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Nationality Backlash

Multinational Corporations in the Shadow of Home-Host State Rivalry

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Abstract

Multinational corporations (MNCs) are experiencing growing and complicated uncertainties globally. Do MNCs face external accusations of misconduct solely based on their own record, or do their countries of origin also play a role? What domestic and external factors lead host-country politicians to blame foreign MNCs? I argue that MNCs' national origins can generate political backlash, prompting host governments to accuse MNCs for where they originate from, or for their home countries' misdeeds. Host-country politicians deploy nationality backlash for two main purposes: to win over electoral gains and to exert geopolitical influence over the home countries. Empirically, I draw on evidence from the 2020 U.S. congressional elections, the bill sponsorship in the 116th Congress, and case studies of major global firms. The findings show how firms are instrumentalized under electoral and geopolitical competition and offer policy guidance for governments and multinational firms navigating politicized markets.

Keywords

nationality backlash – bilateral tensions – electoral pressure – geopolitical competition – multinational corporation – Trade War

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1 Introduction

Home country protection is conventionally believed to be pivotal in assisting multinational corporations (MNCs) when they encounter challenges abroad (Polanco, 2019; Wellhausen, 2015). Home states function as collective goods supporting firms expanding globally, through a combination of legal, economic, diplomatic, and domestic political channels (Wellhausen, 2015, p. 40). Moreover, home governments often provide organizational capabilities for firms to counter risks abroad (Lu et al., 2014). For instance, by signing bilateral investment treaties and agreements, as well as joining investment dispute settlement mechanisms, forward-looking home governments equip private businesses with legal access and tools to safeguard property rights (Lu et al., 2014, p. 48).

However, MNCs are encountering complex uncertainties overseas, where geopolitics plays a key role in getting firms in trouble (Liu et al., 2019; Cuervo-Cazurra et al., 2021; Aisbett et al., 2019; United States Department of Justice, 2020). For instance, the European Union blacklisted nearly 2,000 MNCs from China, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Kyrgyzstan, and India for trading with Russia after its invasion of Ukraine (Nardelli, 2024). Public information, however, reveals little information on if and how the firms have in fact aided the Russian military against Ukraine (Yang & Xijia, 2024). How do we know whether multinational firms face external accusations solely because of their own misconduct, or if their countries of origin also play a role? Further, what domestic and external factors contribute to host country politicians' blaming foreign MNCs?

I argue that MNCs' home nationalities may generate negative repercussions, particularly when there are heightened tensions between the host and the home states (cf. Wellhausen, 2015). On the one hand, cooperative diplomatic relationships often foster the smooth growth of bilateral economic exchange. On the other hand, when home and host countries are in a highly competitive bilateral relationship, MNCs are more likely to face accusations by host governments based on where they originate from, or for their home countries' misdeeds, a phenomenon I term "nationality backlash." Nationality backlash serves two important aims for host country politicians: catering to domestic electoral pressure and pressuring rival governments. Politicians do so to channel domestic nationalist calls, rally support from the public, and exert geopolitical pressure on home countries to foster long-term economic cooperation. When nationality backlash occurs, MNCs face reputation loss through a process of public shaming, a straightforward, swift, and efficient enforcement mechanism in the absence of stronger alternatives (Finnemore & Hollis, 2019; Dannenberg et al., 2023).

It is also important to distinguish the novel concept of nationality backlash from related concepts in the literature of Political Science and Business Management. First, nationality backlash differs from "economic nationalism" in that it targets firms from specific countries with which the home country has bilateral tensions; economic nationalism, on the other hand, centers on the distinction between "us" and "them," emphasizing the contrast between the home country and all other foreign entities (Billig, 2010; Zeng & Li, 2019; Gelter, 2021). Although both concepts view MNCs as passive recipients of host market policy, nationality backlash attributes a company's home origin as the *sole* reason for mistreatment, whereas economic nationalism includes broader explanations like protecting domestic workers and industries. Additionally, nationality backlash pays special attention to the motivation and behavior of *politicians*, as opposed to consumer backlash, which emerges bottom-up from mass hostility toward foreign companies and products (Klein et al., 1998; Kaynak et al., 2000; Balabanis et al., 2001; Shebil et al., 2011).[1] Second, nationality backlash's focus on recipient country politicians also differs from the agencies of sovereign states in "weaponized interdependence." By emphasizing the inter-state nexuses, and the nexuses between states, companies, and supply chains in global networks, weaponized interdependence underscores the unique advantages enjoyed by dominant nations, but such network dominance is not a precondition for nationality backlash to occur. In other words, any host country – regardless of whether it is a powerful global player – can play the card of nationality backlash and de-legitimate foreign companies in host markets (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Drezner et al., 2021; Farrell & Newman, 2023; Chen & Evers, 2023). Finally, nationality backlash shares important commonalities with the "liability of foreignness" (LOF) (Zaheer, 1995; Zaheer & Mosakowski, 1997; Kostova & Zaheer, 1999; Mezias, 2002a; Mezias, 2002b; Eden & Miller, 2004; Denk et al., 2012) and the "liability of origin" (LOR) (Ramachandran & Pant, 2010), as they all describe the disadvantages MNCs may face in overseas investment. However, it also moves beyond what is currently explained by the two concepts. On the one hand, nationality backlash views a firm's home brand as a dynamic factor, and the extent to which it

1 It is also crucial to note that while the consumer backlash literature generally adopts a bottom-up perspective, research on economic nationalism encompasses both elite-led efforts to protect the national economy and domestic jobs (a top-down approach) and mass-level nationalist reactions among the public (a bottom-up approach).

becomes an acute liability depends on the bilateral relationship between the firm's home and host countries. By contrast, both LOF and LOR tend to assume a fixed disadvantage associated with MNCs. On the other hand, as stated in Ramachandran and Pant (2010), LOR is primarily applicable to emerging market multinational firms (Ramachandran & Pant, 2010, p. 4), whereas nationality backlash depicts a broader scenario in which MNCs from both emerging and established markets may suffer disadvantages.

Empirically, I test the proposition that U.S. politicians blame foreign firms to cater to both electoral and geopolitical pressure, drawing on evidence from the 2020 U.S. congressional elections, the 116th congressional bill sponsorship activities, and case studies of TikTok, Dubai Ports World, Huawei, and Ericsson. I argue that politicians are more likely to target firms based on their nationalities when facing high electoral pressure and increased geopolitical demands. Specifically, U.S. politicians blame foreign firms from adversary countries to attract domestic voters. This move is in the hope of appealing to the widespread sentiment that views adversary countries as challengers to U.S. national security (Bonikowski et al., 2021). In addition, such blame would help politicians distance themselves from domestic criticism about subordinating to foreign influences (Urdinez, 2023). What's more, accusations directed at MNCs also serve as coercive tools to force MNCs' home countries to compromise in economic and technological competitions. From a geopolitical perspective, host countries aim to both weaken their rival states and to strengthen importance alliances with other partner states.

This paper contains several theoretical and policy contributions. First, this study not only speaks to the conventional wisdom of how national brands affect global firms' treatments in host markets (e.g. Wellhausen, 2015; Johns & Wellhausen, 2016; Lipsey, 2007; White, 2012; Kim et al., 2019) but also adds new insights on firms as instruments of state power rivalry. For instance, in contrast to Wellhausen (2015), where MNCs co-nationalities serve as a protection umbrella for MNC survival in host countries, I argue that such nationalities may trigger backlash and harm corporate business operations in host countries. By introducing the concept of "nationality backlash" and investigating when and how multinational firms can become a victim of state power rivalry, this paper joins a growing body of literature that pays close attention to corporate behavior in international relations and geopolitical competition (e.g. Kim & Osgood, 2019; Kim & Milner, 2019; Osgood, 2018; Kennard, 2020; Osgood, 2021a; Osgood, 2021b; Perlman, 2023). Second, in line with the growing literature on how public opinion affects foreign economic policies (i.e. Rathbun et al., 2016; Kertzer & Zeitzoff, 2017; Kertzer et al., 2024), this paper demonstrates that domestic pressure is a crucial factor that gives rise to foreign MNCs' various treatments in host countries. What's more, the rhetoric against foreign MNCs is an effective strategy to rally domestic support, fulfilling the realistic desire of political elites to compete in elections. This perspective also enriches our understanding of the interplay between domestic politics and international political economy. Finally, understanding the evolving dynamics among MNCs, home countries, and host states will help both political elites and corporate leaders gain more insight into how to better navigate the complex political and technological landscapes.

2 Theory

2.1 *Multinational Companies' Treatments in Recipient States*

In cross-border investment, a central concern for multinational corporate leaders is the treatment MNCs receive within host countries. The bilateral relationship between MNCs' home and host countries functions as a critical barometer for MNCs' overseas treatments, leading to divergent outcomes. MNCs whose home states have closer ties to focal host states tend to have better performance in overseas markets and face fewer local accusations (Rangan & Drummond, 2004; Huy et al., 2022). Cooperative diplomatic relationships often foster the smooth growth of bilateral economic exchange. For instance, due to the current amicable political relations between Saudi Arabia and China, Chinese companies have surpassed European and American firms in initiating a significant number of intellectual property transfers within the Saudi market (Olcott, 2024), especially considering that intellectual property is deemed as a key source of companies competitive and innovation capacity (Drahos & Braithwaite, 2002, p. 12). In addition, German brands, ranging from high value-added automobiles like Volkswagen, Mercedes-Benz, and BMW automobiles to consumer goods like Braun shavers, Nivea cosmetics, and Grohe faucets, signify "quality assurance," "exquisite craftsmanship," "durability," and "technological advancement" to Chinese consumers (Deutsche Welle, 2004). In earlier periods, frequent trade between two countries largely depended on a conducive bilateral relationship: German consumers welcomed an influx of inexpensive Chinese imports, while Chinese businesses gained access to products and expertise from Germany's advanced manufacturing sector (Ezran & Vaughan, 2022).[2]

2 However, this pattern has recently weakened amid rising economic competition and growing concerns in Germany over "China Shock 2.0." Chinese low-cost industrial products like

However, the home-host country bilateral relationship may not always safeguard transnational businesses; they can generate negative repercussions and bring substantial costs to MNCs. First, the most common form of mistreatment is government expropriation, where host governments coerce an ownership transfer without proper compensation (Jensen et al., 2020; Li, 2009; Wellhausen & Zhu, 2023). Scholars have also explored other ways of indirect expropriation and prejudicial treatment that extracts value without transferring ownership (Pond, 2018; Graham et al., 2018; Johns et al., 2020). Additionally, governments install trade barriers to exert economic pressure and hinder foreign businesses' market entry, development, and sustainability (Gulotty, 2020; Kim, 2018; Kim et al., 2023; Mansfield & Busch, 1995; Ray, 1981). Second, MNCs also suffer from reputation loss through public shaming. Naming and shaming functions as a straightforward, swift, and efficient enforcement mechanism in the absence of stronger alternatives (Finnemore & Hollis, 2019; Terman & Byun, 2021; Tingley & Tomz, 2022; Dannenberg et al., 2023). Firms may also encounter heightened public accusations by host governments amid growing techno-economic clashes (Tung et al., 2023; Luo & Van Assche, 2023). For instance, in the Apple Inc. versus Samsung IP lawsuit (2011–2018), South Korea and Korean companies faced extensive media stigmatization for technological imitation, a consequence of South Korea's remarkable ascent in technological catch-up from a predominantly agricultural economy since the 1980s (Lyan & Frenkel, 2022). In the private domain, publicly blaming foreign firms undermines their reputation, status, trust, and, most fundamentally, their legitimacy – key elements that determine both MNCs' entitlement and their long-term sustainability in the market (Liu et al., 2019; Bitektine, 2011).

What factors account for the hurdles MNCs face in host markets? First, doing business abroad is naturally associated with substantial costs.[3] Scholars use the term "liability of foreignness" to describe the persistent structural and institutional disadvantages for foreign subsidiaries to gain access to new markets and establish local legitimacy (Zaheer, 1995; Zaheer & Mosakowski, 1997; Kostova & Zaheer, 1999; Mezias, 2002a; Mezias, 2002b; Eden & Miller, 2004; Denk et al., 2012). Further, apart from "not being local" in the LOF literature, *national origins* stand out as a crucial factor to account for the challenges MNCs face in host societies (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2000; Ramachandran & Pant,

electric vehicles and electronics have flooded the European Union market, leading to concerns about manufacturing job losses and Germany's trade deficit with China.

3 The "cost of doing business abroad" (CDBA) literature describes the additional disadvantages associated with firms operating in overseas markets, compared to local firms (see Aliber, 1970; Hymer, 1976).

2010). Scholars attribute such disadvantages to the "liability of origin" because of MNCs' "conflict with the regulative, normative or cultural-cognitive elements of the host country institutional environment." (Ramachandran & Pant, 2010, p. 19). Home-state connections expose MNCs to commercial liabilities in host societies (Cuervo-Cazurra et al., 2018; Evers, 2023), which may further exacerbate the investment restrictions, regulatory risks, reputational costs, and public hostility toward foreign firms.

Second, economic nationalism also explains the setbacks MNCs encounter in recipient countries. As an ideological movement, nationalism features the passion to build a unified and sovereign nation (Smith, 1999), seek distinction from other nations, and advocate for a national identity that triumphs other social constructs, such as gender, ethnicity, class, and political affiliation (Bieber, 2018). Within the economic sphere, nationalism underscores state control and autonomy over national economy, in contrast to a pure liberal narrative of globalization (Helleiner, 2002). By virtue of varied tools – including tariffs, investment restrictions, as well as subsidies and preferential policies for firms and sectors deemed as national champions – governments design and implement measures to protect domestic market, production, companies, and workers from foreign competition and penetration (Abdelal, 2001; Fetzer & Schwarz, 2021; Helleiner, 2002; Clift & Woll, 2012; Chaudoin & Mangini, 2025).

As a result, popular backlash toward foreign companies and strong resistance against foreign products may arise (Klein et al., 1998; Riefler & Diamantopoulos, 2007; Antonetti et al., 2019). Consumer boycotts are often triggered by international disputes and bilateral conflicts (Heilmann, 2016; Li & Liu, 2021; Ahn et al., 2022), and in particular, the politically motivated consumer boycotts even place the *nationality* of foreign companies and foreign products in the spotlight (Klein et al., 1998; Kaynak et al., 2000; Balabanis et al., 2001; Shebil et al., 2011). For example, after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, famous American brands like Starbucks, Coca-Cola, Pizza Hut, and Burger King faced severe backlash and mass protests in Middle Eastern and European markets (Silverthorne, 2003), and a statue of Ronald McDonald in Quito, Ecuador, was torched due to anti-U.S. sentiments (Miller, 2003). Additionally, international brands such as Lancome and H&M were exposed to political boycotts by Chinese consumers for openly criticizing Xinjiang's forced labor issue and supporting Tibet's independence (Chan, 2025). By rejecting or punishing external actors identified as "foes," social groups reinforce internal solidarity and further consolidate economic nationalism (Pollins, 1989a). Consequently, such consumer resistance generates substantial material costs and social risks for foreign MNCs, placing expensive and highly visible foreign products in an even more disadvantageous position in host markets (Weiss et al., 2023).

Third, MNCs are also subject to deliberate manipulations by host countries. Governments may harness economic statecraft to advance foreign policy objectives,[4] through both actual and threatened punitive measures like exploiting weaponized interdependence (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Drezner et al., 2021; Farrell & Newman, 2023). Through weaponized interdependence, powerful states exploit structural asymmetries in global networks of informational and financial exchange, employing the "panopticon effect" to gather strategically valuable information or the "chokepoint effect" to deny adversaries access to the network (Farrell & Newman, 2019). For instance, due to its central position, the United States has successfully leveraged the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (also known as "SWIFT"), dollar clearing, and internet infrastructure to gather critical information and coerce competitor states. What's more, recent work shows that weaponized interdependence does not stop at the state level; instead, companies and supply chains become conduits of economic coercion (Chen & Evers, 2023). In this case, governments rewire supply chains and target businesses as weaponized instruments for geopolitical contestation.

2.2 *Conceptualizing Nationality Backlash*

In this paper, I argue that multinational corporations can suffer from *nationality backlash*, a concept that extends existing wisdom of the hurdles firms encounter in cross-border investment. By definition, nationality backlash refers to the punitive actions undertaken by host-country politicians against multinational firms due to perceived or actual misconduct associated with their home country nationalities. This new concept advances our understanding from existing concepts in several important ways.

First, nationality backlash builds upon, but adds new elements to, our current understanding of the liability of foreignness and the liability of origin. Instead of viewing discrimination as a static manifestation of "out-group" bias in both LOF and LOR, I argue that MNCs' overseas challenges arise from a dynamic and evolving process. According to nationality backlash, state-state

4 In defining economic statecraft, Baldwin describes a wide range of state behaviour that "subsume(s) all of the economic means by which foreign policy makers might try to influence other international actors" (see Baldwin, 1985, p. 39). For instance, he categorizes economic statecraft into negative and positive sanctions, arguing that states can both threaten and punish foreign actors through negative sanctions (e.g., embargo, boycott, adding tariffs, blacklist, freezing assets, and expropriation) as well as provide rewards via positive sanctions (e.g., granting most-favored-nation treatment, offering aid and investment, and giving licenses).

interactions serve as crucial barometers for intensifying (or de-escalating) the biases and adverse treatments of multinational firms, which further decreases (or alleviates) corporate legitimacy in host markets. In other words, nationality backlash contends that national origin does not always serve as a severe liability, especially if bilateral tensions are not acute. Additionally, unlike LOR's focus on the internationalization process of emerging market multinational companies (Ramachandran & Pant, 2010, p. 4), nationality backlash captures a broader scope of MNCs regardless of where they originate from.

Further, compared to economic nationalism, nationality backlash shares the common emphasis of MNCs as recipients of passive host country challenges, but it differs in attributing liabilities exclusively to home-country brands. Notably, while economic nationalism unpacks the motivations and response actions of states to protect economic gains within their sovereign borders, both concepts converge in portraying foreign MNCs as passive recipients of unfavorable outcomes. Notwithstanding, a multinational firm's *nationality* does not always play a direct and deterministic role in fueling economic nationalism in host markets, whereas nationality backlash explicitly attributes MNCs' home brands as the source of hurdles. What's more, current studies on nationality-motivated popular backlash tend to adopt a bottom-up perspective, emphasizing the motivations and behavioral patterns of societal groups (Naoi, 2020; Walter, 2021; Steiner & Harms, 2023). Yet, our understanding remains limited regarding whether, and the extent to which, such nationality-based backlash is a top-down process led by calculations from political elites.

Finally, nationality backlash moves beyond the concept of weaponized interdependence and pays particular attention to the agency of host country politicians. On the one hand, weaponized interdependence primarily focuses on the macro-level dynamics of coercion through "state-state" and "state-firm-supply chain" nexuses, highlighting how global interdependence is shaped by the strategic calculations of individual states (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Drezner et al., 2021; Farrell & Newman, 2023; Chen & Evers, 2023). By contrast, nationality backlash examines domestic considerations in recipient countries that shape whether a state chooses cooperative economic policies or to remain defensive against foreign companies. On the other hand, while weaponized interdependence theorizes *structural asymmetries* in global networks, nationality backlash highlights how *host-country politicians* transform firm nationality into a political signal, even absent network dominance.

To sum up, Table 1 presents a detailed comparison between *nationality backlash* and related concepts in both Political Science and Business Management literature.

TABLE 1 Comparison of nationality backlash and relevant concepts

Concept	Actor	Connotation	Role of home nationality	Literature	How nationality backlash (NB) differs
Nationality Backlash	Triad of MNCs, host countries, and home states	Punitive actions undertaken by host-country politicians against multinational firms due to perceived or actual misconduct associated with their home country nationalities	A dynamic barometer for MNC overseas treatments, which can be activated, amplified, or attenuated	Novel concept developed from existing insights	– Same concept
Liability of Foreignness (LOF)	MNCs vis-à-vis host country institutions	Competitive disadvantages of MNCs operating in host countries as an outsider (i.e., not local)	Unimportant	Zaheer (1995), Zaheer and Mosakowski (1997), Kostova and Zaheer (1999), Mezias (2002a, 2002b), Eden and Miller (2004), Denk et al. (2012).	– NB assumes a dynamic process that varies according to home-host state relations, but LOF implies a static out-group bias
Liability of Origin (LOR)	Triad of MNCs, host countries, and home states	Competitive disadvantages of MNCs operating in host countries for where they originate from	Important in shaping regulatory risks and corporate legitimacy in host countries	Ramachandran and Pant (2010), Marano et al. (2017), Fiaschi et al. (2017), Amankwah-Amoah and	– Both emphasize the importance of home origins, but NB views

TABLE 1 Comparison of nationality backlash and relevant concepts (*cont.*)

Concept	Actor	Connotation	Role of home nationality	Literature	How nationality backlash (NB) differs
		(i.e., specific nationality)		Debrah (2017), Cuervo-Cazurra et al. (2018), Tan and Yang (2021), Yu et al. (2024).	origins as a dynamic factor (i.e., not always generate liabilities) – NB has a broader scope of MNCs from both emerging and established markets, whereas LOR is primarily applicable to emerging market multinational companies
Economic Nationalism	Elites and the public in host countries	Ideology and preference for protecting domestic market, production, companies, and workers from foreign competition and penetration	One of the sources of hurdles in host countries	Abdelal (2001), Fetzer and Schwarz (2021), Helleiner (2002), Clift and Woll (2012), Chaudoin and Mangini (2025).	– Both view MNCs as passive recipients of host country challenges – NB attributes MNCs' home nationality as the sole source of hurdles, but

TABLE 1 Comparison of nationality backlash and relevant concepts (*cont.*)

Concept	Actor	Connotation	Role of home nationality	Literature	How nationality backlash (NB) differs
					economic nationalism offers broader accounts like governing national economy and protecting domestic workers
Popular Backlash	Consumers, labors, and civil societies in host countries	Public resistance or rejection of foreign products and companies	One of the sources of hurdles in host countries	Klein et al. (1998), Riefler and Diamantopoulos (2007), Antonetti et al. (2019), Weiss et al. (2023).	– NB assumes a top-down process characterized by elite calculations, whereas popular backlash holds a bottom-up perspective to explain the roots of challenges
Weaponized Interdependence	Sovereign states, companies, and global supply chains	Powerful states explore structural asymmetries in global networks	Unimportant	Farrell and Newman (2019, 2023); Drezner et al. (2021), Chen and Evers (2023).	– NB pays particular attention to the agency of host country politicians,

TABLE 1 Comparison of nationality backlash and relevant concepts (*cont.*)

Concept	Actor	Connotation	Role of home nationality	Literature	How nationality backlash (NB) differs
		and utilize firms and supply chains to gather strategically valuable information or to exert economic coercion to adversaries			while weaponized interdependence focuses on nation states and their "state-state" and "state-firm-supply chain" nexuses – Weaponized interdependence underscores the advantage of network dominance, which is absent in NB

2.3 *Blame Attribution, Domestic Pressure, and Geopolitical Leverage*

When does nationality backlash occur? Building on the discussion in Sections 2.1 and 2.2, I argue that nationality backlash does not arise automatically whenever foreign firms enter a host market. Instead, it intensifies most sharply under conditions of bilateral tensions between the host and the home state. Earlier discussions showed that MNCs may face liabilities of foreignness or origin in any context, and that economic nationalism or consumer boycotts can disadvantage foreign firms more broadly. Yet, what sets nationality backlash apart is its reliance on elite calculations that transform firms' home-country identity into a political signal. In ordinary times, nationality may remain a neutral or even beneficial marker, but when geopolitical rivalry escalates, it becomes an acute liability.

Two mechanisms explain why bilateral tensions heighten the salience of nationality. First, such tensions create fertile ground for popular animosity against firms from adversary states. When interstate rivalry becomes more visible, societal groups often express hostility toward the products, services, or brands of the rival country (Klein et al., 1998; Kaynak et al., 2000; Balabanis et al., 2001; Shebil et al., 2011). This social environment makes it easier for firms to be perceived less as independent economic actors, and more as representatives of their home state. As Pearson, Rithmire, and Tsai (2022) argue, the blurred boundaries between the state and private actors contribute to further backlash, such as intensified investment reviews of firms and attempts to rule them out of strategic sectors.[5]

Second, politicians may blame foreign MNCs for the actions of their home countries, emphasizing that these firms often appear to benefit rival states more than their host country – thereby stoking citizens' concerns about the relative gains from foreign firms to adversaries (Chaudoin & Mangini, 2025). The literature on "trading with the enemy" explores how trade, security competition, and geopolitics are connected. Even under interstate rivalries or active conflicts, countries still retain economic ties, rather than entirely severing economic relations. Instead, governments may strategically politicize economic exchanges when relative gains raise security vulnerabilities or political risks (Liberman, 1996; Mastanduno, 1991). These concerns become particularly salient when geopolitics intensifies domestic political motivations, rendering politicians to attribute blame to foreign rivals for political signaling (Chen & Evers, 2023; Grinberg, 2025). In this way, bilateral tensions magnify the political incentives for elites to reframe firm-level issues through the lens of nationality. Building on this logic, I argue that bilateral tensions create conditions for political elites to frame economic activities through the lens of "nationality," and hence leverage nationality backlash against foreign multinational corporations. Thus, nationality backlash is best understood as a dynamic process, activated when external conflict alters the domestic political payoffs of targeting foreign firms.[6] This reasoning generates the first hypothesis:

5 Notably, while Pearson, Rithmire, and Tsai (2022) highlight how state-firm boundary blurring generates backlash through institutional and regulatory channels, this paper advances a complementary but distinct explanation centered on elite strategic calculations and electoral incentives that politicize firm nationality.

6 In this paper, geopolitical tensions serve as a broad background, and political elites strategically use nationality-based backlash to target foreign firms so that they can gain domestic political returns. Hence, I treat geopolitical tension as a contextual condition that precedes

> Hypothesis 1: *When home and host states face bilateral tensions, foreign MNCs are more likely to encounter pushbacks by host governments for their home countries' misdeeds, compared to non-tension periods.*

The classical "second image reversed" literature underscores how international pressure shapes domestic political outcomes (Gourevitch, 1978). Instead of viewing foreign policy as an exogenous factor shaped by domestic politics and mass preferences, scholars highlight how external conflicts, global competition, or even interdependence shape domestic coalitions, and how international pressure can be translated into policy responses (e.g., Putnam, 1988; Risse-Kappen, 1991). Building on this literature, I argue that bilateral tensions create a permissive environment that political elites further strategically activate. When bilateral tensions are present, host governments' discrimination against firms from rival countries serves two important political aims: catering to domestic demands, and pressuring rival states.

Figure 1 offers an overview of the theoretical framework in this paper. In the face of bilateral tensions between MNCs' home and host states, host country politicians strategically assign blame on certain foreign MNCs for their home countries' misdeeds to win over electoral gains – particularly at the advent of competitive elections – as well as to exert geopolitical influence over the home states as competitors.

The first motivation originates domestically, ranging from addressing domestic protectionist demands, garnering internal support, deflecting criticism, to securing higher future electoral gains. In response to foreign economic threats, workers and labor unions are likely to push for increased protectionist

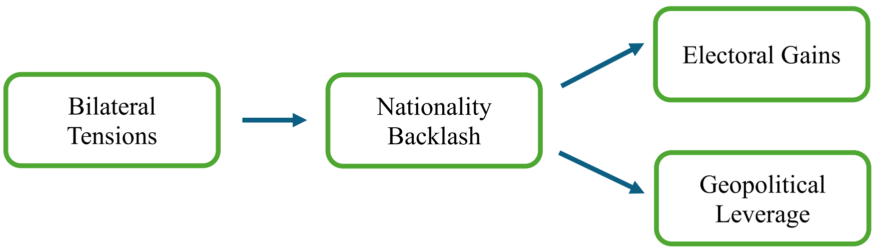

FIGURE 1 Theoretical framework

and constrains elite behavior (an exogenous variable), rather than as an outcome of domestic political maneuvering (an endogenous outcome of elite behavior). However, it is also possible that political elites may seize opportunities for domestic political gain by escalating bilateral frictions into larger-scale geopolitical tensions, but this scenario is beyond the scope of this paper.

measures. Foreign firms that gain market dominance and contribute to local unemployment will then face heightened criticism and censure. Second, business groups in host countries also push for constraints on foreign firms to weaken market competitors for their own gain. For instance, Meta paid Targeted Victory, a Republican consulting firm, to orchestrate a nationwide user campaign that blames TikTok for threatening "American children and society." (Lorenz & Harwell, 2022). Meta also endeavored to collaborate with local politicians and reporters to "take down its biggest competitor." (Lorenz & Harwell, 2022).

The internal root of public pressure is also present in authoritarian regimes. An emerging research strand on authoritarian accountability indicates that the Chinese government is responsive to public sentiment through various means (Kertzer et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2016; Distelhorst & Hou, 2017; Truex, 2016; Meng et al., 2017). Moreover, China has increasingly deemed public opinion as an effective tool in external policies. Beijing tends to channel internal discontent and frustration towards external competitors such as the United States, Japan, and Taiwan, a strategy to garner domestic support and uphold the legitimacy of the ruling party (Friedman, 2005, p. 30). The Chinese government also allocates significant financial and human resources to influence and shape public sentiment on social media; its vigilance stems from recognizing the influential role that domestic sentiments can play in response to international disputes (Weiss & Dafoe, 2019). To sum up, in times of crises and challenges, governments may experience heightened domestic pressure to safeguard its business interests and demonstrate a resolute determination to retaliate, compared to periods of normalcy.

I focus on electoral pressure as the main explanation for politicians' blame attribution to the countries of origins of a multinational firm. Electoral competition serves as one of the core components of studying democracies and is largely manifested when a forthcoming election becomes contested for candidates (Kayser & Lindstädt, 2015). However, what remains less known is how the pressure of electoral competitiveness will be translated into elite attitudes toward and elite assessment of foreign investors.[7] A number of economics and political science studies on trade shocks demonstrate that governments design protectionist policies in accordance with public demands (Autor et al., 2013; Jensen et al., 2017; Steiner & Harms, 2023).

7 Existing literature pays more attention to the attitudes toward foreign investment from the bottom, such as from the general public or trade union members (see, for instance, Zeng & Li, 2019; Raess, 2024).

In line with the literature on blame avoidance and blame shifting (i.e. Schlipphak et al., 2023; Heinkelmann-Wild et al., 2023), I argue that by blaming foreign firms, the host governments will be more likely to attract voter by deflecting public attention from contested policies, and to distancing themselves from domestic criticism. This is particularly salient at campaigns in close elections, where candidates will attempt to win higher electoral gains by catering to domestic calls. The effects of public pressure on politician behavior are also strong when electoral pressure exists. For instance, the former President Biden publicly expressed concerns over the Japanese company Nippon Steel's acquisition of U.S. Steel, aiming to garner support from unionized workers in the pivotal swing state of Pennsylvania ahead of the critical 2024 election (Boak, 2024). Although this landmark transaction was formally completed in June 2025, with the U.S. government oversight through a "golden share," national security considerations had been prominently articulated during political campaigns. Hence, electoral competitions amplify the domestic political salience of international rivalry by incentivizing politicians to translate bilateral tensions into blame attribution toward foreign firms.

> Hypothesis 2: *Prior to a close election, politicians are more likely to blame foreign MNCs for their home countries' misdeeds, compared to periods after an election or when the election is not competitive.*

Second, blaming MNCs from a country with which there are tensions can be an economical way to exert geopolitical leverage. Political scientists have debated if imposing economic tools with high costs, such as sanctions, is effective to coerce adversaries (Pape, 1997; Pape, 1998; Drezner, 2011; Kim et al., 2023, p. 35; Jones, 2015). Rather than resorting to direct military or political confrontation, stigmatizing foreign firms appears to be a convenient and controllable means of coercion, particularly in light of the protectionist sentiment voiced by the public.

Opting for the blaming technique may reveal that the host government does not necessarily expect to completely cut economic collaboration ties with foreign firms in the long run. Scholars have debated whether, and to what extent, economic activities, such as trade and investment, could be affected by bilateral tensions.[8] For example, Davis and Meunier (2011) find that even in the face of deteriorated political relationships, states and firms are still

8 There are rich studies investigating how tensions affect economic activities. See, for instance, the "trade follows the flag" and "commercial peace" literature, such as Pollins, 1989b; Keshk et al., 2004; Bearce & Omori, 2005.

hesitant to change their economic behavior due to sunken costs. In the case of the Turkey-Germany political tensions, Turkey initiated a list of nearly 700 German businesses for financing terrorist groups, but the blacklist was later revoked (Deutsche Welle, 2017). To alleviate tensions and restore "centuries of cooperation," Turkey attributed the accusation levelled against German firms to a "communication problem." (Murphy, 2017). Hence, stigmatizing foreign firms may serve the more ambitious objective of exerting pressure on their home states to compromise, or at the very least, to foster a willingness to engage in negotiations with a conciliatory approach, rather than abandoning any extant economic exchange, or forbidding any foreign firm from that rival state from further market entry.

In addition, public blaming against foreign firms during periods of tension is more of an ostensible way of attack, rather than a wholly destructive approach, which may leave some "buffer zones" for further negotiations, and even collaboration in the long run once bilateral relations improve. Following this logic, I argue that host country politicians strategically employ blaming as a tactic, warning MNCs originating from competitor states. Such a strategy aims to exert pressure on the home state to compromise, while also ensuring that the host state can continue to benefit from the value contributed by foreign MNCs to the local economy. This leads to my final hypothesis:

> Hypothesis 3: *The more blame toward foreign MNCs, the more geopolitical pressure host country politicians impose on the MNCs' home states.*

3 Research Design

To examine Hypothesis 1, I focus on two cases: the controversial bans on TikTok and the Dubai Ports World (DP World) in the United States. Notably, TikTok is the largest non-U.S. social media platform globally, with approximately 1.6 billion monthly active users (Kemp, 2024). Given the absence of other foreign social media platforms with comparable influence in the U.S. market, I use TikTok to illustrate how political tensions generate significant home-country resistance against foreign multinational corporations in the social media industry. In addition, TikTok provides a compelling example of how political tensions shape host country politicians' attitudes and actions toward foreign firms. The extensive media coverage and political discourse surrounding proposed U.S. bans on TikTok offer ample resources to examine the interaction between political tensions and politicians' behavior. Specifically, I evaluate how politicians' attitudes and legislative activities about TikTok vary hugely before and after the upsurge of bilateral conflict between China and the United States. I also show how politicians blame TikTok for the misconduct of the Chinese government and other Chinese firms amid bilateral tensions.

Scholars may view TikTok as a most-likely case: it is a Chinese MNC operating in a period of heightened geopolitical rivalry, with plausible concerns over user privacy and data misuse, and it has a long-term connection with its Beijing-based parent firm, ByteDance. Criticizing TikTok over its nationality thus seems easy to be picked up by U.S. legislators. To push beyond this most-likely case, I also analyze the Dubai Ports World controversy of 2006 as a least-likely case of nationality backlash. DP World, a firm based in the United Arab Emirates, encountered swift bipartisan resistance when it attempted to acquire management rights over several major U.S. ports (Flynn, 2006). Unlike TikTok, the security rationale was far more tenuous in the DP World case: experts, including the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States, broadly agreed that the deal posed minimal tangible risks (Beisecker, 2006). Yet the transaction nonetheless provoked intense opposition, rooted in geopolitical symbolism and the company's foreign identity. By including both cases, I incorporate variation in the credibility of security concerns and test whether nationality backlash arises only when risks appear plausible or also when they are widely viewed as minimal.

Moreover, to test Hypothesis 2, I examine the impact of foreign firm nationality and its subsequent backlash by focusing on the 2020 congressional elections and by analyzing politicians' sponsorship of bills against foreign MNCs in the 116th Congress from 2019 to 2020. A legislator's sponsorship of foreign relations bills reflects the issues they prioritize and the reputation they seek to establish (Schiller, 1995), which influences the decision-making about foreign firms especially during periods of tension. Notably, the 116th Congress saw a surge in legislative endeavors concerning foreign firms, with 49 bills related to foreign MNCs. These bills underscore foreign firms' prominence in the bilateral relationship between the United States and MNCs' host countries. These legislative efforts, aimed at securing U.S. networks and supply chains and limiting foreign firms' global presence (Gallagher, 2022), provide rich data for analyzing how politicians sponsor bills to critique foreign MNCs' nationality and the purposes these critiques serve.

To probe Hypothesis 2, I examine how electoral pressure affects legislators' criticism of foreign firms over their nationalities. Similar to concepts like "pre-electoral competitiveness" (Cronert & Nyman, 2021) and "electoral contestability," (Binzer Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008, p. 312) I define electoral pressure as the uncertainty that political elites face regarding the outcome of the upcoming election. To assess the competitiveness of upcoming elections for each politician, I measure (1) whether the politician has an upcoming election in 2020 (a binary variable), and (2) whether the election is competitive or not (a binary variable). For the first variable, 419 out of 541 legislators facing elections in 2020, creating a dummy variable of election presence in 2020.[9] For the second variable, electoral competitiveness, I measure it by calculating the difference in the vote share between the legislator's main challenger and the incumbent legislator, and compare if such difference is less than 10%. This difference of vote share spans from negative to positive values, where negative values indicate the politician is leading in the election and positive values indicate the politician is falling behind. Thus, the higher the value of the difference, the more competitive the election is perceived to be for the politician.[10] To estimate this difference, I draw on official election results data from Federal Election Commission, the most reliable and reputable source that aggregates validated election data across the United States (Federal Election Comission, 2022). For instance, in the 2020 Senate election in Arizona, the electoral margin between the opposing candidate and the incumbent was 2.4%, indicating a close election and higher electoral pressure for the incumbent. By contrast, in the 2020 Senate election in Louisiana, the electoral margin between the challenger and the incumbent was −40.3%, implying much lower electoral pressure. Finally, setting elections with a margin of 10% or lower as competitive is a common way to categorize elections into competitive and non-competitive ones in the election studies literature (Ballotpedia, n.d.).[11]

Moreover, the dependent variable in Hypothesis 2 is bill sponsorship activities of politicians. After extracting keywords from bills and resolutions in the 116th Congress, I filter all bills with keywords corresponding to foreign MNCs. I thus track all 49 bills and resolutions related to foreign MNCs proposed by legislators during the 116th Congress and then record all their sponsor information. I then match the sponsors with the legislators from 2019 to 2020. During this process, I record whether the Congress member has sponsored or co-sponsored *any* foreign MNC-related bills as a binary variable to measure the activity of Congress members' engagement in anti-foreign MNC legislations.

I include three tiers of control variables across the models. At the legislator level, I account for Congress members' gender, party affiliation, ethnicity, religion, and LGBTQ+ identity. At the precinct level, I include the share of

9 The number of legislators is more than 538 because the database includes some non-voting members of the Congress. They cannot vote on bills in the Congress, but they can sponsor and co-sponsor bills as other voting members do.

10 Although using electoral outcomes in the 2020 Senator Election does not measure the exact pressure politicians faced at the moment of their sponsoring bills, this is the most proximate estimate of the pressure they face during the election.

11 For example, Abramowitz et al. (2006) use 10% as a measure of competitive elections.

residents with a bachelor's degree or higher and the share of White population, since voters' education and ethnicity may shape legislators' foreign policy positions (Rocca & Sanchez, 2008; Gallego, 2010). At the state level, I capture variation in anti-foreign MNC sentiment by including state fixed effects. Different combinations of these controls are applied across models to test the robustness of the estimated effects of the independent variables.

To probe Hypothesis 3, I conduct a *most-similar* case comparison of Huawei and Ericsson. I first focus on the legislative bills and resolutions from the 116th Congress (2019–2020) and compare them to bills concerning Huawei from before the onset of the U.S.-China Trade War. Huawei, a Chinese multinational corporation founded in 1987, specializes in designing, manufacturing, and selling telecommunications network equipment and devices. With a revenue of $138 billion in 2020 and operations in over 170 countries (Gallagher, 2022), Huawei stands as the largest global network equipment maker (Almond, 2019). Despite its success, Huawei has been embroiled in controversy, particularly amid the U.S.-China Trade War. U.S. government officials have raised significant national and economic security concerns about Huawei, pointing to its connections with the Chinese government and military, sanctions violations, unfair trade practices, preferential Chinese policies, and the potential for espionage or sabotage of global networks (Gallagher, 2022).

This comparison underscores Huawei's significant geopolitical value to U.S. politicians during bilateral tensions. As a dominant manufacturer of telecommunications equipment globally, Huawei holds considerable influence in the telecommunications industry for both the United States and China. Much of Huawei's operations are based in China, making the company a strategic leverage point for host countries to exert geopolitical pressure on China. While other foreign firms like TikTok are also economically significant to China, a substantial portion of their operations is outside mainland China, rendering them less effective as geopolitical leverage compared to Huawei. Therefore, focusing on Huawei provides a robust case to test the geopolitical pressure proposition.

Scholars may argue that criticism of Huawei could simply reflect the company's own misconduct – such as sanctions violations, opaque governance, or its well-documented ties to the Chinese Communist Party – rather than broader geopolitical considerations. To address this alternative explanation and to illustrate that nationality-based backlash is driven by geopolitical rivalry, I introduce a *most-similar* case comparison with Ericsson, a leading telecommunications company based in Sweden. Ericsson and Huawei share notable similarities in their industry and market position: both rank as the top three leaders in global 5G technology and have comparable global market shares (Zhang, 2023). Like Huawei, Ericsson has faced with severe allegations in the United States, including bribery, falsification of records, and inadequate internal accounting controls across several countries (Office of Public Affairs, 2023). Yet, despite these clear violations of U.S. law, Ericsson has not attracted the same level of political criticism as Huawei. Although Ericsson and Huawei share many aspects in common – such as corporate misconduct, market shares, global influence, and technological importance – they have encountered different treatments in the United States. Therefore, the comparison of Ericsson and Huawei provide insights of how the distinction between MNCs' home countries, where one is perceived as an adversary and the other as a non-rival state, affect MNC treatments in host markets.

Finally, the rationale for case selection includes not only recent developments, but also geopolitical tensions as a crucial variation. The two contemporary cases concerning China, namely TikTok (ByteDance) and Huawei, occur when both geopolitics and trade conflicts are present between the United States and China, whereas the cases of DP World and Ericsson largely happen at the firm level without the bilateral relations between their home and host countries being escalated into geopolitical tensions. These cases aim to show how global firms may encounter different political and institutional conditions under different home-host country relationships. Admittedly, focusing on a small number of recent cases – particularly those involving China – entails a trade-off: while these cases are substantively important and politically salient, they limit variations across geopolitical contexts and may reduce analytical leverage for broader theory-testing. Notably, while earlier periods such as U.S.-Japan trade conflicts in the 1980s could provide additional variation, they are beyond the scope of this study, as economic tensions during that period did not escalate into sustained bilateral geopolitical competition.

4 Results

4.1 *Political Tensions and Nationality Backlash: the Case of TikTok and Dubai Ports World*

Before the outbreak of the trade tension, the public image of TikTok in the United States was quite neutral, and politicians were not equating TikTok's actions with Chinese government misconduct. For example, TikTok's acquisition of Musical.ly in 2017 and the subsequent merger deal in 2018 did not raise significant concerns. As is shown in Figure 2, there is no public discussion about whether TikTok's merger should be intervened by the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States before 2019. This shows that TikTok's entry into the U.S. market was not seen as a threat to U.S. security at the beginning.

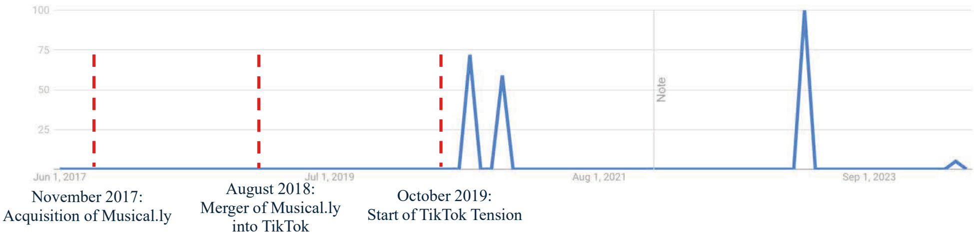

FIGURE 2 Google search trend for "TikTok CFIUS" (June 1, 2017–May 30, 2024)

Further, in November 2018, just before the U.S-China Trade War escalated,[12] TikTok was still viewed as a successful strategy for ByteDance to expand into the U.S. market and attract younger users (Yurieff, 2018). Chinese social media applications have been largely dormant on the international stage, but TikTok was seen as an exception. Apptopia, an intelligence firm that tracks mobile applications, noted in a 2018 report that TikTok was "the first long-term successful social applications in the United States owned and operated by an Asian company" (Blacker, 2018). This perspective underscored TikTok's innovative approach and successful penetration into a foreign market, which was initially welcomed rather than scrutinized.

The neutral depiction was also evident in politicians' attitudes toward TikTok. Prior to the intensification of bilateral tensions, TikTok agreed to pay $5.7 million to settle Federal Trade Commission allegations that it had illegally collected personal information from children (Federal Trade Commission, 2019). This settlement, the largest civil penalty ever obtained by the Commission in a children's data privacy case, was seen as a significant milestone for the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act enforcement program (Chopra & Slaughter, 2019). However, the focus of statements and legislative bills at the time was primarily on technical discussions, not on broader national security concerns. In other words, criticisms remained technical and regulatory, and nationality was not central to the debate. This indicates that before the geopolitical tensions heightened, TikTok's presence and actions were largely seen through a lens of regulatory compliance and business success rather than as a potential national security threat.

12 Although U.S.–China tensions clearly predate 2018, with roots traceable to earlier disputes and the 2016 election, I treat late 2018 as the critical acceleration point in bilateral rivalry. This period saw the escalation of the third phase of the trade war and the re-introduction of tariffs, after rounds of negotiations, to a larger share of exports for both countries.

On the contrary, after bilateral tensions intensified since 2018, such privacy issues are quickly politicized and extend into several criticisms over TikTok about data security, censorship, and assistance for Chinese government. First, TikTok has faced criticism for posing a threat to U.S. citizens' data privacy, with concerns that the company's control over user information could ultimately be accessible by the Chinese government. "(TikTok) is a tool that is ultimately within the control of the Chinese government," Christopher Wray, the director of the FBI, told Congress (Leonhardt, 2024). This narrative suggests that TikTok directly obeys the Chinese government and will hand over American users' data to China, thereby threatening U.S. national security and interests. However, a data research group, Citizen Lab, conducted a study and concluded that compared to other popular social media platforms, TikTok collects similar data to track user behavior (Lin, 2021). Similarly, a report from the Georgia Institute of Technology stated that most other social media and mobile applications do the same thing with TikTok in collection citizen information (Farhat, 2023). This shows that while data privacy was politicized after 2018, the empirical evidence suggests TikTok's practices were not exceptional compared to other global platforms.

What's more, TikTok is accused of participating in the censorship of politically sensitive events in China, such as issues related to Uyghur forced labor camps and the 1989 student protests. In November 2022, FBI Director Christopher Wray told U.S. lawmakers, "The Chinese government could control the recommendation algorithm, which could be used for influence operations." (Tucker, 2022). Such reactions were further highlighted during the testimony of TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew in front of the Congress. For instance, when other politicians were discussing the topic of staff administration inside TikTok, Debbie Lesko, the Republican Representative from Arizona, posed an unrelated question: "Do you agree that the Chinese government has persecuted the Uyghur population?" (Hendrix, 2023). Even though Chew tried to avoid taking a stance on such topics, Congress members still talk about this question for several rounds of discussion, just wanting to present their standing that TikTok could influence content censorship in favor of China. However, apart from some globally controversial content that needs to be reviewed on all platforms, there are few cases of actual censorship specific to TikTok. Evidence from researchers further indicates that TikTok does not engage in the same level of political censorship as Douyin, another version of TikTok just for the Chinese market. This allows a wide range of content on TikTok, including sensitive topics about China, which are often popular and widely shared among TikTok users (Lin, 2021).

Further, politicians are blaming TikTok for the misconduct of Douyin, the Chinese version of TikTok that operates solely in mainland China. The

Washington Post interviewed six former Douyin employees, reporting that Chinese authorities have the final say on whether flagged videos are allowed to be finally posted (Tidy, 2020). Politicians are using this evidence to blame TikTok for the unfair intervention of Chinese government, but this criticism conflates TikTok with Douyin, its Chinese counterpart. TikTok has a set of independent administrative structures and stores data in Singapore, not accessed by Douyin or even ByteDance, TikTok's parent company (Hendrix, 2023). In addition, researchers at Citizen Lab compared TikTok and Douyin, concluding that TikTok does not employ the same political censorship mechanisms as Douyin. TikTok is believed not to implement an obvious post-censorship system (Lin, 2021). Analysts at Georgia Institute of Technology also searched for topics such as "Taiwan independence" or jokes about Chinese leader Xi Jinping on TikTok and concluded that videos on all these topics can easily be found on TikTok (Farhat, 2023). Many are even popular and widely shared. Such findings demonstrate that the two versions operate under different content moderation policies across divergent jurisdictions and are not subject to the same level of government control, which invalidates the politicians' conflation of the two corporations.

In sum, the TikTok case demonstrates how an MNC can become a political target once bilateral tensions escalate, as concerns that were previously regulatory are reframed through the lens of nationality and security. Yet TikTok may also be considered a most-likely case: its Chinese ownership, close ties to its Beijing-based parent company, and the broader U.S.-China rivalry together create conditions where one would expect nationality backlash to emerge. If Hypothesis 1 holds, it should manifest clearly in such a context. To test the logic of my hypothesis more rigorously, it is also necessary to examine a least-likely case – where substantive security risks are minimal, expert consensus is benign, while geopolitical tensions significantly contribute to the backlash of foreign MNCs' nationality. The 2006 controversy over Dubai Ports World provides precisely such a case, allowing for analysis of whether nationality alone can trigger political opposition even in the absence of concrete security threats.

The DP World controversy of 2006 serves as a paradigmatic case of how nationality-based backlash can erupt even in the absence of substantive security risks. DP World, a global port operator based in the UAE, sought to acquire management rights at several major U.S. ports through its purchase of the British company P&O. The transaction had already been rigorously reviewed and approved by the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States, which concluded that port operations would remain under the authority of U.S. agencies such as the Coast Guard and Customs and Border Protection (O'Brien, 2003), and that the Dubai company even agreed to special provisions aimed at ensuring US security (Feldmann, 2006). Numerous security experts emphasized that the commercial nature of terminal management – which involves coordinating logistics rather than controlling security – posed no meaningful threat, a view corroborated by the fact that nearly 80% of U.S. port terminals were already operated by foreign-owned firms, including many from U.S. allies (Flynn, 2006).

Despite the expert consensus and procedural approval, the deal provoked intense bipartisan opposition in Congress, fueled by long-simmering tensions in the U.S.-UAE relationship in the early 2000s. The legacy of the 9/11 attacks profoundly shaped American perceptions of the UAE in the years leading up to the DP World proposal. As documented in the 9/11 Commission Report, two of the hijackers were Emirati nationals (O'Brien, 2003), and the UAE had been used as a financial and logistical hub by al-Qaeda in the planning of the attacks (The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004). Although the UAE had since become a counterterrorism partner, these historical associations created a reservoir of suspicion that political actors readily drew upon. The National Commission's report noted concerns about the potential exploitation of Dubai's financial systems by terrorist networks, reinforcing a narrative of the UAE as a jurisdiction where oversight remained uneven (The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004).

Congressional opponents framed the issue not in terms of operational details but as a symbolic surrender of national sovereignty. Lawmakers from both parties argued that allowing a state-owned company from an Arab country to manage American ports was unacceptable, regardless of the safeguards in place. They invoked the trauma of 9/11 to amplify anxieties around control of critical infrastructure, with Senator Pete King declaring, "this company is coming out of a country that has had a strong Al Qaeda presence. In this post 9/11 world, we cannot consider approving this contract." (Schumer, 2006). This backlash occurred despite repeated assurances from experts that no operational control over security would be transferred. Facing overwhelming political pressure, DP World ultimately divested its U.S. operations to an American entity, illustrating how nationality backlash can override technical assessments of low-risk MNC transactions (Topham, 2022).

The DP World case underscores that nationality backlash can be driven less by demonstrable risks than by geopolitical narratives and identity-based fears. The company's Emirati origins became a lightning rod for broader anxieties about terrorism and Middle Eastern influence, transforming a commercially routine transaction into a security crisis. Unlike cases where legitimate espionage or data-risk concerns exist – such as TikTok – the opposition to DP World was almost entirely divorced from empirical threat analysis. As comments noted, "there's an inherent American fear that their ports are vulnerable and they are made even more so by this deal," which makes it less important whether the fear for nationality is based on facts or not (Feldmann, 2006).

Taken together, the two cases show that foreign MNCs are especially vulnerable to political pushback when home and host states are locked in tense relations. The case of TikTok illustrates how plausible security issues can be politicized and magnified during periods of rivalry, while the case of DP World demonstrates that even in the absence of substantive risks, symbolic associations tied to nationality can provoke intense opposition. Both cases thus support my hypothesis: when bilateral tensions rise, host-country politicians are more likely to frame foreign MNCs as threats and impose pushback based on their home-country identity, rather than on objective evidence of misconduct.

4.2 *Electoral Pressure on Congressional Bills on Foreign MNCs*

I conduct binomial regressions to estimate how competitive elections and the presence of elections affect legislators' anti-foreign MNC bill sponsorship. The results are shown in Tables 2 to 4. Table 2 tests the effect of an upcoming

TABLE 2 Competitive election on bill sponsorship

	Dependent variable:			
	Bill sponsorship activity			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Competitive Election	1.733** (0.730)	2.290** (0.975)	2.738** (1.264)	3.812* (1.970)
Observations	541	541	535	535
Legislator Control	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Precinct Control	No	No	Yes	Yes
State FE	No	No	No	Yes
Log Likelihood	−175.251	−128.202	−126.262	−97.615
Akaike Inf. Crit.	354.501	378.404	378.524	419.229

Note: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01

TABLE 3 Competitive election on bill sponsorship (Ex. no election cases)

	Dependent variable:			
	Bill sponsorship activity			
	(1)	**(2)**	**(3)**	**(4)**
Competitive Election	1.829** (0.734)	2.489** (0.996)	3.055** (1.295)	3.433* (1.970)
Observations	419	419	414	414
Legislator Control	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Precinct Control	No	No	Yes	Yes
State FE	No	No	No	Yes
Log Likelihood	−137.613	−97.966	−96.179	−71.320
Akaike Inf. Crit.	279.227	297.933	298.358	346.641

Note: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01

TABLE 4 Election presence on bill sponsorship

	Dependent variable:			
	Bill sponsorship activity			
	(1)	**(2)**	**(3)**	**(4)**
Election Presence	−0.194 (0.353)	−0.499 (0.406)	−0.493 (0.410)	−0.443 (0.479)
Observations	541	541	535	535
Legislator Control	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Precinct Control	No	No	Yes	Yes
State FE	No	No	No	Yes

TABLE 4 Election presence on bill sponsorship (*cont.*)

	Dependent variable:			
	Bill sponsorship activity			
	(1)	**(2)**	**(3)**	**(4)**
Log Likelihood	−179.852	−132.101	−130.380	−101.734
Akaike Inf. Crit.	363.705	386.202	386.759	427.468

Note: $^{*}p < 0.1$; $^{**}p < 0.05$; $^{***}p < 0.01$

competitive election as the independent variable. Table 3 replicates the analysis but restricts the sample to districts with a 2020 election, thereby eliminating the effect of non-electing cases. Table 4 instead considers the presence of any upcoming election, serving as a robustness check by distinguishing the effect of elections from that of competitive elections. In each table, the first column shows only bivariate regressions, while the second to fourth columns sequentially introduce legislator-level controls, precinct-level controls, and state fixed effects.

Table 2 demonstrates that when facing *competitive* elections, politicians will be more likely to sponsor bills against foreign firms. This effect is statistically significant across all models, regardless of the inclusion of any control variables or fixed effects. Specifically, in column 4, when all controls are incorporated, legislators faced with competitive elections are more than 40 times more likely to sponsor or co-sponsor anti-foreign MNC bills than those without a competitive election.[13] This is a significant rise in the chance of bill proposals related to foreign firms, showing the strong effect of competitive elections in increasing anti-foreign MNC bill activities. Further, even when non-electing cases are excluded, the effect of competitive elections is still significant and consistent across models in Table 3. Coefficients across models are similar to Table 2, and all results remain statistically significant. Table 3 thus indicates the robustness of competitive elections' effect on anti-foreign MNC bill proposals. Finally, in Table 4, the independent variable (whether there is an upcoming election for legislators) does not significantly correlate with

13 In this logistic regression, the coefficient of 3.812 should be interpreted as an odds ratio (i.e., those with competitive elections are e^(3.812) − 1 = 44.24 times more likely to sponsor bills than those without).

Congress members' anti-foreign firm bill sponsorship, regardless of whether control variables are included. The results then show that facing with an election *per se* does not change legislators' bill sponsorship behavior about foreign MNCs, providing evidence that it is the competitive election, not the election itself, that drives legislators' increased bill proposal regarding foreign MNCs. Therefore, quantitative evidence across all three tables lends strong support for Hypothesis 2 that politicians blame MNCs for their home country misdeeds to attract voters prior to close elections.

4.3 *Pressing Huawei for Geopolitical Concerns*

Prior to the Trade War, Huawei was not subject to much criticism in the United States based on its Chinese nationality. The depiction of Huawei in legislative bills before 2017 was relatively neutral or even positive. For instance, the National Defense Authorization Act (S.3254) for the 112th Congress in 2012 mentioned Huawei as a "foreign manufacturer of telecommunications equipment, including advanced wireless technology" that was gaining global market share due to "high quality and low prices." (Levin, 2012). The bill's sponsor, Senator Carl Levin (D-MI), argued that Huawei's growing popularity in the U.S. market was justified by competitive market forces, which ensured that commercial providers of consumer, business, and government systems and services would choose equipment from manufacturers offering high quality and low prices (Levin, 2012).

Further, U.S. Senators did not heavily scrutinize Huawei's geopolitical significance or see sanctions against the company as beneficial for the United States before the Trade War. Although the bill acknowledged that Huawei's competitive position partially resulted from inappropriate government subsidies and other forms of assistance, it also noted that blocking sales from information technology providers over cybersecurity concerns would undermine the United States' commitment to free trade and fair competition (Levin, 2012). Such a stance illustrates that, in the absence of bilateral tensions, blaming foreign firms based on their nationalities was not a typical strategy for U.S. policymakers.

The political landscape changed dramatically with the advent of the Trade War, as U.S. Senators began to blame Huawei for economic disruptions with the backing of the Chinese government. For example, the Fair Trade with China Enforcement Act (S.2) proposed by Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) in 2019, depicted Huawei as being closely linked to the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese government, and the People's Liberation Army. The fact that Huawei's CEO had been a member of the People's Liberation Army intensified concerns among individuals and governments inclined to distrust China's political leadership (Reiff, 2019). Senators argued that these connections heightened the risk of losing unique access to intellectual property in the United States (Rubio, 2019), despite Huawei's repeated assertions that its equipment had never been used for espionage on behalf of the Chinese government (Berman et al., 2023). Such criticism on Huawei became a rallying point for bipartisan consensus in an otherwise polarized political environment. Both Republican and Democratic Senators have found common ground in their stance against Huawei, framing it as a national security issue that transcends party lines. This bipartisan support is evident in the sponsorship of several bills and resolutions, including S.2, by both parties, showcasing a united front in nationality backlash on foreign enterprises during bilateral tensions.

The accusations against Huawei were intended to pressure China into concessions during the Trade War. In S.2 of 2019, Senator Rubio explicitly stated his aim "to create a more balanced economic relationship by safeguarding strategic assets from Chinese influence" and "reducing Chinese involvement in the United States economy" (Rubio, 2019). In 2019, then-President Donald Trump also suggested that Huawei could be part of a broader trade agreement with Beijing (BBC, 2019). Through this pressure, the United States sought to compel China to end the forced transfer of technology from American companies and curb Beijing's ambitions to dominate future technologies (Horowitz, 2019). However, these efforts were not uniformly confrontational; following successful trade negotiations, Trump allowed the resumption of U.S. technology sales to Huawei (Wayne, 2019), further illustrating that Huawei was just a political pawn in the larger geopolitical game influenced by bilateral trade tensions (Culpan, 2019).

In addition, U.S. Senators' criticisms of Huawei served the geopolitical objective of aligning other countries' foreign policy stances with those of the United States. For instance, in S.Res.96 of 2019, Senator James Risch (R-ID) and ten co-sponsors commended the Canadian government for detaining Huawei Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou, the daughter of Huawei's founder Ren Zhengfei, based on a U.S. extradition request (Risch, 2019). This detention prompted significant backlash from China, which responded by detaining two Canadians, former diplomat Michael Kovrig and entrepreneur Michael Spavor, on dubious charges, preparing Huawei for a major legal battle, and applying diplomatic pressure on the Canadian government (Wintour, 2021). In response, S.Res.96 expressed concern over China's actions and supported Canada's call for the immediate release and due process of the detained Canadians (Risch, 2019). This resolution highlighted the Senators' support for the Canadian government and their push for Meng's extradition, countering China's pressure and demonstrating the U.S. effort to exert collective pressure on China with its allies.

U.S. politicians also leverage the Huawei controversy to pressure allied countries into stronger collaborations, even threatening to withhold intelligence sharing to counter China and consolidate foreign alliances. The Five Eyes intelligence alliance, including the United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, has banned or is in the process of banning Huawei (Berman et al., 2023). The United States has been instrumental in persuading European allies to reconsider their use of Huawei equipment in critical infrastructure, including Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, France, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Sweden, and they have restricted Huawei's role in their 5G networks as a result (Berman et al., 2023). The Biden Administration has continued engaging allies and partners in 5G security, providing training and education on 5G security, and sharing strategies for restricting the use of untrusted equipment, including Huawei (Gallagher, 2022). These efforts aim to secure global networks and communications from Chinese interference, using Huawei as a test case for allied countries' compliance and as a hypothetical adversary to consolidate alliances through a perceived threat.

Finally, the legislative discourse in the U.S. Congress has evolved to reflect a broader strategy of technological and economic decoupling from China. This strategy is not merely about Huawei *per se*, but also about reducing dependency on Chinese technology across various sectors. For instance, the Secure and Trusted Communications Networks Act of 2019, aiming to prohibit the use of federal funds to purchase equipment from companies deemed to pose national security threats (including Huawei), highlights a legislative intent to foster a secure and independent technological infrastructure (Pallone, 2020).

While the intensity of these accusations against Huawei is clear, one alternative hypothesis is that the U.S. treatment of Huawei simply reflects the company's own problematic behavior – its alleged links to the Chinese Communist Party, potential security risks, or record of questionable practices. To address this alternative explanation and to illustrate that nationality, rather than corporate misconduct alone, drives political backlash, I introduce a comparison with the most-similar case of Ericsson. Ericsson and Huawei share notable similarities in their industry and market influence: both rank as the top three leaders in global 5G technology and have comparable global market shares (Zhang, 2023). Both firms have faced allegations related to regulatory malpractices in the United States (Michaels, 2019). However, unlike Huawei, Ericsson – a Swedish firm – did not attract the same level of intense political scrutiny in the United States. This difference illustrates how nationality could shape political narratives toward foreign firms.

On the one hand, while Ericsson has violated the United States regulations through paying bribes, falsifying books and records, and failing to implement reasonable internal accounting controls (Office of Public Affairs, 2023), Ericsson's misconduct has not been widely perceived as a threat to U.S. economic interest. Even though these practices took place in countries including China, Vietnam, and Egypt, Ericsson's bribery, false statements, and non-compliance of regulations have generally been treated as legal and ethical issues rather than as potential security threats related to these countries (Michaels, 2019). The U.S. Department of Justice has implemented huge financial penalties against Ericsson, but did not suggest the firm poses a broader national risk when bribing with adversary countries. This reflects the U.S. view that Ericsson's actions are isolated incidents rather than indicative of a security threat.

On the other hand, the U.S. approach to Ericsson highlights a tendency to interpret actions by companies from non-adversary nations as business-level misconduct rather than country-level threats. While Huawei's alleged links to the Communist Party and the People's Liberation Army of China have driven U.S. lawmakers to act against it (Rubio, 2019; Horowitz, 2019), Ericsson's issues have not triggered similar political backlashes. Even when Ericsson has faced accusations related to bribery, false statement, and accounting malpractices, these concerns have not been amplified to the same level as those of Huawei. For instance, the bribes and non-compliance of laws by Ericsson received no discussion in the Congress and had limited media coverage. This indicates a selective political and security response that privileges firms from non-adversary countries over those from adversaries like China.

In all, the legislative activities related to Huawei before and after the U.S.-China Trade War reveals a significant shift in the geopolitical use of foreign firms by U.S. politicians. Prior to the Trade War, Huawei was recognized for its competitive market presence, with little emphasis on its Chinese nationality or potential security threats. The advent of the Trade War, however, marked a turning point, with Huawei becoming a focal point for economic and geopolitical pressure on China. Senators began to depict Huawei as a national security threat due to its alleged ties to the Chinese government, aiming to use this pressure to gain concessions from China in trade negotiations and to align international allies with U.S. foreign policy objectives. Finally, the comparison with Ericsson, a similar leading telecommunications company that received notably different treatment in the United States for its misconduct, further highlights the role of nationality in shaping how host countries respond to potential violations by foreign MNCs.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, I investigate the complex interplay among MNCs, home states, and host countries. The findings illuminate when and how MNCs can be subjective to geopolitical disputes, serving as proxies for the broader state power rivalry. This dynamic is particularly salient during heightened bilateral tensions, where host governments are more likely to blame foreign MNCs for their home country misdeeds. Quantitative and qualitative evidence based on TikTok and Huawei during the U.S.-China Trade War illustrate how political actors leverage public accusations to cater to domestic pressures and exert geopolitical influence.

Regarding the study's scope condition, I focus primarily on the effects of substantial, prolonged bilateral tensions – such as trade wars or extended trade disputes – on foreign firms. Building on existing literature of how sustained bilateral tensions affect firm operations (i.e. Kim et al., 2024), I argue that enduring conflicts amplify nationality backlash for MNCs, affecting their survival in host countries. By contrast, short-term, *ad hoc* commercial clashes do not fall within the main scope of this paper, as they generally lack the intensity and duration necessary to provoke widespread anti-foreign backlash. This distinction is crucial in highlighting how the scale and duration of international conflicts differentially shape the business environment for foreign firms, with my research centered on understanding the far-reaching consequences of prolonged bilateral political tensions.

Further, politicians' blaming tactics are not solely punitive, but also serve some main strategic purposes. Host governments use these public accusations to signal dissatisfaction and to pressurize the home countries of these MNCs into diplomatic or economic concessions. This form of coercion is relatively low-cost compared to more direct confrontations like sanctions or military actions, making it a convenient tool in the arsenal of statecraft. Further, the act of blaming foreign MNCs can also fulfill domestic political objectives by deflecting public criticism and rallying nationalist sentiments, particularly during electoral cycles.

This research aims to shed some light on our understanding of international political economy of MNCs by highlighting how the geopolitical context can influence the treatment of foreign firms. It expands on the concept of "nationality backlash," showing that the origin of an MNC can significantly impact its operations and reputation in host countries during times of political discord. This backlash not only affects the companies' market performance but also their strategic decisions regarding international expansion and investment. Existing research has primarily analyzed how authoritarian governments tend to target foreign MNCs during periods of bilateral tensions (Reilly, 2014; Foley et al., 2018). This paper expands on this literature by suggesting that a host country's regime type may be less central to the backlash MNCs experience. Instead, nationality backlash often arises in response to bilateral tensions, affecting MNCs irrespective of whether they operate within an authoritarian or democratic regime.

Additionally, the findings provide real-world implications for MNCs navigating the global market. While it is true that politicians are concerned about security risks even in the absence of bilateral tensions, the focus on these issues intensifies significantly during periods of heightened geopolitical tensions. Therefore, corporate leaders at global firms need to be acutely aware of the geopolitical landscape and bilateral relationships between their home and host countries. Strategic risk management must include considerations of potential political tensions and the likelihood of becoming a target of public blaming. For policymakers, the research underscores the need for a nuanced approach in foreign economic policy, balancing the immediate political gains from blaming foreign firms against the long-term economic benefits of stable international business relations.

Finally, this research also opens some new avenues for further studies. First, future research could explore how different types of MNCs (e.g., technology versus manufacturing) experience nationality backlash differently, or how these dynamics play out in regions beyond the scope of this study. Examining the long-term effects of such public blaming on MNCs' strategic decisions and bilateral trade relations would provide deeper insights. In addition, future studies may also explore under what institutional, economic, and social conditions governments escalate "trade" tensions into high-level "geopolitical" tensions, and when they choose not to do so. For instance, why did the United States successfully manage trade conflicts with Japan in the 1980s but fail to do so in the recent U.S.-China economic competition? To what extent is geopolitics a precondition for bilateral economic conflicts, or a subsequent escalation resulting from economic tensions? Moreover, what roles do domestic interest groups, such as firms, industry associations, and trade unions, play in shaping policy responses across different levels of global tension? By adopting a longer historical view and adding additional case testing, we can better understand the generalizability of a single event of geopolitical and geoeconomic competition.

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