

U.S. Coercion, Authoritarian Alignment, and Hawkish Attitudes in Chinese Social Media

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Abstract

How does coercion by an established power shape public attitudes in a rising power? We argue that coercion can provoke backlash beyond its immediate targets by signaling hostile intentions and attempts to preserve international hierarchy. Such backlash may also arise when coercion targets politically similar third-party states. We examine these arguments using foreign-affairs videos published by Xinhua on Bilibili and hundreds of thousands of user comments. Using LLM-assisted text classification, we measure anti-U.S. sentiment, perceptions of U.S. decline, hawkish sentiment, and support for assertive Chinese foreign policy. Preliminary results show that U.S. coercion against China is positively associated with all four outcomes. Coercion against autocratic third-party states is also associated with perceptions of U.S. decline and hawkish sentiment, whereas coercion against democratic states produces weaker responses. These findings suggest that coercion intended to preserve an established power's dominance may inadvertently reinforce nationalist opposition within a rising power.

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1. Introduction

Established powers frequently employ coercion to constrain challengers, extract concessions, and maintain their privileged positions in international politics. Although international coercion is traditionally understood as an instrument for inducing behavioral changes in targeted states (Schelling 1966; Zhang 2019), recent scholarship suggests that the coercive behavior of dominant powers may also reflect their efforts to defend international hierarchy amid shifting distributions of power (Monteiro 2012; Onea 2014; Butt 2019). Beyond its immediate material objectives, coercion can therefore communicate the established power’s capabilities, intentions, and expectations of deference to broader international audiences (Jervis 2009; Byun and Carson 2026).

However, such demonstrations of dominance do not necessarily generate accommodation. Research on international status emphasizes that rising powers seek not only greater material capabilities but also recognition of their position within international hierarchy (Larson and Shevchenko 2010; Ward 2017; Murray 2018). When an established power employs coercion to constrain a rising challenger, its actions may be interpreted as evidence of hostile intentions and unwillingness to accommodate the challenger’s growing status. These perceptions can provoke resistance rather than compliance, potentially reinforcing support for confrontational foreign policies.

This paper examines how U.S. coercive foreign policy shapes public attitudes in China. We advance two arguments. First, U.S. coercion directly targeting China may provoke nationalist backlash by signaling hostility and attempts to constrain China’s rise. Second, coercion against third-party states may generate similar responses when Chinese observers perceive those states as politically similar to China. Specifically, U.S. coercion against autocratic states may be interpreted as evidence of broader hostility toward countries sharing China’s political characteristics, whereas coercion against democratic states may generate weaker responses.

We investigate these arguments using foreign-affairs videos published by Chinese state media on Bilibili and large-scale text analysis of user comments. Preliminary findings suggest that U.S. coercion against China is associated with more hawkish attitudes across several dimensions. Moreover, coercion against autocratic third-party states is associated with stronger hawkish responses than coercion against democratic countries.

2. Established Power Coercion and International Hierarchy

2.1. Coercion as an instrument of dominance

International coercion involves threatening or imposing costs to induce another state to change its behavior (Schelling 1966; Zhang 2019). Existing research has generally examined its effectiveness in securing concessions, emphasizing factors such as the credibility of

threats, the costs imposed on targets, and assurances that punishment will end following compliance (Zhang 2019; Pauly 2024).

Yet coercion may also serve broader strategic objectives. Established powers possess incentives to preserve favorable distributions of power and prevent emerging challengers from undermining the existing international order. Even when a dominant power seeks to maintain rather than revise the status quo, enforcing that order may require coercive measures against states attempting to strengthen their capabilities or expand their autonomy (Monteiro 2012). Moreover, dominant powers may experience status anxiety as emerging challengers approach their position in the international hierarchy, encouraging resistance to accommodation (Onea 2014).

Coercion also possesses a symbolic dimension. International status depends not only on material capabilities but also on recognition by other actors (Wohlforth 2009; Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth 2014). Accordingly, coercive behavior may demonstrate an established power's ability to impose its preferences and compel deference. Butt (2019), for example, argues that military intervention can serve a performative purpose by demonstrating hegemonic authority to international audiences. Similarly, Byun and Carson (2026) emphasize how publicly displayed violence can shape international perceptions of relative power.

These arguments suggest that coercion can reinforce international hierarchy by demonstrating the established power's continuing dominance. However, because status and authority depend on recognition, the consequences of such demonstrations ultimately depend on how international audiences interpret them.

2.2. Coercion and backlash in a rising power

The same coercive actions intended to demonstrate dominance may provoke resistance among citizens of a rising power. Research on power transitions emphasizes that rising powers seek recognition commensurate with their growing capabilities (Murray 2018). When established powers refuse to accommodate these aspirations, rising powers may develop perceptions of status dissatisfaction or immobility, potentially strengthening domestic demands for more confrontational foreign policies (Ward 2017). In particular, individuals who strongly identify with their nation may interpret external attempts to constrain its capabilities as challenges to their collective identity and rightful international standing.

This argument builds on social identity theory, which emphasizes that individuals derive self-esteem from their group memberships and may respond defensively to perceived threats against their in-group (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Such mechanisms have also been identified in research on the domestic consequences of foreign coercion. Grossman, Manekin, and Margalit (2018) demonstrate that sanctions can strengthen support for policies opposed by foreign actors, while Gueorguiev, McDowell, and Steinberg (2020) examine how economic threats shape Chinese citizens' preferences through material interests, national identity, and informational mechanisms. Kohnno, Montinola, and Winters (2023) further show that reactions to foreign pressure vary with individuals' political af-

filiations.

Building on these insights, we argue that Chinese citizens may interpret U.S. coercion as an attempt to prevent China’s rise and deny its legitimate status as a major power. Such interpretations may increase negative attitudes toward the United States and support for assertive Chinese foreign policy. Moreover, coercive behavior may reinforce perceptions of U.S. decline if Chinese observers interpret increasing reliance on pressure as evidence of an established power struggling to preserve its dominance.

Hypothesis 1: Exposure to U.S. coercion directly targeting China is associated with more hawkish attitudes toward the United States among Chinese social-media users.

2.3. Third-party coercion and political similarity

Importantly, the political consequences of coercion may extend beyond the directly targeted country. Foreign-policy actions provide information to international observers about a state’s broader intentions and willingness to impose its preferences (Jervis 2009). Coercion against one country may therefore influence attitudes in another, particularly when observers perceive similarities between themselves and the target.

Theories of international status emphasize that perceptions of hierarchy are relational and depend on the responses of multiple audiences (Røren 2023; Lin 2024). Drawing on social identity theory, we expect the political characteristics of coercion targets to shape how Chinese audiences interpret U.S. behavior.

In particular, U.S. coercion against autocratic third-party states may be perceived as evidence of broader hostility toward governments that share China’s political characteristics. Chinese observers may consequently infer that similar pressure could be directed against China, even when China is not directly involved in the dispute. By comparison, coercion against democratic states should provide a weaker signal of hostility toward China’s political in-group.

Hypothesis 2a: Exposure to U.S. coercion against autocratic third-party states is associated with more hawkish attitudes among Chinese social-media users.

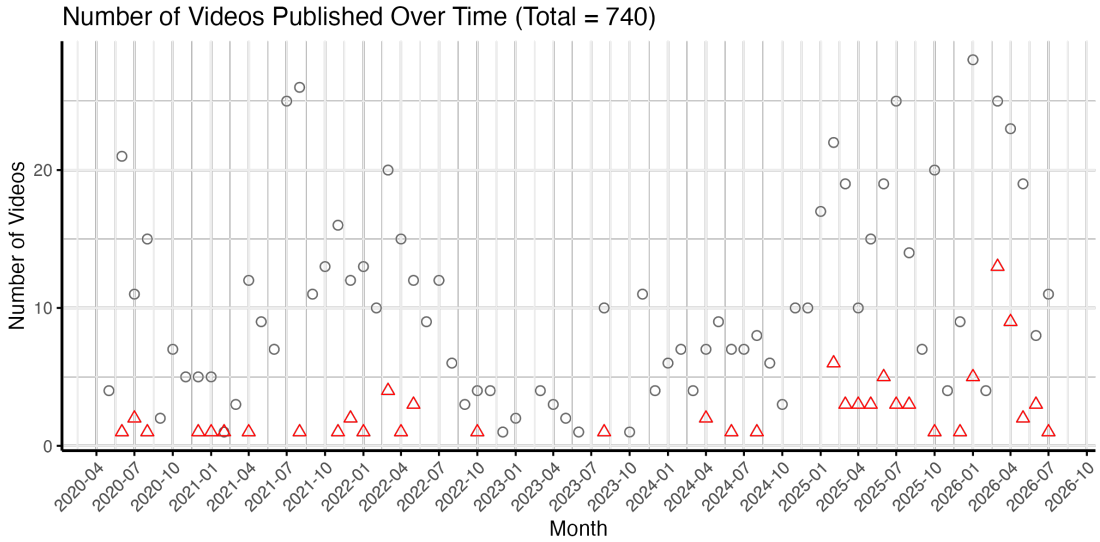
Hypothesis 2b: U.S. coercion against autocratic third-party states is associated with stronger hawkish backlash than comparable coercion against democratic third-party states.

3. Research Design

3.1. Data

We examine the relationship between U.S. coercive foreign policy and Chinese public attitudes using foreign-affairs videos published by Xinhua News Agency on *Bilibili*, a major Chinese video-sharing platform. Our preliminary sample comprises 740 videos mentioning the United States, of which 88 depict U.S. coercive actions. Figure 1 presents the monthly distribution of these videos. The publication volume varies over the observation period, underscoring the importance of accounting for time-specific developments in subsequent analyses.

Figure 1: Numbers of Videos Depicting U.S. Coercion over Time

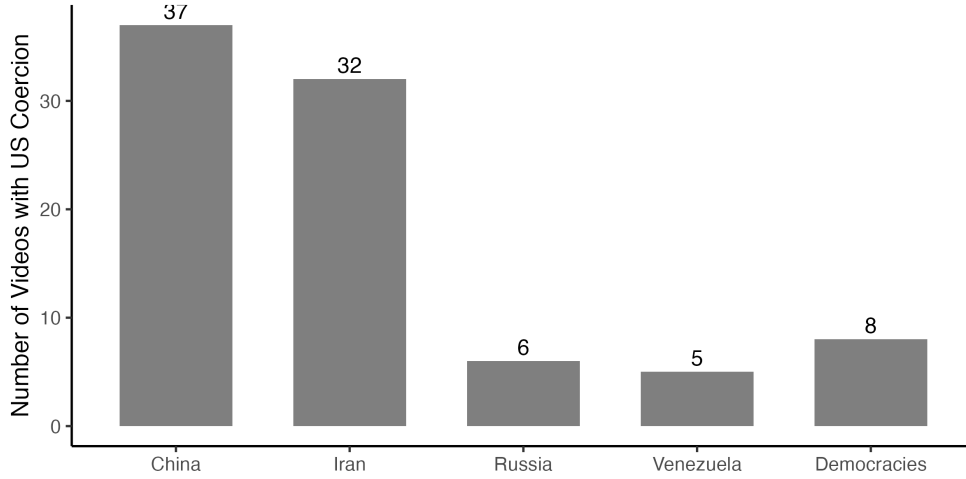


Among the 88 coercion-related videos, 37 concern actions targeting China, 32 Iran, six Russia, five Venezuela, and eight democratic countries (Figure 2). The distribution indicates that the coercion-related sample is concentrated in a small number of targets, particularly China and Iran. The democratic-target category contains substantially fewer videos, an important limitation for comparisons across regime types.

3.2. Measurement

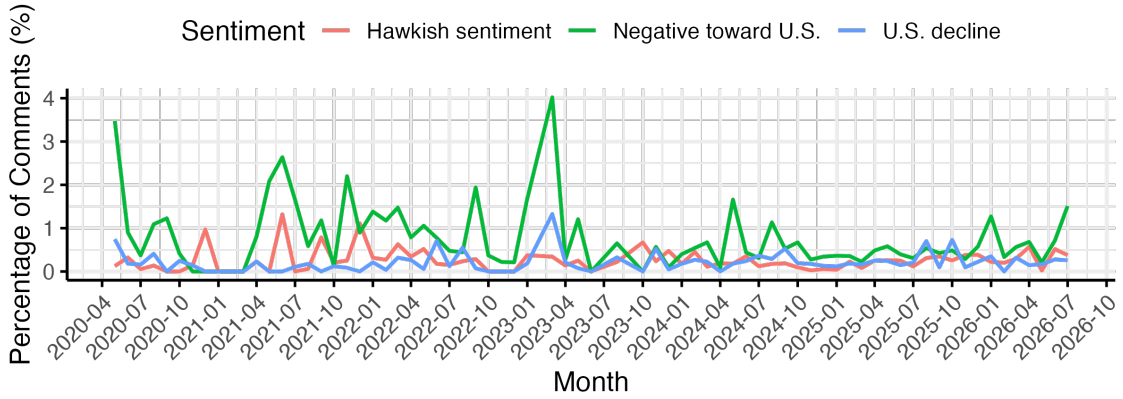
The principal explanatory variable indicates whether a video concerns U.S. coercive action. For the target-specific analysis, coercion-related videos are categorized according to whether the United States targets China, an autocratic third-party state, or a democratic third-party state. The comparison category consists of other U.S.-related videos in the sample.

Figure 2: Number of Videos Depicting U.S. Coercion by Target Countries



The comment corpus contains 315,332 comments. We use large-language-model-assisted annotation (GPT-5.6, as reported in the presentation) to code four binary outcomes: (1) negative attitudes toward the United States, (2) perceptions of U.S. decline, (3) general hawkish sentiment, and (4) support for hawkish Chinese foreign policy. In the initial annotation, the four categories appear in approximately 0.7%, 0.3%, 0.3%, and 0.06% of comments, respectively. Figure 3 displays changes over time in the first three annotated categories. The figure indicates month-to-month fluctuations, although its descriptive patterns do not on their own identify the causes of those changes.

Figure 3: Prevalence of Political Attitudes in Unser Comments over Time



3.3. Empirical Strategy

We examine comment-level associations between video content and political attitudes. The models include video-level controls for logged duration, logged play count, logged comment count, a binary indicator for Donald Trump, the number of countries mentioned, and a bilateral-dispute indicator. At the commenter level, the models adjust for reported gender, user level, and VIP status; they also include province fixed effects. The regression specifications and significance symbols are reproduced from the presentation.

Because the source does not identify the estimation family or standard-error clustering, we do not interpret coefficients as probability changes or assume that standard errors are clustered.

Our design is observational. Users may select particular videos based on preexisting attitudes, and different videos may frame coercive actions differently. Planned extensions include human validation of outcome classifications and user–video participation-network analyses to assess audience sorting and enable within-user comparisons.

4. Preliminary Analysis

Table 1 reproduces the initial estimates. The coefficient on U.S. coercion is positive for each dependent variable: negative attitudes toward the United States (0.35), perceptions of U.S. decline (0.85), hawkish sentiment (0.63), and support for hawkish Chinese policy (1.30). In the reported models, all four coefficients carry statistical significance symbols, with the strongest significance marker for general hawkish sentiment.

Table 1: U.S. Coercion and Hawkish Attitudes (H1)

	(1) U.S. Negative	(2) U.S. Decline	(3) Hawkish Sentiment	(4) Hawkish Policy
U.S. Coercion	0.35* (0.18)	0.85** (0.34)	0.63*** (0.24)	1.30** (0.63)
Video Duration	0.29*** (0.08)	0.22** (0.11)	0.19*** (0.07)	0.16 (0.15)
Play Count	−0.08 (0.08)	−0.32*** (0.12)	−0.05 (0.10)	0.17 (0.16)
Comment Count	−0.05 (0.09)	0.14 (0.12)	0.13 (0.13)	−0.12 (0.14)
Trump	−0.07 (0.13)	0.12 (0.19)	−0.37* (0.19)	−0.48* (0.28)
Country Count	0.01 (0.07)	−0.31*** (0.09)	0.04 (0.07)	−0.10 (0.11)
Bilateral Dispute	0.27* (0.16)	−0.08 (0.24)	0.72*** (0.18)	0.64 (0.42)
Female	−0.13 (0.11)	−0.46** (0.19)	−0.44** (0.19)	−0.34 (0.41)
Male	−0.07* (0.04)	−0.02 (0.08)	−0.10 (0.09)	0.02 (0.16)
User Level	0.01 (0.02)	−0.02 (0.04)	−0.04 (0.03)	−0.13*** (0.04)
VIP	−0.09** (0.04)	−0.15* (0.08)	0.02 (0.08)	−0.17 (0.18)
Province FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	314,798	314,535	314,307	298,806

Notes: † $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

These results are consistent with Hypothesis 1. The positive association extends beyond expressions of dislike toward the United States to perceptions of American decline

and approval of more assertive Chinese foreign policy. This multidimensional pattern is compatible with the argument that U.S. coercion may be interpreted as both hostile pressure and an attempt to preserve the established power’s privileged position. However, the estimates do not directly measure perceived status denial, and they cannot establish whether viewing coercion-related content changes individual attitudes.

Table 2 disaggregates U.S. coercion by target. Direct coercion against China remains positively associated with all four outcomes: the reported coefficients are 0.50, 1.10, 0.84, and 1.90, respectively. This reinforces the descriptive pattern in Table 1.

Table 2: U.S. Coercion by Target Regime Type and Hawkish Attitudes (H2)

	(1) U.S. Negative	(2) U.S. Decline	(3) Hawkish Sentiment	(4) Hawkish Policy
U.S. Coercion (China)	0.50* (0.29)	1.10** (0.49)	0.84*** (0.32)	1.90*** (0.53)
U.S. Coercion (Autocracy)	0.29 (0.23)	0.88*** (0.30)	0.67** (0.27)	0.28 (0.51)
U.S. Coercion (Democracy)	−0.01 (0.29)	0.17 (0.44)	−1.40** (0.59)	−0.60 (1.10)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Province FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	314,798	314,535	314,307	298,806

Notes: † $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

For third-party targets, coercion against autocracies is positively associated with perceptions of U.S. decline (0.88) and hawkish sentiment (0.67), both carrying significance symbols in the presentation. Its coefficients for negative U.S. attitudes (0.29) and explicit hawkish policy support (0.28) are positive but not marked significant. In contrast, coercion against democracies is not positively and significantly associated with any of the four outcomes; the coefficient on general hawkish sentiment is negative (−1.40) and marked significant.

These findings offer partial support for Hypothesis 2a and a pattern consistent with Hypothesis 2b: Chinese commenters appear more hawkish in discussions of coercion against autocratic third parties than in discussions of coercion against democratic targets, especially in their general hawkish sentiment and perceptions of U.S. decline. Nevertheless, separate significance tests relative to a reference category do not establish a statistically significant difference between the autocracy and democracy coefficients. A direct test of their equality is necessary. Interpretation is also constrained by the small number of democratic-target videos and the possibility that differences in topic, state-media framing, or audience composition account for some of the observed variation.

5. Future Directions

Our preliminary findings suggest that U.S. coercive foreign policies are associated with more hawkish attitudes among Chinese social media users, particularly when coercion targets China or autocratic third-party states. These patterns are consistent with our

argument that coercion by an established power may generate nationalist backlash in a rising power, potentially undermining its efforts to preserve international hierarchy. However, further analysis is necessary to establish the robustness of these findings and examine the mechanisms underlying these relationships.

Moving forward, we plan to expand our dataset by incorporating additional foreign-affairs videos from major Chinese state media outlets, including China Central Television (CCTV) and People’s Daily. We will also refine our measures of political attitudes by developing more systematic coding schemes and validating LLM-assisted classifications through human annotation. Importantly, we aim to address potential selection bias by constructing user–video participation networks to examine whether users systematically select particular types of foreign-policy content. By identifying overlapping audiences across videos and comparing political expressions within users, we seek to distinguish differences in audience composition from responses to U.S. coercive behavior.

These extensions will allow us to assess more systematically how the targets of coercion shape political attitudes and whether perceived political similarity contributes to nationalist backlash. More broadly, the project seeks to advance our understanding of how coercive attempts to preserve international dominance may inadvertently strengthen domestic opposition to the existing international hierarchy within rising powers.

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