THE ‘RISE OF CHINA’ IN AUSTRALIAN AND UNITED STATES NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF US PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA’S AUSTRALIAN VISIT

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Abstract

In November 2011, US President Barack Obama made his first Presidential visit to Australia as part of a nine-day trip to attend a number of key Asia-Pacific political and economic forums. Addressing the Australian parliament on November 17, the President outlined a key theme of his trip: “The United States is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay”. This captured international news attention, which highlighted the strategic importance the administration placed on Asia and the Pacific in light of the perceived ‘rise of China’. This paper explores representations of China in Australian and United States media coverage of President Obama’s Australian visit. It presents a comparative discourse analysis that highlights a ‘rise of China’ framework in each nation’s coverage, which drew on long-held fears of China as an unknowable ‘Other’ to connect regional and global stability to national economic and security interests. These representations of the ‘Other’ were part of a twin discourse that opened up space for constructions of the ‘self’, drawing on ongoing debates about the shape of the national ‘we’ in each country. Australian coverage focused on the strengthening of the US alliance as a way to neutralize fears of the threat to national security posed by China’s growing military strength and influence in Asia and the Pacific, while US coverage constructed managing China’s rise as vital for ensuring domestic economic prosperity and maintaining the US sense of identity as the premier force for peace and stability in the world.

Introduction

United States President Barack Obama made his first official visit to Australia on 16-17 November 2011. This was part of a longer nine-day trip in which Obama attended a number of key Asia-Pacific political and economic forums: the APEC meeting in Hawaii, and ASEAN and the East Asia Summit in Bali. Speaking to the Australian parliament on 17 November, the President outlined the key focus of his trip: ‘The United States is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay’ (Obama 2011b). This received extensive coverage in Australia and the US, reported as an indication of the
strategic importance placed on Asia and the Pacific by the Obama administration in light of the perceived ‘rise of China’.

China has long loomed as an unknown ‘Other’ in Western cultural, social and political discourses, a ‘different and competing alter ego’ against which ‘we’ are defined (Said 1978, 332). This has intensified in the last three decades: China has ‘gradually engaged… [in] international political and economic systems’ and is now commonly perceived as ‘an emerging great power’ (Zhang 2010, 234). Narratives of China’s economic and military ‘rise’ have become even more prominent as Western economies deal with the ongoing effects of the 2008 ‘global financial crisis’. In this context, both Australia and the US have been uncertain about how best to respond to China’s new geopolitical position. Political, cultural and media discourse in both nations betrays a tension between a desire to embrace the economic opportunities China’s growth represents, and a fear of a new era in which Chinese military and political influence might surpass that of the United States (and its allies). Attempts to re-imagine their nation’s role in this new global order has led to US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (2011) forecasting ‘America’s Pacific Century’, and Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard positioning Australia in the Asian Century (Office of the Prime Minister 2011).

This paper analyses Australian and United States newspaper coverage leading up to, during, and after President Obama’s 27 hours in Australia. It identifies a central ‘rise of China’ framework in both countries’ coverage, then looks deeper to see how this positioning of China as ‘Other’ opened space for always-present constructions of ‘self’. In both Australian and US newspapers, representations of China prompted discussion of each country’s own national identity and place in the world. While US coverage saw an opportunity to re-invigorate American exceptionalism, Australian coverage displayed a clear anxiety about how to balance economic and security relationships with these two ‘giants’.

Theorising National Identity, the ‘Other’ and News Media
News media coverage offers a window into the political and cultural contexts that both inform foreign policy decisions and help members of national communities construct a sense of individual and collective identity. In a world becoming ‘radically interconnected, interdependent and communicated in the flows of information and culture’, news journalism plays a vital role (Cottle 2009, 1). For Simon Cottle (2009, 1), how we ‘collectively recognise and respond’ to global threats and crises ‘depends in large measure on how they become defined and deliberated, constructed and contested in the contemporary news media’. This echoes Douglas Kellner’s (1995, 1) identification, almost two decades ago, of an emerging ‘media culture’ in which the media provide ‘the materials out of which people forge their very identities’, ‘their sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationalist, of sexuality, of “us” and “them”’. As the ‘parameters of existence and imaged horizons’ extend beyond the local and national to the global, ‘encouraging a sense of the world as a singular, shared space’ (Cottle 2009, 1), the interactions between these levels of identity come into sharper focus.

Here, the news media play a vital role in ‘constructing and shaping the image of a country’ (Peng 2004, 53) at the same time as they help to make real the regional and global. Geoffrey Craig (2004, 177) has noted that the nation is ‘increasingly perpetuated through the use of symbols, narratives and myths’; ‘a kind of symbolic power which binds people together through a sense of belonging to a specific place and culture’. This is located in media ritual as well as content: in the act of reading a daily newspaper (Anderson, 1983); joining the public broadcast audience (Scannell 1989); or watching the celebrations and crises of national (Dayan and Katz 1992) or global (Couldry et al 2010) media events.

While myths of nation draw groups together, these inclusive discourses are always partnered by an image of those who are excluded. As Benedict Anderson (1983, 16) has theorised, we imagine national communities as necessarily limited, with ‘finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations’. These boundaries are the ‘foundations upon which nationalism rests’, allowing the construction of those within the nation as ‘essentially similar and equal’ while differentiating each nation from others (Puri 2004, 2). This is a fundamental element of identity construction, which Edward Said (1978, 332) has argued in his seminal *Orientalism* involves:
…establishing opposites and “others” whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and reinterpretation of their differences from “us”.

For Said, ‘each age and society recreates its “Others”’, with ‘self’ and ‘other’ identity a ‘much worked-over historical, social, intellectual and political process’ involving contest between institutions and individuals in all societies. This theoretical perspective positions both ‘self’ and ‘other’ as constructed but always inherently linked. For Chantal Mouffe (1992, 30), in order to ‘construct a “we” it is necessary to distinguish it from a “them”’, rendering the ‘other’ an always present ‘constitutive outside’, exterior to a community but forming ‘the very condition of its existence’.

**Research Aims and Method**

This foundation informs a comparative language analysis of Australian and US newspaper coverage of President Obama’s 27-hour Australian visit. The analysis highlights the operation of a ‘rise of China’ framework as part of a deeper discourse of ‘self’ and ‘Other’, reliant on long-running debates around national identity and drawing on narratives of ‘American leadership’ and ‘Australian ambivalence’.

A strong US tradition of quantitative media research has focused on news media representations of China. It is overwhelmingly dominated by content analyses of North American newspaper coverage (e.g. Lu 2011; Zhang 2010; Hou and Ma 2009; Peng 2004; Goodman 1999), while some work takes a multi-national approach (Wu 2009; Lee and Yang 1996). In Australia there has been no such media research tradition. Academic attention to China has been dominated by foreign policy and international relations (e.g White 2010; Jones 2008; Zhang 2007; Fung and Mackerras 1985), a central goal of which has been to locate Australia’s relationship with China within the context of its broader regional security and global alliances.¹ Some historical accounts have sought to uncover ‘Australian representations of China and the corresponding formation of Australian self-image’ (Strahan 1996, 2). For example, Kendall (2005) identifies ‘the ways that Australians have come to

¹ Similar attention has been paid to China in recent US work that has focused on appropriate responses to the perceived security and economic challenges presented by China’s rise (Cooney and Sato 2009; Doyle 2007).
understand, or imagine, the People’s Republic of China’ (see also Strahan 1996; and for a US equivalent Goldstein et al 1991). These studies (with David Walker’s (1999) *Anxious Nation*) inform the discursive approach that informs this paper.

Complementary quantitative and qualitative methods are combined in this paper to reveal central themes in the coverage and allow for analysis of ‘systematic links between texts, discourse practices and sociocultural practices’ (Fairclough 1995, 16; see also van Dijk 1985, 4). The paper first outlines the results of an initial content analysis, which then guides a more detailed discourse analysis. The sample includes news articles from three Australian and three US newspapers, selected to represent a mix of ownership, reach, format and demographic (Table One), and was compiled through a Factiva database search. The dates 11-20 November were chosen to cover the President’s time travelling from Hawaii to Bali, and to include ‘preview’ and ‘post-mortem’ coverage of his Australian visit.

**Table One: Newspapers in Sample**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Ownership</th>
<th>Circulation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>The Australian</em></td>
<td>Australia; National</td>
<td>Broadsheet</td>
<td>News Limited</td>
<td>127,942&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt; Seventh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sydney Morning Herald</em></td>
<td>Australia; Metropolitan – Sydney, NSW</td>
<td>Broadsheet</td>
<td>Fairfax</td>
<td>198,335&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt; Fifth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Herald Sun</em></td>
<td>Australia; Metropolitan – Melbourne, VIC</td>
<td>Tabloid</td>
<td>News Limited</td>
<td>469,377&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt; First</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>New York Times</em></td>
<td>United States; Metropolitan – New York, NY</td>
<td>Broadsheet</td>
<td>New York Times Company</td>
<td>1,586,757&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt; Third</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>USA Today</em></td>
<td>United States; National</td>
<td>Tabloid</td>
<td>Gannett Company</td>
<td>1,817,446&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt; Second</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Wall Street Journal</em></td>
<td>United States; National</td>
<td>Broadsheet</td>
<td>Dow Jones &amp; Co/ News Corporation</td>
<td>2,118,315&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt; First</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:

a) Figures for average total weekday sales; national ranking in circulation data.

b) Print only – official digital sales data not available for these publications at the time of writing. Fairfax was the only newspaper publisher in Australia to report its digital sales under new rules that encourage voluntary reporting until mandatory reporting begins in June 2013. Digital sales include replica digital versions, enhanced digital versions (tablets) and paid website subscriptions (Tullock 2012).


2 Both print and online versions of these publications were included; however online articles that were web duplicates of print articles were excluded.
A series of searches identified articles that used one or both of the key terms ‘Obama’ or ‘President’, and then those that also used the keyword ‘Australia’ or appeared in an Australian newspaper. This yielded a sample of 268 news articles, strongly skewed towards Australia with 233 Australian and 35 US articles. These were coded first for significant mentions of China (discussed below), yielding a smaller sample that was then coded for the presence of 22 ‘key terms’ or groups of terms that referred to the rise of China, China’s power, China’s economic and military prowess, and China’s reaction to the President’s visit.

Analysing the links between media perceptions of China’s rise and foreign relations, Zhang (2010, 235) argues that in a ‘mediated world’, it is ‘the news media that construct the world for people’, particularly in relation to foreign countries and international events. This paper analyses constructions both of ‘Other’ countries and of ‘our own’, paying close attention to representation (one of Fairclough’s (1995, 5) three aspects of media discourse). It explores these linked discourses initially in the quantitative results and then qualitatively through representative sampling, drawing on relevant examples. The focus is on news content in the tradition of ‘non-linguistic’ media studies of news discourse (Cotter 2001, 418).

**A ‘Rising China’: Constructing the ‘Other’**

Coverage of Barack Obama’s Australian visit was characterised by a narrative that placed it (and the President’s speeches and announcements) into broader global context. Most striking was the frequency of references to China. An initial content analysis highlighted those articles that focused on China, or used China as a

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3 Articles were included where they specifically covered President Obama’s appearances, speeches, policy announcements or other aspects of his visit while he was in Australia; previewed these in the lead-up to his visit; or analysed these in the days following his departure.

4 Opinion pieces, editorials and journalists’ personal blog posts were excluded.

5 These categories were developed for a larger project for which this analysis operates as a pilot study; only relevant results are discussed here.
contextual frame.⁶ These significant references to China appeared in 46% of articles in the sample (of 123 total). In the US portion this was 60%, while in Australian newspapers it was slightly lower at 44%. These figures also varied by publication; notably, all ten *New York Times* articles covering the President’s Australian visit featured or referenced China (Figure 1).

![Figure 1: News Articles Referring to ‘China’ as Part of Australian and United States Newspaper Coverage of President Barack Obama’s Australian Visit, 11-20 November 2011](image)

Notes: Article totals by newspaper: *Australian* 127; *Herald Sun* 80; *Sydney Morning Herald* 62; *New York Times* 10; *USA Today* 18; *Wall Street Journal* 11.

A closer look at constructions of China in these articles offers an insight into the representation of China as ‘Other’, and to the always-present mirror discourses of Australian and US national identity. China was most commonly represented as ‘rising’ or ‘growing’, with this language used in 63% of articles across both countries. Related language that referred to China’s growing ‘power’ and ‘influence’ was also prominent, used in 51% of articles (Figure 2). This was more frequent in the smaller

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⁶ Incidental mentions, such as the listing of China in groups of countries that were involved in talks or were signatories to a treaty, were excluded.
United States sample, with ‘rise’ terms in 95% and ‘power’ terms in 48% of articles (compared to 56% and 39% in Australian articles).

While explicit negative representations of China were absent, coverage often included descriptors that gave an implicit negative impression of China’s rise. In particular, references to ‘aggressive growth’ (Jackson 2011a) and ‘growing assertiveness’ (AFP 2011) implied that this ‘rise’ was a potential threat to China’s neighbours and challenge to the geopolitical status quo. This was deepened by representations of China’s rise as out of control – a ‘rapid advance’ (Calmes 2011b) – and its intentions as unclear (Meckler 2011b). These constructions of China as militaristic, expansionist, and unpredictable served as a marker of difference in the sample. Presenting the ‘Other’ as a threat, these images ‘allow “us” to say what “we” are not’ (Goodall et al 1994, 73), and contrast China with ‘our’ orderly growth.

Figure 2: Use of ‘Rise’ and ‘Power’ Key Words in Australian and United States Newspaper Coverage, 11-20 November 2011

Notes: Both countries n=123; Australia n=102; United States n=21. Key words were coded to include alternate word forms eg ‘expand’ included expansion, expanding etc; ‘power’ included powerhouse, world power, superpower etc.

China’s rise was painted in both military and economic terms, with 31% of articles using key terms referencing China’s military growth and 30% using terms related to economic strength. These were commonly paired together as elements of the same
trend: ‘economic and military power’ (Calmes 2011c; AAP 2011a). China’s military rise was constructed in broad terms through references to military strength and power, and in specific mentions of technology and capabilities. Language such as China’s ‘growing military muscle’ (Calmes 2011a) was common; while more specific references often relied on ‘expert’ sources (e.g. Hartcher 2011). The impact that China’s military development might have on its neighbours, and on the balance of power in Asia and the Pacific region, was another key feature. In particular, China’s claims to territorial rights in the South China Sea were represented as a threat to regional stability, with China painted as both ‘ambitious’ (Alford 2011) and increasingly militaristic (Wolf 2011b). These concerns were linked to control of resources, as China’s ‘claims to disputed islands’ would give it ‘broad sway over oil and gas rights in the East and South China seas’ (Calmes 2011c).

While China’s military rise was represented almost exclusively as a threat, constructions of its economic development were more complex, and frequently linked to the ‘national interest’. In the Australian articles, this economic growth was represented as creating a ‘voracious demand’ for Australia’s natural resources, making China the nation’s ‘biggest trading partner’ (AFP 2011). Similarly, US coverage painted the President’s trip to the Asia-Pacific region as ‘mostly about expanding US trade and continuing to grow its economy’, something made possible by China’s ‘economic ascendance’ (Wolf 2011a). Here, China’s rise was represented as positive when it opened up opportunities for Australia to maintain its prosperity, or for the United States to rebuild its economy. However, this was balanced against the ever-present threat posed by the military and strategic power that is the flipside of Chinese economic development, evident in this Wall Street Journal passage:

Administration officials argue that US engagement in Asia holds direct benefit for Americans concerned with the economy, with potential to boost exports that support US jobs. The engagement is also meant to counter China’s influence in the region on both economic and security issues (Meckler and Barkley 2011).

China’s rise was constructed, in this way, as a source of both threat and opportunity, its growing influence representing a shift in world power balances and reorganisation of geopolitical hierarchies as well as a potential market for Australian exports and
significant US trading partner. Previous research has identified these links in news media coverage: a ‘developing and threatening China frame’ (Peng 2004, 5) which increases as China becomes ‘ever more economically successful’ (Lu 2011, 346).

Across the sample, China’s ‘rise’ was positioned as a motivating factor for President Obama’s trip, his administration’s ‘Pacific turn’, and also for the announcement of a heightened US troop deployment in Australia’s Northern Territory. Placed in the context of Asia-Pacific development more broadly, China’s growth was represented as contributing to a global power shift that required responses from both the US and Australia. While these responses varied, echoing differences in national identity discourses, what is significant is that the ‘rise’ of China was not so much the focus of these articles as it was part of a deeper discourse of ‘self’ and ‘Other’. Through this lens, painting China as a rising ‘Other’ opens up mirror discourses about the restoration of US leadership in the world, and Australia’s need to deal grapple with long-term ambivalence about its cultural allegiances and geographical location.

‘Partners and Allies’: Constructions of American Leadership

The ‘rise of China’ was represented in the US articles in the sample as an opportunity to regain the position of respected world leader, a construction that relied on the notion that the national myth of ‘American exceptionalism’ had been challenged by increasingly unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in the post-9/11 period and the ongoing effects of the 2008 financial crisis. China’s economic rise, therefore, presented trade and investment opportunities that could stimulate the American economy; and its strategic and military development invited the US to reclaim its role as a beacon of democracy and freedom.

The clearest manifestation of this in the sample was in language that constructed American engagement in the region as a response to the demands of ‘smaller’ allies ‘fearful’ of a newly ‘assertive’ China (Calmes 2011c). Representing China as aggressive and expansionist, in this way, allowed the Wall Street Journal to paint the US as a guarantor of regional peace:

…China is extending its claims in the region, worrying US partners and allies who both depend on China for trade but fear it may exercise its power in more forceful
ways. As a result, China’s neighbours have implored the US to deepen its involvement (Meckler 2011a).

The construction of an ‘assertive China which has raised the fears of other Asian countries’ (Zhang 2010, 249) allowed for a revitalised American ‘exceptionalism’, with the US as ‘a beacon of light in the darkness and defender of the rights of man’ (Weiss and Edwards 2011, 1). This grants the US ‘moral superiority’ in world affairs and links into a broader perception of international relations that has been called upon to ‘account for, or to enable, US leadership during every important period of geopolitical transition since the late nineteenth century’ (McEvoy-Levy 2001, 23).

Exceptionalism operates, in the sample, as a ““nationalistic” expression of a distinctly American sense of identity’, which relies on ‘comparison with a corrupt, dangerous “other”’ (McEvoy-Levy 2001, 71). As China is increasingly pressing its influence on regional security issues, the US is able to reclaim the role of ‘light on the hill’; evident in this passage from the New York Times:

…[the US] is eager to show its traditional allies in Asia, including Japan South Korea, Australia, the Philippines and Thailand, that it is no longer distracted by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and that it is advancing democratic interests, promoting free market economic reform, and counterbalancing the power of an authoritarian China (Fuller and Landler, 2011).

This image was reinforced in the coverage by frequent reporting of the content of President’s speeches, which placed him (and therefore the nation) in an active role. In particular, the President’s response to New York Times reporter Jackie Calmes’ question at the joint press conference with Julia Gillard on 16 November was quoted extensively. Asked, in the context of China’s absence from negotiations towards a new Trans-Pacific Partnership, ‘what is it everyone fears so much from China’, Obama (2011a) responded: ‘I think the notion that we fear China is mistaken. The notion that we are looking to exclude China is mistaken’. In these comments, quoted in the New York Times (Calmes 2011b; 2011c) and USA Today (Jackson 2011a; 2011b) the President went on to emphasise that China would be welcome to join the

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7 The term ‘light on the hill’ derives from Puritan pastor John Winthrop’s sermon delivered on board the Arbella as the Puritans set out for America (Soderlind 2011, 2); it is traditionally seen as the earliest articulation of what would later be referred to as ‘American exceptionalism’.
new Partnership but ‘must play by “the same rules” as everyone else’ (Jackson 2011b) on issues such as intellectual property and currency valuation. Here, the US is represented as actively policing China’s ‘rise’ to ensure they follow accepted ‘international norms’. Implicitly, this monitoring role is required as an aggressive, unpredictable China cannot be expected to ‘play by the rules’ of its own accord.

‘Between Two Giants’: Constructions of Australian Ambivalence

The Australian coverage displayed a clear anxiety about how to balance conflicting economic and security imperatives, a concern about Australia’s ability to maintain a healthy economic relationship with China while ensuring the strength of the US alliance. This echoed a long-running ambivalence in Australian public and political discourse about the tension between the nation’s cultural ties and geographical location.

This ambivalence manifested in a key theme in the Australian sample, in which ‘rise of China’ presented a conflict between Australia’s economic and strategic priorities. China’s strong economy was constructed as vital for Australia’s continued prosperity. Michelle Grattan (2011) noted, in the Sydney Morning Herald, that ‘our prosperity is tightly linked’ to China, while an AFP (2011) report in the Herald Sun explained that China’s ‘voracious demand for Australia’s natural resources’ had made them ‘the nation’s biggest trading partner’. Despite this there was a consistent anxiety about the ‘dramatic expansion of the Chinese navy’ (Packham 2011) and its ‘emerging power in the region’ (Coorey and Welch 2011). Here, the focus was not on China as a direct threat to Australia, but rather on the concern that US international military and strategic influence (on which Australia bases its sense of security) may be challenged. These conflicting desires to welcome the economic aspects of China’s development while fearing the military flipside reflect a deep ambivalence in Australian culture. This was implicit throughout the Australian coverage, and was made explicit by Hudson (2011) in the Herald Sun: Australia might ‘have to choose between our closest security ally and our top trading partner’.

The sense that Australia must ‘steer a course between the two giants’ (AAP 2011a) appeared throughout the sample as a discourse that celebrated the strengthening of the
US alliance on the one hand, and actively downplayed fears about how China would react on the other. Anxiety about China’s reaction to the announcement of increased US troop numbers in the Northern Territory manifested in reporting that emphasised that the decision was not aimed at China and relied heavily on quoting expert opinions (see, for example, Massola 2011). Politicians were also quoted, among them then-Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd (AAP 2011b) and Australian Ambassador to the US, Kim Beazley (Coorey and Welch 2011). Most prominently, the coverage featured reassurances from both the Prime Minister and the Opposition Leader that Australia could balance healthy relationships with China and the United States:

There is no reason why we can’t continue to have a very strong relationship with America and a strong and improving relationship with the Chinese (Abbott in AAP 2011c).

It is well and truly possible for us, in this growing region of the world, to have an ally in the United States and to have deep friendships in our region, including with China (Gillard in Hudson 2011).

Consistent reporting of these statements betrayed a deeper sense of anxiety about the potential threat that China poses to Australia, which can be traced back to its earliest manifestations: from the ‘racial hostility to Chinese goldminers in the late 19th century’ to ‘yellow peril’ fears of invasion and later concerns about the ‘Red threat’ of Chinese Communism (Dalby 1996, 113). Walker (1997, 132) has argued that Australian public figures have been referring to the ‘awakening East’ since the late 19th century, using this to scare Australians into reconsidering their place in the world and getting ‘their house in order’. Here, the fear of losing the nation – whether through threats to its security, prosperity or ‘way of life’ – provokes analysis of ‘how it may be defended’ (Walker 1997, 133). The need to manage the ever-present threat of a populous and powerful China drives these security discourses, which emphasise the strength of the Australia-US alliance as counter-measure and failsafe. In this way, the ‘rise of China’ is used both for domestic political purposes and ‘to define Australia’s place in the world’; it is both threatening ‘other’ and also ‘integral to Australia’s economic, political and strategic future’ (Kendall 2008, 1).
Conclusion

Constructions of an economically ascendant and strategically aggressive China in the sample framed discussions of the restoration of US global leadership, and of Australian anxiety over the tensions caused by its increasing economic dependence on China and ongoing military and cultural alliance with the US. These reflect the narratives of identity that dominate each nation’s public imagination, and the differences in size, economic and strategic influence and geographic location that impact on public debate (Fallows 2012). For both, this was a domestic news story that located global realignments through a localised narrative, and these discourses continued to be evident in the months that followed.

Throughout 2012, media coverage in both countries ‘flared up’ around events of local significance or unusual drama. In Australia, the Gillard Government’s announcement of a new Defence White Paper, as well as official visits to China by new Foreign Minister Bob Carr in May and Defence Minister Stephen Smith in early June, received extensive coverage (see Wen 2012; Garnaut 2012), while new rumours of a plan to build a US naval base in Perth raised concerns this was ‘likely to antagonise China’ (O’Malley, Garnaut and Welch 2012). US media highlighted the mid-February visit of Chinese Vice-President Xi Jinping and the dramatic asylum request and flight of dissident Chen Guangcheng (see Landler and Wong 2012; Richburg and Mufson 2012); and followed their athletes’ battle with China’s to claim first place on the London Olympics medal tally. Both Australian and US media reported concerns about the ‘sudden resurgence’ of the Chinese Olympic swimming team which were linked to memories of China’s ‘drug-fuelled domination of world swimming’ in past Olympics (Smith 2012); and in early November, the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party and once-in-a-decade leadership change was the subject of extensive coverage and speculation (Feller 2012; Davis 2012).

The same ‘rise of China’ narratives that dominated coverage of President Obama’s first Australian visit are evident here, unsettling taken-for-granted assumptions about geopolitical hierarchies and alignments. In this shifting global landscape, media narratives of a ‘rising China’ will continue to pose challenges for discourses of
national identity and offer opportunities for reclaiming ‘American exceptionalism’ and reconfiguring ‘Australian ambivalence’.

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