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## The Trump administration, the far-right and world politics

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### ABSTRACT

We contend that the Trump administration mainstreamed far-right politics through its foreign policy on China, the World Health Organization and its handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. Our Gramscian-Kautskyian theoretical perspective concentrates on elite power, class, and interconnections between advanced global capitalism and domestic inequality. We show that the administration amplified US far-right Sinophobia even as it deepened connections between US and Chinese corporate elites. Its foreign policy strategy attempted to appease transnational capitalist objectives through ‘ultra-imperialism’ and draw on far-right ideas to shore up its domestic support base. But the administration, much like previous ones, attempted to make China a subordinate ‘responsible stakeholder’ through integrating and pressuring it in the Liberal International Order. The Gramscian-Kautskyian approach highlights that Sino-US relations are a mix of security and economic competition and interdependency. Over all, we argue that the Trump administration was not such a threat to the establishment as commonly contended.

### KEYWORDS

United States; China; far-right; Trump administration; WHO

## Introduction

The far-right was a powerful force in the Trump administration and remains firmly embedded in the Republican Party. The events at the US Capitol of 6 January 2021, widely characterized as a ‘coup’ or insurrection, undoubtedly represent a key departure from ‘conventional’ politics even though the far-right has been significant in the US and the broader liberal international order since 1945 (Anievas & Saull, 2020). This international context is vital in explaining the Trump phenomenon. Trump prepared the ground for 6 January and has mainstreamed the far-right’s significant continuing danger to democracy (Drolet & Williams, 2020).

This article shows how far-right discourses, elites, individuals, and organizations have shaped the Trump administration’s foreign policy on China, the World Health Organization (WHO) and Covid-19 and, most importantly, become more mainstream. We outline the complex, sometimes contradictory and incoherent, mix of far-right and conservative ideological and political discourses through using new data on far-right and conservative mainstream elites who became more integrated within the Trump administration; and how mainly fringe far-right think tanks and advocacy organizations became normalized in the administration. We consider some of the policy effects of these developments. Mainstream foreign policy elites attacked some of the Trump administration’s associations and appointments and were relatively successful in keeping the administration within the boundaries of *establishment* politics (Worth, 2019).

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This is further shown by the number of US corporations that returned to funding the GOP a few months after 6 January, despite the GOP's doubling down on claims of election fraud and passing related voting restrictions on minorities (Legum, 2020). Trump has constructed a coalition that includes corporate interests, unorthodox private billionaires, and unusual far-right forces and white working and middle classes, forming a 'white historic bloc' (Robinson, 2019).

At the same time, Trump intensified Sino-US rivalries and sharpened rhetoric for a 'new cold war' over freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific and Wuhan lab leaks. Yet, the US remains interlocked as an economic power, financially interdependent with a China whose power and ambitions are increasing under Xi's leadership. US corporate relations with China continued during 2016–2020 despite Trump's heated rhetoric of anti-China conspiracies and trade tariffs which were, at least partly, motivated at 'opening up' China, rather than destroying its economy. Phase One of the US–China trade deal illustrated seemingly contradictory relations between US corporate interests, the Trump administration, and Sinophobia on the US far-right.

We argue that extant Liberal Internationalist and Realist theories do not explain the current crises of US domestic or global power, the roots of the legitimacy crisis, the sources, dynamics, and character of Sino-US relations, or of the US' attitudes to the LIO. Our Gramscian-Kautskyian theoretical perspective broadly challenges these models through its focus on elite power, class, and interconnections between advanced global capitalism and domestic inequality. Constructivism and Ontological Security Theory (OST) are useful in analysing the complexity of far-right and mainstream conservative discourses. They provide a way to understand the language of fear and anxiety that is integral to the mainstreaming of far-right ideas (Homolar & Scholz, 2019; Lacatus, 2021). Our theoretical model complements these paradigms by encompassing how emotions and audience engagement are key features of Trump's success at building an historic bloc that pursues a contradictory foreign policy on China.

This original Gramscian-Kautskyian analysis explains the crises of US power, the significance of the far right, and its impact on US foreign policy. This is distinctive in several ways. Empirically, given the focus on elite power as the principal driving force of far-right and conservative politics, our new research shows clearly how mainstream the far-right has become in terms of appointments in the Trump administration. We also show how Trump's networks have legitimized far-right advocacy groups and think tanks and marginalized those more traditionally linked with the White House. In addition, we illustrate the roles of key thinkers and intellectuals in weaving together and synthesizing far-right and conservative discourses. This original analysis of Trump, the far-right and world politics, centres on the Covid-19 global pandemic and US–China relations, and extends to the administration's violent culmination in January (Anievas & Saull, 2020; Saull et al., 2015).

The synthesis of Gramscian and Kautskyian thought is innovative and theoretically distinctive in its explanation of elite power, the US-led international order, and Sino-US relations. This stretches Gramsci's 'historical bloc' to a transnational level. To some extent, Gill (2011), and Cox (1987) undertook such research, but they largely focused on intra-Global North *consensus*-building. Our focus is on a very different set of cultures, systems, and inter-relations between China and the United States. We combine Karl Kautsky's ultra-imperialism with the coercive elements of Gramscian hegemony to highlight the consensual and conflictual character of contemporary Sino-US relations. US and Chinese elites played a crucial role in integrating China into the neoliberal world order, and how that fundamental economic and financial interdependence between them is likely to endure, despite turbulence at the level of diplomatic relations and performative 'new cold war' declarations (Parmar et al., 2017).

Gramsci and Kautsky also help analyse the ambiguities of current world politics, which impacts our understanding of far-right politics. Capitalist globalization – or *advanced ultra-imperialism* – results simultaneously in reducing inequality of income and wealth between states, while increasing inequality within states (Kautsky, 1914). This perspective has similarities with Klein and Pettis's (2020) argument that interlinked national economies have bolstered transnational elite power and driven inequality within nations. The domestic political effects of this ultra-imperialism, therefore, include mass discontent and resistance, significantly mobilized by the conservative and far-right behind a hyper-racialised programme. Conservative politics saw an opportunity to grow their tent through the integration and mobilization of the far-right into the Trump bloc. Hence, while corporate interests won tax cuts, subsidies and deregulation, the mass of GOP voters received a psychological wage associated with 'whiteness' and cultural protection, not a real increase in living standards (Roediger, 1991). The world is, at the moment, witnessing relatively contained levels of geopolitical competition, in contrast to highly volatile domestic politics. Conservative and far-right elites manage the latter through a performative nationalism about the China threat in a 'new cold war'.

Gramscian-Kautskyian analysis rivals the comprehensive theoretical character of Ikenberry's analyses of the LIO and the US role in it (Anievas & Saull, 2020; Parmar, 2016). Like Ikenberry, we link domestic and international, state and society. But we add class and elite analysis as core drivers of US power, in building influential hierarchical historic blocs, and embedding inequalities in an imperial LIO. Neither liberalism nor realism does this. Yet, such inequalities are central to explaining how US power works, yielding an explanation that encompasses the complexities and contradictions of both the Trump historic bloc and US relations with the LIO and China. This is therefore a distinctive contribution to the debate about the nature and trajectories of US power and the future of world politics.

This article first discusses the historical and political context of the Trump phenomenon, which provides the justification for our theoretical framework. The second section puts forth the Gramsci-Kautsky theoretical perspective which suits the complicated cooperative-conflictual relationship between the US-China. The last section is an analysis of how the far-right influenced the Trump administration's attitude to China and the World Health Organization.

## Historical and political context

Conservative and far-right forces now have a mass base that, in Gramsci's terms, represent a 'shattered people' who are stridently anti-elitist, feel declassed, nurture a sense of cultural loss, a feeling of being exploited at home and overseas (Parmar, 2021). These views broadly agree that a liberal-globalist anti-American elite that cares more for 'Paris than Pittsburgh' has organized groups against 'real' Americans (Isenberg, 2017; Winter & Groll, 2017). These groups include illegal immigrants, minorities, refugees, women, and the far-left and 'woke' politics more generally. This elite dominates the Democratic Party but has existed in the GOP too. And thus, the enemy is Democrats and Republicans in name only (RINOs), and a globalized corporate elite.

However, such far-right forces have been active in the US since at least the Great Depression and were a fundamental part of the cold war anti-communist coalition that sought to mobilize white voters, and attack the Left and democratic forces such as the civil rights, women's and anti-war movements. Their role becomes politically salient during periods of acute crisis. As Homolar and Scholz (2019, pp. 351–353) show, Trump spoke in 'crisis talk' language which transformed the emotional frame of reference of audiences into heightened anxiety and panic about real or

perceived threats. Anievas and Saull (2020) and Saull et al. (2015) explain the role of the far-right in the LIO through its inclusion of former Nazis and fascists shortly after 1945, US support for right-wing authoritarian and military regimes across the world, and for such forces in Spain, Portugal, Greece, Chile, Bolivia and in Central America.

The US' New Deal historic bloc was composed of a variety of social and economic forces, including banks, industrial firms, agri-business, and organized (mainly white male) labour, the leading elements of both main parties, an array of liberal internationalist think tanks, foundations, and universities. It was always hierarchical and unequal in relation to the power of each force and rewards and costs. That coalition was effectively embedded after World War II into the LIO through systems of regulation at home and attempts at regulation of world affairs and processes under US leadership (Ferguson, 1984). Yet, a liberal anti-communism always underpinned it (Schlesinger, 1949), even before the cold war began, retaining political space for the far-right in both major parties (Anievas & Saull, 2020).

King and Smith's (2014) research on American 'racial orders' in the post-1945 era also show how race and identity shaped present-day politics. Dudziak (2011) shows how cold war liberal-elite-driven civil rights reforms aimed at deflecting international criticism from the USSR and China as they competed with the US and Europe for allies from among newly independent Asian and African states. White segregationists, however, backed by the far-right Ku Klux Klan, John Birch Society and others including elements within the FBI, remained a significant political force, gradually assembling behind the GOP as it drove toward racialized politics after the 1964 election (O'Reilly, 1989; Phillips, 2014).

We argue that the New Deal settlement eroded due to a confluence of changes in the global competitive environment (re-emergence of Western Europe and Japan), attacks from within (by those excluded from the benefits), and the costs of 'Great Society' programmes and the Vietnam war. This led to a corporate counter-mobilization behind neoliberal programmes that rolled back the welfare state, fuelled the 'War on Drugs' and mass incarceration, incorporated and domesticated civil and women's rights agendas in the Democratic Party. Simultaneously, however, there developed a 'new' colour- and gender-blind politics in the GOP (King & Smith, 2014), elevating identity politics on Left and Right, amid increased economic inequality. Liberals largely shifted towards the dominant neoliberal corporate agenda under successive presidents, starting with Carter, deepening under Clinton (after three successive GOP victories), and continuing under Obama after the 2008 crash. The Tea party and the Occupy movements were symptomatic of the legitimacy crisis of both parties, and the former provided a milieu for mainstreaming of the far-right and conspiracy-driven politics of Donald Trump (Winter & Groll, 2017). The post-Cold War and post-2008 crises of the LIO have seen a resurgence of such forces worldwide including among the LIO's core countries (Worth, 2019). Far-right figures and authoritarian ideas are now much more mainstream in conventional domestic and world politics; the crisis of elite-democratic legitimacy is systemic, organic, structural; and responses are increasingly authoritarian, populist, and anti-democratic (Homolar & Scholz, 2019, pp. 354, 359).

For the US, this means a far more aggressive nationalist foreign and national security strategy against all enemies real and imagined, especially China in the WHO and other LIO bodies, as well as the Belt and Road Initiative. And given the centrality of the right in US politics, that affects the attitude and strategies of Democrats too, generating a new hegemonic consensus, as seen in Biden's China policy and rhetoric; military spending; calls for bipartisanship; cutting infrastructure budget to appease the GOP; inability to mitigate vast income inequality; failure to deal with the undemocratic 'filibuster' in the US Senate; and broad failure to take on GOP voter

restriction strategies. Trump's authoritarianism mainstreamed the language of fear into political discourse, which has shifted to otherwise non-authoritarian voters and politicians (Homolar & Scholz, 2019, p. 359).

### The Gramscian-Kautskyian synthesis in IR theory

Donald Trump has a complex relationship with the American Right. He is partly a symptom of a major rightward shift in twenty-first-century American political terrain. This has largely been engineered by billionaire donor consortia; the Tea Party; right-wing militias; and figures in Christian nationalism responding to the legitimacy crisis of US power. Trump is the *political 'glue'* that holds together this factionalized far-right with conservatives (Parmar, 2017; Skocpol & Williamson, 2012; Waring, 2018). Holding such a central role in the far-right network signifies he is not a malleable 'instrument' of the far-right even as he benefits from its support through more coherent far-right ideologues like Stephen Bannon and Stephen Miller. His nationalism is far from 'isolationist' as many on the far-right would prefer, and his conservatism is hardly 'social' or 'traditional' in character. He has combined, even synthesized, far-right ideas with more mainstream figures such as Mike Pence or Robert Lighthizer. We suggest that Trump's 'philosophy' (over and above personal interests) is innovative, relatively coherent but mediated by three powerful tendencies – his *material* base, *ideological* base, and *electoral* base – a white racist historic bloc. Each of those three tendencies is subject to internal conflicts, mediated by Trump's unifying personal influence (Snyder, 2021).

Gramscian hegemony theory provides a way to theorize this phenomenon. His concepts of 'historic bloc' or broad coalition of forces that bring under one umbrella a range of elite and subaltern forces is appropriate. The Right is fractured; its constituent elements do not agree with all aspects of each other's programmes. As Fraser (2017) suggests, their discontents focus heavily on economic issues and opposition to unresponsive party elites as their material conditions deteriorate (Muro et al., 2020). As Gramsci argues (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 210–218; Adamson, 1980a; Hall, 1988), crises of elite authority generate a certain level of spontaneous mass opposition that manifest ideological and racialised repertoires that are embedded in many white communities.

We can see this historic bloc in action through the development of right-wing populism from specific initiatives of billionaire donor networks. They united to build a major ecosystem of faux grassroots organizations, networked with policy advocacy, ideational, and protest groups staffed by over 2.5 million (paid and unpaid) volunteers across America (Skocpol & Hertel-Fernandez, 2016, p. 688). The far-right used this ecosystem during the Trump years to organize protests, including armed resistance to Covid-19 lockdowns, and in violent protests across the US, including the Capitol attacks of 6 January 2021 (King & Koerner, 2021). Though encouraged by Trump, they were not subject to his or the congressional GOP's control (Skocpol & Hertel-Fernandez, 2016).

We combine this Gramscian approach to domestic politics and the legitimacy crisis with Karl Kautsky's concept of ultra-imperialism. The Anglo-American-conceived and US-led international order since 1945 is a good example of ultra-imperialism (Panitch & Gindin, 2013). It features dense networks of international relationships, treaties, and institutions – the UN system, IMF, World Bank, the European Union, and other regional bodies – largely underwritten by US financial, diplomatic, and military power. That system – with all its flaws, tensions, as well as wars on the global 'periphery' – approximates what Kautsky suggested would be a 'league of states' of the big capitalist powers, who would ally to better preserve the *peace among themselves, consolidate their domestic rule, and exploit the world's labour and resources* (Klein & Pettis, 2020; Salvadori, 1990, pp. 181–203).



That postwar ‘settlement’ or New Deal order (Ikenberry, 2020) was based on a domestic cross-class coalition featuring an enhanced role for the state embedded in a dense international order of stabilizing institutions.

As the interests of private capital demanded greater freedom from controls, regulation and taxation, the ‘settlement’ became more and more precarious, eventually giving way in the 1970s and 1980s to a state-led corporate-powered neoliberalism (Panitch & Gindin, 2013). The latter manifested as ‘Reaganomics’, and internationally by expanding its remit into key emerging powers demanding a New International Economic Order (Golub, 2013), but one based on IMF-induced ‘structural adjustments’ to statist development strategies. This clearly also included the transformation of post-Mao China’s political economy (Gerwitz, 2017). Simultaneously, Western manufacturing industries moved to the Global South leaving disaffected communities. The domestic political and social effects culminated in the development of legitimacy crises manifested in Britain’s exit from the EU, Trump’s election in 2016, and the broader rise of right-wing populist anti-elitism across the world. US-led wars since the end of the Cold War also played a key role in intensifying domestic legitimacy deficits. The synthesis of Kautsky’s ultra-imperialism with Gramscian concepts then provides the way to understand the international context and developments that led to the current disorder (Salvadori, 1990, p. 193), including an understanding of the specific domestic contours and politics of organic crisis (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 210–218, 275–276).

For Kautsky, inter-great power alliances, accords, or systems (LIO, EU) are not only the peaceful havens of liberal internationalism but also the bases for jointly exploiting labour and resources on a global scale (Salvadori, 1990, pp. 193–195). These interdependencies are elite-driven and serve through reducing inequalities between national elites while continuing to oversee inequality within states (Klein & Pettis, 2020). This results in mass discontent and resistances at ‘home’, which require more elite management. Those legitimacy crises that Gramsci explains so well generate elite responses that embody the politics of the far-right, that oppose some features of globalization while ignoring corporate elite politics in the global political economy. The far-right is a counter-hegemonic movement whose hard-core adherents and leaders have mainstreamed their ideas in the legitimacy crisis, as established forces have co-opted or mirror far-right features to sustain themselves. Although there is a jockeying for geopolitical position between the US and China, ultra-imperial relations remain undisturbed, but the domestic political reaction is often performative, rather than substantial. As domestic politics remain turbulent, the far-right has seized the opportunity to galvanize the public for a cold war against external threats. This generates xenophobia and complicates diplomatic relations, but it is unlikely to lead to outright war between China and the US for a global hegemonic position. In many fundamentals about military and economic power, the United States remains an unrivalled superpower for the coming years (Beckley, 2018). Hence, the world situation is not comparable to the period before and leading up to 1914 or 1939.

Our Gramscian-Kautskyian theoretical approach is attentive to how the US and China operate in a particular competitive, yet interdependent, relationship. Contra Panitch, we do not refer to the relationship as ‘Chimerica’ because interstate relations are rarely so smooth, particularly during periods of instability, changing relative balances of power, and cultural factors (Panitch, 2014). The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace refers to the relationship as ‘managed enmity’ which accommodates necessary cooperation in financial markets, climate change, and global pandemics (Feigenbaum, 2020). Additionally, both Chinese and US elites are presiding over increasingly unequal societies, managing mass unrest, amid changing global conditions, currently under extreme stress resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated by the coercive methods, attitude, and idiosyncrasies of President Trump. US and Chinese elites successfully integrated



China into the liberal international order, ending its support of national liberation movements, though this is accompanied by attempts to contain Chinese nationalist ambitions (Parmar et al., 2017). What emerges is a *more coercive* ‘conengagement’ strategy that simultaneously contains and engages to maximize China as an economic opportunity while hedging and pushing back against it as a security threat. This would maintain China in a subordinate position within the established international order (Parmar, 2017). Trump’s trade tariffs have intensified the more coercive features of conengagement, a strategy reflecting far-right influence, but has not challenged the underlying goal of US corporate and foreign policy elites. It has injected greater tension into Sino–US relations, previously apparent in Obama’s ‘pivot to Asia’ and, though likely to improve, is unlikely to change radically under President Biden (Turner & Parmar, 2020).

The Sino–US transnational historic bloc that helped integrate China into the US-led international order is explored in-depth elsewhere (de Graaff et al., 2020; Huo & Parmar, 2020). To summarize this: Gramsci’s concept of hegemony features a central role for an historic bloc that diffuses ruling class dominance throughout society via cross-class and other alliances (Bates, 1975). In this process, intellectuals play key roles in ‘concrete institutional settings which connect him or her to the whole hegemonic apparatus of the state’ (Adamson, 1980b, p. 177; Germino, 1990). The historic bloc builds consensus and legitimacy and cements the alliance, particularly through the production of economic growth. Since the 1940s, a major strategy of US liberal internationalist elites is the construction of transnational ‘modernising elites’ allied with US interests and ways of thinking. This was the case as much in post-war Western Europe as it was across the Global South (Parmar, 2012; Augelli & Murphy, 1988). The hegemonic strategy involved active cooperation between US and local elites behind neoliberal programmes of economic transformation and the establishment of transnational elite knowledge networks focused around transforming the teaching of the economics discipline through local universities, think tanks and policy institutes dedicated to new economic thinking, and assisting local state bureaucracies to reform their economies.

In the Sino–US transnational network case, it involved the leadership of the Communist Party, including Deng Xiaoping, the State Economic Commission, the US state, and a wide range of domestic institutions (Gerwartz, 2017; Shuhong & Parmar, 2020). Such activities, from the late 1970s into the twenty-first century, were funded by the Ford Foundation (\$400m) and Rockefeller (\$200m), among others, to the tune of almost \$1 billion. This funding does not include direct funding by China or other educational and cultural support from the US state. Significant think tanks constructed or transformed include the Institute of Quantitative and Technical Economics of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the US Committee on Economic Education and Research in China, the Chinese Economists’ Society, China Center for Economic Research, the Development Research Center of the State Council, and the Economic System Reform Institute of China. These institutions created a new terrain for promoting new economic thinking and transforming the climate of opinion to strengthen support for neoliberalism. As Mobo Gao (2018, p. 207) shows, ‘Chinese capitalists, Communist or not, are part of global capital’, even as they remain nationalistic and critical of US global armed supremacy.

The hierarchical and racialised character of the bloc (Turner, 2014) demonstrates that the underlying idea was to reform China by integrating and *assimilating* it into the US-led LIO to become a ‘responsible stakeholder’, that is a junior partner, within an imperial international order (Ikenberry et al., 2018). Chinese elite networks shared this US aim because they grew richer through the exploitation of labour and resources and creating an export-driven economy to supply the United States and the West with industrial and consumer goods.

The Trump administration heightened the perception that the US is weakening as China became more assertive. *The US, therefore, wants a renegotiation of its positions and cost-bearing in the international system and between states.* This strategy has been to rely on coercive rhetoric incoherently combined with overtures of friendship with Xi and trade tariffs (Turner & Kaarbo, 2021). Our Gramscian-Kautskyian approach suggests that the likely trajectory of relations between the US and China, and between the US and the international system (the LIO) will be a combination of competition and cooperation, ‘managed enmity’ and interdependence. In short, the Trump administration, like other administrations, attempted to assert US global leadership.

## Far-right and conservative discourses, influence and elites: China and the World Health Organization

We use the Covid-19 global pandemic as the context for our analysis of Trump, the far-right and World Politics. We specifically look at how Covid-19 illuminates US relations with both the World Health Organization (as an exemplar of the liberal international order) and China to theorize and explain the Trump administration’s *philosophy and methods* which are a radical development and departure from previous administrations. The Covid-19 global pandemic of 2019–2021 highlights all the key features and contradictions of the Trump phenomenon – the *material, ideological, and electoral* considerations that drove the Trump ‘project’.

Trump’s fear-inducing rhetoric was a successful electoral strategy in creating a wedge of loyal voters for the Trumpian national-ideological project. His unpredictability, relative newness to national politics and outsider status gave him a rhetorical edge to shock audiences and his social media platforms gave him direct access to voters to share ideas, for instance, the Muslim ban or trade tariffs (Bentley & Lerner, 2021; Lacatus, 2021). The administration is effectively the central node in collecting far-right, paleoconservative, and mainstream conservative voices and ideas to form policy. Trump and his appointees are not dogmatic paleoconservatives. His foreign policy is not rigidly ‘isolationist’ of the kind paleoconservatives demand, nor is his failure to denounce far-right violence tantamount to unabashed support for white supremacy. Rather, Trump’s movement is an amalgamation of ideas and a vehicle to achieve some of their objectives (Drolet & Williams, 2020). This section examines how far-right and conservative figures and discourses frame China as threatening American interests.

Far-right and mainstream conservative figures within and outside the Trump administration have adopted coercive approaches to China and combined separate discourses about industrial consolidation, free trade, globalism, ‘clash of civilisations’, immigration and terrorism. Peter Navarro, Robert Lighthizer, Mike Pence, Rex Tillerson and Steve Mnuchin developed an economic-nationalist and anti-China agenda from a mainstream conservative direction. As Mike Pompeo argued, China’s trade practices were ‘long overdue in being tackled’ (Guardian, 2018) and Michael Anton (2017) demanded the US reform the LIO and reorient US trade policy towards national economic interests. Outside the administration, Stephen Bannon and Frank Gaffney reconstituted the Cold War-era Committee on the Present Danger: China (CPD: C) to advocate an ultra-hawkish anti-China policy. What this suggests is that the Trump administration’s far-right rhetoric was an important springboard for creating policy (see Lacatus, 2021).

The CPD: C provided ideational support for Trump, as well as other Republicans, through recreating Covid-19 as the ‘Chinese virus’ specifically to delegitimize China and global institutions. This sought to highlight China’s culpability in suppressing information about the outbreak, hoarding medical equipment and causing the pandemic (O’Donnell & Associates, 2020). It labelled the

WHO as ‘very China-centric’, defunded it, and sought to change its leadership, a stance consonant with discourses about UN organizations chaining the US down, hampering efforts to compete against its rivals (Anton, 2017). Trump backed ‘medical/vaccine nationalism’ aimed at developing the first coronavirus vaccine breakthrough to control its price and supply and boost corporate profits and US geopolitical interests. In this sense, Trump, the congressional GOP, and Steve Bannon’s CPD:C have a shared rhetoric and strategy on China.

The connections between conservative and far-right media and think tanks illustrate an elite network that generated expertise for Trump’s administration and framed supportive media stories (de Graaff & van Apeldoorn, 2019; Parmar, 2019). This framing, such as Covid-19 as a ‘Chinese Virus’, is a part of an elite-driven discourse to divert national attention away from domestic mishandling of the coronavirus crisis. The network of linkages and voices that appeared closely coordinated included the *Washington Times*, Bannon, Brian Kennedy, and Bradley Thayer at the (CPD: C), US senators Tom Cotton and Josh Hawley, as well as secretary of state Pompeo (Gertz, 2020). This orchestrated strategy amplified the Trump administration’s messaging on the ‘Wuhan virus’ to further isolate China in world opinion (Barboza, 2020; O’Donnell and Associates, 2020).

The administration, with the far-right, used rhetoric about Covid-19 and China to narrate a ‘clash of civilizations’ (Anton, 2016; Flynn, 2017; Trump, 2017; see also Musgrave, 2019). Kiron Skinner, as director of the state department’s policy planning staff, argued that the ‘clash’ was predicated on racial-civilizational criteria because ‘it’s the first time that we will have a great power competitor that is not Caucasian’. The administration co-opted human rights discourse to selectively define China’s oppressiveness in contrast to the West (BBC News, 2019; Pompeo, 2020) and cast Trump as a *defender and reformer* of the American-led international order. The ‘clash of civilisations’ narrative is also linked to Trump’s neo-mercantilism (Ladermann & Simms, 2017). The conservative and far-right discourse reframes free trade and multilateralism as a source of weakness (Anton, 2019). Trump’s withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and imposition of tariffs, appointments of Lighthizer, Navarro and Ross, blended protectionism, and anti-elitism (Lighthizer, 2008). Far-right and conservative voices link a strategy of industrial consolidation with anti-immigration sentiment, especially against China. Stephen Miller, Trump’s senior aide, proposed abolishing student visas from China (Zengerle & Spetalnick, 2018). A competitive worldview aimed to congeal and rollback China as a ‘subordinate’ power (White House, 2017).

Bannon hailed a major CPD:C policy victory regarding Federal pension funds invested in Chinese corporate stock. CPD:C pressured congress to demand that the US Federal Retirement Thrift Investment Board prevent investment in Chinese stocks to the value of \$4.5 billion (CPD:C, 2020a, 2020b). The symbolic character of denying \$4.5 billion to China’s stocks is clear (given the total federal fund’s value of over \$560 billion, while the market valuation of China’s listed firms stands at around \$13 trillion; Lardy & Huang, 2020a, 2020b). Yet, it shows a direct influence of the CPD: C and acute anxiety about the trajectories of US power in the international order. The CPD:C stressed that President Xi and his allies consolidated domestic power, which required a shift in US strategy (Khalilzad, 2017). Far-right figures such as Gaffney and Bannon have a common cause with the Republican Party. They reject globalism as a cosmopolitan liberal project that dismisses national sovereignty, borders, and the China threat, in favour of global institutions from the EU to the UN, which have done little to contain China.

The Trump administration’s appointees exhibited some important differences from conventional administrations (de Graaff & van Apeldoorn, 2019). There were a far greater number of appointees without previous political or governing experience, who were more likely to be

drawn from private-business backgrounds than from Fortune500 corporations, and rooted in business conglomerates territorially tied to the US mainland, such as fossil-fuel energy, construction, and real estate. The Trump administration's top 30 appointees with foreign policy/national security responsibilities were often outside of traditional foreign policy or national security think tanks, in contrast with the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations' appointees (de Graaff & van Apeldoorn, 2019). These findings indicate potentially greater possibilities of policy departures from a far-right anti-globalist angle. Many lower-level administration positions remained unfilled, exacerbating discontinuities. Hence, the positions Trump filled with the far-right became more significant in policy implementation terms, partly because highly motivated personnel occupied them.

The Trump administration engaged with the far-right through a series of appointments to policy-making positions. We base our original analysis on 20 significant far-right appointments. These 20 far-right appointees had associations with many extremist organizations. For example, six of them were closely associated with the Gaffney-led Center for Security Policy (CSP), which the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) designated an 'extremist' group. The SPLC also designated Miller as an 'extremist' after a cache of 900 leaked emails showed his white supremacist and anti-immigrant obsessions in correspondence with *Breitbart News* (Hayden, 2019). Five Trump appointees were closely linked with Breitbart, while three were linked with ACT! for America, two with the David Horowitz Freedom Center, and three with American Renaissance. The right-wing Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) was also well-connected via appointments to the Department of Homeland Security. FAIR's president, Dan Stein, stated that pro-immigration laws are liberal retaliation against 'Anglo-Saxon dominance'. In addition, we found linkages between several appointees and one or more groups such as QAnon, VDARE, and Vigilant Patriots – all far-right white supremacist and/or conspiracist groups. At least 13 of the 20 far-right appointees' writings and advocacy could be defined as Islamophobic while at least 7 exhibited Sinophobia. Although their tactics differ, unorthodox voices from the far-right have attempted to make China a subordinate power to the United States, much like liberal internationalists.

Of the 20 appointees under consideration, there was a CIA director and secretary of state (Pompeo), 2 national security advisers (Flynn; Bolton), and deputy NSA (Kupperman), a White House chief strategist and senior policy adviser (Bannon and Miller), an attorney general (Sessions), a secretary of homeland security (Wolf), and an ambassador and director of national intelligence (Grenell). *Over 33% of Trump appointees who occupied major US foreign policy/national security-related positions came from the far or alt-right.* Nine of Trump's far-right appointees were in the top 4 most senior executive positions – with at least 5 positions at Executive Level 1 with the greatest potential for policymaking and setting the overall tone of the administration. Examples of appointees in that category include Stephen Miller, Mike Pompeo, John Kelly, Chad Wolf, and Jeff Sessions. Other administration figures such as Michael Anton, John Bolton, Darren Beattie, Fred Fleitz, Michael Pack, Larry Kudlow, Ian Smith, Richard Grenell and Sebastian Gorka have ties to the far-right, as well as mainstream conservatism, and sought to make Trumpism a longer lasting project to shift the political terrain. Trump put 17 of the 20 appointees in strategic positions related to trade, immigration, and national security.

Think tanks had a role in forging far-right and conservative links with the Trump administration. Kellyanne Conway and Bannon worked with the Council for National Policy, a right-wing policy group that acts as a broad conservative-nationalist Judeo-Christian-values forum. It helped curate Trumpism with the Religious Right and cultural conservative causes. Richard Spencer's white nationalist think tank, the National Policy Institute, news websites such as Breitbart

News and Jihad Watch, the journal *American Renaissance* and the publishing house Counter-Currents are pivotal nodes of the Alt-Right network. Their world politics is fundamentally organized by racial categories, rather than strong ideological attachments to American conservatism (Hawley, 2017). Think tanks such as Heritage and the Center for Security Policy (CSP), developed direct ties with the administration and helped to push far-right policies. A significant number of Trump's staff, including those who vetted candidates, came from the Heritage Foundation (Mahler, 2018). The Deputy National Security Advisor in 2019, Charles M. Kupperman, sat on the board of CSP (Hatewatch, 2019). Many far-right conservative figures and groups, including Gaffney, Brigitte Gabriel and Pamela Geller, signed a letter to President Trump asking him to investigate China for its alleged role in the coronavirus outbreak and hiding its origins (SPLC, 2020).

The administration often had contradictory switches of policy and rhetoric on China, so on the surface, it seems difficult to identify a coherent policy. However, the Gramscian-Kautskyian framework provides a path to understand these contradictions and the historic bloc that is reforming in its wake. We can see from the Trump administration's far-right ideational influences and appointments that it has a shared aim to subordinate China in the US-led world order. Although many figures held unorthodox views throughout the administration, they remained wedded to subordinating China through advocating trade tariffs, Phase One trade deal, Sinophobic rhetoric, overtures of friendship with president Xi, or defunding WHO. Some of these work at cross-purposes and made for incoherent policy, but the overall aim was the same.

## Conclusion

Influence is notoriously difficult to measure in the political sphere where so many forces are at play among think tanks, media, congress, and the White House. Our approach reflects that complexity: exploring the Right's discourses and networks, and approach to the international system, to China and the Covid-19 pandemic, suggest that there are shared worldviews that flow multi-directionally. *Influence or power, in this case, is shared between the White House and its external networks*, even if there is a division of political labour in implementing the programme.

We argue that the Gramscian-Kautskyian synthesis of ultraimperial competitive-conflictual-cooperation – a turbulent transition amidst a legitimacy crisis – provides the best available approximation of the US position in the world and its relations with China, and the increased influence of the far-right. It suggests that the volatile and conflictual character of domestic politics will continue to play a key role in international tensions as far-right xenophobic politics remains deeply embedded in the Republican party.

Trump has courted and empowered the far-right ideationally, stylistically, and policy-wise. The coercive character of Trump's foreign and domestic policies, the harder line on immigrants, Muslims, and America's strategic competitors and allies, reflects and amplifies those far-right concerns. The far-right is now part of mainstream US politics. In foreign policy, Trump shifted further towards open coercion against China than previous administrations and used this coercion toward the WHO because of its alleged China bias. Blaming China for US Covid-19 deaths became official policy, mobilizing all elements of the far right-oriented Trump coalition. Simultaneously, the administration used the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue to coordinate American allies in the Indo-Pacific, pushing to expand the alliance to New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam (Turner & Parmar, 2020).

The Trump administration's coercive policies at home, violation of constitutional norms, increasingly authoritarian attitude towards political opposition and media criticism dovetailed its appeals to white supremacists and armed right-wing militias and use of federal law enforcement

violence against protestors. Trump's open support for the attack on the US Capitol on 6 January to prevent a peaceful transfer of power after the November 2020 election, indicates a step-change in US domestic politics and the prevailing regime. Open White House discussion of declaring martial law to overturn the election, and Trump's historic second impeachment for 'incitement of insurrection' indicate the rightward authoritarian tendencies of that administration and US politics more generally (Mangan 2020; Snyder, 2021).

Trump emboldened the far-right's agency. The Proud Boys, for instance, aligned with Trump and provided a far-right counter to Antifa and Black Lives Matter protests. But after the 2020 election, they, along other far-right groups, such as the Oath Keepers, criticized Trump over backing down against the Democratic Party. As they lost a mainstream advocate, they tried to reorganize along local rather than national lines. This suggests that Trump was the *glue* that held together the far-right with the GOP.

In foreign policy, despite coercive rhetoric, US interdependencies with China – trade, investment, students, and US universities and think tank linkages – are dense, enduring, even if under pressure from a specific administration. This also applies to US interests and connections with Europe and the Asia-Pacific. The big picture is that the US is fundamental to the world system and cannot easily extricate itself without massive economic and political costs (White House, 2017). That is why we argue above that the Trump administration recognized that the world has shifted beyond liberal postwar arrangements. The issue is on what or whose terms, and through which diplomatic style and methods, is the world system of interdependent relationships to function.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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