

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rhetorical coercion, institutional legitimacy and the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank

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Abstract

This article centres around one singular yet substantively important empirical puzzle: why did the United States fail to delegitimize the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank? I argue that a crucial factor missing from existing analyses is China's rhetorical coercion. To substantiate this argument, I first reconstruct from the perspective of framing the US-China rhetorical contestation over the AIIB at the early stage. This results in the identification of seven competing frames pertaining to the purpose and procedural legitimacy of the bank: *Sub-standard*, *Tool* and *Rival* promoted by the United States; *High-quality*, *Equality*, *Complement* and *Welcome Change* by China. To flesh out China's rhetorical coercion, I gauge the coercive power of the frames identified before zooming in on *Complement* and *Welcome Change* and uncovering therein three coercive claims: shortfalls in Asia's infrastructure finance, weaknesses in the existing system of international financial institutions and inconsistency in the US approach to the AIIB and China's rise. These claims considerably restricted the room for the United States to engage in principled opposition, and in tandem with developments favourable to the AIIB (not least the participation of Western countries), enabled China to rhetorically coerce the United States.

1 | US DISSUASION FAILURE

The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) was proposed by China in October 2013 and formally launched in January 2016. The Beijing-headquartered multilateral development bank (MDB) is now widely recognised as a success of China's multilateral institution-building (Chin, 2019). Yet at the early stage, the Chinese proposal was met with considerable suspicion in Washington and other Western capitals. Few openly contested the AIIB's utility given that its focus on infrastructure aligns well with Asia's needs and priorities. But many doubted China's ability to build a high-quality, well-functioning MDB. More fundamentally, sceptics were wary of China's ulterior motives, raising concerns that the bank would allow Beijing to leverage financial power in pursuit of strategic ambitions, undercut the authority of Western-led international financial institutions (IFIs) and threaten the US leadership in the liberal

international order (Drezner, 2015; Economy, 2015; Lipsky, 2015).

One year after China unveiled the proposal, only 21 Asian states signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Establishing the AIIB, and most of them were small and medium-sized economies. Major advanced economies represented by the Group of Seven (G7) were absent. As late as January 2015, G7 agreed to remain out if they could not reach a consensus (Anderlini, 2015). In addition, countries such as Australia and South Korea that had earlier shown interest shied away (Freeman, 2019, 669). All these were largely attributable to one factor: the United States. Many noted that US officials covertly put pressure on allies to stay away (Economy, 2015; Harris, 2015; Perlez, 2014; Roach et al., 2015).

In this light, the decision of the United Kingdom on 12 March 2015 to break ranks and join the AIIB came as a surprise to many, not least the United States.

A senior US official rebuked the United Kingdom for making such a momentous decision with ‘virtually no consultation with the US’ (Dyer & Parker, 2015). The UK decision had a cascade effect. Shortly thereafter, a string of US allies and partners followed suit. By 31 March 2015 (deadline for joining as founding member), 57 countries signed up. That a great number of countries, some of them staunch US allies, applied for AIIB membership against US wishes was widely seen as a debacle for Washington. As one commentator put it bluntly, ‘the Obama administration’s year-long effort to delegitimize and marginalize the AIIB has failed and failed spectacularly’ (Drezner, 2015).

What factors contributed to the ‘spectacular failure’ of the United States to delegitimize the AIIB? In this article, I address the question from the vantage point of rhetorical coercion, defined as ‘a strategy that seeks to rhetorically constrain political opponents and maneuver them into public assent to one’s preferred terms of debate and ideally to one’s policy stance’ (Krebs & Lobasz, 2007, 412). The argument I make is that China’s rhetorical coercion greatly restricted the range of socially sustainable (counter)arguments and courses of action available to the United States and combined with the participation of US allies in the AIIB, left Washington unable to effectively contest the legitimacy of the China-led bank. China’s rhetorical coercion, I contend, is a key piece of the puzzle missing from extant explanations that underline the botched strategy of the US government, the accommodation and responsiveness of China and the politico-economic-normative considerations of Western participating countries. To substantiate this argument, I conduct a qualitative analysis of a purpose-built corpus comprising AIIB-related official and media texts from China and the United States, with a view to tracing the contours of US-China rhetorical contestation and identifying the claims underlying China’s rhetorical coercion.

The article proceeds as follows. First, I provide a brief review of the AIIB literature to situate this research. Then, I elaborate the analytical framework of rhetorical coercion and finesse it with insights from institutional legitimacy and framing. This is followed by a brief note on data and method. In the empirical sections, I reconstruct the competing frames embedded in the intensely polarised US-China debate over the AIIB before turning to the frames and frame elements invoked by China that carry the potential for rhetorical coercion. I conclude the article by discussing the key findings and implications of this research.

2 | SITUATING THE RESEARCH

Existing AIIB scholarship focuses on the multiplicity of considerations that motivated China to create the bank (Andornino, 2019; Chen & Liu, 2018; Ren, 2016;

Policy implications

- Policymakers and analysts should accord more attention to political contest at the rhetorical front. The strategic use of norm-based arguments can be instrumental in restricting the range of acceptable rhetorical and policy responses.
- International actors, not least governments, should have a holistic understanding of the diverging perspectives on China’s creation of multilateral institutions and opt for a policy response aligned with widely-accepted arguments.
- Institutional status quo defenders should refrain from overemphasizing procedural standards and dismissing new (China-led) multilateral institutions altogether, primarily or solely on procedural grounds. By joining, they may be better-positioned to shape how these institutions are governed and operate.
- Proponents of new institutions should accentuate their purpose as much, if not more, as their convergence to the established standards. When an institution is yet to take shape, invoking its distinct function is a key legitimization mechanism and an effective counter to procedural concerns.

Wilson, 2019; Yang, 2016) and the potential implications the China-led MDB has for Western-dominated IFIs and global economic governance at large (Chin, 2016; Hameiri & Jones, 2018; Kahler, 2017; Kawai, 2015; Lipsy, 2015; Qian et al., 2023; Reisen, 2015; Stephen & Skidmore, 2019; Wang, 2017). In comparison, much less attention has been paid to the factors that may have contributed to the failure of the United States (and the success of China) in the contest over the AIIB. This is surprising given the recurrent framing of the AIIB as an episode of US-China strategic rivalry (Yang & Van Gorp, 2019, 615). Among the scant analyses that did explore this topic, emphasis is put on three factors.

The first is the erroneous strategy of the United States. Washington presumed the AIIB—an institution in the making and with a mandate to address a widely-recognised problem—would fall short of high standards and refused to engage it altogether (and pressed allies to do the same). At the same time, it was unable to provide an alternative solution to Asia’s chronically unmet infrastructure needs nor respond to China’s legitimate grievances over emerging economies’ under-representation in the Bretton Woods institutions (Drezner, 2015; Economy, 2015; Harris, 2015; Roach et al., 2015). While this tells an important part

of the story, it leaves out US-China contestation at the rhetorical front. US missteps led directly to its inability to mount an effective counter to China's claims that the AIIB was born out of frustration and would be useful for meeting Asia's infrastructure needs.

The second is the accommodation and responsiveness of China. That is, Beijing showed willingness to concede and adapt in response to the demands of (prospective) AIIB members over important issues such as membership, governance and shareholding (Sun, 2015; Wilson, 2019; Yang, 2016), and exercised restraint by substantiating the bank's multilateral character and complementarity to other MDBs (Chen & Liu, 2018; Stephen & Skidmore, 2019; Zhu, 2019), principally the World Bank (WB) and Asian Development Bank (ADB). This clearly played a role in the AIIB's success in winning diffuse support. Yet again, it does not take into account China's strategic use of normative arguments to legitimate the AIIB, and more importantly, to coerce opponents and sceptics.

The third factor gives more attention to participating Western countries, not least traditional US allies, and zeros in on the politico-economic-normative calculus behind their decision to join the AIIB. The motives discussed include hedging amid heightened US-China strategic rivalry, pursuing business opportunities attendant on infrastructure investment and pushing China to institute high standards (Chen, 2018; Gabsui, 2019; Jang, 2022). Undoubtedly, the calculus of these countries was related to the outcome of US-China jostling over the AIIB. Yet focusing on participating countries relegates to the margins a main part of the international political context in which these decisions were made. That Western countries, the key first movers in particular, were able to join the China-led institution without coming under too much pressure from the international community (notably the United States) was linked to the enabling environment created by China's rhetorical (out)manoeuvring in the debate with the United States.

My research advances a supplementary explanation that puts China's rhetorical coercion front and centre. It should be clarified that the aim of this research is neither to provide an all-compassing account for why many (Western) countries joined the AIIB nor to assess the explanatory power of China's rhetorical coercion relative to alternative explanations outlined above. In my view, none of these factors, including China's rhetorical coercion, is determinative. Rather, they worked in tandem to shape the outcome of US-China struggle over the AIIB.

To assess the role of China's rhetorical coercion, I reconstruct the US-China rhetorical contestation at the early stage of the bank's formation (October 2013–June 2015) and show how China promoted a set of widely accepted claims that threw into sharp relief the *raison d'être* of the AIIB and inconsistency of the United States in opposing the bank. This, together with

developments favourable to the AIIB, enabled China to close off routes of appropriate rebuttal and coerce the United States into accepting the bank.

3 | RHETORICAL COERCION: 'TWISTING ARMS BY TWISTING TONGUES'

Rhetoric is central to politics. Among mainstream IR theories, constructivism stands out for recognising the (causal) power of rhetoric (Payne, 2001, 37). In this respect, constructivists privilege persuasion as a mechanism to grapple with the reasons why actors exhibit behavioural changes contrary to their interests (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Being persuaded means that an actor does not grudgingly comply but genuinely believes in the appropriateness of the norm/action proposed.

Some take issue with this understanding and foreground the difficulty in finding empirical proof of persuasion. This is because motives are too elusive. As Bennett (1980, 800) posits, 'of all the elements of social action, motives are the least subject to proof or disproof'. To (dis)confirm whether behavioural changes are motivated by sincere beliefs or instrumental reasons, we need unmediated access to people's mind (Krebs & Jackson, 2007, 40). Given that, Krebs and Jackson (2007, 41) propose an analytical model that seeks to 'minimize the place of motives as driving forces' in explaining political processes and outcomes: rhetorical coercion.

It should be stressed that coercion, as construed by Krebs and Jackson (2007, 58), is distinct from the typical definitions that focus on the use of force to alter behaviour, which, in their view, 'too tightly link the instrument of influence with the nature of influence'. Following Baldwin (1985, 38), they view coercion as involving 'a high degree of constraint on the alternative courses of action available to ... the target of an influence attempt'. As such, coercion can come in many forms, including the rhetorical, that limit the choices available to the target.

In privileging rhetorical coercion to study the power of rhetoric, Krebs and Jackson (2007, 39–42) explicitly differentiate it from persuasion. In the process of arguing with a view to persuading, 'actors try to convince each other to change their causal or principled beliefs in order to reach a reasoned consensus about validity claims. And... they are themselves prepared to be persuaded' (Risse, 2000, 9). Yet the logic of arguing is premised on an 'ideal speech situation', which is a counterfactual presupposition excluding 'all forces ... except the force of the better argument ... all motives except that of a cooperative search for the truth' (Habermas, 1984, 25). This is not an empirically accurate characterisation of politics. In fact, power and

rank are ubiquitous in politics, and rational deliberation rarely characterises actual political debate. Therefore, it seems ‘more helpful to adopt a theoretical framework that explicates the power of rhetoric even when politics is *not* truth-seeking and truth-generating, and a conception of rhetoric that includes *all* speech, no matter how interlaced with power relations’ (Krebs & Jackson, 2007, 40). For the model of rhetorical coercion, it does not matter ‘whether actors believe what they say, whether they are motivated by crass material interests or sincere commitment’; what matters is that actors ‘can be rhetorically maneuvered into a corner, trapped into publicly endorsing positions they may, or may not, find anathema’ (Krebs & Jackson, 2007, 42).

How does rhetorical coercion work? In an open debate, the contending sides need to justify their positions with a view to providing account to and mobilising support from an audience, whose presence ‘makes it especially hard to appear motivated merely by self-interest’ and forces actors to ‘replace the language of interest by the language of reason’ (Elster, 1998, 111). Such justificatory accounts hold special import for public debates as they establish normative grounds on which the audience evaluates ‘the propriety or legitimacy of action’ or ‘the actor’s role and status and the relevant institutional and procedural trappings surrounding the action’ (Bennett, 1980, 794). If these justifications do not resonate with the audience, they will not be able to forestall the emergence of competing and more appropriate claims (Binder & Heupel, 2020, 94).

Rhetorical coercion occurs when an actor through skilful framing manages to sideline competing frames, shift the debate onto terrain more favourable to itself and close off routes of acceptable rebuttal (Krebs & Jackson, 2007, 44–5). It is successful when the appropriate roles opponents can play out and possible responses compatible with these roles are so severely constrained that they are left with no choice but to acquiesce or accept. As such, rhetorical coercion is also known as a strategy for ‘twisting arms by twisting tongues’ (Krebs & Jackson, 2007, 42).

Actors engaging in rhetorical coercion do not need to truly believe in the validity of the claims they make. Rather, ‘they are strategic actors who use justifications instrumentally, choosing those rhetorical devices they expect to yield most traction’ (Binder & Heupel, 2020, 95). Rhetorical coercion is often about inflicting hypocrisy costs and force opponents into acceptance (Kruck & Zangl, 2020, 8–9). Also, for opponents, being rhetorically coerced does not amount to being silenced altogether. However, they are unable to mount an effective challenge to the dominant narrative and can only contest at the margins (Binder & Heupel, 2020, 94; Krebs & Lobasz, 2007, 412).

It is apposite here to clarify the difference between rhetorical coercion and rhetorical entrapment.

Rhetorical entrapment refers to ‘the mechanism by which actors are compelled to act in conformance with their prior argumentative commitments’ in a situation wherein such conformance is actually in conflict with their current preferences (Schimmelfennig, 2021, 143). It results from rhetorical action, that is, ‘strategic use of norm-based arguments in pursuit of one’s self-interest’ (Schimmelfennig, 2001, 63). When publicly declaring support for a particular norm for strategic reasons, actors tie their hands and are compelled to act in accordance with the prescriptions of the norm, lest they are shamed for being hypocritical (Schimmelfennig, 2001, 64–65).

In contrast, rhetorical coercion operates by denying opponents ‘rhetorical materials out of which to craft a socially sustainable rebuttal’ (Krebs & Jackson, 2007, 42). Entrapping opponents with their past commitment and forcing them to honour it constitutes a form of rhetorical coercion. That said, there are other forms, such as invoking broadly accepted norms and widely recognised problems or threats. For example, governments heightened the acute threat posed by COVID-19 to justify sweeping public health restrictions (Yang, 2023). In the AIIB case, China’s reference to Asia’s unmet infrastructure needs—an issue on which there was a broad consensus—not only highlighted the AIIB’s legitimacy but greatly narrowed the range of rhetorical and policy responses available to the bank’s opponents.

To enhance the analytical purchase of rhetorical coercion, I finesse it in two ways. First, similar to Binder and Heupel (2020), I link the (in)effectiveness of rhetorical coercion to institutional legitimacy, or rather, the standards of legitimacy commonly referenced in international organisation (IO) literature. Legitimacy, generally defined as the right to act or govern (Reus-Smit, 2007, 158), is related to rhetorical coercion. It is a medium through which rhetorical coercion may operate. More specifically, standards of legitimacy define the proper ways of exercising authority and determine the extent of appropriateness of political purposes and programmes. In so doing, they allocate ‘different degrees of legitimacy to the actors’ political aspirations, preferences, and behaviours’ and those that ‘possess and pursue preferences in line with ... the standard of legitimacy’ and craft their accounts accordingly are advantaged in rhetorical contestation (Schimmelfennig, 2001, 63). To maximise the effectiveness of rhetorical coercion in the legitimisation of a new IO such as the AIIB, its proponents must provide justifications broadly aligned with IO legitimacy standards. This makes public opposition to its creation exceedingly difficult, if not impossible. As Schimmelfennig (2001, 65) notes, ‘to the extent that the standard of legitimacy is clearly and unambiguously defined as well as internally consistent, it becomes difficult to rhetorically circumvent its practical implications’. This study follows the conceptualisation

of legitimacy as anchored in purpose, procedure and performance (Lenz & Viola, 2017; Yang, 2021), but leaves out performance due to the focus on the contestation before the AIIB's actual operation.

Second, I draw insights from framing to uncover the diverging views embedded in a rhetorical contestation. Rhetorical coercion is not tantamount to rhetorical contestation. In general, a party to a debate advances a political account comprised of multiple arguments. Some are able to coerce, while others are contested. Identifying the multiple perspectives of contending parties helps disaggregate the debate and thereby enables us to gauge the coercive power of particular arguments and accounts. From the vantage point of framing, perspectives are frames that interpret an issue from a particular angle. By selecting and emphasising certain aspects, framing promotes 'a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation' (Entman, 1993, 52). Operationally, a frame can be represented by an interpretative package with three constitutive elements (Van Gorp, 2007, 64): framing devices (manifest elements in a text like keywords, metaphors, exemplars, images), reasoning devices (manifest or latent elements that pertain to the framing functions identified by Entman—define problem, diagnose cause, evaluate causal agent, suggest solution) and a cultural code that acts as a central organising idea of the package.

4 | DATA AND METHOD

To reconstruct the rhetorical contestation over the AIIB and show how the United States was rhetorically coerced, this study relies on data gathered from official sources and news media in China and the United States, covering the time period from October 2013 (when China proposed AIIB) to June 2015 (when founding members signed the bank's Articles of Agreement—a founding document that significantly reduced contestation). For government sources, all publicly available documents (e.g. statements, speeches, press releases, op-eds by officials) referring to the AIIB were included. For media sources, all the texts with a substantial focus on the AIIB were collected.

For China, data were first gathered from the Foreign Ministry. Due to the small number of official texts, articles produced by four state media outlets—*Xinhua News*, *People's Daily*, *China Daily*, *Global Times*—were included. For the United States, data were first collected from the White House, Treasury and State Department. But as discussed earlier, the US government, apart from expressing concern over standards, refrained from publicly criticising the AIIB. As such, official texts alone would not suffice to reveal the multi-pronged rationale underlying the

US position. To fully capture the rationale and the substantive justifications for it, the study included AIIB-focused news articles from three US elite newspapers: the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal*. In total, the corpus counts 508 texts: 36 from Chinese Foreign Ministry, 394 from Chinese state media, 16 from US government bodies and 62 from US quality press.

Data analysis proceeded in three phases. The first phase centred on reconstructing all the frames relating to the AIIB promoted by the United States and China. I performed iteratively a qualitative content analysis in three steps: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Open coding involved parsing and coding texts with a view to gathering all the evaluative excerpts. Axial coding entailed clustering coded excerpts based on framing devices and reasoning devices around thematic categories, for example why China created the AIIB? Will the China-led bank respect high standards? What are the impacts on existing MDBs? Lastly, selective coding required the linking of framing devices and reasoning devices to the central organising idea and drawing out the frame package. To use as an example the view that the AIIB will not meet high standards, the last step of coding entailed articulating a coherent story about why and how the bank may defy common standards. After reconstructing the frames, I categorised them by the aim of framing (legitimation or delegitimation) and the types of legitimacy (purpose and procedural). Lastly, I assessed the coercive power of each frame based on its ability to foreclose contestation.

5 | US-CHINA RHETORICAL CONTESTATION OVER AIIB: A FRAMING PERSPECTIVE

The first part of the empirical analysis, based on a qualitative deep read of the corpus, sketches out the diverging views on the AIIB from the vantage point of framing. The United States and China advocated diametrically opposite interpretations on the bank's purpose and procedural legitimacy. An overview is presented in [Table 1](#).

6 | THE UNITED STATES: DELEGITIMATING AIIB

The United States tried to delegitimize the AIIB by questioning its purpose and procedural standards. It expressed concerns that the China-led bank might ride roughshod over international standards, serve as a conduit for narrow Chinese interests, and pose a threat to institutional incumbents.

TABLE 1 Framing AIIB by the United States and China.

	Legitimacy type	Frame	Meaning: The AIIB is (or will be) ...
United States	Procedural	F1. <i>Sub-standard</i>	<i>An MDB that falls shy of Western standards</i>
	Purpose	F2. <i>Tool</i>	<i>An instrument of Chinese geopolitical manoeuvring and economic statecraft</i>
		F3. <i>Rival</i>	<i>A direct competitor to existing MDBs</i>
China	Procedural	F4. <i>High-quality</i>	<i>A high-quality, well-functioning institution</i>
		F5. <i>Equality</i>	<i>Open, inclusive, and democratic</i>
	Purpose	F6. <i>Complement</i>	<i>Useful in addressing Asia's infrastructure needs and complementary to existing MDBs</i>
		F7. <i>Welcome Change</i>	<i>Able to catalyse much-needed change to the status quo</i>

6.1 | F1. Sub-standard

Officially, the United States stated that it did not oppose the AIIB per se but had concern about the bank's ability to uphold high standards. As said by Nathan Sheets (2015a), then Under-Secretary for International Affairs at US Treasury, when referring to new MDBs such as the AIIB in January 2015, the United States 'stands ready to welcome new institutions into the international development architecture, provided that they share the international community's strong commitment to ... maintaining time-tested, and ever-improving, principles and standards.' This formula of welcoming yet with caveats relating to standards remained the official position of the Obama administration. Such a posture was not baseless. US officials and quality press reasoned that given the AIIB was created and dominated by China, it would line up most favourably with the interests and preferences of its foremost shareholder. And China does not have an exemplary record in respecting international labour, social and environmental standards, and Chinese state lenders and companies are often slammed for 'damaging the environment, promoting corruption and ignoring the concerns of the communities' (Denyer, 2015). It is thus not unreasonable for the United States to hold out and caution US allies and partners against 'putting their imprimatur on an institution that could fall shy of Western standards' (Thomas & Hutzler, 2015).

6.2 | F2. Tool

That the AIIB would become a tool of Chinese geopolitical manoeuvring and economic statecraft did not feature explicitly in US official rhetoric. It was nevertheless widely believed to be a key factor underlying the US response (Economy, 2015; Harris, 2015). The reasoning, as spelt out by US quality press (often by citing policymakers anonymously or policy analysts), behind the *Tool* frame was three-pronged. First, China

established the AIIB not out of altruism but narrow self-interest. Second, China is the bank's largest shareholder with a voting share well above other members, thereby enjoying veto on most critical decisions. Given China's controlling shareholding, it is 'a safe bet that its interests will find a way into the projects the bank finances' (Voeten, 2014). Third, IOs are known to be subject to undue influence of powerful members, as no key initiative can be implemented 'without the support, or at least the acquiescence, of [their] major stakeholders' (Babb, 2009, xv). Taken together, the AIIB is poised to be a bank of China, by China and for China. The logical course of action for the West is to remain out.

6.3 | F3. Rival

Another key concern shaping the US approach to the AIIB pertained to the likelihood of the new bank competing with and undermining existing MDBs, notably the WB, wherein the United States predominates. Akin to the *Tool* frame, US officials made little reference to inter-institutional rivalry in official rhetoric. Still, the concern was often reflected in the conditions attached to the US acceptance of new entrants into the current international economic system: 'each new addition to the architecture should be designed to add value to the system as a whole, and have a clear role alongside of, and complementary to, the existing institutions' (Sheets, 2015a). The case for the AIIB becoming direct competitors to established MDBs unfolded along three lines. First, the primary mandate of the AIIB overlaps with that of the WB and ADB. This creates fears of competition, duplication and fragmentation. Second, the China-led MDB does not predicate lending on policy conditions, a common practice of existing MDBs. Its de-emphasis on conditionality and prioritisation of efficiency risk encouraging a race to the bottom. Third, the AIIB, along with other China-led initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and BRICS New Development Bank, portends China's increasingly sophisticated institutional statecraft. Left unchecked, a burgeoning network of China-led parallel structures could hollow out the US-led world order. The sensible

response for the West is to stay out and urge China to contribute more to existing IFIs.

6.4 | China: Legitimizing AIIB

China promoted frames antithetical to those endorsed by the United States. These frames directed attention to the bank's commitment to high standards, equality in decision-making, complementarity to other MDBs and ailments of global economic system.

6.5 | F4. High-quality

China constantly asserted that the AIIB would build on the experience of established peers and institute quality governance and lending standards. For example, Lou Jiwei, then China's Finance Minister, stated during the signing ceremony of the MoU that the new bank would 'fully respect and draw upon the good practices of existing MDBs and set up high-quality standards and feasible safeguard policies' (*China Daily*, 2014a). That said, before the participation of major Western countries and the publication of the Articles of Agreement, *High-quality* rested almost entirely on statements of reassurance by China, an outlier with a track record of contesting common practices in international development financing.

6.6 | F5. Equality

To mitigate concerns about China dominating and instrumentalising the AIIB, Beijing made prevalent reference to the principles of openness, inclusiveness and equality. As Jin Liqun (then Secretary-General of AIIB Multilateral Interim Secretariat, now AIIB President) said, 'AIIB is China's initiative but it is not China's bank' (*China Daily*, 2014b). Specifically, *Equality* was backed by reference to the bank's inclusive and democratic features and China's commitment to building a real multilateral institution. First, AIIB membership is open to all the countries willing to join, including those perceived as China's rivals whose participation would substantially shrink its shareholding and influence. Second, founding members were able to participate in the institutional design and set the rules of the bank. Third, China made clear that it would be ready to reduce voting share for broad participation, even if it means losing veto. The answer, then, to misgivings over standards and China's dominance is to join the bank and shape it from inside.

6.7 | F6. Complement

China consistently presented the AIIB as a useful complement to established MDBs. This frame was

buttressed mainly by three claims. First, Asia needs enormous infrastructure to turbocharge growth and existing sources of capital fall well short of what is needed, hence the AIIB's added value. Apart from directly bankrolling infrastructure development, the AIIB can crowd in private capital. Second, given that the WB and ADB put more emphasis on poverty alleviation and the AIIB focuses on infrastructure, relations between these institutions are more complementary than rivalrous. Third, previous creation of regional MDBs, such as the ADB, did not undercut the WB but reinforced its centrality. This quote from *People's Daily* (2014) sums up the case: 'given the tremendous infrastructure financing needs in Asia and the different mission and business priorities that AIIB has, the AIIB will play a complementary instead of competitive role with existing MDBs'. As such, fear over intense competition is overblown and the AIIB should be welcomed into the family of MDBs.

6.8 | F7. Welcome change

As a logical corollary of sustained emphasis on complementarity, China regularly pointed to the AIIB's innovation that would introduce and incentivise much-needed changes to the status quo. For example, during the MoU signing ceremony, Chinese President Xi said, 'AIIB itself is an innovation mechanism, and its establishment is of great significance as it contributes to improving global financing governance' (Chinese Foreign Ministry, 2014). From the Chinese perspective, global economic governance is flawed in fundamental ways. In terms of governance, China noted that voting arrangements in major IFIs are anachronistic and fail to reflect changes in global economy. Also, China referenced to a multiplicity of problems with existing MDBs. In according a bigger voice to emerging economies, streamlining decision-making, de-prioritising conditionality and channelling more finance to infrastructure, the AIIB represents a welcome change and may catalyse long overdue reforms.

7 | VARIED COERCIVE POWER OF FRAMES

This section assesses the coercive power—or the lack thereof—of the seven frames identified above. In line with the conceptualisation of coercion as the imposition of constraint on choices, the key criterion for gauging the coercive power of the seven frames is whether they effectively foreclose contestation. While in principle rhetorical coercion can cut both ways, the United States was on the defensive in the rhetorical contestation over the AIIB. This is borne out by the lack of coercive power of the US-endorsed frames. *Sub-standard*

and *Tool* were unable to close off routes for acceptable rebuttal, for one compelling reason: there existed a potentially more appropriate approach than criticising from outside—joining the AIIB and shaping the new bank from inside. That was exactly what China and US allies contended. As for the *Rival* frame, its coercive power was reduced to nil by the consensus on Asia's huge infrastructure needs.

Out of the four frames promoted by China, *High-quality* could not serve the purpose of rhetorical coercion during the time period examined. That this frame was based almost exclusively on rhetorical commitments of China—a country viewed as an outlier in international development—rendered it ineffective in marginalising the *Sub-standard* frame. This was shown by the US effort to make *Sub-standard* a centrepiece in its justification for questioning the AIIB, even after many US allies joined. For example, when remarking on the participation of the UK, Germany, France and Italy in the AIIB on 17 March 2015, then US Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew reiterated the US position, 'our concern has always been ... will [AIIB] adhere to the kinds of high standards that the international financial institutions have developed? Will it protect the rights of workers, the environment, deal with corruption issues appropriately' (US Treasury, 2015).

Likewise, *Equality* was ill-suited for rhetorical coercion, especially when the AIIB was yet to take shape. China made significant concessions on shareholding in response to external development and pressure: It initially planned to contribute as much as 50 per cent of the bank's total capital stock but lowered to approximately 30 per cent following the enthusiasm shown by advanced economies (Sun, 2015, 37). That said, the fact remains: China continues to be the undisputed dominant shareholder and enjoys veto power over the most critical decisions.

In contrast, *Complement* and *Welcome Change* contain some arguments well-suited for rhetorical coercion. Three are highlighted here. The first pertains to Asia's needs for infrastructure. By noting the pressing infrastructure needs and the inability of existing actors to meet those needs, China was able to make a compelling case for establishing an MDB explicitly mandated for bridging this gap. In this light, opposing the AIIB based on the presumption that it will turn out to be low-quality and self-serving, and doing so without providing an alternative, was politically unsustainable.

The second concerns the weaknesses and problems of the institutional status quo. China repeatedly drew attention to the problems of existing MDBs identified in an influential report presented to the WB by a high-profile international commission (Zedillo, 2009). In this regard, a commonly referenced thread was the limited voice of emerging markets and developing countries (EMDCs). Despite notable shifts in global economy in favour of large EMDCs, extant IFIs went

through little change in governance structure and remained dominated by the United States, (Western) Europe and Japan. Efforts to revamp their shareholding led by countries such as China were stalled. The prime example was the blocking by the US Congress of IMF 2010 governance reforms that would moderately increase the quota of China. It is therefore of little surprise that the AIIB was presented by China as born out of grievances about the unfairness in global economic governance. As argued in a *China Daily* (2015) article, the AIIB 'represents the needs of emerging countries which have been failed by the international multilateral institutions that were created and remain frozen in the mid-1940s.' Other problems of established MDBs China invoked include excessive red tapes, onerous policy conditionality, and insufficient attention to infrastructure and growth. These claims found a large receptive audience, not least in the Global South. As a result, contesting the AIIB and urging China to contribute to incumbent IFIs while refusing to reform the problematic status quo became untenable.

The third argument targets specifically the United States, namely its display of inconsistency with regard to the AIIB and China's international role. China argued that the US response to the AIIB reflected broad patterns in its China policy: deep reluctance to accord China a greater international status and reflexive effort to contain it. Before the AIIB, the United States had for years called on China to stop free-riding the US-led international system and become a responsible stakeholder. Also, the United States stated that it would not seek to contain China. As proclaimed by President Obama during a visit to China in 2014, the United States 'welcomes the continuing rise of a China that is peaceful, prosperous and stable and that plays a responsible role in the world. And we don't just welcome it, we support it' (White House, 2014). China thus framed the AIIB as an example of the rising power taking international responsibility and providing needed infrastructure finance. In this light, the US dissuasion campaign flied in the face of its publicly stated expectations of China to be a responsible stakeholder. As a *Xinhua* (2015) text put it, opposing AIIB 'makes Washington more hypocritical when it comes to the "China free rider" allegation ... blam[ing] China for not taking more international obligations. However, when China moves in that direction, as it is doing with the AIIB, the [US] seeks to boycott it'.

8 | CLOSING OFF ROUTES OF ACCEPTABLE REBUTTALS

Before March 2015, the debate on the AIIB can be best described as a polarised rhetorical contestation, with the United States and China promoting diametrically opposite frames on the AIIB. While China was engaging in rhetorical coercion by accentuating the widely

acknowledged distinct value of the AIIB and exposing the inconsistency of the United States, it was unable to convincingly dispel the concerns that the AIIB would defy international standards (and by implication, undercut the institutional status quo) and be appropriated by China for strategic ends. This allowed the United States to continue to justify why it eschewed participation and why allies should do the same. But the participation of the United Kingdom in the AIIB on 12 March 2015, followed by scores of other US allies, significantly changed the contours of the contestation.

Substantively, the primary basis on which the United States built its public opposition—the possibility of the AIIB being *Sub-standard*—was undermined. Upon announcing their intention to become a founding member, US allies pledged that they would play an active role in the negotiations over the AIIB's rules and policies and push the bank to institute standards that befit an MDB. As Germany, France and Italy said in their joint statement, they would be 'keen to work with the AIIB founding members to establish an institution that follows the best standards and practices in terms of governance, safeguards, debt and procurement policies' (Italian Foreign Ministry, 2015). A quality multilateral institution with respectable governance and advanced economies as members also lowered the likelihood of China wielding the AIIB as a *Tool* of influence and the new MDB becoming a *Rival* to institutional incumbents (endorsement by existing IFIs amplified the view that the AIIB is not a *Rival*). In other words, the limited space for principled opposition left by China's rhetorical coercion was completely closed off by the participation of the West.

With more countries joining the AIIB, China started framing external support as an imprimatur of approval, thus heightening the isolation of persistent holdouts such as the United States. As suggested in a Xinhua (2015) commentary titled 'Washington, what are you waiting for',

The joining of Germany, France, Italy as well as Britain ... has opened a decisive crack in the anti-AIIB front forged by America. As more and more Western countries mull over joining the China-led lending body, the US will feel lonelier if it continues to be a holdout.

Consequently, the United States was cornered and compelled to accept a policy stance to which it was averse. Its position on the AIIB shifted from 'grudging disapproval' to 'grudging acceptance' (Harris, 2015, 46). This can be seen by comparing essentially the first official statement on the AIIB of the United States—an op-ed by Nathan Sheets (Under-Secretary for International Affairs at US Treasury) in January 2015 with a remark on the bank made by President Obama in April 2015. In the

op-ed, Sheets (2015a) offered a defence of the standards and practices of existing MDBs and urged new entrants such as the AIIB to work alongside them and comply with their high standards. There was no acknowledgement of Asia's infrastructure financing gap nor appreciation that China/AIIB may play a useful role in narrowing the gap. This changed after March 2015. As President Obama stated on 28 April 2015,

Asia needs infrastructure. There are a lot of countries that have difficulty financing infrastructure, but if they got that infrastructure put in place and developed, they can grow much more rapidly. ... So to the extent that China wants to put capital into development projects around the region, that's a positive. (White House, 2015)

The quote above attests to the grudging concession made by the Obama administration on the purpose of the AIIB. Although US officials continued to contest the bank's procedural standards for some time after March 2015 (White House, 2015; Sheets, 2015b), such contestation was marginal at best and became increasingly unsustainable due to the commitment of allies that joined to ensuring high standards, and later, the publication of multilaterally negotiated Articles of Agreement that locked in the bank's quality governance and lending standards. Simply put, the United States was rhetorically coerced. By mid-2016, it had all but stopped public contestation, conceding that 'today, the AIIB is more likely to meet [high] standards' thanks to the United States' insistence (US Treasury, 2016).

9 | CONCLUSION

This article centres around one singular yet substantively important empirical puzzle: why did the United States fail to delegitimize the AIIB? I argue a crucial factor missing from existing analyses is China's rhetorical coercion.

To show the relevance of this factor, I first reconstruct from the vantage point of framing the US-China debate over the AIIB. This results in the identification of three frames promoted by the United States (*Sub-standard*, *Tool*, *Rival*) and four competing frames by China (*High-quality*, *Equality*, *Complement*, *Welcome Change*), which provided diametrically opposite perspectives on the purpose and procedural legitimacy of the AIIB. I then zoom in on two frames underpinning China's rhetorical coercion: *Complement* and *Welcome Change* and draw therefrom three coercive claims. The first relates to the huge infrastructure investment shortfalls in Asia, hence the incontestable added value of a new MDB explicitly mandated for addressing this problem. The second concerns the deficiency in the existing

system of MDBs and the ability of the AIIB to improve on the status quo. The third coercive claim lays bare the contradictory posture of the United States as manifested in its response to the AIIB, not least between its call for China to assume more international responsibilities and resolve to curb China's ambitions and refuse the rising power a greater international status reflecting its increased weight. The three coercive claims considerably limited the room for the United States to openly and normatively contest the AIIB, confining in effect its opposition to the procedural front. The participation of US allies and their pledges to ensure the AIIB's standards denied the United States the remnant rhetorical material out of which to craft an appropriate rebuttal and left it little choice but to accept the bank.

Seven years into operation, the AIIB has approved 218 projects worth US\$41.3 billion (as of June 2023). Its membership has increased steadily from 57 to 105, including 16 Group of 20 members. From all the indications so far, the world's newest MDB has gained international recognition as a bona fide multilateral institution. It has defied initial concerns over standards by adopting lending safeguards that are aligned with those of existing MDBs (Gabsui, 2019; Lichtenstein, 2019). It has also substantiated claims about its multilateral credentials by instituting quality governance and showing autonomy from China (Zhu, 2019). Furthermore, the bank has mitigated apprehensions over direct competition with other MDBs by working with its putative rivals at the formative stage and engaging in co-financing with them after its establishment. In brief, the political-justificatory account advanced by China has largely been borne out and that of the United States controverted.

Conceptually, the analysis here first and foremost demonstrates the analytical purchase of rhetorical coercion in heightening the 'productive and disciplinary power of discourse' (Krebs & Lobasz, 2007, 450). Equally, it attests to the utility of framing in the analysis of rhetorical contestation and rhetorical coercion. Framing makes it possible to systematically map the accounts of contending actors, pinpoint the key dimensions of a debate, juxtapose the diverging views and the logics by which they are justified and explore the dynamics leading to rhetorical coercion.

Pertaining to the link between rhetorical coercion and institutional legitimacy, this study showcases the relevance of purpose legitimacy for rhetorical coercion at the early stage of institution-building. This is because procedural and performance legitimacy are difficult to establish when an institution is yet to take shape, particularly when it is backed by a country like China. As discussed above, China's rhetorical coercion was buttressed almost exclusively by arguments for the added value of the AIIB, which found a large receptive audience and allowed China to prevail in the rhetorical back-and-forth. A related point is that the effectiveness of rhetorical coercion in the legitimation of

institution-building is partly rooted in legitimacy deficits of the institutional status quo. The case for the AIIB was rendered more compelling by the widely acknowledged problems in the Bretton Woods system and the deep aversion of the US to institutional reforms.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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