

Media Analysis: US News Coverage of China's Nuclear Program

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Introduction

China's nuclear buildup and conventional naval expansion in the Pacific are undeniably key drivers of US strategic and military policy. Yet even as US government actors focus on China as the "pacing threat" to the United States, leading to shifts in military planning and increasing Pentagon spending and investments in nuclear modernization, the disarmament and arms control community has struggled to effectively engage with anti-China narratives and rhetoric or push a coordinated message that moves the needle on enabling US-China arms control cooperation. This report, based on a detailed media audit, examines how US news outlets cover China's nuclear program, providing insights into public opinion and thematic trends.

This research, generously funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY) and the Ploughshares Fund, is part of a multi-year commitment to helping the nuclear community grapple with existing media narratives regarding China as a nuclear threat, develop shared strategies to counter harmful, alarmist narratives, and promote a more balanced US-China relationship that enables constructive US-China nuclear dialogue. The ultimate goal is to foster an alternative vision for the US-China relationship — of which the nuclear relationship is an integral piece — that prioritizes stability and cooperation over confrontation and escalation.

Methodology

This analysis examines US news coverage of China's nuclear program from January 2021 to December 2023. To conduct this mixed-methods analysis, we gathered more than 2,000 news and opinion articles from ReThink Media's proprietary database, which includes a robust landscape of coverage from national outlets (e.g., *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*), foreign policy-focused publications, regional newspapers, and broadcast outlets. The full outlet list can be found in the [Appendix](#).

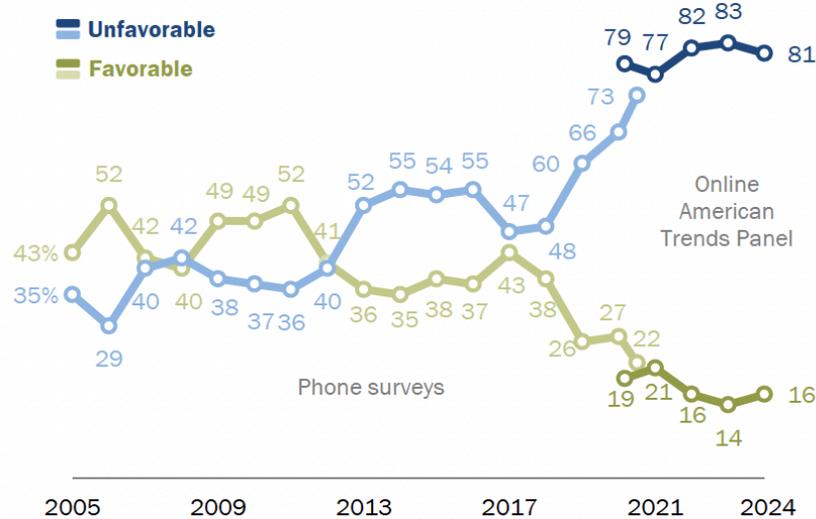
Background

US Public Opinion About China

The media's portrayal of China's nuclear program does not exist in a vacuum. It is both a product of and a contributor to the prevailing public opinion. Strikingly, Americans' view of China has shifted dramatically in recent years: Data from a [Pew Research Center survey](#) from April 2024 indicates that 81% of American adults now view China unfavorably, a significant increase from 48% in 2018.

Most Americans hold an unfavorable view of China

% who have a(n) ___ opinion of China



Note: Those who did not answer are not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 1-7, 2024. Q4b.
"Americans Remain Critical of China"

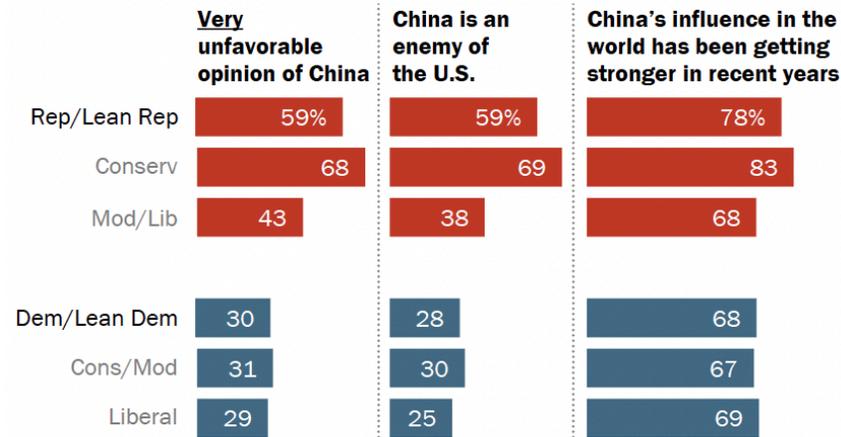
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Chart credit: [Pew Research Center](#)

This growing unfavorable view is particularly pronounced among Republicans, with 69% of conservative Republicans viewing China as an enemy.

Conservative Republicans are very unfavorable toward China and most likely to see China as an enemy

% who have a/say that ...



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 1-7, 2024. Q4b, Q53a & Q55.
"Americans Remain Critical of China"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

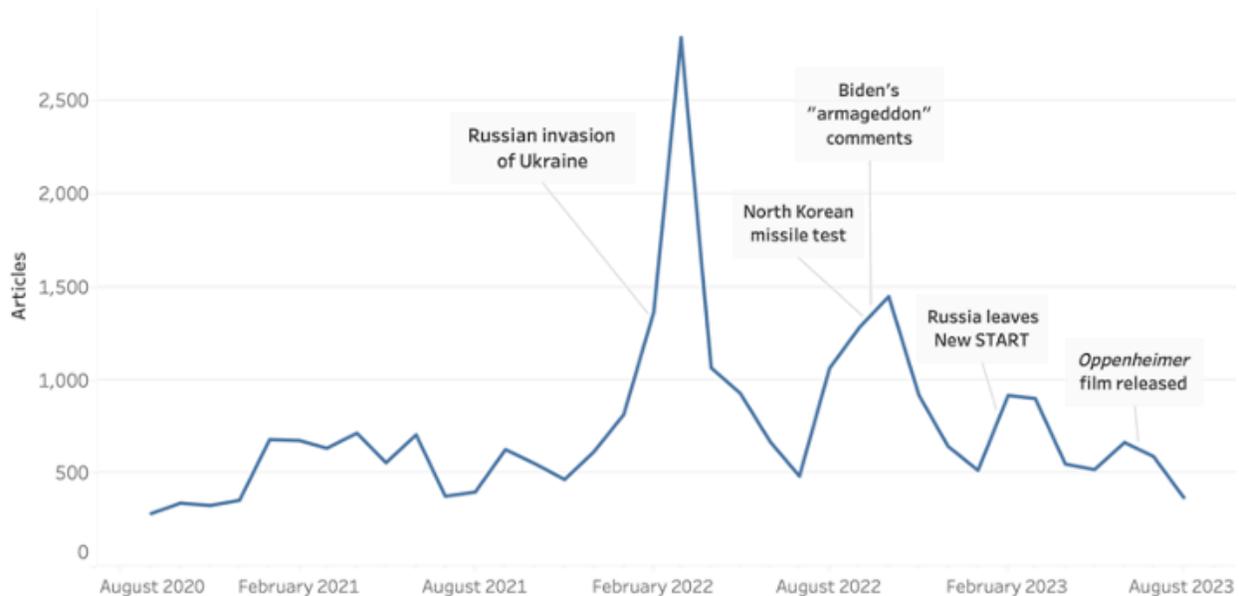
Chart credit: [Pew Research Center](#)

This shift in public opinion is not just a reflection of geopolitical tensions; it actively shapes and is shaped by the media narratives that dominate US news coverage. Media outlets often amplify narratives that align with these prevailing attitudes. This creates a cycle where public sentiment and media coverage reinforce each other, leading to a more entrenched perception of China as a strategic threat.

Media Coverage of Nuclear Weapons Issues in US Media From 2020 to 2023

Understanding the current media narratives surrounding China's nuclear weapons requires first situating them within the broader landscape of nuclear weapons coverage. ReThink Media conducted such an [analysis](#) in fall 2023, examining the broader landscape of nuclear weapons coverage from mid-2020 to 2023. This analysis found a significant increase in nuclear weapons coverage in 2022, coinciding with Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

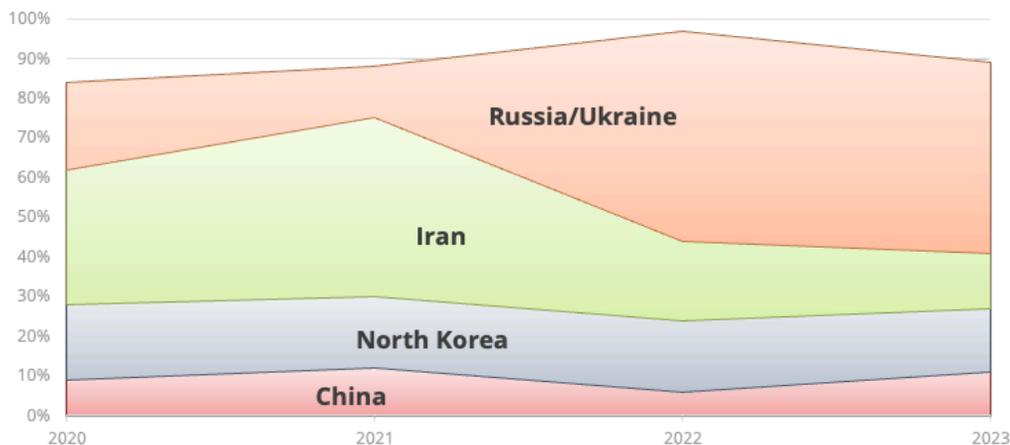
Volume of news coverage of nuclear weapons, by articles per month



Periodic spikes in coverage were driven by major events such as North Korean missile tests, President Biden’s comments on “nuclear armageddon”, Russia suspending participation in the New START treaty, and the release of Christopher Nolan’s *Oppenheimer* film.

As illustrated in the chart below, there was also a significant topical shift from 2020-2021 coverage, in which the media focused much more on Iran’s nuclear program. For the entire period, coverage of China and North Korea was steady but appeared at lower volumes.

Regional focus of nuclear news over time, by share of coverage



Although nuclear news pertaining to China constitutes a relatively small share of nuclear news, China’s increasing importance to US foreign policy — and the concern it provokes in the American public — indicates that its nuclear program deserves a closer look.

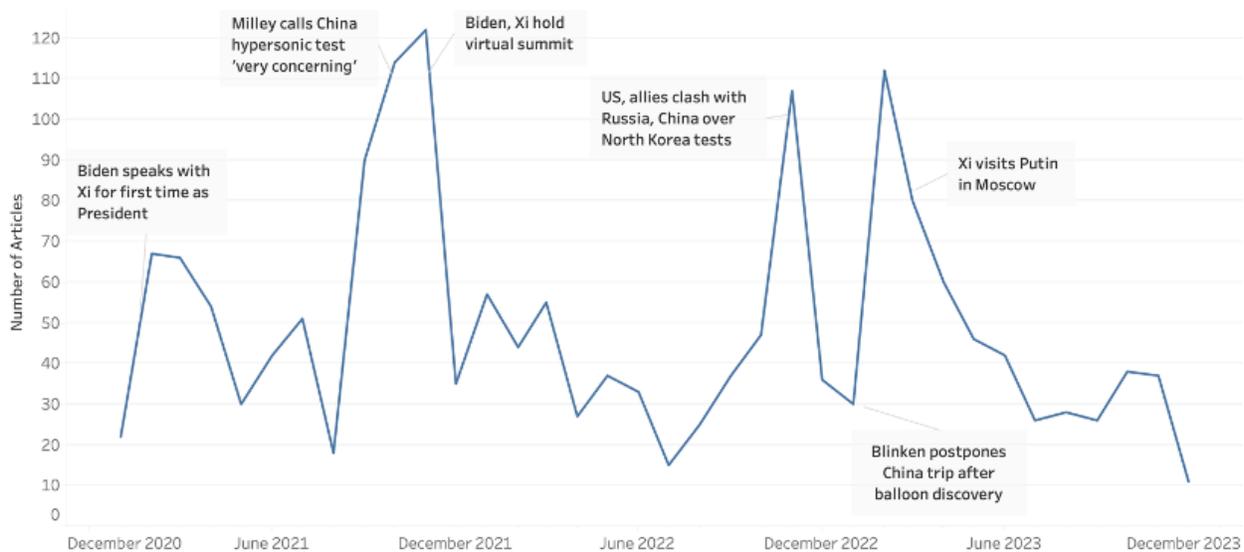
Findings

Our analysis of news about China and nuclear weapons reveals a complex and often alarmist narrative surrounding China’s nuclear program in the US media. Coverage is predominantly driven by major geopolitical events and is heavily influenced by official government and military perspectives, which tend to emphasize the strategic threat posed by China. This narrative is further shaped by the prominence of select sources, with a significant reliance on federal officials and conservative-leaning outlets. This analysis also highlights key themes in the media’s portrayal of China, including the recurring depiction of China as a “strategic challenge” and the use of speculative language that fuels public fear and policy hawkishness.

Coverage Drivers

Media coverage of China’s nuclear program is driven primarily by major global events involving the US and China. These include high-profile meetings between Chinese President Xi Jinping and other world leaders, China’s hypersonic missile tests, and international reactions to North Korean missile launches. Spikes in coverage often coincide with significant geopolitical events that involve US interests either directly or indirectly.

Volume of news coverage of China and nuclear weapons, by articles per month



General Thematic Analysis

China’s nuclear program is predominantly portrayed as a “strategic challenge” for the US. In their 2022 National Defense Strategy, the Department of Defense referred to China as the “pacing challenge” to US national security. A major component of that concern is the expansion of China’s nuclear program. About 35% of articles analyzed discuss China’s nuclear expansion, often highlighting a lack of transparency around these activities.

A general “threat” theme is also prevalent. The term “threat” appears in about 60% of the articles analyzed, while “Cold War” is mentioned in approximately 25%. Another common theme is China’s advancements in hypersonic technology, mentioned in 18% of articles, and the need for transparency and accountability, discussed in about 12% of articles.

Just 4% of articles mention China’s “No First Use” policy, and when it is mentioned, it is often with an air of skepticism about NFU’s consistency with China’s nuclear buildup.

Coverage is also **rife with speculation**, especially from political sources, namely members of Congress and both current and former politicians. This speculation is not idle or random; rather, the speculation in coverage reinforces the aforementioned sense of fear, often **employing worst-case guesses, estimates, and hypotheses about China’s activities and intentions** to paint a picture of a looming threat. For example, in a February 2023 [Washington Post article](#), Rep. Michael R. Turner (R-Ohio), chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, said of China in the wake of the “spy balloon” sighting:

“I believe that they were trying to gain information on how to defeat the command and control of our nuclear weapons systems and our missile defense systems.”

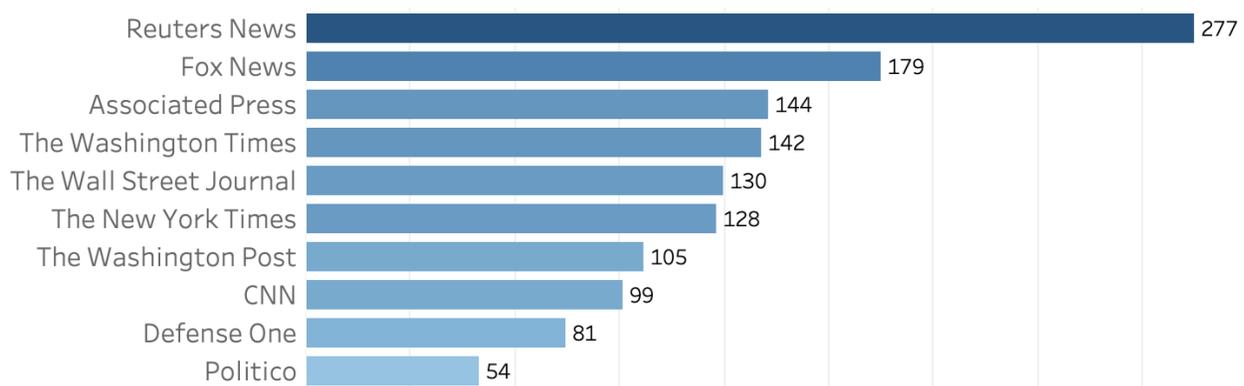
News Quote Analysis

Our analysis of news coverage of China’s nuclear program reveals both a concentration of coverage within a select group of outlets, particularly conservative-leaning publications, as well as a heavy reliance on US federal and military officials for sourcing. This component of the analysis underscores the limited diversity of voices and perspectives in the media, pointing to the need for a more balanced approach to public discussion of US-China nuclear relations.

Outlets

News articles about China’s nuclear program are predominantly published by the top wire services (*Associated Press* and *Reuters*), as well as several conservative-leaning publications (*Fox News*, *The Washington Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*).

Top publishers of news stories on China’s nuclear program, 2021-2023, by # of articles



The prevalence of conservative outlets in this coverage contrasts with coverage of the nuclear issues more broadly, as we found more ideological parity among outlets in our prior research. This reflects a significant interest by conservative outlets in the US-China nuclear relationship, and a bias in the interest in their audiences that is reflected in the public opinion research.

Sources

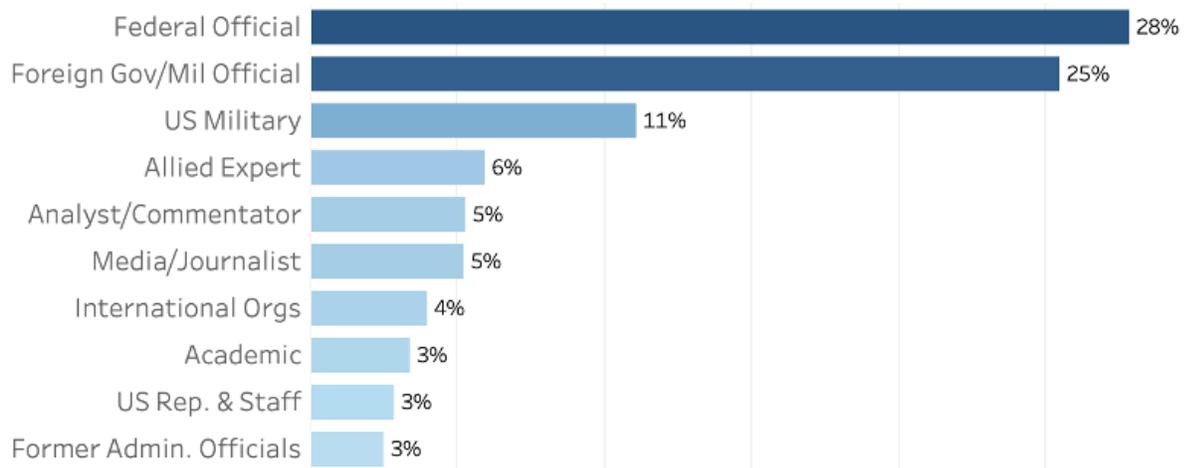
During the time period analyzed, news coverage has relied heavily on sourcing from US federal and military officials, shaping a narrative that heavily emphasizes threat perception and strategic competition. Reliance on government and military perspectives, coupled with the frequent use of anonymous sources and reports, suggests a media landscape that prioritizes official viewpoints over

a more balanced and nuanced discussion. While this approach aligns with the US government's strategic objectives, it risks limiting the public's exposure to alternative perspectives, particularly those advocating for diplomacy and arms control.

Federal Officials as Primary Sources

Our analysis revealed that US federal officials are the most frequently quoted sources in news coverage of China's nuclear program.

Top sources of quotes in news about China's nuclear program, 2021-2023, by % of quotes



These officials include high-ranking government members such as the president of the United States, the secretary of state, and other key figures in the foreign policy and national security apparatus. President Joe Biden, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and former Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley are among the most cited individuals.

The prominence of federal officials as sources demonstrates how heavily the press currently relies on government perspectives and official statements. **This can lead to a public narrative that aligns closely with the US government's strategic and political objectives**, potentially limiting the diversity of viewpoints the public encounters when hearing about US-China relations.

President Biden illustrated this government perspective in the first [foreign policy address](#) of his presidency in Feb. 2021:

"American leadership must meet this new moment of advancing authoritarianism, including the growing ambitions of China to rival the United States and the determination of Russia to damage and disrupt our democracy."

Military Officials and Analysts

US military officials and analysts are also frequently quoted in this coverage. These sources often provide expert opinions and assessments regarding China's military capabilities and strategic intentions. While the inclusion of military perspectives adds a layer of technical and operational insight, it **can also serve to over-emphasize the threat and adversarial aspects of China's nuclear program**, as it is the military's job to plan for the worst-case scenarios.

For instance, quotes from retired military officers and security analysts often highlight concerns about China's nuclear expansion and the negative implications for US national security. This

emphasis likely reinforces to news consumers the perception that China is a growing military threat and requires a robust response from the United States, as demonstrated by retired Air Force General John Hyten in a [CNN piece](#) from October 2021:

"Calling China a pacing threat is a useful term, because the pace at which China is moving is stunning ... the pace they're moving and the trajectory they're on will surpass Russia and the United States if we don't do something to change it. It will happen. So I think we have to do something."

Reports and Anonymous Sources

A significant portion of the coverage relies on reports and anonymous sources, with 21% of quotes coming from various reports and statements — including the Department of Defense's annual National Defense Strategy report — and 10% of quotes attributed to unnamed sources. The use of anonymous sources is common in reporting on sensitive topics like national security and foreign policy, where confidentiality can be crucial for protecting individuals and sensitive information.

However, a **reliance on anonymity can pose challenges for accountability and transparency**. Anonymous sources can make it difficult for news consumers to assess the credibility and motivations behind the information presented. Moreover, the heavy use of reports and statements by reporters suggests that the coverage lacks the investigative depth and critical analysis that come from including more direct and named sources.

Foreign Government and Military Officials

Foreign government and military officials, particularly from China, Russia, and North Korea, are also frequently quoted in the coverage. Chinese President Xi is the fifth most-quoted individual source.

These sources provide insights into the perspectives and responses of other nations regarding China's nuclear activities. For example, statements from Chinese officials might highlight their own stance on nuclear policy and strategic intentions, which can contrast sharply with US interpretations. For example, China's ambassador to Washington, [Qin Gang, said](#) in September 2021 that the United States persists in "wrong beliefs" about China and world affairs and warned of "disastrous consequences" if Washington follows what he called a "Cold War playbook."

As with any other source, journalists often include just a part of foreign officials' complete statements. Moreover, most of these statements are quoted in translation — that is, the original version is typically in a language other than English. They may also be intended for a different audience, for example, a domestic political constituency or a domestic academic or military audience. Taken alongside the way these quotes are framed in the context of US strategic concerns, **these factors make it harder for news consumers to be sure that they're getting a complete picture of viewpoints from outside the US.**

Allied Experts and Advocacy Groups

The patterns of sourcing in the media coverage of China's nuclear program reveal a landscape wherein official and military perspectives dominate, with limited — but crucial — contributions from allied experts advocating for diplomacy.

Allied experts, whom we define as scientists, academics, analysts, and advocates who support arms control and nuclear disarmament, make up about 6% of the quotes in our sample. These allied experts often call for diplomatic solutions and increased transparency, providing a counterbalance to the often hawkish perspectives of government sources. For instance, experts from arms control and disarmament organizations frequently emphasize the importance of dialogue and cooperation

over military buildup and escalation. This is demonstrated in the following quote from Daryl Kimball of the Arms Control Association in a [Wall Street Journal article](#) from Nov. 2021:

“It is good that the president raised the need for a regular nuclear risk-reduction dialogue, but such a process will not likely get off the ground unless the US makes this one of its highest bilateral goals.”

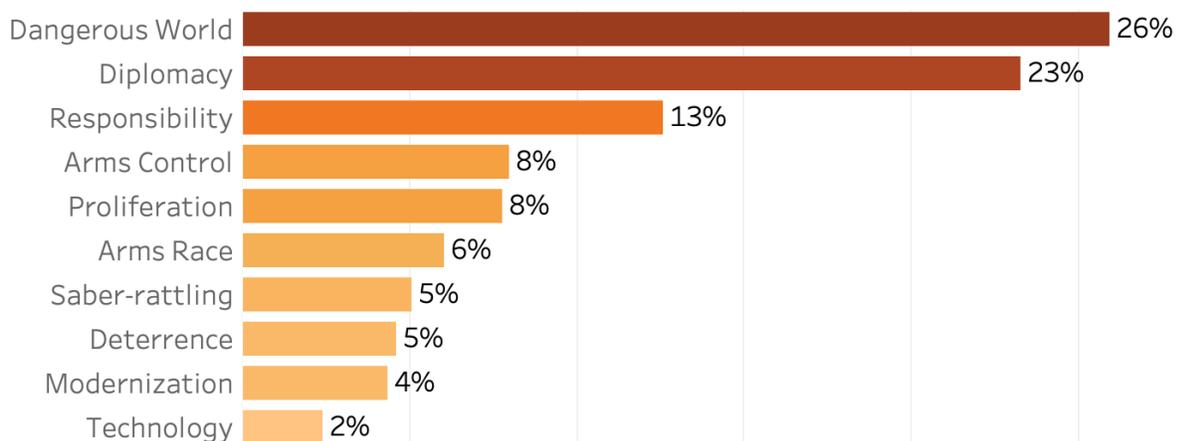
Themes

To analyze the ways that sources discussed China and nuclear weapons, we conducted a detailed hand-coding of a sample of news quotes and assigned each to one of the following ten themes:

Frames	Description
Arms Control	Discussion of international agreements/treaties about nuclear weapons
Arms Race	Discussion of competition for nuclear superiority (often prompted by an adversary’s buildup)
Dangerous World	Reference to looming threats/danger and general risks of nuclear buildup (without much technical detail about policy, technology, or frameworks)
Deterrence	Explicit discussion of the need to use of nuclear weapons to deter attacks/threats from other states (or explicit invocation of the nuclear deterrence framework)
Diplomacy	Discussion of cooperation, talks, de-escalation
Modernization	Technical (i.e., relatively neutral) discussion of updating existing weapons
Proliferation	Technical (i.e., relatively neutral) discussion of increase in number of weapons
Responsibility	Discussion of the need to use restraint or to urge transparency
Saber-Rattling	Making threats (usually using inflammatory language) related to nuclear weapons
Technology	Technical (i.e., relatively neutral) discussion of advancements in weapons systems, computing, AI, etc.

The analysis revealed that **the most prevalent framing was the *Dangerous World* theme**. We applied this frame to quotes that conveyed a sense of impending threat, danger, or concern, albeit in a nonspecific manner.

Share of themes found in news quotes, by % of total



Notably, the frequency of the *Dangerous World* frame, which accounted for 26% of the quotes, likely underestimates its true prevalence in the coverage. Many of the quotes, including those from allied experts, conveyed an implicit sense of menace or threat, even when they were categorized under a different frame among the ten we identified in our study.

The following example taken from a letter from a group of Republican US representatives to President Biden reported on in [Defense News](#) illustrates the *Dangerous World* frame:

"A future war in the Indo-Pacific would be over before it began. It is not an exaggeration to say peace in the Indo-Pacific — not to mention the lives of countless American service members — hangs in the balance."

Encouragingly, the frame advocating for diplomacy and dialogue was also prominent, with *Diplomacy* being the second most frequent frame at 23% of the sample. This frame was frequently employed by allied experts in our field, who were significantly more likely than other sources to emphasize the need for diplomacy. Approximately half of all expert quotes in our sample were framed around diplomacy. A third of the quotes from federal officials — the most frequently quoted source type — also employed the *Diplomacy* frame.

Crucially, over 90% of quotes focusing on diplomacy were advocating for it, with fewer than 10% arguing against dialogue or portraying calls for diplomacy as “naïve.”

In an example of a quote advocating for diplomacy, David Gompert, Senior Fellow at RAND and former US intelligence official, stated in an [NPR interview](#) in February 2023:

"What is missing is dialogue. The US-China strategic nuclear relationship, which is stable because of mutual deterrence, ...is fraught with suspicion. ... And that level of suspicion is very troublesome and potentially dangerous. What we need is not simply a hotline. We need a dialogue."

Implications

This analysis of US news coverage of China’s nuclear program reveals a media landscape where federal and military officials, unnamed sources, and conservative-leaning outlets dominate and drive the narrative. The reliance on official government perspectives in particular contributes to a portrayal of China that is heavily focused on threat perception and strategic competition, often at the expense of more nuanced discussions about diplomacy and arms control. However, the prominence of the *Diplomacy* frame, especially among allied experts advocating for arms control and dialogue, suggests an opportunity to shift the conversation. The findings underscore the need for a more diverse set of sources in media reporting, as well as a broader array of perspectives that can better inform public debate and policy decisions regarding US-China nuclear relations.

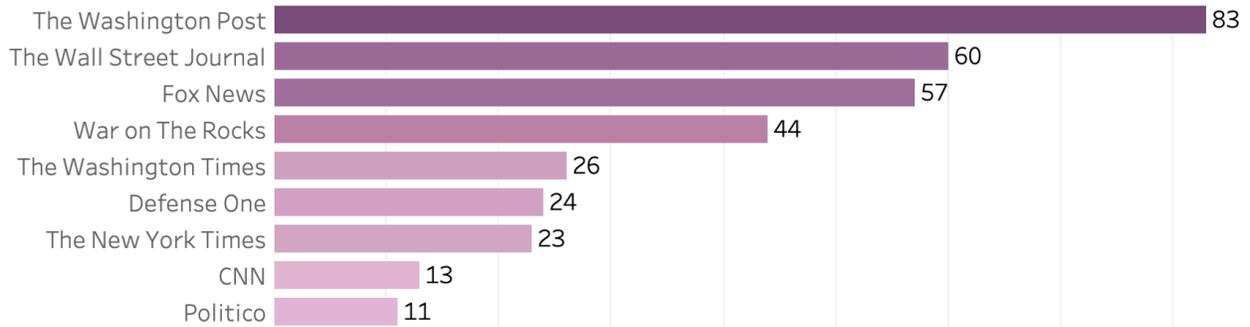
Opinion Coverage

Our examination of opinion pieces published about China’s nuclear program reveals a landscape dominated by conservative-leaning outlets and a limited diversity of voices. The analysis highlights the predominant framing of China as a significant and escalating threat, with many commentators advocating for a more assertive US policy response. However, the analysis also identifies a critical, though less frequent, call for diplomacy and dialogue, emphasizing the need for non-military solutions to this complex issue.

Outlets

Opinion pieces about China’s nuclear program are predominantly published in conservative-leaning outlets such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *Fox News*, and *The Washington Times*.

Top publishers of opinion pieces on China's nuclear program, 2021-2023, by # of articles

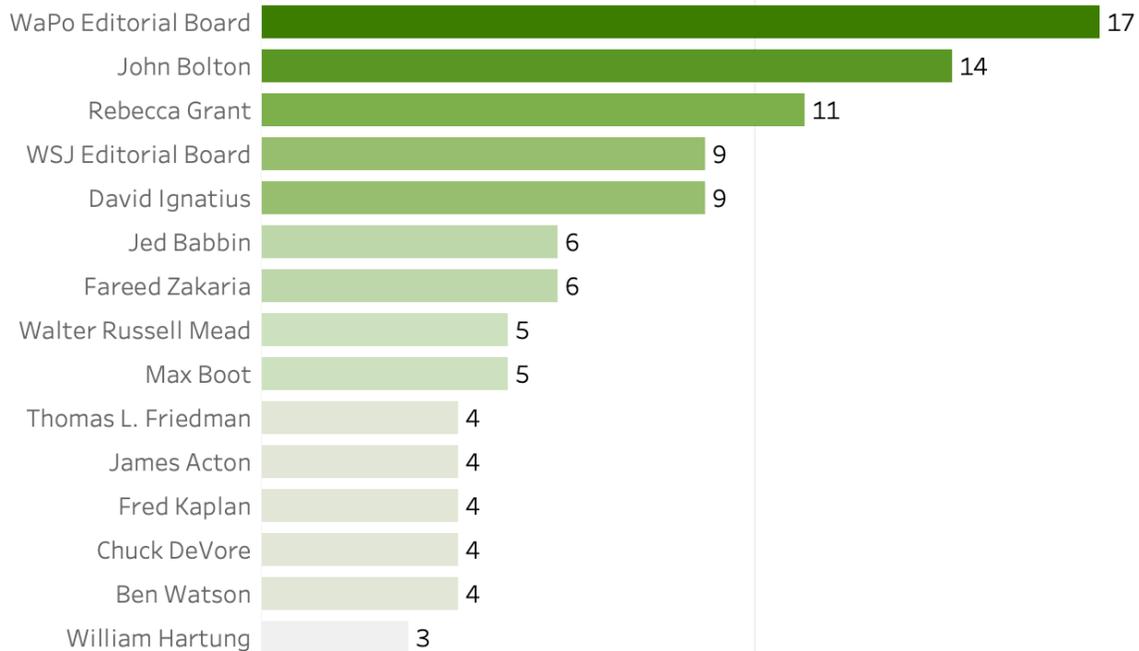


As noted in the news analysis section above, the presence of conservative outlets in the top 10 publications in this space contrasts with the more balanced representation of perspectives we've observed in broader discussions of nuclear issues.

Authors

In an investigation into the authors of opinion pieces on this issue, the *Washington Post* Editorial Board stands out with the highest number of articles, contributing 17 pieces. John Bolton follows with 14 articles, reflecting his prominent voice in national security discourse, driven by his background as a former National Security Advisor. Security analyst Rebecca Grant is another significant contributor, with 11 articles.

Top authors of opinion pieces on China's nuclear program, 2021-2023, by # of articles



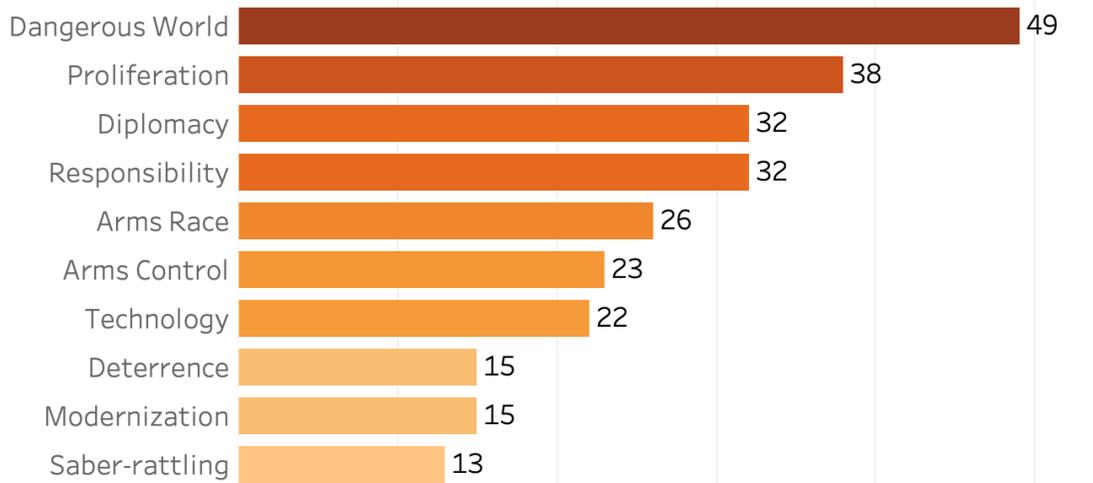
An additional consideration in the opinion coverage is the gender and diversity of the authors. This analysis shows a predominance of white male voices in opinion coverage, reflecting broader trends in media and foreign policy commentary. This lack of diversity limits the range of perspectives and

solutions discussed, underscoring the need for more inclusive representation in public discussion of nuclear issues.

Themes

Utilizing the same 10 frames as for the news coverage, we also hand-coded a sample of the opinion pieces to understand how the US-China nuclear relationship was being discussed in commentary. We also conducted keyword searches and performed topic modeling to extract the top themes, narratives, and arguments present in the opinion coverage.

Frames assigned to opinion pieces on China's nuclear program, 2021-2023, by # of articles



A Dangerous World

Underlying many of the arguments in the opinion coverage is the *Dangerous World* frame, which appears in about two-thirds of the pieces analyzed. Just as it did in our analysis of the news quotes, this frame encompasses discussions of looming threats, dangers, and concerns about China's nuclear ambitions. The narrative often suggests that China's nuclear program poses a direct, rapidly-escalating threat to US interests and global security, as demonstrated in this headline from a [Defense One](#) opinion piece:

Edging Towards the Nuclear Abyss

In doctrine and posture, the world's nuclear powers are making nuclear war more, not less, likely.

JOEL HICKMAN | SEPTEMBER 26, 2022

Themes of proliferation, diplomacy, and responsibility are also common in opinion coverage. About half of the articles address the need for China to be more transparent and accountable in its nuclear activities. These pieces often call for China to join international arms control agreements and increase openness about its nuclear capabilities. The argument is that greater transparency would reduce the risk of miscalculation and build trust, thereby enhancing global security. However, opinion authors are also skeptical about China's willingness to adhere to such agreements, reflecting a broader distrust of China's intentions.

Critique of US Policy as 'Weak'

As for the stances these opinion pieces take, **calls for a more robust and assertive US strategy towards China — and its inverse, critiques of US policy as “weak” — abound** in this coverage. Some commentators argue that the current US administration has not responded adequately to China's provocations, which has emboldened China to further challenge US interests. This theme is often articulated through comparisons with past US foreign policy approaches and through warnings of the potential consequences of perceived weakness. This is reflected in this headline from a [Fox News](#) opinion piece on the Biden-Xi summit in November 2023:

Biden-Xi summit: Showing weakness to this evil regime endangers Americans

What agreement could Biden and Xi come to that we could possibly trust a dictator to uphold?



OPINION By Michelle Steel · Fox News

Published November 27, 2023 8:00am EST

This sentiment is driven by concerns over China's expanding military capabilities, particularly its nuclear program, and its increasing assertiveness in places such as the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. Further, news events such as the Chinese spy balloon sighting and reports of missile tests are frequently cited as provocations that justify a more aggressive US response. The underlying argument is that these incidents pose a direct threat to US national security and, by extension, to global stability. For example, former Pentagon officials James H. Anderson and David J. Trachtenberg wrote in [a Feb. 2023 letter in The Washington Post](#) after the Chinese spy balloon incident:

"Given China's increasingly belligerent actions, massive military buildup, growing threats against Taiwan and expansive nuclear weapons program, the Biden administration's handling of this situation likely reinforces the belief of China and other US adversaries that the United States is not prepared to act forcefully in its own self-defense when its territory is violated."

The intensifying rivalry between the US and China in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly concerning Taiwan and the South China Sea, emerges as another key theme. Opinion writers often frame China's actions in these areas as challenges to US influence and as efforts to alter the regional balance of power. In this context, the growth of China's nuclear arsenal is frequently mentioned not only as a direct threat but also as a symbol of China's broader ambitions in the region.

Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich reflected this sentiment in a [January 2022 Newsweek piece](#):

"Last Sunday, the Chinese Communists flew 39 aircraft — including a nuclear bomber — near Taiwan. The simple fact is Putin and Xi sense real weakness in the American commander in chief. They sense that American confusion and weakness is an enormous opportunity."

Calls for Diplomacy and Dialogue

Despite the many calls for a tougher stance, some voices in the coverage — most prominently, allied experts — advocate for diplomacy and dialogue. Approximately a quarter of opinion pieces discuss the importance of diplomatic solutions and the need for increased engagement with China to manage risks and promote stability, such as [this piece](#) in the *Washington Post*:

Diplomacy defused Cold War crises. It can help again today.

The type of quiet, personal, informed diplomacy advocated by George Kennan can reduce tensions with China and Russia.

These often argue that military confrontation is not the only or best solution to the nuclear issue and that engaging in strategic dialogue and cooperation instead will lead to more sustainable outcomes. For example, noting that “both the United States and China have nuclear arsenals capable of decimating each other,” the Harvard Belfer Center’s Graham Allison wrote in the [Washington Post](#) in June 2023:

“Can Biden and Xi find a way to build a world safe enough to allow the competition between America’s liberty-centered democracy and another nation’s party-led autocracy to continue peacefully for long enough for one to triumph? It has happened before.”

The example above also references past success (in this case, diplomacy with the Soviet Union) to make the case that catastrophic conflict can be avoided again.

Implications

[Opinion coverage significantly influences public perception and policy](#), so it is important to pay close attention to the narratives and arguments present in this coverage. Frequently engaging with the dominant themes of danger, strategic competition, and calls for a tougher stance can shape the public’s understanding and expectations of US-China policy. Those voices advocating for diplomacy and cooperation provide an important counterbalance, highlighting the potential for non-military solutions to complex international issues. Recognizing these dynamics is essential for developing more balanced and informed public discourse on China’s nuclear program and broader US-China relations.

Appendix: List of News Outlets Analyzed

- Associated Press Newswires
- Black Agenda Report
- Christian Science Monitor
- CNN
- Defense News
- Defense One
- Fox News
- Houston Chronicle
- HuffPost
- Los Angeles Times
- NBC
- Newsweek
- NPR
- PBS
- Politico
- Reuters News
- Roll Call
- Slate
- South China Morning Post
- Talking Points Memo
- Task and Purpose
- The Atlanta Journal - Constitution
- The Atlantic
- The Boston Globe
- The Chicago Tribune
- The Daily Beast
- The Hill
- The Intercept
- The Miami Herald
- The New York Times
- The Wall Street Journal
- The Washington Post
- The Washington Times
- Univision
- USA Today
- Vice
- Vox
- War is Boring
- War on The Rocks

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