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Not Friend, Not Foe

Reassessing U.S.-China Great Power
Competition with the Hydrangea Framework

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Executive Summary

The relationship between the United States and China has been in a state of flux for decades, but the tensions and rhetoric of the last few years appears to have left the bilateral relationship tainted and semi-hostile. Although most prevalent in security realm issues such as in the South China Sea, these tensions have spread to all sectors of the U.S.-China relationship under the notion of a renewed great power competition. While now approaching a cliché after being out of mainstream use for decades, the term ‘great power competition’ remains accurately self-descriptive for today’s contest.

What has gone wrong with the current U.S.-China bilateral relationship? Why has the relationship deteriorated and become so competitive in nature? The uncomfortable feelings that come from seeing a cooperative bilateral relationship suddenly deteriorate is fully understandable. These reactions, born from ingrained perceptions, are ultimately rooted in fear, which breeds irrationality. Due to a heavy distrust between China and the United States, individuals perceive the current great power competition relationship in the wrong way. Moreover, the United States and China employ both outdated and mismatched expectations of the other party that further feeds frustrations, distrust and impatience. Each of these seemingly minor factors have compounded to produce the soured U.S.-China relationship of today. Officials from both countries are, at least in part, responsible for unnecessary deterioration.

However, this explanation does not paint the full picture in understanding the change in the U.S.-China bilateral relationship. A full breadth of understanding will not be found in history either. While the current U.S.-China relationship shares features observed in other great power relationships in modern history, it is problematic to analogize the state of the bilateral relationship with historical parallels because this relationship is unprecedented. The current competition contains two themes that have never coexisted within any bilateral relationship in the past: 1) an irrevocable interdependence born from a globalized world order and 2) a genuine balance of power. Attempting to use past historical analogies for this case is inadequate to assess the current U.S.-China relationship and would most likely lead to inefficient conclusions, policy suggestions, and a potential global crisis. Additionally, it is detrimental to reason that the main factor of decline is

ideological or political differences; especially when the two powers are as interconnected as the U.S. and China are at present, post-globalization. History has proven that differing ideological and political systems are not the ultimate reason for the destruction of bilateral relations, but can actually coexist well.

Contrary to popular opinion, this relationship between the United States and China has not gone wrong. Rather, it is how parties are reacting to the shifting balance of power that has resulted in the current tensions, which leads to the notion of a renewed great power competition. Over the next decade, the reality of a renewed great power competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China will continue to take center stage.

This report seeks to deeply explore the evolving dynamics in this unprecedented bilateral relationship by discussing the shifting balances of power within each of the significant realms (security, trade and economics, technology, etc.) related to the development of the U.S.-China relationship. It questions the sufficiency of utilizing the traditional case study approach when assessing a relationship as complicated and interwoven as the U.S.-China relationship under the context of renewed great power competition. Furthermore, the report points out that the insufficiency of case-study policy research itself is a source of misled judgements and disappointed attitudes that contribute directly to the unnecessary deterioration of the vital U.S.-China relationship.

Additionally, this report reevaluates the history and development of the U.S.-China bilateral relationship in the modern context. Contrary to conventional ideas, this paper treats elements of interdependency and elements of competition and cooperation as interactive and inseparable in the bilateral relationship. It summarizes the three major characteristics of the current U.S.-China relationship as 1) global, 2) multifactorial, and 3) complex. Lastly, it aims to present the foundation for a new framework for researchers and policymakers to apply when assessing this unique bilateral relationship with the hope to help develop a newer, more effective approach for the U.S.-China relationship in the future.

In order to explore this fresh, unpublished framework that helps reflect the reality of the current unprecedented U.S.-China relationship this report compares historical record with current policy discussions to discover the consistencies and inconsistencies of policy making and strategy making in the history of the development of the U.S.-China relationship.

The latter part of this report presents this new framework: the Hydrangea Framework. The base premise of the Hydrangea Framework is to conceptualize, debate and apply the three significant characteristics of a great power competition in the new globalized context, such as the current one between the U.S. and China, for the purpose of supporting undisturbed development of the bilateral relationship. Instead of debating “what it should be” based on historical precedence, the report calls for policymakers and policy researchers to be more pragmatic and focus on debating “what it is” in reality of the present, ever-changing context. Upon this shift, the current U.S.-China relationship can be assessed on the various 1) distributions of strategic resources and 2) implementations of strategic processing in

overlapping realms. This report argues that it is more important for policymakers and researchers to build up a comprehensive, macro-level understanding of the unprecedented reality in the current context prior to rushing into specific, micro-level realms of U.S.-China engagement with outdated relational understandings..

Finally, by incorporating the new Hydrangea Framework, this report seeks to explore the merits of a crisis prevention mechanism to help facilitate better communication and understanding of the evolving dynamics between China and the United States. The goal of developing a crisis prevention mechanism is to ensure the stable development of the bilateral relationship even under the context of great power competition in the modern global order.

Note: Throughout the report, there will be supplementary footnotes provided to enhance the understanding of the related discussion. Moreover, readers may find that some of the longer footnotes contain side opinions of the authors in an attempt to challenge the debate further. These comments are provided to serve as a teaser for and potentially foment further discussion.

Note: Although all in support of the report's arguments, the various sections of this report are aimed at different audiences. For instance, the first section of the report may be less useful for policymakers and policy researchers compared to the general public, since the first section is intended to help establish an alternative way of learning history; the alternative way being to not only observe "what history has been" but also perceive "what history has not been." The intent of the second section is to bring to the attention of the reader the comprehensive and relevant information to help facilitate an objective understanding of the shifting dynamics in the current U.S.-China relationship. It is also meant to encourage the greater discussion on the future of the U.S.-China relationship and how it may develop in various circumstances. The authors find such discussion particularly useful in the wake of the 2020 U.S. presidential election since it is the period for reflection and reassessment. Hence, the third section presents the new Hydrangea Framework for policymakers, policy researchers, and the general public to continue searching for a better understanding and management for the current U.S.-China relationship.

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Then...and Now

GREAT POWER COMPETITIONS: THEN...AND NOW

The United States and China are currently in great power competition, with the U.S. and China are currently in great power competition, with the U.S. standing as the leading great power and China as the rising great power. However, to compare the state of the U.S.-China bilateral relations with that of any historical parallels would be problematic because it is unprecedented and contains two themes that have never coexisted in any bilateral relations of such kind in the past: 1) irrevocable interdependency and 2) a genuine balance of power.

Since the Congress of Vienna in 1815, there have been four prior historic periods when the world was in a state of great power competition like the U.S. and China are in today. These four historical bilateral relations each possess one major theme of failure that makes their analogies inadequate to compare with contemporary U.S.-China relations.

Cases of Competitions Between Major Powers in Modern History			
Time Period	Leading Power	Rising Power	What the Rising Power Lacked, What China Possesses Now
1871-1919	United Kingdom	German Empire	German Empire: Economic interdependence
1890-1945	Great Britain	United States	United States: Unique culture value system
1980s	United States	Japan	Japan: Military capabilities
1947-1991	United States	Soviet Union	U.S.S.R.: Far-reaching trade capabilities

Great Britain - The German Empire (1871-1919)

Germany, following the Franco-Prussian War and its unification in 1871, became one of the world's leading military powers. Unlike the United States, Germany actively competed with British colonial interests worldwide and developed a world-class navy in a very short period of time. Great Britain, in the role of the world leader, regarded the German Empire as a force that sought to revise the world order. Germany's strong naval forces were a threat to British communications and security operations between the British Isles and the rest of the world. The two powers eventually fought on opposing sides in the First World War, in which Britain prevailed and continued to possess its global primacy.¹

The relationship between Great Britain and Germany was similar to that of the current U.S.-China relations in two ways: 1) China's rapidly growing global status leads to a growing need for a "world-class" force to protect its overseas interests, just as the U.S. feels threatened by China's rapid development of its military capability, especially its navy; and 2) like Germany, China's growing global status also demands Beijing to seek a greater role in maintaining and potentially revising the current international order, which the U.S. sees as a direct threat to its national interests.

However, the bilateral relations between Great Britain and Germany was dominated by the theme of balance of power; the competition of military superiority and overseas colonies was the major concern of the two countries. Both countries lacked the same level of interdependency that permeates the U.S.-China relationship of today, which inherently makes initiating a direct conflict harder. Despite security concerns, the current U.S. and China bilateral relationship still contains mutual benefits within its economic interdependence. China, in the process of upgrading its manufacturing industry and moving up the production chain, continues to supply the U.S. with manufactured goods while American farmers are China's primary source of soybeans.² The bilateral Phase One Trade Deal signed in January 2020 promised to strengthen these ties as the U.S. exports services, especially financial services, to the Chinese market in exchange for increased imports of American goods.³

Great Britain - The United States (1890-1945)

By the end of the 19th century, the U.S. was already one of the world's largest economies. Despite America's focus on securing its primacy in the Western Hemisphere under the guidance of the Monroe Doctrine, its decision to overthrow Hawaii's monarchy in 1893 and to join World War I in 1917 planted the seeds of America's rise to global leadership. The U.S. was the most productive and fast-growing economy at the time while Great Britain had found a home as the world's superpower and financial center in terms of territory, military might and capital resources.

Notably, after reestablishing diplomatic relations in 1815, these two countries have never found themselves on opposite sides in military hostilities despite sharing space on the world stage.⁴ They instead chose to operate interdependently and in active support. The declining hegemon had to rebuild after two world wars, resulting in a peaceful transition of the global leadership role to the United States.

The U.S.-Great Britain relationship was similar to that of the current U.S.-China relationship in the following three ways: 1) China is a fast-growing economy and so was the U.S.; 2) the U.S. currently has global military superiority like Great Britain possessed during this time; and 3) the U.S. promotes free trade like Great Britain had. However, unlike the U.S.-China relationship of today, this connection was dominated by the theme of interdependency and trust and was also a result of a shared cultural value system. This is a different context from the current U.S.-China relationship which, despite operating under economic interdependence terms, is simultaneously experiencing strategic balances of power in the military and technological domains in the midst of differing culture value systems.

The United States - Japan (1980s)

Despite its defeat by the Allies in World War II, Japan quickly recovered and became the world's second largest economy by the 1960s.⁵ It continued to grow for two decades, soon rivaling the United States' economy from the early 1980s until the economic bubble burst in the early 1990s.⁶ While Japan continued to be the world's second largest economy, it was never again capable of challenging the United States' economic primacy.

Like China today, Japan became the world's second largest economy after rapid, state-led development and challenged U.S. global economic primacy as their trade deficit continued to increase. Similar to how it handled Japan's rise in the 1980s, the U.S. is now engaging in a trade war with China and accusing China of threatening U.S. economic security by creating a huge trade deficit.

However, a fundamental difference between this case and current U.S.-China relations is that Japan in the 1980s was considered a great power given its status as a demilitarized country. The U.S. and Japan have been mutually reliant as major security partners since 1945. This interdependency over security made it impossible for Japan to conflict with the U.S. as China has increasingly done over the last decade. While the risk of going to war was very low during the 1980s, the current military competition between China and the U.S. today is far more unstable due to this vital lack of security cooperation.

The United States - Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (1950-1991)

Over the last decade, many scholars and observers have entertained the notion of a new Cold War between China and the U.S. like the one between the U.S. and the Soviet Union from 1950-1991. Indeed, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. were the two largest military and economic powers during the Cold War period, just like the U.S. and China are today. Similarly, China and the U.S. also have two different political systems like the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. did during the Cold War.

However, both the U.S. and the Soviet Union had officially proclaimed military and ideological hostilities during the Cold War, which China has not done up to this point.⁷ Also, unlike China today, the Soviet Union favored trade with Communist allies from within the "Iron Curtain."⁸ Regardless of political systems, today's China clearly desires trade with countries around the world, including the United States. The interdependency present between China and the U.S. today was lacking in the U.S.-Soviet Union relations of the Cold War. So far, the risk of decoupling and rushing towards an ideological conflict is low.

Within the last two decades, China has successfully and firmly accumulated what each of these previous rising powers (the U.S., German Empire, Japan, and the U.S.S.R.) did not possess: 1) global influence, 2) economic interdependence, 3) need to extend influence, and 4) wide-reaching trade capabilities, respectively. Until political advisors and experts acknowledge that China is a new breed of rising power in great power competition politics, the political roadmap for the next two decades will be outdated and skewed.

Despite minor similarities, none of these four historical major power relationships are comparable

with the current U.S.-China relationship. Unlike past rising powers, China presently does not lack but instead possesses in notable amounts: economic interdependence, a unique culture value system, military capabilities and far-reaching trade capabilities. This is why the current form of the great power competition is unprecedented. Past comparisons alone are now inadequate for policymakers and policy researchers to analyze; a process that is in vital need of reassessment.

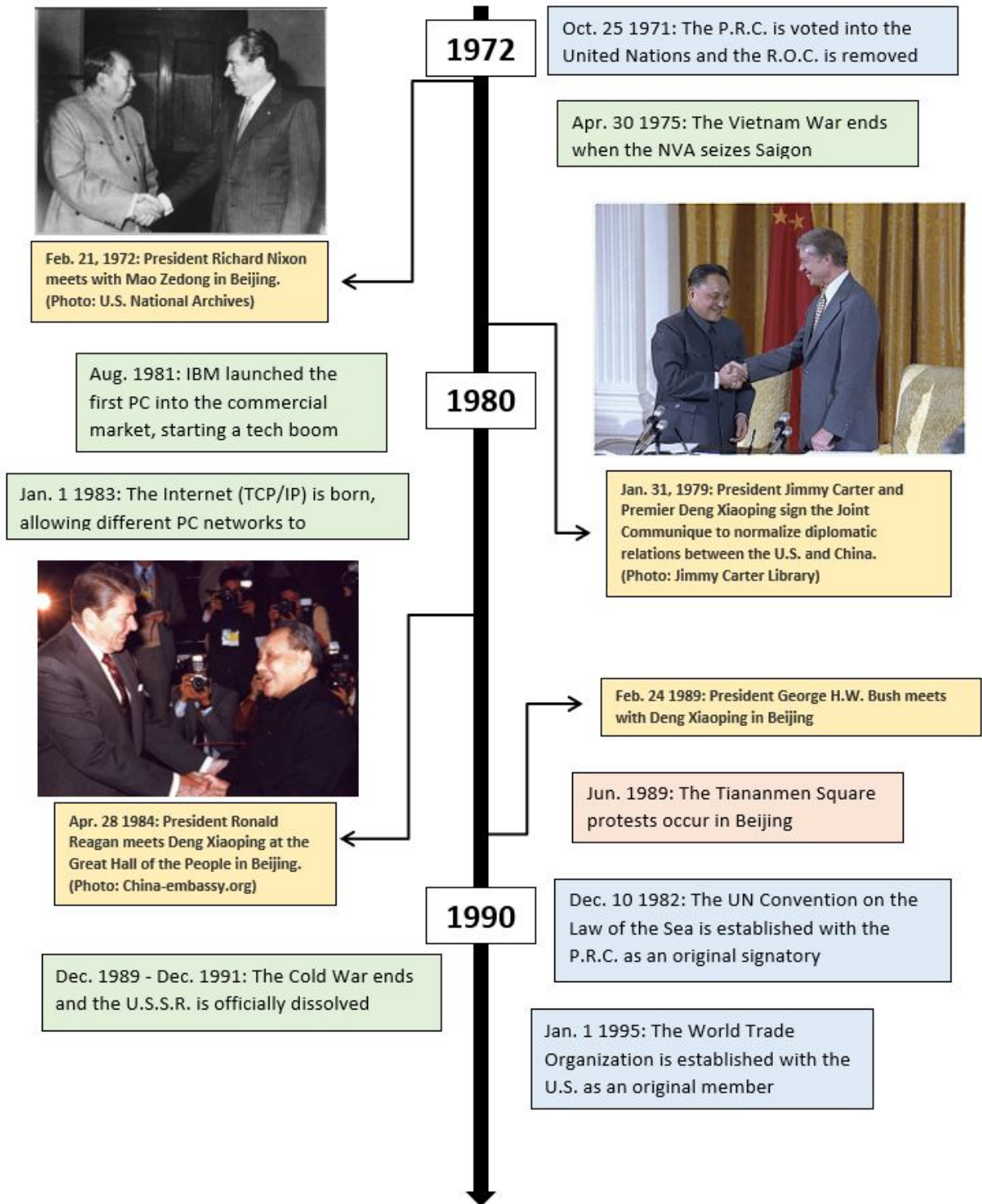
THE EVOLUTION OF U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS: THEN...TO NOW

'The Good Start'... 'Trade Buddies'... 'Mentorship to Partnership'... 'Mutual Partnership'... 'Competitors'

Over the past four decades, there have been certain elements that are consistently present over time in the bilateral relationship. Examples include: 1) trade and economics, 2) security, and 3) international engagement. However, given that we live in a fast-changing world, within each period, events and activities evolve quickly that policymakers of different generations have to adjust to. These events include: the collapse of the Soviet Union, the 2008 international financial crisis, and the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States.

At its root, the current U.S.-China competitive relationship has not fundamentally drifted away from where it formally began in the 1970s. A competition between a rising China and a leading U.S. has naturally deteriorated the once friendly bilateral relationship. That policies and perceptions respond to these evolving dynamics is natural and should be expected. Therefore, the new realities require new sets of policies to address emerging challenges, resources and processes. But in past shifts in U.S.-China relations, these policies were typically harmonious with the previous approaches, which ensured a stable--not necessarily friendly, but intact--and sustainable development of the US-China relationship. What is worrying is that recent U.S.-China engagements are failing to harmonize and sustain this stability, which accelerated the further deterioration of the U.S.-China relationship unnecessarily.

TIMELINE OF U.S.-CHINA ENGAGEMENTS AND MAJOR INFLUENTIAL WORLD EVENTS, 1972-2017





Jan. 1998: China and the United States sign the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement

2000



Jun. 27 1998: President Bill Clinton and President Jiang Zemin at the State Banquet honoring President Clinton's visit to China in the Great Hall of the People, Beijing. (Photo: Barbara Kinney, White House)

Feb. 21 2002: President George W. Bush with President Jiang Zemin in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. (Photo: U.S. Dept of State)

Sep. 11 2001: The September 11 attacks occur in the U.S., sparking the U.S. war against terrorism

2008: The 2008 financial crisis hits, devastating Wall Street, Main Street, and the banking industries with worldwide repercussions

Dec. 11 2001: China officially joins the World Trade Organization

Aug. 2008: The 29th Summer Olympic Games are held in Beijing

2010

May – Oct. 2010: The Shanghai World Expo 2010 is held in Shanghai

May 2013: China becomes a permanent observer on the Arctic Council

Jul. 2010: U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton affirms Washington's interests and neutrality on sovereignty in the South China Sea

Sep. 2013: Xi Jinping announces China's Belt and Road Initiative and related infrastructure projects

Sep. 2012: China claims territorial sea baselines and the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and puts its first aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*, into service

Nov 2013: China's Ministry of Defense announces their East China Sea ADIZ

Oct 2015: The US Navy conducts its first freedom of navigation operations in the disputed waters of the South China Sea

2017

Sep. 3 2016: President Barack Obama and President Xi Jinping hold a diplomatic meeting in Hangzhou China.

Jul. 2016: The UN Tribunal rules against China in the case of *Philippines v China*

Jan. 20 2017: Donald Trump is sworn in as the 45th President of the United States.

The Current State: Now...What Now?

THE DETERIORATION OF THE U.S.-CHINA RELATIONSHIP

The current deterioration of U.S.-China relations is due to a culmination of misplaced hopes, national prioritization, intrusive affronts, and increasingly open hostilities that have foundations from as far back as the 1970s. These actions have been catalyzed by frustrations from misplaced understandings and misjudged expectations. Furthermore, the Trump Administration has made it clear that U.S. foreign policy perception is no longer American exceptionalism but “America First” while China touts “Community with a Shared Future for Mankind.” While it is natural and expected for nations to prioritize and protect their own interests, the way they are propagated can have adverse effects on their relationship with the rest of the world. Among these individualized perceptions, there are specific actions, cases and trends that contributed to the deterioration of the relationship over the last four to five years.

On the topic of global influence and presence, China has moved in on certain places and international circles that the U.S. has backed down in or even removed itself from entirely. For instance, one of Donald Trump’s first policy decisions in January 2017 was to remove the U.S. from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), now known as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).¹ As summarized by Earl Anthony Wayne of the Wilson Center in 2018, this move “gave up leadership of a group of 11 growing and friendly economies in one of the world’s most dynamic economic regions, where China is asserting its economic prowess.”^{[2][9]} This removal may be a contributing factor to why, in a recent 13-nation survey by the Pew Research Center, the majority in Europe named China as the world’s leading economic power instead of the United States.¹⁰

The withdrawal was seen as highly controversial by both domestic and international observers, especially as Beijing was in the height of promoting its Belt and Road Initiative across the world. China was also in the midst of negotiations for the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), both of which would launch Beijing into

1. Following this controversial decision by Trump, observers have referred to the CPTPP as ‘TPP 2.0’ and implied the unprofessionalism of the Trump administration, but very little research has been done to identify the differences between the TPP and CPTPP. Even if the clauses and discourses of both partnerships are similar, this seemingly thoughtless action by President Trump strongly delivered his “America First” ideal at the onset of his presidency. In other words, as capricious as it may seem, Trump reminded U.S. allies, including those in the Pacific, who is the ‘real Don.’

2. Notably, from the beginning of both the TPP and CPTPP, neither of these ambitious regional economic initiatives ever considered inviting China to join despite the fact that American policymakers admit that China has a growing economic influence across the Asia Pacific. This brings to question, “At what point did the U.S. decide to shift from a cooperative to a competitive--and potentially a policy of containment--relationship with China?”

a place of regional economic leadership if negotiations come to completion. These negotiations appear to still be progressing. At the Tenth RCEP Intersessional Ministerial Meeting in late June 2020, the ministers of the 15 East Asian countries in the RCEP reaffirmed their commitment to sign the RCEP Agreement in 2020 in a Joint Statement. This agreement would be the largest free trade agreement ever and is described as a complement to the CPTPP--both agreements of which the United States is not a party to and has no seat of influence on.^{[3][11]}

Conversely, there are certain roles and issues that the United States has refused to detach itself from despite warnings from Beijing. Examples include but are not limited to maintaining freedom of navigation operations in the East and South China Seas, giving input on democracy and human rights cases in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Xinjiang, and speaking out on Beijing's potentially unequal relationships with international organizations like the World Health Organization.

The U.S. still sees itself as the world leader and global peacekeeper; or at least believes other nations to still have this expectation of the U.S. So when China continues with--and has more frequently made--attempts to expand its regional influence and presence in the Asia-Pacific through territorial acquisitions and regionalized agreements, among other activities, American leadership views this culmination of unilateral regional activities as destabilizing and likely detrimental to the autonomy of the region's member states, some of which are formal U.S. allies. U.S. leadership feels the need to act on duty or to live up to expectations from third parties. Some experts debate that the Trump Administration has been pulling the United States away from this role as global peacekeeper in favor of prioritizing national interests.⁴ This was especially evident early in his presidency as Trump repeatedly mentioned the natural path of nations to be self-interested.¹² Yet, as the years continued, Trump's earlier statements and distancing of the U.S. seem contradictory to other policy actions, further increasing frustrations and unpredictability for all parties.

The current tit-for-tat escalation of military buildup and public denouncements over the last four to five years has only catalyzed the deterioration as both governments appear to have dropped a facade of wholly positive relations and win-win possibilities. Contrary to the confident image put forth by most of the Trump administration regarding China, the current U.S. National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien summarized the situation on October 16, 2020 at a public think tank event, saying "China is truly the challenge for the United States for this generation," adding that "[w]e've really had a win-lose relationship where China has won and we've lost...We're having to stand up to them."¹³

Lastly, when gone overlooked, inherent cultural differences between Western and Eastern countries have only contributed to these frustrations and confusions. Deciding factors--especially in war--can vary greatly across different regions and people groups, pushing their counterparts to witness outcomes that seem unfathomable and unexplainable. This is and will continue to be an ever-

3. Note that many of the former TPP or current CPTPP member states are either committed to or interested in participating in the RCEP as well. Interestingly, in the comparison of gains and losses, only the U.S. and China have failed to obtain tangible benefits from other parties. This interesting phenomena is not exclusive to economic cooperation but rather a common phenomena shared across realms, which the latter section of this report will discuss in detail.

4. The role as global peacekeeper and the prioritization of U.S. national interests are not mutually exclusive, as evidenced by past U.S. presidents, such as how the George W. Bush Administration dealt with the War of Terror. A potential reason for them to be treated as mutually exclusive under the Trump Administration is either because the global context no longer permits the U.S. to preserve both or because the Administration failed to prioritize what truly represents U.S. national interests.

present, vital aspect for policy-makers to understand, especially when addressing two seemingly opposite cultures.

For example, to avoid capture in World War II, some Japanese military officers and civilians committed seppuku or another ceremonial honor suicide, and intentional kamikaze plane crashes became infamous.¹⁴ North Vietnamese guerrilla fighters, after fighting opposite the West's modern military machine for almost three decades and losing a reported 1.1 million fighters, pushed the last of the Americans out of Vietnam in 1975 to reclaim their country despite the odds.¹⁵ A popular Arab saying that still fuels warlordism to this day in the Middle East states: "It is better to die with honor than live with humiliation."¹⁶ And after suffering a "Century of Humiliation" at the hands of Western colonialism until the end of World War II, Chinese leadership, with their long memory, vowed to retain complete sovereignty over their lands and interests, which still heavily influences Beijing's policies today.¹⁷

To American leadership untrained in a deep awareness of the East, whose collectivist cultures do not often operate primarily on reason and structure like those of the West, these actions and outcomes can come across as unexpected and even incomprehensible, fomenting frustration and sowing conflict further. The same logic can be used to debate Chinese leadership, although the centralized, unified nature of the Chinese Communist Party at the helm in Beijing makes Chinese policy-making a vastly different affair.

These differences should not be viewed as the fundamental root cause of the deterioration of U.S.-China relations. They are only to be considered as an unavoidable accelerator of contributing to the deterioration. Moreover, such cultural differences will become less significant as younger generations, who are nurtured under a more globalized setting and better equipped with cross-cultural communication experience, participate in the engagement between the U.S. and China.



Source: UnSplash

“NO MORE PARADE”

The frustration on both sides seem genuine and innocent. Both China and the United States see each other as the rule breaker and believe that the bilateral relationship shall return to normal if the other nation lives up to its commitments and promises and, most importantly, stop intervening with their internal affairs. It is to be respected that both nations cherish the ‘good old days’ and still possess the goodwill to return to the bright history of the bilateral history that existed in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Nevertheless, honoring the past is very different from dogmatizing the past or simply being nostalgic. With China’s rise, the order of the “old parade” where the prestigious U.S. carries global burdens leads while the low-profile China bides its time and follows has ended. People from both sides who get frustrated are still fantasizing about this parade and can end up panicking about the unfamiliar new common. It is necessary, however, to first understand the source of their frustration before reminding them “there will be no more parade.”⁵

The mismatch of outdated policy objectives that both Beijing and Washinton have held since normalization of bilateral relations has contributed to half of the frustrations. For the United States, under the Nixon, Ford and Carter Administrations, Washington was devoted to establishing friendly relationships with China in hope of empowering China as a third party to shift the balance of power between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. in favor of the leader of the free world. That policy objective no longer existed after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Some American leaders, especially those who lived during this Cold War period, see China as a replacement for the U.S.S.R., so their rhetoric focuses on the similarities between the U.S.S.R. and China while overlooking the vast differences.

Under the Reagan, H. W. Bush, and Clinton administrations, while the United States still needed to devote resources to conclude and recover from the duel with the U.S.S.R., a rising China provided enormous potential for trade and liberalization. The latter was addressed in substantial amounts by all three presidents, resulting in China joining the World Trade Organization in late 2001, but concerns were less prioritized; especially as the U.S. was winning the Cold War.

“Washington has long sought to manage China’s rise by integrating the country.. into global institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) in the hope that China would fully accept the prevailing international order. But U.S. policymakers have struggled to respond to Beijing’s growing assertiveness.”¹⁸

Today, the trade relationship has mostly matured. A fresh hope to have free trade (the concept of free trade that is understood by American standards) with China ran into roadblocks as the rising China began to assert its own will. What did not seem seriously problematic during these three administrations, such as pirating of intellectual property and favorable treatment to domestic companies, now seems intolerable.

5. The “parade” metaphor is originated from Ford Madox Ford’s novel *Parade’s End* (1924–1928), which portrays an old-fashioned British country gentleman who struggled to adapt to the post-Victorian era society, and everything he believed were shattered by the evolution of society as well as the First World War.

Under the W. Bush Administration, with the United States devoting most of its resources to the War on Terror, China's rapid rise became an issue worth discussing. However, expanding business relations remained the top priority while other issues, such as human rights issues and regional security matters, were still on the margin. At present, not only does the "candid and fair conversation" method commonly applied by W. Bush no longer succeed, China's rapid growth in the security realm has left those that are now frustrated with a sense of being taken advantage of by Beijing during this period of the War on Terror.

Lastly, under the Obama Administration, Washington did extend offers of cooperation with China, and potentially even co-management, in global affairs. However, holistically, Beijing either backed off from these invitations to take on more responsibility or failed to live up to America's expectations of a responsible great global power. Therefore, frustrations developed in persons committed to the Obama Administration's China policy as China continued to rise and become a serious competitor to the U.S. in both the economic and security realms while the U.S. continued to struggle under the Obama Administration to recover from the 2008 economic crisis.

As summarized by James Green:

"Indeed, Chinese leadership goals, aspirations, and capabilities shifted in the years around 2008-2012. They began to focus on strengthening the Party at home and abroad by increasingly relying on surveillance technology, and on moving away from market economics and social liberalization. While Beijing's own choices have largely driven a need for a coordinated global response, the move to a more confrontational U.S. approach often rests in part on a critique of the past four decades of U.S. policy towards the People's Republic of China (PRC), a criticism broken down into three intertwined elements. First, the previous policy of bringing China into international institutions through diplomacy has failed, and the act of "engagement" has somehow ceded U.S. leverage. Second, U.S. leaders and policymakers were ignorant of, or naive about, the true nature of the repressive Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Third, that misunderstanding led to policies that endangered U.S. security, prosperity, and open society—threats which could have been mitigated or avoided with different policies."¹⁹

It is important to note that, as of now, Beijing has not officially acknowledged the notion of a renewed great power competition. As a rising global power, China's rhetoric focuses on sustaining and enhancing its internal growth to realize a "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." This "great rejuvenation" has been the governing philosophy of the Communist Party of China since its introduction by then-President Jiang Zemin at the 16th Party Congress (2002). Specifically, Jiang called for the party to take a firm grip on development to "make the people rich and the country strong."²⁰

President Xi Jinping has only intensified the open pursuit of Chinese great rejuvenation in the last decade. In his report at the 19th Party Congress in 2017, Xi capitalized this phrase to express two goals: 1) by 2035, China's economic and technological strength will increase significantly and China

will become a global leader in innovation and 2) by 2050, China will become a global leader in terms of composite national strength and international influence, with a people's armed forces that have been fully transformed into world-class forces.²¹ This latest interpretation of the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" had made it clear that China seeks to become one of the leading countries on the global stage. This inherently affects the United States' current position in the world and, subsequently, the bilateral relationship between the U.S. and China.

Concurrently, China's attitude to its interaction with the United States also evolved during the 2010s. While visiting Berlin in 2014, Xi Jinping emphasized the idea that the Chinese people "do not make trouble, but have no fear of trouble."²² Following President Xi's example, officials from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Commerce, and National Defense utilize this rhetoric when addressing China's position on controversial events such as the speech on the South China Sea dispute, made by Admiral Sun Jianguo (then-chief of staff of the People's Liberation Army Navy) during the 2016 Shangri-La Dialogue,²³ U.S. freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the Indo-Pacific, and the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and alleged media suppression by the U.S.²⁴

Historically, this attitude is a major shift from Deng Xiaoping's 16-character guiding principle for internal and foreign policies built on the idiom "observe calmly, cope with affairs calmly, hide your capacities and bide your time."²⁵ It also clarifies how China will respond to American policies developed under the notion of a renewed great power competition: in stalwart defense of its national interests and reputation.

Different generations of policymakers who have their historical understandings and believed in these various policies are all improperly trying to apply them to today's relationship. These differing American and Chinese perceptions of their places in the world and of the U.S.-China relationship, partnered with policy-makers often misinterpreting the current and ever-changing realities, have bred frustrations that are difficult to forget and ignore upon interactions. In this regard, the blame for the deterioration of the relationship should be placed on both sides.

THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION POLICIES ON CHINA

Since being elected president in November 2016, Donald Trump and his administration have been simultaneously overtly aggressive and occasionally amicable towards China, leaving observers with a pool of mixed messages about the Trump Administration's overall policy on China. In general Trump's personal statements and his administration's policy decisions heavily suggest that the Trump Administration views China--the Chinese Communist Party in particular--as a dangerous and inevitable competitor on the world stage and has, therefore, shifted American foreign policy activity based on that perception.

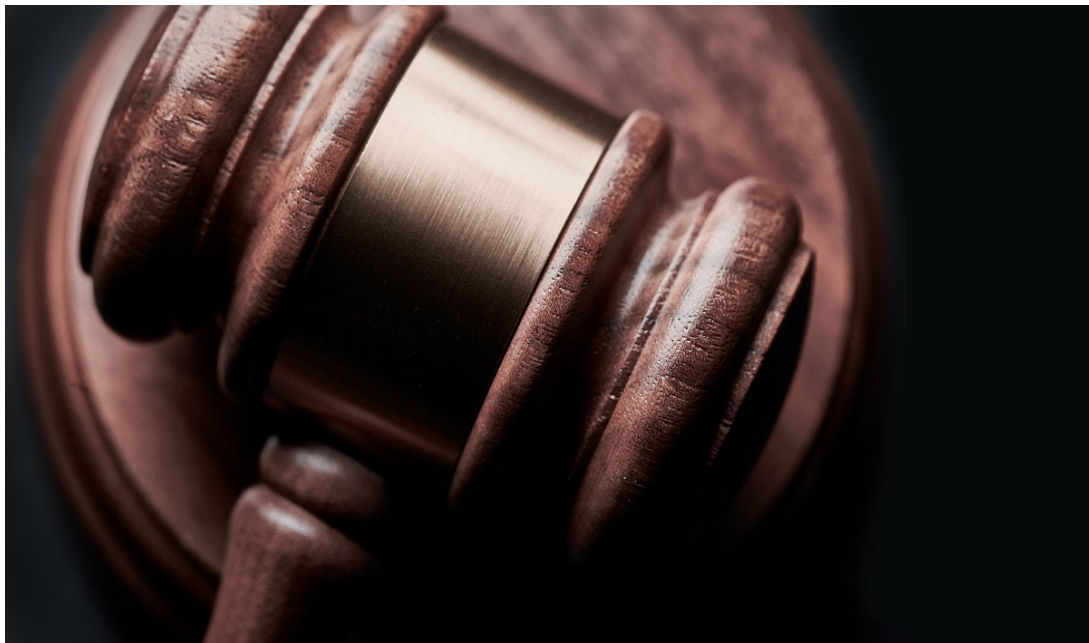
Washington has painted China as a threat prior to Trump's election in 2016, especially regarding the South China Sea and manufacturing, but largely characterized China as a threat to international stability, human rights and peace rather than a nation bent on usurping the United States' position on the world stage. The perception of China as a dangerous adversary was streamlined in the Trump Administration's December 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) and January 2018 National Defense

Strategy, the latter of which “formally reoriented U.S. national security strategy and U.S. defense strategy toward an explicit primary focus on great power competition with China and Russia.”²⁶Notably, the 2015 National Military Strategy did not use the phrase “great power competition” to characterize the United States’ relationship with China. However, it did characterize China as one of the countries that “are attempting to revise key aspects of the international order and are acting in a manner that threatens our [the United States’] national security interests.”²⁷ At that time, the term “great power competition” was primarily related to security-related matters until it was expanded by the Trump Administration to include trade, technology and influence, among other sectors.

The Trump Administration has made it clear that bilateral competition with China and Russia lies not just in the military realm, but also in economics, technology, and influence. Although the 2017 NSS emphasized that “competition does not always mean hostility, nor does it inevitably lead to conflict,” it did acknowledge how the notion of competition had trickled into virtually every sector of the U.S.-China relationship (e.g., economics, technology, society, communications, transportation, politics, humanitarianism).²⁸ Setting aside judgement on U.S. management of its relations with China, the continued notion of a “renewed great power competition” conceived by the Obama Administration is undoubtedly a primary guiding theme of the American approach to China both at present and in forthcoming years, regardless of who wins in the upcoming U.S. presidential election in November 2020.

From “I love China” to “Hold China Accountable”

In recent months, the coronavirus pandemic has laid siege to the world. During this period, which incidentally followed the signing of a bilateral Phase One Trade Deal agreement in January 2020, Trump’s administration has become notoriously outspoken against the Chinese Communist Party both on social media and in formal government reports. It is interesting to note that the Trump



Source: UnSplash

Administration has made it a habit to refer directly to the Chinese Communist Party over the Chinese government. Likewise, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) and President Xi Jinping are also directly related to the CCP, not the Chinese government. On October 16, 2020, National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien stated: "I hope we're not enemies, although I understand that Xi Jinping was telling his troops this morning to prepare for war." Despite the insignificant difference between the CCP and the Chinese government, given China's political system, the Trump Administration's heavy emphasis on the CCP has led to the nuance of an intentional public relation campaign of delegitimizing the governing party of China. This approach was rarely observed in past U.S. administrations.



Source: Hua Chunying/@SpokespersonCHN, tweet, September 27, 2020

In particular, Twitter has become a virtual battleground, with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Chinese spokeswoman Hua Chunying being particularly outspoken. Beijing has responded to Secretary Pompeo's tweets with similar intensity, publicly chastising the U.S. and calling Pompeo "the enemy of world peace"²⁹ and the "common enemy of mankind."³⁰

While the Trump Administration's rhetoric has been increasingly antagonistic towards China--in particular towards the Chinese Communist Party--it is important to note that, until very recently, President Trump maintained that he and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping had a great relationship and "would always be friends," citing diplomatic visits and congratulations for various achievements. When asked about Xi in an October 2017 interview with FOX Business, President Trump said "I happen to think he's a very good person. Now with that being said, he represents China, I represent the USA, so, you know, there's going to always be conflict. But we have a very good relationship," emphasizing again that they "have a very good relationship and that's a positive thing."³¹

This dual-sided rhetoric towards President Xi and the CCP was also present throughout the notorious 18-month long U.S.-China Trade War of 2018 and 2019. A recent report suggests that the China ‘hawks’ in Trump’s cabinet “have been itching to confront a China they view as the greatest threat to the U.S.” since they were held back by Trump’s prioritization of the trade deal, among other related factors.³² At the 2020 World Economic Forum in Switzerland--a week after the Phase One trade deal was signed in Washington, D.C. on January 15, 2020--President Trump echoed, “[h]e’s for China, I’m for the US, but other than that we love each other,” adding that “[the United States’] relationship with China has probably never been better. We went through a very rough patch, but it has never, ever been better.”³³ It should be noted that this statement was made less than a month before the Trump-claimed “Kung Flu” began spreading in earnest past its origin point in Wuhan, China and devastating the world.³⁴

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly cast shadows on this Trump-Xi relationship. At the onset of the pandemic, he wavered between touting this positive relationship and laying blame at the feet of the Chinese government. At a coronavirus press briefing on March 20, 2020, President Trump stated “I have a very good relationship with China and with President Xi. I have great respect for President Xi. I consider him to be a friend of mine...I know President Xi. He loves China. He respects the United States and I have to say I respect China greatly and I respect President Xi.”³⁵

Simultaneously, at that same press briefing and many others of its kind, Trump and his staff reminded observers that the virus originated in China and criticized the CCP for its lack of transparency and slow reaction time to alerting the world of what became a pandemic, threatening new tariffs along the way.³⁶ Chinese officials countered this with “increasingly nationalistic” boasts of their virus management system, joining Washington in stoking tensions tit-for-tat “as each side tries to outdo the other in shifting blame” for its handling of COVID-19 and hindering any cooperative efforts in countering the pandemic.³⁷ For instance, in May, China’s CCTV news thoroughly described Trump as “standing on the opposite side of world unity” regarding the pandemic.³⁸ In an interview on August 11, 2020, Trump notably began phrasing the relationship in the past tense: “I had a great relationship with President Xi...I certainly feel differently. I had a very, very good relationship, and I haven’t spoken to him in a long time.”³⁹

This shift in perceptions may bode poorly for the future of U.S.-China diplomatic relations or blow over once the pandemic officially ends and it becomes mutually beneficial--likely economically--to reestablish amicable relations. Perhaps this sudden change from positive rhetoric is part of a carefully crafted strategy to decrease international trust in Chinese governance or a tactic to divert domestic pressure of the mishandling of the coronavirus in the United States.⁴⁰ It is too soon to tell any significant ramifications of this change.

On a personal front, Trump’s occasional tough view on China is not newly developed. In his 2011 book *Time to Get Tough*, he directly called out China as an “enemy”:

“What name would you prefer me to use for the people who are hell bent on bankrupting our nation, stealing our jobs, who spy on us to steal our technology, who are undermining

our currency, and who are ruining our way of life? To my mind, that's an enemy. If we're going to make America number one again, we've got to have a president who knows how to get tough with China, how to out-negotiate the Chinese, and how to keep them from screwing us at every turn.”⁴¹

In another of his books published more than a decade earlier, *The America We Deserve* (2000), he stated:

“Our biggest long-term challenge will be China. The Chinese people still have few political rights to speak of. Chinese government leaders, though they concede little, desperately want us to invest in their country. Though we have the upper hand, we're way too eager to please. We see them as a potential market and we curry favor with them at the expense of our national interests. Our China policy under Presidents Clinton and Bush has been aimed at changing the Chinese regime by incentives both economic and political. The intention has been good, but it's clear that the Chinese have been getting far too easy a ride.”⁴²

Setting aside any veracity, dating, or lack thereof of the content of these books, these are published statements made by the now-President regarding the U.S.-China relationship. Based on Trump's overall tough stance towards China throughout his presidency, it seems that he still holds these two perceptions to be true today; as if China is a dangerous, single-minded competitor ready to strike against a vulnerable America. Perhaps Trump is applying the old adage “keep your friends close, and your enemies closer” when addressing his friendship with Xi in a positive light.

Each of these perceptions and statements have permeated the U.S.-China relationship over the last four years, fanning angry flames and clouding up chances for understanding and compromise. It is difficult to judge the efficacy of such severe changes in policy within such a short time period. These tactics and strategies may prove useful and some would argue that the signing of the Phase One trade deal in January 2020 is evidence of the Trump Administration's successful China policy in action. Still, it is evident that outwardly treating China as an enemy hinders any semblance of goodwill and, therefore, chances for mutual communication in this unprecedented bilateral relationship yet to be addressed.

TRUMP ADMINISTRATION POLICIES ON TRADITIONAL ISSUES

The Trump Administration has repeatedly proven its willingness to break from past approaches to foreign policy and diplomatic affairs, having altered or changed many major U.S. policies in the international realm and moving the U.S. perception, and consequently the U.S. reputation, far from where it was in previous decades. Holistically, when it comes to China policy, these changes tend to involve enhanced use of force and taking bold actions through executive orders, formal statements

from various federal departments, and congressional actions.

The tactics that the Trump administration has been using are not, for the most part, novel. It is the rapid rate of applying these tactics and the open intensity used alongside them that sets the Trump administration policy on China--and on much of the rest of the world--apart from his predecessors. Trump's decision-making often appears to hinge on whether he believes a foreign relationship, agreement, deal, etc. is unfavorable or taking advantage of the United States. If his evaluation comes back positive, his administration then takes steps to distance the U.S. from that disadvantageous situation, many examples of which (e.g., removing support for the World Health Organization) directly involve China or cite Beijing as the reason for the change of terms.

Specifically, Trump Administration policies have addressed old issues with China mostly in regards to 1) trade and economics, 2) democracy building and human rights, 3) traditional security and espionage, and 4) global influence.⁶

Trade and Economics

According to analysts, Chinese currency manipulation started after its admission into the World Trade Organization in 2001 and peaked as a salient issue in the late 2000s. In 2019, the Trump Administration officially labeled China a currency manipulator. Trump had threatened to take this step for years, but the effects of this label--or any other action meant to deter China from manipulating its currency and disturbing the ideals of a free market system--have yet to be seen and may actually prove inconsequential. Denouncing China's manipulations may buy the U.S. some popularity points on the world stage but, as aptly summarized by Laurence Howard of the Emory International Law Review, "it appears that there is no solution to the problem of Chinese currency manipulation. Getting a country to stop manipulating its currency is like getting a country to stop polluting."⁴³



President Donald Trump, right, and Chinese Vice Premier Liu He, left, shake hands after signing a trade agreement between the U.S. and China during a ceremony in the East Room of the White House in Washington on January 15, 2020.

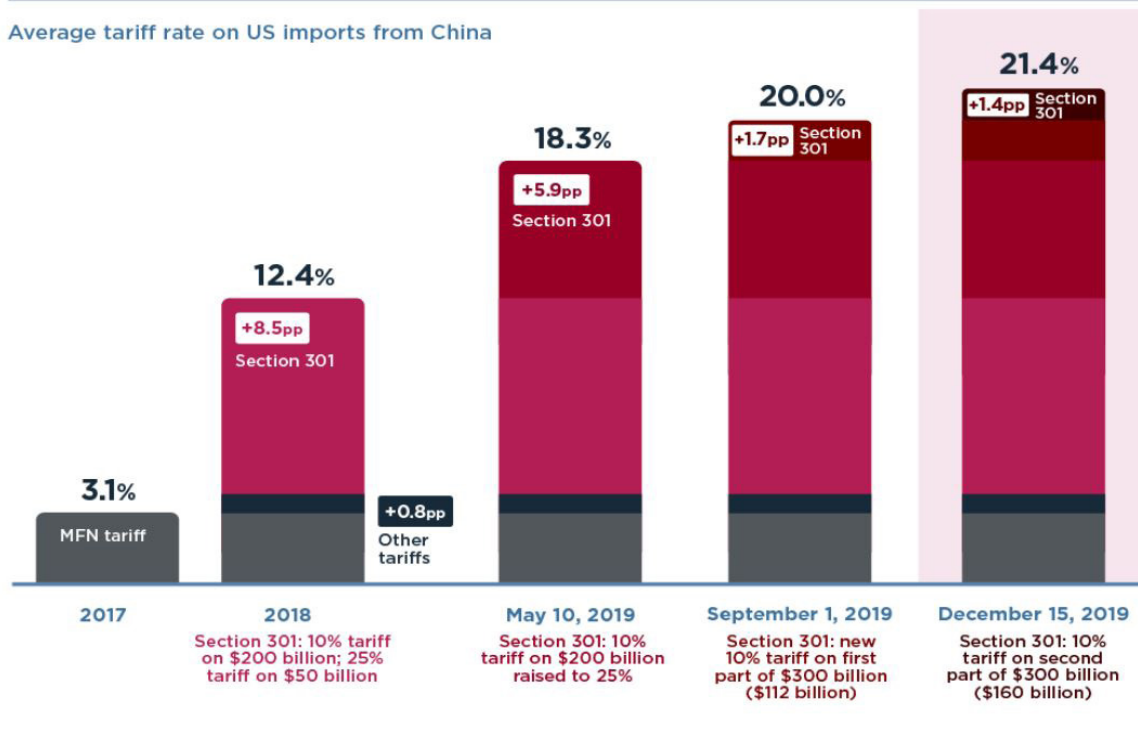
Credit: Official White House Photo by Shealah Craighead

6. Note: The following overview of Trump administration policies is not meant to be an exhaustive list of actions and inactions but to identify and discuss the major trends of policy action in the US-China relationship across the past four years and how they may differ from those of previous administrations.

Tariffs have become Trump’s weapon of choice against China over trade issues. Aimed at retaliating against unfair trade practices and protecting domestic producers, the threat of tariffs and sanctions is a historically popular tool in the foreign policy handbook and has become a standard talking point in the Trump administration’s China policy. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, “President Donald J. Trump has wielded tariffs more than any recent president, including against China and U.S. allies such as the European Union.”⁴⁴ Notably, during the course of its negotiations for entry to the WTO, Beijing had agreed that its trading partners could resort to a “China product-specific” safeguard.

Trump’s plan will push average tariffs on China above 21 percent by December 15

Average tariff rate on US imports from China



pp = percentage points; MFN = most favored nation

Note: Updated on August 13, 2019. Other tariffs include steel (+0.6pp), solar (+0.2pp), aluminum (+<0.1pp), and washing machines (+<0.1pp). Trade-weighted average tariffs computed from product-level tariff and trade data, weighted by China’s exports to the world in 2017.

The Trump Administration is not the first to place tariffs on Chinese goods, though. For example, in 2009 the Obama Administration placed tariffs on imports of automobile tires largely in retaliating for currency manipulation.⁴⁵ President George W. Bush did impose a controversial tariff on steel imports in 2002--including Chinese steel--but “resisted entreaties to come down harder on China” despite the existence of a “China product-specific” safeguard added as a condition of China’s entry into the WTO.⁴⁶ President Trump is not taking the so-called “sluggish” approach to trade policy with China that the Bush administration employed in the early-2000s.

To date, this Administration has placed tariffs on goods such as solar panels, washing machines, steel and aluminum imports and, on March 22, 2018, in response to Chinese theft of U.S. intellectual

property, \$50 billion worth of Chinese goods.⁴⁷ In response, the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China announced plans to implement its own tariffs on 128 U.S. products, which were enacted eleven days later.⁴⁸ The following day, the U.S. Trade Representative's office published a list of 1,300+ Chinese goods to impose levies on.⁴⁹ These three actions were the beginning of the tit-for-tat trade war that would continue for 18 months.⁵⁰

In addition to currency manipulation and tariff issues, the Administration has also been encouraging American companies to move their factories back to the U.S. to boost the domestic job market, protect their intellectual and physical assets, and bolster overall American pride; an encouragement that Trump's predecessors largely left in the hands of free market laws. There is sparse public mention on the monetary debt that the U.S. owes China--an amount that is at its lowest point since 2010 but still exceeds \$1 trillion.⁵¹

Democracy Building and Human Rights

The Trump Administration, in conjunction with the U.S. Congress, has taken an unapologetically hard line against Chinese human rights and democracy issues in recent years, launching verbal condemnations, publishing critical reports, and rescinding economic benefits granted to related regions like Hong Kong. This is not to discount the work done by former administrations or ascertain the efficacy of these actions but to emphasize a major shift in foreign policy actions on this subject. Any past 'inaction' by former U.S. presidents may simply be a factor of timing, as the last half decade has proven to be more exposing of China's activities than ever before, garnering more public attention and a drive to act. Were current circumstances to have existed in the past--such as information leaks on domestic Chinese affairs and globally-publicized, record-breaking democratic protests--previous administrations and congressional sessions may have taken similar steps that the Trump Administration is taking now. Or they may have not, still.

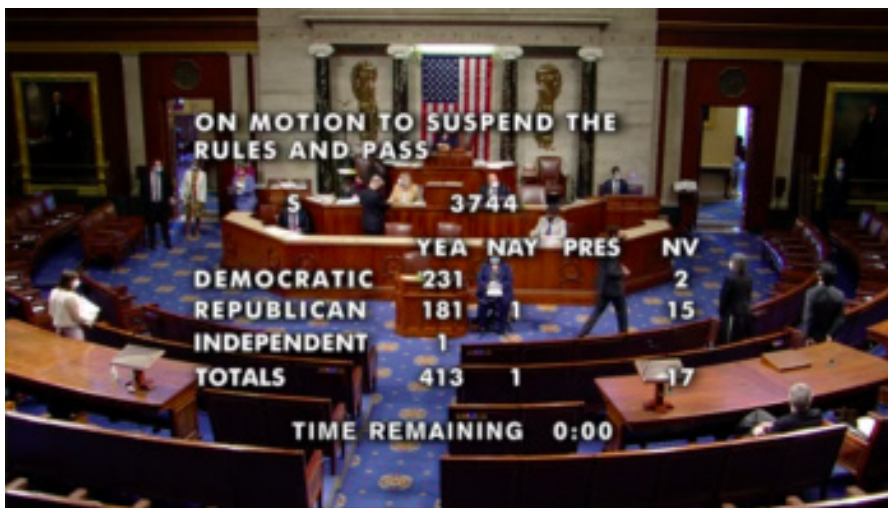
An overarching complaint against Beijing that has existed for decades is over its lack of transparency, especially in regards to potential human rights violations accused by the West. This is not a new problem and one that this administration has not been successful in circumventing. Be it in regards to coronavirus research or the realities of what is occurring in Xinjiang, Beijing, seeing these accusations an interventions on internal affairs, appears no more willing to open its channels on the subjects of Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Taiwan than it was in the past, despite what either Washington or Beijing may claim otherwise. Beijing may even be keeping domestic affairs more secret than ever as tensions and poor opinions grow. What the public does know of any major 'incriminating' details on Chinese domestic affairs largely comes from information leaks that cannot be verified due to Beijing's unwillingness to exchange. For example, The Xinjiang Papers were leaked in November 2019 to The New York Times included 400 alleged Chinese government documents on occurrences in the Xinjiang region. More recently, there is the case of Chinese social media reports in December 2019 regarding Dr. Li Wenliang's warnings of a potential viral outbreak in Wuhan--an outbreak that eventually grew into the coronavirus pandemic--and subsequent passing.⁵²

--Suppression of Minorities in Xinjiang--

For whatever reason or incentive, the Trump administration has taken a bolder approach towards the situation of the Uighur Muslim and other minority groups in the Xinjiang region of China compared

to past U.S. administrations; especially within the last year.⁷ This uptick aligns with a general global rise in interest in and knowledge of the region, which was catalyzed by the 400 alleged Chinese government documents leaked in November 2019 to *The New York Times*, collectively known as The Xinjiang Papers, which “showed how officials worked to repress Uighurs, lock them in camps, and prevent them from leaving.”^{[8][53]} Actions taken by the Administration and recent U.S. Congress sessions include repeated condemnation of the CCP’s activities, expanding ease of access to information on this subject, referring to Xinjiang at multinational forums, inviting victims of religious persecutions to the White House,⁵⁴ and enacting legislation designed to deter or disrupt these accused human rights violations.

Most notably, on June 17, 2020, Trump signed into law S.3744, the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020. This Act, which took little more than one month to pass through Congress, “imposes sanctions on foreign individuals and entities responsible for human rights abuses in China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous region” and requires regular reports be provided to Congress on the realities of and policies that may hinder human rights in the region.⁵⁵



Roll call of the U.S. Senate upon the passing of S.3744, the “Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020, on June 17, 2020. Source: UHRP

A couple months later in October 2020, the U.S. Department of State imposed visa restrictions on Chinese officials “who are believed to be responsible for, or complicit in, the detention or abuse of Uighurs, Kazakhs, or other members of Muslim minority groups in Xinjiang, China.” In this same notice, the U.S. called on the People’s Republic of China to “immediately end its campaign of repression in Xinjiang, release all those arbitrarily detained, and cease efforts to coerce members of Chinese Muslim minority groups residing abroad to return to China to face an uncertain fate.”

⁵⁶Washington has also sanctioned hair products that are produced in Xinjiang.

7. It is not the first time that Washington has specifically focused on one particular region of minorities in China. Similar issues have occurred over Tibet in the 2000s. Similar to today, Beijing responded with accusations of the United States interfering in Chinese internal affairs. However, the Trump Administration’s efforts regarding Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang are both larger in scale and more aggressive compared to the policies done regarding Tibet in the 2000s.

8. Interest and research on events in Xinjiang have been expanded outside the U.S. as well. For example in September 2020, The Xinjiang Data Project at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute “released the largest database of Xinjiang’s detention facilities in existence,” encompassing 380 “re-education camps, detention centres and prisons that were newly built or significantly expanded since 2017,” when a government crackdown is reported to have begun in the region.

The U.S. Department of State recently created a new page on their website, “CCP Abuses,” dedicated to pointing out and defending against perceived Chinese human rights abuses. The top of the page reads a quote from Secretary Pompeo: “We call on the Chinese Communist Party to immediately end these horrific practices and ask all nations to join the United States in demanding an end to these dehumanizing abuses.”⁵⁷ In another example, at a public event hosted by the Aspen Institute on October 16, U.S. National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien pointed out details of what is occurring in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, concluding that “if not a genocide, something close to it is going on in Xinjiang.”⁵⁸

However, the worth and efficacy of these activities are being heavily questioned by some observers. In a July 2020 interview, President Trump explained that the Treasury sanctions against CCP officials were delayed because of the trade deal and that the potential use of the 2016 Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act to enact these sanctions had not yet been mentioned to him in relation to China.⁵⁹ Trump also denied the allegations made in John Bolton’s controversial memoir *The Room Where It Happens* that Trump once encouraged Xi to “go ahead with building the camps” in Xinjiang.⁶⁰

Democracy and human rights initiatives, especially those of this nature and with virtually no access to the concerned region, cannot be expected to show grand results in weeks or even months. If Donald Trump remains president after the U.S. 2020 presidential election in November, it will be very telling to watch whether or not the president and the Congress continue to push Beijing on this particular subject or if it becomes a fleeting footnote.

While signing restrictions and allowances into law have the potential to be both fruitful in appearance and potentially ineffective in the long-term, it is not a method unique to this administration on the topics of democracy and human rights and does not ensure progress in the name of protecting human rights. This and other related actions are clouded by accusations of hypocrisy as China and other observers have pointed out the Trump administration’s “alarming” human rights agenda at home and abroad, making American statements on the subject far less potent.⁶¹ For example, the nonprofit Human Rights Watch (HRW) group summarized the Trump administration’s 2018 record:

“The United States continued to move backward on human rights at home and abroad in the second year of President Donald Trump’s administration...also continued to support abusive governments abroad militarily, financially, and diplomatically. Though it has expressed support for some international initiatives aimed at sanctioning individuals and governments committing human rights abuses, overall administration policy undermined multilateral institutions and international judicial bodies seeking to hold people accountable for egregious human rights violations.”⁶²

It should be noted that this evaluation by HRW was written before the Hong Kong Autonomy Act was signed or the 2019 and 2020 Black Lives Matter movements spread like wildfire across the U.S. Valuing and protecting human rights has been enshrined in U.S. law and national security strategies

since the birth of the nation; the Oval Office spearheading human rights denouncement campaigns is not a novel idea. And past presidents have spoken out specifically against China’s human rights record before. For instance, the day following the Tiananmen Square Incident of June 1989, U.S. President George H.W. Bush joined with the European Union in imposing an embargo on armament sales to China because of the “massacre of demonstrators in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square,” among other minor offers of aid.⁶³ When a potential lifting of this arms embargo was being discussed in 2005, the George W. Bush administration “strongly oppose[d] an end to the EU’s arms embargo and urge[d] stronger arms export controls,” explaining that the “United States contends that engagement with China need not send the wrong signals on China’s human rights record.”⁶⁴

--Taiwan--

Historically, the U.S. has been very cautious in expressing its views on the topic of the political status of Hong Kong and Taiwan, especially on Taiwan, perceiving it as a domestic issue for China. For example, when the US Navy sent the Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Strait in 1950 during the First Taiwan Strait Crisis (1954-1955), the goal was to maintain regional stability as war was breaking out in the Korean Peninsula by deterring attacks between the mainland (CCP) and Taiwan (ROC)--not to support either side.

Donald Trump and his administration has not followed this tradition of playing a cautious middle ground. On December 2, 2016, as president-elect, Trump became the first president or president-elect since 1979 to speak directly with a Taiwanese president when he spoke with President Tsai Ing-wen. The short courtesy call received both praise as a “brilliant” move in America’s interest and disapproval as an “inexperienced” move that uprooted “37 years of U.S. diplomatic practice in a few minutes.”⁶⁵



*President Tsai Ing-wen, right, talks with US Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar, left, at the Presidential Office in Taipei, August 10, 2020.
Credit: Taiwan Presidential Office, CC-BY-2.0*

This phone call was a marked shift in Washington's view of the "one-China" policy that had existed for decades. Trump's predecessor Barack Obama, who supported the existence of the "one-China" policy in his tenure as an admittedly unsatisfactory "status quo," commented on the call, saying the policy "has kept the peace and allowed the Taiwanese to be a pretty successful" and warned Trump of the serious consequences that could come from changing Washington's view on the issue.⁶⁶

The "antagonising" tactic recently played again in early August 2020 when the White House sent the U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar to Taiwan to meet with President Tsai Ing-wen. In the first such engagement by a top-level American official since 1979, Azar "heaped praise" on Taiwan's coronavirus response, telling Tsai that "it is a tribute to the open, transparent, democratic nature of Taiwan's society and culture."⁶⁷ This visit was not received well by Beijing.

On the security front, as Trump's tenure continued, the U.S. military began taking more bold steps in openly supporting Taiwan. These moves, which became more apparent in the last two years, include more frequent movement of US Navy ships in the Taiwan Strait--at rates double or triple of those under the Obama Administration--and encouraging arms sales of F-16 fighter jets to the island, which hasn't occurred since 1992.⁶⁸ These sales have been accompanied by increasingly amicable declarations of bilateral ties. In an address at the National Taiwan University on August 11, 2020, U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex M. Azar II called Taiwan "a democratic success story, a reliable partner, and a force for good in the world."⁶⁹

Traditional Security and Espionage

The Trump Administration's overall strategy for addressing security matters is not entirely dissimilar to those of his predecessors. What makes this administration's security policies different is the amplified rate of change and intensity of focus on national security, both of which have been catalyzed by years of increasingly wary perceptions and a prideful demand to be the best in the world. Trump has led his administration to undertake a colossal modernization of the military, which quickly became a hallmark of his tenure. As summarized by the Council on Foreign Relations, Trump has "championed the military, pushing for increases to defense spending, major new weapons programs, and a new branch focused on space."⁷⁰ His administration's 2017 National Security Strategy sets a top U.S. goal to "preserve peace through strength by rebuilding our military so that it remains preeminent, deters our adversaries, and if necessary, is able to fight and win...including in space and cyberspace."⁷¹

One gauge of the Trump administration's commitment to the military is in the national defense budget. During his tenure, Trump has seen the Department of Defense enacted budget totals increase from \$580.3 billion (FY 2016) under Barack Obama to \$606 billion (FY 2017), \$670.6 billion (FY 2018), \$687.8 billion (FY 2019), and then \$712.6 billion (FY 2020).⁹ As of May 2020, the president's proposal for FY 2021 is set at \$705.4 billion. As the 2018 National Defense Strategy explains, China is one of the two main adversaries the U.S. is competing against that is driving budget spikes:

9. For details on the allocation of, additions to, and application of U.S. national DoD budget requests for fiscal years since 1998, see the annual Defense Budget Overviews and other supporting materials at: Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), "DoD Budget Requests," <https://comptroller.defense.gov/Budget-Materials/>.

U.S. Department of Defense Budget					
<i>\$ in billions</i>	FY 2017 Actuals	FY 2018 Actuals	FY 2019 Actuals	FY 2020 Enacted	FY 2021 Request
Base	523.5	599.6	616.4	633.3	636.4
Overseas Contingency Operations	82.5	65.2	68.6	66.4	53.0
OCO for Base	-	-	-	4.9	16.0
Emergency	-	5.8	2.8	8.0	-
Total	606.0	670.6	687.8	712.6	705.4

Source: Department of Defense, *FY2020 Budget Request Overview Book*/FY2021 *Budget Request Overview Book*

“Long-term strategic competitions with China and Russia are the principal priorities for the Department [of Defense], and require both increased and sustained investment, because of the magnitude of the threats they pose to U.S. security and prosperity today, and the potential for those threats to increase in the future.”⁷²

While speaking at a Heritage Foundation online forum on October 15, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper noted that the U.S. military is unequivocally prepared “if called upon to fight” but acknowledged that the department is still in the process of transitioning “from the post-9/11 counterterrorism wars to preparations for potential conflict with China and Russia.” Listing China and Russia as today’s American “strategic competitors,” Esper made direct comparisons between the China of today and the USSR of the Cold War. Notably, Esper emphasized the “top 10 goals to focus the department on China” and the plans to develop deep understandings of “Chinese military systems, tactics, and doctrine.”⁷³

While a simple increase in budget amount does not promise increased results, proper application of funds, or self-explanatory goals, it is a valuable quantitative statistic in comparing U.S. perceptions of the present and the future state of great power competition. In the case of this administration, it also exhibits a marked difference from past administrations who tended to increase budget in smaller increments.

On the topic of China, traditional security issues that the Trump Administration has honed in on are maritime territorial disputes, cybersecurity and espionage.

--Territorial Disputes--

Although both China and the U.S. have shown vested interest for centuries in maintaining influence over international waters and what is contained therein, the last decade has undoubtedly seen a renewed uptick of activity in seizing--or reclaiming, depending on who describes the situation--territorial waters. Although the East China Sea and now the Arctic are two major hotspots of Chinese maritime activity, since the early 2010s, the South China Sea has taken center stage in the contest between China and the United States over maritime territorial disputes. The issue in this region was one instigator of President Obama’s “Pivot to Asia” policy and has since been used as an infamous example of China’s dedication to obtaining regional, if not global, dominance.

The Obama Administration was the first to conduct freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) specifically targeted against Chinese activity--meaning that US Navy vessels sailed within

12 nautical miles of features claimed or occupied by China--with a total of two in 2015 and three in 2016. Under Trump, the frequency of these FONOPs has multiplied, with six occurring in 2017, five in 2018, and nine in 2019.⁷⁴ FONOPs and joint drills with allies have continued in 2020 amidst the pandemic, with three U.S. carrier strike groups underway in the Pacific by mid-June: USS Nimitz (CVN 68), USS Ronald Reagan (CVN 76) and USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN 71).⁷⁵



US aircraft fly in formation over the Nimitz Carrier Strike Force on July 6, 2020, in the South China Sea. The USS Nimitz (CVN 68), right, and USS Ronald Reagan (CVN 76) and their carrier strike groups are conducting dual carrier operations in the Indo-Pacific as the Nimitz Carrier Strike Force.

Credit: U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Cody Beam

The increased frequency of these FONOPs, which regularly agitate their Chinese counterparts and been described as “a real threat to peace,” are accompanied by an seemingly intensified boldness by the Chinese Navy in the region to maintain control of the waters and archipelagos that they claim is within their territorial seas; a claim that was pronounced unlawful by the United Nations Permanent Court of Arbitration in July 2016.⁷⁶ For years, experts have speculated the possibility of a hot war beginning between the U.S. and China over these FONOPs, especially in recent months as both sides seem to be becoming bolder not only in the South China Sea but in the waters of the Taiwan Strait.⁷⁷

Under Trump, the US Navy maintains the need for FONOPs is to protect the right of innocent passage in the high seas and support allies in the region against a Chinese regional hegemony. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo released an official statement, the “U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea,” in July 2020 on a topic that has often been left unclarified by previous administrations. In addition to officially aligning the U.S. position with the United Nations Tribunal’s decision in 2016, it reaffirms the United States’ commitment “to preserve peace and stability, uphold freedom of the seas in a manner consistent with international law, maintain the unimpeded flow of commerce, and oppose any attempt to use coercion or force to settle disputes.”



The USS Asheville (SSN 758) sails alongside U.S. Seventh Fleet flagship USS Blue Ridge (LCC 19) in the Philippine Sea, June 14, 2020. Credit: US Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Adam K. Thomas)

“The world will not allow Beijing to treat the South China Sea as its maritime empire. America stands with our Southeast Asian allies and partners in protecting their sovereign rights to offshore resources, consistent with their rights and obligations under international law. We stand with the international community in defense of freedom of the seas and respect for sovereignty and reject any push to impose “might makes right” in the South China Sea or the wider region.”⁷⁸

According to Gregory Poling, the director of the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative at the Center for Strategic and Intelligence Studies in Washington, the statement “marks a significant clarification of prior U.S. positions but not a radical break from past policy. It makes explicit things that had been implied by previous administrations. And in that it sets the stage for more effective diplomatic messaging and stronger responses to China’s harassment of its neighbors.”⁷⁹

Among other members of the Trump Administration, David R. Stillwell, Assistant Secretary at the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs has also made strong comments on the subject in July 2020, listing the CCP’s increasingly aggressive “neo-imperialist ways,” reaffirming the importance of upholding international law and order, and expressing the United States’ “vigilant” commitment to “protect our vital interests and those of our allies and friends.” The U.S. Embassy in China released a short press statement in late September titled “China’s Empty Promises in the South China Sea” that fact-checks Beijing’s statements over the last four years and leaves no concessions.⁸⁰

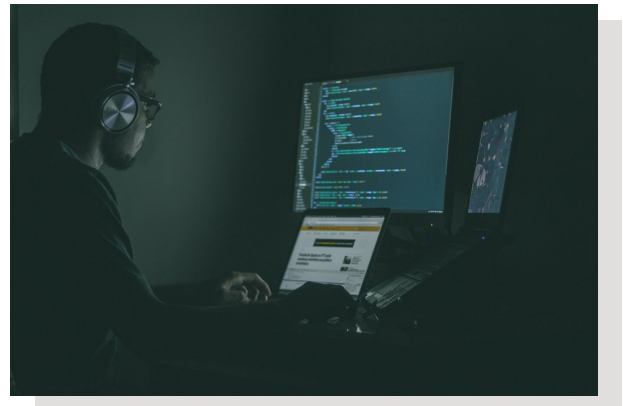
These statements, which are recent examples of many, encompass the consistently hard-line view of the Trump administration on the subject of the China and the South China Sea.⁸¹

--Cybersecurity and Espionage--

It is difficult to gauge the efficacy of any cybersecurity policies under the Trump Administration. Like former administrations, cybersecurity has earned special attention in national and department security strategies and increased funding, sometimes listing the “Chinese government” as a cyberthreat.⁸² It can be argued, however, that Trump Administration policy decisions regarding Chinese technology--for instance, Huawei and companies with connections to the Chinese military --have brought the awareness of cybersecurity concerns to the forefront of the media at new levels.

At the center of rising U.S.-Chinese tensions over technology security are Huawei and 5G. Huawei and its threats existed long before Trump became president in 2016. As summarized by Roslyn Layton of Forbes, “[t]he Trump Administration did not originate the tough stance on Huawei, but it has gone further than any other to enact specific policies to address security concerns, including developing significant bipartisan policy.”⁸³ Policies on Huawei have come in the form of federal bans against Chinese technology companies, funding prohibitions (e.g., from the National Defense Authorization Act), firm accountability plans by the Department of Justice, and an increased insistence on American primacy in 5G development, all to a mixed review of efficacy.

In April 2019, the White House released a statement saying the U.S. is “now leading the global race to deploy secure and reliable 5G” and that Trump is “ensuring [that] America wins the global race to 5G and remains the world leader in information and communications technology.”⁸⁴ The lack of evidence backing these statements, such as the non-existence of a viable U.S.-based competitor in 5G, leaves such statements muddled and frustrating.



Source: UnSplash

A month later on May 15, 2019, after almost a year of internal debate, President Trump signed the “Executive Order on Securing the Information and Communications Technology and Services Supply Chain.” While not citing any specific country or company, the order prohibits “any acquisition, importation, transfer, installation, dealing in, or use of any information and communications technology or service (transaction)” that “poses an undue risk of sabotage...[or] undue risk of catastrophic effects on the security or resiliency of United States critical infrastructure or the digital economy.”⁸⁵ This Order was widely recognized as a strike against Huawei and was officially extended for one year, citing the continued “unusual and extraordinary threat.”⁸⁶

As recent as August 17, 2020, the U.S. Department of Commerce imposed additional restrictions designed to close loopholes and block Huawei’s access to commercially available chips made with tools acquired from the U.S. Explaining in simple terms during an interview that same day, Trump said “[w]e don’t want their equipment in the United States because they spy on us;” an accusation that Huawei has repeatedly denied. Observers and analysts are concerned that the Trump administration’s policies do nothing to resolve the issue and are failing to push the U.S. to actively compete in innovating its own alternatives.⁸⁷ While Huawei insists it has not been harmed

by these policies, it is interesting to note that Huawei's 2019 annual report indicates that its sales growth has declined in every region outside of China.⁸⁸

Huawei may be denying acts of cyberespionage, but the presence of human espionage remains strong. In the last few years, cases of Chinese human espionage have been revealed more frequently, especially when the case involves a Chinese citizen or connection to Beijing. American media have been highlighting cases of espionage in places such as university labs and U.S. government facilities at increasing rates, either because the number of discoveries has increased, the information is now more readily available to the public, or the number of personnel employed has increased. The U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has stepped up attention to the threat more than ever before, reportedly having launched in September 2019 a counterintelligence taskforce specifically for Chinese espionage that includes partners from the Department of Defense.⁸⁹

WANTED BY THE FBI

APT 41 GROUP

ZHANG Haoran TAN Dailin QIAN Chuan

FU Qiang JIANG Lizhi

CAUTION

ZHANG Haoran, TAN Dailin, QIAN Chuan, FU Qiang, and JIANG Lizhi are all part of a Chinese hacking group known as APT 41 and BARIUM.

On August 15, 2019, a Grand Jury in the District of Columbia returned an indictment against Chinese nationals ZHANG Haoran and TAN Dailin on charges including Unauthorized Access to Protected Computers, Aggravated Identity Theft, Money Laundering, and Wire Fraud. These charges primarily stemmed from alleged activity targeting high technology and video gaming companies, and a United Kingdom citizen.

On August 11, 2020, a Grand Jury in the District of Columbia returned an indictment against Chinese nationals QIAN Chuan, FU Qiang, and JIANG Lizhi on charges including Racketeering, Money Laundering, Fraud, Identity Theft, and Access Device Fraud. These charges stem from their alleged unauthorized computer intrusions while employed by Chengdu 404 Network Technology Company. The defendants allegedly conducted supply chain attacks to gain unauthorized access to networks throughout the world, targeting hundreds of companies representing a broad array of industries to include: social media, telecommunications, government, defense, education, and manufacturing. These victims included companies in Australia, Brazil, Germany, India, Japan and Sweden. The defendants allegedly targeted telecommunications providers in the United States, Australia, China (Tibet), Chile, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand. The defendants allegedly deployed ransomware attacks and demanded payments from victims.

If you have any information concerning these individuals, please contact your local FBI office, or the nearest American Embassy or Consulate.

Field Office: Washington D.C.

www.fbi.gov

Source: *The Wanted and Caution poster released by the FBI for the five members of the APT 41 GROUP.*

Credit: "APT 41 GROUP," FBI.gov, <https://www.fbi.gov/wanted/cyber/apt-41-group>

For instance, in September 2020, Washington unsealed charges against five Chinese citizens (collectively addressed as the APT 41 Group) that officials say appear linked to Chinese intelligence, accusing them of hacking more than 100 companies, “including social-media firms, universities and telecommunications providers.”⁹⁰ In May, Boston was once called “City of Spies” for all the university scholars and researchers being hauled off in handcuffs by the FBI for “either directly or indirectly working for the Chinese government.”⁹¹ There are hundreds of other examples, but the number of publicly reported instances has notably risen in the last few years. In 2019, the Center for Strategic and Intelligence Studies compiled a “Survey of Chinese-linked Espionage in the United States” including 137 publicly reported instances of Chinese espionage directed at the United States between 2000 and August 2019; 73% of which occurred between 2010 and 2019.¹⁰

After a year of interviews and research, in September 2020, the U.S. House Intelligence Committee announced the completion of a 200 page, classified report titled: “The China Deep Dive: A Report on the Intelligence Community’s Capabilities and Competencies with Respect to the People’s Republic of China.” A 37-page redacted version of the report, which featured talking points on “Chinese Propaganda & Disinformation Efforts,” “Chinese Military Might,” Digital Authoritarianism,” and a “Post-COVID-19 Authoritarian Playbook,” among others, includes the Committee’s central finding that the U.S. intelligence community is currently unprepared to successfully counter the Chinese threat.

“The United States’ intelligence community has not sufficiently adapted to a changing geopolitical and technological environment increasingly shaped by a rising China and the growing importance of interlocking non-military transnational threats, such as global health, economic security, and climate change. Absent a significant realignment of resources, the U.S. government and intelligence community will fail to achieve the outcomes required to enable continued U.S. competition with China on the global stage for decades to come...”⁹²

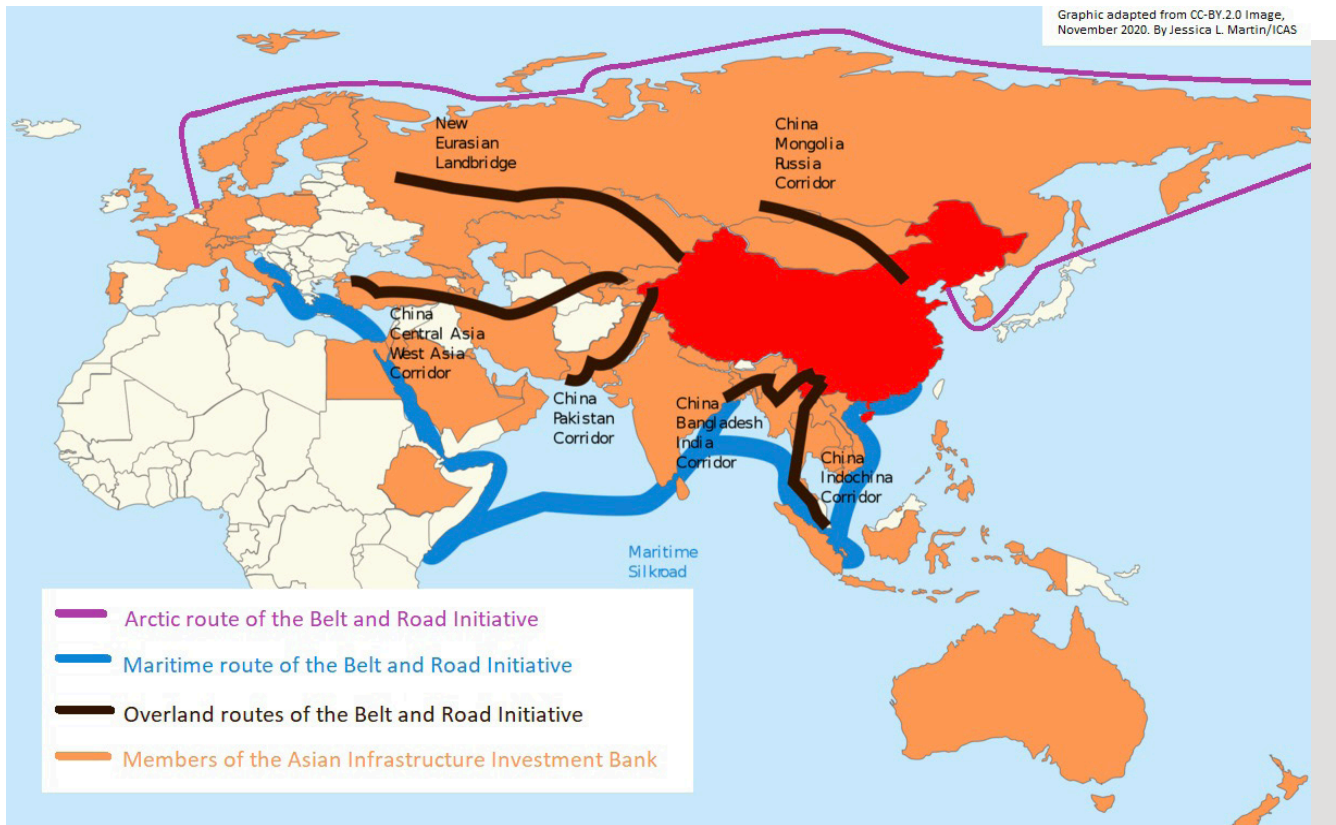
--Global Influence--

Like many of its predecessors, the Trump Administration has made it clear that “the United States must compete for positive relationships around the world.” The 2017 National Security Strategy notably states: “China and Russia target their investments in the developing world to expand influence and gain competitive advantages against the United States.”

China has become well-adept at planting influence in developing countries through personalized infrastructure development projects (e.g., the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), waterway construction project, the “10,000 Villages Project”), soft power initiatives (e.g., university scholarship programs,

10. According to CSIS, this survey “does not include espionage against other countries, U.S. firms or persons located in China, nor an additional 50 cases involving attempts to smuggle munitions or controlled technologies from the U.S. to China. We also did not include more than 1200 cases of intellectual property litigation brought by U.S. companies against Chinese entities in either the U.S. or Chinese legal systems.” Examples include but are not limited to mass hacking of SIPRNet, theft of trade secrets and classified documents, cyberattacks on military servers, and recruiting operatives at universities. “Survey of Chinese-linked Espionage in the United States Since 2000,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, accessed October 5, 2020.

the “China Shelf” literature campaign, media access), regular diplomatic visits, and economic incentives (e.g., large loans and incentives). In some cases, such as in Africa, Chinese influence already outweighs American presence.⁹³



Map of the Belt and Road Initiative including the Arctic, Overland, and Maritime routes across the European, Asian, and African continents. Image Credit: Jessica L. Martin/ICAS

The contest for global influence is still open to great change. The results will largely depend on whether the U.S. and its allies will focus more on degrading and dismantling opportunities for China or rally to provide alternatives to the problems faced by the countries targeted by China. According to a September 2020 report by the Asia Society, *Weaponizing the Belt and Road Initiative*, “There is still abundant opportunity for the U.S. and like minded states to compete--and to out-compete--China for influence and credibility in the Indo-Pacific. The problem presented by China’s “weaponization” of the BRI is not primarily a military one, and its solution can’t be primarily military either. The U.S. and likeminded partners should work together to provide a credible alternative to the BRI and to what Beijing is offering in other domains.”⁹⁴

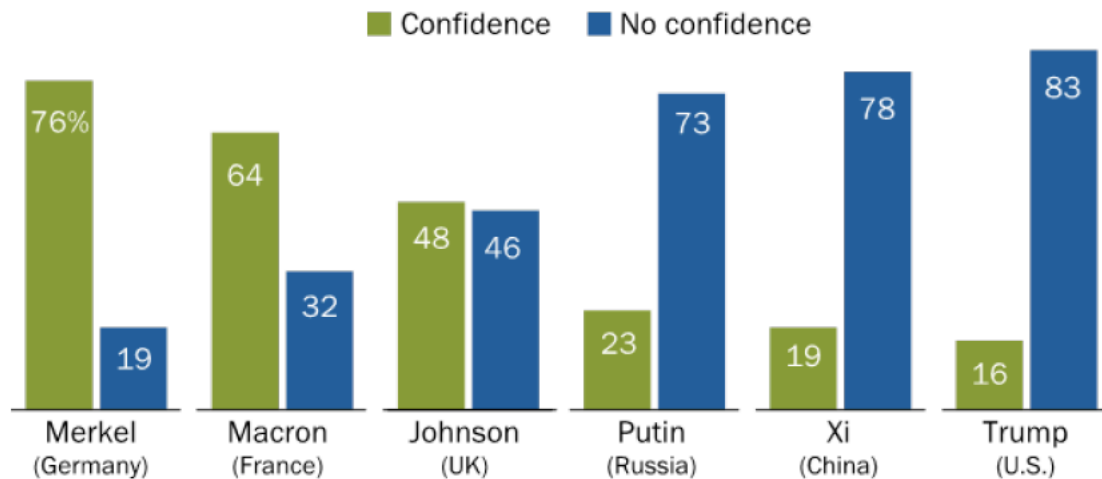
President Trump’s habit of extricating the United States from places of international influence--with China often related to the reasoning--is distressing. In his four years as president, Trump has taken multiple actions to point out potential pro-Chinese prejudices in multinational institutions, either threatening to or actively pulling support from these institutions. These actions, often seen as unimaginable by policymakers/analysts, are stark contrasts to former presidents who have valued, expanded and nurtured these multinational relationships through global forums for decades.

Trump has been known to pull the U.S. out of treaties and partnerships since the beginning of his

presidency, starting with the controversial cases of the Trans-Pacific Partnership and NATO in 2017, the latter of which China is not a member state. Withdrawing the U.S. from the Paris Agreement addressing climate change was also a highly controversial action that angered many parties and individuals at all levels of society, explaining in July 2020 how it “would have crushed American manufacturers while allowing China to pollute the atmosphere with impunity.”⁹⁵ A new 13-nation survey by the Pew Research Center from September 2020 shows that “Since Donald Trump took office as president, the image of the United States has suffered across many regions of the globe...[and] America’s reputation has declined further over the past year among many key allies and partners” to some of the lowest approval ratings in two decades. In that same, extensive survey, which included questions regarding coronavirus response, Donald Trump was found to be less trusted than Angela Merkel, Emmanuel Macron, Boris Johnson, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping.⁹⁶

Trump less trusted than leaders of Germany, France, UK, Russia and China

% who have ___ in each leader to do the right thing regarding world affairs



Note: Percentages are medians based on 13 countries: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, South Korea, Spain, Sweden and the UK. “Don’t know” responses not shown.

Source: Summer 2020 Global Attitudes Survey. Q15a-f.

“U.S. Image Plummet Internationally as Most Say Country Has Handled Coronavirus Badly”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

On the matter of the World Trade Organization (WTO), for example, Trump has threatened to withdraw the U.S. over accusations that China, by posing as a developing country, is taking advantage of the system and receiving unfair allowances. Since China is still statistically a developing country but is simultaneously the second largest global economy, this is a highly controversial subject. There are also frustrations over China’s currency manipulations and the apparent inability of the WTO to resolve it.

A few months into the coronavirus pandemic, Trump began to chastise the World Health Organization (WHO) for its “alarming lack of independence” from the P.R.C. and how it “is clear the repeated

missteps by [the WHO and its leaders] in responding to the pandemic have been extremely costly for the world.”⁹⁷ In April 2020, he announced he would freeze funding to the WHO over the issue until investigations were complete. A month later on May 18, Trump published a letter to Director-General Tedros of the WHO announcing the results of the investigation and the termination of U.S. relations with the WHO completely if there is no “substantive improvement” of independence from China within one month; though the withdrawal may ultimately require congressional approval and not end up passing into reality.⁹⁸

Donald Trump and his administration are playing the international stage unlike any of his predecessors in a bid against China for righteousness and national security, largely using similar tactics as previous administrations but at far higher levels and intensities. Some would call the Phase One Trade Deal, signed January 15, 2020, and series of signed congressional condemnations evidence of an overall success of Trump’s hard-line China policy. Others look at the loss of global prestige and presence and the ever-increasing tensions as failures of his extreme China policy. Regardless, the Trump administration policies on China only add to the unprecedented nature of the current U.S.-China great power competition relationship and make it that much more dire to understand at a root level.

TRUMP ADMINISTRATION POLICIES ADDRESSING EMERGING ISSUES

With the world changing so rapidly, many issues now exist that were only in early development at the beginning of Trump’s tenure. These changes and new issues that accompany them, which come with every presidency, require adaptations--and oftentimes reevaluations--of priorities. With the technology revolution of the last two decades and the broadening of access information thereof, these changes are only coming more rapidly.

In addition to addressing the tested issues of trade, democracy building and human rights, traditional security and espionage, and global influence Trump Administration policies have faced new issues with China mostly in regards to 1) new security regions, 2) technology leadership, and 3) Beijing’s increasing assertiveness in confronting a US-led democratic order.

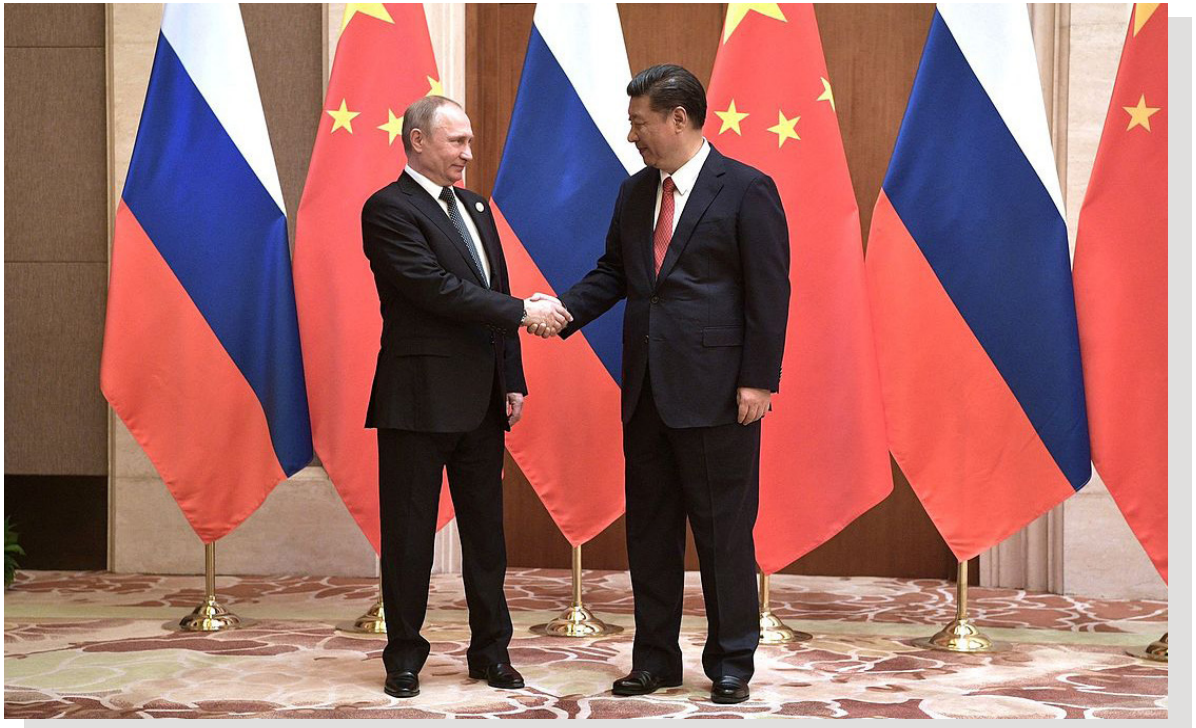
New Security Regions

--*The Arctic*--

In the last four years, security measures have been spread even thinner, requiring an expanded expertise and consistently progressive research of regions and technical skills. The Trump Administration has attempted to address emerging regions like the Arctic and outer space--both which require advanced technological developments for their extreme climates--with mixed results so far.

With the Arctic melting more every year and the waterways opening up, the Arctic Circle is garnering more attention than ever before by Arctic States--a list of eight that includes the United States--and by non-Arctic States like China. According to Yun Sun of The Arctic Institute in April 2020, “[t]he Arctic is emerging as a new domain for the strategic rivalry between the United States and China.”

Rebecca Pincus, an assistant professor at the U.S. Naval War College, spoke at a congressional hearing in March 2019 on “An Emerging China-Russia Axis,” stating that China is expected to start operating nuclear submarines in the Arctic as soon as the next five to ten years, and “that’s really going to change the game up there.”⁹⁹



*President Vladimir Putin with President of China Xi Jinping, 14 May 2017, in Beijing for the Belt and Road International Cooperation Forum and in the roundtable meeting at the forum.
Credit: Kremlin.ru, Creative Commons*

China’s interest in the Arctic suddenly exploded in January 2018 when it, for the first time, published a white paper on China’s Arctic Policy, declared itself a ‘near-Arctic’ State, and launched a plan for its ‘Polar Silk Road.’¹⁰⁰ Their long-term interest has only become more evident with their increased presence in the region drilling for gas, testing new shipping lanes and partnering with the region’s military powerhouse, Russia.¹⁰¹ Beijing has notably been an ad hoc observer on the Arctic Council since 2007 and, since 2013, has been a permanent observer.¹⁰²

Washington has acknowledged and addressed China’s sudden outburst of interest in the Arctic to mixed success, most of which includes public chastisement of China’s interference in a region to which it does not belong. “American criticism of China’s Arctic policy reached an unprecedented level in 2019,” with representatives of the Department of Defense and other members of Trump’s administration publicly casting doubt on China’s self-proclaimed status as a “near-Arctic state” and warning of Chinese attempts to dominate the region and its resources.¹⁰³

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has been particularly outspoken on China in the Arctic. In May 2019, he gave a “tongue-lashing” on China and Russia during an Arctic Council gathering, stating that Beijing’s claims “entitles them to exactly nothing;” a speech that reportedly left observers and Pompeo’s foreign counterparts “stunned” and upset over the Trump administration’s aggressive

approach on a stage where, traditionally, “all the parties have respected having a good mood and spirit.”¹⁰⁴ The following July during a trip to Copenhagen to celebrate the reopening of the U.S. consulate in the Danish territory of Greenland, Pompeo reiterated his statements and said Washington will become “more active in the Arctic to...thwart attempts by China to insert itself into the region.” The same day, Jenis av Rana, a government minister of the Faroe Islands, another Arctic Danish territory, shared heavy concerns that the Arctic may become “a playground or a scene of war for the great powers” including the U.S., China and Russia.¹⁰⁵

Strategic thinkers in the U.S. and elsewhere are also concerned that China’s activities are simply precursors to much more invasive political and strategic ambitions similar to what has been occurring in the South China Sea.



Source: U.S. Army

Along with public chastisements and warnings, Donald Trump did offer to purchase Greenland from Denmark—an offer that was initially mistaken as a joke by much of the world and called “absurd” by Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen. The rejected bid did not deter the Trump administration’s interest in connecting with Greenland, however. On April 23, 2020, the Trump administration announced a \$12 million aid package to Greenland for “sustainable” economic development that was received warmly as tangible evidence of “increased cooperation between Greenland and the U.S.”¹⁰⁶

Between this aid package, increased arms sales to Arctic States like Finland,¹⁰⁷ and the American consulate that reopened in the capital city of Nuuk in Summer 2020 for the first time since 1953, the Trump administration’s renewed interest in the Arctic is clear.¹⁰⁸ And this renewed interest can be directly linked to China and Russia’s own and the larger great power competition. As summarized by a senior state department official upon the announcement of the aid package to Greenland, Washington’s “goal is to be the partner of choice for Arctic states...We want to increase our engagements across the region for just that reason.”¹⁰⁹

--Outer Space--

Even more than the Arctic, outer space is virtually untouched, filled with unknowns, and requires specialized resources and knowledge to traverse. It is a costly region to maintain a presence within, but the Trump Administration has determined that maintaining stability in space is worth the costs and vital to national security. With the virtual renewal of a ‘space race’ between the U.S., China and other interested parties, Washington has become more overt with its space policy and intentions in the region compared to past administrations. The current situation has been equated to a “new space race,” equating China’s current position and intentions to the Soviet Union’s during the Cold War.¹¹⁰

As early as his presidential inauguration, President Donald Trump had brought the space domain back to the forefront of American national security policy. On June 30, 2017, 24 years after its disbandment, the Trump Administration revived the National Space Council to guide U.S. national

space strategy and, later that year in December, signed the Space Policy Directive-1 that sets goals for human launches above low-orbit and beyond to Mars.¹¹¹ In March 2018, the Administration unveiled its America First National Space Strategy that emphasizes “peace through strength” by enhancing “deterrence and warfighting options,” which has been supplemented by major changes in funding allocations for specific projects.^{[111][112]} Whether these changes will make a marked difference in U.S. presence in space is yet to be seen.

The largest change in Washington’s space policy comes in the form of the newly formed branch of the U.S. Armed Forces: the US Space Force (USSF). Established on December 20, 2019 within the Department of the Air Force with the enactment of the Fiscal Year 2020 National Defense Authorization Act, the USSF will house the current space-related programs formerly housed under the U.S. Air Force command and new initiatives designed to “protect U.S. and allied interests in space and to provide space capabilities to the joint force.”¹¹³ According to the website, the Space Force will not reach full operational capacity until 18 months after its establishment, making it difficult to currently judge the full impact it will have on future U.S. space endeavors or how that may shift across presidencies.

President Trump and his administration have been publicly contemplating the addition of a “space force” since March 2018. At a National Space Council meeting at the White House on June 18, 2018, he publicly instructed the Pentagon to “immediately begin the process to establish a space force.” “We must have American dominance in space,” Trump explained in his speech, describing the force as “separate, but equal” to the Air Force.



President Donald Trump, flanked by astronauts, members of Congress and Vice President Mike Pence, signs an executive order June 30 re-establishing the National Space Council. Credit: NASA/Aubrey Gemignani

11. Compared to the FY2019 enacted NASA budget, the final FY2020 President’s Budget Request (PBR) for NASA depicts a steep increase in support for Exploration (+27%), Space Technology (+24%), Safety, Security & Mission Services (+12%), and Construction and Environmental Compliance (+72%) initiatives. Conversely, it shows a decline in support for Science (-8.7%), Space Operations (-7.6%), Aeronautics (-8.1%), and STEM Engagement (-100%) initiatives. These steep shifts may have been influenced by the launch of a new U.S. representative in space: The United States Space Force. FY 2020 Explore Budget Estimates, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, March 4, 2019.

As described by U.S. congressman Rep. Mike Rogers (R-AL), the “vulnerabilities we have to China and Russia” is what pushed the Administration to create the USSF.¹¹⁴

The Administration has received mixed reviews, from domestic and international sources, most of which revolved around the “vague” and “ill-defined” description of its responsibilities and the possibility of the “aggressive” act kicking off an unnecessary arms race in space.¹¹⁵ It has also been argued that the Armed Forces aren’t positioned well enough at present to effectively utilize a ‘space force’ program, predicting it will “be yet another failed organisational effort to conduct space activities.” Alternatively, the USSF has been defended as a necessity to counter China and Russia who are both rapidly developing “counter-space capabilities” (e.g. ‘anti-satellite weapons’ or ‘ASATs’): “So when it comes to space war, the horse has long since bolted. The United States has to act to protect its vital capabilities. It’s a reality the United States has an obligation to deal with. It’s not an aggressive response, but a defensive response.”¹¹⁶

There is reason to be concerned about China’s interests in space, especially as the world relies on the internet--which operates through satellite connectivity--and other high technologies more each year. It would be concerning if the Obama and Trump administrations did nothing to protect the national interests of the U.S. and its allies in this largely uncharted, unclaimed region. Leaving China to independently develop space capabilities is detrimental to U.S. national security as isolation leads to information loss and an inability to establish checks and balances.

Space policy has been woven into China’s national security plans and strategies since 2000 and by 2008, CNSA was already regarded by Western experts as an impressive “world leader in yearly space launches.”¹¹⁷ CNSA is also aiming for the Moon, Mars and beyond. IN October 2018, the Chinese company C-Space revealed CNSA’s “Mars Base 1” located in the depths of China’s Gobi Desert which has reportedly produced project progress.¹¹⁸ Recent estimates typically set the budget of the Chinese National Space Administration (CNSA)--NASA’s Chinese counterpart--at around \$8 billion.¹² These trends heavily attest to Beijing’s dedication to space development, which Brian Wang estimated in July 2019 could reach \$15-20 billion by 2030.¹¹⁹

As the USSF and the so-called ‘new space race’ matures, the main endeavors by NASA under the Trump administration in the space realm are 1) the eight-nation Artemis project to return astronauts to the Moon and 2) a “Lunar Gateway” project, both of which are being conducted in conjunction with U.S. allies; notably, not with China or Russia, which can be both advantageous and disadvantageous.¹²⁰ Ventures into outer space are still very young and the next two decades could determine the outcome of whether control in outer space is divided or unified. The U.S. recognized this potential issue in the late Obama administration and the Trump administration has made tangible policy changes in attempts to level the playing field for the U.S. in this emerging arena, with results pending. The support for these projects and their ultimate success could vastly change depending on the outcome of the 2020 U.S. presidential election.

12. While exact budget amounts for CNSA are elusive to determine due to dual-use technology applications and lack of opacity on the part of Beijing, it is evident that the space program enjoys a multi-billion USD budget that has received increasing support from decision-makers since the early 1990s. For details on various reportings on the CNSA’s budget, general backgrounds of NASA and CNSA, and current projects by the CNSA and NASA, see Jessica L. Martin, “Pursuing U.S.-China Cooperation in the Space Domain: Incentives and Obstacles,” Institute for China-America Studies, February 27, 2020.

Technology Leadership

As previously mentioned, technological advancements have skyrocketed over the last three decades, especially dual-use technology that can be applied to both commercial and national security purposes. While the increased global competition over emerging technologies has become a major concern of Washington since the late 20th century and has pushed congressional, among other, actions, the battle for technology dominance, specifically involving China, has risen to dangerous levels under and frequently because of the Trump Administration.

Aside from ongoing issues with Huawei, the Administration has begun targeting other China-based technology companies citing national security concerns and wider projects like China's "digital silk road," which is a subset of the Belt and Road Initiative. In a commentary on the South China Morning Post in September 2020, Sam Olsen described the larger Chinese outlook going forward: "Chinese technological ambitions abroad aren't limited to the exploits of a handful of companies...Launched in 2015, the digital silk road is a mainly private-sector-driven programme, supported by the state, with the aim of enhancing China's digital presence abroad, and thereby extending its commercial and political influence. It is so far going well, particularly in the emerging world."¹²¹

Most of the cited concerns are over a lack of opacity of company operations and surveillance by Chinese companies with ties to the Chinese Communist Party but have also been influenced by democracy and human rights issues. For example, in July 2020, in addition to officially removing Hong Kong's special economic status following Beijing's implementation of its national security law, Trump signed legislation to impose new restrictions on U.S. technology exports to Hong Kong.

Trump has made use of congressional action when addressing technology dominance and security. Following an uptick in Chinese investments in strategic sectors such as technology, the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS), an interagency panel that screens foreign transactions with U.S. firms for potential security risks, submitted a reform in 2018, backed by Trump, that grants U.S. regulators more oversight and power to review foreign acquisitions.¹²² During this time, Washington also increased restrictions specifically against major technology firms operating in the U.S., such as Huawei, Tencent, WeChat and TikTok, which are under major suspicion of influence by Beijing.

The Administration's 'attacks' are largely perceived by observers as "knee-jerk" overreactions that, while addressing the undeniable need for technology security, do not go about resolving the issue in the correct way. Users and creators of TikTok and WeChat "mourned" the announcement of the ban that reportedly "came as a shock."¹²³ Trump's bans and attempted bans are "fracturing the global internet, upending families and online communities, and disrupting the flow of tech investment and innovation in both countries" instead of creating policies that resolve the issues of user privacy and security. One expert on internet governance at George Washington University expressed concerns that "the US is becoming China by trying to block off apps."¹²⁴

Beijing has not hidden its disdain for Trump's technology bans, calling them hypocritical as the European Court of Justice ruled in August against a data-sharing plan between the U.S. and the European Union "over concerns that data shared by Europeans might not be adequately protected from US surveillance."¹²⁵ While the Administration's policy has potentially helped enhance technology

security, which became a necessity that could not be neglected, the tactics used and single-minded rhetoric applied along the way have obscured the benefits and may have dropped U.S. opinion of Washington and the U.S.-China relationship even further.

Beijing's Increasing Assertiveness Confronting US-Led Democratic Order

Just as with sensitive issues like Xinjiang and Taiwan, Washington has historically tread lightly over issues related to Hong Kong. Ultimately, the reasons for this policy boil down to maintaining the status quo. However, with the Trump Administration's policy towards Beijing and the Chinese Communist Party becoming more brazen with every year, Washington has become a vocal supporter of democracy-building in China's autonomous regions; especially Hong Kong and Taiwan as their relations with Mainland China have grown tense in the last two years. The situation of these regions being a 'domestic issue' no longer appears to be a barrier to criticism and counteractions by the United States and the world at large. Also, the popularization of social media catalyzed a rising interest in human rights among the world's population, with evidence--and propaganda--of the reality in these autonomous regions becoming more readily available and known.

At present, the U.S. appears eager to side with the people of Taiwan and Hong Kong because they are seen as symbols of democracy fighting against the authoritarian regime of the Chinese Communist Party and a platform to reprimand Beijing and damage its international reputation. Ever since protests broke out again in Hong Kong in the summer of 2019, shattering records and receiving international attention for months, the U.S. and much of the Western world have become outspoken against the so-called authoritarian crackdown that Mainland China has taken against Hong Kong. The Trump Administration has taken multiple steps in Congress, on Twitter, and through executive orders to make the United States' stance on the events in Hong Kong clear.

For example, on July 14, 2020, President Trump signed into law the U.S. Hong Kong Autonomy Act that took only a short two weeks to pass through the House of Representatives and become public



*Hong Kong anti-extradition bill protest on 8 September 2019.
Captured by Studio Incendo from Flickr. CC-BY-2.0*

law.¹²⁶ In summary, this Act affirms protections for civil rights such as freedom of speech in Hong Kong, imposes sanctions on foreign individuals and entities that materially contribute to China's failure to preserve Hong Kong's autonomy, in addition to requiring the Department of State to report to Congress annually on individuals or institutions that inhibit these pro-democracy initiatives. On the same day, President Trump signed Executive Order 13936, ending Hong Kong's preferential trade status that had existed since 1984. The ultimate message sent by this order was that, upon witnessing the recent authoritarian moves made by Beijing against Hong Kong, Hong Kong became "no longer sufficiently autonomous to justify differential treatment in relation to the People's Republic of China (PRC or China)" and the benefits accompanying that status.¹²⁷

Between this Act and Order, President Trump all but renounced the so-called "one-party, two-system" framework as valid; a move that former U.S. presidents and most other world leaders have left unchallenged as an unfortunate status quo. The blatantly accusatory tones of the two announcements are difficult to dismiss and the first of its kind in defying Chinese governance over its territories. They were received with much animosity in Beijing, whose spokesperson immediately urged the U.S. to "correct its mistake" and stated that China would "definitely hit back" with sanctions if the Act was implemented. Hua Chunying, Spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, added near-demands that the U.S. "immediately stop meddling in Hong Kong affairs and China's internal affairs in any way."¹²⁸

Despite the reduced attention on Hong Kong since the coronavirus pandemic outbreak and the legislative measures taken by the Trump Administration, the situation in the municipality remains dire and without resolution. Protestors are still being arrested and still feel the need to find political asylum abroad in countries like Great Britain, Canada, Australia and the United States.¹²⁹ In a public event at the Aspen Institute on October 16, National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien said that the U.S. would welcome immigrants from Hong Kong, calling them "terrific people" and noting the "sad" situation occurring there as "Hong Kong has been fully absorbed into China."¹³⁰ Much of the anxiety stems from the Hong Kong National Security Law imposed by Beijing on June 30, 2020. The sudden announcement of this highly controversial and fear-inducing national security law is what prompted the creation of the Hong Kong Autonomy Act and the executive order normalizing relations with Hong Kong.¹³¹

The Trump Administration has followed through on the Autonomy Act so far. For instance, on October 14, 2020, the U.S. Department of State released a public report to Congress that reiterated the unequivocally rebuking stance of the Trump Administration on the subject: "The CCP has systematically dismantled the autonomy that Beijing promised to the Hong Kong people and the world in a UN-registered treaty. Through the imposition of the National Security Law, the CCP has crippled democratic institutions, human rights, judicial independence, and individual freedoms in Hong Kong." Also in the report, there was an official warning to "international financial institutions doing business with individuals deemed responsible for China's crackdown in Hong Kong that they could soon face sanctions" for their connections; which was a stipulation of the Autonomy Act.¹³² The 11 listed individuals, including Hong Kong's chief executive Carrie Lam, had already been sanctioned in August after being identified by the Department of Treasury for "undermining Hong Kong's autonomy and restricting the freedom of expression or assembly of the citizens of Hong Kong."¹³³

TRUMP'S CHINA POLICY IN REVIEW

In short, the Trump Administration's China policy is more 'intensely aggressive' than it is unique. There is no novel foreign policy despite the unprecedented modern context of the unprecedented U.S.-China competition, breeding inefficiency, inaccuracies, and oftentimes negative outcomes. The tactics used to counter various traditional and emerging threats from China--be they on trade, security, human rights, global influence, or technical dominance--are not untested. Past administrations have both succeeded and failed with the tactics of applying tariffs, increasing military presence as deterrents, signing brusque executive orders and creating personalized acts with Congress to recognize and penalize the wrongdoings of another government, among other tactics. The overall and pervasive difference with Donald Trump and his Administration's approach is the outright aggressive stance taken at virtually every point of the U.S.-China relationship, deteriorating amicable connections. Trump placed the U.S. in a direct, openly-acknowledged competition against China and has shown few signs of slowing down on his war path.



Source: Pixabay

Reasons for this Administration to take this aggressive approach are debatable. Perhaps the pro-interdependence approach, as was seen under the Obama administration, was seen as a failure which led the Trump administration to adopt the competitive approach. The U.S. has also been resisting adaptation to a new reality. Over the last century, the world has arguably developed at a faster rate than it ever has in human history; even more so within the last two decades. While this competitive approach was made easier due the distasteful actions taken by China that the U.S. has perceived as anti-democratic and infringing on human rights, such as the Hong Kong National Security Law and the camps in Xinjiang, based on his past publications and campaign statements, Donald Trump would have led his Administration towards firm competition regardless of new Chinese activities.

The pro-interdependence approach was seen as a failure by Donald Trump and his Administration. Donald Trump believes that his administration has taken major steps that his predecessors have failed to take. In his statement at the 75th anniversary of the United Nations on September 22, 2020. "For decades, the same tired voices proposed the same failed solutions, pursuing global ambitions at the expense of their own people. But only when you take care of your own citizens will you find a

true basis for cooperation. As President, I have rejected the failed approaches of the past, and I am proudly putting America first, just as you should be putting your countries first. That's okay — that's what you should be doing.”¹³⁴

The reasoning was explained by Aaron Friedberg in September 2020: “For the past four decades, Western democracies have hoped that engagement with China would cause its leaders to abandon any revisionist ambitions they might harbor and accept their country's place as a ‘responsible stakeholder.’”¹³⁵

It is too soon to judge the full efficacy or inefficacy of many of these policy actions; especially those related to human rights, democracy building, and outer space that require patience. What can be judged and evaluated, however, is the impact these decisions have made on the U.S.-China relationship and the international perception of the United States. While likely meant to paint the U.S. as a fearsome, law-defending nation that will not allow itself to be taken advantage of, Trump's actions have also brought great, and potentially irreparable, harm to both the U.S.-China relationship and the United States' image at large. These unprecedented circumstances in a great power competition relationship, which have been expanded by the Trump administration's China policies, require a supplemental framework to understand in their entirety.

THE 2020 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Regardless of whether Donald Trump remains or Joe Biden becomes president and Commander in Chief of the United States by the end of 2020, the U.S.-China relationship will remain estranged and in a state of great power competition due to events and actions over the last decade that have culminated in the current tensions seen today. Washington began officially analyzing China in earnest as a global competitor in 2011 when then-president Barack Obama announced his ‘Pivot to Asia’ and national strategies have listed China as a threat ever since, and such weighted actions cannot be mollified on both sides in just a few years. Furthermore, both presidential candidates Donald Trump and Joe Biden have recognized China as a competitor more than an ally and have expressed this danger during their campaigns.

While China policy has been addressed in both Donald Trump's and Joe Biden's limited campaigns and during official debates, the majority of the candidates' discussions have understandably focused on domestic policies, leaving observers wondering what may become of the U.S.-China relationship. “China policy” has become a stand-out subject of attack for both campaigns. Following the first 2020 presidential debate, CNN highlighted how “one of the few things Donald Trump and Joe Biden agreed upon was China,” with both candidates criticizing the other for “being too soft on Beijing.”¹³⁶ In an interview on October 15, Trump said “If Biden wins, China will own the United States.”¹³⁷ Analysts at The Wall Street Journal predict that the “hard line the U.S. has taken on China in recent years is likely to continue no matter” which candidate wins the election.¹³⁸ Similarly, policy director Benjamin H. Friedman at the Defense Priorities think tank says Biden would be “tougher” on China, but to “expect a less confrontational rhetorical approach overall, meaning less bluster of the sort (U.S. Secretary of State) Pompeo specializes in, which tends to damage relations for no good reason beyond domestic political consumption.”¹³⁹

Regardless of what is currently speculated of both China policies, the presidential candidates are each missing aspects of a successful China policy that must be addressed for successful policy-making regarding China.



U.S. President Donald Trump (Left), waving to crowds at the White House on July 4, 2017. Credit: Executive Office of the U.S./Former U.S. Vice-President Joe Biden (Right) speaking at McKinley Elementary School in Des Moines, Iowa on January 4, 2020. Credit: Flickr, Creative Commons

Trump-Pence Priorities and Outlooks on China

In short, the Trump Administration believes that past administrations have been too soft and too accommodating to China, which has placed the United States at a disadvantage in a renewed era of great power competition. A significant part of Trump's presidential campaign is dedicated to denouncing Biden's relationship with President Xi and highlighting his so-called soft views towards China. For example, on July 14, 2020, following signing an executive order meant to punish China, Trump stated that "Joe Biden and President Obama freely allowed China to pillage our factories, plunder our communities and steal our most precious secrets."¹⁴⁰ At the vice-presidential debate on October 8, when criticized by vice presidential candidate Kamala Harris over the "catastrophe" of the trade war, Vice President Mike Pence responded: "Lose the trade war with China? Joe Biden never fought it. Joe Biden has been a cheerleader for Communist China through over the last several decades."¹⁴¹

The current ways that the Trump Administration views the U.S. relationship with China as a great power competitor is inadequate for the current realities. It has bred instability and tension through consistently aggressive rhetoric and official actions in an attempt to prioritize the national security interests of Washington, the United States and its citizens. This is not to suggest that past administrations have been adequate or that there is a potentially flawless policy plan that exists and

that is simply untapped.

By observing the Trump Administration's China policy in action over the last four years, three notable aspects appear to be missing that could ameliorate the dissidents of this policy approach and make it more successful in the long-term: 1) cooperative compromises, 2) a backup plan in case China 'wins', and 3) an acknowledgement and balancing of the collateral damage the policy decisions have on third parties, domestically and internationally.

--Cooperative Compromises--

As previously explored, Donald Trump and other representatives across his administration have taken it upon themselves to exemplify Beijing and the Chinese Communist Party as untrustworthy, authoritarian violators of human rights and democracy who are trying to place the world at its feet. This accusatory rhetoric has been consistent over the last four years (except for a brief respite while the Phase One Trade Deal was being decided upon in late 2019 through January 2020) but has intensified since the coronavirus pandemic to dangerous levels.

Distrust now permeates most comments coming from Washington regarding Beijing, with sincere invitations to cooperate having become virtually extinct. This closing of doors drastically limits policy options in the near future and may eventually force other nations to 'pick a side.' If Donald Trump is reelected, there are few indications that his China policy will be at all altered, which suggests that the lack of cooperative compromises and the problems that follow will persist.

It should be noted that, compared to these representatives, in both their speech and their various legislative actions on China, members of Congress have achieved a greater balance of expressing both interest in finding common ground with China and contempt for the authoritarian activities committed by Beijing. Furthermore, many of these legislative actions were bipartisan in nature and passed quickly through to public law, which can indicate a unified consensus across Congress.

--A Backup Plan--

Regardless of what is promised or predicted, the future is unknown; especially with so many parties keeping secrets close at hand. The potential lack of a non-classified 'backup plan' is understandable, as an open acknowledgement of the possibility would be twisted by domestic Trump antagonists into meaning the Trump Administration is not confident in winning this great power competition. It may actually be concerning if such a plan were to be publicized for this and other reasons.

However, at present, observers are left to wonder what will become of the United States should the outcome of the competition not be in favor of the United States. Beijing, and much of the rest of China, holds a strong and long memory and would not soon forget what it perceives as four "immoral" years of "interfering in China's internal affairs," placing "unfounded accusations," and abusing the concept of national security for domestic purposes.¹⁴²

A well-prepared administration prepares for any outcome regardless of its prospects or appeal, and Trump's single-minded China policy may end up backing the United States into an inescapable corner. If a backup plan is not yet in place, it needs serious consideration with the risks that this Administration is taking.

--A Balance of Collateral Damage on Third Parties--

In his speeches and executive orders, Trump has referenced the danger of Chinese activities to the American people and the world at large, especially in reference to impacts on the economy and corporate security, but in practice this harm seems to be often overlooked in favor of harming Beijing. The most significant example would be the impact of the sanctions from the 18-month long Trade War on American farmers and business owners.¹⁴³ The Brookings Institute summarized the Trade War as having resulted in “more pain than gain” at the cost of billions, if not trillions, for American companies.¹³ This lack of attention to domestic repercussions could be distancing supporters of his administration’s policy-making and ultimately harm his chances of reelection and ability to follow through with his tough stance on China.

There is also the matter of international opinion. The world is watching the U.S.-China great power competition very closely and are often hit with unintended socioeconomic collateral damage from Trump China policies that go unaddressed. Trump’s infamous detachments of the U.S. from various major multinational organizations has heavily wounded this opinion of America and its intentions.

The Trump Administration lacks a person like Henry Kissinger, Howard Schultz, and John Kerry who served as a sort of ‘control tower’ consolidating opinions and policy suggestions from both political camps/outlooks (that is to say, pro-competition, pro-cooperation) to grant the final decision-maker with a more neutral, less-radical policy suggestion.

Trump reportedly asked the recent Ambassador to China Terry Branstad who, according to Secretary Pompeo, “has contributed to rebalancing U.S.-China relations so that it is results-oriented, reciprocal, and fair,” to help with his reelection campaign. “Instrumental” in making the Phase One trade deal with China a reality, the Chinese Foreign Ministry has described Branstad as an “old friend of the Chinese people” and has known Xi Jinping for decades.¹⁴⁴ If Ambassador Branstad does join the Trump Administration in an influential role to take on this ‘control tower’ position and Trump remains president, perhaps there will be a rebalancing of Washington’s China policy in the near future.

Biden-Harris Priorities and Outlooks on China

With much of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris’ focus understandably on domestic issues, there is yet to be much confirmation regarding a Biden administration China policy. Experts can glean educated predictions based on his time as Chair of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and as vice president under Obama, but there are no guarantees, especially as the outlook on the U.S.-China relationship has drastically changed compared to 2008, or even just compared to 2016. New issues of national security and their related global pressures have risen to precarious levels that would need to be factored into a Biden Administration China policy.¹⁴

13. As explored in “More pain than gain: How the US-China trade war hurt America,” August 7, 2020 by Ryan Hass and Abraham Denmark of the Brookings Institute: “A 2019 report from Bloomberg Economics estimated that the trade war would cost the U.S. economy \$316 billion by the end of 2020, while more recent research from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York and Columbia University found that U.S. companies lost at least \$1.7 trillion in the price of their stocks as a result of U.S. tariffs imposed on imports from China. Numerous studies have found that U.S. companies primarily paid for U.S. tariffs, with the cost estimated at nearly \$46 billion.” [It should be noted that it is unknown to what extent these statistics taken for 2020 separate the impacts of the Trade War and the COVID-19 pandemic.]

14. For an exploration of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris’ current and potential China policy, see the upcoming issue brief by Matt Geraci: “Biden’s Tai Chi on China: Analyzing Joe Biden’s Past and Present Legal and Policy Positions on China,” Institute for China America Studies, October 2020.

Like Trump's, what is known of Biden's China policy is lacking. Based on current predictions, what still needs to be addressed in a Biden China policy includes 1) a long-term outlook, 2) accountability measures and, like Trump, 3) an acknowledgement and balancing of the collateral damage that policy decisions have on domestic and international third parties.

--Long-Term Outlook--

Beijing is playing the long game and has been doing so in force successfully for more than four decades. Washington will need a clear, public long-term plan to guide the U.S. through this great power competition. Such plans are typically created after an election and cabinet selection and, as tradition dictates with presidential elections, domestic matters have taken precedence. The four-year term limit is also highly discouraging to long-term planning. But these facts do not prevent Biden or Harris from pre-meditating on and sharing a plan for addressing the nation that the U.S. is currently in bitter rivalry with. If Biden becomes president, the release of a national security document and its comparison to past counterparts will be very insightful to understanding his administration's long-term outlook and primary concerns on foreign policy; especially regarding China.

--Accountability Measures--

One significant issue that would be vital to resolve would be ensuring whatever policies are made on China are held accountable, be they domestic-based such as in Congress or against China. Biden did speak on China in a speech in 2019, noting his support to "build a united front of friends and partners to challenge China's abusive behavior." According to the Los Angeles Times, "Trump's campaign has sought to paint Biden as soft on China, noting his history in the Senate and in the Obama White House of promoting political and economic engagement with Beijing."¹⁴⁵ The active participation of the U.S. Congress and multinational connections would be powerful and pivotal tools in making accountability a reality for whichever candidate wins the presidency in November.

Perhaps Biden's past interactions with and reportedly amicable relationship with Xi Jinping--which has been targeted in Trump presidential advertisements--would be a core tool as well, though the status is unknown. Joe Biden did call President Xi a "thug" at the Democratic presidential debate on February 25, 2020, promising to aggressively use sanctions if American companies and people are targeted.¹⁴⁶ The efficacy of this relationship, however, is unknown as it would have to wade through the sea of tensions and animosity that have been mutually cumulated over recent years.

--A Balance of Collateral Damage to Third Parties--

As mentioned in the previous section, the world economy and society is now so interwoven that consequences and collateral damage from policy decisions are virtually inevitable when two nations are decoupling. This can refer to the business community and other nations and international organizations observing the great power competition. Whether it is placing Americans at home at a disadvantage, pressuring allies to make unwanted decisions, or negatively altering international connections, collateral damage will result if not checked; especially in the turbulent, unstable U.S.-China relationship that currently exists and will not rapidly change.

To give the best chance at overall success and reduce dissent towards Washington, any China policy team in a potential Biden administration, the U.S. Congress or other seat of power in Washington must

not only acknowledge the existence of and factor in the danger of these unintended repercussions on the allies, adversaries and citizens of the United States but also take steps to ameliorate the dissent caused by them.

UNDERSTANDING THE PRESENT, PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

The current state of U.S.-China relationships between the nation's leaders appear more grim than ever before, as is exemplified in the statements given by President Trump and President Xi at the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations this September. Both leaders gave statements reflecting on the past, present and future of their countries and international cooperation, largely centered around the current coronavirus pandemic and the bilateral tensions therein.

In his speech, which was filled with an almost vitriol against China, President Trump wasted little time in directing attention towards Washington's perception of China's role in the pandemic and calling for retribution:¹⁴⁷

"As we pursue this bright future, we must hold accountable the nation which unleashed this plague onto the world: China...The United Nations must hold China accountable for their actions."



US President Donald Trump (on screen) addresses the general debate of the 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2020 via video. Photo: United Nations Handout

And included other 'wrongdoings' by China such as pollution and indirect references to human rights violations in Xinjiang:

"In addition, every year, China dumps millions and millions of tons of plastic and trash into the oceans, overfishes other countries' waters, destroys vast swaths of coral reef, and emits more toxic mercury into the atmosphere than any country anywhere in the world. China's carbon emissions are nearly twice what the U.S. has, and it's rising fast."

"If the United Nations is to be an effective organization, it must focus on the real problems of the world. This includes terrorism, the oppression of women, forced labor, drug trafficking, human and sex trafficking, religious persecution, and the ethnic cleansing of religious minorities."

In his own speech that followed, President Xi Jinping reiterated promises of China's intentions to be a cooperative, non-threatening competitor on the world stage.¹⁴⁸

"China is..., a country that is committed to peaceful, open, cooperative and common development. We will never seek hegemony, expansion, or sphere of influence. We have no intention to fight either a Cold War or a hot war with any country...We do not seek to develop only ourselves or engage in a zero-sum game...we aim to foster, over time, a new development paradigm with domestic circulation as the mainstay and domestic and international circulations reinforcing each other."

Xi also emphasized the importance of respecting a nation's domestic affairs, likely referring to the U.S. commentaries on Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Taiwan:



"We should see each other as members of the same big family, pursue win-win cooperation, and rise above ideological disputes and do not fall into the trap of "clash of civilizations". More importantly, we should respect a country's independent choice of development path and model."

Chinese President Xi Jinping (on screen) addresses the general debate of the 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2020 via video. Credit: UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

The current tensions in the U.S.-China relationships have reached a perilous height and have shaped every aspect of the bilateral--and international--relationship. The world needs restabilization. While senior policy-makers are still trying their best to address certain issues with tools currently available, for the foreseeable future, certain issues will require more discussion. However, tailoring policies for each issue 1) costs time, 2) costs resources, and 3) may contradict with one another in the end upon implementation. These contradictions could create inconsistencies and confusion across the holistic China policy, which could foment even more frustrations. The greater the inconsistencies, the more likely the relationship will become even more turbulent and unstable. This is why open communication between domestic leaders and a firm understanding/acknowledgement of the base reality is essential to diminishing these inconsistencies as much as possible.

Regardless of who wins the 2020 presidential election, a new framework will be required to regain a semblance of stability in the great power competition. This framework will need to encompass three tasks. First, reevaluate the current reality in its holistic entirety in the context of modern circumstances. Second, understand the bare minimum requirements to continue developing U.S.-China relations, whatever results it may lead to. Third, provide a macro-level guidance that coordinates policy-making on each of these single issues that are essential to U.S.-China relations.

What Next: The Hydrangea Framework

THE THREE CHARACTERISTICS

With fewer than two weeks until the 2020 U.S. presidential election, neither of the presidential candidates have put out any innovative agenda regarding the United States' engagement with China over the next four years.¹ The discussion over China has been both limited and incomplete. While it may be important for each candidate to prioritize the most domestically-attractive China topic for election purposes (e.g., trade or the job market), focusing on specific issues in the U.S.-China relationship risks overlooking or, perhaps even worse, misidentifying the direction for well-processed policy making.

On October 7, 2020, the U.S. vice-presidential debate was held. Susan Page, the moderator of the debate, asked both Senator Kamala Harris and Vice President Mike Pence to describe the United States' "fundamental relationship with China," which neither of them directly responded to.¹⁴⁹ The reaction from both candidates are reasonable, given that two minutes is an insufficient amount of time to fully characterize the complicated relationship between the two countries.² However, the lack of clarity on the U.S.-China relationship is the very problem that needs to be tackled by American leadership. For policymakers and researchers, this relationship cannot be solely summarized as "complicated." Without the courage to at least portray what the U.S.-China relationship looks like, incomplete understandings and radical rhetoric would eventually kidnap the same policy making process.

With its importance having been established, the next step is to question: How would one describe the United States' fundamental relationship with China? What makes this relationship so complicated to explain?

1. For understandable reasons, foreign policy issues are not typically addressed in presidential campaigns since they do not fit the needs for quick soundbite campaign messages. Domestic political agendas remain the highest priority for this election; not the China policy. However, compared to the 1952 election, which focused on the rising tension of the Cold War, and the 2004 election, which focused on the War on Terror, this year's lack of discussion over China reveals two insights. First, on a general base, there are certain issues that have already been addressed and require no further elaboration. Second, from the American public's view, the U.S.-China relationship has not reached the same level of urgency as the Cold War did in 1952 and as counterterrorism did in 2004.

2. One interesting thing to notice is that the potential answers provided by Miss Page, the moderator, when she originally posed the question to the candidates. At the end of her question, she offered three potential answers, all of which are negative in nature: "Competitors? Adversaries? Enemies?" Other common relational terms such as "partner" or "co-operator" were excluded, likely intentionally, from her suggestion. Given that these questions were prepared based on the interests of the American public, the phrasing of this question contains a presumption that the U.S. can only have a negative relationship at present with China at present.

The coexistence of cooperation and competition would certainly make it virtually impossible to summarize correctly in one or two words, but there are three characteristics that are vital to unpacking this unprecedented relationship:

1. Global
2. Multifactorial
3. Complex (in inner- and outer-balance between competition and cooperation)

Global

The first characteristic of the current U.S.-China relationship is that it is global. Both the stage and the consequences of their interactions are global. Furthermore, the stage is set within a world that is more globalized than ever before and neither country has shown the capability of reversing the trend of increased globalization. As previous sections have discussed, these attempts at deglobalization, though accompanied by strong rhetoric on decoupling, were primarily seeking to cancel out the undesired impacts of globalization--for which neither country has been fully prepared.³

3. This determination reflects the need for a long-term plan of engagement between China and the U.S. since it would take years before the two countries find themselves comfortable with their relationship status in 2020. That being said, the effect of globalization is undoubtedly a worthy topic for further discussion with regard to the development of the U.S.-China relationship. Trade is the most well-known sector that can be easily, but not necessarily accurately, reflected by figures and charts. The impact of globalization on other sectors, such as human and intellectual exchanges, could take decades to come to light. It would be necessary for policy researchers and policymakers to explore a direct and effective method to keep track of each of these sectors. This report will be addressing this need in the following content.



Trump and Xi during a state visit to China. Credit: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China

Nevertheless, both Beijing and Washington possess clear global visions. The United States, despite being troubled by particular emerging issues brought by globalization such as increased trade deficits and immigration, has remained at the center of the current world order.⁴ Many of President Trump's "America First" policies have intentionally or otherwise sought to revise the current world order to better fit American interests.¹⁵⁰ Still, Trump's anti-globalization rhetoric and policies have not led to America's isolation from the global stage.

On the other hand, Beijing has only recently embraced a global vision. While looking forward to its perceived national rejuvenation, it seeks to actively plant itself across the world and gather increasingly significant roles:

4. The CRS report *U.S. Role in the World: Background and Issues for Congress*, describes the United States' role in the world since the end of World War II as "one of global leadership and significant engagement in international affairs." While the merit of such a role is debatable, it would be more than difficult for the U.S. to give up its role and return back to its state under the "Monroe Doctrine" which, contrary to general understanding, was not entirely isolationist.

“This new era will be an era of building on past successes to further advance our cause, and of continuing in a new historical context to strive for the success of socialism with Chinese characteristics...It will be an era for the Chinese people of all ethnic groups to work together and work hard to create a better life for themselves and ultimately achieve common prosperity for everyone...an era for all of us, the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation, to strive with one heart to realize the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation...an era that sees China moving closer to center stage and making greater contributions to mankind.”¹⁵¹

The notion of taking center stage on world politics, together with the concept of the “Community with Share Future of Mankind,” has become the guiding theme for China’s international engagement in recent years.¹⁵² Although China has a long journey to establish its image as a responsible great power, Beijing’s vision would only get more global than before.¹⁵³

The consequences of engagement between China and the U.S. would also be global. Geographically, as China’s power continues to rise, the bilateral engagement is no longer limited to the Asia-Pacific region. China’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) first displayed Beijing’s substantive outreach beyond the border of the Asia-Pacific since its reform and opening-up in 1979. The BRI has already alerted many Western observers as they feel it could be used to harm U.S. global interests.¹⁵⁴ Engagements over international development and development finance could ultimately project a global impact in virtually every developing country around the world.¹⁵⁵ Moreover, given that both countries are deeply embedded into the current international system, the impact of the bilateral engagement would have massive repercussions. For example, the 18-month long trade war hurt not only both countries’ domestic economies but also global economic growth.¹⁵⁶

The globalness of the current U.S.-China relationship has two significant implications. First, there are other global actors and factors to be considered when assessing this unprecedented bilateral



World leaders at the 2019 G20 Summit in Osaka, Japan. Credit: Palácio do Planalto, CC BY 2.0

relationship. Second, a long-term strategy and rules of engagement are needed more than ever to achieve a stable development of this bilateral relationship and avoid the extreme turbulence that triggers unnecessary global casualties. Therefore, although both countries began injecting notions of competition into their bilateral relationship, neither side would dare give up the remaining opportunity of cooperation, which serves as the stabilizer of the world system.

Multifactorial

The second characteristic of the current U.S.-China relationship is that it is multifactorial. Despite both the U.S. and China playing significant roles in the international system, they are just two of hundreds of actors, who can impact the development of the U.S.-China relationship.

The interactions of state and non-state actors with the U.S. or China have the potential to shift the power balance between the two countries. These third-party actions may not be beneficial to either the U.S. or China.⁵ But both countries must be prepared to respond to any such development since their global vision carries global responsibility. These responsibilities, such as the pressure to play global police or maintain the level of production as the world factory, are often burdens.⁶ Moreover, third-party state actors do not necessarily act independently, which adds further dynamics to the bilateral relationship as it becomes ever more complicated.

Non-state actors, including transnational corporations, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations, can also have a significant impact on the development of the U.S.-China relationship. This leads to two important issues that are worthy of further exploration.

First, given their varied agendas and interests, these non-state actors could bring in new elements to the development of the bilateral relationship, which leads to further complications. Global terrorism, for example, is one factor that requires cooperation between China and the U.S. Nevertheless, if the notion of competition oversimplified both countries' interaction, it would cost both countries and the rest of the world a lot more than seeing China and the U.S. in a stable state of great power competition.

Second, since non-state actors can associate with more state actors as a result of globalization, interaction among third-party actors and its complexities can multiply. This is especially true when third-party actors have conflicting interests, as it would be difficult to simplify Beijing and Washington's interaction with either cooperation or competition.

5. Take the 2016 South China Sea Arbitration as an example. As the Philippines' military ally, the U.S. was expected to respond to China's growing assertiveness and to show other allies its commitment. Beijing and Washington sent in large numbers of warships in order to deter the other. Over the last five years, tension in the region has subtly intensified as a result. Retrospectively speaking, however, following President Duterte's succession of Aquino III as the Philippines' new president, the U.S. did not receive any favorable outcome. On the contrary, Duterte has been distancing Philippine from the U.S. and pivoted to China until late 2020, when the two countries struggled over maritime affairs yet again. The security alliance limited options of Washington's response to China, which led to a greater expense of resources, with little return. In cases like this in today's globalized world, other third-party countries can be more flexible than either the U.S. and China.

6. The concept of inherent responsibility that accompanies global power is interesting to address. The U.S. under President Trump has abandoned many moral constraints that do not align with U.S. interests. regardless of the prestige the international system has brought to the U.S. This could be interpreted in a very "Spiderman" way: "With great power, comes great responsibility." Becoming the world's most prestigious country can also lead to an even greater expenditure of strategic resources and a tied-hand when it comes to national grand strategy making. President Trump and Former Vice President Biden have shown different attitudes towards this matter. Now, when it comes to China, how will President Xi perceive the inherent responsibility of China? China has long been cautious with the notion of hegemony, and there are reasons to believe that this caution is partly resulted from this cost-benefit calculation. The following section will be discussing this matter in greater detail.

For countries like the Philippines, its flexibility has already made the U.S.-China relationship more complicated. The bilateral relationship could only get more complicated when it involves countries that have deep history with both China and the United States. Take Pakistan, for instance, who is an American ally on counterterrorism. Yet it also possesses a strong tie with China. Pakistan's interaction with its neighbour India could be a very complicated issue to unpack regarding the development of the U.S.-China relationship. The same issue applies to Japan and South Korea. As both the two countries develop deeper economic and regional ties with China, dynamics within the United States' alliance management and China's regional commitments will further evolve.

Complex

The varied interests brought by third-party actors, together with the global outreach of both China and the United States leads to the third characteristic of this bilateral relationship that it is complex. The coexistence of competition and cooperation is pervasive. Despite showing significant trends towards a more competitive future, there remains room for cooperation between the two countries within and across sectors.¹⁵⁷



The inner-balance between competition and cooperation in each sector determines the general feature displayed by the realm. The security realm displays a general feature of competition, while the environmental realm displays a general feature of cooperation. It is dangerous to assume that the general feature displayed by each realm portrays that of the entirety of the realm. It does not. For certain realms where cooperation continues to be seen as the dominating feature, for example, such as international trade, while business continues to operate, competition between the two countries has quietly affected the flow of trade. Likewise, within realms that display a general notion of competition, there remains limited but significantly important cooperation between the two countries. Take the security realm as an example. Despite the rising tensions and ongoing geopolitical strategic power competition, both China and the U.S. continued to dispatch task forces to Somalia for an international escort mission.¹⁵⁸ While escorting convoys may not be the top priority and the major strategic consideration for the two countries, it was nevertheless a form of cooperation between the two countries even in such a competitive realm.

The outer-balance across all the different realms of U.S.-China engagement ultimately determines what we, as observers and researchers, see: a relationship of tense competition with minimal cooperation. While certain realms continue to show the general notion of cooperation, the significant increase of competition in certain realms eventually led to an ultimate perception of a primarily competitive bilateral relationship. That being said, it is worth emphasizing again that this approach is more reasonable to understand the increasing competition between the two countries. Taking the outer-balance displayed feature for granted would be a foreign affair version of the Blind and the Elephant.

The thought process matters in the assessment of the current U.S.-China relationship. Starting with the presumption that the relationship is first and foremost competitive risks overlooking the evidence

of cooperation in the background. Such ignorance would jeopardize the efficient policymaking process, which requires a comprehensive understanding and insight into the U.S.-China relationship. Unfortunately, there is a strong presence of mismatched expectations and ignorance on this matter, especially in recent years in both China and the U.S. The “What it is” question no longer matters. People instead ask “what it should be.” In this regard, both sides have to reflect on this dangerous development, since it is the very source of a non-negotiable, uncompromisable ideological conflict.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE THREE CHARACTERISTICS

These three combined characteristics--global, multifactorial and complex--are unprecedented to the world of policy research given that they are largely the product of globalization, which itself is still in the process of a dynamic evolution. This leads to the question of whether the current framework for policy assessment properly addresses and fully includes these three characteristics as frameworks adopted following the Cold War seem inadequate and insufficient in the globalized age.

After seeing the bilateral relationship develop stably for decades and anticipating that global economic interdependence would eventually lead to desired outcome, the shock, brought by the shifting balance of power between China and the U.S., plunged policymakers and researchers into unexplored territory. While some decided to hold steady onto what they had seen to be true for decades, others, after realizing the errors of this outdated approach, soon switched their tactics and sought blueprints from history. This initially appears to be a wise move. However, there is a blind spot in such kinds of thinking. Whatever ‘way’ the policymakers or researchers select, they are still on the existential path of political theory. Applying any state-centered political theory of international relations and their variations--realism or liberalism--independently to the unprecedented U.S.-China relationship of today produces an incomplete assessment of the reality. When experts use one-sided thinking in their analyses of this particular relationship, they inevitably discard the unique factors found therein--the ‘mutations’ or ‘outliers’--because they do not fit into their present model. In other words, the developments in the current U.S.-China relationship, whether positive or negative, would eventually be viewed as a negative add-on when analyzed through one of these traditional lenses.

That being said, this is not to suggest that policymakers or researchers who still utilize these traditional lenses are incorrect. This is meant to suggest that there is a missing framework apart from the two existing approaches for assessing the current U.S.-China relationship. Since this is an unprecedented scenario, it requires a customized worldview to form an effective solution. Just as the world is evolving, so is the U.S.-China relationship. Subject to changes in technology, values, and balances of power, the bilateral relationship could eventually drift away from these two historical models, which would make any attempt to revise the reality back to either perfect case scenario anachronistic.

Instead of using historical analogies to categorize the current bilateral relationship, this unique framework of thinking must assess the current U.S.-China relationship without relying on past political theory; in other words, starting with this unprecedented reality of the situation without

considering a perfect-case scenario in mind. Moreover, the new framework should be able to conclude the current characteristics of the U.S.-China bilateral relationship as well as initiate the assessment based on the characteristics of the present--not on past inadequate case studies such as those addressed at the beginning of this report. Finally, the new framework should be able to fluidly evolve alongside the U.S.-China relationship in order to remain accurate and relevant.

But how can this new framework reflect the current characteristics of the relationship without applying presumptions? This report hereby presents the Hydrangea Framework, which seeks to pave the way to the broader discussion that provides a fresh alternative in assessing the current U.S.-China relationship.

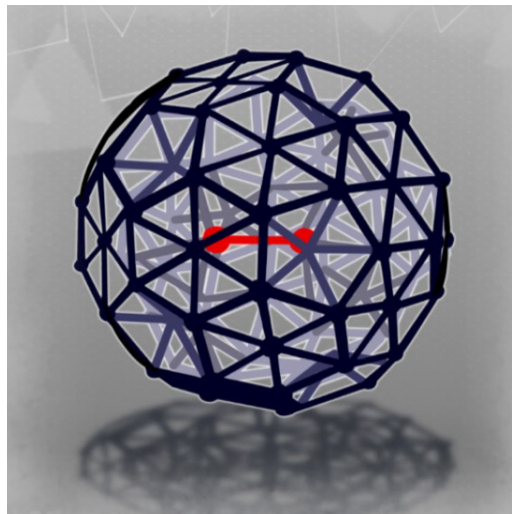
INTRODUCING THE HYDRANGEA FRAMEWORK

“Hydrangea, (genus Hydrangea), any of a genus of erect or climbing woody shrubs, in the family Hydrangeaceae, native to the Western Hemisphere and eastern Asia. About 23 species are known. Several species are grown in greenhouses and gardens for their showy, usually ball-like flower clusters.”¹⁵⁹

The hydrangea flower is an appropriate metaphor to depict the current world order with regard to the U.S.-China relationship.



Image Source: Pixabay



A hydrangea flower, left, and an artistic representation of the Hydrangea Framework, right.

To begin, a hydrangea flower’s multiple clusters fits well with the depiction of the third-party countries under the current world order. The interests of these multiple actors (state and non-state actors) diversified and do not necessarily face the same direction. Moreover, while each of the flower’s clusters differ, they are connected to one core, which is similar to the third-party actors’ connection with the U.S.-China relationship. Given the significant roles played by both China and the United States, the interaction between each of the “clusters” (third-party countries and players) would eventually transmit impacts towards the “core” (China and the U.S.) of the hydrangea flower.

There is a clear distinction between what we have observed from the current U.S.-China relationship and the Core and Periphery Model proposed by Wallerstein.¹⁶⁰ This distinction is that it is the bilateral relationship of two great powers, not any individual country that serves as the “core.” Moreover, Wallerstein’s model focused more on addressing an economic system that has a strong sense of hierarchy where the “core” is superior to all other actors. In contrast, the Hydrangea Framework seeks to remind policymakers of the ‘power versus responsibility’ equation and how the “core” U.S.-China relationship is not only responsible for their self-development but also that of the rest of the world.⁷ Even for prestigious countries like the United States and China, the constraints they face from the rest of the world would prevent them from setting policy goals that exceed their strategic resources.⁸

Given the globalized setting however, in the long-run, development of the U.S.-China relationship could slowly change the form of the current world order. That being said, the process, if that ever happens, will be slow and limited. The development of the U.S.-China relationship is also subject to the development of other countries’ and their respective relationship with China and the United States. The development, or evolution of power in a sense, shall be observed and assessed closely, which means that the stable development of such new order will be crucial. A comprehensive assessment of the U.S.-China bilateral relationship, therefore, should involve both the comprehensive portrait of the evolving dynamics between the two countries, as well as the rest of the world with regard to the development of the two countries.

The million-dollar question here is, how could we better utilize the notion of the Hydrangea Framework to better serve our understanding of this unprecedented bilateral relationship between two great powers? What does the Hydrangea Framework tell us about the important factors to consider during our policy research?

The Consideration of Strategic Resources and Strategic Processes

For the context of this report, the term ‘resources’ will be defined as the strategic tangible ‘who’ and ‘what’ that are employed and implemented to fulfil policy goals while the term ‘process’ will encompass the strategic process or goal of ‘when’, ‘where’, and ‘how’ in implementing policy actions. ‘Resources’ are the foundations (material and political) of policy while the ‘processes’ are the methodology guiding the distribution of resources and the implementation of policy. In terms of an automated engine, ‘resources’ are the fuel while the ‘processes’ constitute the transmission system.

Material resources can originate from, but are not limited to: economics, natural energy, military force, technology, intelligence, and human capital. Political resources include

7. While the inhabitants of the “core” can change, the process of this requires decades to shift. Meanwhile, it is necessary for policy researchers and policymakers to look into potential solutions to see through a smooth, slow, but stable transition of power that sees either or both of the two countries fading out of the core relationship, while a new rising power slowly moves in and forms up the new core relationship. Given the current state of globalization and development on multilateralism, it would be very difficult to see one country taking center stage and becoming the core of the world order. The Hydrangea Framework intends to address such issues and help facilitate deeper discussion to the pursuit of stability in the new world order.

8. It is an important reminder that, in a globalized world, regardless of a country’s power and prestige, it cannot, and will not go against the entire world since power is a relative measure rather than an absolute one. To measure power and to see the peak of each country’s own power cycle is one important approach to examine. The “Power Cycle Theory” is contributed by Charles F. Doran who helped encouraged some of the thinking of this report.

intangible assets that can be cashed out for political gains, such as: social connections, trust, confidence, and legitimacy.

Related but not the same, processes can come in the form of establishing priorities, calculating and comparing cost and benefits, and making choices. It can also be understood as the reasoning and realization of political values and beliefs.

Efficient policy making and execution requires proper and balanced applications of both strategic resources and processes. In other words, resources and processes are mutually reliant for effective policy making and policy execution. Selecting the correct resource to support the implementation does not guarantee proper execution. Likewise, selecting a capable person to execute the policy does not guarantee an ideal outcome if the foundational resources are not properly addressed. Rather than identifying the proper resources or political leadership, it is the methodology and timing chosen that ultimately determines whether or not the resources are applied at optimal efficiency to meet policy goals. This realization is where the traditional understanding of the rational actor theory of International Relations requires clarification/expansion, and is the niche understanding that this report will operate within.

The purpose of conceptualizing these two terms is to fill in gaps in the application of the rational actor model in the field of International Relations. It does not seek to counter the current understanding of this complex model but aims to deepen assessments when applying this updated rational actor model to modern cases in the globalized era. As depicted by Alan Shadunts, there is no consensus on the meaning of the terms ‘rationality’ and ‘rational actor’ in debates on realism in International Relations. “Some of the most influential structural realists (such as John Mearsheimer and Kenneth Waltz) understand the rational actor assumption differently” and involve it to differing extents in their theories.¹⁶¹ Kenneth Waltz, the founder of structural realism, does not include the rational actor assumption in his analysis. He states: “[t]he theory requires no assumption of rationality...The theory says simply that if some do relatively well others will emulate them or fall by the wayside.”¹⁶²

Alternatively, in his book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001), John Mearsheimer lists Rationality as the last of the five core assumptions of his theory of rational actors, explaining:

*The fifth assumption is that great powers are rational actors. They are aware of their external environment and they think strategically about how to survive in it. In particular, they consider that preferences of other states and how their own behavior is likely to affect the behavior of those other states, and how the behavior of those other states is likely to affect their own strategy for survival. Moreover, states pay attention to the long term as well as the immediate consequences of their actions.*¹⁶³

While acknowledging and respecting the range of perspectives on the meaning of ‘rational choice theory,’ there lies a general assumption across these perspectives that applying an appropriate amount of resources to policy implementation guarantees success.

This report argues that this basic assumption is too material-centric and imbalanced, causing an over-

reliance on resource-dependency. When assessing policies and their implementation it is important to equally weigh the resources and the processes of designing and applying those resources. In other words, the 'processes' to distribute and apply the 'resources' should be considered as an inseparable and interdependent component of the assessment.

For example, in U.S. foreign policy, Africa is sometimes considered to be a forgotten region because of the general lack of U.S. activity in and with the region, especially compared with the United States' activities in the rest of the world. This declined presence has drastically reduced the options for suitable 'processes' that the U.S. may apply for acting in Africa. The U.S. has plenty of 'resources' at its disposal in the form of aid, military defense, human capital and connections, but without access to the 'processes' to reach the inroads to African nations, any new goal the U.S. may develop for its activity in the region will be difficult to achieve. Alternatively, through projects like its Belt and Road Initiative and soft power initiatives in education, technology, telecommunications and transportation, China has been applying its 'resources' to its self-committing 'processes' to meet its goals in the region.

The case of naval base acquisitions in Djibouti will be used to illustrate this understanding of 'resources' and 'processes' in the modern context of U.S.-China relations. Strategically located in the Horn of Africa in East Africa, the small country of Djibouti sits on the choke point of Bab-el-Mandeb Strait that separates the Red Sea from the Gulf of Aden and, therefore, the Suez Canal and the Indian Ocean, respectively. Its location has attracted the attention of multiple foreign militaries for decades, leading to multiple small-scale foreign naval presences being hosted on its coast. At present, France, a former colonizing power of Djibouti, Japan, Italy, the U.S. and now China have installed military bases or support bases around the capital city of Djibouti. The establishment of these various bases are part of the implementation of 'processes' required for these nations to apply their 'resources' (material and political) in the Horn of Africa.

The Hydrangea Framework seeks to encourage policy researchers and policymakers to begin their policy assessment by considering the state of their strategic resources and the strategic processes in that particular region or realm. The starting point will be to reevaluate U.S. and China and their relative relations with each other and with the rest of the world.

Efficiency Matters

Keeping the notion of strategic resources and strategic processes in mind, the efficiency of policy implementation and strategy-making is a paramount measure of evaluating current and future policy options for both the United States and China regarding the development of their bilateral relationship.

As previously discussed, both China and the United States have made unconventional attempts across many realms of engagement in order to change the current status-quo. However, neither country could possibly make significant progress. Many observers have argued that this is due to a lack of commitment for making changes in these realms, and hence suggested an increasing effort to further implement policies aim at realizing either cooperation or competition; not both. This is one direction to look at the current state of the U.S.-China bilateral relationship. Through the Hydrangea Framework, the situation can also be assessed and argued from an opposite direction.

The presumption for advocating any radical policy change to achieve significant shifts of power balance between China and the United States has downplayed or overlooked a fundamental issue: the reality. The status-quo of the current U.S.-China relationship is already a product of policy implementations through devoting currently available strategic resources distributed and arranged by the available strategic processes.

Had one nation obtained additional strategic resources, the current power balance would have already evolved.¹⁶⁴ This new reality--the new common--is itself to be considered as a flexible equilibrium, rather than a starting point. ⁹Those who advocate for extreme policy change, either towards a more competitive model or a more cooperative model, cannot assume that the change will happen within years without jeopardizing the fragile but stable power balance between the two countries. In other words, changes must evolve at a stable pace to ensure efficient policy implementation. Rapid changes or turbulences would require additional acquisition of strategic resources, and potentially rearrangement of priorities, which leads to inefficiency.

The current reality of the three characteristics of the current bilateral relationship makes radical change to current policies very costly. This is not only due to the fact that, under such a globalized setting, interests of multiple factors should be considered and options waged carefully, but also because of the significant role that both China and the United States are playing in the hydrangea-shaped world system. Strategic resources devoted specifically for changing the balance of power within the bilateral relationship is at the expense of redistributing strategic resources from the engagements with other countries. It should be that the redistribution of strategic resources involves refitting of strategic processes, which is also costly and time-consuming.

The Survival of Responsible Great Powers

The management of the current U.S.-China relationship requires pragmatism more than ever before. The fragile status-quo of this bilateral relationship also reflects the limitations of the current prestige of these two nations. Rather than discussing the power of the two countries, one issue that needs greater discussion is the survival of the two countries if they seek to sustain, and perhaps expand, their current prestige.¹⁰

Both China and the United States, while managing their bilateral relationship, cannot ignore other third-party actors. While both countries' strategic processes prioritized the great power competition, leaving any third-party actors out of scope would be dangerous and hence requires adequate, simultaneous distribution of strategic resources. This distribution of resources on two fronts is a vulnerability of both China and the United States. In other words, the U.S.-China relationship could

9. This is not to discourage or criticize policymakers for including their beliefs and value judgements in the strategy-making process. These factors should be, if properly incorporated, included in the strategic processes, which sets priorities and agendas. What is dangerous here, however, is how the policymakers, their advisors, or their policy researchers can lack a general understanding of what the new reality truly is. The latter part of this report will discuss in greater detail on building common ground of understanding the current state of U.S.-China relationship and tracking the development of the shift power dynamics.

10. Neither China nor the U.S. should take their current status and level of prestige for granted. Both countries reached their current status after many decades of effort. Current rhetoric such as "The United States is the greatest country in the world!" and "Nobody and nothing stands in the way of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese race!" are good slogans for boosting domestic morale and mobilizing the people. However, had such sentiments infect policymakers, their operation concept would be less about "what it is," but rather "what it should be." The increasing nationalistic sentiment and assertiveness from both nations is alarming and should require new mechanisms to address the challenges ahead.

be a lot more competitive and similar to the Cold War if there were less third-party actors involved in the current world system.¹¹ In this regard, maintaining stable development of the current U.S.-China relationship is in both country's self-interests.

In addition to contending with this vulnerability, the U.S. and China would have to deal with the issue of morality and reputation. Winning over the hearts and minds can bring credibility and prestige, both of which are important strategic resources. During the ongoing global novel coronavirus pandemic, both China and the United States have not been successfully portraying their image of responsible great powers to the rest of the world.¹⁶⁵ For this reason as well, it is in both nations' self-interest to live up to the commitment as responsible great powers. The great power competition between the two countries does not contradict with both providing and sustaining a stable international structure under the current world system.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE HYDRANGEA FRAMEWORK TO TRENDING ISSUES IN THE U.S.-CHINA RELATIONSHIP

Keeping the three characteristics of this unprecedented U.S.-China bilateral relationship (global, multifactorial, complex) and the importance of considering strategic resources and strategic processes in mind, this section seeks to reassess many of the trending issues in the current U.S.-China relationship through the Hydrangea Framework to provide a general outlook of how this new framework could encourage alternative ways of thinking. The main questions asked and addressed here are: What factors contributed to this current reality? How is this current state beneficial or harmful to the United States and China?

Security

The security realm has perhaps seen the greatest deterioration of relations and the strongest notion of competition between China and the United States under the renewed great power competition. There are three major factors that make total competition inefficient and losing for both competitors. Moreover, there exists the need to avoid decoupling and remain intact for both countries in the security realm to prevent losing marginal but vital security interests through cooperation. A rapid change of policy approach in the current state of the security realm would be very costly.

First, neither country could afford the consequences of a hot war given that the relationship is so global. Radical hawkish advocates on both sides must be repeatedly reminded of the serious

11. Theoretically, the two countries could go ahead with their honorable duel, but even the winner of the duel is not guaranteed to be the one who takes all. Many have called the 2000s as the strategic opportunity period for China since the United States was occupied with fighting the War on Terror and lacked time to check and balance the rising Beijing. It is arguable, however, that a more suitable period to be considered as China's strategic opportunity period would be the 1970s and 1980s when the United States had to devote most of its resources to competing with the Soviet Union. Significant third-party actors, such as the E.U., India, and Russia are not likely to intervene with the U.S.-China competition, had it emerged into the new Cold War. The full-out competition between China and the United States will become the strategic opportunity period for these third-party actors. Whoever the winner of the duel may be, will soon find a second rising power entering the power balance. Cynically, the current power balance between China and the United States is needed to prevent any potential "stab in the back" by any other party.

consequences posed by a potential Third World War.¹² Moreover, despite being undermined by recent radical policies, the current level of interdependence has remained strong. Cutting these ties to start a war is possible but extremely costly. The Washington-Moscow hotline could be a potential historical case for both China and the United States to refer to as a historical analogy.¹⁶⁶ Competition in the security realm does not have to result in the form of hot war.

Furthermore, there are incentives for both countries to remain intact regardless of the increasing competition in the security realm. The impact of third-party actors requires both nations to co-manage and, if necessary, counterbalance the attempts to sabotage prestige. For instance, there is the case of the Japan-South Korea trade dispute that has continued until today. While both Asian countries not only competed on trade issues, the struggle expanded to historical issues and territorial disputes.¹⁶⁷ Without proper bilateral communication on third party issues, the U.S. and China bilateral relationship could receive serious impact since both Japan and South Korea are important allies to the U.S. and China's important regional partners.

In addition, without proper communication channels in place, the competition between China and the United States could send inaccurate signals to third-party actors, which invites further instability. The South China Sea is a good example to exhibit the importance of improving communication between China and the U.S. to avoid sending false signals to other regional actors. So far, they have not facilitated any productive discussion on the subject despite it being such a high priority policy on both sides. Instead, the U.S. released its new position paper that contains a critical rhetorical position without taking any solid action against China.¹⁶⁸ The strong rhetoric, however, could mislead regional actors to take U.S. intervention for granted, which would test the American commitment and stress the strategic resources available to the region.¹⁶⁹

Finally, even in such a competitive realm, there are still opportunities for the U.S. and China to cooperate. In certain areas, both countries still need to work together to maximize interests. Shifting towards full competition is at the expense of losing the cooperation that has benefited both countries for decades. For instance, although the security concern in outer space has led the U.S. to establish the U.S. Space Force as an independent military branch in 2019, there are certain areas that both countries need to cooperate over while they coexist and compete in outer space.¹⁷⁰ The International Space Station (ISS) is planned to retire by 2024. Notably, the Trump Administration and NASA have not publicly proposed any plan to substitute the ISS.¹⁷¹ Consequently, by 2025, the only operating space station would be China's new Tiangong space station. China has extended an invitation to all United Nations members to conduct experiments on-board Tiangong, which could be a potential temporary substitute for the retired ISS.¹⁷²

There are other examples of where maintaining or fostering cooperation in the security realm is beneficial to both the U.S. and China. For instance, both countries shared interests with regard to preventing the nuclear proliferation on the Korea Peninsula. Also, the two countries both joined the international effort to escort convoys near the coast of Somalia to combat piracy. Finally, although the major theme has shifted away from the War on Terror, as the two great powers who both suffered

12. Big-talking policymakers must be reminded of the cost of any radical policy implementation. The consequences should be weighted as equally important as the temptation of the potential benefits. One question that the general public should constantly ask their leaders in such situations is "And what, must we give in return?"

huge casualties from terrorist attacks, both countries remain committed to counterterrorism. These limited cooperation efforts were not only beneficial to the U.S. and China, but also ensured that the U.S.-China competition would not empower any third party that could take advantage of the situation and challenge their positions.

Trade and Economics

Trade relations have significantly declined in recent years, mostly due to the trade war. However, as previously discussed, the trade war did not fundamentally change the trade flow between China and the United States. Unless globalization is reversible, which it has been established that it is not, the United States and China need to remain intact and explore a more efficient path to balancing cooperation and competition in the trade and economics realm while addressing both the great power competition.

It is generally understood that the United States and China serve as the global nexus for the world's economy. That alone makes it important for both countries to remain intact to at least sustain the status-quo. The consequences of a U.S.-China competition without backstops have been clearly revealed from the outcome of the trade war, and some were unexpected. Should such competition continue without proper management and communication, it would be devastating to the global economic development and development of these two countries, since the world now lives in a permanent state of globalization.

From a competitive perspective, the great power competition also requires a stable global trade system to fuel the resources of both countries. Trade between the United States and China involves international suppliers. That supply chain also provides prestige and flow of information, which are critical to both countries under the great power competition. Moreover, the interdependence could provide an additional source for balance of power and maintaining a certain level of interdependency on trade issues helps the U.S. to defend the primacy of the U.S. dollar.¹³ If the relationship was forced to break and moved towards complete competition, China would likely aim to further expand the influence of its renminbi (yuan) currency as an accompanied effort to establish blocs and camps in order to prepare for a Cold War. So far, there's no guarantee that third-party actors would switch to the renminbi even if China decides to promote the influence of its currency and challenge the US dollar. The reality would not be guaranteed if the relationship in the trade realm, or the bilateral relationship, broke completely.

Finally, with the current level of competition, despite certain areas that see unnecessary waste of resources, which requires further assessment to readjust the current approach, the competition between China and the U.S. in the realm of trade has, overall, been benign. The spill over of trade creates both resources and boosts technological knowledge that is the basis of both countries'

13. Regardless of the questionable justification of the trade war, the Phase 1 Trade Deal, as an outcome, could be seen as an operable tool for the balance of power between China and the United States in many regards. The Phase 1 Trade Deal brought up certain areas that have long been called for further reform and opening-up especially in the financial sector. In fact, financial service would be one of the few powerful U.S. exports to China that both bring additional sources of reform to China and strategic leverage to the United States. That being said, it does not necessarily suggest that the reform could only be achieved through the means of a trade war. For more information, see Understanding the US-China Trade Relationship (The US-China Business Council, January 2017), <https://www.uschina.org/sites/default/files/Oxford%20Economics%20US%20Jobs%20and%20China%20Trade%20Report.pdf>.

sustainable development. As long as radical policy approaches don't jeopardize or intensify the benign competition, current trade and economic relations between China and the United States would only need improvement rather than restructuring.

The understanding of current U.S.-China trade relations is perhaps the most widely studied and presented realm among all regarding the bilateral relationship, especially since information gathering for trade activities and big economic figures are relatively easier compared to many other realms such as human exchange and technological development. The Hydrangea Framework highlights the importance of the third-party actors in this realm and their interactions with both China and the United States, to be paired with the abundant amount of data and analyses on the bilateral trade. Moreover, the global network of trade and economic activities such as the global supply chain would require a more comprehensive measure and structure to be presented in order to show the constantly evolving dynamics and their potential implications.

Democracy and Liberalization

Before expanding on this topic, it is worth reiterating the distinction between the promotion of international democratic values and the ideological democracy. Beijing has not denied the need for promoting democratic value around the world and has never denied the nuance and essence of democracy, but it does apply a notably different interpretation of democracy compared to most of the West.¹⁷³ That being said, debate between the American interpretation of democracy and the Chinese interpretation, would certainly exist. Yet such forms of debate are very different from an ideological conflict advocated by the American hawks and Chinese "Wolf-Warriors" in recent years.¹⁷⁴ It appears that the current global interpretation and understanding of democracy aligns with that of the West--and, therefore, that of the U.S.--which surely is frustrating to governments with alternate understandings of the term. The lack of a consensus on the definition of democracy, and therefore the strategic processes, makes cooperation not only difficult but frustrating; especially in a realm that shows little tangible return for resources spent.

The basis of democracy, common across understandings, is to encourage and see all views. Preserving Sino-American connections under the context of the great power competition itself is a symbol of the international liberal order, which benefits both countries as they seek to sustain or even expand their influence and promote their reputation and credibility. For the United States, maintaining even a limited connection with China contributes to the United States' global reputation as the democratic leader. On the other hand, resisting its domestic "wolf-warrior" sentiment and establishing limited engagement with the U.S. benefit China being regarded as responsible and liberal.¹⁴ In addition, both the U.S. and China want to remain and be seen, respectively, as a responsible leader. Each third-party actor would have its own view of both China and the U.S. evaluating their commitment to the international liberal order. But if the U.S. and China decide to instead accuse each other of breaking promises over non-negotiable ideological issues, the message sent to the rest of the world

14. One long-standing debate is whether China is to be considered as a revisionist state. Over time, the term "revisionist state" has become tainted with a negative connotation in both Chinese and English nuances but, interpreted as a neutral term, it describes a state that seeks to revise certain order through various means, for good or for bad, to better address its needs. It is a nation's policies and implementations that are worth discussing and analyzing, especially in such a complex and dynamic relationship. Name branding only deepens the presumption of the state being a troublemaker and does not help facilitate the healthy connection between the two countries.

would jeopardize their current global recognition as well as the strategic resource provided by such recognition.

Finally, from a great power competition perspective, China remains in the initial stage of economic liberalization, which is typically followed by further liberalization of its society and political structure.¹⁷⁵ Although the pace of China's liberalization was rather frequently criticized by the United States, China's current level of liberalization is, in general, largely improved from where it was back in the 1970s.¹⁵ Remaining intact helps preserve channels of communication for the U.S. to continuously deliver its need to China.

Technology

Given the rise of the internet and the technology revolution over the last three decades, the technology realm was an emerging field for the great power competition between China and the United States. Given its undeniable significance to future power building, it is expected that there will be an increasing notion of competition in the technology realm in upcoming years, especially with highly-public clashes such as those involving Huawei and TikTok that were previously discussed. Yet, for many emerging fields in the technology realm, a collective system of rulemaking is lacking and parties are often left deceived, embittered, and distrustful.¹⁷⁶ This is one of the fundamental incentives for China and the United States to at least communicate on the global effort of rulemaking regarding the technology realm.¹⁷⁷

Moreover, technological development in both the U.S. and China are deeply intertwined with the global supply chain. Remaining intact as it is right now could at least stabilize the global supply chain and benefit the sustainable development of both countries. The international community relies heavily on both American and Chinese technology, so breaking the connection would not only harm the production of technology but also the spread of technological knowledge, which contradicts the responsibility of great powers in the liberal world order.

Finally, similar to the outer space issue, there are certain technologies that neither the U.S. nor China want anyone to take the lead on. Maintaining relations and open lines of cooperation in the emerging technology realm could provide, to a certain degree, a reliable means to check and balance each other, which neither contradict to the notion of the renewed great power competition, nor jeopardize or harm innovation.

15. This improvement may be due to a host of factors that could be both intentional (allowances and laws passed by the government) and incidental from globalization (the impact of interconnectivity and influence of Western ideas of democracy).

THE HYDRANGEA FRAMEWORK IN USE: OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The previous section provided a general outlook on how the Hydrangea Framework could be used to evaluate and assess the current state of the U.S.-China relationship. Based on these assessments, there are six major observations and conclusions with regard to this new framework.

1. The Hydrangea Framework does not demand friendly cooperation between the competing power. Unlike most of the classic models, it is not an “ideal” model that presumes a perfect form of engagement between China and the United States, but rather a “timely” model that seeks to depict the notion that even great powers, to a certain extent, need to remain intact to survive.
2. Balancing out the turbulence requires not only the sound strategic processing and efficient strategic resources contributed by China and the United States, but also requires the interaction and involvement of third-party actors. These actors play an important role in maintaining the stability of and influencing the great power relationship and their voices matter under the current liberal world order.
3. Notions of competition and cooperation between the United States and China are constantly shifting both within and across each realm of engagement. Within each realm, certain sectors will display dominance of the notion of competition, while others will display dominance of the notion of cooperation. Holistically, it is the policymaker’s choice whether all sectors should be dominated by either notion of competition or cooperation. Nevertheless, even if that is the case, the bottom line is to always preserve the potential means to reverse the course of actions as the implementation of the policies meet significant pushback or intolerable levels of inefficiency. Devoting every available strategic resource and reorganizing strategic processes to prioritize one cause without leaving a way to return is not policymaking but gambling.
4. Given that the Hydrangea Framework focuses on not only the core bilateral relationship to the current world order but also the great power’s interaction with third-party actors, the designation of the competing powers (in the context of this report, China, and the United States) can be exchanged when circumstances lead a third party to rise. That being said, the evolving power dynamics and the potential for succession of core great powers would require more than just standard case studies to track and present trends.
5. Given that the Hydrangea Framework does not presume a perfect model, there is no right or wrong when evaluating the relationship between the two competing powers. The Framework, from a policymaking perspective, only champions the efficient distribution and usage of strategic resources as well as the reasonable and well-implemented strategic processes. Therefore, based on the evaluation of the Hydrangea Framework, what is needed is mechanisms that balance out the turbulence caused by competitive actions to ensure the bilateral relationship remain intact and stable

6. The currently existing crisis management mechanism is insufficient in keeping the U.S.-China relationship intact since there lacks a common ground of understanding on which to preserve and foster the effective channels of communication that allow information exchange. Moreover, due to the significant global consequences of a potential fallout between China and the United States, the traditional approach of limiting the damage would be less effective. What is needed is a crisis prevention mechanism that facilitates long-term policies to sustain the stable development of the bilateral relationship, which could ultimately result in a more competitive or cooperative outcome, without the disturbance of turbulence and crises.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR CRISIS PREVENTION MECHANISM

The Hydrangea Framework seeks to provide a supplementary method to assess the global, multifactorial, and complex U.S.-China relationship. The deep understanding of this relationship should be incorporated into a crisis prevention mechanism that identifies and tackles the serious global consequences brought by a potential crisis between China and the United States.

The foundation of the crisis-prevention mechanism is to keep the U.S.-China bilateral relationship intact. The Hydrangea Framework has revealed that, despite the context of renewed great power competition, preserving at least a minimum level of connection is not only achievable but beneficial in many ways to both China and the United States. This leads to an expanded discussion over what the crisis prevention mechanism does, how it differs from the traditional crisis management mechanism, and what needs to be improved on or implemented to bring the mechanism to reality.



“Red Phone” Moscow–Washington hotline from the Carter Administration White House. Contrary to popular belief, this red phone was NOT used for the Washington-Moscow Hotline, but was a teletype and later a facsimile link, it never was a phone line. Photo: Jimmy Carter Library and Museum, CC BY 3.0

Channels of Constant Communication

Although there was never a real “red telephone” between the United States and the Soviet Union,¹⁷⁸ the concept of maintaining a direct line of communication has become a textbook example of a crisis management mechanism. Its fundamental value, which is maintained today, is to establish early and direct engagement in crises, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, to avoid lagging in communication and missing time-sensitive messages.

“In the view of the United States, such a link should, as a general matter, be reserved for emergency use; that is to say, for example, that it might be reserved for communications concerning a military crisis which might appear directly to threaten the security of either of the states involved and where such developments were taking place at a rate which

appeared to preclude the use of normal consultative procedures. Effectiveness of the link would not be degraded through use for other matters.”¹⁷⁹

The crisis management mechanism does take into consideration the fact that communication serves as the important vehicle to help de-escalate crises and perform potential damage control. However, in today’s world, considering the rapid transmission of information as a result of technological advance, a crisis between China and the United States could trigger strong nationalistic sentiment and hostility before leaders of both countries have the opportunity to communicate positions and discuss solutions of de-escalation. Assessing the serious global consequences of a potential crisis emerging between the U.S. and China under the current context of great power competition, easing away tensions in the presence of mass and rapidly-disseminated nationalistic sentiments would be challenging and costly.

Therefore, due to today’s context, what is needed is a mechanism that plans beyond the currently-existing crisis management mechanism: a crisis prevention mechanism. Instead of passively waiting for a crisis to emerge and containing the resulting damage, a crisis prevention mechanism should focus on identifying potential risks of crisis prior to a crisis outbreak. The first step is to establish and foster channels of constant communication that allows professionals from both China and the United States, and even third-party actors from various backgrounds, to communicate and identify at-risk issues worth tracking, even during the absence of a crisis.

These channels of communications can exist in various formats. Formal diplomatic channels, strategic dialogues between senior officials, roundtable discussions, and track II engagements are all adequate examples. What is important is to ensure that, given the complexity and diversity of issues and interests involved, each of these channels of communication should have a systematic approach to the general U.S.-China relationship prior to trickling down discussions to each of the specific realms or issues. Moreover, both China and the United States should designate experienced and capable officials to consolidate information received from each of these channels for systematic analysis and assessment of the evolving dynamics. The outcomes of these analyses could also be exchanged and disseminated through these channels to form a common ground of understanding of the evolving dynamics and current realities, as well as the potential areas that require further premeditation.

Of course, this would only be possible with the commitment and support of both governments. Given that the average party would prefer to wait until a crisis emerges to deal with any consequences rather than spend resources preventing a crisis, the successful implementation of such a crisis prevention mechanism is questionable. However, when applying this concept to world order and the stability of great power competition, the consequences of crises are far greater and undeniably worthy of a crisis prevention mechanism. Investing in long-term preventative measures can also be seen as fulfilling the responsibility of great powers to protect the stability of the world order.

The comprehensive collection and exchange of information is merely the first step of the crisis prevention mechanism. Given the huge amount of information involving various sectors and actors, new methods should be incorporated to help the process of consolidation and make sense out of the large raw information.

HOW TO BUILD UP A COMMON GROUND? THE BIG DATA IMPLICATION

As technology developed, many businesses and industries began to use ‘big data’ to improve and process large amounts of information. The technology is not new to the world but it yet to be fully applied to the field of international policy research. Traditional case-based policy research has its merits in providing quick and reliable assessments on specific issues. But as previous sections discussed, when it comes to analyzing complicated bilateral relationships such as the U.S.-China relationship and subsequently providing policymaking insights, this traditional method risks oversimplifying the situation by only focusing on the dominating theme while overlooking each of the specific evolving dynamics. Moreover, the oversimplification of risks creating the perfect models that either mislead policymakers and researchers or disappoint them.

Instead of prioritizing qualitative case studies that can mislead the researcher into the direction of “what it should be,” with properly designed schemes of data collection, big data could help honestly reflect the ever-changing dynamics between China and the United States and facilitate shared understandings of the reality of the U.S.-China relationship. This is why the constant communication between China and the United States is vital to the establishment of the crisis prevention mechanism. Experts from both countries and third-party countries bring in as many different factors and standards as possible. This will be the shared standard for information gathering and assessment, which is also subject to mutually agreed revision based on constant communication.

Big data will mostly be useful in reflecting the shift between cooperation and competition, which is particularly helpful identifying potential risks of crisis under the context of great power competition. In addition to the advantage of quantitative processing, visualizations of big data (e.g., interactive geographic information systems and charts) could provide an intuitive understanding of the evolving trends. This would be very useful for informing and engaging the public. Finally, these intuitive experiences with big data could also help facilitate the understanding of the nuance of trends in the U.S.-China relationship.

Conclusion: Understanding the Nuance of Trend

The crisis prevention mechanism, alongside the incorporation of big data technologies, could help provide objective depiction of the current reality and provide intuitive insights into where the evolving trends may lead. The more that trends are consolidated, the easier it will be for policymakers and researchers to also explore potential futures of the U.S.-China relationship and perhaps even their likelihoods.

Capturing the notion of a trend is not an innovative idea. Both Americans and Chinese have long encountered and embraced the idea of trends with regard to the evolving dynamics and the potential of emerging crises. Dr. Henry Kissinger in his *On China*, specifically discussed the significant and distinctive nuance of the Chinese word *shi*, meaning trend or tendency:

“Hence the task of a strategist is less to analyze a particular situation than to determine its relationship to the context in which it occurs. No particular constellation is ever static; any pattern is temporary and in essence evolving. The strategist must capture the direction of that evolution and make it serve his ends.”¹⁸⁰

Ancient Chinese theorists developed the connotation of shi to help nuance the two most important factors to inform the strategist of the two most important factors in policy making: trends, the observable information that helps present the evolving dynamics, and the application of an objective understanding. Identifying potential risks is a process based on the assessment of the reality and the trends, which can lead to the prevention of crisis.

With the incorporation of big data, and the constant channels of communication, the ancient connotation shi could be more clearly nuanced and even conceptualized through the exchange of information between policymakers, policy researchers, and the general public from China, the United States, and the third-party actor. Such a crisis prevention mechanism would require government officials to not only draw clear distinctions between domestic political agendas and foreign policy goals, but also take the initiative to invite and mobilize the participation of experts from all sectors to join in the effort of preserving the U.S.-China relationship. That is, the most important unprecedented bilateral relationship ever observed in our history.

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