2021-22 WILSON CHINA FELLOWSHIP

Knowing the PRC: America's China Watchers between Engagement and Strategic Competition

David M. McCourt is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of California-Davis and a 2021–22 Wilson China Fellow

Abstract

Common pronouncements that Washington enjoys a "new consensus" on China mask wide variations in assessments of the China challenge. America's China watchers disagree on a host of issues: How much of a threat is China? Was "Engagement" a failure? What even *was* Engagement? This paper maps out the distinct positions on the shift to Strategic Competition. It centers America's China watching community as a worthwhile object for understanding Engagement's demise. Against the prevailing explanation—that China changed rendering Engagement unworkable—I show that no amount of "re-litigating" Engagement will get us to a genuine consensus on what must come next—nor, again, should it. I then analyze the four major groups among America's watchers and their views on China and U.S. policy—the *Strategic Competitors*, the *Engagers,* the *New Cold Warriors*, and the *Competitive Coexisters*. Finally, I identify the gaps between these groups, as a first step not toward consensus but productive disagreement.

Implications and Key Takeaways

- Undoubtedly an asset, America's vibrant China watching community features a tendency toward polarization and politicization. The U.S. government and the community should endeavor to counter such trends;
- Congress should continue to support the development and funding of opportunities for the study of Chinese language and culture, including reinitiating the China Fulbright program, and funding people-to-people exchanges and cultural diplomacy;
- The USCC and CCE should be supported, and they should continue to hear from a broad swathe of U.S. China experts in their testimony;
- Think tanks should follow suit: promoting dialogue among China experts across the spectrum of views described below at public events and during collaborative work;
- Finally, the government promote Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues with the PRC.

Introduction

Common pronouncements of a "new consensus" in Washington on China ignore wide variation among America's China watchers.[1] America's China watchers disagree on a host of issues: How much of a threat is China, and what kind? Is China rising, or about to collapse? Was America's policy of "Engagement" a failure, or reasonable at the time? *Was Engagement even a thing*? What does Strategic Competition entail? Proclamations of consensus are over-stated, if not inaccurate.

The lack of consensus should be unsurprising and is no bad thing.[2] U.S. foreign policy does not reflect pure rational calculations of threat or opportunity. Shifts in strategy are result of messy policy struggles that will not—nor should—cease. Baked into the concept of the national security community is that as a "clearing house" or "market" of ideas, as the community tests, checks and filters, policy recommendations and their intellectual bases, leading to better policy.[3]

To that end, in this paper I adopt a sociological perspective, foregrounding shifting social positions in the China debate, and the processes by which the community of China experts discuss, interpret, and frame China as an object for U.S. policy, I map out the distinct positions on Engagement and Strategic Competition within the China expert community. The topographical metaphor is deliberate. While individual experts view the world distinctly, nodal views emerge, clustering around a small number of positions. Those positions, in turn, contain holes and create blind spots. For example, a specific view might be strong on *de*scription—"China's human rights record is terrible," or "China's middle class still represents an important market for American business"—but weaker on *pre*scription, or *what to do*.

I identify four primary groupings within the debate: the *Strategic Competitors*, the *Engagers,* the *New Cold Warriors*, and the *Competitive Coexisters*. The *Strategic Competitors* seek a new, more hard-headed, approach. Viewing the U.S. and China as locked in a long-term competition—geopolitical, economics, and technological—they hope to operationalize Strategic Competition as policy. The *Engagers* defend the record of Engagement with the PRC. Typically more senior, with long-standing personal and professional ties to China or China policy, Engagers adopt a long view, and remain optimistic about cooperation. The *Competitive Coexisters* are mid-to-early career experts grappling with how to promote cooperation within a competitive

climate. Rejecting many of the assumptions of the Strategic Competitors, they focus on specific policy questions, particularly in business and technology. The *New Cold Warriors* take a more strident line. Convinced that China not just a competitor, but rival, even enemy, the Cold War is more than a metaphor. It is a framing definition of a global existential struggle for the hearts and minds of people around the world, necessitating the expenditure of all necessary military and economic resources.

Identifying these groups highlight gaps between their social locations and policy prescriptions. The question of how to promote human rights in China, in the context of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, and whether to formally repudiate America's policy of "strategic ambiguity" towards Cross-Strait relations, each represent critical "wedge" issues. With the New Cold Warriors scathing in their rejection of Engagement and the Engagers trenchant in their defense, the Strategic Competitors seek to frame policy as distinct from what came before. In so doing, they are aware—with the Competitive Coexisters—of the reality of doing business with China, diplomatic and otherwise.

I begin by centering America's China watching community as a worthwhile object of analysis. Against the prevailing explanation—that China changed rendering Engagement unworkable—I show that no amount of "relitigating" Engagement will forge a real consensus on what must come next, nor, again, should it. I then analyze four major groups among America's China watchers, before identifying important gaps. I highlight these gaps in the conviction that "consensuses" on any topic in the U.S. national security community should raise red-flags for those tasked with making policy. I conclude with some brief policy-recommendations, centered on expanding the range of voices heard in the debate, while fostering a broad community of knowledgeable China experts.

America's China Watchers and the Rise and Fall of Engagement

What *is* China? With a population of 1.4 billion and a land area of 10 million square kilometers, the answer is far from obvious. Is it the actions of the CCP? Or the hopes and dreams of ordinary citizens? There is no simple object for the referent "China."[4]

Despite this, an array of individuals profess authoritative insight.[5] From positions in the academy, the government, business, the media, and think tanks, they analyze China's economy, politics, military, society, and history, interpreting its past and, for some, divining its future. Some adopt the label "China watcher," a term harking back to before the opening when sinologists peered behind the "bamboo curtain."[6] The closing off of diplomatic exchanges between 1949 and 1972 limited the number of knowledgeable Americans to a handful of former diplomats, businesspeople, missionary children, and scholars. Since then, the number of credentialed China experts has grown to many thousands—from former diplomats to younger think tankers, from Wall Street analysts to new media commentators.

Institutionalizing Engagement

From the early 1970s, America's China watchers interpreted China as a multi-faceted opportunity. They saw the PRC as a geopolitical partner against the Soviet Union, a collaborator in growing cultural and educational exchange, a vast economic opportunity, a new world for scholarly and journalistic discovery. At base, they *knew* China as something that needed to be engaged.

Such understandings manifested at the policy level as "Engagement."[7] The term is a recent invention—first emerging during the run up to WTO membership during the 1990s, and later a way of negatively characterizing China policy since the 1970s.[8] Nevertheless, as a useful shorthand, "Engagement" conveys how successive policymakers shared the view that China was an enormous opportunity to be tapped, and sought to persuade the public of the same. The precise nature of that persuasion varied and is today a topic of contention, especially over whether Engagement was explicitly to the expectation—promise even—of liberalization in China.[9]

One tactic was to suggest that China could be brought into the Western-led international order as a "responsible stakeholder,"[10] and that greater integration might even lead to changes in China in a more liberal, democratic, direction.

From the mid-2010s, China morphed in the American imagination. Out went the vision of a complex object necessitating scholarly scrutiny and diplomatic engagement, and in came the idea that China was a bad international actor, the essential nature of which was settled and which no amount of

engagement could alter. While far from uniform, and not uncontested, a paradigm shift saw the vision of China as country to engage replaced by a one of a long-term adversary. It was increasingly accepted that China had reached the "end of reform," as a "third revolution" in the nature of the Chinese state—to a personalistic dictatorship—had taken place, a dictatorship playing a "long game" to supplant America as the global hegemon.[11] While some remained hopeful, many came to feel hopelessness, even despair.

What explains the transformation? Why did the growing Chinese economy—a place for the West's largest firms to find growth after the exhaustion of the North American, European, and other global markets—stop representing an opportunity and begin representing a challenge? When did Chinese outbound investment come to be seen as a vehicle for destabilizing political influence? In short, *how did engagement and cooperation stop making sense?* For whom, when, and why?

China Changed

The typical answer is that China changed—its economic growth outstripping expectations, its interconnectivity altering political economies across the globe, a widening definition of its core interests unsettling security architectures in East Asia and beyond. From the first shoots of liberalization in the 1980s, China changed—or reverted—into an authoritarian state, one willing to stamp down on the freedoms of its citizens—Uighurs, Hong Kongers, tennis players—and make commercial exchange with Western companies difficult if not impossible. Beyond China, critics point to the militarization of the South China Sea, ongoing threats against Taiwan, and attempts to spread Chinese influence abroad—from United Front campaigns in Australia, Europe, and the United States, to the sprawling Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The widespread belief that Beijing hid the outbreak of COVID-19, add to the impression that China is a bad international actor.

In the context of a bellicose and authoritarian China, a cooperative frame no longer fit with reality. It seemed naïve at best, at worst corrupt—intellectually and otherwise. As Kurt Campbell and Ely Ratner pithily noted in March 2018: "America got China wrong."[12] In such an environment, few could continue to advocate in good faith for exchanges of various types with the Chinese government and civil society.

Other explanations complement the "China changed" story. China's rise and, for some America's decline multiplies the effect of changes in China, from irritant to threat. Likewise, commentators note the importance of the election of Donald Trump in 2016, under whom the American government effected the shift to strategic competition. A long-time critic of U.S. trade policy toward China, Trump made much of standing up to China and bringing back American jobs. In office, he normalized tough rhetoric, and rather than prevent officials from developing initiatives likely to annoy the notoriously prickly Chinese, he empowered policymakers across government departments to root out Chinese influence campaigns, and to investigate security vulnerabilities tied to Chinese information technologies.

Developments in American thinking—and the strategy-making it underpins—appear therefore as straightforward responses to changes in China. Set against macro-historical shifts in global power, and changes in U.S. domestic politics, the sort of pro-globalization arguments of the 1990s now seem arcane. Indeed, *nothing could seem more obvious that U.S. China strategy has changed in response to changes in China.*

Engagement Reconsidered

The problem is that the world does not work that way. Knowledge production and strategic thinking are far from automatic—especially in messy liberal democracies like the United States. Scholarly communities, like the China field, are diverse arenas, featuring individuals personally, politically, and professionally invested in the knowledge they produce, and have produced over their careers. The changing of minds is an exception, rather than the rule.

The idea that China's transformation led automatically to developments at the level of American strategy, is thus a useful—even convenient—shorthand. And not entirely inaccurate as many China experts have changed their views. But it is not an adequate account of what has transpired, nor, therefore, guide to what might come next. An adequate account would make plain which individuals and groups altered their interpretation, how, when, and in response to what *specific* realizations or combination thereof—be it PRC designs on Taiwan, the militarization of the South China Sea, human rights violations, or some combination thereof. An adequate explanation would also make plain the sources of such knowledge, again, of how China is *made known*. An

adequate explanation of recent shifts in predominant interpretations of China would make clear their specific provenance—be it an area of governmental strategy-making or sector of the think tank space. Finally, an adequate explanation would account for the positions of those who—despite prevailing wisdom—still see China as more complex object than the military-security framing suggests, an object still necessitating engagement.

Attempts to understand Engagement's downfall are rendered difficult by two tendencies in the policy and academic debates, however. A first tendency is to present "Engagement" as a singular phenomenon—typically a coherent strategy, policy, or approach. Take, for example, the *United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China* of May 2020,[13] which begins:

> Since the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) established diplomatic relations in 1979, United States policy toward the PRC was largely premised on a hope that deepening engagement would spur fundamental economic and political opening in the PRC and lead to its emergence as a constructive and responsible global stakeholder, with a more open society.

Note here the slippage between "policy," "strategy," and "approach." Which, *precisely*, is it? While some slippage may be desirable—allowing officials to evade the specific usage of strategy in Department of Defense-speak as the rational alignment of national security mean to ends—such slippage impedes scholarly analysis. First, historically it suggests a degree of coherence difficult to sustain over four decades. Can Nixon's approach to China and Obama's pivot really be lumped in as the same kind of object? Second, it suggests a degree of concreteness typically lacking in international affairs. Has Engagement really ended? What about top-level climate change meetings? Are these not examples of engagement?[14]

A second problematic tendency is to assess Engagement's record exclusively within the frame of U.S.-China relations.[15] China is only one aspect of U.S. policy, and its history cannot be told solely with reference to major events in Sino-U.S. relations. Most starkly, the primary rationale behind the opening to Beijing was to further confrontation with the Soviets. While China is a consistently prominent concern, it is rarely top priority—others, from elections

to impeachments to pandemics, intervene. The Global War on Terror, for instance, re-organized U.S. foreign policy away from a nascent pivot to Asia, for the better part of 15 years.[16]

Together, these tendencies suggest the current debate mischaracterizes its object, lumping together different contexts and concerns, themselves shifting over time. For one a former long-time State Department official: "I do not recall any debate over "engagement" per se with China; for that matter, the word "engagement" rarely entered into the language of the 70s and 80s."[17] As this interviewee elaborated: "The term 'engagement' only began to be heard frequently during the [George H.W.] Bush administration, as President Bush, National Security Adviser Scowcroft and Secretary of State Baker sought to enunciate a new rationale for maintaining close ties with China—despite the Tiananmen Square atrocity, despite the halting of political 'reform,' despite the vanished Soviet threat."[18]

The upshot is not that Engagement "did not exist," but rather that since it has no singular referent, no amount of re-litigation will set the historical record straight. "Engagement" is not a single thing, but a polysemous artifact of the struggle among America's China experts to shape U.S. policy. Of greater import than defining Engagement is mapping the varied ways participants in that struggle use the term as part of their political projects. It is to that task we now turn.

Methodical note

This paper forms part of a broader project on the American China watching community and its impact on the recent evolution of U.S. foreign and security policy toward the PRC. The main project data is a set of 135 original semi-structured interviews with a range of U.S.-based China experts, including policymakers, diplomats, think tankers, academics, researchers, and journalists. U.S. data is augmented with 32 interviews with experts located in Australia (16) and the United Kingdom (16)—connected yet distinct China-watching eco-systems that, taken together, highlight some of the specificities of the Washington policy milieu. In addition, the paper draws on an exhaustive survey of secondary academic writings, think tank reports, media articles, and government strategy documents and speeches.

Engagers, Anti-Engagers, Strategic Competitors, and More

What are the major social groupings among America's China watchers? What do those groups believe? Why? In what follows I describe four broad groups in the current debate: groups I label *Strategic Competitors*; *Engagers*; *New Cold Warriors*; and *Competitive Coexisters*.

Any such mapping exercise necessarily does violence to reality. These categories should be considered "ideal types"—necessarily simplified accentuations of reality, not to be confused with empirical reality itself, to be judged on their usefulness for analysis and comparison.[19] Where some individuals might fit in more than one group, the aim is not to discern where they *really* belong, but to identify them as outliers, and hone of our understanding of why they are so.

In the following descriptions, I name names only when individuals' views are public. The aim is not to initiate the sort of "food fight" popular inside the Beltway. Again, the aim is not to identify "panda huggers" and "dragon slayers"—since those labels are far from helpful—nor to question people's motivations and investments. It is to recognize "who is where" in the debate, why, and what is policy perspectives are missed as individuals and groups frequently talk past less than to one another.

The Strategic Competitors

"Strategic Competitors" can be defined as experts seeking to develop a new, more robust and hard-headed, approach to U.S. relations with the PRC. Viewing Washington as locked with Beijing in a long-term competition across geopolitics, economics, and technology, these mostly mid-to-early career experts, not associated with the policy of Engagement, hope to contribute to policy formulation and implementation in the post-Trump era. At the core of the Strategic Competitors are those who theorized and then effected the shift away from Engagement, first from within the Trump administration, later continuing under Joe Biden. The group also includes those within in the broader China watching community supportive of the new frame. The group is broadly speaking bipartisan, despite the clear importance of the Trump presidency for the change in rhetoric and approach. What unites the group is less ideology than policy-focus—the urgency of conceptualizing and operationalizing a new approach to Sino-U.S. relations.

The Strategic Competitors' lodestar is Matthew Pottinger—Senior Asia Director on Trump's National Security Council and later Deputy National Security Director. A former U.S. marine and journalist, Pottinger was brought into the Trump administration by short-lived NSC Director Michael Flynn. Together with a team of deputies at the NSC who shared his sense of urgency, Pottinger managed not only to stick around in the notoriously tumultuous Trump White house, but develop a strategic throughput for a new American approach to relations with Beijing. The most important statements of the Strategic Competition approach can be found in the *National Security Strategy* of December 2017, the May 2020 *United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China*, and the *U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific,* declassified in January 2021.[20]

Although Pottinger and his team were at the heart of Strategic Competition, the *Strategic Competitors* group is wider. Their military-security view of the China challenge resonated with others inside and outside government. For example, organizations like the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission (USCC), the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments and Project 2049, and its Director Randall Schriver—are in a similar place, and have been for some time. So too, crucially, are a group of Democratic-affiliated experts and organizations—many with connections to the Center for a New American Security (CNAS)—including current NSC China Director Kurt Campbell, and other members of Biden's team, such as Ely Ratner and Rush Doshi.

Despite the turnover of administration, therefore, Strategic Competition remains the operating mode within government. As such, it has challenged America's China watchers to adapt to the new reality: either rethink their own views, defend the old approach, or advocate a perspective yet-more critical of China and the CCP. In this sense, the Strategic Competitors group includes—and has drawn inspiration from—long-standing experts who have changed their interpretations of the wisdom of Engagement, including Jerome Cohen, Michael Pillsbury, Orville Schell, David Shambaugh, and Winston Lord. Previously associated with America's embrace of China, in different ways they have all become China skeptics.

Like Engagement before it, Strategic Competition occupies the mainstream view within the Washington think tank space—the intellectual center

of gravity—as evidenced by its position at core think tanks such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)'s China Power Project, CNAS, and even Brookings and the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). The group also includes mid- and early-career experts from these organizations and others—like Jude Blanchette—especially those younger military-security specialists, like Elsa Kania, Elbridge Colby, and Hal Brands. Several China-skeptic journalists also fall into this category, such as John Pomfret and Bill Bishop.

The boundaries of the Strategic Competitor position are nevertheless fuzzy; the aforementioned might well disagree with their inclusion. Here the comparative function of the ideal-type becomes evident—again, the identification of boundary cases not to classify them fully, but to highlight why they do not fit. Take, for example, a China expert such as Liz Economy—formerly of the Council on Foreign Relations, now at Stanford University. Is Economy a Strategic Competitor? Forthright scholarship focused particularly on Chinese leader Xi Jinping's role in the PRC's global ambitions would suggest a closer affinity to the Strategic Competition position than Engagement.[21] Yet, Economy has not been as critical of longstanding policy as others, highlighting what ties the center of the Strategic Competitor group together.

Beyond the question of inclusion, then, the degree of "groupness" of the *Strategic Competitors* is also debatable. No suggestion of homogeneity is implied here. What is implied is a shared social location within the China field. The expression of that social location is the belief that Engagement did not work—that U.S. policy was predicated on economic and political opening that has not obtained, and a mistaken belief that America could "change China," rendering Engagement in need of replacement. Some focus more on the rise to power of Xi Jinping, some on the fundamental nature of the Chinese Communist Party, some say another successor might have gone the same way. For all of them, however, the United States is locked in a long-term competition with China, not of its own choosing, but China's. The United States, they believe, must recognize this and mobilize all its economic, military, and diplomatic resources for the challenge.

The social basis for the Strategic Competitors' beliefs is thus primarily their position vis-à-vis policy. In short, Strategic Competition is a "get tough" with China position for those invested in making and theorizing U.S. policy, particularly in the military and security spheres. The view's typical expression

are the myriad reports, papers, panels, and events on how better to compete with China, from tech,[22] to security and diplomacy,[23] and including a strong emphasis on human rights.[24] This may sound self-evident, but is in fact anything but—foreign policy often remains non-militarized or un-securitized. The Strategic Competition view thus makes the most sense for those not invested in going to China or investing in China, their career and personal investments being mostly Washington DC security space—primarily, but not exclusively, at the "revolving door" intersection between the government and think tanks.[25]

The Engagers

The Strategic Competitors exist in opposition to a group they replaced at the levers of power: the *Engagers*. Engagers can be defined as China experts who seek to defend the record of America's Engagement with the PRC. Typically more senior, with long-standing personal and professional ties to China or U.S. China policy, the Engagers a longer time view, and remain optimistic about what cooperation with Beijing can achieve.

At the heart of the Engager group is a set of former policymakers and diplomats—notable among them Charles "Chas" Freeman, Susan Shirk, J. Stapleton Roy, and Jeffrey Bader—who worked to maintain a degree of cooperation between the United States and China, despite the shifting pendulum of Sino-U.S. relations and occasional crisis. Beyond them, the Engager group includes individual like Jan Berris and David "Mike" Lampton, experienced China watchers associated with the cultural exchange organization the *National Committee on U.S.-China Relations* (NCUSCSR). It also includes others coming to the same place on China, but from distinct professional viewpoints. One thinks here of think tankers like Carla Freeman at John Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Service (SAIS) and Cheng Li at Brookings, or individuals like Charlene Barshevsky and Steve Orlins from the U.S.-China Business Council. Finally, a core constituency of the Engager group are academics, including MIT's Taylor Fravel from, as well as security specialists such as like Lyle Goldstein and Michael Swaine.

For the Engagers, "Engagement" was not a failure. It was justified from the 1970s onwards, first as a means to counter the Soviet Union, and later to raise living standards both here and in China, while promoting international

peace and security, as—for them—it remains.[26] In the Engager's view, at no point was a policy aimed at arresting China's rise morally or politically defensible. What the Strategic Competitors get wrong, in their view, is to confuse outcomes in China—which Engagers agree have not been what Americans would hope—with the intentions of American diplomacy, given that such intentions are not promises. Precisely what, they ask, should American have done differently? WTO membership stands here as a signal event the United States might not have pushed so heavily. Engagers counter, however, by asking whether successive governments themselves have been sufficiently committed to such global institutions, and might have done more to hold Beijing's feet to the WTO fire.

For the Engagers, moreover, the terms of the debate appear are not only stacked against the policies many had a hand in effecting, they are intellectually incoherent. As one senior ex- diplomat to me, "the current rhetoric... about the 'failure' of 'the engagement policy' is a gross misreading of the intentions and substance of U.S. policy."[27] For Staple Roy, as a political argument, the notion that Engagement failed "is the contention that Presidents Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush #41, Clinton and then Bush #43 and Obama *all* misconceived 'the national interest' and proceeded willy-nilly into something called an 'engagement' strategy toward China?"[28] Just as importantly, perhaps, Engagement was not really "a thing." In their terms, what is now known as Engagement was simply the prudent conduct of U.S.-China relations. For Roy, "Since there was never an 'engagement' strategy with uniform contents and goals, it is equally absurd to maintain that 'it' was a 'failure.'"[29]

The Engagers laid out their views in an open letter to the *Washington Post* in July 2019,[30] arguing that Trump's militarized anti-China rhetoric, together with the trade war, risked creating the type of zero-sum security dilemma diplomacy the United States should be trying to avoid. Against the Strategic Competitors' argument that previous U.S. policies sought to "change China," the Engagers charge that, in reality, it is the Strategic Competitors who are failing to accept China as it is. For the Engagers, while the Chinese government are engaging in policies and actions we find abhorrent, engagement remains the best way to keep America safe while advancing its interests.

Like the Strategic Competitors, what distinguishes the Engagement group within the broader China field is its relationship to policy—in this case, past

policy. In short, the Engagers believe what they believe because they have been involved professionally in engagement—especially diplomacy, and cultural, economic, and educational exchange.[31] Many have spent their lives engaging China, rendering it difficult for them at a personal level to accept the claim that Engagement failed. Some, when pushed, might agree that competition is a workable framework as a policy *evolution*, not a genuine *revolution*, since—again—there was no long-standing Engagement (with a capital "E") Strategic Competition replaces. As Stape Roy told this forum in 2021, "the U.S. policy of engagement has been discredited by knowledgeable foreign policy specialists who claim engagement was based on wholly unrealistic expectations that it would produce positive change in China. There is no question that engagement did facilitate Deng Xiaoping's reform and openness policies that produced several decades of rapid economic development in China, resulted in the globalization of its economy, and imbedded hundreds of thousands of western educated young Chinese in governing and educational institutions throughout the country."[32]

The Engagers' beliefs are also explained as much by what the Engagers are *not* as what they are. The Engagers are not, for example, professionally invested in human rights in China. This makes it possible for them to separate the CCP government as agents of human rights abuses from the CCP as a necessary interlocutor. While human rights-focused members of the China community might prefer to isolate Beijing internationally, the Engagers view some degree of engagement as inevitable. Finally, with some exceptions, the Engagers are not professionally invested with China's near neighbors—Korea, Japan, and—of course—the disputed Taiwan. This pushes in the same direction—of the need to engage with China diplomatically and personally, not as an ever-present "problem," but on its own terms and as a global player in its own right.

To summarize so far: the Strategic Competitors and the Engagers are two distinct social groups located within the China policy debate. The groups are not homogenous, nor are they closed or fully institutionalized. There are thus points of overlap with the broader China watching community, which features two further relatively distinct groups.

The Competitive Coexisters

The next group are the *Competitive Coexisters*. The Competitive Coexisters are mostly mid-to-early career China watchers grappling with how to promote cooperation within a competitive climate. Rejecting many of the assumptions of the Strategic Competitors, they focus on similar policy questions, particularly business and technology. Critical of the rhetorical and conceptual basis of Strategic Competition, yet recognizing that 2022 is not 2002, the Competitive Coexisters seek a broader understanding of the U.S. national interest, and display a marked skepticism not only toward politics in the PRC, but in America also.

While, like in the case of the Strategic Competitors, there is some overlap with the *Engagers*, the group is distinct, being mostly younger, and focused less on defending the old Engagement than with theorizing a new approach. In the think tank space, the group includes the Wilson Center's Robert Daly, Oriana Skylar Mastro at Stanford, New America's Samm Sacks, and Damien Ma from the Paulson Institute. The *Competitive Coexisters* also has a strong base in new media, such as Kaiser Kuo's "Sinica" podcast, Jeremy Goldkorn's *SupChina*, and roving China watcher Graham Webster.[33]

The question of the group's borders exact constitution remains, once again, an open question. One illustrative case is that of Susan Thornton, former Acting Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. Is Thornton an Engager or a Competitive Coexister? Well known for adopting a more diplomacy or engagement-first position on U.S.-China relations than the Trump administration she served under, Thornton accepts the reality of, but challenges the rhetorical and conceptual basis of, Strategic Competition. In a recent *New York Times* op-ed, Thornton notes that "The Biden administration has said that the era of engagement with China is over…and is building coalitions to deter and contain China militarily and issues frequent public critiques of Chinese actions. So unless something changes and more compelling incentives appear, I do not expect China to alter its behavior." For Thornton, leverage with Beijing will only be developed if Biden "recognize[s] and give[s] due weight to the concerns of allied and get[s] true—not half-baked—agreement on the agenda with them first. This takes time, hard work and compromise."[34]

Or, as another example, is Brookings's Ryan Hass a Competitive Coexister or a Strategic Competitor? Associated with Engagement due to government

service under Obama, Hass remains active in seeking to shape the prevailing policy narrative, in so doing he adopts the language of competition to look forward from the Trump administration's "experiment," rather than backwards toward Engagement.[35] For Hass, "The more Washington approaches its competition with China from a position of confidence in its own relative strengths, sets clear-eyed objectives, and executes a coherent strategy that enjoys support from allies and the American public, the better it will be able to craft policies that tangibly improve the security and prosperity of the American people."[36]

A final example of the Competitive Coexisters' fuzzy boundaries comes from a group of allies—whether aware of it or not—with a new set of voices in the Washington landscape: the "restrainers." The Quincy Institute on Responsible Statecraft and the military-security think tank Defense Priorities provides organizational hubs, where Michael Swaine and historian Stephen Wertheim are advocating for a reduced defense spending burden and theorizing what it means for U.S.-China relations.[37] The Atlantic Council's Emma Ashford adopts a similar viewpoint, as do IR realists such as Harvard's Stephen Walt and—from the UK—Patrick Porter. Individual others, like career intelligence officer Paul Heer, share points of overlap with the Competitive Coexisters.

While demarcation lines can be debated, what conjoins the Competitive Coexisters' position is the view that the rejection of Engagement was a political or tactical move by the Strategic Competitors, rather than a rational policy response to changing conditions in China. Like the Engagers, Competitive Coexisters worry about threat escalation, the securitization of China in the American political mind, and the creation of *faits accompli*, in which future leaders are locked into conflict even where they might hope to. For the Competitive Coexisters, like the Engagers, China is more than the Chinese Communist Party and its military-security apparatus. Competitive Coexisters deeply care for Chinese people too, having often strong connections to real Chinese people. As one told me, "I have friends there, friends I would give a kidney to."[38] Like the Engagers, the Competitive Coexisters do not deny China is going through a period of increased authoritarianism. But unlike the Strategic Competitors, the Competitive Coexisters do not see the change as having been inevitable, nor a return to openness impossible.

While they differ in their views of the necessity for the change in China policy developed by the Trump administration, in general the Competitive Coexisters see the "competition" frame as vague and unhelpful—smuggling in imagery of great power struggle ill-suited to the reality of a multipolar, globalized, world. Moreover, the imagery ignores important domestic challenges, reflecting a willingness of the Competitive Coexisters to cast a critical gaze at America when considering China. The generational difference between the Competitive Coexisters and the Engagers here becomes salient. Where many of the Engagers came of educational and professional age during the heady years of opening to a still exotic China—roughly the 1970s through the early 1990s—the Competitive Coexisters did the same in a very different domestic and international context. The Competitive Coexisters thus view current debates against a backdrop of post-9/11 cultural malaise, including a marked concern about the future of democracy and the socio-psychological effects of technological change.

For the Competitive Coexisters, "foreign policy begins at home."[39] Against arguments that the United States should invest domestically to compete with China—from childcare to infrastructure to vital manufacturing materials and components—for many Competitive Coexisters, the United States should do those things *because they are good regardless*. Competitive Coexisters are also marked by concerns over possible implications of a new Cold War with China, particularly anti-Asian sentiment in the United States and possible violence.[40] Others marry concerns over prudent policymaking towards Beijing with a wish to promote female voices in the traditionally male-dominated national security space.[41]

The Competitive Coexisters hold their views for reasons the inverse of the Strategic Competitors. The Competitive Coexisters are still invested in Engagement, not competition. They do, practically, interact with the Chinese—from think tankers, to diplomats, to people. They are not, at present, positioned to make a specific policy intervention—although those that might in future administrations may be inclined towards some form of rollback, which, in U.S. foreign policy parlance, will likely be cast as a "reset," which—we know from Russia policy—are notoriously difficult to effect. For now, the Competitive Coexisters form a distinct, younger, group, within the mainstream debate, but are no longer—as were the Engagers—at the center of the China policy debate.

The New Cold Warriors, or Anti-Engagers

The final group are the *Anti-Engagers* or *New Cold Warriors*. The New Cold Warriors take a more strident line than the Strategic Competitors. Convinced that China not just a competitor, but rival or—for some—an enemy, the New Cold Warriors are on board with Strategic Competition as a frame for U.S.-China relations because it is explicitly couched as a rejection of Engagement, the long persistence of which many consider a dangerous failing on that part of America's foreign policy elite. For the New Cold Warriors, the Cold War is not for just a metaphor,[42] but a very real analogy to what they see as a new period of global existential struggle for the hearts and minds of people around the world in which the United States and China are now embroiled, necessitating the expenditure of all necessary military and economic resources on the part of Washington.

The New Cold Warriors includes strong military-security "hawks" and some neoconservatives, one might think here of Robert Kagan and several prominent ex-military and former intelligence officers, such as Brigadier General Robert Spalding.[43] Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo might be considered part of this group, despite having been central to Trump's approach to China and thus *de facto* a Strategic Competitor. The group includes those with a professional interest in Taiwan and the military security threat from China—here Ian Easton from Project 2049 comes to mind.[44]

The new Cold Warriors is thus a broad group, spanning the partisan spectrum and the China watching community. It includes long-standing public critics of the CCP—such as Gordon G. Chang—and journalists critical of U.S. China policy, such as the *Washington Post*'s Josh Rogin.[45] Advocates of a human rights-focused foreign policy, such as Peter Mattis of the Jamestown Foundation and AEI's Michael Mazza, are on similar ground, as are several younger Congressional staffers and politicos.[46] A final, important, anchor is Committee on the Present Danger-China, which collects a group of strong China critics with a civilizational view of the threat posed by Beijing—such as former Trump advisors Steve Bannon and Peter Navarro.[47] The CPD-China in turn connects organizationally current China critics with long-standing opponents of U.S. policy, self-labelled the "Blue Team"—a playful inversion of the military tactic of "Red Teaming."[48]

For the new Cold Warriors, the new approach brought in by Trump focuses U.S. attention on developing a robust China policy, while offering the

rhetorical space for calling what—for them—China is: a threat. In short, the new Cold Warriors believe much of what the Strategic Competitors believe, but cast in darker and more urgent terms. For them, China is a bad international actor, a serial human rights abuser, and a clear military security threat to American hegemony—particularly evident in the naval sphere. Before Strategic Competitor Rush Doshi's work on China's "long game" to challenge U.S. power, and Michael Pillsbury's own *Hundred Year Marathon*, new Cold Warriors like Navarro had come to the conclusion that China has a real plan to emerge as a global great power by 2049, the 100-year anniversary of the CCP's victory in the Chinese civil war.[49] Former naval intelligence officer James Fanell, for instance, warned with growing urgency of the PLAN's growing strength, rendering the next 10 years a "decade of concern" in U.S.-China relations.[50]

The new Cold Warriors share with the Strategic Competitors much of their assessments of what China's rise and changes in Beijing's recent behavior mean and require from America. But their support for U.S. policymakers is dependent on the maintenance of tough rhetoric—and policies—on China. Biden's recent use of terms such as "responsible" or "managed competition" are alarming for those who, rhetorically, would prefer "containment" or "decoupling." For the new Cold Warriors, their views can be harder because they are, for the most part, not in positions close to policymaking at the major executive branches. Instead, they are closer to Congress, public opinion, and some hawkish think tanks. They are rooted primarily in non-China-focused organizations—such as Project 2049, human rights groups, and defense organizations.

Holes, Gaps, and Silences: Policy Implications

The above mapping exercise of the social worlds of U.S.-based China expertise aids in the identification of both areas of agreement, and some of the holes, gaps, and silences in their respective interpretations of China. Each of the groups described above captures some of the "elephant" of China in U.S. foreign policy, but not all of it. Baked into their interpretations and policy-recommendations are specific understandings of China—its relations with the CCP regime, the broader region, and the international community, for

example—and America—a liberal hegemon tasked with underwriting global order, or a normal great power managing international affairs in a newly-multilateral world. Identifying gaps is not intended to imply they are easily overcome. There are points of genuine disagreement. But it does help identify wedge issues from semantic ones. For the sake of space, I collapse the four groups into two, exploring first the merits and demerits of the Strategic Competitors' position alongside that of the New Cold Warriors, and subsequently, the Engagers and Competitive Coexisters, focusing particularly on the policy discussion. I then explore three specific policy areas: human rights, including the CCP's persecution of Uighurs in Xinjiang, evidenced by discussion of China's hosting of the 2022 winter Olympics; the defense of Taiwan; and military-security affairs in the South China Sea.

What the Strategic Competitors/ New Cold Warriors Cannot See

Many interviewees for this project accepted that, in the end, the Strategic Competitors had done the United States a positive service by raising China's salience in U.S. national security conversations. This was especially true of the broad group of *New Cold Warriors*, but also of many Competitive Coexisters. Many agree that the time had come by 2018 to "get serious" about China.

Yet, by adopting the rhetorical strategy of politicizing Engagement, in so doing exaggerating the coherence of U.S. policy toward China around its most naive and optimistic interpretation, the Strategic Competitors leave a hole at the heart of their position. Engagement with the PRC is not only inevitable, but morally and politically necessary. Put differently, where the Strategic Competitor position is strongest is in the urgency of the description of a China the United States can no longer reasonably expect to join the "rules-based international order" on America's terms. Where the position is weakest is on the question of what, *precisely*, competing with China means, and what space is left within the approach for the sort of diplomatic, economic, and military interaction that must take place to address areas of common concern unless a complete "decoupling" it to be the aim of U.S. policy. Yet, as Engagers are keen to point out, even at the height of the Cold War, the United States maintained lines of communication and some, minimal, diplomatic engagement, with the Soviet Union. Given China's deep enmeshment

in the international economy and global governance architecture—and, of course, its nuclear arsenal—the sort of decoupling some New Cold Warriors would prefer are not viable options.

Like Engagement before it, Strategic Competition will become going forward simply "U.S.-China relations," and getting on with it will be the name of the (policy) game. However, the politicization of Engagement renders "getting on with it" more problematic, for three reasons.

The first problem is rhetorical: the engagement component of strategic-competition-as-U.S.-China-relations will have to be rhetorically justified, as evidenced by the Biden administration's use of the phrase "responsible" or "competition," which reflect initial adjustments faced with this challenge. The word "engagement" might be off the table for now, but it should not stay that way as meaningful synonyms are in short supply—"interaction" is vague, while "cooperation" is even worse from a China-skeptic's perspective. It turns out, perhaps, that the "engagement" is usefully innocuous.

The second problem concerns the expert struggle itself. The politicization of the manufactured notion of capital-e Engagement, contains within it a rejection of the Engagers as a social group of experts, many of whom are older sinologists, steeped in Chinese language and culture. Yet, the prudent management of U.S.-China relations going forward, even in a competitive mode, will still require experts knowledgeable in China, many of whom might have a tendency toward a more Engager-type position. In short, the U.S. government still needs China expertise, without the suggestion such expertise is, by its very natures, politicized. As criticisms of "groupthink" and the advocates for "red teaming" grasp, consensuses are not necessarily positive states of affairs. The military-security knowledge common among the Strategic Competitors is, to be sure, useful, but the U.S. government is not only the military, and China experts of various types will be important actors in years to come.

The third hole in the Strategic Competitors' position is political. Robust rhetoric of competition and rivalry with Beijing has served since 2016 to justify Engagement's replacement. It has also empowered strong China critics, notably in the media but also—crucially—in Congress, which has significant power in driving China-focused legislation, notably that aimed at China's human rights abuses and America's commitment to the defense of Taiwan. While Congress should, of course, have a role in foreign policy, as the longevity of the

1974 Jackson-Vanik amendment shows, once legislation or sanctions are put in place by Congress, there are notoriously difficult to remove. They institutionalize hostility and tie the hands of future administrations hoping to improve relations. The danger of the Strategic Competitors' position—both rhetorically and practically—is to lock in hostility from the United States' side of the relationship, regardless of what happens in China.

What Engagers and Competitive Coexisters Do Not See

A similar exercise illuminates the holes, gaps, and silences in the position occupied by the Engagers and the Competitive Coexisters. These lacunae revolve around changes in the People's Republic and the level of objectivity of the threat from China felt by the Strategic Competitors and New Cold Warriors. In short, China is now a rich and militarily powerful state with well-documented ambitions for regional and global influence. Beijing is seeking to exert its power in ways overt and covert. The work of Clive Hamilton and colleagues on the actions of the United Front in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States cannot be brushed to one side.[51] Neither can the Chinese deployment of a style of "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy in its global interactions—a new forceful brand making compromise difficult to achieve.[52] Engagement is an outmoded approach given this new reality.

But it is not only China that has changed in ways militating against the sort of old fashioned engagement of the 1990s and early 2000s. The United States has too, in ways acknowledged by the Competitive Coexisters but perhaps underplayed. Engagement is weakened internally too.

The United States is now a deeply polarized society in which any consensus on foreign threat or challenge is likely to elicit an outsized response. The new right is louder, brasher, less concerned with anything smacking of the nuanced and diplomatic—if China is bad, they would argue, it should be called out openly, without reservation. Many younger people to their left are more convinced of the virtues of democracy and that "a threat to freedom anywhere is a threat to freedom everywhere." Moreover, they are less tolerant of policies aimed at fortifying America's multinational corporations, especially Wall Street—a vital constituency for Engagement.

Much as some Engagers might think, therefore, the Strategic Competitors are not naïve "dragon slayers." While certainly focused on military-security

matters, Matthew Pottinger and his team are well respected China experts. The center of gravity of the China watching community has moved closer to their position on what China means for the United States, with greater prominence of defense generalists in the debate.

Most importantly, however, the Strategic Competitors successfully changed U.S. policy ways that are not possible to simply reverse. The Engagers are no longer in the drivers' seat, and neither are their younger kin, the Competitive Coexisters. After resentment of the fact has faded, engagers must act as a reasonable "opposition," which means framing both China and the United States differently than they currently do. This fact explains why many commentators have gotten on board the strategic competition train. But, as noted above, that train will inevitably hit bumps that may push it off the tracks. When the ride gets bumpy, the Competitive Coexisters need to be ready with a new way of talking about a different China, for a different America.

Wedge Issues: Human rights and Taiwan

Two prominent challenges illustrate the policy gaps that emerge between the main groupings in the U.S. China watching community. Human rights and the defense of Taiwan each represent wedge issues that highlight genuine disagreements.

On human rights, how far should the United States go to force a change in Beijing's policy in Xinjiang? China's hosting of the 2022 Winter Olympics highlights the dynamics of the debate. For New Cold Warriors like Randall Schriver, China's actions in Xinjiang render it unworthy of the honor of hosting the winter games. An "elegant solution," consequently, presented itself in the summer of 2021, when the games could have been removed from China, and folded into the delayed 2020 Tokyo summer Olympics.[53] While this initiative did not gain significant traction, it demonstrates the lack of concern New Cold Warriors have in angering Beijing, which they see as a political tactic used by to advance its geopolitical interests. For New Cold Warriors, the only acceptable outcome is for the games to come out of China, or the United States to reconsider its participation.

Given Congress' strong views and activity on the issue of human rights, no U.S. administration can genuinely avoid taking a strong stand on the topic in the making of China policy. The Biden administration's diplomatic boycott of

the games is thus an attempt to plot a middle ground position, reflecting the position shared by Engagers and Competitive Coexisters that human rights concerns be recognized, but not allowed to dominate U.S.-China relations. A boycott grasps the opportunity of protest, without punishing U.S. athletes, corporations, and damaging U.S.-China relations too far. As Engager Chas Freeman has noted, moreover, China was unlikely to have allowed high-level representation in any case, rendering a diplomatic boycott relatively costless.[54]

Taiwan represents a second, and likely more crucial, wedge issue—crucial on account of its potential to lead to active hostilities between Washington and Beijing. Should the United States formally renounce its long-standing policy of "strategic ambiguity," a central pillar of Sino-U.S. relations since the late 1970s? For Engagers especially, strategic ambiguity continues to serve U.S. national interest, helping to sustain a peaceful status quo, and underpinning a working relationship with Beijing and Taipei, and facilitating cross-Strait relations.[55]

For Strategic Competitors and New Cold Warriors, by contrast, Taiwan's democratic development, together with Chinese moves toward unilaterally altering the status quo, have changed the nature of the American interest.[56] For them, the time is now ripe to replace ambiguity with strategic clarity—making it clear the means the United States would use in the event of Chinese attempts to change the status quo. In his *Strategy of Denial*, China watcher Elbridge Colby makes a forceful case for an Asia-focused U.S. grand strategy, with defending Taiwan at its heart.[57] The United States, Colby argues, does not seek conflict with the PRC, but must prepare for one if it is to secure its real goal of a "decent peace." For Project 2049's Jae Chang, Taiwan is a "modern day Fulda Gap"—a bulwark against the PRC's domination of East and Southeast Asia.[58]

Early in 2021, the Biden administration began to adopt the phrase "responsible competition" in relation to its China policy. Some China watchers and politicos voiced concern the President was backing off Strategic Competition, backsliding toward Engagement. Secretary of State's Anthony Blinken's comment that the United States will be "competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be," solidified the fear.[59] Yet bold statements, like NSC Asia Director Kurt Campbell's pointed assertion that "Engagement is dead" proved that

responsible competition is less a new rhetorical departure than only one attempt among many we are likely to see over coming years of threading the aforementioned needle in U.S. China strategy.[60]

While the challenge for U.S. policymaking is not merely rhetorical, and should not be confused as such—as just described, there are genuine wedge issues that divide Strategic Competitors and Competitive Coexisters, issues the Biden administration is tasked with addressing—the perspective adopting here suggests that together, Biden's China team—Biden himself, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, Campbell, Laura Rosenberger, and others like Assistant Secretary of State for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Ely Ratner—realize that the relationship has to be managed on an ongoing basis, that there is no conceivable without interaction. They also appear to realize that while a definite "strategy" might be a good basis for that management, the attempt to define one—as did Pottinger and company—comes with political pitfalls. It might be best therefore not to announce a specific shift, since any new label would need to distinguish itself from Strategic Competition, which most are on board with. Although unlikely to all be on the same page,[61] they appear committed to treading the fine line between rhetoric overly confrontational and accommodationist. With "engagement" still off the table, images of responsibility, management, co-existence, and competition—presented with strong valence—are the overlap point on the Venn Diagram.

Conclusion and Implications for Policy

Perhaps more than he realized, China watcher Elbridge Colby puts his finger on the core issue facing America's China watchers at the present time. What *is* a "decent peace" for the United States vis-à-vis the PRC?[62] Is the peace we have with Beijing "decent?" If not, why not? In essence, the groups identified here disagree on the answer and where to look for one. While policy implications do not flow directly from the sort of sociological enterprise engaged in here, nurturing a community able to answer that question is a policy implication of the first order.

To that end, this paper recommends the main organizations of the China watching community and the U.S. government endeavor to foster a broad conversation across the groups surveyed here. Doing so requires renewed

commitment on the part of the executive and legislative branches to support critical language training, educational and cultural exchanges, and the sort of people-to-people ties nurtured to positive effect during the latter stages of the Cold War with the Soviet Union.[63] Public diplomacy and Track 1.5 and 2 dialogues also provide knowledge and training of U.S. China experts, and personal contacts, beyond the specific issues discussed.[64] At the same time, think tanks, Congressional committees, and the two main Congressional China commissions should keep the door open to the broadest possible range of voices from the U.S. China community. Together, such efforts should—to the greatest extent possible—hinder the emergence of polarization, politicization, and group-think, while arming the United States with a knowledgeable, diverse, and vibrant community of true China experts.

The views expressed are the author's alone, and do not represent the views of the U.S. Government or the Wilson Center.

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