

Getting Tough on China: An Exploratory Analysis of Sentiments in Washington and in American Media Toward China from 2016 to 2024

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Introduction

The commonly heard phrase “politics stops at the water’s edge” appears to hold increasingly less credence in today’s climate of increasing polarization over U.S. foreign policy.¹ Yet, one policy stance has continued to garner bipartisan support since its unequivocal hardening during President Donald Trump’s first administration—getting “tough on China.”² Washington’s strategy for getting “tough on China” varied under both Trump and his successor, President Joseph Biden. In light of the 2024 Presidential election, it has become increasingly apparent that, today, no candidate can run as a legitimate contender without framing China as a threat to American interests that must be managed.³ Our study undertakes sentiment analysis, powered by computer programming, to answer the question: how and why has the “tough on China” rhetorical and policy stance changed in the United States between the first Trump administration and the Biden administration? Although being “tough on China” has become a bipartisan stance, studying trends of *how* and *why* American sentiments toward China have evolved, particularly those displayed by the government and media outlets, could evince a feedback loop between the two entities. Through an analysis of documents from the U.S. Department of State (DOS), as well as news articles from Cable News Network (CNN) and Fox News, which are prototypical of left- and right-leaning outlets respectively, we find that:

1. All analyzed political entities maintained decisively negative sentiments toward China, regardless of their political affiliation.
2. The DOS maintained a relatively restrained level of negative sentiments, regardless of the president’s political affiliation, phase within an election cycle, or developments in international affairs, while CNN and Fox News expressed greater swings in the intensity of these same negative sentiments.

3. Variations in sentiments expressed by CNN and Fox News are heavily contingent on the administration in power, as well as intervening events like elections or exogenous shocks.

Tough on China: A Precis on the Concept's Emergence in U.S. Politics

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, U.S.-China relations remain tepid at best and near conflict at worst. Early tensions, driven by Cold War geopolitics, shaped Washington's cautious stance toward China. Only with President Richard Nixon, who took strategic advantage of the Sino-Soviet split, and whose 1972 visit to Beijing culminated in the Shanghai Communiqué, did the normalization of U.S.-PRC relations commence its gradual course.⁴ However, because this rapprochement did not resolve latent Cold War-era tensions, subsequent administrations oscillated between cautious engagement and overt confrontation.

When President Jimmy Carter assumed office, he condemned human rights abuses in China and oversaw the passage of the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, which committed U.S. arms provisions to Taiwan for its self-defense but remained ambiguous about sovereignty over the island.⁵ The same year, Carter also formally recognized the PRC and granted it "most favored nation" trade status.⁶ Thereafter, President Ronald Reagan issued his "Six Assurances" in 1982, which promised continued arms sales to Taiwan and explicitly refused the idea of Chinese sovereignty over the island.⁷ At the same time, he also authorized U.S. arms sales to China.⁸ Continuing this balancing act, President Bill Clinton broke with a 15-year-old policy prohibiting U.S. visas for high-level Taiwanese officials when he authorized Lee Teng-hui—who would win Taiwan's first Presidential elections—to visit his alma mater Cornell University where he gave a speech trumpeting Taiwan as a bastion of liberal democracy.⁹ Still, Clinton normalized U.S.-China trade relations and supported China's 2001 accession to the World Trade Organization.¹⁰

A decisive shift occurred under President Barack Obama. His administration initially pursued collaboration, hoping China would emerge as a "responsible stakeholder" capable of drawing actors like North Korea and Iran into negotiations—a concept first introduced during the preceding George W. Bush administration.¹¹ However, China's ambitious economic expansion, militarization of the South China Sea, and pursuit of technological dominance, prompted Obama to pivot U.S. strategy toward containment. In 2011, his "Pivot to Asia" strategy redirected resources to counter China's ambitions. This included strengthening defense alliances with Japan and South Korea and promoting the Trans-Pacific Partnership as an economic coalition to counter China's growing influence.¹²

Subsequently, Trump institutionalized bipartisan skepticism toward China by explicitly designating China as the primary competitor of the United

States in the 2017 National Security Strategy.¹³ His administration's confrontational approach included imposing substantial tariffs on approximately \$370 billion in Chinese imports, alleging intellectual property theft and unfair trade practices,¹⁴ while bolstering support for Taiwan through the 2018 Taiwan Travel Act, which enabled mutual visits by high-level officials of both countries.¹⁵

Under Biden, the bipartisan commitment to a "tough on China" stance persisted. Biden retained Trump-era tariffs,¹⁶ augmented military support for Taiwan through record-breaking arms sales,¹⁷ and demonstrated U.S. resolve through naval operations in the Taiwan Strait.¹⁸

We will thus temporally situate our analysis starting from the first Trump administration—under which "tough on China" as a rhetorical and policy stance became observably ubiquitous in Washington—through to the Biden administration. By observing trends in how the stance developed rhetorically and manifested in policy, we will examine prospective similarities and differences between administrations. In particular, we will employ documents published by the DOS, which represent Washington's foreign policy stance, for our analysis.

A Typology of American Media: Situating the Left and the Right

The Fourth Estate is at the pinnacle of its historical influence on U.S. politics.¹⁹ Filled with bounds of information, often manipulated to gain viewership, each media outlet occupies their niche along the political spectrum.²⁰ Right-wing media is dominated by Fox News. Typically, Fox News promotes traditional social values and conservative economics, aligning more with Republican than Democratic candidates.²¹ In recent years, Fox News has adopted a candidate-first approach, supporting Trump's populism by amplifying his inflammatory rhetoric, albeit occasionally compromising core conservative values.²² Left-wing media is a battleground for dominance among outlets with similar stances. Leading outlets include CNN, NPR, Politico, ABC News, CBS News, and the New York Times Company. Left-wing news outlets generally champion liberal policy, emphasizing the need to reform social programs and enshrine progressive movements into law.²³

The U.S. political spectrum and the values of Americans are more intricate than news agencies present. Some Americans occupy the center, selecting stories from a variety of news outlets. Others lean farther left or right than mainstream news appeals to. Many more hold mixed views on different issues; such is the saying, "fiscally conservative, socially liberal." As of September 19, 2023, a quarter of Americans feel that neither party represents them.²⁴ Overall, the American media, protected by the First Amendment, is a collection of voices clamoring to be heard, with the end-goal of selling the most advertisements.

Methodology

Through a large-N study involving sentiment analysis of texts, we aim to answer the question: how and why has the “tough on China” rhetorical and policy stance changed in the United States between the first Trump administration and the Biden administration? Our study serves to be exploratory rather than predictive. We uncover trends in the Department of State’s and the American media’s treatment of “tough on China,” suggesting potential explanations by referring to coinciding events and observable policymaking, rather than testing or forming theories. As such, our study prioritizes construct validity, while striving to offer a useful reference for other studies that might seek to attain internal and external validity in theorizing about U.S.-China relations or U.S. political polarization.

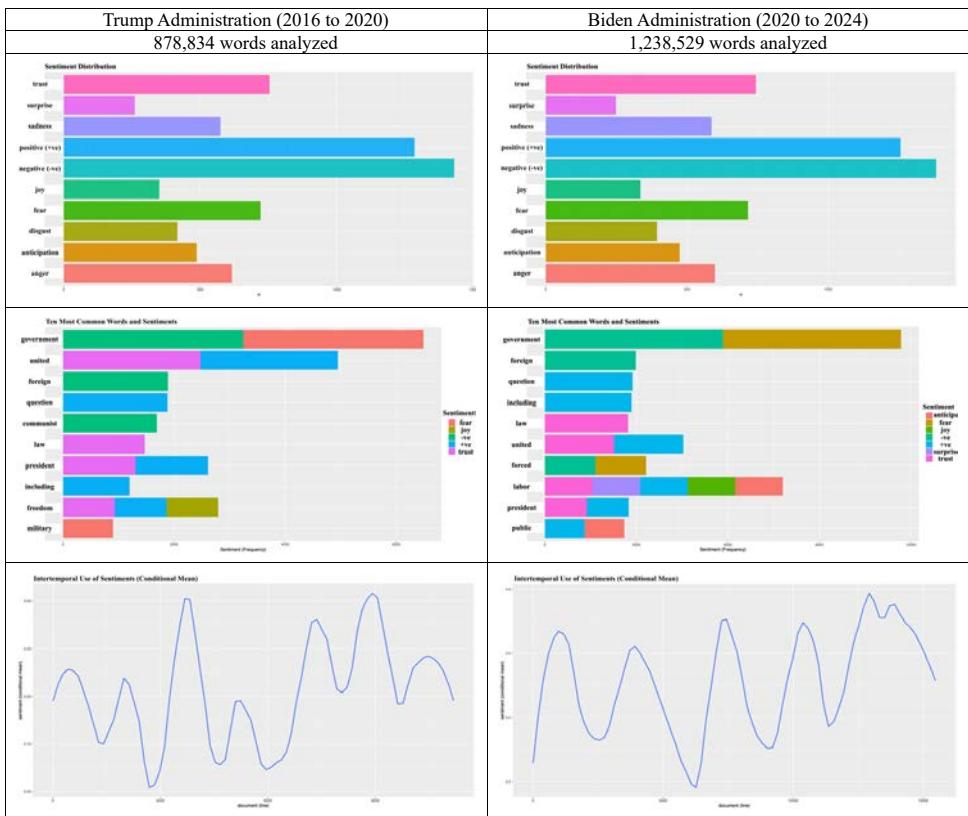
For our input data sets, we compiled documents, articles, press releases, and communiqués from DOS archives as well as news reports, op-eds, and television transcripts from CNN and Fox News between 2016 and 2024.²⁵ Our data collection process was automated by a Python script filtering search results for “China” with a list of keywords to select paragraphs relevant to our study.²⁶ We then arranged our strategically sampled paragraphs, in chronology of their publication date, into text documents; namely DOS archives, CNN articles, and Fox News articles, under the Trump, then the Biden administration.

Each document was then fed into an R program which matched words to their sentiments. The ten sentiments analyzed for are: trust, surprise, sadness, positive, negative, joy, fear, disgust, anticipation, and anger. Since sentiments are highly contextual—for example, using the same word in two different contexts could express two different sets of sentiments—we base our program on an R package designed by researchers at the National Research Council of Canada (NRC). The NRC’s Word-Emotion Association Lexicon is a large-scale annotation project that parses through texts online, labelling words with their associated sentiments determined by the contexts of their usage.²⁷ The extensive nature of this project produced a generalizable metric optimal for our study. Using this metric, our program generates quantitative visualizations for each document: the ten most expressed words and their associated sentiments, the distribution of sentiments within each document, and a trend-line showing the mean sentiment distribution over time. Thus, if “negative,” “fear,” and “anger” are expressed more frequently, an increase in the mean sentiment distribution would reflect a disproportionate increase in these sentiments. In sum, our graphical outputs elucidate *how* the “tough on China” rhetoric has changed between the first Trump administration and the Biden administration.

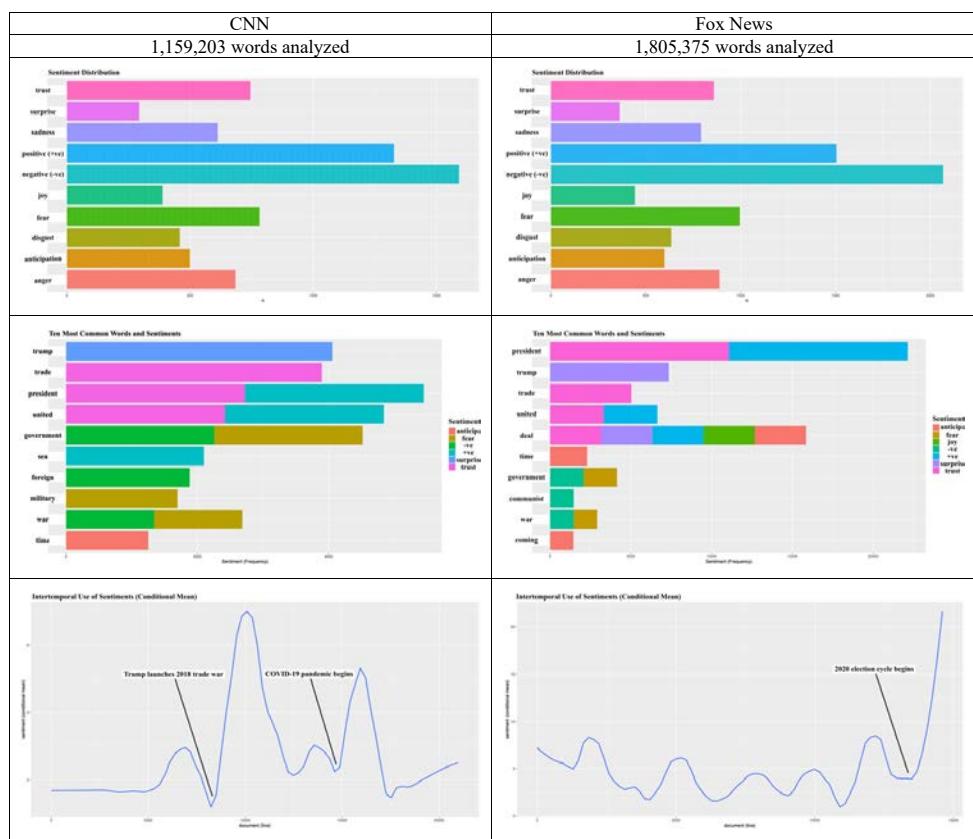
Recognizing rhetoric offers incomplete understanding of the “tough on China” stance, we complete our analysis by relating rhetoric to policy implementations. Drawing these connections allow us to examine *why* “tough on China” as a rhetorical and policy stance has changed between the first Trump administration and the Biden administration.

Results

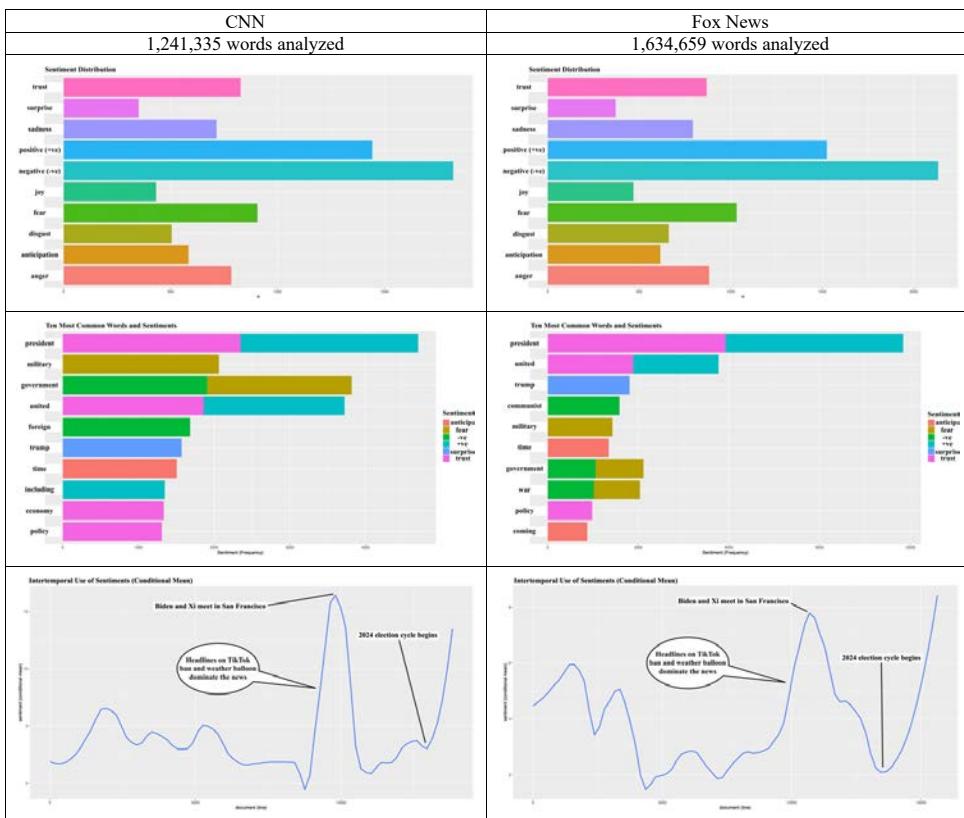
U.S. Department of State on China



Media Outlets on China Under the Trump Administration



Media Outlets on China Under the Biden Administration



Findings

From Trump to Biden: Rhetorical Divergence, Policy Continuity

The distribution of sentiments toward China in releases from the DOS, CNN, and Fox News, under Trump and Biden, are disproportionately “negative.” There is no doubt “tough on China” has become a bipartisan touchpoint for contemporary U.S. politics and civil society. Yet, in most documents, the sentiments “positive” and “trust” emerge as the second and third highest in proportion, respectively, and are consistently associated with the words “president” and “united.” This could reflect expected confidence from the DOS and unexpected bipartisan hope among media outlets in U.S. capability to manage tensions with China. Furthermore, the sentiment distribution of DOS documents under either administration remained relatively unwavering, only fluctuating within a narrow range of means between 2.5 and 4. This suggests moderation in official DOS stances toward geopolitical precarity. In contrast, the same sentiment distribution of CNN and Fox News spans wider mean ranges under either administration, possibly reflecting a sensationalization of geopolitical developments.

The most common words invoked in DOS documents reveal insight into either administration’s “tough on China” strategy. “Military” and “communism” are among the most common words in DOS releases during the Trump administration, while seldom used in DOS releases during the Biden administration. The Trump administration’s “tough on China” rhetoric ostensibly takes shape by framing China as an ideological and military threat. A 2020 release from the White House compiling speeches on China from the first Trump administration is described to “[lay] out the most significant United States foreign policy shift in a generation.”²⁸ A 2018 speech by former Vice President Mike Pence remarked “the American people deserve to know that . . . Beijing is employing a whole-of-government approach, using political, economic, and military tools, as well as propaganda, to advance its influence and benefit its interests in the United States.”²⁹ Pence also reiterated Trump “signed into law the largest increase in our national defense since the days of Ronald Reagan—\$716 billion” to “mak[e] the strongest military in the history of the world stronger still.”³⁰ In 2020, former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo explained American vulnerabilities China intends to exploit: “Perhaps we were naive about China’s virulent strain of communism, or triumphalist after our victory in the Cold War, or cravenly capitalist, or hoodwinked by Beijing’s talk of a “peaceful rise.”³¹ By framing China as an ideological and strategic competitor, the Trump administration established Washington’s “tough on China” stance.

Conversely, “labor” was among the most common words in DOS releases during the Biden administration, while seldom used in DOS releases during the Trump administration. This could indicate the Biden administration got “tough on China” by attempting to address threats to American labor. In particular,

the Biden administration criticized China’s “heavily subsidized industries of the future” that “produce far more than the rest of the world can absorb,” then “[dump] the excess products onto the market at unfairly low prices, driving other manufacturers around the world out of business.”³² Other “anti-competitive tactics” also include “forcing the American companies to transfer their technology in order to do business in China.”³³ These threats drove the Biden administration to increase tariff rates across critical industries in 2024: 0-7.5% to 25% on steel and aluminum, 25% to 100% on electric vehicles, and 25% to 50% on solar cells.³⁴ This was coupled with steep investments in critical technologies and infrastructure, through the Inflation Reduction Act,³⁵ the CHIPS and Science Act,³⁶ and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.³⁷ Secondarily, the Biden administration confronted China’s labor rights abuses, particularly in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), by signing into law the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act.³⁸ This Act prohibits the import of any goods produced in the XUAR to the United States.³⁹

Thus, the Biden administration’s “tough on China” approach focused on labor policies both domestically and in China. This does not suggest that the Trump administration was disinterested in labor economics as it launched the largest-scale trade war of the 21st century.⁴⁰ However, the Trump administration preferred less technocratic rhetoric, emphasizing ideological and military threats to rally Americans against China. Thereafter, the Biden administration largely exercised policy continuity despite attempting to differentiate its “tough on China” rhetoric.

Media During the Trump Administration: Skeptics and Sycophants

Fox News adopted a harsher stance toward China than CNN likely following the establishment of “tough on China” during the Trump administration. Fox News’ frequent use of the word “communist” echoed the ideological threat of China among Americans. CNN maintained a less hostile stance, frequently invoking “military” and “war” with fear. However, in comparison to broader Trump-era left-wing media, which struggled to support any Trump policy, 79% of liberal news media did not oppose the trade war.⁴¹ Furthermore, both news agencies released content with the highest mean sentiment distribution in distinct time periods. For CNN, these peaks occurred at the end of 2018 into 2019 and in the spring of 2020. For Fox News, their peak occurred at the end of 2020, prior to Trump’s potential reelection.

For CNN, we speculate the first spike followed the launch of the Trump administration’s trade war. CNN highlighted potential weaknesses of the tariffs, stating “a trade war could make life a lot more difficult for some well-known, blue chip American firms.”⁴² Nevertheless, CNN remained largely neutral, with headlines like “China Stocks Slump as US Steps Up Trade War.”⁴³ CNN’s second peak coincides with the declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic in March 2020. However, the mean sentiment distribution could be artificially inflated by content assigning stronger criticism for the purported role of China in the pandemic. CNN headlines such as “China Approves Sinopharm

COVID-19 Vaccine, Promises Free Shots for all Citizens,”⁴⁴ and “Kim Jong Un is Cutting Off His Economic Lifeline, China, to Stave Off COVID-19,”⁴⁵ support this possibility.

COVID-19 pandemic could also explain Fox News’ peak in 2020. Alternatively, a spike in the third and fourth quarter of 2020 could indicate an election-time strategy framing China as a point of contention and Trump as the superior arbiter. Fox News host Sean Hannity pointed out Biden’s weaknesses: “China was on the rise, Joe Biden downplayed the threat, his son got rich.” Meanwhile, he boasted about Trump’s presidency, commenting, “[Democrats] weren’t focused on China. The president was focused on China.”⁴⁶ The disparity between news agencies suggests a broader pattern: during the Trump administration, an event could make headlines for one outlet, but not for the other.

Media During the Biden Administration: Bipartisan Criticism—“Get Tougher on China!”

During the Biden administration, the peaks in mean sentiment distribution for CNN and Fox News coincided, with the largest peak occurring in the fourth quarter of 2023. Leading up to this spike, trial hearings over the potential TikTok ban intensified; a Chinese weather balloon—which Washington alleged was for surveillance—instilled paranoia; and harsh criticism over China’s compliance with fentanyl exports to North America further strained relations. A meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and President Biden in San Francisco was inadvertently postponed, and China made headlines as the primary threat.⁴⁷

When the meeting eventually happened on November 15, 2023, sentiments were negative for both media outlets. Fox News made bold claims such as “China’s economy, it is now a dumpster fire” and “President Xi is desperately looking for a win and with a pathetically weak U.S. president.”⁴⁸ CNN highlighted their concerns with headlines such as “Xi signals marked shift in tone for China on US—but with Biden’s off-the-cuff ‘dictator’ comment can it last?”⁴⁹ These assertions could indicate bipartisan support for getting “tougher” on China as well as signal fleeting left-wing support for Biden’s reelection.

The mean sentiment distribution for both outlets peaked as the 2024 election approached. This could be attributed to candidates campaigning on anti-China rhetoric, most notably Trump, who promised sweeping tariffs on China.⁵⁰ Alternatively, these peaks could instead reflect negative sentiments surrounding subjects other than China, as candidates try to degrade each other. Overall, the media transitioned to bipartisan support for confronting China—a unique niche within the polarized political landscape of the United States.

Conclusion

Our study sought to examine *how* and *why* “tough on China” as a rhetorical and policy stance has changed in the United States. The mix of sentiments

displayed by the DOS, CNN, and Fox News, were characterized by outright negativity toward China. However, the smaller variation in the mean sentiment distribution of DOS releases suggests the DOS chooses to maintain diplomatic civility when reporting on U.S.-China relations, in spite, and perhaps because of, inflammatory statements from other branches of the government. Conversely, wider swings in the mean sentiment distribution for CNN and Fox News, regardless of the administration in power, suggest the media frames information for their own interests, typically producing provocative headlines for profit.

Notes

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