

The U.S.-Threat Discourse, Hawkish and Maneuvered Public, and China's Foreign Policy

Xiangning Wu

Abstract

It has been argued that Chinese public opinion is often instrumentalized by the government to accomplish maneuverability and flexibility in Chinese foreign policy. Meanwhile, the dynamic social media environment continues to develop in novel and sometimes unanticipated ways that have various consequences for Chinese foreign policy. Can the authoritarian Chinese government dynamically shape public opinion using social media as the main communication channel to produce and collect responses to international affairs? What effect does a highly unified public opinion have on China's foreign policy? The dynamics of posts on Weibo throughout 2020 and the frequency of comments pertaining to specific issues are examined in this study through content and sentiment analysis. The results demonstrate an alignment and suggest a correlation between Chinese public opinion and the attitudes of the party-state on China's foreign policy. The results indicate that Chinese public opinion exhibited an increasing sense of the superiority of China's achievements, an endogenous preference for more hawkish attitudes toward the U.S., and a drive for a "wolf warrior" diplomacy. This is both a consequence of governmental manipulation and education over the long term and a catalyst for a more hawkish foreign policy in the future. In the long run, the highly unified public opinion that has been intentionally created by the party-state may eventually require additional effort to justify foreign policy positions that the public considers insufficiently assertive.

Xiangning Wu is Assistant Professor at the Department of Government and Public Policy, University of Macau. Correspondence should be sent to xiangningwu@um.edu.mo.