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The limitations of strategic narratives: The Sino-American struggle over the meaning of COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Recent research has explored how the Sino-American narrative struggle around COVID-19 might affect power shift dynamics and world order. An underlying assumption is that states craft strategic narratives in attempts to gain international support for their understandings of reality. This article evaluates such claims taking a mixed-methods approach. It analyzes American and Chinese strategic narratives about the pandemic, and their global diffusion and resonance in regional states that are important to the U.S.-led world order: Australia, India, South Korea, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. While the article confirms that strategic narratives remain a highly popular policy instrument, it argues that their efficacy appears limited. Overall, the five states in question either ignored the Sino-American narrative power battle by disseminating their own strategic narratives, or they engaged in “narrative hedging.” Moreover, even China’s narrative entrepreneurship was enabled and constrained by pre-existing master narratives integral to the current U.S.-led world order.

KEYWORDS China; COVID-19; power shift; strategic narratives; United States; world order

As COVID-19 jolted the world in early 2020, various actors immediately began to spin narratives around it. They proposed competing accounts of causality, of heroes and villains, and of measures that ought to be adopted based on the lessons they drew. In this context, numerous references were made to an “infodemic,” and to a narrative power struggle, in particular between the world’s two most powerful states—the United States and China. Observers suggested that the narrative power struggle over the meaning of the pandemic could have implications for the future of world order and the ostensibly ongoing power shift from the United States to

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China, thereby linking recent developments to pre-pandemic debates about China's rise and the future of world order (Allison, 2017; Breslin, 2013; Ikenberry, 2008; Yan, 2018). For example, scholars have suggested that China's handling of the pandemic has proved superior to that of the United States, and that this may be a harbinger of China's emergence as a global leader (Dunford & Qi, 2020; Schindler et al., 2020). Some have highlighted the success of Chinese narratives as skillfully delegitimizing the Western liberal order's crisis management (Ogden, 2020; Smith & Fallon, 2020), while representing China's own authoritarian approach as a successful alternative (Chang, 2021). In this way, the pandemic has offered China an opportunity to promote its "own conception of an international order" (Dunford & Qi, 2020, p. 11). Others have lamented such developments, expressing concern that China is seeking to assert global leadership by spreading a largely false story about how it has defeated the virus while democratic states are succumbing to it (DiResta, 2020; Green & Medeiros, 2020). Still others have claimed that while the U.S. response to the pandemic provided China with an excellent opportunity to assume a global leadership role, it failed because its narrative was too aggressive (Zhao, 2021). Meanwhile, it has been suggested that Chinese narratives were ultimately targeted at domestic rather than international audiences (Gill, 2020; Jacob, 2020; Verma, 2020).

While much of this debate has fixated on Chinese activities, some studies have noted that U.S. leaders have also been spreading disinformation (Harris & Dong, 2020; Tisdall, 2020). They describe the narrative power struggle between the United States and China as a "blame game" (Gill, 2020; Ogden, 2020; Tyler & Liu, 2020), from which neither party is likely to emerge victoriously (Jaworsky & Qiaoan, 2021).

This debate has largely accepted that narratives matter and can affect world politics by attracting or even fooling global audiences into acquiring a certain understanding of reality. It is underpinned, to a significant extent, by a distinct set of assumptions. First, great importance is ascribed to *strategic* narratives—an inclination that reflects the fact that many states currently spend huge resources on projecting their own stories and "brands" to the world. Hence, much like burgeoning research agendas on "disinformation," "propaganda," "information warfare," "sharp power," and "fake news," current research and commentary often seem to assume that actors can control narratives and use them strategically (Prior, 2017; Verrall & Mason, 2018; Walker, 2018). Moreover, existing studies have largely focused on narratives about specific issues—in this case COVID-19—while paying less attention to institutionalized *master* narratives. This article examines the dissemination and reception of Sino-American strategic narratives about the pandemic, as well as whether or how they invoke master narratives and with what effects: What narratives have the U.S. and Chinese

governments disseminated about the pandemic? To what extent and how have those narratives been referenced and reproduced by decision makers in Australia, India, South Korea, Turkey, and the United Kingdom—five regional states vital to the future of the current U.S.-led world order?

Based on this analysis, we find that both China and the United States have sought to use narratives strategically. However, we argue that the efficacy of these narratives seems rather limited. Indeed, the five states analyzed either largely ignored the Sino-American narrative power battle, and instead focused on disseminating their own strategic narratives, or engaged in “narrative hedging.” In addition, we find that attempts to use narratives strategically by both states were enabled, and constrained, by pre-existing master narratives integral to the current U.S.-led world order. Consequently, we argue that there are significant limitations to the use of strategic narratives, and that any attempt to use them seriously needs to take into account the pre-existing narrative context or constellation of entrenched master narratives. The article’s findings thus have important implications for both the academic study and the practical use of strategic narratives.

The next section presents our approach to narrative power. Drawing on constructivist and post-structuralist theories, it clarifies that strategic narratives can be understood as enabled and constrained by pre-existing and firmly institutionalized master narratives. After presenting our mixed-methods design, which employs both qualitative narrative methods and quantitative textual methods to analyze extensive empirical materials, three subsequent sections analyze American and Chinese narratives about China, the United States, and the pandemic, and trace their global diffusion and resonance with a focus on Australia, India, South Korea, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. The final section concludes that scholars and practitioners should pay more attention to how firmly institutionalized master narratives not only limit, but also empower the crafting and diffusion of strategic narratives.

Narratives in world politics

Narratives are “discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way ... and ... offer insights about the world and/or people’s experiences of it” (Hinchman & Hinchman, 2001, p. xvi). While all discursive forms are intersubjective and ascribe meaning, narratives are characterized by their chronological storytelling structure (White, 1973). Whereas arguments “have premises and conclusions,” narratives contain “beginnings, middles, and ends” (Roe, 1992, p. 563). Narratives tend to revolve around key actors, and their attributes and actions; they often include causal claims and unfold in a particular setting. They construct positive and negative identities through the juxtaposition of heroes and villains, thereby playing a key role in

threat constructions (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019; Spencer, 2016; Yuan & Fu, 2020). Furthermore, narratives typically conclude with lessons for the future and policy suggestions (Jones & McBeth, 2010). Lessons that warn of the malevolence of other actors, and foresee conflict with them, can even set the stage for “self-fulfilling geopolitics” (Guzzini, 2012, p. 5). The narrative construction of Self and Other has enabled and legitimized several conflicts and wars in the past (e.g., Krebs & Lobasz, 2007; Subotic, 2016).

Current debates imply that narrative power battles over COVID-19 reflect and could play into ongoing power shift dynamics. For example, if narratives about China’s skillful crisis management were to be successfully disseminated and gain a large following around the world, at the same time as U.S. narratives were ignored or rejected, this might indicate a potential shift in the world order. In this way, a power shift could be defined as a structural shift in the global dissemination of narratives about world politics (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019, p. 400).

The existing scholarship has typically analyzed the diffusion of narratives in world politics with the help of agent-centric approaches—the rich and growing research agenda on strategic narratives being a prime example (e.g., Hellman & Wagnsson, 2015; Miskimmon et al., 2014; O’Shea, 2018). These approaches assume that actors—whether states or leaders—strategically create, mobilize, diffuse, and contest narratives to get others to do what they would not otherwise have done. Political leaders, for example, have been called “storytellers-in-chief” (Bandurski, 2018; Gallo, 2015). Such approaches have a lot going for them. International actors clearly seek to secure an international followership for their preferred narratives, for instance, through various government initiatives such as China’s Confucius Institutes and Russia’s Sputnik News agency, but also the U.S. Fulbright Program.

While actors certainly *try* to use narratives strategically in this way, however, we argue that such strategizing has limitations. One reason for this is that policymakers’ use of strategic narratives often fails to take into account the myths that target audiences subscribe to (Schmitt, 2018). To gain resonance, strategic narratives arguably have to take account of and reference the deeper and more stable master narratives that exist not only within target states, but also internationally. A master narrative is defined as “a dominant storyline that permeates and structures knowledge, including lower-level narratives, on a certain broad topic” (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019, p. 388). We thus regard actors as operating within an existing narrative terrain, which both enables and constrains their capacity to narrate and act (Brown, 2006; Somers, 1994). In this way, master narratives form a key part of the context in which strategic narratives are promoted and narrative power battles are waged. This research is situated within broadly

constructivist and post-structuralist IR scholarship that highlights the role of “internarrativity”; that is, how narratives draw on and shape each other (Hansen, 2006; Spencer, 2016). The insight that narratives have a highly institutionalized component of this kind forms an integral part of the “narrative turn” in International Relations (IR), but is not always reflected in the IR research and analysis that draws on narrative, again particularly research on strategic narratives, disinformation, sharp power, and so on. Indeed, even seemingly opposing narratives can be limited by the same underlying master narrative. For example, the two competing narratives that China must be either contained or handled through engagement both rely on the master narrative that China is rising and that its rise is a problem that must be addressed. The master narrative about the rise of China, in turn, seems plausible because it invokes even more deeply institutionalized master narratives about power transitions and the rise and fall of great powers, which draw legitimacy from their status as academic theories.

A mixed-methods design for analyzing narrative power struggles

The following sections analyze U.S. and Chinese narratives about COVID-19, and the extent to which they are referenced and reproduced by the most senior government offices and officials in Australia, India, South Korea, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. While all five states are engaged in trade with both the United States and China, the pre-existing political context means that narratives constructed by officials in Australia and the United Kingdom are arguably “least-likely” cases for displaying any similarity with Chinese narratives and, conversely, “most-likely” cases in terms of similarity with U.S. narratives (Eckstein, 1975, pp. 118–119). The other three states maintain more ambiguous relations with both the United States and China, but are nonetheless strategically aligned with the United States and important pillars of the U.S.-led world order. Consequently, if officials in these five states produce and disseminate narratives that closely reflect Chinese ones, it would be a potentially more significant political development, which might have a greater impact on world order and power relations than if officials in Russia, Iran, Venezuela, or even South Africa did so. The timeframe in each case is from mid-January to late October 2020, with an emphasis on the first five months. We adopted a mixed-methods approach that corroborated findings from qualitative narrative analysis with large-scale quantitative textual analysis.

In the case of the United States, we first relied on qualitative narrative methods to analyze comprehensive empirical material that closely reflected the Trump administration’s narrative entrepreneurship. It comprised 73 press briefings and remarks related to COVID-19, with President Donald

J. Trump and Vice President Mike Pence the main narrators of interest, downloaded from the Trump White House website and the Twitter accounts associated with the Trump administration relevant to this study, primarily those of the then president and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, as well as official accounts associated with the State Department and the White House. We are aware there was no consensus on the Trump administration's narrative about COVID-19 even within the United States—it was vehemently contested by leading Democrats—but the focus of this article is on the main narrative that the U.S. government projected at home and abroad at the time, and that the Chinese side engaged with.

In the case of China, the material for the qualitative narrative analysis consisted of all 11 English-language speeches and remarks by, and interviews with, Foreign Minister Wang Yi that touched on COVID-19, found on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (PRC) website, as well as the Twitter accounts associated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its key spokesperson, Hua Chunying. Because we are primarily interested in the Sino-American *international* narrative power struggle over COVID-19, rather than domestic narrative politics within China, we limited our analysis of Chinese materials to that which could be accessed in English.

We then thematized the U.S. and Chinese materials. In line with narrative methods (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019; Jones & McBeth, 2010; Spencer, 2016), we sought to answer the following questions: Who are the main protagonists and how are they depicted? Is there a clear sequence of events or ascription of causality? Is there an indication of lessons to be learned or resolutions prescribed? Based on the answers to the above, we identified two strategic narratives each in the United States and China.

We later sought to corroborate our findings by using a range of quantitative textual methods. Based on the two U.S. and two Chinese narratives identified through the qualitative analysis and mentioned above, we applied specified search terms to the data corpus to determine the extent to which they were also present in the extensive Twitter material,¹ which consisted of 54 U.S. and 63 Chinese social media accounts, focusing particularly on accounts associated with government officials, ministries, and the media (see Appendix). We ingested 107,135 tweets from U.S. accounts between February 1 and October 31, 2020, including 9,862 tweets from the Twitter archive associated with former President Trump,² and 245,028 tweets from Chinese accounts. Data ingestion is the process of obtaining and automatically importing data into a database for immediate use or storage. We also analyzed the entire data corpus for the most frequently used hashtags and phrases, which we then ranked. In this case, using the accounts and terms identified, the relevant social media posts were taken from their original social media networking site—Twitter—and captured in a database for

reference and analysis. COVID-19 was mentioned in conjunction with the United States *or* China in 47,406 Chinese tweets, or 19.3% of the total number of Chinese tweets, and in 2,636 U.S. tweets (2.5%). We used these quantitative textual methods to compare the temporal distribution of phrases used in the tweets, gaining insight into how government officials embraced or countered competing narratives.

We went on to turn our attention to the five other states to investigate qualitatively the extent to which and how the United States and China featured in statements related to COVID-19, and to what extent and how various high-ranking offices and senior officials in each state reiterated and reinforced or challenged the narratives pushed by the United States and China. In the case of Australia, we went through the Twitter accounts of Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Foreign Minister Marise Payne, as well as all the relevant press conferences and interviews with the prime minister found on his office's website. In the case of India, we focused on the Twitter accounts of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, as well as on the relevant speeches and interviews with the same two officials, found for example on Modi's own website. In the case of South Korea, we examined English language tweets on President Moon Jae-in's account, as well as the speeches and remarks by the president and the then foreign minister, Kang Kyung-wha, downloaded from the websites of the Blue House (Cheong Wa Dae) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the case of Turkey, we considered remarks by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, translated into English and found on the websites of the presidency and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as on the Twitter accounts associated with the same two officials and Deputy Foreign Minister Yavuz Selim Kiran. In the case of the United Kingdom, finally, we gathered material consisting of remarks by and interviews with Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Foreign Minister Dominic Raab, found on the government's official website and their Twitter accounts. We also analyzed transcripts from the meetings of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee that were devoted specifically to the British response to COVID-19. Given its character as a first analytical step, the qualitative analysis focused only on remarks made in or translated into English. The quantitative analysis described below, however, also relied on Twitter material in local languages.

Finally, we identified social media accounts in Australia (53), India (51), South Korea (75), Turkey (52), and the United Kingdom (91) associated with government officials, ministries, the media, and, where applicable, pro-U.S. and pro-China civil society groups (see Appendix). We ingested 262,530 tweets from accounts in all five states between February 1 and October 31, 2020. COVID-19 was mentioned in conjunction with the United States *or* China in 2,840 tweets, or in 1.1% percent of the total number of tweets.³

Needless to say, Twitter penetration varies significantly across the five states in question. However, since these are government and media accounts, there is no direct correlation between Twitter data output and the percentage of a population that uses Twitter.

U.S. narratives

Immediately after the COVID-19 outbreak, U.S. officials praised China's crisis management and stressed the two countries' "close cooperation" (White House, 2020a). However, as the virus spread in the United States and the administration's response came under increasing domestic scrutiny, official U.S. narratives became more critical of China. From late February, the Trump administration began to promote a strategic narrative that China had sought to cover up the COVID-19 outbreak. U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, for example, tweeted: "#China didn't report the outbreak of the new #coronavirus in a timely fashion to the WHO," and "didn't share all of the information it had" (Pompeo, 2020c). There were allegations that China had misreported domestic casualties, for example by Trump, who asked a rhetorical question whether anybody really believed Chinese casualty figures (White House, 2020b). He subsequently stressed that China was "way ahead of us in terms of death" (White House, 2020i).

Another recurring theme was that COVID-19 originated in China (e.g., White House, 2020d), and parts of the administration also started using the term and hashtag #WuhanVirus (e.g., Pompeo, 2020a). In early May, China was implicated even more clearly as the villain. For instance, Pompeo stated that "there is a significant amount of evidence that this came from that laboratory in Wuhan" (Borger, 2020). U.S. officials inserted this claim into a broader causal story about China, laboratories, and the spread of disease: "China has a history of infecting the world and they have a history of running substandard laboratories" (Pompeo, 2020e).

Arguably, this not only refers to earlier viruses originating in China, such as the Asian flu, the Hong Kong flu, and SARS-CoV-1, but also invokes the "yellow peril" master narrative that emerged in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which portrayed Chinese people as "devious and immoral; as uncivilized; as dirty and a source of disease" (Hanser, 2013). Moreover, if the Chinese were responsible for the spread of the virus, it follows that they "could have stopped [it]," and that they are to blame for "causing such global economic devastation" (State Department, 2020b). Later in the period under investigation, U.S. officials continued to refer to COVID-19 as the "China virus" or even the "China plague" (White House, 2020l). Trump confirmed: "[W]e are not happy with China ... because we believe it could have been stopped at the source, it could have been stopped quickly, and it wouldn't have spread all over the world" (White House, 2020j).

From late April, U.S. officials began urging China to be more transparent. Pompeo, for example, stated: “The CCP [Chinese Communist Party] needs to be transparent as the world seeks answers to #COVID19 and its origins ... China has a responsibility to cooperate” (Pompeo, 2020d). Here, U.S. officials invoked a master narrative about China lacking transparency, which has recurred in recent years particularly in relation to military affairs (Pan, 2012, pp. 23, 30, 127). A related trope that was repeatedly emphasized throughout the period was that China perpetrated a “cover-up” (Pompeo, 2020f). In this way, U.S. narratives held China directly accountable for the thousands of deaths occurring in the United States. Trump, for instance, claimed in September that “It was China’s fault” (White House, 2020m). The larger issue at stake, and the lesson to be learned, was that China must commit to shared rules and norms if it wishes to “join the community of nations” (State Department, 2020a).

The Trump administration’s condemnation of China also translated into criticism of the World Health Organization (WHO): “we’re paying them [the WHO] more than 10 times more than China. And they are very, very China-centric” (White House, 2020f). Trump complained that the WHO “willingly took China’s assurances to [sic] face value,” “defended the actions of the Chinese government, even praising China for its so-called transparency,” and “pushed China’s misinformation about the virus” (White House, 2020g). China’s method of swaying the WHO, moreover, was discussed as reminiscent of how it has allegedly taken advantage of the World Trade Organization. Trump refused to be fooled, however, unlike previous U.S. administrations: “China has taken advantage of the United States—until I came here—with Sleepy Joe Biden and Obama and Bush and everybody else” (White House, 2020e). In this way, the Trump administration justified its decision to withdraw funding from the WHO.

While it is beyond the scope of this article to analyze the narrative contestation within the United States, leading Democrats actually shared the Trump administration’s concern about China’s lack of transparency and disinformation. According to Eliot Engel, the Democrat Chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee: “No one believes China’s propaganda about the origins of the virus” (U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, 2020). Moreover, Bob Menendez (New Jersey) and other Democrat Senators called for enhanced understanding of “what actions China took to conceal information or misrepresent the severity of the crisis” (U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2020a). This again confirms the operation of a more institutionalized master narrative on how to handle relations with China, according to which harsh criticism is the norm and any conciliatory gesture is seen as “appeasement” and “showing signs of weakness” (Pan, 2012, p. 94). For Democrats, however, this ultimately meant the Trump administration was too soft on China in the early days of the pandemic.

For example, opposition leader and current President Joe Biden repeatedly criticized Trump for being “weak” on China: “For months, he falsely told us we had nothing to worry about while praising China’s response to managing the coronavirus” (Biden, 2020b).

Leading Democrats criticized most other components of the Trump administration’s narrative about COVID-19 and the policies for handling the pandemic that it sought to justify. They condemned the Trump administration for associating the virus with China and Wuhan, thereby potentially stigmatizing Asians in general and Asian-Americans in particular (U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2020b). They warned that such stigmatization not only risked dividing American society, but could also “play into the Chinese Communist Party’s propaganda and messaging in ways that undermine our unity, national interests, and global leadership” (U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2020c). Democrats also criticized the U.S. decision to cut funding for the WHO as “counterproductive” and putting “lives at risk” (Engel, 2020). While leading democrats agreed that the WHO had handled the crisis “imperfectly” (U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, 2020), they still favored continued multilateralism and support for the organization (U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2020b). Instead, the biggest problem, in their narrative, was the Trump administration’s crisis mismanagement, which they described as “calamitous” (Engel, 2020). The president himself, moreover, was portrayed as “incapable” (Biden, 2020a; Pelosi, 2020), and not sufficiently grounded in the facts and the science.

By contrast, in its own narrative the Trump administration dealt with the crisis proactively and did a “great job” (White House, 2020b). For example, in late February Trump stated: “We’ve taken the most aggressive actions to confront the coronavirus” (White House, 2020c). Pompeo, for example, stressed that the United States “continues to lead the global response to COVID-19,” mentioning “\$270 million in new humanitarian economic security assistance,” which “will help protect Americans and our partners as we fight this virus together” (Pompeo, 2020b).

The notion that China lacks transparency is arguably widespread around the world but apart from that line of critique, the Trump administration’s strategic narratives did little to appeal to master narratives already accepted by foreign audiences. As seen above, the “yellow peril” master narrative was not even accepted by all Americans. The Trump administration also reproduced a widespread master narrative about American greatness and supremacy (Hagström, 2021), but here such traits were intimately intertwined with Trump’s own person and numerous comments from within the administration praised decisions as Trump’s own (White House, 2020k). The main lesson to be learned was that Trump was a capable leader whose mandate should be renewed in the November 2020 election.

To summarize the key findings of the qualitative analysis, the United States projected two main strategic narratives: (i) COVID-19 originated in China, the country tried its best to hide the outbreak and refused to cooperate with investigations, and China duped the WHO, which is pro-China; and (ii) the United States has taken a proactive approach to COVID-19 that is better than anywhere else in the world and the Trump administration has been highly successful.

Having performed this qualitative analysis, we went on to ingest 33,052 tweets from 19 U.S. domestic political accounts (nine Republican and 10 Democrat) and 16,754 tweets from 22 U.S. diplomatic accounts across the five countries of interest. We also ingested 9,862 tweets from the now-deleted @realDonaldTrump account, which we accessed via the Trump archive. Finally, we ingested 34,054 tweets from seven English-language Voice of America Twitter accounts to represent U.S. government-funded media, as well as 23,275 tweets from five right-wing media Twitter accounts to represent media more ideologically aligned with the Trump administration.

Important elements of both of the U.S. narratives summarized above were present in U.S. political and government-aligned media tweets but accounted for only 1.1% of them in the period February to October 2020 (see [Table 1](#)). In addition to confirming the divergence between Democrat and Republican officials, we also identified a systematic discrepancy between Twitter accounts based in the United States and U.S. government diplomatic accounts based abroad. The latter rarely amplified the strategic narratives embraced by domestic accounts and never repeated their most incendiary language, for example by using the word “plague” to describe COVID-19. This suggests that the narrative battle between the United States and

Table 1. The table provides an estimate of the number of U.S. domestic government, U.S. diplomatic, and government-aligned media tweets associated with each narrative element based on the associated search terms.

Narrative element	Search string	#Tweets
1. COVID-19 originated in China	(Wuhan* OR chin* OR origin*) AND (pandemic OR plague OR Virus OR lab OR laboratory OR labs OR escap* OR leak*)	435
2. China tried to cover up COVID-19	(COVID* OR corona* OR virus) AND (CCP* OR Chin*) AND (propaganda OR cover* OR report* OR hid* lie* OR publish* OR accountab*)	199
3. China refuses to cooperate with investigations	(Chin* OR CCP) AND (transparen* OR cooperat* OR investigat* OR trust* OR dishon*) AND (COVID* OR corona*)	41
4. WHO is pro-China	(Chin* OR CCP) AND (@WHO OR #WHO OR (World and Health and Organization) OR Tedros)	50
5. The United States has a proactive approach that is better than anywhere else	(Chin* AND ban*) OR (humanitarian AND (COVID* OR corona*)) OR ((covid* OR corona*) AND MAGA)	175

China was largely waged between the Chinese government and the Trump administration. By contrast, many U.S. diplomats sought to stay out of it.

Chinese narratives

Chinese officials have promoted strategic narratives depicting China's crisis management as resolute and efficient, and as a "heavy sacrifice" that limited the spread of COVID-19 and bought time for the rest of the world to prepare (e.g., Wang, 2020a). In a tweet, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua (2020a) attributed the successful response to China's system:

Many state leaders note it is admirable that the Chinese government & people show solid resolve in dealing with the epidemic. The high speed & massive scale of China's response are rarely seen in the world. China's speed, scale & efficiency reflect advantage of China's system.

Chinese officials also invoked statements by authoritative representatives of international organizations. Hua (2020b), for example, quoted Bruce Aylward of the WHO as telling China: "The world's in your debt." China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2020a) cited UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres as praising China for setting "a new standard for outbreak response by saving time for the world and slowing the spread." Foreign Minister Wang (2020b), moreover, quoted WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus as saying: "China is protecting not only its own people, but also the rest of the world."

As the virus spread internationally, Chinese narratives began to stress how China was helping other countries by providing medical aid. Such commentary contained photographs from airports around the world, and quotes from foreign government officials expressing gratitude at the arrival of Chinese aid packages or medical teams. It also emphasized the "unbreakable" bond of solidarity between China and the rest of the world. On April 16, Wang (2020c) further highlighted China's selflessness: "Although fighting the virus in China remains a formidable task, we have been doing all we could to provide assistance to other countries and actively engage in international cooperation."

Chinese representatives also countered the Trump administration's claim that the virus originated in a Chinese laboratory, quoting a renowned science journal: "@TheLancet published a statement condemning the conspiracy theory on #COVID19 and concluding the virus is originated in wildlife, not from labs," and stressed the importance of fighting "political viruses" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2020a). One tweet went further: "Confirmed cases of #COVID19 were first found in China, but its origin is not necessarily in China. We are still tracing the origin" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2020b).

References to “political viruses” appeared frequently in official Chinese tweets. They criticized the term “Wuhan coronavirus” as “anti-science,” “despicable stigmatization,” or “racist and xenophobic” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2020d). Invoking the WHO, Foreign Ministry tweets stated that “stigma is more dangerous than the virus itself” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2020c). Towards the end of May, Foreign Minister Wang addressed the source of the virus, stating that “the difference between China and some U.S. politicians is as wide as that between facts and lies, between science and prejudice” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2020g). These denouncements were embedded in criticism of the American response to the pandemic. Chinese spokespersons stressed that they had informed the U.S. government of developments in early January, but said that “time has been regrettably wasted by the U.S.” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2020e). They also suggested that the U.S. government might be hiding something (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2020f).

Even though the analysis covers several months, the Chinese narrative about the pandemic was strikingly consistent and coherent (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2020h). It was neatly summarized in the New China TV YouTube video clip, “Once upon a virus,” produced by the *Xinhua* news agency, which featured Lego-like figures representing China, the United States, and the WHO. In the story, the Chinese protagonist informs the WHO and the United States that it has identified a new and dangerous virus, that it is important to take precautions, and so on. The American character responds with complacency, rejecting the Chinese warnings. After a while, when it becomes ill and is attached to an intravenous drip, it starts to criticize the Chinese protagonist and the WHO (New China TV, 2020). The film clip echoed and summarized the themes identified above, portraying the Chinese protagonist as rational and responsible and the American character as irrational and irresponsible.

Much like U.S. narratives about the pandemic analyzed above, Chinese statements also drew on highly institutionalized master narratives on the greatness of the Chinese nation and the effective leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (Hagström, 2021). Another, arguably more significant, underlying theme in the Chinese narratives was that they referenced and reproduced master narratives about the importance of multilateralism and international cooperation, depicting China as a responsible champion of international organizations, and as working for the interests of humanity as a whole (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2020g). For example, at the April 28 BRICS summit, Foreign Minister Wang (2020d) stressed:

We the BRICS countries must support UN bodies in playing their due roles in fighting COVID-19. The World Health Organization (WHO) is a central force

in coordinating the global response, and is indispensable for helping developing countries, especially our African brothers and sisters, in fighting the disease.

This support for the WHO was accompanied by attempts to delegitimize the United States, calling it selfish and unattuned to the common interests of the international community: “My way or the highway, put a hold on funding. Is this the right way of [a] responsible country?” (Hua, 2020c). On April 23, Hua (2020d) tweeted that China would provide the WHO with US\$ 30 million. She commented: “At this crucial moment, supporting WHO is supporting Multilateralism and Global Solidarity” (Hua, 2020e).

Hence, we find two main Chinese narratives: (i) China is the champion of the international system because its domestic crisis management is resolute and effective, and because internationally it is based on multilateralism and assisting other countries by providing medical aid; and (ii) the United States engages in politicization and stigmatization, such as the Wuhan lab conspiracy theory, which is more dangerous than COVID-19 itself, and it wasted the time that Chinese sacrifice had given it.

Having identified these two narratives, we went on to ingest 18,315 tweets from seven Chinese domestic government accounts and ten Chinese diplomatic accounts across the five countries of interest. Because state-sponsored media was a key force in circulating Chinese narratives internationally, we also ingested 226,713 tweets from 46 accounts associated with such media. The quantitative textual analysis confirmed the existence of both narratives summarized above and a strong narrative consistency among Chinese accounts. There is evidence from the data to suggest that Chinese government tweets were intended solely for foreign consumption: First, Twitter is banned in China; and, second, 88% of the Chinese posts were in English and only 0.2% were in Chinese. Finally, more than 3.1% of Chinese government and state media tweets included elements of the two Chinese narratives, highlighting China’s greater focus on strategic dissemination of narratives about COVID-19 (see Table 2).

By using a data-driven approach to the corpus, we were able to detect an additional Chinese narrative trope concerning the international distribution of COVID-19 vaccines that was not included in the qualitative analysis. Beginning in the late summer of 2020, Chinese government and media accounts began to disseminate posts focused on Chinese generosity in its vaccine distribution and support for COVAX, and the greed of the U.S. and its allies in hoarding vaccines for domestic use (CGTN Sports, 2020; People’s Daily, 2020). Ultimately, both “versions” of the COVID-19 vaccine trope support the two different Chinese narratives summarized above.

Table 2. The table provides an estimate of the number of Chinese domestic government, Chinese diplomatic and state-owned media tweets associated with each narrative element based on the associated search terms.

Narrative element	Search string	#Tweets
1. China is a champion of the international system	((multilateral* OR solidarity) AND (COVID* OR corona* OR virus* OR pandemic*)) OR #FightTogether	1,744
2. China's crisis management is resolute and efficient	(China OR Chinese OR Wuhan) AND ((#WHO OR @WHO OR (World AND health AND Organization) OR sacrific*) AND (COVID* corona* virus* pandemic*))	718
3. China is helping other countries by providing medical aid	Chin* AND (((donat* OR export*) AND (mask* OR ventilator* OR PPE OR (Personal AND protective AND equipment))) OR ((COVID* OR corona* OR #COVID* OR #corona*) AND (aid OR suppl*)))	2,771
4. Politicization and stigmatization is more dangerous than COVID-19	(political AND virus) OR ((racis* OR discrim* OR stigma* OR origin*) AND (COVID* OR corona* OR virus* OR pandemic*))	1,742
5. Refute conspiracies about the Wuhan lab	Wuhan AND lab*	289
6. China sacrificed itself to buy time, which the U.S. wasted	(US or (United AND states) OR America* OR Washington OR Trump) AND (waste* OR blame* OR sacrific* OR selfish* OR fail*) AND (Covid* OR corona* OR virus* OR pandemic)	378

The diffusion and resonance of U.S. and Chinese narratives

How have U.S. and Chinese strategic narratives about the COVID-19 crisis diffused and resonated around the world? We analyzed the extent to which decision makers in five states important to the U.S.-led world order have referenced or reproduced similar narratives, again using qualitative narrative analysis and quantitative textual methods. Such referencing and reproduction always occur within pre-existing geostrategic and political contexts. States may, for example, be long-time allies, trade partners or rivals. Strategic narratives may seek to invoke support from actors in all categories. As a far-reaching effect of narrative power struggles, the international political context, or world order, might also be subject to change.

Qualitative narrative analysis

U.S. narrative diffusion

U.S. strategic narratives were referenced and reproduced particularly by Australian politicians and officials, and some British Conservative Party politicians. Australia's Prime Minister Morrison, for instance, repeated the trope that China was the source of the virus, but also reproduced the Chinese soundbite that the virus has no nationality (Prime Minister of Australia, 2020a). In a press conference, answering a question regarding the U.S. allegation that the virus came from a laboratory in Wuhan, Morrison stated that while this was not a "likely source," he could not "rule anything out"

(Prime Minister of Australia, 2020c). The Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the British House of Commons, Tom Tugendhat, rebutted a Chinese Government spokesperson who blamed the United States for the virus outbreak as “laughable” and “particularly bizarre, given that the silence and fear brought about by Beijing’s tyrants exposed China and the world to this terrible disease” (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2020a).

Moreover, Morrison (2020b) not only pledged that Australia and the United States were collaborating closely—were “the best of mates”—but also associated the two with a high degree of transparency. He repeatedly stressed the importance of a “transparent” and “independent” review of the origin of the virus (Prime Minister of Australia, 2020b). While labeling this “a fairly common sense position,” he implied that China might have a “difference of view” on such an inquiry (Prime Minister of Australia, 2020d). British officials similarly mentioned the need for a “review” that was “driven by the science” (Mikhailova, 2020). For example, on April 16, the British Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, who at the time was acting prime minister, was quoted as saying: “We’ll have to ask the hard questions about how it came about and how it couldn’t have been stopped earlier” (Mikhailova, 2020). In the meantime, he warned, “We can’t have business as usual [with China]” (Mikhailova, 2020). The United Kingdom has also backed U.S.-led calls for an investigation of China (A. Payne, 2020).

Moreover, asked about Trump’s decision to withhold funding from the WHO, Morrison said: “Well, look, I sympathise with his criticisms and I’ve made a few of my own” (Prime Minister of Australia, 2020e). He also said he wanted “to see an improved set of arrangements at the WHO” (Prime Minister of Australia, 2020d). In the case of the United Kingdom, Tugendhat also criticized the WHO, saying: “There has been a remarkable—and perhaps expected—unwillingness by the WHO to call out nations that are doing better or nations that are doing worse” (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2020a).

Officials in the three other states made only scant references to the United States. India’s Prime Minister Modi (2020b) retweeted Trump, emphasizing the importance of bilateral cooperation following India’s dispatch of an anti-malaria drug to the United States. In a tweet about medical supplies being sent to the United States, Turkey’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs similarly stressed bilateral cooperation, using the hashtag #StrongerTogether (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020), which Pompeo frequently used—a sign that Turkey “stand[s] fully with our strategic partner” (Kiran, 2020). Meanwhile, South Korea’s President Moon underscored that the country’s response to COVID-19 was guided by openness, transparency and democracy, positioning himself against “fake news” about the pandemic, but without clearly targeting China (Cheong Wa Dae, 2020a).

Chinese narrative diffusion

Elements central to Chinese narratives appeared in statements from all five states. Praise for and references to cooperation with China were found in statements by Australian and British officials. For example, early on in the outbreak, Australia's Foreign Minister Payne tweeted that she had spoken with China's Foreign Minister Wang and "thanked him for China's cooperative approach" (M. Payne, 2020). Subsequent tweets thanked China for "helping to bring Australians home" (Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2020). Similarly, Raab (2020a) in the United Kingdom lauded the Chinese response in late January, saying: "Authorities have acted quickly and the international community is rallying to support." In mid-March, Raab (2020b) tweeted: "The UK will continue to work with China to tackle #COVID19. We are both determined to galvanise international cooperation." British officials also tweeted about shipments of Chinese ventilators and other equipment sent to the United Kingdom, including a retweet showing photographs of packages being sent from China on which was written: "UK and China, United We Stand" (UK in China, 2020).

The emphasis on solidarity, multilateralism, and international cooperation—central components of Chinese narratives—recurred to varying degrees in statements by representatives of all five states, but China was not usually singled out as the champion of such cooperative arrangements. However, this emphasis on international cooperation and solidarity was often linked to support for the WHO, as in the Chinese narrative and unlike in the U.S. one. For example, in a joint statement on April 9 the foreign ministers of Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia (MIKTA) emphasized "the crucial role of relevant international organizations, in particular the World Health Organization (WHO), in coordinating the international response to the COVID-19 pandemic" (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). Meanwhile, in April, South Korea's President Moon (2020) thanked the WHO Director General, thereby representing the WHO as a key authority on dealing with the pandemic. Similarly, the United Kingdom was said to "support the responses by China, the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the international community" (Raab, 2020c). On April 21, the British Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, Simon MacDonald, said the WHO "is a key agency and we continue to support [it]" (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2020b).

Another recurring tendency was to depict cooperation as the opposite of fear in a way that is reminiscent of Chinese narratives. As Moon commented: "The weapon that can protect us from the new coronavirus is not fear and aversion but trust and cooperation" (Cheong Wa Dae, 2020b). Prime Minister Modi (2020a) similarly stated: "Collaboration not Confusion. Preparation

not Panic. We have to fight this battle together, and we have to win it together.” This differentiation of international cooperation from fear resonates with comments on the importance of countering stigma and relying on science, as also stressed by Indian and South Korean officials. For example, in an exchange with his Chinese counterpart on March 24, India’s External Affairs Minister Jaishankar (2020) agreed on the importance of not labeling the virus in a stigmatizing way, and stressed international solidarity and “global cooperation.” South Korea’s Kang (2020) also warned of “fear and phobia,” and referred to reports of Asians being verbally and physically abused, pointing out that such incidents impede the “spirit of collaboration that we absolutely need to overcome this challenge.” The criticism of stigmatization, and how it is differentiated from science and international cooperation, thus resembled connections made in Chinese narratives.

However, the fact that other states repeated elements that appeared in Chinese narratives does not necessarily mean that they supported China. Instead, we argue that this suggests that Chinese government actors invoked pre-existing master narratives that other states already largely accepted, but that the Trump administration had not recently been invoking or even explicitly criticized.

Quantitative textual analysis

The above findings were again corroborated through quantitative textual analysis. To analyze the resonance of U.S. and Chinese narratives, we identified high-profile government accounts in each of the five other states and ingested tens of thousands of posts in each (see columns 2–4 in Table 3). We used the narrative search strings identified in Tables 1 and 2, but when necessary revised them slightly to ensure that different cultural and linguistic contexts did not limit the results. The number of results generated in each case was small enough to hand-code. Our findings largely support the results of the qualitative narrative analysis (see columns 5–6 in Table 3).

While the qualitative analysis showed that some support for U.S. narratives was expressed by *Australian* officials, the quantitative analysis reveals that the number of such expressions was actually relatively limited. We found only a few Australian posts using language similar to the strategic narratives pushed by the United States, and especially related to the Chinese origin of COVID-19 and apprehension that China was trying to cover up any traces of it. We also found both support for and criticism of the WHO. However, there was also some support for the Chinese narrative element that China’s crisis management was resolute and effective. The Australian government praised China in particular for its assistance in getting stranded Australian citizens home in four tweets in February 2020, comprising half the results for this narrative element’s search string (e.g., Morrison,

Table 3. Figures in the data include only host country government accounts, either domestic or diplomatic. The number of posts ingested includes all posts regardless of language or content.

State	# Govt Accounts Identified	# Govt Accounts Active, Feb. to Oct. 2020	# Posts Ingested	# Tweets Supporting US Narrative Elements	# Tweets Supporting Chinese Narrative Elements
Australia	44	35	18,696	8	5
India	41	32	42,639 ^a	3	1
South Korea	62	39	16,525 ^b	0	0
Turkey	38	27	19,509 ^c	0	2
United Kingdom	79	50	52,771	16	0

^a58.2% of the content from Government of India accounts was in English, 32.1% in Hindi, and the remainder in other Indian languages.

^b90.1% of the content from Government of South Korea accounts was in Korean and 5.2% in English.

^c76.8% of the content from Government of Turkey accounts was in Turkish and 18.4% in English.

2020a). There was no support for other elements, although some Australian posts criticized increasing discrimination against Asian Australians and expressed support for international cooperation, albeit without adopting any other characteristics of the Chinese narrative.

Based on our analysis, the Government of *India* did not advance U.S. narratives. Each narrative search string generated some results, but they were coded either as noise or as false positives. While there was language adjacent to U.S. narratives, Indian tweets were instead pushing *Indian* narratives and were sometimes critical of the United States. In one exception, a single Member of Parliament affiliated with Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) referred to China "attacking the world with the Wuhan Virus" (Lekhi, 2020). Although this inflammatory language is in line with the U.S. narrative, even fellow BJP members did not pick it up. Indian officials alluded to Chinese narratives to a slightly greater degree, although the number of posts was again small. For example, there were a few tweets featuring praise for the Chinese government for its support for diplomatic relations and facilitation of international evacuations from Wuhan.

In the case of *South Korea*, no posts were found to support either U.S. or Chinese narratives. Aside from tweets expressing support for general ideals promoted in certain narratives, such as those related to multilateralism and transparency, South Korean government posts that explicitly referenced either the United States or China and COVID-19 consisted mostly of neutral reports about infection numbers and announcements on international travel restrictions. Posts instead tended to address South Korea's domestic response, focusing on the success of its testing and vaccination efforts.

We also found little explicit support for U.S. and Chinese narratives in *Turkey*. In fact, one example suggests the Turkish government may even

deliberately have avoided repeating elements of U.S. narratives. Early in the pandemic, Turkish accounts frequently noted that the virus originated in China. However, in mid-March 2020 when the phrase “China Virus” became associated with the U.S. narrative, they largely stopped mentioning China and COVID-19 in the same sentence. Moreover, although Turkish officials repeated elements of Chinese narratives about anti-discrimination, the importance of international cooperation and solidarity, they appeared deliberately to avoid expressing explicit support for either U.S. or Chinese interests. One exception was a few posts by the Turkish ambassador to China, which openly supported the Chinese narrative element that China’s crisis management was resolute and efficient (e.g., Önen, 2020).

Turning to the *United Kingdom*, finally, a handful of Conservative Party Members of Parliament (but not the mainstream political leaders) actively promoted the U.S. narrative critical of China and the WHO. The same Conservative accounts also supported the U.S. trope that the WHO is unduly influenced by China (e.g., Kearns, 2020), but this was roundly rejected by most other British accounts, including those associated with Raab, Johnson, and the Ministry of Health. Although we know that the Chinese government donated masks, ventilators and personal protective equipment (PPE) to the United Kingdom in April, no British government accounts mentioned these donations or thanked China for them. Instead, they touted British support for China, and in one instance thanked the British embassy in China for procuring a supply of ventilators (Raab, 2020c). Later in the summer, Scottish government accounts used language from the Chinese narrative element to *undermine* it by calling for independence from Chinese medical and PPE supply chains and bolstered domestic production (The Scottish National Party, 2020). In other instances, language that repeated Chinese tropes, for example about multilateralism, solidarity, and anti-Asian discrimination, did not mention China and instead seemed to reflect domestic concerns and political posturing, with one possible exception (Raab, 2020b).

Conclusions and implications

This article has explored the Sino-American narrative power struggle over COVID-19 to tease out how the dissemination of strategic narratives might reflect or affect global power shift dynamics and provide lessons about the future of world order. Admittedly, not all U.S. narratives may have been strategic or directed at foreign audiences. The Trump administration’s narrative entrepreneurship related to COVID-19 and China could arguably have been more intent on swaying domestic voters ahead of the November 2020 presidential election than audiences around the world. A tweet from Trump in September even stated: “If Biden wins, China wins”

(Trump, 2020). By contrast, Chinese narratives remained strikingly coherent and consistent, suggesting a more deliberate and coordinated approach to targeting foreign audiences.

The analysis has demonstrated that both the United States and China tried to use narratives strategically, which suggests that strategic narratives are *seen* as important policy instruments. However, this article has argued that these attempts were largely unsuccessful. With regard to international resonance, the qualitative narrative analysis showed elements of the U.S. narratives referenced and reproduced in Australia and to some extent the United Kingdom. The quantitative textual analysis, however, found only a few Australian tweets with content similar to U.S. narratives and only a handful of British Conservative Party MPs pushing similar narratives in the United Kingdom. Indian, South Korean, and Turkish statements, meanwhile, praised cooperation with the United States but did not reproduce narrative content with a U.S. connection. Our mixed-methods approach revealed that key elements of the Chinese narratives appeared in statements from all five states, but China was only explicitly mentioned when cooperation with the country was praised. China did not figure at all when support for multilateralism, international cooperation and the WHO was discussed, or when stigmatization of Asians was criticized. The fact that narrative elements associated with both China and the United States appeared in all five states suggests that a kind of “narrative hedging” could have been occurring. Pempel (2019) has recently found that Asian middle powers engage in similar hedging strategies vis-à-vis China and the United States when it comes to international trade.

While some internarrativity was detected between U.S. and Chinese narratives and those promoted by the five other states under investigation, officials in Australia, India, South Korea, Turkey, and the United Kingdom primarily emphasized their own efforts and successes in fighting COVID-19, seeking to present themselves in a positive light. This serves as an important reminder that other states are not necessarily interested in Sino-American narrative power struggles. Instead of merely supporting either the United States or China, they have their own agendas and agency. The fact that they do not seem overly interested in participating in the narrative battle waged by the U.S. and Chinese governments might also provide reason for some caution about the usefulness of strategic narratives as a government tool.

This article has also argued that the analysis and use of strategic narratives need to take account of the importance of master narratives. Not all Chinese narrative elements originated in China, and some of them—especially the emphasis on multilateralism and international cooperation—are quite general. Hence, to the extent that Chinese narratives did gain some international traction, they did not do so by spreading falsehoods (e.g.,

DiResta, 2020; Green & Medeiros, 2020), but rather by appealing to master narratives that are widely shared throughout the world. Ironically, these master narratives have often been drawn on to criticize China, for instance with regard to trade, intellectual property rights, democratic values, and human rights. This indeed demonstrates the limits of actor-centrism, as China's narrative entrepreneurship around COVID-19 both appealed to and seemed constrained by master narratives integral to the current U.S.-led world order.

The implication is that the most significant narrative power resides not with particular states, but with influential master narratives. Hence, when exploring the possibilities for changing global narrative power dynamics, we should analyze not only the diffusion and reception of strategic narratives, or even just changing master narratives, but also how key actors situate themselves vis-à-vis existing master narratives. Needless to say, with the Biden administration more intent on upholding and strengthening the current U.S.-led liberal world order with its emphasis on multilateralism and international cooperation, it may become more difficult for China, or any other state, to take control of or use these global master narratives for their own strategic purposes.

Notes

1. The exact search terms appear in the second column in Tables 1 and 2.
2. See <https://www.thetrumparchive.com/>.
3. Broken down by state, 486 tweets mentioning COVID-19 in conjunction with the United States or China appeared in tweets from Australia, 704 from India, 49 from South Korea, 952 from Turkey, and 649 from the United Kingdom.

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Appendix. Summary of Twitter data ingested and analyzed

U.S. accounts

Account type	Accounts	Number of accounts	Number of tweets
Democrats	SenatorMenendez, RepEliotEngel, HouseForeign, JoeBiden, AOC, SpeakerPelosi, KamalaHarris, SenSchumer, BernieSanders	9	12,750
Republicans	SenateForeign,realDonaldTrump, SecPompeo, StateDept, statedeptspox, SenatorRisch, RepMcCaul, VP45, LeaderMcConnell, WhiteHouse45, Scavino45	11	20,302
All US Diplomatic	CGSydney, uscongenperth, usconsulatemelb, PACAF, USConGenSydney, USAembassyinOZ, USAsiaPacific, INDOPACOM, USAndIndia, USAmbIndia, USAndChennai, USAndMumbai, USForcesKorea, USEmbassySeoul, USAmbROK, ABDIstanbul, USEmbassyTurkey, USAinNI, USAinScotland, USAinUKConsular, USAinUKPress, USAinUK	22	16,754
All US Government		42	49,806
Right-Wing Media	TuckerCarlson, sean Hannity, OANN, FoxNews, newsmx	5	23,275
Government-Sponsored media	Voadirector, CarolynVOA, CarolCastielVOA, voa_extremism, insidevoa, W7VOA, VOAnews	7	34,054
All US Media		12	57,329
All US		54	107,135

Chinese accounts

Account type	Accounts	Number of accounts	Number of tweets
Chinese Domestic Government	SpokespersonH2M, FuCong17, CIDCAofficial, SpokespersonCHN, MFA_China, chinascio, zlj517	7	4,740
All Chinese Diplomatic	ChinaConSydney, ChinaSpox_India, China_Amb_India, ZhaLiyu, chinaconsulist, ChinaEmbTurkey, KusakveYol, chinacgedi, ChineseEmbinUK, AmbLiuXiaoMing	10	13,575
Chinese State-Controlled Media	CdOpinion, ChinaDaily_Life, CGTNStories, ChinaDaily_EU, CD_Visual, FlyOverChina, wangxh65, CGTNTech, ChinaDailyWorld, China24Official, WorldInsight_TW, XinhuaTravel, HuXijin_GT, beltroadnews, CGTNSports, hongfenghuang, PDChinaLife, ChinaScience, PDChinaBusiness, loveqingdao, CGTN_Culture, GlobalTimesLife, GlobalWatchCGTN, Chinacultureorg, shen_shiwei, thepapercn, XHSports, womenofchina, Guangming_Daily, PeoplesDailyapp, SixthTone, CCTV_Plus, ShanghaiEye, BeijingReview, ChinaDailyAsia, shanghaiidaily, CCTV, chinaorgcn, Echinanews,	46	226,713

(Continued)

Continued.

Account type	Accounts	Number of accounts	Number of tweets
All Chinese Government & Media	ChinaPlusNews, yicaichina, PDChina, ChinaDaily, CGTNOfficial, globaltimesnews, XHNews	63	245,028

Australian accounts

Account type	Accounts	Number of accounts	Number of tweets
Australian Domestic Government—Executive	ausgov, MarisePayne, ScottMorrisonMP, DeptDefence, Birmo, ausenate, healthgovau, dfat	8	5,629
Australian Domestic Government—Legislature	perindavey, MariaVamvakinou, JulianHillMP, kevinandrewsmp, damiandrummp, merylswanson, SenatorAbetz, Deborah_Oneill, PatrickGormanMP, jacquilambie, PeterKhalilMP, Senator Siewert, SenKatyG, fitzhunter, senpaterson, janet_rice, Kkeneally, mehreenfaruqi, MurrayWatt, senatorfawcett	20	8,208
Australian Political Parties	RichardMarlesMP, the_nationals, M_McCormackMP, LiberalAUS, AlboMP, AdamBandt, AustralianLabor, Greens	8	3,579
Australian Diplomatic	AussieCGSF, AustChamSH, A_Sinodinos, AusConsulateLA, AustradeUSA, AusInTheUS, AustraliaUN, AusWTO	8	1,280
All Australian Government		44	18,696
Pro-Chinese Civil Society	AusChinaBC, ChinaMattersAUS, AcfsVic	3	968
Pro-US Civil Society	_aaausa, CISOZ, PerthUSAsia, ASPI_org, AustAmFulbright, AmChamAU	6	5,207
All Australia		53	24,871

Indian accounts

Account type	Accounts	Number of accounts	Number of tweets
Indian Domestic Government	VMBJP, narendramodi, AmitShah, MoHFW_INDIA, drharshvardhan, rashtrapatibhvn, VPSecretariat, PMOIndia, DrSJaishankar, MEAIndia, MIB_India, MIB_Hindi, IndianDiplomacy, ghulamnazad, ambtstirumurti, abhishekaitc, murmu_chandrani, MadhaviGoddeti, HarsimratBadal_, DrKCPatel4, KBanerjee_AITC, RebatiTripura, bjpamswaroop, preneet_kaur, PCMohanMP, M_Lekhi, MpManne, BrijLal_IPS, mpriteshpandey, KapilSibal, PChidambaram_IN	31	39,267
Indian Diplomatic	IndianEmbassyUS, IndiainChicago, CGI_Atlanta, SandhuTaranjitS, IndiaUNNewYork, EOIBeijing, cgiguangzhou, IndiaInShanghai, CGIHongKong, VikramMisri	10	3,372
All Indian Government		41	42,639
Indian Media	PIB_India, pibhindi, COVIDNewsByMIB	3	31,247
Chinese Media	cri_hindi	1	0
Pro-US Civil Society	USIBC, IndiaChamber, NUICC, iaccindia, EducationUSAIndia	5	1,503
Pro-China Civil Society	ics_delhi	1	0
All India		51	75,389

South Korean accounts

Account type	Accounts	Number of accounts	Number of tweets
South Korean Domestic Government	TheBlueHouseKR, sk0926, MOFAkr_eng, yky2015, Lee_InYoung, KoreaDCA, TheMFDS, hellopolicy, ROK_Mission, jongchoisu, withkcc, govkorea, mohwpr, TheBlueHouseENG, moonriver365, gangseonsunwoo, minjung_dal, kyi4853, Kangkiyoun, ms2030, kimsungju, nisoona, beakjongheon, unclevitamin, suhjs52, shy740, jgt_forever, jchounsook, jongsyy1, moefkorea, kimminki84, thekimweapon, jinpyokim, minstar21c, sulhoon, AGBhope, lci8572, taekyungh, YoungpyoHong, JoonPyoHong, Kwon_Youngse, kmc89521, ybkim86, park_wanju, ourpark, SeoYoungkyo, ykd21, heartsaver119, jejudongbak, asanworld, leehsik, limhoseon, hanjeoungae_na, withyou3542, polinlove, nohyoungmin21c	56	15,743
South Korean Diplomatic	KoreaCultureDC, RokEmbDC, kcglosangeles, geneva_korea, kcginhk, koreantlanta	6	782
All South Korean Government		62	16,525
South Korean Media	kbsnews, yohnaptweet, yohnapnews, actualpolicy_kr, Mylife_KTV	5	17,289
Chinese Media	kr_people, chinaradiokorea, CRIKorean	3	5,484
US Media	VOA_Korean	1	1,840
Pro-US Civil Society	uskbc, fullbrightkorea, KoreaEconInst, AsiaSocietyKR	4	1,385
All South Korea		75	42,523

Turkish accounts

Account type	Accounts	Number of accounts	Number of tweets
Turkish Domestic Government	diabgm_tr, Akcapar, trpresidency, RTErdogan, MFATurkey, yavuzselimkiran, Communications, TC_Disisleri, MevlutCavusoglu, iletisim, chp_en, akpartyenglish, hdpint, kilicdaroglu, HDPenglish, PervinBuldan, iyiparti, dbdevletbahceli, SezaiTemelli, meral_aksener, MHP_Bilgi, Akparti, HDPgenelmerkezi, herkesicinCHP	24	17,222
Turkish Diplomatic	ceylan117, TurkDeINATO, serdarkilic9, TRConsulMiami, TurkEmbBeijing, eminonen, TRConsulBoston, TurkishEmbassy, AvbirDT, Turkey_UN, TRConsuLA, TRConsulChicago, TRConsulHOuston, TurkeyWTO	14	2,287
All Turkish Government		38	19,509
Chinese Media	criturk, CRI_Turkish	2	23,762
US Media	VOAKurdish, VOATurkish	2	10,737
Pro-US Civil Society	musiaden, tadmerkeztaa, taikofficial, MUSIADInegol, AmericanTurkish, FulbrightTurkey, MUSIAD, bejaiainvest, TurkeyAmCham, MUSIADUSA	10	2,229
All Turkey		52	56,237

UK accounts

Account type	Accounts	Number of accounts	Number of tweets
UK Domestic Government—Executive	BorisJohnson, DominicRaab, cabinetofficeuk, 10DowningStreet, DHSCgovuk, FCDOGovUK	6	7,629
UK Domestic Government—Legislative	commonsforeign, Commonshealth, HouseofCommons, HLCOVID19Com, lolahornsey, TaiwoOwatemi, dean4watford, rosie4westlancs, drlukeevans, AlderdiceLord, JamesDavies, LordTobySays, Jeremy_Hunt, loWBobSeely, royston_smith, paulbristow79, AndrewRosindell, SarahOwen_, EricPickles, PeterHain, nickymorgan01, ClaudiaWebbe, HenrySmithUK, coyleneil, Marthalanefox, ianduncanhmg, aliciakearns, TomTugendhat, FloellaBenjamin, JNHanvey, KeeleyMP, StewartMcdonald, RhonddaBryant	33	25,573
UK Domestic Government—Political Parties	Keir_Starmer, Conservatives, NicolaSturgeon, UKLabour, theSNP	5	12,715
UK Diplomatic	JoeWhiteUK, EmilyClopeUK, HannahyoungNYC, MichaelHTatham, davidpasquini33, erinjkuhn, JanLBauer, AndyTerrellINC, NicBrentUKCG, KarenPierceUK, richardhyde99, UKAWWhittaker, johawleyinChina, StauntonUK, UKinLA, Cwilson_FCDO, ukinchina, AmbassadorAllen, FCDOPeterAbbott, CScottFCDO, ukintex, RobinTwyman, JulianWTO_UN, DHCAndrew,	35	6,854

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Continued.

Account type	Accounts	Number of accounts	Number of tweets
	ukinchicago, AJPhillipson, tradegovukUSA, UKNATO, ukinatlanta, UKinNewYork, Ukin_SF, UKinBoston, UKinFlorida, UKinUSA, ukun_newyork		
All UK Government		79	52,771
Chinese Media	CGTNEurope, chenweikhua, ChinaDailyEU	3	4,765
Pro-Chinese Civil Society	SACUUK, ChinaBritTech, ChinaBritain	3	311
US Media	RFERL	1	5,030
Pro-US Civil Society	ASL_1895, BABC_NW, USUKFulbright, TransatlanticCh, BritAmBusiness	5	633
All UK		91	63,510