

The End of Engagement: Expertise, Domestic Politics, and U.S. China Strategy under Trump

What explains the dramatic shift in U.S. strategy toward the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which began in approximately 2016?¹ The long-standing strategy of “Engagement,” which aimed to incorporate a rising China into the Western-led international order, has given way to a tough but as-yet-unnamed approach variously termed “competition,” “decoupling,” and for some, “containment” amidst a new “Cold War.”² The 2015 National Security Strategy (NSS 2015) welcomed “the rise of a stable, peaceful, and prosperous China.” Celebrating “unprecedented” cooperation on issues like climate change, it looked forward to “a constructive relationship...that delivers benefits for our two peoples and promotes security and prosperity in Asia and around the world.”³ Just two years later, however, NSS 2017 labelled China a “revisionist power” that seeks “to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests,” including displacing the U.S. from the Indo-Pacific.⁴ This shift mirrored a rhetorical change on China emanating from the administration of President Donald Trump, its chief policy manifestation the trade war launched in January 2018.⁵

¹ For stylistic purposes, and following common usage, I frequently refer to the PRC using the shorthand “China.”

² See, for example, Michael Nacht, Sarah Laderman, and Lisa Beeston, “Strategic Competition in U.S.-China Relations,” *Livermore Paper on Global Security No. 5*, October 2018; Satoru Mori, “U.S.-China: A New Consensus for Strategic Competition in Washington,” *The Diplomat*, 30 January 2019; Edward Luce, “The New Era of US-China Decoupling,” *The Financial Times* 20 December 2018; Michael Mandelbaum, “The New Containment: Handling Russia, China, and Iran,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2019; Odd Arne Westad, “The Sources of Chinese Conduct: Are Washington and Beijing Fighting a New Cold War?” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 5, pp. 86-95; Niall Ferguson, “The New Cold War? It’s With China, and It Has Already Begun” *The New York Times* 2 December 2019.

³ The National Security Strategy of the United States, February 2015. Available at https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf, p. 24, accessed October 2019.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁵ In a speech in October 2018, for example, Vice President Mike Pence gave substance to President Trump’s tough stance on China. Highlighting its repressive domestic practices—including the curtailing of religious freedoms and the creation of a surveillance dragnet in the guise of the Social Credit System—Pence described how China was “employing a whole-of-government approach, using political, economic, and military tools, as well as propaganda, to advance its influence and benefit its interests in the United States.” Pence ended by promising the Trump administration would “continue to act decisively to protect America’s interests, American jobs, and American security.” See “Remarks by Vice President Pence on the Administration’s Policy Toward China,” 4 October 2018.

Although significant downturns in U.S.-China relations have occurred in the past, most recently under President George W. Bush, this time things appear different.⁶ U.S.-China relations have entered a qualitatively new era, marking the end of Engagement.

The change in U.S. China strategy is significant because Engagement weathered numerous crises over multiple decades since the normalization of relations with the PRC in 1979. Under Engagement, successive administrations refrained from sustained criticism of China, even after events like the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre.⁷ Disagreements over specific issues, from human rights to trade distortion practices, were isolated from broader questions over the implications of China's rise. Then-Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick gave a succinct justification for the Engagement strategy in a 2005 speech.⁸ Urging China's leaders to continue on the journey to China becoming a "responsible stakeholder" in international affairs, Zoellick argued America's policy of supporting Beijing has "succeeded remarkably well."⁹ Mounting evidence from the early 2000s of expansionist military aims—including the 2012 standoff between China and the Philippines over Scarborough Shoal, during which Beijing ignored an agreement brokered by the U.S.—did not budge successive U.S. administrations from Engagement.¹⁰ What explains Engagement's sudden collapse?

Available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-pence-administrations-policy-toward-china/>, accessed October 2019. For a good overview, see "Timeline: Key Dates in the U.S.-China Trade War," *New York Times*, at <https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2019/10/11/business/11reuters-usa-trade-china-timeline.html>

⁶ See Nina Silove, "The Pivot Before the Pivot: U.S. Strategy to Preserve the Power Balance in Asia," *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 4, Spring 2016, pp. 45-88.

⁷ Although President George H.W. Bush strongly condemned the crackdown, he was criticized by leaders in Congress for too muted a response, especially after it emerged he had sent his National Security Advisor, Brent Scowcroft, and his Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, to Beijing to consult with the government on how to maintain good relations. See <http://www.chinafile.com/conversation/did-president-george-hw-bush-mishandle-china>, accessed October 2019, and <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/05/29/30-years-after-tiananmen-square-a-look-back-on-congress-forceful-response/>, accessed October 2019.

⁸ See <https://www.ncuscr.org/content/robert-zoellicks-responsible-stakeholder-speech>, accessed October 2019.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ See Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), pp. 90-120.

There are currently three ways of accounting for Engagement’s demise. A first explanation focuses on Engagement’s policy failings. For critics Kurt Campbell and Ely Ratner, Engagement failed because China “defied American expectations,” exposing as fanciful U.S. policy-makers’ hopes of influencing Chinese development.¹¹ What is required, for them, is a root and branch reassessment of America’s interests in East Asia and the assumptions underpinning U.S. China strategy. A second, structural realist, explanation focuses on the shifting balance of global power.¹² From this perspective, China is emerging as a great power challenger to America.¹³ China’s rise follows a historical pattern—“Thucydides’ Trap”—wherein rising and declining leading states enter a spiral of mistrust frequently ending in conflict.¹⁴ The authoritarian character of China’s Communist regime makes Thucydides’ Trap especially strong this time around. A final perspective, undeveloped in the literature, would stress domestic politics and the coming to power of president Trump. Trump was a vocal of China during the 2016 campaign, accusing Beijing of American jobs and intellectual property, and promising to reset U.S. relations with China.

None of these three perspectives can be neglected in explaining the end of Engagement. They each capture something of the truth. Yet, they cannot account for the sudden and profound shift in U.S. strategy toward China, taken individually or together.

¹¹ Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, “The China Reckoning: How Beijing Defied American Expectations,” *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 97, No. 2, March/April 2018, 60-70.

¹² John J. Mearsheimer, “Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order,” *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 4, Spring 2019, pp. 7-50.

¹³ Whether and when China will catch up to the United States remains a matter of some debate. See Michael Beckley, “China’s Century? Why America’s Edge Will Endure,” *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 3, Winter 2011/12; Michael Beckley, “The Power of Nations: Measuring What Matters,” *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 2, Fall 2018, pp. 7-44; Joshua Itkowitz Shiffrinson and Michael Beckley, “Correspondence: Debating China’s Rise and U.S. Decline,” *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 3, Winter 2012/13, pp. 172-81; Andrea Gilli and Mauro Gilli, “Why China Has Not Caught Up Yet: Military-Technological Superiority and the Limits of Imitation, Reverse Engineering, and Cyber Espionage,” *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 3, Winter 2018/19, pp. 141-89.

¹⁴ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’ Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

First, Engagement's supporters have responded to their critics by arguing that far from failing, Engagement was a victim of its own success in opening up the China market, which has led to the domestic disharmony in the U.S. harnessed by in 2016.¹⁵ They have also argued that while U.S. China policy was justified in the language of liberalization and democratization, Engagement was a realistic policy reflecting enduring national interests in good relations with Beijing.¹⁶ Second, although a structural realist perspective shows why U.S.-China relations are likely to become fractious as China rises, it is unable to account for the specific timing and nature of growing mistrust of China, which remains a matter of some debate.¹⁷ Hewing to a constructivist way of thinking, in other words, shifts in the balance of power alone do not explain when and why U.S. policy-makers' understandings of the challenge posed by China have changed. Third, the coming to office of President Trump cannot by itself account for the end of Engagement. Not only had U.S. policy toward China begun to shift before Trump's election, the change in opinions of officials, experts, and policy-makers well beyond the White House too needs explaining.¹⁸

My answer centers on the role of China experts in the formation and legitimation of U.S. China policy, and on the relationship between China experts and the U.S. government in the domestic politics of the Trump era. Drawing on over 100 original interviews with China watchers, I show that Engagement was not simply a foreign policy strategy, but a set of institutionalized links between government agencies and a diverse constituency of think tanks, research institutes,

¹⁵ See "Did America Get China Wrong? The Engagement Debate," at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-06-14/did-america-get-china-wrong>, accessed October 2019.

¹⁶ See especially Stapleton Roy's contribution to the above *Foreign Affairs* debate.

¹⁷ See Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century: China's Rise and the Fate of America's Global Position," *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 3, Winter 2015/16, pp. 7-53; William Z.Y. Zhang an, Stephen G. Brooks, and William Wohlforth, "Correspondence – Debating China's Rise and the Future of U.S. Power," *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 2, Fall 2016, pp. 188-191.

¹⁸ The emergence on China in the second Obama administration is evidenced by a speech in May 2016 by then-Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, which presaged the change in approach signaled by NSS 2017. See <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Speeches/Speech/Article/783891/remarks-at-us-naval-academy-commencement/>, accessed October 2019.

and academic China centers, as well as journalists and business groups, which supported positive ties to Beijing. I describe the severing of many of these long-standing connections as president Trump imported a set of advisers previously considered outside the mainstream on their views of China, among them Peter Navarro, Robert Lighthizer, and Michael Pillsbury, who advocated a harder line in the economic and military spheres. From this perspective, the end of Engagement is more than a strategic shift: it is a paradigm change in the type of expertise underpinning America's approach to China.

Beyond the trade war, the chief effect of Trump's new China team has been to encourage critics of Engagement inside and outside the government to air their own often long-held concerns over China's rise. From current and former military officers worried about the People Liberation Army's growing capabilities, to Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) officials hoping to investigate Chinese influence campaigns, Trump's rhetoric has emboldened China experts unconvinced of the virtues of continued Engagement. Once hopeful of liberal political change in China, the paradigm shift in U.S. policy has prompted a period of profound introspection among America's China watching community. In diverse offline and online fora, China watchers have vigorously debated whether Engagement failed, whether there is a new consensus in the community on the need for a replacement, and if so, what it should be.

As a result, pro-Engagement view is now a thoroughly politicized perspective, in terms of both U.S. China policy, and vis-à-vis the Trump administration, creating some strange bedfellows in the debate. Proponents of continued Engagement with Beijing, both policy-makers and scholars—individuals like former diplomats J. Stapleton Roy, Susan Thornton, Charles "Chas" Freeman, and prominent think tankers Michael Swaine and David Lampton—find themselves outside the center of gravity in the community on the prospects of a return to positive U.S.-China

ties. Meanwhile, former Engagers concerned by China's human rights abuses find common cause with supporters of U.S. primacy in East Asia. Crucially, calls to "nuance" descriptions of Chinese activities, which are central to academic China experts' ability to inform debate over strategy, are themselves politicized because they seem to reject the China threat and the need for bold, resolute, response from the United States. As a result, there are few powerful individuals in U.S. China policy circles willing to either defend or construct a China strategy that bears much resemblance to Engagement.

My argument has relevance both for scholarly and policy debates over China's rise. In relation to the academic debate, in contrast to prominent accounts based on the changing balance of global power, the broadly constructivist perspective I develop emphasizes the ideas and beliefs of policy-makers and elites, together with reigning narratives about the meaning of China's rise for America.¹⁹ Taking into account liberal IR theory's commitment to assessing the interests of diverse domestic groups, and the literature on epistemic communities, I address the interconnection of China experts and the U.S. government in the guise of Engagement.²⁰ In so doing, I show that U.S. strategy-making circles can both feature a high degree of cognitive uniformity, as Patrick Porter has recently argued in this journal, at the same time as there is heated contestation over foreign policy and corresponding fluctuation in approach, as Porter's critics have countered.²¹

¹⁹ For a similar focus on reigning narratives or "memes," see Alastair Iain Johnston, "How New Is China's New Assertiveness?" *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 4, pp. 7-8.

²⁰ See respectively, Andrew Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics," *International Organization* Vol. 51, No. 4 (1997), pp. 513-53; Peter M. Haas, "Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination," *International Organization* Vol. 46, No. 1 (1992), pp. 1-35.

²¹ See Patrick Porter, "Why America's Grand Strategy Has Not Changed: Power, Habit, and the U.S. Foreign Policy Establishment," *International Security*, Vol. 42, No. 4, Spring 2018, pp. 9-46; Peter D. Feaver, Hal Brands, Rebecca Friedman Lissner, and Patrick Porter, "Correspondence – The Establishment and U.S. Grand Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 4, Spring 2019, pp. 197-204.

In terms of policy, my argument aims to ensure the debate over U.S. China strategy is, as far as possible, unaffected by factors separable from America's national interests in East Asia, such as the qualifications of Trump's advisers and the president's political style more broadly. To be sure, foreign policy is never truly outside of such domestic political calculations, and in a democracy, nor should it be. But given that the relationship between the U.S. and China will likely be the most consequential bilateral relationship in world politics for the remainder of this century, it is imperative that the debate over Engagement's replacement carefully and rationally assesses America's national interests in a complex and changing East Asia.²²

The following section explores the demise of Engagement and the shortcomings of existing explanations, before I develop an account based on the dynamics of expertise creation and transfer to the U.S. government. I begin by rethinking Engagement, drawing attention to the nature of China expertise and its relationship to American domestic politics in the Trump era. I then draw on interview data to trace first the politicization of Engagement as a policy and set of expert-government connections, and subsequently analyze the intense struggle over China expertise underpinning the failure of Engagement debate.

The end of Engagement: existing explanations

Three broad explanations can be put forward to account for America's changed China policy. From a first perspective, U.S. policy makers have ditched Engagement because it failed. A second perspective focuses on shifts in the global balance of power. Here, what changed is China—from an economic and military dwarf into a geopolitical behemoth, and an authoritarian one at that, threatening America's national interests. Finally, the timing of Engagement's demise suggests a

²² See also Aaron Friedberg, "Getting the China Challenge Right," *The American Interest*, available at <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2019/01/10/getting-the-china-challenge-right/>, accessed October 2019.

determinative role for politics and personality in the guise of Donald Trump. All three approaches capture something of the truth; in important respects, however, each is wanting.

DID AMERICA GET CHINA WRONG?

In March 2018, former Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell and China expert Ely Ratner from the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) made a splash in national security circles by labelling the America's long-standing policy toward Beijing an abject failure.²³ The U.S., they said, had "got China wrong." The decades old policy of engaging China in hopes of encouraging its leaders towards democracy and liberalism, they argued, was a bust. Economic development had not translated into political openness and a flourishing civil society, as Engagement's defenders had promised. Quite the opposite had happened: economic growth had proceeded hand in hand with authoritarianism, creating a communist state able to exert technologically sophisticated control over its population, while investing in the military and diplomatic capacity to spread influence internationally. For Ratner and Campbell, America needed a "China reckoning."

Much like George Kennan's famous rejection of cooperation with the Soviet Union in 1946,²⁴ the idea that a China reckoning was required did not come out of nowhere. The need for a tougher approach to Beijing is an idea whose time has come in Washington DC. Campbell and Ratner tapped into pent up frustrations among numerous China hands and grand strategists.

Experts Robert Blackwill and Ashley Tellis sounded the alarm four years ago. Adopting the language of challenge and competition rather than opportunity and engagement, Blackwill and Tellis stated that "China represents and will remain the most significant competitor to the United

²³ Campbell and Ratner, "China Reckoning."

²⁴ X, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 25, No. 4, July 1947, pp. 566-82.

States for decades to come.”²⁵ For critics of Engagement, changes in China have driven necessary changes in views in America was self-evident. Developments like the declaration that anything inside the so-called “nine-dash line”—a series of nine lines drawn on maps of the South China Sea claiming most of the area as the PRC’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)—are simply too difficult to square with sympathetic views of China’s political development. They seem to signal, in particular, that under Xi Jinping the Communist Party has ditched Deng Xiaoping’s famous dictum “hide you capacities, bide your time.” The need for a more coherent U.S. response to increasing Chinese power is for many long overdue.

Even China experts commonly-understood to be in favor of Engagement, such as David Shambaugh and David Lampton, have signaled notes of caution in the direction of US-China relations, proof that the prevailing opinion among the China expert community had shifted toward a far more concerned stance over changes in China and its implications for the U.S.²⁶ By early 2018, the sense of gloom had moved beyond the small world of China watchers to the broader public, with journalist Evan Osnos capturing the mood in a January *New Yorker* article warning of Chinese premier Xi Jinping’s growing ambitions.²⁷ By early 2019, the language used to describe US-China relations had taken on explicit Cold War associations, with dragon-slaying imagery prominent.²⁸

²⁵ Robert D. Blackwill and Ashley J. Tellis, *Revising U.S. Grand Strategy Toward China* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2015).

²⁶ See David Lampton, “A Tipping Point in U.S.-China Relations is Upon Us,” available at <https://www.uscnpm.org/blog/2015/05/11/a-tipping-point-in-u-s-china-relations-is-upon-us-part-i/>, accessed October 2019, and the interview with Shambaugh <https://blogs.gwu.edu/elliott360/2018/03/01/david-shambaugh-speaks-out-on-china/>, accessed October 2019.

²⁷ Evan Osnos, “Making China Great Again,” *The New Yorker*, January 2018, available at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/01/08/making-china-great-again>, accessed October 2019.

²⁸ See, for example, Odd Arne Westad, “The Sources of Chinese Conduct: Are Washington and Beijing Fighting a New Cold War?”, *Foreign Affairs* September/October 2019.

What began as an academic exchange captured the early tremors of a seismic shift in American relations with China. For journalist John Pomfret, the “pendulum” of US-China relations, which since the nineteenth century had swung many times from curiosity, hope, even infatuation, to fear, insecurity, and vindictiveness, was swinging again.²⁹ David Brooks similarly reported that in a polarized Washington D.C. one thing brought everyone together: the view that China is an “existential threat” to America.³⁰ Engagement really is dead.

However, the connection between Engagement’s demise and its supposed failure is less clear-cut than it seems. Claims that a new, tougher, consensus on US-China relations now hold sway in Washington have not lasted long. Established China experts have pushed back against the blanket denouncement of Engagement. Former Ambassador to Beijing J. Stapleton Roy has defended the approach adopted since the opening to China in 1972.³¹ Far from a naïve and utopian policy, for Roy, Engagement rested on a clear calculation of the U.S. national interest in a China bound into the rules and norms of the American-led international order. Justified publicly in liberal terms, Engagement was, in fact, thoroughly realist in intent. Long-time China watcher Michael Swaine, from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, echoed Roy’s warning of the self-fulfilling nature of a tougher stance toward Beijing. Discarding Engagement, for Swaine, risked “demonizing” China at precisely the time Washington and Beijing should be cooperating on the most pressing global problems. In an open letter published in the *Washington Post*, Swaine, together with other leading China experts M. Taylor Fravel from M.I.T., Ezra Vogel from Harvard, former Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Susan Thornton, and Roy,

²⁹ See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/09/11/pendulum-us-china-relations-is-swinging-again/>, accessed September 2019.

³⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/14/opinion/china-economy.html>, accessed September 2019.

³¹ See “Did America Get China Wrong? The Engagement Debate”, *Foreign Affairs* July/August 2018.

dismissed the notion that America's China experts united behind a policy of containing China.³² China, they argued, is "not an enemy" and U.S. policy should aim to keep it that way.

The debate over Engagement remains active. In July 2019, for example, a group of China experts, including many former military officers and intelligence service officials, published a strong rebuttal to the letter of Michael Swaine and co., urging the Trump administration to "stay the course."³³ Moreover, there is little to no consensus among China watchers on what should replace Engagement. With over one third of the world's population, cutting off ties and decoupling economically is for many an unwise course. The argument that Engagement failed as a policy cannot account for the fact that many experts see no such failure.

AMERICA AND CHINA IN THUCYDIDES' TRAP

The predominant frame for understanding the changing nature of U.S.-China relations in IR and security studies is that of the shift of global material power from West to East.³⁴ The titles of frequently appearing books and articles invoke the imagery of "rising giants" and "falling titans"³⁵—or, better yet, dragons and eagles—alongside hegemonic turnover,³⁶ the changing polarity of the international system,³⁷ and the timeless wisdom of Thucydides' description of the

³² See https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/making-china-a-us-enemy-is-counterproductive/2019/07/02/647d49d0-9bfa-11e9-b27f-ed2942f73d70_story.html, accessed October 2019.

³³ See <http://www.jpolorisk.com/stay-the-course-on-china-an-open-letter-to-president-trump/>, accessed October 2019.

³⁴ See, among many others, Evan Braden Montgomery, *In the Hegemon's Shadow: Leading States and the Rise of Regional Powers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016); Montgomery, "Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China's Rise and the Future of U.S. Power Projection," *International Security*, Vol. 38, No. 4, Spring 2014, pp. 115-149; David Edelstein, *Over the Horizon: Time, Uncertainty, and the Rise of Great Powers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017); Paul K. MacDonald, Paul and Joseph M. Parent, *Twilight of the Titans: Great Power Decline and Retrenchment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

³⁵ See Joshua R. Itkowitz Shiffrin, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

³⁶ Montgomery, *In the Hegemon's Shadow*.

³⁷ Christopher Layne, "This Time, It's Real: The End of Unipolarity and the "Pax Americana." *International Studies Quarterly* Vol. 56, No. 1 (2012), pp. 203-13. See also Nuno P. Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Peloponnesian War.³⁸ In each case, U.S. relative decline is deemed the key fact of international political life today, and the sense of threat engendered in Washington by a rising China.³⁹

Developments in China under Xi Jinping, which amount to a new authoritarianism internally and assertiveness externally, increase the urgency of the China threat. For Carl Minzner, for example, the era of reform in China—associated with the period from Mao Zedong onwards—is over.⁴⁰ The state is re-establishing control over every sphere of Chinese life. Light years from the continued opening hoped for by supporters of Engagement, China’s new authoritarianism features Orwellian social controls for clamping down on any opposition to the Chinese Communist Party, including face recognition technology, a censored internet⁴¹—engineered with the help of Google—and the maligned “Social Credit System” tying everything from job opportunities to romantic decisions to one’s reputation as a good Chinese citizen. Similarly, for Elizabeth Economy, recent developments in China constitute a third revolution, a qualitative new type of state internally and externally from the “second revolution” proclaimed by Deng Xiaoping.⁴²

The strength of balance of power and China threat imagery is also a source of analytical weakness, however. *Why, how, and crucially when*, does the rise of a potential challenger state—here China—come to be perceived as threatening, and become accepted as so among makers of U.S. national security policy? What mechanisms, *precisely*, are in play when China’s growing power is seen as a problem for the United States?

³⁸ Allison, *Destined for War*.

³⁹ See, for example, Gideon Rachman, *Easternization: Asia’s Rise and America’s Decline from Obama to Trump and Beyond*. New York: Other Press, 2017); Richard McGregor, *Asia’s Reckoning: China, Japan, and the Fate of U.S. Power in the Pacific Century* (New York: Viking, 2017).

⁴⁰ Carl Minzner, *End of an Era: How China’s Authoritarian Revival is Undermining Its Rise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁴¹ See Margaret E. Roberts, *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China’s Great Firewall* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

⁴² Elizabeth Economy, *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Why, for example, did neither the Taiwan Straits Crisis—when China threatened to attack Taiwan—nor the Hainan Island incident of April 2001—featuring the capture of 24 American airman by China—lead to the sort of grand strategic rethink that took place between 2015 and 2017? As Nina Silove has shown, the administration of George W. Bush entered office committed to a tougher foreign policy toward China, yet soon abandoned the policy.⁴³ Given that the Chinese economy was growing at double-digit rates throughout the early 1990s, why did these incidents not set off more alarm bells in Washington?

The answer to these questions lies at least partly in the United States, not with timeless laws of rising and declining states. David Edelstein, for example, draws attention to the time horizons of American leaders, who throughout the 1990s and 2000s viewed China as a long-term rather than short-term issue.⁴⁴ The above crises did not, as a result, become enveloped in a larger imagery of geopolitical challenge, as they frequently are today. Jarrod Hayes, meanwhile, compares US relations with China and India to show that China's authoritarian governing structure—as opposed to the democratic India—facilitates Chinese perception as threatening in Washington.⁴⁵ Finally, Stacie Goddard emphasizes the independent role of rhetoric to how established powers like the United States interpret the intentions of growing powers like China.⁴⁶ Here China's legitimation of its actions as national destiny and re-emergence does little to assuage the fears of policy-makers in American of a clear plan to push the United States out of East Asia and challenge American hegemony globally.⁴⁷

⁴³ Silove, "The Pivot Before the Pivot."

⁴⁴ Edelstein, *Over the Horizon*.

⁴⁵ Jarrod Hayes, *Constructing National Security: U.S. Relations with India and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁴⁶ Stacie Goddard, *When Might Makes Right: Rising Powers and World Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

⁴⁷ As outlined in Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2015).

In sum, the very common-sensical nature of the language of China's "rise" and threat a powerful China poses to the American national interest should give us pause before we accept the explanatory claims made on its behalf. The signal story of U.S.-China relations since 1972 is not a narrative of the rise of China and the decline of the United States. To be sure, the United States *is* declining relative to China in the brute sense that America's share of the global economy is shrinking. U.S. national security policy-makers do now consider China a threat to the United States. However, as others like Michael Beckley and Josef Joffe have argued, the United States itself is becoming more powerful as its population, economy, and military capabilities grow.⁴⁸ The key issue, therefore, is what China's relative growth *means* to different actors in the United States.

THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION AND CHINA

A final explanation for the demise of Engagement is the election in 2016 of Donald Trump. The trade war, launched in January 2018, was a creation of the Trump executive, and followed scathing statements about China and its economic practices by then-candidate Trump during the election campaign of 2016.⁴⁹ Trump criticized the "theft" of US jobs by China, and reiterated long-standing criticisms that China was not playing fairly in supporting its state-owned enterprises (SOEs) against foreign competition, and manipulating the Chinese currency to support exports.

Shortly after entering office, Trump appointed China critics Robert Lighthizer and Peter Navarro to key positions on trade to back up these assertions. As United States Trade Representative and director of the newly created executive Office of Trade and Manufacturing

⁴⁸ Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018; Josef Joffe, *The Myth of America's Decline: Politics, Economics, and a Half Century of False Prophecies* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014).

⁴⁹ See <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/10-times-trump-attacked-china-trade-relations-us/story?id=46572567>, accessed October 2019.

Policy, respectively, Lighthizer and Navarro were tasked with implementing Trump's promise to confront Beijing. Navarro's criticisms of Chinese trade policy in particular were long-standing and well known. A former professor of economics at the University of California-Irvine, Navarro had written a "global call to action" titled *Death By China*.⁵⁰ Crucially, over time criticisms of China as a challenger to the United States in the economic sphere spread in Navarro's mind to geopolitics more broadly, reminiscent of the warnings of Michael Pillsbury, Gordon Chang, and Newt Gingrich, among others.⁵¹

In a sharp departure from his predecessors, consequently, Trump's rhetoric explicitly cast China as an enemy. As he stated in an interview in November 2015, China is "an economic enemy, because they have taken advantage of us like nobody in history. They have; it's the greatest theft in the history of the world what they've done to the United States. They've taken our jobs."⁵² In his pre-election book, *Crippled America: How to Make America Great Again*, Trump explained, "There are people who wish I wouldn't refer to China as our enemy. But that's exactly what they are. They have destroyed entire industries by utilizing low-wage workers, cost us tens of thousands of jobs, spied on our businesses, stolen our technology, and have manipulated and devalued their currency, which makes importing our goods more expensive—and sometimes, impossible."⁵³

No account of the change in U.S. policy toward China—signaled by the 2015 and 2017 national security strategies, together with the trade war and its attendant rhetorical shift—can neglect the effect of Trump's election. Yet, neither does Trump's election by itself explain the

⁵⁰ Peter Navarro and Greg Autry, *Death By China: Confronting the Dragon – a Global Call to Action* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education, 2011).

⁵¹ See Pillsbury, *Hundred-Year Marathon*; Peter Navarro, *The Coming China Wars* (Upper Saddle River: FT Press, 2008); Peter Navarro and Gordon G. Chang, *Crouching Tiger: What China's Militarism Means for the World* (Blue Ridge Summit: Prometheus Books, 2015); Newt Gingrich, *Trump Vs. China: Facing America's Greatest Threat* (New York: Center Press, 2019).

⁵² See https://archive.org/details/WMUR_20151103_120000_Good_Morning_America, accessed October 2019.

⁵³ Donald J. Trump, *Crippled America: How to Make America Great Again*. New York: Threshold Editions, 2015), p. 43.

change in China policy. American elites in business and the military had begun to shift their views on China before Trump's election. Some sort of a change in U.S. policy toward China is likely to have been in the offing even had Trump not won the election. A speech by Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter in May 2016 at the U.S. Naval Academy is indicative. Foreshadowing NSS 2017, Carter declared America was entering a new era of great power competition, and described the malign intentions of both Russia and China, and how the U.S. should respond.⁵⁴

Moreover, Trump's attacks on China on the campaign trail formed only one aspect of his electoral appeal, which rested more on his promise to bring American jobs home and less on to where those jobs had been lost. Ripping up the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and bringing jobs home from Mexico was at least as important. In other words, the Republican candidate did not win the election because of his attacks on China. In that sense, the shift in US China policy should be explained as part of a broader change in approach to international affairs promised and effected by Trump, including abnegating long-standing commitments with allies and rivals alike, from weapons agreements with Russia, the Iran nuclear deal, NATO funding agreements with Europe, global warming pacts, and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

Finally, Trump's choice of China team itself needs explaining. Robert Lighthizer's credentials for trade representative are unremarkable: a degree in law from Georgetown followed by private service in the prestigious firm of Covington and Burling—the alma mater of former Secretary of State, Dean Acheson—from where Lighthizer was chosen to act as Deputy U.S. Trade Representative under Ronald Reagan. By contrast, the choice of Peter Navarro as presidential advisor on trade and subsequently director of an entirely new executive office focused on manufacturing policy is noteworthy. Navarro came something out of left field. What explains his

⁵⁴ <https://www.capitalgazette.com/education/naval-academy/cgnews-full-transcript-secretary-of-defense-ash-carter-s-naval-academy-commencement-address-20160527-story.html>, accessed October 2019.

appointment? Navarro is considered “heterodox” within economics, focusing on the often-negative effects of free trade agreements on workers—not the typical analytical concern of economists. An outsider to Beltway politics, Navarro was thus in many ways an unlikely choice for top office.

More than a strategy: politics, expertise, and Engagement

Neither the weaknesses of Engagement, the shift in the balance of global power, nor the election of Trump can explain the recent hardening of U.S. China policy. Yet, neither can China’s staggering economic rise and authoritarian turn, the policy priorities of the Trump administration, and widespread dissatisfaction with Engagement among American China experts be ignored. In the remainder of the paper, I develop an explanation that can envelop these perspectives. It has two principal components, centering on the making of China expertise in the United States and its transfer to the principal organs of the U.S. government under Trump.

First, I show that Engagement was more than a foreign policy strategy: it was a set of linkages between the government—principally the National Security Council and the departments of State and Defense, but other administration positions besides—with outside institutions producing credentialed experts to fill China-related roles. More than a set of ideas, therefore, Engagement was a reflection of personal and professional investments in positive U.S.-China relations of a group of China experts from think tanks and research centers, to universities and for-profits from businesses, including law firms, consultancies, and media organizations. Individuals like Michel Oksenberg (Michigan), Ezra Vogel (Harvard), Susan Shirk (later UC-San Diego), and Kenneth Lieberthal (Michigan and Brookings), and Joseph Nye (Harvard), and many others, moved between the China expert community and the government, from where they promoted

Engagement. The end of Engagement is at base a disruption in these interconnections. The Trump administration, in short, is not listening to the same people and the same type of people who predominated in the making of U.S. China policy previously. The result has been a sharp change in policy direction, typified by the trade war.

However, I argue, second, that the end of Engagement is more than a story of expert turnover from supporters to opponents of Engagement. Trump's election has fostered a politicization of China in U.S. national security circles, driving a wedge into a community previously characterized by a high degree of bipartisanship. China, put simply, was for a long time not a political issue capable of generating a recognizable divide such that one set of advisors could be replaced with another. From the opening in 1972 well into the 1990s, China expertise crossed party lines: most agreed that although China was a potential future challenge, with a dubious human rights record and problematic claim on Taiwan's sovereignty, but nevertheless it was in America's interests to engage Beijing. Trump's election upended this bipartisan consensus. Trump has turned away from traditional forms of expertise, part of a broader political strategy that seeks to represent widespread disaffection with elites in Washington and the effects of globalization. The result has empowered China critics in government and beyond, fracturing the China expert community into supporters and opponents of Trump, with various shades of gray in between.

While the failure of Engagement debate is seemingly a battle over policy and the ideas underpinning it—with defenders crediting Engagement with China with 40 years of peace, and critics countering that Engagement rested on false promises and frustrated hopes—the debate is better understood as an artifact of the changing relationship between America's China expert community and the U.S. government. The debate is “Washington thing,” a senior China watcher told me; it reflects how the “beast” of U.S. strategy-making works. In particular, it reflects the

manner in which influence and authority in given policy spheres—like U.S. policy in East Asia—is created and maintained. Individuals mobilize part-political-part-intellectual support for new policy directions on electoral time, using ideas from experts located in the many think tanks, research organizations, and universities in Washington and beyond. Claims that Engagement has failed are therefore Janus-faced: they are at the same time *political*, about positioning the person making the argument vis-à-vis China as an issue in American politics, and a claim to *expertise*, about signaling someone’s ability to intervene as an expert. Understanding Engagement’s rapid demise requires keeping the hybrid nature of claims and counterclaims in mind. I first turn to the political construction of Engagement, before addressing the use of Engagement as a weapon in expert struggles among those seeking to shape U.S. China policy.

A NOTE ON METHOD

The following account draws on interviews conducted between late 2016 and early 2019 with 108 U.S.-based China experts, part of a broader project on American hegemony and the rise of China. Interviews lasted an average of 65 minutes, totaling over 100 hours.⁵⁵ Interviewees ranged in age and experience from current and former diplomats, including former ambassadors to Beijing, through prominent academics and think tankers, to junior and aspiring China experts. I identified subjects using the snowball sampling method. I sought a balanced coverage of the field, not only demographically but regionally and professionally also—including interviews with journalists, consultants, researchers representing the whole political spectrum of D.C.-based think tanks, in addition to academics from across the social sciences, humanities, and law. To maintain confidentiality, I have refrained from identifying interviewees by name, using letters to identify

⁵⁵ Further information about the interviews is in the author’s possession. The University of California’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted permission to conduct the interviews under protocol no. 1036710.

distinct interviewees. However, I have sought to contextualize comments as far as possible by situating interviewees' position in the community of China experts, as well as using publically available interviews wherever possible.

In addition to interview data, I draw on insights from membership of popular China-related listservs.⁵⁶ China listservs are both a central forum for debate and discussion about China, by China watchers from around the world, and an important symbol of expert status and community membership. Access to China listservs has provided not only an inexhaustible range of materials from the media, government, and private sectors shared for discussion by members, but also a sense of the debate and group dynamics underpinning expert contestation. Finally, I attended multiple China-related events—including book launches and panel discussions—in Washington D.C. and beyond during research stays. Together, these data allow something approaching an insider's view of the demise of Engagement.

ENGAGEMENT AS A POST-HOC CONSTRUCTION

As a political term of art, Engagement is a recent invention, first emerging during the run up to WTO membership during the 1990s, and later a way of negatively characterizing U.S. China policy since the 1970s. As one interviewee explained, Engagement is a retroactive, *post-hoc* rhetorical construction. “[Y]ou didn’t have people calling engagement a strategy... as a coherent thing from Nixon to Obama, depending on where you want to draw the line on when it ends ...I don’t think it was ever used at the time...it just kind of became a catch-all in a sense people have started critiquing.”⁵⁷ A former long-time State Department official confirmed the impression. “I do not

⁵⁶ As requested by moderators who have been kind enough to facilitate my membership, I refrain from identifying the listservs by name.

⁵⁷ Interview A.

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.”⁵⁸ As this interviewee elaborated:

“The term “engagement” only began to be heard frequently during the 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. The new policy rationale put stress on (1) China’s rising global influence, and ability to exercise it in ways supportive of or detrimental to U.S. interests (China’s UNSC veto power, China’s influence over North Korea, China’s security and economic ties with nations such as Iran and Pakistan, China’s sales or prospective sales of missiles and nuclear knowhow, China’s abiding commitment to “liberate” Taiwan, preferably by suasion but by force if necessary); (2) China’s growing openness to U.S. investment and growing importance as a U.S. market (by the Bush administration, most top firms in the Fortune 500 made plain that their future earnings and stock valuations would hinge on the success or failure of their footprint in China; and, more cynically (in my view), (3) the prospect that through “engagement” China would “evolve” into a thriving market economy within a non-communist/socialist state structure.”⁵⁹

A Google Ngram of “Engagement with China,” while admittedly a crude measure, backs up these accounts of when Engagement entered political discourse (see figure 1). Engagement with China was rarely used before the end of the Cold War, increasing exponentially over the course of the 1990s, before declining again from 2000 until the end of the data allows in 2008. What this suggests is that Engagement was an artifact of the political debates over the course of the 1990s in the United States over Most Favored Nation (MFN) trade status and subsequently WTO

⁵⁸ Interview B.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

membership. The lack of mention before 1989 equally suggests that Campbell and Ratner’s use of the term to describe U.S. policy before the end of the Cold War lumps together two qualitatively different debates and political contexts. This helps explain, in turn, why the term “Engagement” is absent from two prominent academic texts from the 1990s on US-China relations by leading China scholars Harry Harding and Ezra Vogel.⁶⁰

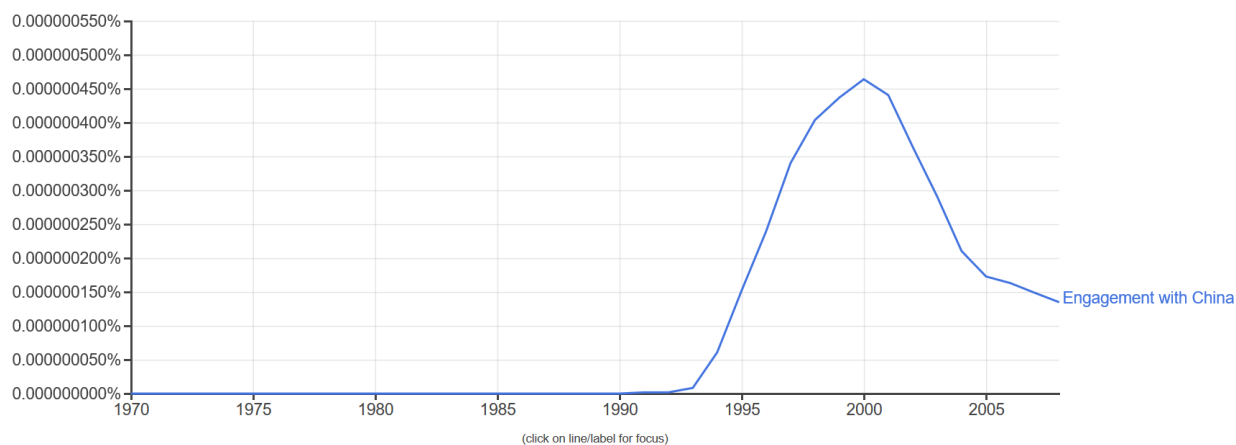


Figure 1 – Ngram results for “Engagement with China”

The decline in references to Engagement after 2000 fits with what numerous interviews confirmed: after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the initiation of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, America’s military and security architecture was configured to focus on counter-terrorism and irregular warfare. The War on Terror fed off and contributed to the post-Cold War military priorities of the Pentagon, which centered on Central Command (CENTCOM) and counter-insurgency and small mobile engagements. The return of great power competition in the 2017

⁶⁰ Harry Harding, *A Fragile Relationship: The United States and China since 1972* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press; 1992); Ezra Vogel, ed. *Living with China: U.S.-China Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997).

National Security Strategy—and the re-emergence of the term “Engagement”—is only one feature of a broader shift in emphasis and institutional logic of key military, security, and intelligence organizations, and cannot thereby be understood in a China or East Asia context in isolation.

Consequently, analysis of Engagement should proceed from its use in political and expert struggles, rather than as the label for a consistent American strategy. What events, aims, and motivations in the history of U.S. China policy are participants in that struggle combining under the label “Engagement?” Who self-identifies as an Engager, and who distances themselves from the word and the strategy’s supporters? What effect do these political moves have within the broader struggle over America’s post-Engagement China strategy?

AMERICA’S CHINA EXPERTS AND ENGAGEMENT

Interviewees described the institutional and personal connections underpinning Engagement in varied ways. Some stressed the role of a so-called “Kissinger clique:” a set of friends of former Secretary of State and National Security Council Director Henry Kissinger, many of whom went with President Richard Nixon and Kissinger to China in 1972, and stayed in the China field after. Individuals like Stapleton Roy—Distinguished Scholar at the Wilson Center and later Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research—and Winston Lord—Special Assistant Secretary to the National Security Advisor 1970-3 and Director of the Policy Planning Staff 1973-77—figure prominently. Roy and Lord personify the deepening connections between China and America over last four and a half decades. In particular, they embody the commitment to the Three Joint

Communiqués signed between the U.S. and China, including U.S. commitment to China’s sovereignty through intentionally ambiguous language in relation to the status of Taiwan.⁶¹

Other interviewees drew attention to the Hopkins-Nanjing Center—Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies’ China location. One critic of Engagement referred to Hopkins-Nanjing “a one-year brainwashing in Engagement.”⁶² Hundreds of China hands employed in China-related positions in and out of the government have passed through Hopkins-Nanjing to gain language and cultural training—as have others trained at institutions like the Princeton-China Center and Stanford’s Center at Peking University, to name but two.

Yet, while Kissinger remains a doyen of the China watching community, and programs like Hopkins-Nanjing are still important nodes, the China expert community is larger and more diversified than these two characterizations suggest. The community is a coherent group of individuals personally and professionally invested in providing commentary on, and analysis of, China. Geographically centered on Washington D.C.—with an economic hub in New York—and institutionally located in think tanks as well as academic, journalistic, business, and governmental organizations, the community comprises anywhere from 100 to multiple thousands of people, depending on the criteria used to delineate its boundaries. Before the 1980s, the number of Americans with deep knowledge of China counted in the double-digits. After normalization, when educational changes became routine the numbers began to grow, and alongside them calls from academia, think tanks, and for-profits for China knowledge.⁶³ Well into the 1990s going to China remained quite exotic. Today, the number of people with deep China knowledge numbers in the

⁶¹ For a good overview, see Richard C. Bush, “A One-China Policy Primer,” Brookings East Asia Policy Paper 10, March 2017, available at <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/one-china-policy-primer-web.pdf>, accessed October 2019.

⁶² Interview C.

⁶³ See David Lampton, ed. *A Relationship Restored: Trends in U.S.-China Educational Exchanges, 1978-1984* (National Academies Press, 1986).

many thousands. As one interviewee described it, the community of China watchers can be usefully viewed as a series of concentric circles—with around 40-60 high profile China experts in the center, and outer rings of many hundreds if less prominent retirees, aspiring junior experts, and those employed in the closed world of the intelligence services are included.⁶⁴

China experts engage in a range of activities—from writing books, articles, reports, and op-eds, to organizing conferences, acting as media talking heads, engaging in online discussion, and participating in public engagement events. Together, the China expert community represents what one interviewee described as a “permanent conference” on China.

Like academia, the permanent conference on China is the site of an often intense struggle for prominence, prestige, and, for some at least, political influence over U.S. China policy. As with the recent discussion in this journal over role of the American foreign policy “Establishment” in the making of U.S. grand strategy, the Engagement strategy persisted despite the China community never sharing a unified view of China, nor unquestioned access to the levers of the American state.⁶⁵ Often-sharp dissension has characterized the community, and the advice of China hands has been only one input into U.S. policy-making. The key question is how and why a pro-Engagement group was able nevertheless to foster a degree of continuity in U.S. China policy over time, and how and why it quickly lost influence after the election of Donald Trump in 2016.

A leading think tank China expert—deeply involved in promoting U.S.-China relations since the late 1970s—explained how for the last eight administrations, some version of a group of colleagues and friends of theirs had been in a position of influence over the general direction of US-China relations, promoting Engagement with China:

⁶⁴ Interview D.

⁶⁵ Porter, “Why America’s Grand Strategy Has Not Changed”; Feaver, Brands, Lissner, and Porter, “Correspondence – The Establishment and U.S. Grand Strategy.”

“Susan [Shirk, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia 1997-2000] was in...[Ken] Lieberthal was in, Mike Oksenberg [a member of President Carter’s National Security Council with responsibility for China, 1977-1980] was in. Dick Solomon [member of the National Security Council under President Nixon] before was in. Those were all in this group....William Perry, who’s now out at Stanford, but was Defense Secretary, was in this group. Even at the beginning, Ashton Carter [Defense Secretary under President Obama, 2011-2013] was and then, uh, I think he got, sort of, mugged by reality I guess and began to migrate a bit on this topic. [Kurt] Campbell maybe a little bit.”⁶⁶

Engagement was more than a governmental strategy or a set of policy beliefs located solely in the departments of State, Defense, and the National Security Council. Engagement was a set of personal and professional dispositions to view U.S. national interests as tied to positive U.S.-China relations, embodied in the upper reaches of the U.S. government from Reagan through the second Obama administration by political appointments from a particular group within the China expert community.

Engagement served political, personal, and professional interests for many within the China expert community. The National Committee of U.S.-China Relations (NCUSCR) has been a strong supporter of positive connections between Washington and Beijing. Scholars from the main academic centers at Harvard, Columbia, Michigan, Berkeley, Stanford, and the University of Washington, built their competence in China studies, attracting funding and promoting scholarly exchanges along the way.⁶⁷ So too did established think tanks like Brookings, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Carnegie Endowment. Good relations between Washington and Beijing

⁶⁶ Interview E.

⁶⁷ After leaving office in 2000, former deputy assistant secretary of State for East Asia Susan Shirk founded the 21ST Century China Center at the University of California-San Diego, which has quickly established itself as a prominent center of China studies.

was also good for American businesses, entranced by the lure of the China market back to the opium trade of the nineteenth century. The American Chamber of Commerce and U.S.-China Business Council were both strong lobbyists for China's entry to the World Trade Organization in 2000. Developments at the national level were mirrored at the state level, where the normalization of relations in 1979 led state governments to promote direct links with Beijing.

None of the foregoing is meant to suggest uniformity among China experts on their views of U.S. China strategy, consistent influence of pro-Engagement experts, nor therefore the inevitability of Engagement as a foreign policy strategy toward China. Strong dissenters from Engagement have long populated the field, and been prominent within it, from human rights advocates to those desirous of a firmer stand on Taiwanese independence. A condition of Congressional approval for Chinese accession to the WTO, moreover, was the creation of two commissions—the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission (USCC) and the Congressional-Executive Committee on China (CECC)—which have since 2000 institutionalized through yearly reports and frequent hearings a probing and often critical voice on developments in China and their implications for the United States.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, Engagement has been for four decades less a coherent strategy or policy, and more a fact of life for an array of individuals whose careers have tracked the growth in institutional links between China and the United States.

THE ELECTION OF PRESIDENT TRUMP AND THE POLITICS OF ENGAGEMENT

As numerous interviewees explained, the immediate effect of the 2016 election of Donald Trump was to close the door to the White House on many of individuals and institutions with long-

⁶⁸ See <https://www.uscc.gov/>; <https://www.cecc.gov/>.

standing connections to the formulation and implementation of U.S. China policy—the Engagers. According to one former policy-maker,

“from my point of view, the arguments that I’m hearing (China threat, engagement was wrong)...for 25 years, the same people [from the same] part of the political spectrum and the same institutions held those views. The difference was, for all the administrations up through the end of the Obama first term at the White House level, at the most senior levels, there was a vision which A) supported Engagement and B) saw to pursue both managing or dealing with the frictions and differences and enhancing cooperation. But now, what’s happened is because of the top levels of the White House, it’s, sort of, bash China all the time basically. The FBI, the DOD, DHS, I mean, all these people who have consistently been on a leash.”⁶⁹

The consequence of the shift in tone emanating from the Trump administration, a leading Engager described, was “the takeover of the management of this [US-China] relationship” by people “not anywhere near my group. And we’re pretty immobilized, frankly. This group has no idea what the hell you do.”⁷⁰

The degree to which administrations seek advice from outside varies. Some are active in reaching out to the think tank community and academia, others less so. The inner workings of any administration—Trump’s included—are difficult to assess, meaning the shape of government-expert links in the contemporary context is impossible to ascertain, and could quickly change in any case. Some connections can be mapped with a degree of certainty, however.

First, the main business groups were immediate victims of the change in rhetoric and policy direction from the White House. “The U.S.-China Business Council isn’t on the list [to be

⁶⁹ Interview F.

⁷⁰ Interview E.

contacted],” a senior think tanker in Washington said. “You know, this administration has no interest really in hearing from the business community and certainly not the major business organizations, like the U.S.-China Business Council. You know, they view them as a bunch of panda huggers and “You sold out, and, anyway, we know, you know, you guys preached engagement all these years and look where it got us. We know better.””⁷¹

Also evident from what numerous interviewees told me is that the Trump administration has had little interest in consulting the mainstream think tanks—where many of them worked—in line with Trump’s criticism of the “the Swamp” and the “deep-state.” More interestingly, therefore, the Trump administration has also had a thorny relationship with the conservative think tanks in Washington a Republican candidate would be expected to plumb for personnel and expertise. In partial explanation of this disconnect, soon after entering office a group of some 150 GOP-leaning national security experts signed an open letter opposing Trump’s views on foreign policy.⁷² The President’s “vision of American influence and power in the world is wildly inconsistent and unmoored in principle,” the letter stated, “He swings from isolationism to military adventurism within the space of one sentence.”⁷³ Consequently, the signatories were lead to “conclude that as president, he would use the authority of his office to act in ways that make America less safe, and which would diminish our standing in the world.”⁷⁴ Many signatories of the letter later professed to being excluded from high-level discussions over national security matters.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Interview F.

⁷² <https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/open-letter-on-donald-trump-from-gop-national-security-leaders/>, accessed October 2019.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/these-republicans-signed-the-never-trump-letters-in-2016-now-some-are-having-second-thoughts/2019/07/12/a7e7a49a-a3ed-11e9-bd56-eac6bb02d01d_story.html, accessed October 2019.

Trump's view of China then has been shaped more by select individuals, such as Michael Pillsbury and Randall Schriver, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Affairs (January 2018-). Both have strong reputations as China experts, and a recognized conviction that China poses a serious national security threat. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is another insider in favor of a robust get-tough policy. Connections to individuals and groups outside the administration—such as the newly-reformed Committee on the Present Danger-China whose members include former advisor to Trump, Steve Bannon—are likely to be episodic rather than systematic. Trump's well-documented wish to avoid the use of force—including the departure in September 2019 of National Security Advisor John Bolton—suggests only partial overlap in views of China.

In this context, Campbell and Ratner's argument that Engagement failed is "a political argument," a former State Department official told me plainly.⁷⁶ Far from hawkish critics of Engagement, this interviewee went on, Campbell and Ratner are *internal* critics of a policy both had previously been involved in, and as seeking a new viable policy to replace it. "[T]hey're Engagers," they continued, their argument is "an exaggeration based on the need to position themselves politically." In particular, Campbell and Ratner are Democratic Party affiliates, looking to develop a distinct Democratic viewpoint on China policy. "They're positioning a Democratic Party position... they're the Democratic Party foreign policy realists, right? And they're defining that position as it relates to China and East Asia."⁷⁷ Both are plausible candidates for political appointments in the State Department and National Security Council under a possible future Democratic administration, and are developing a strong and resolute positions on China.

⁷⁶ Interview G.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Consequently, critics of Ratner and Campbell see behind their proclamation that Engagement has failed a cynical political ploy. In one interviewee's words, "they're opportunists. Kurt is certainly an opportunist, to a certain extent, and he sees which way the wind is blowing. But, "Oh my God, engagement was terrible. Engagement was wrong." You know, you go, "Kurt, where were you all these years?"⁷⁸ As Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific between 2009 and 2013, Campbell was a key official engaging China. Alongside others like Jeff Bader and Hillary Clinton, Campbell promoted the "pivot to Asia," later renamed the "rebalance."⁷⁹ Campbell's tenure also included a failed attempt to negotiate a resolution to the standoff between Beijing and the Philippines over Scarborough Shoal in April 2012. Dubbing Engagement a failure rang hollow for many interviewees.

More important than claims of cynicism, however, the political effect of the debate over Engagement is to stake out a strident position vis-à-vis U.S. policy toward China that challenges the China expert community to take sides, not only on Trump's trade war, but on the history of U.S.-China relations and their own role in its construction. Over the course of 2018 and 2019, the debate over Engagement became a politicized one. Defending Engagement came to mean defending policies, people, including policy-makers, which have taken part in the formation and implementation of U.S. China policy. It also meant taking a stand on the administration of Trump, on the one hand, and the PRC, on the other. The consequence has been the creation of strange political bedfellows, and a sharply restricted space for anyone hoping to argue, in part or in whole, in favor of the Engagement strategy.

⁷⁸ Interview F.

⁷⁹ See Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy* 11 October 2011; Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2012).

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS AND THE PRECARIOUS CENTER ON CHINA

As an argument over ideas, the failings of the “failure of Engagement” are multiple, as Alastair Iain Johnston has shown.⁸⁰ First, the referent object of Engagement—“China”—is vague. As numerous interviewees expressed, assessing the success or failure of U.S. China policy depends what you mean by “China.” For former diplomats, China means the Chinese government, and thus “The argument that engagement is the wrong approach is absurd. Engagement is always the right approach...But engagement may not necessarily be done properly. So you can argue that engagement under Obama was too disengaged,” as one prominent China expert argued.⁸¹ For others, like China scholars, and particularly human rights activists, an important distinction separates the Chinese government from the Chinese people and society. As one senior China scholar explained, “the word engagement to me is ambiguous between engagement with the government and engagement with the society in all of its manifestations. I’ve been on a blacklist for almost, yeah, more than 20 years and haven’t been to mainland China. But I consider myself engaged with the society tremendously...So, engagement with whom[?]...I’ve always been for engaging with China.”⁸²

As a political debate, however—and not a debate in the realm of intellectual ideas—the gaps and rhetorical slippage that come along with the claim that Engagement failed are productive. They allow individuals and groups who might otherwise agree on very little to occupy the same political ground on the issue of U.S. policy toward China. Indicatively, the demise of Engagement has disrupted traditional understandings of Left and right, liberal and conservative. Human rights advocates have found common cause with military hawks and opponents of China’s unfair trade

⁸⁰ See Alastair Iain Johnston, “The Failures of the ‘Failure of Engagement with China’”, *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (2019), pp. 99-114.

⁸¹ Interview H.

⁸² *Ibid.*

practices. On the other side, libertarian groups pushing a grand strategy of restraint find allies in leftist critics of the military industrial complex.

As one human rights advocate noted, although not a natural supporter of the president, “I’m thrilled” with the new China policy, “I don’t care who is in the White House..., not because it’s poking a stick in the eye of an extremely repressive and dangerous China which is what I also believe, but just on pure, on its own terms.”⁸³ Another senior professor described how “The [conservative] American Enterprise Institute invites me. And they pretty much love what I say. On the other hand I, just this morning I’m writing for the New York Review of Books which is, there’s a left/right split there.”⁸⁴ As this professor, with a long track record of involvement with human rights issues in China explained, “on the other hand, in the middle...people don’t warm to my critical point of view as much. In the business world a few years ago, this sort of rumble through and everything will be ok...Those people just don’t want to hear about human rights or topics like that.”⁸⁵

The effect is to render difficult the carving out and occupation of something approaching center ground within this political dichotomy. In the words of one long-standing and prominent Engager: “what’s in the middle of the [political] road?” “Roadkill.”⁸⁶

Some of the few who have tried to defend Engagement are former diplomats and policy-makers like Stapleton Roy and Chas Freeman.⁸⁷ They suggest that while things have not turned out as planned in China, the aims of the Engagers were strategically and politically sound *at the time*. As one former diplomat explained,

⁸³ Interview I.

⁸⁴ Interview H.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Interview E.

⁸⁷ See Roy, “Engagement Works,” *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 97, No. 4 (July/August 2018), pp. 185-86; Chas Freeman, “On Hostile Coexistence with China,” remarks at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Stanford University, 3 May 2019, at <https://chasfreeman.net/on-hostile-coexistence-with-china/>, accessed October 2019.

“the current rhetoric, or narrative, about the “failure” of “the engagement policy” is a gross misreading of the intentions and substance of U.S. policy. It is born of ignorance—some of it willful—about the nature of foreign policy, and how its making resembles that of sausage. But even more it is an expression of a political view, or attitude, which is to say an argument that *today* the U.S. policy toward China must be clear-eyed, unromantic, and utterly tied to the U.S. national interest. That sort of thing strikes me, and other practitioners of my generation, as facially (as lawyers would put it) absurd.”⁸⁸

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?”⁸⁹ Yet, once again, “Since there was never an “engagement” strategy with uniform contents and goals, it is equally absurd to maintain that “it” was a “failure.” One sees not a few straw men erected by persons pursuing a contemporary political agenda—especially when a very high percentage of those making such arguments were never themselves in the executive branch and who therefore purport to “know” that which they simply cannot or do not know.”⁹⁰

While *intellectually* these arguments have weight, *politically* they are defensive and weak by comparison to the starker and bolder claim that Engagement is a failed policy ripe for replacement. It is telling, therefore, that very few interviewees actively defended Engagement. One who did suggested, “in spite of our growing concern, the expectations of the early engagers have by and large had a lot of successes to point to.”⁹¹ Engagement had, for them, been a success overall. Expressing the sort of optimism Engagement’s critics point to, another senior engager explained

⁸⁸ Interview J.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Interview K.

how “I think history’s a long process and you have ups and downs and we’re, certainly, in a down. We may stay there for four decades. Uh, but, eventually China’s middle class will...seek self-actualization and then greater control over their future.”⁹² China was not, in their estimation, without its problems. “We’ve got a huge trade deficit and the Chinese are trading unfairly. I’ll just concede that, right? Yes, Xi Jinping is not the continuation of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao and I wish he were. But he’s not yet Mao. He’s headed in that direction and we’re all worried. But, I think most of us think this direction could last a long time, but not forever.”⁹³ As this interviewee went on, “most foreign policies don’t last 40 years. This has lasted 40 years and, on balance, it’s been positive...so, let’s not blow up the world.”⁹⁴

Experts willing to defend Engagement were noteworthy exceptions, therefore. Many more interviewees adopted a perspective that Engagement had not worked and that while Trump’s trade war and strongly anti-Beijing rhetoric has its problems, U.S. China policy needs a reset. As one younger China expert explained, “I don’t think that engagement has been as big a failure as a lot of people seem to be wanting to paint it...there’s definitely problems in the relationship. I don’t think there’s any getting around that, but the idea that you cannot have engagement and somehow have a viable China strategy is just very odd to me....I might just be nitpicky, rhetorical question, but I think it cuts to the heart of the framing of the deal which is essentially we tried to playing nice with China, we tried diplomacy. Well that didn’t work so let’s try something else.”⁹⁵ Put differently, as a political rather than intellectual argument, the claim that Engagement failed is powerful, even in for those rejecting the argument.

⁹² Interview E.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Interview A.

THE CENTER DIVIDES

“Not blowing up the world” and presenting new policy solutions in the face of accepted shifts in predominant views of China are two different propositions, which over time has led the pro-Engagement group to struggle to maintain coherence. As one interviewee described, the Engagers as a group are “splitting apart.”⁹⁶ The reports of two U.S.-China task forces—co-sponsored by the Asia Society in New York and the 21st Century China Center at the University of California-San Diego, respectively—highlight the processes by which the group’s unity frayed. The issue is who participates, who signs, and who writes dissents as to the tone and substance of the final report. Again, each of these choices is in part intellectual and in part a political one. Disagreements on intellectual substance and over the possible political effects of report conclusions are inseparable.

A first task force, co-chaired by long-time China experts Orville Schell and Susan Shirk, presented its “recommendations for a new administration” in February 2017.⁹⁷ The report described “U.S.-China relations” as “in a precarious state,” with “China now more assertive in Asia, more mercantilist in its economic policies, and more authoritarian in its domestic politics.”⁹⁸ The report urged the Trump administration to adopt a policy characterized by “greater firmness, more effective policy tools, and a greater insistence on reciprocity.”⁹⁹

However, while reflective of the shift in tone towards a more pessimistic view of developments in China and the prospects for U.S.-China relations, the report affirmed “a rising power need not become an adversary of the established power if its rise is restrained in manner and if the established power is open to sharing responsibility with the rising power.”¹⁰⁰ Reprising

⁹⁶ Interview E.

⁹⁷ See https://china.ucsd.edu/_files/02072017_US_China_task-force_report.pdf, accessed October 2019.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

the basic principles of Engagement, the report concluded the Trump administration “should recognize that US engagement with China from a principled position of strength in Asia has generally served these interests well and should be continued.” It is telling then that the report split individuals broadly on the same page on China. Of the participants, 12 chose to sign—including Former US Ambassador to China Winston Lord and Kurt Campbell—while six other participants, including Michael Swaine, Stape Roy, David Lampton from Johns Hopkins University and Jeffrey Bader—former NSC senior director for Asian Affairs under President Obama—declined.

When a second report appeared in February 2019, tellingly titled *Course Correction: Toward an Effective and Sustainable China Policy*,¹⁰¹ some original participants chose not to take part at all. As one interviewee noted, “I wasn’t very happy with the first report and refused to sign it and then they wanted me to be on the second group report and I just said I don’t want to get involved with it...at some point, you just become—you’re too far away from the group. It’s, just, like, why would I sign that, right? And, so you, can see this thing, sort of, pulling apart.”¹⁰² The headlines of the report were duly starker: “The United States and China are on a collision course,” with “Beijing’s recent policies under Xi Jinping’s leadership...primarily driving this negative dynamic.”¹⁰³

While still on friendly terms, a consensus on the China challenge was difficult to reach, facilitating the shift in the center of gravity in the community of China experts as a whole to an anti-China position: “I’m very much of the opinion,” they explained, that “we ought to try to find a center place, but we can’t find one and, to me, that’s a sad thing. I don’t like to see this...For me to say I-my group, right? And I don’t mean mine. The group with me in it...we’re not going to

¹⁰¹ See http://china.ucsd.edu/_files/2019-CourseCorrection.pdf, accessed October 2019.

¹⁰² Interview E.

¹⁰³ “Course Correction,” p. 7.

come to a policy consensus. And when, when, what you might call relatively moderate, reasonable people can't, themselves, find a consensus then it means the people with more extreme views will have a greater room to operate, because there's no coherent opposition."¹⁰⁴

Expertise, authority, and the virtues of Engagement

The debate over the wisdom of Engagement with China, the likely success of Trump administration's policies regarding the PRC, and what comes after Engagement, is simultaneously political and intellectual—a dispute over Engagement as a set of ideas at the same time as a competition for policy-making influence. The Engagement debate is also an artifact of a struggle over the nature of expertise and expert authority when it comes to China. Critics of Engagement cast Engagers as living in the past, disconnected from the new reality in China and US-China relations, relying on academic credentials and long-standing ties to China now viewed as politically compromised. Engagers, for their part, question the lack of the very same knowledge, academic qualifications and credentials, and Engagement's critics lack of contacts with well-placed Chinese. Each side is aware the debate over Engagement is in part over their respective statuses as China experts, which amplifies the ill will in the debate.

EXPERTISE, INTERESTS, AND COMPETENCE

Following Trump's election in 2016, for the first time in decades a varied group of China critics found themselves in the position of sharing a vision of U.S.-China relations with the occupant of the White House. For these self-professed "China hawks," the demise of Engagement means the welcome end to the political influence and epistemic hegemony of a group of elite China hands

¹⁰⁴ Interview E.

whose connections to China had rendered it blind to the reality of Beijing's increasing bellicosity—many authors of the task force reports discussed above. These critics are largely located institutionally outside the main international affairs think tanks, research centers, and academic departments in Washington D.C. and beyond. Frequently retired from the military and intelligence services, or employed in for profits like risk consulting, these China watchers nevertheless retain a keen watch on all things China, including in online listservs, some overlapping with the broader China expert community.

As one critic of Engagement, a now-retired intelligence officer, explained to me, while the Engagers were talking to Chinese scholars, liberal elites, and friendly policy-makers, people like my interviewee were reading classified military intelligence presenting a different aspect to China's rise. "[B]efore 2012," they explained, pro-Engagement China experts "ridiculed people like me. They ridiculed us. They mocked us. They said we were uneducated. They said we didn't speak the language. They said we were uninformed. We didn't really know the Chinese people... Yet, guys like me were reading what the Chinese were saying, understanding what the Chinese were saying from sources that they couldn't get access to."¹⁰⁵

The expertise of the China hawks thus frequently differs markedly from the expertise of the pro-Engagement former policy-makers, diplomats, think tanker and scholars. "They go to China," my interviewee explained, "They get hosted. They get banquets... They get this taken to all the scenic tour spots. And they're shepherded around and told that, you know, the Chinese are really, really working on making things better. And these [Chinese] Ministry of Foreign Affairs guys that would, you know, lead them around like horses through a barn. What they called the barbarian handlers. These people were the subject of the barbarian handlers."¹⁰⁶ While many

¹⁰⁵ Interview L.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

prominent China scholars were “all very respected and all very erudite,” they go on, this only enabled them to evade criticism of other China watchers, like them.¹⁰⁷ “We’re really seeing the inside. We’re not being led around by barbarian handlers. They were stewed enough to, they just had an answer for everything. But they denied the actual facts on the ground.”¹⁰⁸

The problem, they went on, is that the Engagers “had been indoctrinated with the Kissinger school.”¹⁰⁹ The name of former National Security Advisor and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger has special significance, meaning a “corpus of thought on China, which was to say China’s not expansionist. China’s not really an aggressive nation. They’ve always been an inward nation, right?”¹¹⁰ For those with extensive experience reading Chinese propaganda and classified intelligence material, most of it filtered through direct witnessing of Chinese military actions in the South China Sea, nothing could be further from the truth. The upshot was that the Engagers “were advocates for the [Chinese Communist] Party but denying that they were. They would vehemently deny that they were showing for the party. But, in essence, that’s what they were doing.”¹¹¹

In the words of Patrick Porter, Stephen Walt, and others, what my interviewee describes is a form of groupthink and stablished habits and routines of the national security Establishment.¹¹² “[T]hey have events. There’s talks at the universities. And there’s talks at the State Department. And there’s talks at the National Defense University. And there’s conferences hosted by CSIS [the Center for Strategic and International Studies] and the Carnegie Foundation and the Council on Foreign Relations. And there’s this whole milieu of people that go and meet and talk. And they

¹⁰⁷ Interview L.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Porter, “Why America’s Grand Strategy Has Not Changed”; Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America’s Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2018).

were in that. They grew up with that. They lived in that.”¹¹³ More importantly, perhaps, “They became to their positions of power because of that. And so, they were bought into this whole idea. And so, when somebody comes in and says, hey, everything that you’ve everything believed in your adult life is wrong, they’re going to actually put up the wall. They’re going to put up the defenses.”¹¹⁴

Other interviewees back up these impressions. For one prominent China watcher, the end of Engagement debate has generated a lot of ““personal antipathy in the community... a lot of these people are ones whose career didn’t go so well because they were effectively sidelined because they were not on the [right side].”¹¹⁵ The election of Donald Trump and authoritarian turn in China has emboldened such individuals. “[F]or them, you know, what I’m seeing is a lot of real personal—just kind of real personal vindication in what’s going on.”¹¹⁶ They were, this interviewee goes on, “marginalized...[as] kind of the China hawks. You know, the scaremongers in the eighties and nineties who are coming back and saying, you know, “Look, we were right.””¹¹⁷

The opposite holds for supporters of good relations with China. One interviewee, an emeritus professor of political science, gave the example of a former business leader, central in the in attempt to open up China to American investment during the 1990s as someone who “clearly experiences this turn as saying he wasted his life and so he almost doesn’t want to hear the conversations, like you can see him tuning out...I think he’s feeling...that no-one wants to listen to him anymore.”¹¹⁸ Even for my interviewee, “petty bourgeois neurotics tend to have their own identity at risk, whether it’s their farm, their small business or their intellectual positions. Petty

¹¹³ Interview L.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Interview M.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Interview N.

bourgeois neurotics are petty bourgeois neurotics...I'm including me in this. We are sick people. We really, really care and identify ourselves with these things we thought."¹¹⁹ For many, especially academics, their very lives were shaped by engagement. As one interviewee explained,

“All of us, as I said, we were not expecting to ever get in to China and know people. In other words, we expect to go through a career and never really talk to a resident Chinese person in the leadership or in society...We always thought we would be dealing with refugees. People who escaped that system and try to understand that system from outside. And from our perches on the outside, what did we, we see? We saw bodies floating down the Pearl River into Hong Kong Harbor. We saw thousands of people trying desperately to escape. We saw gun towers along the bow-boarder to and dead me-uh, no man zones to keep their people in China and so forth. We saw no, um, economic activity, virtually, except smuggling and so forth. Uh, and our-the reality has been, we've become more interdependent faster...Our careers totally did not follow the pattern we thought. It was almost the exact opposite of what we thought it would be when we went in. And it's all been positive-not all, but almost all positive change.”¹²⁰

The personal investment of policy-makers was, if anything, even starker. As one prominent newspaper columnist noted, “there's a whole group that has criticized Trump's policies on China, like the Jeff Bader crowd. But their solution was to continue doing what they had done before, which has failed [laughs], right? So it's, like, you know, but again, because many people are wedded to—I mean, especially the policymakers, they're wedded to the policies they made. And they don't want to admit that this didn't work.”¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Interview N.

¹²⁰ Interview E.

¹²¹ Interview O.

DEFENDING EXPERTISE, AND CAREERS

The very nature of China expertise is therefore at stake in the struggle over Engagement. Critics of Engagement, including individuals now working inside the government, feel that their expertise has for a long time been downplayed and discounted by pro-Engagers as not “real” China expertise. Almost to prove the point, many other China watchers are deeply concerned about the lack of influence of established China hands in the Trump administration. The background context is a broader crisis of expertise, strongly evident in Trump’s governing style, but extending well beyond it.¹²²

As one China expert in the legal field suggested, the most troubling thing about recent US China policy was “the more general rejection of expertise” it reflected.¹²³ Acknowledging their bias—“I, of course, speak from a point of extreme bias because I consider myself an expert on foreign relations in the China sphere. So, I think we are valuable people. Otherwise my work is meaningless”—they nevertheless affirmed that Engagement’s chief critics are not China experts in their estimation.¹²⁴

Another senior China scholar argued, the problem with the Trump administration is that it has failed to recruit or retain any “good China watchers.” “The Trump administration has kids, but no strategy and no long-term perspective,” they professed.¹²⁵ The result is a lack of knowledge on China and East Asia. Defending the Engagers, my interviewee explained, the “hawks think the China folks were naïve—that’s not true...So, I think we’re in an unusually bad spot right now” with only people like Kurt Campbell “who are overly ambitious and like to be advisers” and people

¹²² See Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹²³ Interview P.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Interview Q.

like Senator Congressman Marco Rubio, who “think that you use the China card as a way to propel themselves into a higher position. They’re becoming vocally anti-Chinese without understanding and without realizing that they way to get, work with China is to get along with it.”¹²⁶

In particular, a lack of deep historical knowledge about China was commonly cited as a weakness of anti-Engagement China hands. As one prominent China watcher noted, “I don’t have my eyes closed to the fact that...things have gotten a whole lot more, you know, conspicuously illiberal [in China]—this isn’t my first rodeo. [But] I’ve seen these sort of turns happen in the past. I think that often there’s a lack of a longer temporal perspective.”¹²⁷

Special advisor on trade, Peter Navarro, is a particular target of doubt about his expertise and credentials. “If Navarro has a Harvard Ph.D. in history,” one former high ranking diplomat told me, “he certainly doesn’t show any signs of it.”¹²⁸ Another China scholar suggested Navarro “comes from passion” rather than objective knowledge of economics. “I don’t know any serious economist in Washington who’s saying that blanket tariffs against Chinese products is a good idea. It’s just not a view that I’ve heard....The business community, the think-tank community, academia, there’s not—there’s not research to back it up.”¹²⁹ Others intimated that advisers like Navarro were not correcting the President’s own misunderstanding of the trade relationship with China: “it’s very clear that [Trump] literally believes that a trade deficit is a loss in trade. If you have a trade deficit of 300 million, billion, whatever it is, then you’re losing 300 billion on trade. And that’s not what a trade deficit is.”¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Interview Q.

¹²⁷ Interview R.

¹²⁸ Interview S.

¹²⁹ Interview T.

¹³⁰ Interview U.

For some, however, Navarro's expertise is not in question: but it is *political* expertise, not economic. People like Navarro, one China scholar at a top business school explained, "want gone...the level of integration, the deep integration the two economies have below the level of the state."¹³¹ The aim is "disentanglement [of the American and Chinese economies]...And if it comes to higher prices for American consumers, trouble for American business, fewer products being possible because we don't have this collaborative supply chain thing, they don't care. This is the goal. They're not naïve. They're incredibly strategic."¹³² Navarro and others are therefore experts of a sort, just not economic China experts.

Together, these impressions highlight the deep interconnection between the various professional and institutional investments of different China experts and their views of Engagement and the developments in U.S. China policy under President Trump. Navarro et al, the previous interviewee went, "just believe things that I deeply don't believe, which is that we are on our way to having some sort of conflict with this country, and the less economic engagement we have, the better decision making we can have. We don't want our decision making clouded by the facts of [America's deep interconnection with China.]"¹³³

When the debate over Engagement is understood as a struggle over the nature of expertise, it becomes clear that a signal purpose of the two U.S-China task force reports is to bolster the authority as experts of its authors, despite their affiliation with now politically unpopular Engagement policy. The first report, released just after the Trump administration entered office, noted how the task force members had have "all dedicated ourselves to the study of China and East Asia."¹³⁴ Their aim is thus "to pool our collective experience to assist the new administration,"

¹³¹ Interview V.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ "US Policy Toward China," p. 16.

principally by showing how the new administration could be “mindful of lessons from the past”—like the sanctity of the One China Policy and America’s commitment to Taiwan.¹³⁵ The shift from the first to the second task force reports is stark in the terms used to describe the challenge from China, but the faith in knowledge and expertise remained: although “Everyone in our Task Force is alarmed about the sharp deterioration of the U.S.-China relationship. All of us feel a strong sense of responsibility to utilize our knowledge and experience to help prevent a hostile face-off that would be devastating not only to the United States and China, but also to the rest of the world.”¹³⁶

NUANCING THE ENGAGEMENT DEBATE: DEFINING AMERICAN INTERESTS IN EAST ASIA

The divisions opened up among former Engagers in the process of drafting the Asia Society task force reports illustrates the politicization of Engagement and China expertise. Attempts to question possible alternatives to Engagement, and what might have been done differently in the past, highlight the challenge of staking out intellectual and political ground on U.S. China relations in what could be perceived as a pro-Beijing direction. Also curtailed is the space for questioning U.S. motives and the nature of American interests in East Asia—what role has America and particularly American businesses played in China’s rise? Finally, attempts to nuance the stark assessments of Chinese intentions are rendered problematic as they suggest a pro-Engagement position, whether intended or not. The effect is to limit the scope of the discussion over U.S. strategy by politically tainting the ideas, people, and forms of expertise associated with Engagement.

As one journalist and Asia expert asked, “What’s the alternative [to Engagement]?...No one really offers an alternative of what the US should have done differently.”¹³⁷ At what point in

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 17.

¹³⁶ “Course Correction,” p. 46.

¹³⁷ Interview A.

the last four decades of US-China relations should Engagement have been abandoned and a new policy developed? After Tiananmen? The Taiwan Straits Crisis of 1996? “If you’re saying that engagement was such a terrible idea, you know, what should the US have done differently?”¹³⁸ For another China watcher, professionally located at a top business school, even while agreeing that Engagement had a utopian tinge, “I don’t think there was anything else we could have done...I mean if we tried to contain China in that late 1990s, where would we be? I mean, the only thing you could do was what we did. And I actually thought the Obama policy [of rebalancing US foreign policy toward Asia] was really thoughtful.”¹³⁹

Others questioned why the role of Americans—especially American businesses—in facilitating China’s rise was entirely absent from the failures of Engagement debate. As one senior scholar of Chinese language and literature explained, “in 1994 the Clinton Administration decided we’re going to have permanent most-normal trading relations. And the business community loved it because they wanted to go exploit cheap labor. And they did. And look what we have as a result. I was angry at that. I thought, you guys are feeding a baby dragon, and you don’t know it.”¹⁴⁰ For another popular China watcher, “I mean it’s not like China came here in the middle of the night, broke into our house, and stole our factories, and brought them over to Shenzhen....it was American actors with perfect agency who did this. This is on us. This is not, not on China. I mean we mean, we mean what to change our policy, but the idea that this is, is about China’s fault. I mean the loss of jobs is not China’s fault. I mean isn’t it the greed of American institutions, our academic institutions, the greed of our corporations...a lot of this is really on us.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Interview A.

¹³⁹ Interview V.

¹⁴⁰ Interview H.

¹⁴¹ Interview R.

Very few interviewees questioned U.S. motives in East Asia and the scope of American national interest challenged by China's rise. Experts on China, not America, and keenly aware of it, they broadly speaking remained on the topic of developments in China and the China watching community.

One senior China scholar and political scientist asked, "why should anybody want to be subordinated to the United States?...as if they don't think their own nation is great to be independent is really a radical American parochial discourse that's no good for anybody."¹⁴² For another former Ambassador, "[W]e need to be clear about what's at stake [in the China challenge]. It's—not yet anyway—the defense of the United States. It's the defense of American primacy in the Pacific. And so—and I would argue, and do and have, that in fact American primacy like any primacy is not eternal and cannot be preserved forever."¹⁴³ For them, "the thesis is that China must not be allowed exercise influence, governance, or, you know, achieve a military capability in its own neighborhood...that's pretty absurd."¹⁴⁴ Looking further back into history, it is clear that "we're in their face, they're not in ours. And that's been the case since we first went out there in 1835. We set up a fleet to harass China. And then in 1854, we began patrolling the Yangtze....And it didn't stop until 1941. Now can you imagine the Germans patrolling the Mississippi for 90 years?...And yet we accused them of being in our face. They're assertive, right?"¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Interview N.

¹⁴³ Interview W.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

Another questioned whether Chinese influence operations in the US were really as serious a problem as people were making out:

“these influence operations...are ham fisted. They’re clumsy. They’re spotted from a mile off. They’re totally ineffective. And, you know, and more to the point, like, what are we really concerned about? We’re concerned about the integrity of the American civic fabric, right? That’s what we— We’re afraid that China’s influence ops will damage this. Well, what will damage it worse? These clumsy, easy to spot operations that so far have been, you know, terribly ineffective, or the reaction to them, our overreaction to them, where we’re about to start racially profiling East Asian people? We’re going to start excluding them from our research institutions where we’re going to, you know, have McCarthyite, red, witch hunt thing going on. Which is the more apt to damage that civic fabric? I mean I think the answer to me is obvious, so...”¹⁴⁶

Former diplomat Chas Freeman is a noteworthy exception. A prominent and unabashed commentator on U.S.-China relations, Freeman turns his gaze towards U.S. politics and society to a greater extent than most China watchers. In Freeman’s view, “it is the United States, not China, that is ignoring the U.N. Charter, withdrawing from treaties and agreements, attempting to paralyze the World Trade Organization’s dispute resolution mechanisms, and substituting bilateral protectionist schemes for multilateral facilitation of international trade based on comparative advantage.”¹⁴⁷ For Freeman, after decades of increased inequality, American citizens are “vulnerable to demagoguery that attributes their distress to selfish corporate collusion with

¹⁴⁶ Interview R.

¹⁴⁷ Freeman, “On Hostile Coexistence with China.”

China.” In his view, however, “Blaming China for their distress may alleviate it. Sadly, it will not fix it.”¹⁴⁸

However, Freeman is in a marked a minority in the China expert community for his views on U.S.-China relations. Few interviewees juxtaposed China’s new assertiveness and America’s own international behavior and domestic political problems. Some noted that the long-term US position in East Asia is untenable if China remains on its current economic growth trajectory. One mid-career think tanker noted how, although they would not say it openly, the United States has to scale back to objectives. “China wants certain things, like Taiwan, very badly, [like] control of the South China Seas and the India trade routes, [and they] won’t bend. How could the US accommodate [these Chinese interests]?”¹⁴⁹ Note, then, that even the strong rebuttal of the Trump administration’s China policy remains over China, not America’s interests in East Asia. For Swaine and his co-signatories, China is not “an economic enemy or an existential national security threat that must be confronted in every sphere.”¹⁵⁰ To be sure, China’s leaders are “seeking to weaken the role of Western democratic norms within the global order.”¹⁵¹ But China “is not seeking to overturn vital economic and other components of that order from which China itself has benefited for decades. Indeed, China’s engagement in the international system is essential to the system’s survival and to effective action on common problems such as climate change.”¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ Chas Freeman, “The Sino-American Split and Its Consequences”, The Foreign Policy Association’s Centennial Lecture Series, New York, 13 June 2019, available at <https://chasfreeman.net/the-sino-american-split-and-its-consequences/>, accessed October 2019.

¹⁴⁹ Interview [...].

¹⁵⁰ See https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/making-china-a-us-enemy-is-counterproductive/2019/07/02/647d49d0-9bfa-11e9-b27f-ed2942f73d70_story.html, accessed September 2019.

¹⁵¹ See https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/making-china-a-us-enemy-is-counterproductive/2019/07/02/647d49d0-9bfa-11e9-b27f-ed2942f73d70_story.html, accessed September 2019.

¹⁵² See https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/making-china-a-us-enemy-is-counterproductive/2019/07/02/647d49d0-9bfa-11e9-b27f-ed2942f73d70_story.html, accessed September 2019.

Attempts to nuance the bold claims of those rejecting Engagement are themselves politicized, weakening the political impact of the work of scholars like Alastair Iain Johnston—well respected among China experts precisely for clear-eyed empirical assessments of common notions like China’s position as a “revisionist” or “status quo” power.¹⁵³ Turning his attentions to the question of whether China really is seeking to overturn the international order, and the prior question of what precisely is meant by the notion, Johnston demonstrates that there is no single international order, but rather a plurality of international orders. Johnston thus makes clear than in some regional and issue-specific areas China strongly upholds the existing order, such as over arms control agreements and open trade.¹⁵⁴ Indeed, Johnston goes on to make the claim—likely controversial to anti-Engagers—that in some issue areas China is more active than the United States in defending the international order, especially in upholding norms of sovereign independence.

Critics of Engagement reject arguments like Johnston’s and the whole attempt to nuance the debate over U.S. China policy, however. For many interviewees, especially those with military and intelligence experience, the aim of the China’s military buildup is clear: “To kill Americans. You can’t be rosy about things when you have that fundamental reality.”¹⁵⁵ As one China scholar with military experience explained, you could ask theoretical questions such as “is China really challenging the international order?” and “what is the international order anyway?”, but “People in defense are, like, “We don’t care, they’re shooting stuff at us.” For them, “the weapons systems the Chinese are developing can only be understood as targeting the United States.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Alastair Iain Johnston, “Is China a Status Quo Power?” *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Spring 2003), pp. 5-56.

¹⁵⁴ Johnston, “The Failures of the ‘Failure of Engagement with China.’”

¹⁵⁵ Interview Y.

¹⁵⁶ Interview Z.

Opponents of Engagement see in the views of Freeman, Johnston, Roy, and others merely the doubling down on four decades of head-in-the-sand thinking on the geopolitical threat posed by China. For Mike Pillsbury, former Defense Department official-turned-China expert, and advisor to President Trump, China's leaders are committed to a long-term plan to replace the United States as the leading superpower, beginning with removing the US Navy from the western Pacific.¹⁵⁷ One leading critic of Engagement explained the issue as follows:

“for 40 years we engaged. We engaged on their advice, on their, on their expert testimony, if you will. Guys like Ken Lieberthal, guys like Winston Lord, guys like... Who's the guy that was the ambassador there that, Stapleton Roy. I mean, Orville Schell, all these people, they were all the intellectual foundation for advising every administration, Republican and Democrat to engage, to engage, to engage. And some of them now recognize that they can't keep selling that because it's so patently false. You can't say that China's got nice intentions when they build seven islands in the South China Sea. And that's really what busted open the floodgate, in my opinion, was the actual undeniable physical evidence.”¹⁵⁸

For Pillsbury and others, the implications are clear: as one China critic told me, the Chinese “are out to clean our clocks.”¹⁵⁹

THE CASE OF SUSAN THORNTON

The case of the failed Senate ratification of State Department official Susan Thornton is indicative of the twin struggle over expert and political authority over China under the Trump administration. Thornton, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs (2017-2018),

¹⁵⁷ Pillsbury, *Hundred-Year Marathon*.

¹⁵⁸ Interview L.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

retired in August 2018, shortly after it became clear that Florida Senator Marco Rubio and others in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee would likely block her ratification to a permanent position. Thornton's fate illustrates the interconnection between reputation, politics, and personality, which can determine the fate and identity of the individuals who guide U.S. China policy at the highest levels.

For Engagers, Thornton was the one true China expert left in the highest positions in the administration—with the exception for some of National Security Council member Matthew Pottinger. As a career State Department official and Mandarin speaker—and graduate of Hopkins-Nanjing—Thornton had the sort of expert credentials interviewees considered imperative for anyone holding high office in relation to China.¹⁶⁰ Again, in large measure, their assessment of Thornton followed their own estimation of what it means to be a China expert.

For critics, Thornton's purported expertise was less important than a reputation as soft on China, association with Engagement rendering her unacceptable as Assistant Secretary of State with responsibility for China. Thornton was opposed by Senator Rubio in particular, who has staked a reputation as a strong critic of China as a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Chairman of the Congressional-Executive Committee on China. On 17 May 2018, Rubio tweeted that he would “do all I can do to prevent Susan Thornton from ever being confirmed as Ass[istant] Secretary of State for E. Asian and Pacific Affairs,” claiming that Thornton was at that moment in Tokyo undermining the President by advocating for only a partial surrender of nuclear weapons by North Korea.¹⁶¹ In the background was Rubio's view that Thornton was an

¹⁶⁰ Interview E.

¹⁶¹ <https://twitter.com/marcorubio/status/997120123164135424>

Engager. Among her supporters were Daniel Russel, Senior Director for Asian Affairs on President Obama's National Security Council.¹⁶²

Thornton's ratification thus became entangled with the "palace wars" within the Trump White House, namely that between advisor Steve Bannon and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Tillerson had strongly supported Thornton to assume the Assistant Secretaryship on a permanent basis, being impressed by Thornton's knowledge of East Asia and cognizant of the need to maintain morale among career Foreign Service officers in the department.¹⁶³ Bannon considered Thornton weak on China, and made clear his intention to get "hawks" in and "Thornton out."¹⁶⁴

The Thornton case demonstrates the limitations of explanations of the demise of Engagement based on either its policy failings, the shifting balance of global power, or the priorities of the Trump administration when it comes to China. The end of Engagement is in the end an intimate story of struggle over U.S. China strategy among a discrete and relatively small number of individuals in the government and China expert community. At the same time, it is a struggle over strategy, politics, and expertise. Ultimately, strategies change because people change, and institutions too: either new policy-makers come in, change their mind, or are allowed to say things they previously could not. As one former State Department official put it, "The difference is that, you know, the Matt Pottingers of the world and the John Boltions of the world and the Peter Navarro of the world and the Lighthizers of the world...[now] they're calling the shots."¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² See https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/tillerson-scores-a-personnel-win-as-top-east-asia-adviser-is-nominated/2017/12/24/fd1bd20a-e743-11e7-a65d-1ac0fd7f097e_story.html?undefined=&wpisrc=nl_headlines&wpmm=1, accessed October 2019.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/josh-rogin/wp/2018/03/15/without-rex-tillersons-protection-a-top-state-department-nominee-is-in-trouble/>, accessed October 2019. See also <https://prospect.org/power/steve-bannon-unrepentant/>, accessed October 2019.

¹⁶⁵ Interview F.

Conclusion

Security scholars agree the U.S.-China bilateral relationship will be the most consequential in world politics for the remainder of the century. Whether conflict or cooperation obtains will have implications well beyond the military-security sphere, including for global governance of issues of common concern such as climate change. Predominant frames emphasize the threat engendered in leading states by rising competitors, regardless of other factors such as regime type, which in this case exacerbate tensions between Washington and Beijing. Politics in the guise of the election of President Trump also loom large U.S. China strategy, precipitating a broad debate over the wisdom of Engagement. Grasping the demise of Engagement requires viewing Engagement as more than a foreign policy strategy, however. Engagement was a set of relationships between the U.S. government and the China expert community, relations transformed under Trump in a new atmosphere of politicized China policy, as China's continued rise and authoritarian turn makes proximate long-held concern over geopolitical trends. The consequences are highly significant for the debate over what comes after Engagement.

The first major consequence is that China expertise itself is now directly implicated in the debate over what comes after Engagement. In a politicized moment like this one, claims to expertise become partisan. Critics view scholars as either disinterested from pressing national security threats, or as at worst potential apologists for geopolitical rivals. The politicization of expertise has serious implications for readers and contributors to this journal, which seeks objective analysis of major trends in U.S. security policy, including regarding China. As Michael Desch for one has chronicled, the barriers to mutual intelligibility between the Ivory Tower and American strategic community are high enough without the dismissal of scholarship as partisan.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ Michael C. Desch, *Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

Expertise is threatened beyond matters of national security, moreover.¹⁶⁷ Placing current developments in historical context, thinking theoretically, and breaking down common sense, remain invaluable tools for the pursuit of a rational security toward a rising China, and the construction of an approach the best serves the U.S. national interest.

Secondly, therefore, foregrounding the social dynamics underpinning the struggle over Engagement highlights how views of the strategy might further polarize into opposed camps—the small group of Engagers on one side, the broad coalition of anti-Engagers the other—with implications for what comes after Engagement. The issue is in part rhetorical: some measure of “engagement” with China will undoubtedly be necessary after Engagement—whether “partial” engagement in the economic sphere alongside competition, or military cooperation with China in matters such as securing North Korean nuclear weapons after a potential failure of the Pyongyang regime.¹⁶⁸ But because politics by its nature tends to the black and white—a matter of us versus them—the danger is that expert voices critically analyzing new proposed strategies may be ignored because of who they are, or where they stand, not what they argue.

¹⁶⁷ See Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹⁶⁸ See, respectively, Charles W. Boustany Jr. and Aaron Friedberg, “Partial Disengagement: A New U.S. Strategy for Economic Competition with China,” *The National Bureau of Asian Research Special Report #82*; and Oriana Skylar Mastro, “Conflict and Chaos on the Korean Peninsula: Can China’s Military Help Secure North Korea’s Nuclear Weapons?” *International Security* Vol. 43, No. 2 (Fall 2018), pp. 84-116.