging the extensive preparation and focus on Olympic-related propaganda.⁴⁵

4.3. Partner country politics

To control for the impact of countries' global standing and regime type on the *PD*'s editorial choices, the authors coded 1 if the country is a member of the Group of Seven plus South Korea (or "G8"),⁴⁶ the Group of 20, or the "BRICS+" group,⁴⁷ and 0 if otherwise. Furthermore, anticipating that the nature of a country's political regime could influence its portrayal in the *PD*, the paper incorporates the Liberal Democracy Index, derived from the V-Dem dataset, to control for regime-type effects.⁴⁸ Considering these variables, our full statistical model is presented in the following:

$$\ln(\mu_i) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{SecondTerm}_i + \beta_2 X_i + \beta_3 \text{SecondTerm}_i \times X_i + \beta_4 \text{Hu}_i \quad (1)$$

$$+ \beta_5 \log_GDP_lag_i + \beta_6 \text{FTA_lag}_i + \beta_7 \log_Import_lag_i + \beta_8 \log_Export_lag_i \quad (2)$$

$$+ \beta_9 \text{president_visit}_i + \beta_{10} \text{premier_visit}_i + \beta_{11} \text{BRI_lag}_i + \beta_{12} \text{MID}_i + \beta_{13} \text{TIES}_i \quad (3)$$

$$+ \beta_{14} \text{CSP_lag}_i + \beta_{15} \text{G8_lag}_i + \beta_{16} \text{BRICS_lag}_i + \beta_{17} \text{Distance}_i + \beta_{18} \text{VDem}_i + \beta_{19} \text{Olympics}_i \quad (4)$$

Here, μ_i represents the expected foreign news coverage for observation i . This multifaceted analytical strategy ensures a focused examination of how variations in the power dynamics of CCP leadership specifically affect foreign news coverage in the *PD* while carefully controlling for a comprehensive set of economic, diplomatic, geographical, and regime-type factors that might otherwise confound the observed relationships.

⁴⁴ Ji and Liu, "State as Salesman."

⁴⁵ These economic data come from the World Economics and Politics (WEP) Dataverse.

⁴⁶ This group comprises the United States, Japan, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Canada, and South Korea. (This group is somewhat different from the conventional G8, which includes China but excludes South Korea.)

⁴⁷ The members of BRICS+, aside from China, include Brazil, Russia, India, South Africa, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Ethiopia. This group is different from the conventional BRICS+, which consists of the listed countries *and* China.

⁴⁸ These political data come from the V-Dem dataset.

5. Results

5.1. Regression analysis

The analytical outcomes, as depicted in table 2, demonstrate a discernible contraction in the editorial allocation for foreign news across the tenures of Xi Jinping when benchmarked against Jiang's era ($-0.8546, p < 0.01$), while Hu's period does not appear to be statistically significant.

TABLE 2. Negative binomial regression results

| Independent variable | Coefficient | Standard error | <i>z</i> | <i>P</i> > $ z $ |
|----------------------|-------------|----------------|----------|------------------|
| SecondTerm | -0.2606*** | 0.0735 | -3.54 | 0.000 |
| Xi | -0.8546*** | 0.2584 | -3.31 | 0.001 |
| SecondTerm#Xi | -0.2310*** | 0.0893 | -2.59 | 0.010 |
| Hu | -0.3038 | 0.1591 | -1.91 | 0.056 |
| log_GDP_lag | 0.2100*** | 0.0717 | 2.93 | 0.003 |
| FTA_lag | 0.1920 | 0.1301 | 1.48 | 0.140 |
| log_Import_lag | 0.1250 | 0.0974 | 1.28 | 0.199 |
| log_Export_lag | -0.0544 | 0.0559 | -0.97 | 0.331 |
| president_visit | 0.2896*** | 0.0541 | 5.35 | 0.000 |
| premier_visit | 0.1038 | 0.0618 | 1.68 | 0.093 |
| BRI_lag | 0.0504 | 0.1097 | 0.46 | 0.646 |
| MID | 0.5570*** | 0.1778 | 3.13 | 0.002 |
| TIES | 0.4060 | 0.3112 | 1.30 | 0.192 |
| CSP_lag | 0.3268*** | 0.1159 | 2.82 | 0.005 |
| G8_lag | 0.9554*** | 0.2470 | 3.87 | 0.000 |
| BRICS_lag | 0.7421*** | 0.1796 | 4.13 | 0.000 |
| Distance | -0.0001*** | 0.0000 | -3.40 | 0.001 |
| VDem | 0.0915 | 0.3425 | 0.27 | 0.789 |
| Olympics | -0.0000 | 0.0000 | -0.35 | 0.728 |
| <i>/lnalpha</i> | | | | |
| Constant | -0.6873*** | 0.1340 | | |
| <i>alpha</i> | | | | |
| Constant | -1.4555 | 1.3307 | | |

Note: Dependent variable: foreign coverage (number of mentions).

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Notably, the analysis substantiates a significant negative impact associated with second terms ($-0.2606, p < 0.01$) across all leaders, lending substantial support to our first hypothesis. This finding underscores the amplified editorial sway in leaders' subsequent terms, affirming the hypothesized second-term effect and its ramifications for the portrayal of foreign news in the *PD*.

Delving deeper into Xi's tenure, the study finds that the empirical evidence reveals a noteworthy further reduction in foreign news coverage during his second term ($-0.2310, p < 0.01$), beyond the general trend observed for second terms. Coupled with the significant downturn during Xi's tenure overall ($-0.8546, p < 0.01$)—the most substantial among the leaders examined—these findings resoundingly corroborate the second hypothesis. Xi's second term is marked by a significant decline in foreign news coverage, exceeding that of any other leader's first or second term, including his own initial term. This distinctive pattern not only underscores Xi's singular influence over the editorial direction of the *PD* but also signifies a strategic adjustment of media content that aligns with his consolidated authority and the overarching political narrative promulgated by the CCP.

With the given results, it becomes necessary to delve into the balance between the propagandistic role of the *PD*, which serves to amplify leadership narratives, and its journalistic function of reporting on international events. The critical inquiry then turns to the following questions: With the conspicuous absence of extensive foreign news coverage, what content occupies the editorial space in the *PD*? Does the newspaper indeed prioritize the articulation of political leaders' viewpoints, as postulated in the hypotheses? To address these questions, the authors conduct an in-depth content analysis of the *PD* in the next section, aimed at uncovering the nature of news that supplants foreign coverage and whether coverage aligns with the leadership's voice, as hypothesized. The authors examine the change by comparing Hu Jintao's first and second terms because he is widely seen as the least powerful of the three leaders since Deng and thus constitutes a least likely or hard case for the theory. If there is evidence of greater editorial control and less foreign coverage in Hu's second term, then we can safely conclude that the phenomenon exists for the other, more powerful leaders as well.

5.2. Hu Jintao's state visits to the United States

Hu Jintao's state visits to the United States, which predominate among state visits to other foreign countries mentioned, illustrate how the *PD* fulfills its editorial function in relation to foreign news coverage. Among all the visits Hu made to the United States from 2003 to 2012, two were classified as state visits. The first was on April 20, 2006, and the second on January 20, 2011, taking place in Hu's first and second terms, respectively. It is noteworthy that when the *PD* reports an event related to political leaders in foreign diplomacy, its format is consistent and mechanical. For example, the 2006 news report on the White House reception for Hu Jintao is structured as follows: After a brief summary of the event, the opening of the piece describes the welcoming ceremony, including the favorable weather at the time, and the state visit. This description is followed by a summary of speeches given by leaders of both countries. Compared to brief coverage of President George W. Bush's expression of friendship, a large portion of the article is devoted to Hu.⁴⁹

In the 2011 visit story, when President Barack Obama hosted Hu at the White House, the article's structure and format remained entirely consistent with that in 2006, even reusing

⁴⁹ Wang, Li, and Tang, "[President Hu Jintao, Attending the Welcome Ceremony]," *People's Daily*, 1.

descriptions of the weather as “bright and sunny”⁵⁰ and details of the ceremony, such as the 21-gun salute.⁵¹ The lengths of the news articles were also very similar: The first article was 1,501 words and the second was 1,408 words. The only slight difference between the two articles was that, in the 2006 article, Hu’s speech was mentioned after Bush’s speech; while in the 2011 article, Hu’s speech was mentioned before Obama’s speech.

Through examining the US-related coverage surrounding the periods in which the visits occurred, we can make two important observations. First, the American perspective receives less coverage during the second term than the first term. This does not imply that the *PD* places less emphasis on the US state visit. On the contrary, in both 2006 and 2011, the newspaper prioritized these state visits in terms of length and placement of coverage, with many related news pieces trying to clarify and prove how significant General Secretary Hu’s visits are to the country and to the world. However, what has changed is the coverage surrounding the visits. On April 19, 2006, among the news praising the importance of Hu’s state visit, the *PD* posted two parallel news topics: “The United States through the Eyes of the Chinese People”⁵² and “China through the Eyes of American People.”⁵³ These two news articles interviewed residents of both countries of various professions and ages, quoting their views on each other’s countries. Although in “The United States through the Eyes of the Chinese People” some opinions criticized America’s “hegemonism” and “bullying,”⁵⁴ the article also acknowledged America’s “advancement”⁵⁵ and the merits worthy of China’s learning and reference. Conversely, in “China through the Eyes of American People,” the interviewees expressed their fondness for and welcoming of the Chinese culture, Chinese goods, and celebrities such as Jackie Chan and Yao Ming. This series of news articles not only served to lay the groundwork for the political significance of Hu’s visit to the United States but also conveyed the message that “Americans also wish for friendly relations between the two countries” by presenting the perspective of the American people.

However, this American perspective disappeared in the series of news reports about Hu’s 2011 visit to the United States. For comparison, on January 19, 2011, the *PD* published an article titled “China Displays Positive Image in the US,”⁵⁶ reporting that the “Chinese National Image Film—Personalities” started showing on the large electronic display screens in New York’s Times Square on January 17, broadcasting 15 times per hour for a total of 300 times daily. Following this news, the *PD* published two consecutive articles titled “Listen, ‘National Image’ Representatives Speak Like This”⁵⁷ to narrate the content of the documentary. The first article reported on an interview with Chinese scientist Yuan Longping in the documentary, praising the achievements of the hybrid rice that he developed. The second article featured athlete Deng Yaping’s interview in the documentary, where she addressed the question, “Who can represent China’s image?” The articles concluded with the statement that the Times Square display was “enough for the world to see the confidence and splendor of the Chinese people today.”

⁵⁰ In Chinese: 阳光明媚 [bright and sunny].

⁵¹ Wu, Wen, and Wang, “[Invited to the United States for a State Visit, Arrives in Washington],” *People’s Daily*, 1.

⁵² *People’s Daily*, “[United States through the Eyes of the Chinese People],” 7.

⁵³ *People’s Daily*, “[China through the Eyes of American People],” 7.

⁵⁴ In Chinese: 霸权主义 [hegemonism] and 霸道 [bullying].

⁵⁵ In Chinese: 先进 [advancement].

⁵⁶ Wen and Peng, “[China Displays Positive Image in the US],” *People’s Daily*, 3.

⁵⁷ Jiang, “[Listen],” *People’s Daily*, 16; Fang, “[Listen],” *People’s Daily*, 16.

Another noticeable change is in the news reporting of Hu's visit to the United States, where the content and length of discussions about the leadership significantly increased. As previously noted, for reports on Hu's visit to the United States that involved the same level of leadership and diplomatic content, the actual reporting on the event itself did not change in length or content. However, after the 2011 news of the White House reception for Hu, the *PD* added a subreport under the main news article, which featured Vice President Joe Biden and his party warmly welcoming Hu at the airport. This subreport included almost 500 words of Hu's official speech at the airport, covering topics like the international situation and Sino–American relations.⁵⁸ There wasn't a similar subreport following the 2006 news of the White House reception for Hu.

Concurrent with the 2006⁵⁹ and 2011⁶⁰ reporting on the White House receptions for Hu Jintao in those years, reports titled "Chairman Hu Jintao Holds Talks with President Bush" and "Hu Jintao Holds Talks with US President Obama," respectively, were also published in the *PD*. Although both reports briefly share the content of the highest leaders' talks, the content and length of the news changed significantly: The word count of the 2006 report was 1,288,⁶¹ whereas the 2011 report reached 2,965 words.⁶² In the 2006 report, Hu's quoted content was 673 words; in 2011, his quoted content increased to 1,878 words. It is noteworthy that in both reports, the content of the Chinese leader's speech did not significantly change in substance or format: The first section was Hu's positive outlook and appraisal of Sino–American relations, and the second emphasized the "One China" principle with zero tolerance for Taiwan's independence. In other words, the same speech content by Hu received more extensive coverage in the *PD* during his second term.

This pattern showing an increase in the length of the news reports was also observed in other news reports: In 2006, the report titled "Hu Jintao Attends Lunch Meeting with American Friendship Groups and Delivers a Speech" contained 1,333 words;⁶³ in 2011, a similar report titled "Hu Jintao Attends Welcome Banquet by American Friendship Groups and Delivers an Important Speech" had 2,365 words.⁶⁴ Following both reports, the *PD* published the full text of Hu's speeches. Interestingly, Hu's 2006 speech to the friendship groups was 4,736 words,⁶⁵ whereas his 2011 speech was only 3,476 words.⁶⁶ So, although Hu's speech at the 2011 event was shorter in content and length than the 2006 speech, the report on the 2011 speech by the *PD* significantly increased in word count.

Such an increase was also reflected in Hu's meetings with American officials during his visit to the United States. The *PD* dedicated 727 words to a report on Hu meeting with the governor of Washington State, Christine Gregoire, where Hu's speech accounted for about half of the report's length.⁶⁷ However, in the 2011 report on Hu meeting US House Speaker John Boehner and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, the length increased to 1,149 words, with the majority of the content

⁵⁸ Wu, Wen, and Zhang, "[Arrived in Washington]," *People's Daily*, 1.

⁵⁹ Wang, Li, and Tang, "[President Hu Jintao, Attending the Welcome Ceremony]," *People's Daily*.

⁶⁰ Wu, Wen, and Wang, "[Invited to the United States for a State Visit, Arrives in Washington]," *People's Daily*.

⁶¹ Wang, Li, and Tang, "[Chairman Hu Jintao Holds Talks with President Bush]," *People's Daily*, 1.

⁶² Wu, Wen, and Ma, "[Hu Jintao Holds Talks with US President Obama]," *People's Daily*, 1.

⁶³ Wang and Zou, "[Hu Jintao Attends Lunch Meeting]," *People's Daily*, 2.

⁶⁴ Wu, Wen, and Ma, "[Hu Jintao Attends Welcome Banquet]," *People's Daily*, 1.

⁶⁵ Hu, "[Deepen Mutually Beneficial Cooperation and Promote Common Development]," *People's Daily*, 3.

⁶⁶ Hu, "[Building a Sino–American Cooperative Partnership]," *People's Daily*, 2.

⁶⁷ Wang and Zou, "[Hu Jintao Meets with the Governor of Washington]," *People's Daily*, 1.

comprising Hu's speech.⁶⁸ This comprehensive reporting not only highlights the increased space dedicated to Hu's speeches and interactions during his visit but also signifies the shift in reporting focus, underscoring the growing significance attributed to Hu's words and China's stance on international relations as presented by the *PD*. The observed expansion in reportage, while not enhancing the intrinsic appeal or persuasiveness of the content—since the essence and structure of the messages remained consistent—underscores a deliberate editorial choice to amplify the leader's presence. This editorial decision to allocate increased space to essentially unchanged speeches does not aim to sway public opinion through propaganda in the traditional sense. Rather, it serves a distinct signaling function, subtly indicating the escalating prominence of the leader within the state's hierarchy. This strategic use of editorial space thus aligns with this paper's theoretical framework, which posits the primary role of the *PD* not as a vehicle for persuasion but as a signaling medium to underscore the leader's growing stature, thereby aiding in the consolidation of their authority.

Comparing the same diplomatic events across different terms for the same leader, the authors observe that from the first to the second term, although there was no change in the *PD*'s direct reporting of the events, significant changes occurred in the news related to the events. The first change was a shift in focus from the bilateral relations including the target country, such as the United States, toward China itself. In other words, the propaganda news shifted its focus from “what foreign countries are doing in diplomacy” to “what the Chinese leader's views are on diplomacy.” The foreign country in question shifted from being treated as a subject in coverage to an object. This shift naturally led to a decrease in news coverage classified as foreign news, even if it was related to that foreign country. The second change is reflected in the variation in the lengths of discussions about the Chinese leaders: For news of the same diplomatic nature that involved reporting on leaders' speeches, even if the length of the leaders' speeches did not change or even decreased, the *PD* allocated more space to these reports and quoted the leaders' discussions in more detail. This change clearly aligns with this paper's hypothesis: As leaders gain more power in their second term, the propaganda space provided to them by the *PD* also increases. This increase naturally compresses the space originally allocated to foreign news.

5.3. Zhongsheng editorials

The examination of the *PD*'s editorial articles further supports the power–foreign news coverage paradigm. It is a well-known fact that the *PD* employs writing task groups to draft editorial articles under specific pen names, providing analysis and commentary. These editorial articles, compared to other types of news articles, accurately represent the views of their superior regime organ. This means the content of the editorial articles can be directly understood as coming from the leadership at the nerve center of the party and attributed to the “pure” propaganda aimed at propagating ideologies and dominated by political power.⁶⁹ Among these pen names, the authors have selected Zhongsheng⁷⁰ for analysis because the Zhongsheng editorials are considered the most authoritative regarding the CCP leadership's views on international affairs.⁷¹ If it could be observed that in all the *PD*'s articles focusing on the same country, the reduction of other articles

⁶⁸ Wu, Wen, and Wang, “[Hu Jintao Meets with US House Speaker Boehner],” *People's Daily*, 2.

⁶⁹ Gitter and Fang, “Chinese Communist Party's Use of Homophonous Pen Names.”

⁷⁰ In Chinese: 钟声, which is a homophone for “voice of the Central Committee.”

⁷¹ Carothers, *Understanding the Chinese Government's Growing Use of Anti-American Propaganda*.

is greater than those authored by Zhongsheng, then there would be more confidence in the claim that the decline in foreign news coverage is driven by the dynamics of political power.

As shown in figure 2, the annual number of articles discussing the United States (the most frequently mentioned foreign country) that are authored by Zhongsheng in the *PD* increased steadily from 2009 to 2022, peaking in 2019 and 2021. Although the number of articles declined in 2022, the value remained relatively high. As figure 3 shows, when this trend is compared to the overall trend of US-related news articles in the *PD*, the contrast becomes more pronounced: While the total number of the *PD*'s articles referencing the United States declined, the number of articles in the Zhongsheng column increased. In other words, although the total magnitude of foreign news coverage decreased, the politicized reports regarding a foreign country that represents the voice of the power center increased. This contrast aligns with the expectation that the propagandistic function of the *PD* takes precedence over its news-reporting function.

FIGURE 2. US-focused *People's Daily* articles authored by Zhongsheng, 2009–2022

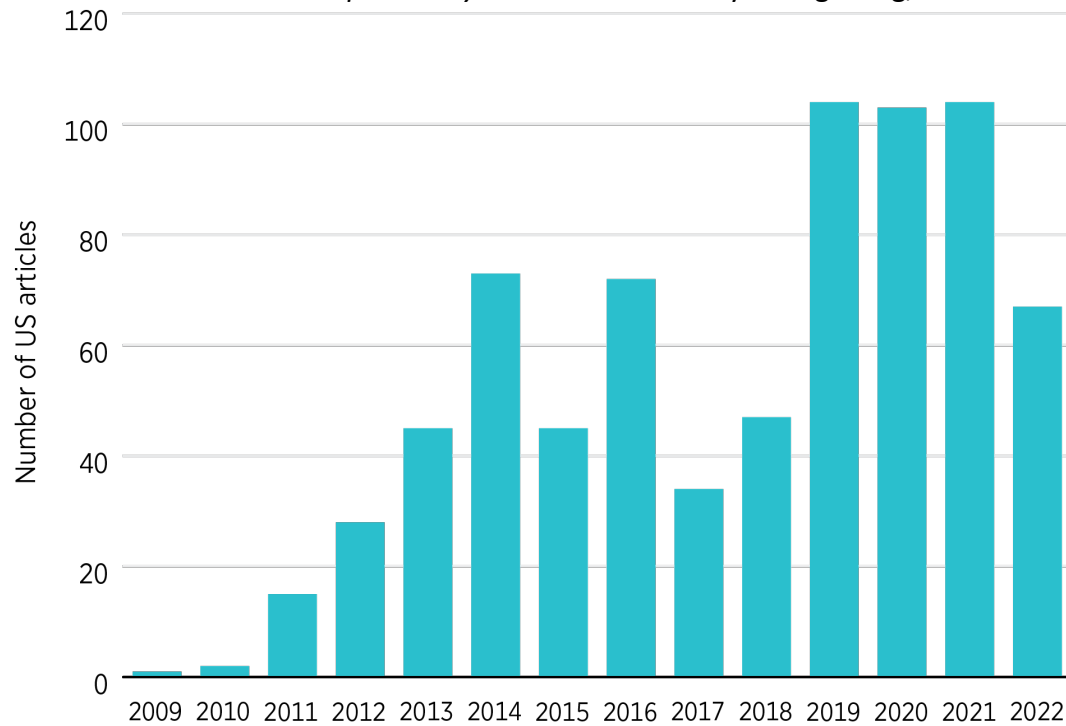
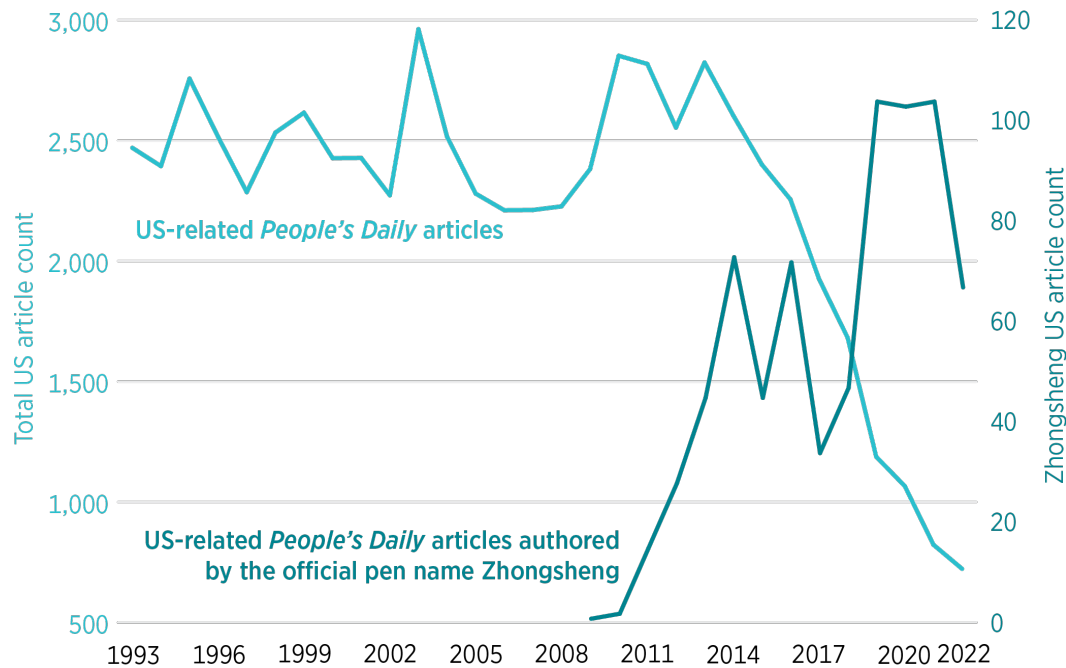


FIGURE 3. US-focused *People’s Daily* articles, 1993–2022



5.4. Article length in second term

To illustrate the evolution in the length of internationally focused *PD* articles that mention Chinese leadership, a subset of the corpus was filtered to include only those articles explicitly mentioning the name of a Chinese leader. The average length of the articles was computed annually, revealing a discernible increase in article length during the second term of each of the three post-Deng Xiaoping leaders.

Figures 4–6 illustrate the annual trends in the length of international *PD* articles corresponding to the tenures of Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping, respectively. These findings substantiate the hypothesis that the focus and scope of China’s international *PD* efforts have expanded significantly in recent years.

Furthermore, the authors analyzed a shift in the narrative perspective of these articles—from reporting on the viewpoints of foreign countries to a more China-centric perspective. This analysis was achieved by calculating the proportion of international *PD* articles that mention “中方” (The Chinese Side). The analysis indicates a higher frequency of “中方” mentions during the second terms of the post-Deng leaders, suggesting a strategic pivot toward emphasizing China’s stance in its international *PD* initiatives.

FIGURE 4. International-focused *People's Daily* article length under Jiang Zemin, 1993–2022

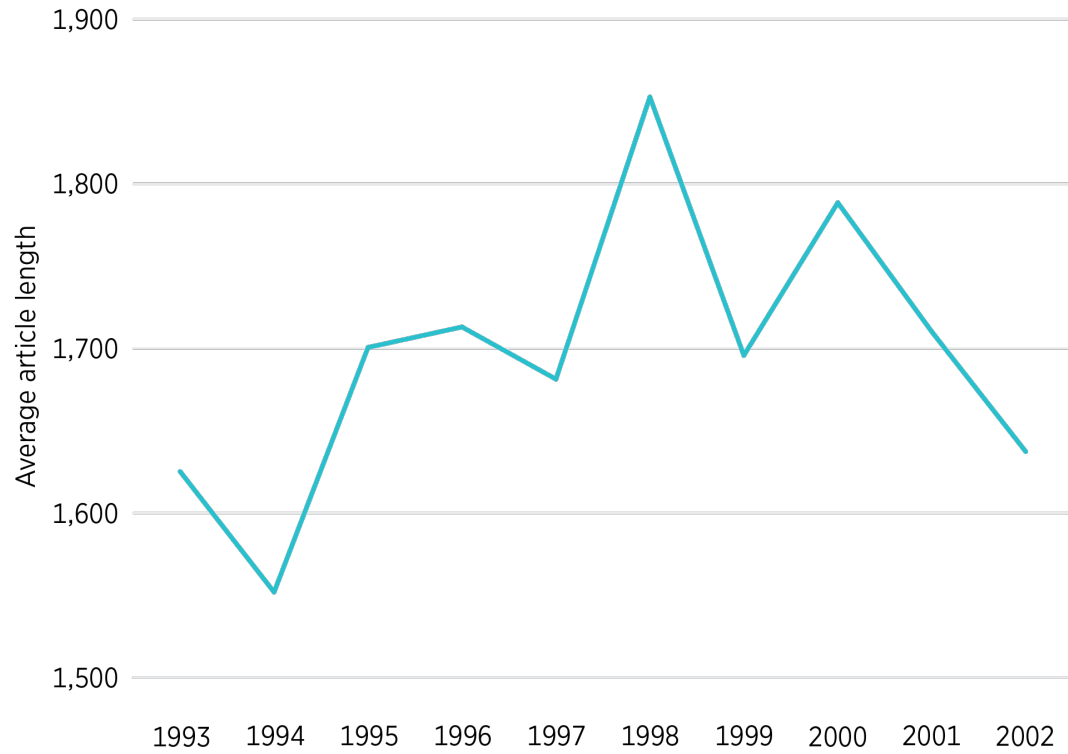


FIGURE 5. International-focused *People's Daily* article length under Hu Jintao, 2003–2012

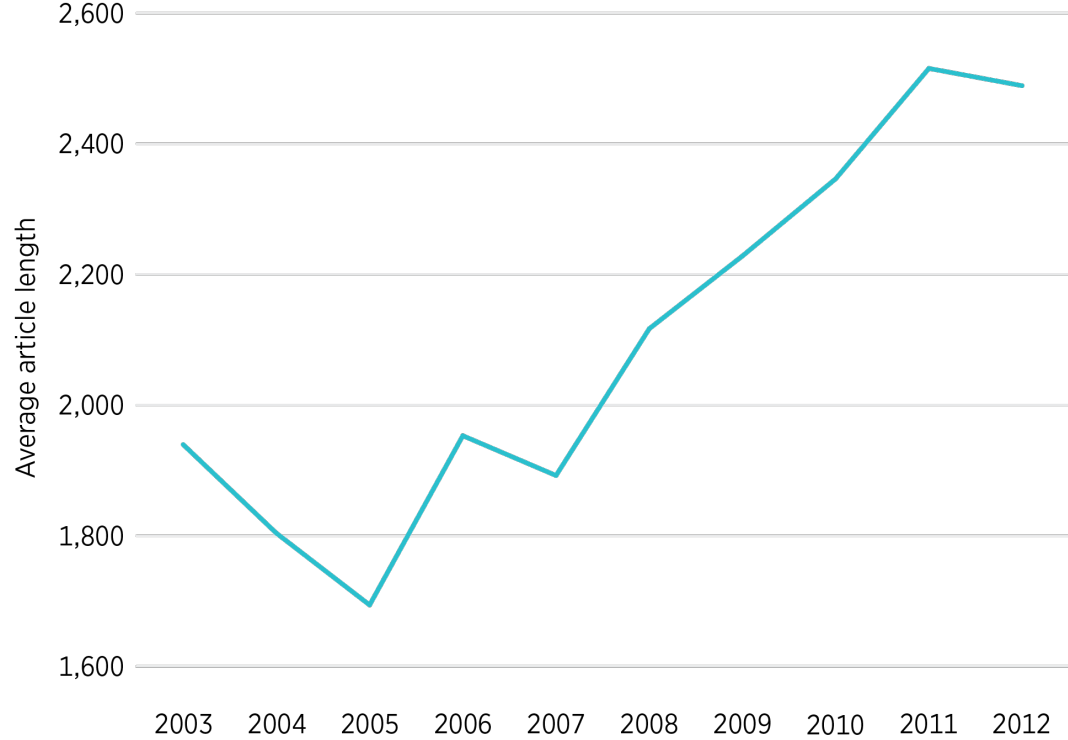
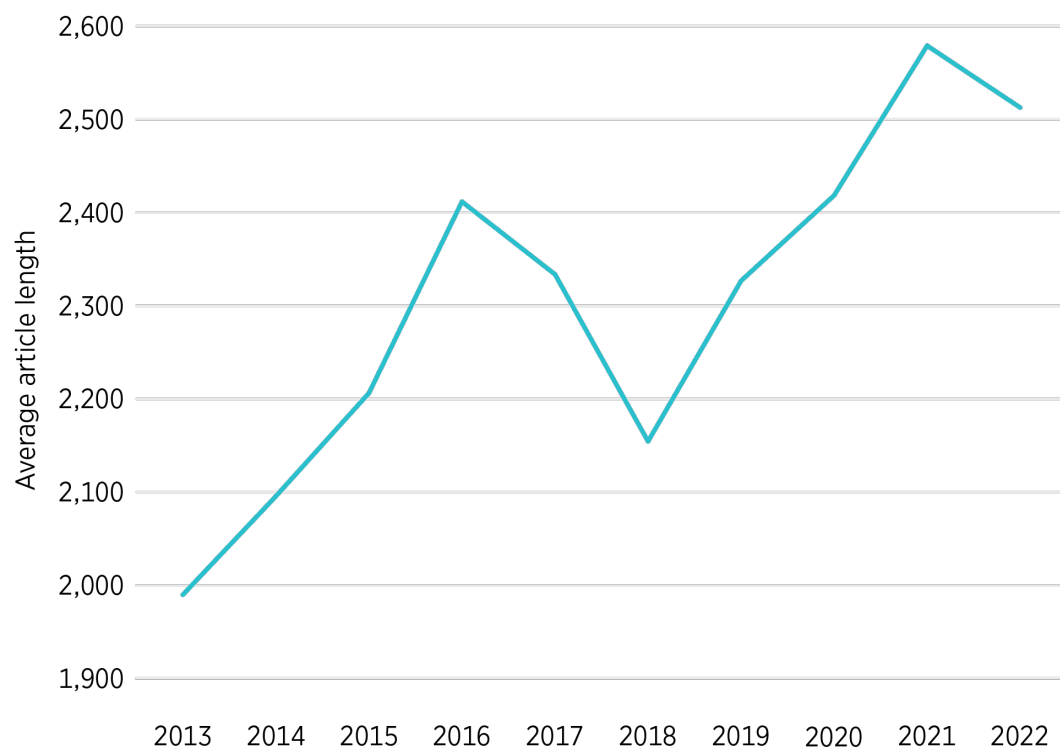


FIGURE 6. International-focused *People’s Daily* article length under Xi Jinping, 2013–2022



We also examined whether the focus of such international articles has shifted from the perspective of the other country to the perspective of China. We did this by simply counting the percentage of those international articles where “中方” is mentioned. Results showed that the percentage of international *PD* articles where “中方” is mentioned is higher during the second term for all post-Deng leaders.

5.5. Declining coverage of democracies

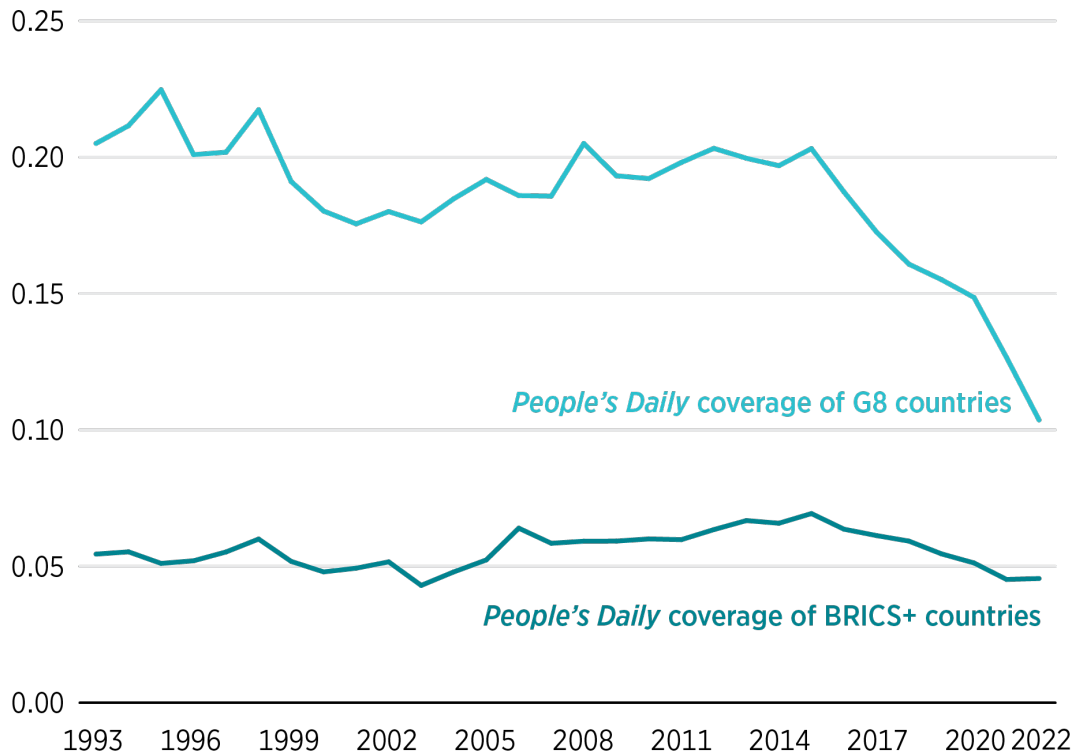
Finally, the authors disaggregate foreign coverage to compare the volume of coverage between the countries of the “G8,” which are all developed democracies that are US allies, and the “BRICS+” countries, which contain a set of major emerging economies with a variety of regime types and are also, for the most part, members of the BRI.

The results in figure 7 show that the *PD* historically devoted much more coverage to the economically developed “G8” countries than the emerging economies in the “BRICS+” group, even though the first BRICS summit was held in 2009. The trends in coverage of the two groupings are roughly parallel until 2013. After 2013, there is a noticeable decline in coverage for “G8” countries while coverage for “BRICS+” countries remains flat.

The authors attribute this decline in coverage of “Western” countries to Xi Jinping’s attempt to tighten ideological control over the media. Document No. 9, also known as “Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere,” was leaked in 2013 and is an internal directive issued

by the CCP and circulated among party officials that aimed to address what the party perceived as threats to its ideological control, particularly in the realms of education, media, and culture.⁷²

FIGURE 7. Foreign coverage of developed and developing countries, 1993–2022



The document specifically targeted what are referred to as “Western values,” such as democracy, human rights, and freedom of the press, which were seen as undermining the CCP’s legitimacy and authority. In response, there was a noticeable increase in censorship and suppression of foreign news coverage that promoted or reflected these values, particularly on sensitive topics such as political dissent or social unrest.

Document No. 9 also called for the promotion of CCP ideology, which has since evolved into a greater emphasis on “telling China’s story well” by bolstering the narrative of China’s rise as a global power under CCP leadership. This involves countering perceived Western biases or misconceptions about China’s political system and development model but also helps explain the pronounced decline in foreign coverage, driven by a decline in Western coverage, even during Xi’s first term in office. The effort to maintain strict control over ideological discourse represented by Document No. 9 reinforces the phenomenon of power consolidation by the top leader translating into greater emphasis on editorial foreign coverage than on traditional reporting.

6. Discussion

This study builds on existing literature by introducing a new perspective on the dynamics between political power within China’s leadership and editorial decisions in the *PD* concerning foreign news coverage. Recognizing the valuable insights provided by prior research on external

⁷² ChinaFile, “Document 9.”

influences shaping state media content, the paper's investigation delves deeper into how internal political fluctuations, particularly power consolidation, affect the portrayal of foreign policy. In doing so, the authors uncover the predominant role of propaganda as a mechanism of signaling the leader's political standing and intentions rather than purely as a tool of persuasion, as propaganda is traditionally viewed in foreign policy literature. This approach does not challenge previous findings but rather complements them by highlighting an additional layer of complexity within the state's narrative construction process.

The paper's findings indicate a significant correlation between the tenure of CCP leaders and the thematic focus of the *PD*, especially a discernible shift toward amplifying leaders' interpretations of foreign policy as they consolidate power. This trend is apparent in the tenures of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao and is particularly pronounced under Xi Jinping, illustrating a strategic realignment of the newspaper's editorial priorities according to the supreme leader's enhanced authority. Such a shift underscores the complex interplay between political power, media strategy, and narrative control in authoritarian contexts, presenting the *PD* as a pivotal instrument in advancing the leadership's agenda and sculpting the public's perception of China's foreign policy.

The paper's content analysis enhances the empirical dimensions of the study, elucidating the characteristics of editorial shifts that prioritize specific content over conventional foreign news reporting. This strategic reduction in foreign news coverage, a consequence of the leaders' amplified consolidation of power, underscores a deliberate editorial bias toward narratives that bolster political ideologies and the prevailing leadership's narrative. Patterns in the newspaper's content unveil the nuanced application of media for signaling the authority of the leadership, maintaining a consistent format and rhetoric across articles. The alterations are not in the substance or style of the content but are discernible in the extended lengths of articles and the inclusion of additional reports that echo the main narrative. This pattern indicates a sophisticated strategy to use media not just for dissemination of information but as a reflective mirror of political power dynamics, emphasizing the leader's prominence through the expansive coverage and auxiliary content that complements the primary narratives.

These findings have important implications for Chinese foreign policy. Because the *PD* is the newspaper of record in China, its coverage of foreign affairs shapes both public and elite opinion on international relations. The risk of miscalculation and misperceptions in China's dealings with foreign countries increases if the information Chinese people are receiving about the outside world becomes less objective. This paper has shown that greater editorial control exercised by more powerful leaders results in a reduction of objective "news" and an increase in subjective "editorial" content. Foreign countries are thus portrayed with less frequency and given less agency in official depictions of world affairs. Information asymmetry features centrally in modern theories of international conflict.⁷³ By increasing the gap between the messy reality of China's international relations and the rose-tinted image of foreign affairs in official media accounts, Chinese foreign coverage risks making diplomacy more difficult and conflict more likely. Of course, it is possible that China's elites and public can access alternative sources of foreign news or that other official channels will engage in less editorialized reporting of foreign affairs, but the tendency toward increased state control under Xi Jinping appears to extend to these other channels.

Looking forward, this study opens avenues for further research into the specific mechanisms through which political narratives are crafted and disseminated in state-controlled media, and how

⁷³ Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War."

these narratives influence both domestic governance and China’s international image. Future investigations could explore the reception and impact of these leader-centric narratives among the Chinese populace and in the international community, providing deeper insights into the efficacy and implications of state media strategies in authoritarian regimes.

In sum, by bridging the gap between internal political dynamics and media representation, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the strategic considerations underpinning editorial choices in the *PD*. The study underscores the importance of considering internal political fluctuations alongside traditional economic and diplomatic factors in analyzing state media behavior, offering a fresh lens through which to view the intricate relationship between political power, media, and narrative construction in contemporary China.

Appendix: Additional Tables

TABLE A1. Article count by country, 1993–2022

| Country | Total article count | Articles per year |
|----------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| United States | 67,207 | 2,240.23 |
| Japan | 32,422 | 1,080.73 |
| Russia | 23,401 | 780.03 |
| United Kingdom | 17,891 | 596.37 |
| France | 16,382 | 546.07 |
| Germany | 15,130 | 504.33 |
| Taiwan | 15,032 | 501.07 |
| South Korea | 14,129 | 470.97 |
| India | 9,976 | 332.53 |
| Vietnam | 8,117 | 270.57 |
| Italy | 7,932 | 264.4 |
| North Korea | 7,518 | 250.6 |
| Thailand | 7,504 | 250.13 |
| South Africa | 7,309 | 243.63 |
| Iraq | 6,781 | 226.03 |
| Pakistan | 6,746 | 224.87 |
| Egypt | 6,623 | 220.77 |
| Israel | 6,563 | 218.77 |
| Brazil | 6,189 | 206.30 |
| Australia | 5,724 | 190.80 |
| Spain | 4,854 | 161.80 |
| Iran | 4,849 | 161.63 |
| Canada | 4,302 | 143.40 |

| Country | Total article count | Articles per year |
|----------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Singapore | 4,187 | 139.57 |
| Mexico | 4,064 | 135.47 |
| Greece | 3,888 | 129.60 |
| Afghanistan | 3,784 | 126.13 |
| Belgium | 3,660 | 122.00 |
| Mongolia | 3,333 | 111.10 |
| Malaysia | 3,206 | 106.87 |
| Turkey | 3,191 | 106.37 |
| Philippines | 3,088 | 102.93 |
| Argentina | 3,066 | 102.20 |
| Cambodia | 2,960 | 98.67 |
| Kazakhstan | 2,807 | 93.57 |
| Netherlands | 2,767 | 92.23 |
| Laos | 2,596 | 86.53 |
| Ukraine | 2,572 | 85.73 |
| Indonesia | 2,550 | 85.00 |
| Sweden | 2,538 | 84.60 |
| Poland | 2,532 | 84.40 |
| New Zealand | 2,340 | 78.00 |
| Switzerland | 2,084 | 69.47 |
| Myanmar | 2,059 | 68.63 |
| Austria | 1,983 | 66.10 |
| Chile | 1,810 | 60.33 |
| Qatar | 1,797 | 59.90 |
| Denmark | 1,717 | 57.23 |
| Nigeria | 1,488 | 49.60 |
| Peru | 1,462 | 48.73 |
| Hungary | 1,440 | 48.00 |
| Norway | 1,262 | 42.07 |
| Czech Republic | 1,213 | 40.43 |
| Kyrgyzstan | 1,170 | 39.00 |
| Sri Lanka | 1,167 | 38.90 |
| Kuwait | 1,016 | 33.87 |
| Bangladesh | 976 | 32.53 |

| Country | Total article count | Articles per year |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Saudi Arabia | 857 | 28.57 |
| Angola | 757 | 25.23 |
| Oman | 488 | 16.27 |
| United Arab Emirates | 320 | 10.67 |
| Democratic Republic of the Congo | 189 | 6.30 |

TABLE A2. Ordinary least squares regression results

| Variable | Coefficient | Standard error | <i>t</i> | <i>P</i> > <i> t </i> |
|-----------------|--------------|----------------|----------|-----------------------|
| SecondTerm | -61.4915*** | 21.8423 | -2.82 | 0.007 |
| Xi | -203.4745** | 82.5638 | -2.46 | 0.017 |
| SecondTerm #Xi | -62.9529** | 29.4672 | -2.14 | 0.037 |
| Hu | -94.0624** | 45.1368 | -2.08 | 0.041 |
| log_GDP_lag | 27.1381* | 15.8053 | 1.72 | 0.091 |
| FTA_lag | -11.2153 | 33.7745 | -0.33 | 0.741 |
| log_Import_lag | 45.0758 | 31.0715 | 1.45 | 0.152 |
| log_Export_lag | -3.0162 | 11.0197 | -0.27 | 0.785 |
| president_visit | 61.3113*** | 19.4741 | 3.15 | 0.003 |
| premier_visit | 2.5803 | 24.1770 | 0.11 | 0.915 |
| BRI_lag | 72.1606 | 49.1406 | 1.47 | 0.147 |
| MID | 500.9234** | 198.1405 | 2.53 | 0.014 |
| TIES | 27.2166 | 99.3996 | 0.27 | 0.785 |
| CSP_lag | -28.2534 | 50.6665 | -0.56 | 0.579 |
| G8_lag | 443.1089*** | 151.3280 | 2.93 | 0.005 |
| BRICS_lag | 90.5590 | 68.0681 | 1.33 | 0.188 |
| Distance | -0.0032 | 0.0078 | -0.41 | 0.686 |
| VDem | -39.4415 | 60.7652 | -0.65 | 0.519 |
| Olympics | -0.0058 | 0.0050 | -1.15 | 0.254 |
| Constant | -1312.8769** | 546.1158 | -2.40 | 0.019 |

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