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Knowledge Communities in US Foreign Policy Making: The American China Field and the End of Engagement with the PRC

David M. McCourt 

ABSTRACT

The United States' long-standing approach to the People's Republic of China—"engagement"—is at an end, replaced by a tougher approach, labeled "strategic competition." Foregrounding the role of knowledge communities in the making of US foreign policy, I show that engagement's demise followed less a rational process responding to shifts in Chinese behavior and the balance of power, and more a paradigmatic turnover in key individuals' views of China within the government and the China expert community. Adopting a sociological perspective attuned to the social and professional underpinnings of US foreign policy, I trace the paradigmatic turnover in US views of China to three processes: politicization, professional status competition, and personalization. Drawing on a range of sources, including over one hundred original interviews with members of the US China expert community, this article traces the entanglement of engagement at once political, professional, and deeply personal.

Beginning in 2017, US foreign policy makers transformed America's long-standing approach to the People's Republic of China (PRC). Out went *engagement*, which sought to incorporate China into the US-led international order, and in came *strategic competition*, which seeks to confront a Beijing that hopes "to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests."¹ Sino-US relations have waxed and waned, with periodic upswings punctuating skepticism and occasional crises, such as Tiananmen.² Though

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¹United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China (Washington, DC: White House, 20 May 2020), <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/U.S.-Strategic-Approach-to-The-Peoples-Republic-of-China-Report-5.24v1.pdf>; National Security Strategy of the United States of America (Washington, DC: White House, December 2017), 25, <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/NSS2017.pdf?ver=CnFwURrw09pJ0q5EogFpwg%3d%3d>.

²John Pomfret, "The Pendulum of U.S.-China Relations Is Swinging Again," *Washington Post*, 11 September 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/09/11/pendulum-us-china-relations-is-swinging-again/>; Michael J. Green, *By More Than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific since 1783* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

cooperative relations may return in the future, engagement appears a thing of the past for now.³

Here I assess whether engagement is at an end and offer an interpretation of its demise based on a new sociological perspective on the role of knowledge communities in US foreign policy making. I first justify the conclusion that engagement is over by delineating its three aspects: engagement as policy—the concrete decisions and processes of US-China relations; as frame—the predominant narrative about China and its meaning for America, and policy justification; and as community—the China professionals with a stake in engagement as policy and frame. Despite some policy continuities—such as high-level bilateral contacts—engagement as community and frame have changed markedly. US China policy is no longer backed by tight connections between the government and pro-engagement China professionals, nor by an optimistic framing of China's rise. In the words of Kurt M. Campbell, President Biden's China "czar," "the era of Engagement is at an end."⁴

Disaggregating engagement paves the way for my principal argument—an interpretation of the concept's decline rooted in the social and professional struggles underpinning US foreign policy. Drawing on a range of sources, including 134 original interviews with members of the US China field, I trace the paradigmatic turnover away from engagement to three processes: *politicization*, *professional status competition*, and *personalization*.

"Politicization" refers to the crystallization of opposed groups in the struggle over US China policy—what I term the "engagers" and the "anti-engagers." Until 2017, a dominant view in the China field held that—disagreements with Beijing notwithstanding—America's national interests were best served by cooperation, justified in optimistic language. Consensus on "engagement" was never total, and engagement as a frame and the engagers as a group frayed during Barack Obama's second term. Under Donald Trump, however, engagement was swiftly replaced as policy, frame, and community. A new set of policymakers, drawn from the anti-engagers, effected a "China reckoning."⁵ Forging new connections to the China field, they fashioned a new frame—strategic competition—which justified policies across the government countering China.

³Orville Schell, "The Death of Engagement," *Wire China*, 7 June 2020, <https://www.thewirechina.com/2020/06/07/the-birth-life-and-death-of-engagement/>; David M. Lampton, "Engagement with China: A Eulogy and Reflections on a Gathering Storm," in Anne F. Thurston, ed., *Engaging China: Fifty Years of Sino-American Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 391–422.

⁴Biden's Asia Czar Kurt Campbell Says the Era of Engagement with Xi's China is Over," *Straits Times*, 27 May 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/united-states/us-says-looking-at-quad-meeting-in-fall-focused-on-infrastructure>.

⁵Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, "The China Reckoning: How Beijing Defied American Expectations," *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 2 (March/April 2018): 60–70.

The politicization of engagement, accelerating especially under Trump, was critical to its demise but not sufficient. Formation of opposed groups was possible because engagement became a stake in professional status competition: China policy and its justificatory frame's entanglement in struggles over prestige, influence, legitimacy, and professional rewards. The Trump administration's China reckoning replaced a set of policymakers who not only thought of China differently but were also different *kinds* of China experts, backed by distinct credentials and affiliations. Where the engagers emphasized deep country-specific knowledge, "nuance," and personal connections to China, the anti-engagers viewed those credentials and contacts with suspicion, prioritizing bold pronouncements about the China threat to galvanize Washington for protracted competition.

Engagement's personalization amplified politicization and professionalized struggle. For the engagers, four decades of engaging China represented their career and personal accomplishments. For the opposing camp, engagement's longevity rendered them outside the mainstream view in Washington until the mid-2010s, with mirror-image implications for their personal and professional lives. In that context, the engagement debate has been marked by animosity, with anti-engagers outspoken in their criticism of engagers, whom they fear have been biased by their professional interests. For their part, engagers resent critiques that stretch the bounds of intellectual debate.

The following account is developed in part to supplement, and in part to supplant, three existing or likely explanations of engagement's demise: policy failure; domestic politics, especially the election of China skeptic Donald Trump; and shifts in the balance of power. Each accounts for some of the factors leading to engagement's replacement, yet they are limited in important respects. Although not thereby rendering engagement's replacement an irrational process, alternative accounts' limitations pose questions that my argument is in a good position to address.

First, the case for engagement's failure as policy downplays how engaging Beijing made sense for much of the last half century, led to positive outcomes for certain sectors of the US economy, and still makes sense if the United States and China are to cooperate on today's challenges.⁶ Why was engagement interpreted as a failure, by whom, and how did the view gain traction within the often-immovable US policymaking machinery? Second,

⁶Wang Jisi, J. Stapleton Roy, Aaron Friedberg, Thomas Christensen, Patricia Kim, Joseph S. Nye, Jr., Eric Li, Kurt M. Campbell, and Ely Ratner, "Did America Get China Wrong? The Engagement Debate," *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 4 (July/August 2018), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-06-14/did-america-get-china-wrong>; Tiffany Barron, Rorry Daniels, Dan Jasper, and Susan Thornton, *Engagement Revisited: Progress Made and Lessons Learned from the US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue* (New York: National Committee on American Foreign Policy, September 2021), <https://www.ncafp.org/new-report-us-china-strategic-economic-dialogues/>.

a domestic politics explanation leaves unexplained the character and views of the Trump national security team. Why did his administration effect a paradigmatic turnover when other administrations had not? Finally, a balance of power explanation suggests few mechanisms to account for the change in expert views, offering a limited role for economics, politics, and the interpretation of threats and interests. Why, precisely, was the balance of global power interpreted as necessitating a shift in China policy?

By focusing on a paradigmatic turnover in key individuals' view of China in the government and China expert community, the interpretation I develop explains how and why those in positions of power come to believe and make instrumental use of certain interpretations of the world—that “engagement failed.” It can also account for the importance of domestic politics to US foreign policy making, namely the critical juncture of Trump's election. Finally, the perspective I develop identifies the mechanisms by which changing balances of international power lead to policy change.

This article addresses a question of general relevance to security scholars: What role do knowledge or “epistemic” communities play in foreign policy making? Long considered important, only rarely do knowledge communities determine outcomes.⁷ Drawing on recent work in the sociology of knowledge and expertise, my account illustrates the indirect but critical interplay between knowledge communities and policy.⁸ I show that the role of knowledge communities in making foreign policy is not to create, test, and transport ideas into government but to participate in professional struggles over the construction, legitimation, and boundaries of national security frames, defining the parameters of mainstream views on a given issue, and to credential individuals available for government service.

My argument also contributes to international relations (IR) debates about the role of ideas in national security.⁹ In particular, it offers a way to grasp ideas as intrinsic—a matter of belief—and strategic.¹⁰ This article traces how a group of China experts in the Trump administration viewed engagement with Beijing as having failed, and that new conditions required new thinking. Although held intrinsically, these ideas were also—in part—strategic, emerging from and deployed in struggles over US China policy at once political, professional, and personal. The Trump administration's China ideas manifested not as a minor policy correction directed at specific

⁷Mai'a K. Davis Cross, “Rethinking Epistemic Communities Twenty Years Later,” *Review of International Studies* 39, no. 1 (January 2013): 137–60.

⁸Gil Eyal and Larissa Buchholz, “From the Sociology of Intellectuals to the Sociology of Interventions,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 36 (2010): 117–37.

⁹See, for example, Andrew Flitbirt, “The Road to Baghdad: Ideas and Intellectuals in Explanations of the Iraq War,” *Security Studies* 15, no. 2 (April–June 2006): 310–52.

¹⁰See also Stacie E. Goddard and Ronald R. Krebs, “Rhetoric, Legitimation, and Grand Strategy,” *Security Studies* 24, no. 1 (January–March 2015): 5–36.

issue areas such as trade or human rights. They manifested as a paradigmatic reframing of America's national interest, which solidified an understanding of engagement as a coherent policy. As an artifact of political, professional, and personal contestation, engagement's demise demonstrates the limitations of viewing policy ideas as either intrinsic or strategic.

Finally, by foregrounding the social and professional impediments to rational policymaking, my analysis has direct policy relevance. With some degree of engagement inevitable, I show how political, professional, and personal dissociation can close off ideas and expertise invaluable for strategizing how engagement and strategic competition can be operationalized in tandem. Here questions of the broader political moment, including a hyperpartisan political culture, the role of new media, and the rejection of expertise, point to questions beyond this article's scope.¹¹ Nevertheless, they are relevant for what happens next, and for the promise of a China policy that is rational in reality, not just in theory.

Next, I explore existing accounts of engagement's demise and foreground the role of knowledge communities in US foreign policy. I then outline my approach, reviewing literature on the relationship between ideas and policy, before delineating engagement as policy, frame, and community. After describing my research design, I trace the role of politicization, professional status competition, and personalization in engagement's decline, and end with reflections on the argument's major theoretical and policy implications.

Engagement to Strategic Competition: Existing Accounts

Existing or likely explanations for engagement's demise center (1) policy failure; (2) the Trump administration's preferences; and (3) shifts in the balance of power coupled with Beijing's growing authoritarianism. Together, they form a composite common sense among many in the China professional community: that changes in US policy were a rational response to engagement's failure; they were undertaken under Trump; and they were made against the backdrop of global power shifts and China's authoritarian turn. All capture something of the truth. Americans—elites and the public alike—are convinced that China is headed in the wrong direction, with many accepting Beijing's "long game" to become the world's leading power.¹² However, each factor contains gaps and weaknesses, limiting the power of common sense.

¹¹Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹²See Kat Devlin, Laura Silver, and Christine Huang, "U.S. Views of China Increasingly Negative amid Coronavirus Outbreak," Pew Research Center, 21 April 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/04/21/u-s-views-of->

A first explanation foregrounds policy failure. Outlined by Trump officials and outside commentators, this account asserts engagement was based on the false promise of influencing China in a liberal direction.¹³ As the May 2020 *United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China* states, US policy was “premised on a hope that deepening engagement would spur fundamental economic and political opening in the PRC and lead to its emergence as a constructive and responsible global stakeholder ... More than 40 years later, it has become evident that this approach underestimated the will of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to constrain the scope of economic and political reform.”¹⁴ Such changed circumstances required a new approach to relations with Beijing.

Theoretically, the policy failure explanation follows a rationalist perspective attuned to engagement's changing costs and benefits. Its strengths are that it accords with the views of the agents behind engagement's replacement. It also reflects a widely shared understanding that China has become more authoritarian and bellicose, especially under Xi Jinping.¹⁵ Light-years from the opening engagement's supporters hoped for, China's new authoritarianism represents a “third revolution” in the Chinese state¹⁶ to one featuring Orwellian controls: face recognition technology, a censored internet, and a Social Credit System tying everything from job opportunities to romantic decisions to “good citizenship.”¹⁷ Such a PRC is seen as threatening in ways it was not just a few years ago.

The explanation's weaknesses reflect rationalism's limitations, downplaying the varied political, economic, and discursive processes underpinning preferences and perceptions. To illustrate, the connection between engagement's demise and its record is not clear-cut. Though high-level government rhetoric—especially that aimed at securing congressional support for China's World Trade Organization (WTO) accession in 2001—did explicitly link engagement and liberalization, everyday policymaking was not predicated on liberal change.¹⁸ In terms of its achievements, engagement brought tangible diplomatic progress,¹⁹ whereas economically it less failed than succeeded too well, but for only a fraction of Americans.

china-increasingly-negative-amid-coronavirus-outbreak/; Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

¹³Campbell and Ratner, “China Reckoning.”

¹⁴*United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China*, 1.

¹⁵Carl Minzner, *End of an Era: How China's Authoritarian Revival Is Undermining Its Rise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹⁶Elizabeth Economy, *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹⁷Margaret E. Roberts, *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

¹⁸Neil Thomas, “Matters of Record: Relitigating Engagement with China,” *MacroPolo*, 3 September 2019, <https://macropolo.org/analysis/china-us-engagement-policy/>.

¹⁹Barron et al., *Engagement Revisited*.

Questioning the policy failure account does not imply that engagement's rejection was irrational. Rather, as constructivists in particular would highlight, the issue is when engagement stopped making sense, and a new—military-security—understanding of China took over. My interpretation therefore identifies how and why rejecting engagement came to be viewed as rational by whom, and how these views came to political predominance before and after Trump.

A second explanation drawn from domestic politics theories of foreign policy can address the question of timing. Trump's election was a "critical juncture" that uploaded a China-skeptical view to the highest echelons of US policymaking. On the campaign trail, Trump criticized the "theft" of American jobs and reiterated long-standing criticisms of China's state-owned enterprises and manipulation of its currency.²⁰ In office, his administration launched the July 2018 trade war, while robust rhetoric contributed to diplomatic tensions.²¹ Trump's victory brought into positions of policymaking authority strong China critics. On trade, Robert Lighthizer and Peter Navarro were tasked with confronting Beijing. Author of a "global call to action" on China,²² Navarro's economic criticisms morphed over time into the sort of geopolitical threat reminiscent of the warnings of Michael Pillsbury, Gordon Chang, and Newt Gingrich.²³

No explanation of recent US policy can ignore the critical juncture of Trump's election. Yet important issues remain unexplained. Like any administration, Trump's had to staff its policy positions. Unless these individuals are to be seen solely as executors of Trump's agenda, the domestic politics account fails to explain their views, and why they—and not (pro-engagement) others—were brought in. For example, Lighthizer's credentials are unremarkable: a degree in law from Georgetown, private service at Covington and Burling, and prior experience under President Ronald Reagan. But Navarro came out of left field. What explains his appointment? Moreover, clear signals of a change in US views predate Trump.²⁴ Thus,

²⁰Veronica Stracqualursi, "10 Times Trump Attacked China and Its Trade Relations with the US," *ABC News*, 9 November 2017, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/10-times-trump-attacked-china-trade-relations-us/story?id=46572567>.

²¹For example, Jane Perlez, "Pence's China Speech Seen as a Portent of a 'New Cold War,'" *New York Times*, 5 October 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/05/world/asia/pence-china-speech-cold-war.html>.

²²Peter Navarro and Greg Autry, *Death by China: Confronting the Dragon—A Global Call to Action* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2011).

²³Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* (New York: Henry Holt, 2015); Peter Navarro, *The Coming China Wars: Where They Will Be Fought and How They Can Be Won* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: FT Press, 2008); Newt Gingrich with Claire Christensen, *Trump vs. China: Facing America's Greatest Threat* (New York: Center Street, 2019).

²⁴See the speech by Defense Secretary Ashton Carter, which presaged later developments, as discussed below. "Full Transcript: Secretary of Defense Ash Carter's Naval Academy Commencement Address," *Capital Gazette*, 27 May 2016, <https://www.capitalgazette.com/education/naval-academy/cgnews-full-transcript-secretary-of-defense-ash-carter-s-naval-academy-commencement-address-20160527-story.html>.

although Trump's election is key to engagement's demise, important questions remain.

A final account rests on the implications of China's rise.²⁵ Theoretically grounded in realism, its greatest strength is its military-security focus, as policymakers' language shifted to the imagery central to realism, rendering it commonsensical. The strength of balance of power and China threat imagery is also a source of analytical weakness. Why, how, and when is a potential challenger recognized as threatening? Why did neither the 1996 Taiwan Straits Crisis nor the April 2001 Hainan Island incident—featuring the Chinese capture of twenty-four American aviators—lead to the sort of strategic rethink of 2017–2020? The signal story of US-China relations since 1972 is not China's inexorable rise and America's decline. The United States is declining relatively but also becoming more powerful as its population, economy, and military capabilities grow.²⁶ The balance of power explanation thus displays many of the flaws realism's critics point to: a lack of contingency and alternative possible outcomes; a macro or “30,000 feet” perspective with few mechanisms of change; and a limited role for economics, politics, and the interpretation of threats and interests. The key issue, therefore, is what China's growth means to US actors.

Existing and likely accounts' limitations question the common sense among many in Washington: that the shift from engagement to strategic competition followed a purely rational rethinking of the costs and benefits of engaging a more powerful and threatening PRC, undertaken by a new Trump administration with more critical views, less shackled to previous policy. In the remainder of this article, consequently, I develop an alternative explanation based on paradigmatic epistemic turnover. My account is meant to supplant existing explanations as a standalone counterposition with a corresponding distinct theoretical underpinning—namely a constructivist sensibility married to a reading of the new sociology of expertise. Yet my account is supplementary to the extent that it retains the role of new understandings of China and the policy implications thereof, the crucial changeover in administration, and the backdrop of shifts in global power. By focusing on the social dynamics of interpreting other countries at the intersection of knowledge communities and the US government, these alternatives become explananda rather than explanans. My aim, finally, is not to overemphasize the China expert community's impact

²⁵See, for example, Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Evan Braden Montgomery, *In the Hegemon's Shadow: Leading States and the Rise of Regional Powers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016); Christopher Layne, “This Time, It's Real: The End of Unipolarity and the Pax Americana,” *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (March 2012): 203–13; Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

²⁶Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

vis-à-vis other key constituencies, nor imply neat causal arrows running from the China epistemic community to engagement's demise.²⁷ Yet neither should the community be sidelined. The China field links the government with outside constituencies, from academia to think tanks, and from the military and intelligence services to business and the media. No account of US policy toward China should thus ignore American's China experts.

Ideas into Action: An Approach from the Sociology of Expertise

There are three main ways of accounting for the role of ideas and expertise in US foreign policy. A first traces the influence of intellectuals and “epistemic communities” from specific individuals such as Henry Kissinger, to groups like the post-World War II defense intellectuals, climate scientists pivotal to 1980s US environmental policy, and the neoconservatives.²⁸ Impact tends to be fleeting, however—few overcome the gap between the government and the ivory tower in a sustained way.²⁹ Lobbyists, policy-makers, and the military typically drive policy, not experts.³⁰ In the case of engagement, although individual engagers have had influence, four decades is a long time to be explained by reference to a single, supposedly coherent, group.

Similar issues bedevil a second approach centered on how “groupthink” narrows strategic debate.³¹ Patrick Porter, for instance, argues that a logic of habit underpins liberal internationalism in establishment thought, repeatedly drawing America into foreign policy imbroglios.³² Below the level of grand strategy, however, Porter's diagnosis of a lack of contestation within the establishment fails to square with the lively debate in the US China field.

Finally, a normatively inflected viewpoint focuses on the functioning of the “marketplace of ideas.” Foreshadowed in John Milton's 1644 *Areopagitica* and usually traced to John Stuart Mill's defense of free speech in *On Liberty*,³³ the marketplace metaphor entered US political discourse

²⁷Peter M. Haas, “Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination,” *International Organization* 46, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 1–35.

²⁸Bruce Kuklick, *Blind Oracles: Intellectuals and War from Kennan to Kissinger* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Daniel Bessner, *Democracy in Exile: Hans Speier and the Rise of the Defense Intellectual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Haas, “Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination.”

²⁹Michael C. Desch, *Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

³⁰Lawrence R. Jacobs and Benjamin I. Page, “Who Influences U.S. Foreign Policy?” *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 1 (February 2005): 107–23.

³¹Irving L. Janis, *Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign-Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972).

³²Patrick Porter, “Why America's Grand Strategy Has Not Changed: Power, Habit, and the U.S. Foreign Policy Establishment,” *International Security* 42, no. 4 (Spring 2018): 9–46.

³³Jill Gordon, “John Stuart Mill and the ‘Marketplace of Ideas,’” *Social Theory and Practice* 23, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 235–49.

via Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes's dissent in the *Abrams* case of 1919, where Holmes argued that the "theory of our constitution" was one of "the free market competition of ideas."³⁴ The concept appears to have purchase on engagement's downfall, with changes in Chinese behavior leading to the rejection of an outmoded set of ideas. As noted above, however, the notion of a clear policy failure leading to changed opinions underplays disagreement among America's China experts on whether engagement did, in fact, fail.

These approaches' limitations in the engagement case reflects a general issue with how one accounts for ideas and epistemic communities in policy formation. The assumption of neat causal arrows traveling from expert communities depicted as coherent entities to receptive policymakers poorly reflects reality. More often, dispersed and internally divided epistemic communities enjoy varied and changing connections with the government and only indirectly exert influence, if at all.³⁵ It is thus necessary to use analytical tools sensitive to the contingency of connections between epistemic communities and policymaking processes.

The US China field is one such dispersed community, connected to the government but far from determining policy. Centered on Washington, with hubs in New York, Hawaii, and the West Coast, the China field is composed of think tankers, research analysts, current and former government and military officials, and academics from an array of organizations: a "permanent conference on China."³⁶ Rather than a fixed commodity tied to a functional capacity, such as the skills of a surgeon or accountant, China expertise is the product of an ongoing professional competition to translate certain abilities into a reputation for knowledge of the vast object that is "China." Recognized China experts share some family resemblances, notably language ability, time spent in-country, and notoriety gained through publication or public service. Members engage in significant "boundary-work," or policing of the group's scope along these two criteria.³⁷ Non-Chinese speakers are considered useful interlocutors, who may impart knowledge—such as IR theory—but they are not "real China people," for example. Even putative "experts" often decline that label, favoring less grandiose terms such as China "scholar," "hand," or "watcher."

In the words of sociologist Thomas Medvetz, the China field is "interstitial," sitting at the intersection of more bounded social spaces such

³⁴Rodney A. Smolla, "The Meaning of the 'Marketplace of Ideas' in First Amendment Law," *Communication Law and Policy* 24, no. 4 (Autumn 2019): 437–75.

³⁵Cross, "Rethinking Epistemic Communities."

³⁶Robert Ash, David Shambaugh, and Seichiro Takagi, eds., *China Watching: Perspectives from Europe, Japan and the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

³⁷Thomas F. Gieryn, "Boundary-Work and the Differentiation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists," *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 6 (December 1983): 781–95.

as the academy, the media, and the government, with their distinct rules, incentive structures, and capitals that shape how individuals seek success.³⁸ Think tankers, for example, are pushed and pulled between contradictory goals: from notoriety gained via public prominence; to intellectual credibility gained via academic means, such as publishing; and funding gained from a variety of sources, tied to demonstrated public impact.

Viewing the China expert community as an ongoing struggle in an interstitial space follows recent work that aims to produce a sociology of professional expertise that does not simply tell the story of the “necessary formation of a professional group nor by a presumed functional identity between profession and task.”³⁹ Unlike doctors or accountants, one does not need a degree in Chinese studies to make US China policy. Recent scholarship has thus moved from considering experts as a distinct social type to focusing on the conditions enabling their expert interventions. Rather than posit the existence of some essential knowledge that constitutes expertise,⁴⁰ Gil Eyal, for example, focuses on expertise “analyzed as networks that link together objects, actors, techniques, devices, and institutional and spatial arrangements.”⁴¹

The sociology of expertise requires sensitivity to experts’ views but also the varied practices that produce recognized expertise.⁴² Particularly salient is the role of the state and the political arena. Sociologists have traced the state’s influence on the making of scientific knowledge, showing how shifting policy priorities, funding structures, and geopolitical rivalries politicize ostensibly objective academic knowledge.⁴³ They have also chronicled the inverse relationship, as knowledge producers shape policy outcomes.⁴⁴ Together, a picture of intertwined fields emerges, where state power prevents autonomous spheres of knowledge production from forming and creates fuzzy boundaries between the state and the academy.

Taken together, the new sociology of expertise prioritizes struggle over expert competence over fixed meanings of expert status, displaying three tendencies that separate it from older visions of the expert’s policy role.⁴⁵ First, agency is conceptualized as distributed rather than a singular attribute

³⁸Thomas Medvetz, *Think Tanks in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 18.

³⁹Gil Eyal, “For a Sociology of Expertise: The Social Origins of the Autism Epidemic,” *American Journal of Sociology* 118, no. 4 (January 2013): 863–64; Andrew Abbott, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

⁴⁰Harry Collins and Robert Evans, *Rethinking Expertise* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

⁴¹Eyal, “For a Sociology of Expertise,” 864.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 872.

⁴³Joy Rohde, *Armed with Expertise: The Militarization of American Social Research during the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); Ido Oren, *Our Enemies and US: America’s Rivalries and the Making of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

⁴⁴Daniel Hirschman and Elizabeth Popp Berman, “Do Economists Make Policies? On the Political Effects of Economics,” *Socio-Economic Review* 12, no. 4 (October 2014): 779–811; Stephanie L. Mudge, *Leftism Reinvented: Western Parties from Socialism to Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

⁴⁵Eyal and Buchholz, “Sociology of Interventions.”

of an individual or group. In the case of foreign policy, agency is a function of a connection or relation between government officials seeking a new perspective or understanding of an issue, such as China, and those with conceptualizations to offer. Second, in place of singular truths uploaded to government—China’s “new authoritarianism,” for instance—the new approach highlights truth effects—the convergence on new shared perspectives. And third, the approach foregrounds the dynamics of interstitial domains, such as the China community, rather than supposedly homogeneous spaces of expertise. Individual experts and groups hold the potential for indirect influence, but such influence is not guaranteed.

To summarize, I set aside three perspectives on the role of ideas produced by knowledge communities in US foreign policy making. Epistemic communities are only rarely sufficiently coherent and powerful to upload their ideas to the policy level. Although groupthink is a danger in policy and think tank circles, the US national security space is also frequently diverse in its views. Finally, the marketplace of ideas metaphor is more a normative ideal than an accurate description of today’s national security community. In their place, I depict diverse knowledge communities struggling to frame a given issue area and, in so doing, outlining the boundaries of mainstream debate, while creating credentialed experts for possible government service. Rejecting fixed notions of expertise, the task is to interpret the processes by which ideas, frames, and people cohere to make contingent expert interventions. To do so, I next disaggregate engagement as policy, frame, and community before identifying three processes underpinning engagement’s demise: politicization, professional status struggle, and personalization.

Accounting for Engagement’s Demise as Policy, Frame, and Community

What is or was engagement? Is it really a thing of the past? Two roadblocks stand in the way of a clear-eyed assessment.⁴⁶ First, engagement is vaguely characterized, typically as a “strategy” or “policy” that can begin and end in a definite way.⁴⁷ Second, engagement is usually analyzed in isolation from broader US foreign policy, when China has often been secondary to other issues, from the Soviet Union to the Global War on Terror.⁴⁸ To justify the claim that engagement is over, and grasp the factors that led

⁴⁶Ana Swanson, Mike Isaac, and Paul Mozur, “Trump Targets WeChat and TikTok, in Sharp Escalation with China,” *New York Times*, 6 August 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/06/technology/trump-wechat-tiktok-china.html>; Jeanne Whalen, “U.S. Blocks Imports of Chinese Goods It Says Are Made with Forced Labor,” *Washington Post*, 14 September 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/09/14/us-bans-imports-china-forced-labor/>.

⁴⁷James B. Steinberg, “What Went Wrong? U.S.-China Relations from Tiananmen to Trump,” *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 1 (Winter 2019/2020): 119–33.

⁴⁸Schell, “Death of Engagement.”

to its fall, three aspects can be distinguished: policy, frame, and community. Vestiges of engagement as policy remain, but the engagement frame and community are no longer the operative mode of America's approach.

Engagement as policy covers government actions and connections with China in the diplomatic, military, and economic spheres, including tacit understandings vis-à-vis Taiwan, joint military exercises, and a series of high-level dialogues.⁴⁹ Engagement as policy also included exchanges below the governmental level, so-called Track 2 dialogues—nongovernment to nongovernment—and Track 1.5—with some governmental involvement.⁵⁰ Such non- and semigovernmental contacts burgeoned after the Cold War, from few in the early 1990s to 269 Asia-Pacific Track 2s by 2008.⁵¹ Finally, engagement as policy comprised connections between prominent individuals associated with the concept and parts of the US government.⁵²

The Trump election was a critical juncture in the rejection of engagement as policy. Although engagement policy did not disappear, momentum in continuing existing dialogues and developing new ones stalled.⁵³ Together, the withdrawal of US participation from the Trans-Pacific Partnership in January 2017, the introduction of tariffs on Chinese goods, the imposition of sanctions related to the curtailment of freedoms in Hong Kong, and recent decisions aimed at Chinese technology firms sum to a qualitatively different policy. As Secretary of State Mike Pompeo explained, administration policy was to “distrust and verify” rather than engage for its own sake, leading to a partial economic “decoupling.”⁵⁴ Thus, though remnants remained at the end of the Trump administration—including limited military exchanges such as the Kowari survival training and defense policy coordination talks⁵⁵—engagement as policy had been largely replaced.

⁴⁹See *U.S.–China Relations* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 29 August 2019), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45898.pdf>.

⁵⁰Michael O. Wheeler, *Track 1.5/2 Security Dialogues with China: Nuclear Lessons Learned* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2014), <https://www.ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/t/tr/track-152-security-dialogues-with-china-nuclear-lessons-learned/p-5135.ashx>; Peter Jones, *Track Two Diplomacy in Theory and Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).

⁵¹Wheeler, *Track 1.5/2*, 6.

⁵²Though difficult to detail with certainty, people such as Evan Feigenbaum, Evan Medeiros, Thomas Christensen, and even prominent engagers such as Michael Swaine, retain important connections in Beijing.

⁵³The most recent dialogues were: Diplomatic and Security Dialogue, November 2018; Comprehensive Economic Dialogue, April 2017; Law Enforcement and Cybersecurity Dialogue, the first and only in October 2017; and U.S.–China Social and Cultural Dialogue, 28 September 2017. See also Barron et al., *Engagement Revisited*.

⁵⁴Michael R. Pompeo, “Communist China and the Free World’s Future,” 23 July 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/communist-china-and-the-free-worlds-future/index.html>. See David J. Lynch, “TikTok Tussle Shows the Uneven Economic ‘Decoupling’ That Has Accelerated between the U.S. and China,” *Washington Post*, 21 September 2020.

⁵⁵Respectively, Katie Howe, “A Quiet Kowari: US, Australia, and China Trilateral Military Exercise,” *Diplomat*, 30 September 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/09/a-quiet-kowari-us-australia-and-china-trilateral-military-exercise/>; “China Hosts Largest Land-Based ADMM-Plus Joint Counter-Terrorism Drill,” *Global Times*, 14 November 2019, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2019/11/14/c90000-9632289.html>; US Department of Defense, “U.S.–PRC Defense Policy Coordination Talks,” news release, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2058597/us-prc-defense-policy-coordination-talks/>.

Engagement as a frame refers to engagement as an overarching justificatory narrative on China in US foreign policy. This frame centered on meeting the challenges of China's "rise" while realizing the benefits, and was most explicitly on display during the run-up to WTO accession.⁵⁶ The link between frame and policy was as much in what the engagement frame urged US leaders to not do as what it facilitated—namely, refrain from actions potentially damaging to cooperation, such as, for example, labeling China a currency manipulator or signaling a change in the status quo on America's position on the status of Taiwan—both of which the Trump administration later did. Engagement as a frame did not go unchallenged prior to 2016. The "pivot to Asia," designed by Hillary Clinton and Campbell, for example, is perhaps better described as a nascent containment strategy than engagement.⁵⁷ A stalled "pivot before the pivot" also characterized the early months of the George W. Bush administration's China policy.⁵⁸ Yet both are exceptions that prove engagement's durability. After 9/11 shifted the Bush Jr. administration's focus away from China, in 2005 Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick reiterated engagement as the master frame for US policy, urging China to become a "responsible stakeholder" in international society.⁵⁹

The rejection of engagement as a frame stimulated the formation of an alternative: strategic competition. As the May 2020 *Strategic Approach* explains, at the heart of the new frame is an acknowledgment "that we are in a strategic competition" with China, and of the need to "[protect] our interests appropriately."⁶⁰ Though vague on the nature and scope of the competition, the frame foregrounds working with allies in East Asia and beyond, as well as stakeholders in the United States, including "Congress, state and local governments, the private sector, civil society, and academia."⁶¹ In each case, the aim is not to maintain surface-level calm in the relationship, since "the United States now acknowledges and accepts the relationship with the PRC as the CCP has always framed it internally: one of great power competition."⁶² The development of the strategic competition framing did not entail a complete rejection of engagement policy, since competition "necessarily includes engagement with the PRC." Yet, the

⁵⁶Thomas, "Matters of Record."

⁵⁷Kenneth G. Lieberthal, "The American Pivot to Asia," Brookings, 21 December 2011, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/>; Kurt M. Campbell, *The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia* (New York: Twelve, 2016).

⁵⁸Nina Silove, "The Pivot before the Pivot: U.S. Strategy to Preserve the Power Balance in Asia," *International Security* 40, no. 4 (Spring 2016): 45–88.

⁵⁹Robert Zoellick's Responsible Stakeholder Speech," National Committee on United States-China Relations, 21 September 2005, <https://www.ncuscr.org/content/robert-zoellicks-responsible-stakeholder-speech#:~:text=It%20was%20as%20National%20Committee,interestingly%2C%20had%20significant%20difficulty%20coming.>

⁶⁰*United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China*, 7.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 2.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 8.

document affirms, “our engagements are selective and results-oriented, with each advancing our national interests.”⁶³

Engagement as community, lastly, refers to the individuals and groups inside and outside the government whose work defined, justified, and executed engagement. As a community, engagement centered on a series of high-level advisors and political appointees, including secretaries of state such as Alexander Haig (1981–1982), national security advisors such as Sandy Berger (1993–1997), and National Security Council (NSC) Asia directors such as Michel Oksenberg (1977–1980) and Kenneth Lieberthal (1998–2000), in addition to many others across government—a group I label the “engagers.” The engagers were not a formal grouping with clear membership criteria. Individual experts and officials might disagree over their inclusion in or proximity to the group. Like “engagement” itself, moreover, the label itself is in many ways a post hoc construction, rather than a fixed term equally applicable over the decades. Nonetheless, from the late 1970s onward, the engagement community was a set of shared positions and dispositions favoring cooperative policies with China and an associated framing of US-China relations. This community spanned the government and nongovernmental spheres, with institutional bases in the ever-growing community of think tanks, universities, and cultural and economic organizations in Washington, D.C., and beyond, the work of which provided engagers intellectual space, academic prestige, and policy credibility.

As explored below, the engagers were not hegemonic prior to 2016. Strong critical voices on China existed, as evidenced by the testimony of academics, research analysts, and policymakers provided to two congressional commissions on US-China relations—the Congressional-Executive Community on China (CECC) and the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission (USCC). Skeptical voices were especially loud during the second Clinton administration and continued to be heard among the neoconservatives under George W. Bush. This is clearest among the vocal “Blue Teamers” who opposed Clinton’s China policy. The Bush Jr. administration was also rent on the subject of China, with China skeptics such as Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Affairs John Bolton in favor of developing a tough approach, whereas Secretary of State Colin Powell and Deputy Secretary Richard Armitage favored finding a *modus vivendi* with Beijing.

Although not hegemonic, pro-engagers embodied the mainstream view on China and US-China relations in the policy community and broader China field. The gravitational metaphor is purposeful here: though

⁶³Ibid., 9.

individual engagers diverged on their level of optimism about China's direction, they occupied the gravitational center of the policy debate. As a segment of the broader China field, much of engagement community remains, as evidenced by their pushback against what they see as a dangerous rejection of engagement as a frame and policy.⁶⁴ Even some key Trump administration figures, such as Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, voiced support for pro-engagement policies, notably in bringing an end to the trade war.⁶⁵ Yet the center of gravity now rests with those who favor strategic competition. I return in the conclusion to the status of strategic competition as itself policy, frame, and community.

America's engagement with the PRC is poorly understood as a "strategy," "policy," or "approach." Engagement was a multifaceted phenomenon with policy, frame, and community manifestations—and was replaced across each dimension beginning in 2017. The result is what can best be described as a "paradigmatic" change, in Thomas Kuhn's terms.⁶⁶ As a paradigm change, not simply a strategic shift, the end of engagement resists a pure rationalist explanation, whether based on policy failure, domestic politics, or a changed balance of power. Because policies are not separable from the frames within which they make sense and from the communities of experts that participate in their continuation, a broader perspective is required that can include the varied processes underpinning policy change, frame redefinition, and community turnover.

Engagement between Politicization, Professional Status Struggle, and Personalization

Distinguishing engagement's three aspects—policy, frame, and community—helps identify accurately what its demise entailed: engagement's replacement with a new set of policies aimed at managing US interactions with the PRC; justified using a new narrative of China's rise; and called for by new and different members and new coalitions of China experts. Delineating engagement's three faces thereby enables an alternative explanation centered on the effects of three forms of struggle: political, professional, and personal.

⁶⁴M. Taylor Fravel, J. Stapleton Roy, Michael D. Swaine, Susan A. Thornton, and Ezra Vogel, "China Is Not an Enemy," *Washington Post*, 3 July 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/making-china-a-us-enemy-is-counterproductive/2019/07/02/647d49d0-9bfa-11e9-b27f-ed2942f73d70_story.html. See also Laurie Chen, "Overreaction to China Threat Could Turn into McCarthyite Red Scare, Says Former US Official," *South China Morning Post*, 31 March 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3003973/overreaction-china-threat-could-turn-mccarthyite-red-scare>.

⁶⁵Alan Rappeport, "How Mnuchin Keeps a Steady Grip in a Tug of War on Trade," *New York Times*, 3 June 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/03/us/politics/mnuchin-trump-trade.html>.

⁶⁶Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

Politicization is the formation of distinct groups within the China professional community taking opposite sides on China policy, the most appropriate framing of US-China relations, and its relations with the US government. Politicization is not, it should be stressed, limited to partisan affiliation. Although partisanship is common in the national security community, only rarely does it determine a person's views on China. Indeed, foreign policy—and China policy specifically—is one of the few areas resistant to the polarizing tendencies of contemporary US politics.⁶⁷ Politicization here refers instead to the emergence of camps within the China expert community sharing broad positions, beyond the common, but equally misleading, notion of “hawks” and “doves.” I label these groups the “engagers” and the “anti-engagers.”

Sociologically, the aim of tracing engagement's politicization is to identify the relationship between social positions—membership of such groups—and the dispositions of particular actors—here, how engagers and anti-engagers see the world. When and how did China policy become a politicized issue? By what processes do policymakers and experts identify as members of one group or another, or seek to avoid such positioning? What are the two camps' institutional bases? What was the role of successive presidents in limiting or facilitating engagement's politicization, and in the electoral politics of more and less critical positions?

Politicization of US China policy was not new under Trump. China skeptics—particularly in the area of human rights—had long maintained a strong presence in the China field, with particular influence in Congress. Nevertheless, the Trump election was a critical juncture. Tough rhetoric and the development of an alternative China policy, framed as strategic competition, solidified the engagers and anti-engagers as distinct social groups within the mainstream China segment of the US national security community. Trump's election then provided anti-engagers opportunities previously denied them to leverage their distinct epistemic and professional capital. Trump's victory led to a new and distinct set of China experts controlling the levers of frame- and policymaking power. At the same time, the Trump administration's rhetoric, framing, and policymaking posed a challenge to the American China policy community and the China epistemic community more broadly: to either adapt to the new way of depicting China—as a competitor for global power rather than a collaborator in defending the international order—or to identify with, and accurately stake out, another perspective, whether labeled “engagement” or something else entirely. As such, Trump's election forced engagers onto the intellectual

⁶⁷Benjy Sarlin and Sahil Kapur, “Why China Might Be the Last Bipartisan Issue Left in Washington,” 21 March 2021, *NBC News*, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/why-china-may-be-last-bipartisan-issue-left-washington-n1261407>.

and political defensive, weakening their position by fragmenting it between those willing to adapt to the new reality of strategic competition and those rejecting the foundations of the new competitive approach.

Realist IR theory has long held politicization as a primary social dynamic. A sociological perspective adds sensitivity to the specific modes in which struggle is carried on. In the case of China policy, the political struggle for policymaking control is inseparable from broader professional and personal contests. Crucially, such contests have distinct stakes, rules of engagement, and rewards. In professional status competition, participants struggle for cultural rewards such as status and prestige, rather than political rewards such as power, or the economic reward of wealth. The primary division in the China field separates the holders of intellectual prestige and credibility from those without such status, with outsiders nevertheless seeking to influence the conversation. Professional struggles are thus inseparable from political struggles, but are related only orthogonally. Here the fate of “nuance” in ongoing attempts to influence the formation of a post-engagement frame is illustrative of broader dynamics. Nuance is the embodiment of the intellectual social position in the politicized struggle over China policy. Yet nuanced knowledge of China is not required when the nature of China—as a threat—has been determined, rendering arguments for a partial return to engagement weaker than those seeking firmer policies.

In what follows, I interpret the end of engagement with the PRC as the outcome of politicization and professional status struggle in America’s China expert community. The account would be incomplete, however, without sensitivity to a final, personalized, form of contestation. Though large and growing, the top levels of the China field include a relatively small group of people, many of whom know each other personally and have for many years. Beyond political contestation and professional struggle, therefore, engagement as policy, frame, and community was tied to specific individuals’ particular perspectives and careers. No account of the end of engagement is complete without attention to the often-intense emotional and affective ties people have to certain policies, positions, and decisions.

Research Design

The following account draws on a range of primary and secondary data. A first source is a set of 134 original interviews with US-based China experts, scholars, and former policymakers—in addition to interviews with China watchers institutionally located in the United Kingdom (16) and Australia (16). Interviews were conducted between late 2016 and early 2022, lasting

an average of 60 minutes, and totaling over 165 h of professionally transcribed interview notes.⁶⁸ Subjects were identified and recruited using the snowball sampling method—beginning with widely recognized China experts at the major foreign policy think tanks in Washington, D.C., and moving outward with the aim of balanced coverage of the field. Interviewees ranged in age and experience, from former diplomats (including former ambassadors to Beijing), to prominent academics and think tankers, to junior and aspiring China experts. In addition, a small number of interviewees were professionally located outside or at the margins of the field—for example, non-China academics whose work on issues such as cybersecurity has pulled them into the China space.

I sought demographically, regionally, and professionally balanced coverage of the field—including interviews with journalists, consultants, and 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 in citations to identify distinct interviewees. However, I have sought to contextualize comments as far as possible by situating interviewees' position in the community of China experts and using publicly available interviews wherever possible.

With a sample primarily of think tankers, journalists, former policy-makers, and academics, on a topic of immediate relevance, the take-rate for interviews was consequently high. The vast majority of individuals approached agreed to speak to me, on or off the record. The interviews were semistructured. They typically began with a biographical account of the interviewees' trajectory into and through the China professional community. Discussion then moved to the main dynamics of the field from the interviewees' viewpoint—such as principal social divisions in the field, key personalities, etc. The aim was to position the interview in the community, illuminating important aspects of it at the same time. The discussion then moved to recent US China policy and the fortunes of engagement—a topic that shifted over the course of the interviewing period.

The interviews provide a guide to the China community. I augment interview data with insights gained from attendance at several China-watching events, from book talks to panel discussions, both in Washington, D.C., during research trips in November 2016, November 2017, and March and November 2018, and elsewhere, including UC-San Diego (December 2018) and the 2018 and 2019 annual meetings of the Association for Asian Studies. Finally, this article draws on data gained from membership since

⁶⁸Further information about the interviews is in the author's possession. The University of California's Institutional Review Board granted permission to conduct the interviews under protocol no. 1036710.

early 2018 of two China-focused listservs, which have provided well over 100,000 emails and counting containing an almost exhaustive coverage of media and government sources. Together, these data underpin the following close account view of engagement's replacement.

Engagement Politicized

While campaigning, then-candidate Trump railed against China's economic policies, explicitly casting Beijing as an enemy that has "destroyed entire industries."⁶⁹ Playing on economic resentment proved successful on Trump's road to the White House. Once there, his administration began the replacement of engagement with a new approach, which by mid-2020 had crystallized as strategic competition. Driven by three distinct understandings of China as an economic rival, security threat, and ideological competitor, Trump fostered a taking of sides on engagement as a frame within the China-watching community, which drew on more long-standing divisions and led to a fracturing of the engagers.

Lifting the Lid on China

Whereas others administrations had come to office promising a tougher China policy—including Clinton's and Bush Jr.'s—later to soften their stance,⁷⁰ Trump offered a very different high-level direction. As a former State Department official explained: "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."⁷¹ Yet "for all the administrations up through the end of the Obama first term ... at the most senior levels, there was a vision which (A) supported engagement and (B) sought to pursue both managing or dealing with the frictions and differences and enhancing cooperation."⁷² As this interviewee went on, under Trump the dynamic was "bash China all the time basically. The FBI, the DOD, DHS [Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of Defense, and Department of Homeland Security] ... all these people who [had] consistently been on a leash."⁷³

Two episodes under Obama illustrate the shift. As chief China hand Jeffrey A. Bader recalls, on one occasion, in late 2009, the president met

⁶⁹See *Good Morning America*, aired 3 November 2015, on ABC, https://archive.org/details/WMUR_20151103_120000_Good_Morning_America; Donald Trump, *Great Again: How to Fix Our Crippled America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 43.

⁷⁰Ana Swanson, "American Presidents Have a Long History of Walking Back Tough Talk on China," *Washington Post*, 6 December 2016.

⁷¹Interview A.

⁷²Interview A.

⁷³Interview A.

with four CEOs from powerful US multinationals, who requested pushback against China's discriminatory trade practices.⁷⁴ Considered a strong engager,⁷⁵ Bader was nevertheless "entirely comfortable with pursuing a tougher policy on trade" but thought any policies had to limit collateral economic damage.⁷⁶ Others supported Bader's conclusion, such as Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner, for whom the effects of Chinese practices were small compared to the risks of retaliation.⁷⁷ Obama resisted calls for action.

A May 2016 speech by former secretary of defense Ashton Carter offers another illustration.⁷⁸ Carter presaged the 2017 National Security Strategy by naming China a "great power competitor," reflecting language gaining ground in Defense Department strategic thinking at the time—thinking reflected in the so-called Third Offset Strategy, announced in November 2014, which aimed to enable the United States to compete with peer competitors—notably China—via continued technological superiority in key areas.⁷⁹ Carter, however, ruffled the feathers of a White House anxious to avoid the term for fear of it becoming a self-fulfilling prophesy. The administration told the Pentagon to refrain from using the phrase.⁸⁰

By "letting off the leash" officials eager to develop policies aimed at Chinese misdeeds, Trump nurtured a politicized engagement—the taking of sides on engagement as policy and frame. Yet, although a crucial stimulus, Trump's coming to power was not the sole driver of this politicization; Trump's election was both cause and effect. His administration drew on latent divisions over the engagement frame in the government and the broader China professional community. It did so by not only facilitating the formation of policy initiatives of the sort likely to be vetoed in previous administrations but also by shifting the typical relationships with outside stakeholders.

Trump's election closed the White House door on individuals and institutions with long-standing connections to engagement as policy and frame—the engagers. As a leading engager expressed, Trump's election resulted in "the takeover of the management of this [US-China] relationship" by people "not anywhere near my group."⁸¹ For this interviewee, those of a like mind to them in the China field were "pretty

⁷⁴Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2012), 113.

⁷⁵Interview B.

⁷⁶Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, 113.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Ash Carter, "Remarks at U.S. Naval Academy Commencement," 27 May 2016, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Speeches/Speech/Article/783891/remarks-at-us-naval-academy-commencement/>.

⁷⁹Chuck Hagel, "Reagan National Defense Forum Keynote," 15 November 2014, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Speeches/Speech/Article/606635/>.

⁸⁰Interview C.

⁸¹Interview D.

immobilized, frankly.”⁸² In their place, Trump forged connections with individuals unassociated personally or institutionally with engagement and who were indeed critical of it: among them his first two national security advisors, H. R. McMaster and John Bolton, NSC Asia director and later deputy national security advisor Matthew Pottinger, advisor Steve Bannon, Assistant Secretary of State for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Randall Schriver, trade advisor Peter Navarro, and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director and subsequently secretary of state, Mike Pompeo—the “anti-engagers.”

Although the inner workings of any administration are difficult to assess, even after the fact, some connections between the Trump administration and the China field can be mapped with certainty.⁸³ First, the Trump administration sidelined the main business groups: “The U.S.-China Business Council [was not] on the list [to be consulted],” a senior Washington think tanker explained shortly after the election. Trump had “no interest in hearing from the business community and certainly not the major business organizations ... they view[ed] them as a bunch of panda huggers.”⁸⁴ A key force behind engagement, notably during the 1990s debates over Most Favored Nation status, business interests have been a constant feature pushing engagement as a frame and policy.⁸⁵ Figures such as Henry M. Paulson Jr., treasury secretary under Bush Jr. (2006–2009), embodied such connections.⁸⁶ In the anti-engagers’ view, the business community was untrustworthy: it had “sold out ... preach[ing] engagement all these years and look where it got us.”⁸⁷

In line with his pledge to “drain the swamp,”⁸⁸ Trump also loosened ties to mainstream think tanks, including conservative organizations a Republican would normally plumb for expertise. Soon after entering office, a group of 150 GOP-leaning experts signed an open letter claiming the president’s “vision of American influence and power in the world is wildly inconsistent and unmoored in principle.”⁸⁹ The signatories “conclude[d] that as president, [Trump] would use the authority of his office to act in

⁸²Interview D.

⁸³For a close account, see Josh Rogin, *Chaos under Heaven: Trump, Xi, and the Battle for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2021).

⁸⁴Interview A.

⁸⁵Ho-fung Hung, “The Periphery in the Making of Globalization: The China Lobby and the Reversal of Clinton’s China Trade Policy, 1993–1994,” *Review of International Political Economy* 28, no. 4 (August 2021): 1004–27.

⁸⁶Henry M. Paulson Jr., *Dealing with China: An Insider Unmasks the New Economic Superpower* (New York: Twelve, 2016).

⁸⁷Interview A.

⁸⁸Michael D. Shear and Gardiner Harris, “Trump Wants to ‘Drain the Swamp,’ but Change Will Be Complex and Costly,” *New York Times*, 10 November 2016.

⁸⁹“Open Letter on Donald Trump from GOP National Security Leaders,” *War on the Rocks*, 2 March 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/open-letter-on-donald-trump-from-gop-national-security-leaders/>.

ways that make America less safe, and which would diminish our standing in the world.”⁹⁰

Trump’s National Security Team and China

Severing links between established China constituencies, the home of the broadly pro-engagement frame, Trump imported in their stead individuals and associated beliefs more forthright than their predecessors. In broad-brush terms, Trump and his principal national security advisors were convinced of the view, elaborated perhaps most clearly by former Defense official Pillsbury, of a coordinated Chinese plan to eject America from East Asia and challenge the United States as global hegemon.⁹¹ Pillsbury’s book was reportedly favored reading of Trump advisor Bannon, who urged the president to read it.⁹² The notion of a “China dream” provided a new interpretation of Beijing’s actions for those searching across government departments, from the NSC and the Pentagon, to intelligence, commerce, and the FBI.

At a more granular level, the Trump team’s views of China had three distinct components, associated with bases outside the administration, which at times sat uneasily with one another. The primary strand was economic, underpinned by Trump’s opposition to America’s dealings with China. Trump’s critique crossed traditional political lines, sharing with supporters of labor groups and small- and medium-sized manufacturing organizations a vision of the American worker sold out to China.⁹³ Bannon expressed the systemic logic of Sino-US economic relations: “Let’s be brutally frank: slaves in China made products financed in London and New York for the unemployed in the West ... a neo-feudalist system where the working class and lower class own nothing and buy cheap [stuff].”⁹⁴ Yet any potentially leftist or prolabor aspects of such China skepticism were shorn from it—in part for reasons of traditional Republican probusiness leanings, in part because of Trump’s idiosyncratic appointment process. The choice of Navarro as presidential advisor and subsequently director of a new executive office focused on manufacturing policy is especially noteworthy. An outsider to Beltway politics, Navarro was an unlikely choice for top office, and reportedly came to Trump’s attention via an internet search

⁹⁰“Open Letter on Donald Trump from GOP National Security Leaders.”

⁹¹Pillsbury, *Hundred-Year Marathon*.

⁹²Whether Trump did so is unclear. Ben Schreckinger and Daniel Lippman, “The China Hawk Who Captured Trump’s ‘Very, Very Large Brain,’” *Politico*, 2 December 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/11/30/trump-china-xi-jinping-g20-michael-pillsbury-1034610>.

⁹³For example, the Coalition for a Prosperous America, <https://www.prosperousamerica.org/>.

⁹⁴Robert Spalding with Seth Kaufman, *Stealth War: How China Took Over While America Slept* (New York: Penguin, 2019), 32. See also Emily Rauhala, “Steve Bannon’s Views on China Depend on Whom He Is Talking To,” *Washington Post*, 12 September 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/09/12/stephen-k-bannons-views-on-china-depend-on-whom-he-is-talking-to/>.

conducted by his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, which returned Navarro's 2011 book *Death by China*.⁹⁵

Rooted in trade and economics, the tough views shared by Trump, Navarro, and Lighthizer are unlikely to have caused the politicization of US-China relations, however. Two further sets of views were necessary. First, central to Trump's national security team's view on China was a military perspective that rejected the notion that China's rise could be peaceful. This military-security view opposed what some have termed the "China Is Not a Threat Mantra," repeated by successive presidents and officials seeking to keep a lid on tensions. George W. Bush, for example, stated in May 2006, "I wouldn't call China an enemy," a claim Defense Secretary Robert Gates repeated in December 2007—"I don't consider China an enemy"—and later CIA Director Michael Hayden: "It is not inevitable that [China] will be an enemy."⁹⁶ For the anti-engagers, such a claim no longer held up; China was now at least a competitor; at most, it was an enemy.

A final source was an ideological, even civilizational, view of China associated primarily with Bannon, Stephen Miller, and commentators such as Newt Gingrich.⁹⁷ The ideological view goes beyond economics and security to the notion that an authoritarian China cannot coexist with a free and democratic West. Such a view has institutional grounding in the newly reformed Committee on the Present Danger: China, and has widespread support in the Republican Party, including as a strategy for coordinated campaigning during the 2020 election.⁹⁸

The economic, military, and ideological aspects of anti-engagement thinking were not equivalent in their impact on Trump. The economic view had the most immediate policy effect, with the initiation of the trade war in 2018. The military view was slower to take hold, but added to longer-term planning at the Pentagon centered on great-power competition. The ideological view, finally, though marginal, gained ground as evidence of gross human rights violations in Xinjiang emerged, alongside frustration with Beijing's role in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The three inputs are thus important to parse, as they highlight the different elements pushing the changed China frame, its policy manifestations, and the community

⁹⁵Sarah Ellison, "The Inside Story of the Kushner-Bannon Civil War," *Vanity Fair*, 14 April 2017, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/04/jared-kushner-steve-bannon-white-house-civil-war>.

⁹⁶Bill Gertz, *Deceiving the Sky: Inside Communist China's Drive for Global Supremacy* (New York: Encounter Books, 2019), 174.

⁹⁷Gingrich, *Trump versus China*.

⁹⁸Colby Itkowitz, "Republican Strategy Memo Advises GOP Campaigns to Blame China for Coronavirus," *Washington Post*, 25 April 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/04/25/senate-gop-talking-points-coronavirus-blame-china-not-trump/>. For the memo, see *Corona Big Book: Main Messages* (O'Donnell and Associates, 17 April 2020), <https://static.politico.com/80/54/2f3219384e01833b0a0ddf95181c/corona-virus-big-book-4.17.20.pdf>.

underpinning the shift to strategic competition, which thrust a wedge into the engagement community.

The Engagement Community Fractures

Would engagement have been replaced if the 2016 election turned out differently? The answer rests on the individuals a Clinton administration would have imported. Clinton would thus likely have also adopted a stiffer stance, as—in addition to Defense Department planning—notes of skepticism were gathering strength in the China field prior to 2016.⁹⁹ Events such as Beijing’s declaration of an Exclusive Economic Zone in the South China Sea were increasingly difficult to square with the engagement frame. Even pro-engagement experts adopted a cautious tone.¹⁰⁰ Engagement would therefore likely have come under strain regardless of the winner in 2016.

Trump’s election, however, was undoubtedly a “critical juncture”: the president’s tough rhetoric and economic policy measures accelerated the politicization of engagement as policy and community, visible outside the Beltway as 2018 proceeded.¹⁰¹ Trump’s approach forced China professionals to take sides, not only on the substantive issue of the trade war but on the history of US strategy toward Beijing. A notable consequence was the emergence of strange political bedfellows, and an increasingly restricted space for those in favor of something like engagement.

Engagement’s demise ran orthogonally to common divisions in US politics—left/right, liberal/conservative, hawk/dove. Human rights advocates found common cause with military hawks and opponents of Chinese economic practices. Libertarian groups pushing a grand strategy of “restraint” found allies in leftist critics of the military industrial complex. One human rights advocate, not a natural Trump supporter, for example, was “thrilled” with his 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 ... but ... on its own terms.”¹⁰² Another senior humanities professor and strong critic of China’s human rights record described how “the [conservative] American Enterprise Institute invites me and they pretty much love what I say. On the other hand ... I’m writing for the *New York*

⁹⁹Robert D. Blackwill and Ashley J. Tellis, *Revising U.S. Grand Strategy toward China*, Council Special Report 72 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2015), <https://www.cfr.org/report/revising-us-grand-strategy-toward-china>.

¹⁰⁰David Lampton, “A Tipping Point in U.S.-China Relations,” Council on Pacific Affairs, video, 2 June 2015, <https://www.councilpacificaffairs.org/news-media/security-defense/dr-david-lampton-on-a-tipping-point-in-u-s-china-relations/>.

¹⁰¹Evan Osnos, “Making China Great Again,” *New Yorker*, 1 January 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/01/08/making-china-great-again>.

¹⁰²Interview E.

Review of Books ... so there's a left/right split there."¹⁰³ As they explained, "In the middle ... people don't warm to my critical point of view as much. In the business world, [the dominant view is to] rumble through and everything will be OK ... Those people just don't want to hear about human rights or topics like that."¹⁰⁴

Campbell and Ely Ratner's early 2018 critique of engagement encapsulated the emerging dynamic.¹⁰⁵ As a former State Department official stated plainly, Campbell and Ratner made "a political argument."¹⁰⁶ Far from China hawks, Campbell and Ratner were internal critics of an engagement policy with which both were previously involved. "They're engagers ... [their argument was] an exaggeration based on the need to position themselves politically." Specifically, Campbell and Ratner sought a distinctly Democratic viewpoint, with future political appointments in mind. "They're [positing] a Democratic Party position ... they're the Democratic Party foreign policy realists ... defining that position as it relates to China and East Asia."¹⁰⁷ Here ideas' intrinsic or instrumental value becomes relevant. Campbell and Ratner viewed engagement as policy and frame as a failure for reasons simultaneously instrumental and intrinsic.

The fracturing of the engagement community that followed the Trump administration's rejection of the engagement frame prompted a defense mounted by a group of mostly former diplomats and officials,¹⁰⁸ who argued that, though things have not turned out as planned, engagement was a sound policy at the time.¹⁰⁹ For J. Stapleton Roy, for example, the notion that engagement failed as a political argument "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."¹¹⁰ Other leading engagers echoed Roy's warnings.¹¹¹ Discarding engagement, they argued, risked "demonizing" China precisely as pressing global problems required cooperation.

Intellectually, arguments like Roy's had weight, and continue to. Yet within a politicized context such justifications became defensive—weak and out of touch with changed conditions. Indicatively, few interviewees for

¹⁰³Interview F.

¹⁰⁴Interview F.

¹⁰⁵Campbell and Ratner, "China Reckoning."

¹⁰⁶Interview G.

¹⁰⁷Interview G.

¹⁰⁸See, for example, J. Stapleton Roy, "Engagement Works," in Jisi et al., "Did America Get China Wrong?," 185–86; Chas Freeman, "On Hostile Coexistence with China," remarks to the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies China Program, at Stanford University, 3 May 2019, <https://chasfreeman.net/on-hostile-coexistence-with-china/>.

¹⁰⁹Interview H.

¹¹⁰Roy, "Engagement Works."

¹¹¹Fravel et al., "China Is Not an Enemy."

this article proactively defend engagement, with only a small number of typically senior engagers expressing the optimism to which their critics point. Although China was not without problems, one such senior engager commented, “We’ve got a huge trade deficit and the Chinese are trading unfairly ... [and] Xi Jinping is not the continuation of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao ... [but] most foreign policies don’t last 40 years ... And on balance, it’s been positive ... so, let’s not blow up the world.”¹¹² By 2018, such previously mainstream views were increasingly marginal. In the words of one long-standing and prominent engager: “What’s in the middle of the [political] road? Roadkill.”¹¹³

“Not blowing up the world” and presenting new policy solutions in the face of accepted shifts in predominant views are two different propositions, however, which over time led the pro-engagement group to struggle to maintain coherence. As one interviewee described in 2018, the engagers as a group were at that time “splitting apart.”¹¹⁴ The reports of two US-China expert task forces highlight how the group’s unity frayed. The issue is who participates, who signs, and who dissents—choices part intellectual and part political.

A first task force presented its “recommendations for a new administration” in February 2017.¹¹⁵ Describing how “China is now more assertive in Asia, more mercantilist in its economic policies, and more authoritarian in its domestic politics,”¹¹⁶ the report urged Trump to adopt a policy characterized by “greater firmness, more effective policy tools, and a greater insistence on reciprocity.”¹¹⁷ Yet, while reflective of the overall shift in thinking in Washington, the report affirmed “a rising power need not become an adversary of the established power,” and—reprising the basic principles of engagement as a frame—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.”¹¹⁸ It is telling then that the report split individuals broadly on the same page on China. Of the participants, twelve chose to sign—including former US ambassador to China Winston Lord and Campbell. Six others, including Roy and Bader, declined. When a second report appeared in February 2019, tellingly titled *Course Correction: Toward an Effective and Sustainable China Policy*,¹¹⁹ some original participants decided

¹¹²Interview D.

¹¹³Interview D.

¹¹⁴Interview D.

¹¹⁵See *US Policy toward China: Recommendations for a New Administration* (New York: Asia Society on US-China Relations, 2017), https://china.ucsd.edu/_files/02072017_US_China_task-force_report.pdf.

¹¹⁶*US Policy toward China*, 65.

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹¹⁹*Course Correction: Toward an Effective and Sustainable China Policy* (New York: Asia Society Center on US-China Relations, 2019), http://china.ucsd.edu/_files/2019-CourseCorrection.pdf.

not to take part. As one explained, “At some point ... you’re too far away from the group. It’s like, why would I sign that? And so you can see this thing ... pulling apart.”¹²⁰

By early 2018, engagement as a frame and policy were thoroughly politicized, with those in agreement over the need for a new, tougher, frame and set of policies then being developed by the Trump administration separated from individuals defending engagement. Although fissures in the US China debate predated Trump, what explains engagement’s deep and swift politicization after 2017? Campbell and Ratner’s call for a China “reckoning,” together with the fracturing of the engager group, points to an answer: engagement’s entanglements in struggles within the broader China professional field. In the following section, I trace the struggles over legitimate China expertise, and the types of individuals fit to make China policy, which were crucial to engagement’s demise.

Engagement in the US China Field’s Professional Status Competition

Professional competition over engagement presented a distinct axis of opposition. In place of a “with-us or against-us” political logic, professional competitions are over knowledge, prestige, and status: in short, recognition as an expert. Both before and during the Trump administration, Engagement as a frame supported, and was supported by, claims to “nuanced” understandings of China. In that context, key organizations in Washington—notably two congressional commissions on the country—provided much-needed legitimacy to engagement skepticism and its adherents. This group included some of the very same individuals who shifted to strategic competition.

To Know China

As suggested by the new sociology of expertise, China expertise is grounded in a performance of unique knowledge of or insight into China. Alongside general attributes of professional esteem—such as affiliations to prestigious universities and think tanks—the performance of China expertise is underpinned by special markers such as language ability, time spent “in-country,” and demonstrated commitment to understanding China. China experts attach special significance to language skills, frequently distinguishing between those with real linguistic ability and those merely “throwing in buzzwords” in Chinese. As a community, the engagers distinguished themselves from other potential voices in the China policy debate—including many of the defense and security generalists on Trump’s national security

¹²⁰Interview D.

team—by their attachment to China-specific expertise. The engagers used these credentials to form tight connections to the main foreign-policy-making positions of the US government, from where they promoted cooperation with China—differences of opinion with Beijing notwithstanding.

The paradigm shift away from engagement was therefore also a turnover in the type of China expertise key policymakers held. For the first time in decades, a varied group of critics found themselves in the position of sharing a vision of US-China relations with the occupant of the White House. For these self-professed “China hawks,” the demise of engagement meant the welcome end to the influence and epistemic hegemony of the elite China hands whose connections to China had rendered it—in their view—blind to Beijing’s increasing bellicosity. These critics were located institutionally outside the main international affairs think tanks, research centers, and academic departments, frequently retired from the military and intelligence services, or employed in for-profit enterprises, such as risk consulting.¹²¹

Anti-engagers viewed—and continue to view—engagers as disconnected from what the former see as the new reality in China and Sino-US relations. In the anti-engagers’ view, engagers rely on academic credentials and long-standing ties to China to prove their status, both of which they see as politically compromised—a view difficult to dismiss given the Trump administration’s politicization of engagement, as described above. Though “all very respected and all very erudite,” one interviewee noted, this erudition enabled the engagers to evade the criticism of other China watchers, particularly on the issue of China’s increasingly militaristic behavior on the global stage.¹²² The problem, the interviewee went on, is that the engagers had been “indoctrinated” in what they termed the “Kissinger school,” meaning a “corpus of thought on China, which was to say ... China’s not really an aggressive nation. They’ve always been an inward nation.”¹²³ For this interviewee, nothing could be further from the truth. Their career in intelligence, spent reading Chinese propaganda and classified material, leads to a thorough repudiation of the view that China is not a threat to the United States.

Engagers, by contrast, have questioned the anti-engagers’ knowledge of China, noting a relative discrepancy in terms of academic qualifications and credentials, and criticized the anti-engagers for their lack of contacts inside China. Engagers think the anti-engagers’ forthright views on China policy are a reflection of their focus on defense and security matters. This

¹²¹See, for example, the signatories to “Stay the Course on China: An Open Letter to President Trump,” *Journal of Political Risk*, 18 July 2019, <https://www.jpplrisk.com/stay-the-course-on-china-an-open-letter-to-president-trump/>.

¹²²Interview B.

¹²³Interview B.

leads anti-engagers, in the engagers' view, to miss the broader cultural, historical, and political factors at play in China's behavior. Crucially, the engagers also consider the anti-engagers' perspective to reflect their lack of the same credentials that anti-engagers believe compromise engagers' arguments. Engagers expressed deep concern about the lack of influence of established China hands in the Trump administration—with Pottinger at the NSC an important exception. As one senior China scholar argued, the problem with the Trump administration was that it failed to recruit or retain any “good China watchers.”¹²⁴

Anti-engagers' expertise differs markedly from that of the engagers. Each side was aware the debate was in part over their respective statuses as China experts, which amplifies ill will—as detailed in the next section. An important background context, as engagers in particular frequently noted, was the sense that Trump's China policy reflected a broader crisis of expertise. As one China expert in the legal field suggested, the most troubling thing about Trump's China policy was “the more general rejection of expertise” it reflected.¹²⁵ 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”—they affirmed that engagement's chief critics are not at all China experts in their estimation.¹²⁶

Together, these impressions highlight the interconnections between the professional investments of different China experts and their views of engagement and US China policy under Trump. They also once again prove the inadequacy of understandings of ideas' role in politics as either used instrumentally or held intrinsically. Navarro and others in his camp, the previous interviewee went on, “just believe things that I simply 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. From the opposite perspective, for the anti-engagers, it is the engagers' very credentials that have clouded them to the facts of Chinese aggression.

Nuance and the End of Engagement

Central to the engagers' performance of expertise is the claim to “nuanced” understandings of China. Nuance fits with engagement as a frame—a master narrative of relations between Washington and Beijing that rejects

¹²⁴Interview D.

¹²⁵Interview I.

¹²⁶Interview I.

black-and-white conclusions about China in the vaguely defined hope of improved relations going forward. For anti-engagers, engagers invoke “nuance” to avoid accepting what they see as the undeniable facts of the China threat. With the fracturing of the engagement community and the paradigmatic shift to strategic competition, members of the China field faced the challenge of adjusting their claims to nuance amid new conditions. Why is a nuanced view of China needed in the face of a documented arms buildup, human rights violations in Xinjiang, and Beijing’s impeding of international investigations into the origins of COVID-19? Engagers were faced with the choice to either reject strategic competition, and thereby risk forfeiting relevance, or to reassert the need for a nuanced approach in operationalizing strategic competition.

How China professionals critical of anti-engagement have sought to nuance the debate depends largely on their field position. One group, former diplomats in particular, continued to defend engagement as a natural part of international relations. 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.”¹²⁷ Noteworthy among such voices are former ambassadors Roy and Chas Freeman,¹²⁸ who each argue that although things have not turned out as planned, engagement as both policy and frame was sound at the time: “The current rhetoric, or narrative, about the ‘failure’ of ‘the engagement policy’ is a gross misreading of the intentions and substance of US policy. It is born of ignorance—some of it willful—about the nature of foreign policy ... But even more it is an expression of a political view.”¹²⁹ Baked into this perspective is a claim to a certain kind of nuanced expertise, derived from experience and exposure to China and its people, and a rejection of politicized policymaking.

Others seek nuance by focusing on historical counterfactuals. “What,” one interviewee asked, “was the alternative [to engagement]?”¹³⁰ At what point in the last four decades should engagement have been abandoned? After Tiananmen? At the time of 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?”¹³¹ For another China watcher (who works 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 ... if we had tried to contain China in the late 1990s, where would we be?”¹³² Still others questioned why America’s role—especially that of US

¹²⁷Interview F.

¹²⁸See, for example, Roy, “Engagement Works.”

¹²⁹Interview J.

¹³⁰Interview K.

¹³¹Interview K.

¹³²Interview I.

businesses—in facilitating China’s rise was absent from the failures of engagement debate. 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.”¹³³

As a performance, however, China expertise is based on recognized understanding of China, not the United States. Consequently, few interviewees questioned America’s motives and the nature of American national interest in China’s rise. One retired political scientist asked why “anybody [should] 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.”¹³⁴ For another former ambassador, “We 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 ... [But] American primacy like any primacy is not eternal and cannot be preserved forever.”¹³⁵ For them, “the thesis is that China must not be allowed [to] exercise influence, governance, or, you know, achieve a military capability in its own neighborhood ... that’s pretty absurd.”¹³⁶ Such reflections, however, were rare.

Alastair Iain Johnston’s attempts to nuance the end of engagement debate through empirical assessments of notions such as China as a “revisionist” or “status quo” power typifies the dynamic.¹³⁷ Johnston demonstrates that China cannot be understood as seeking to overturn the “international order” because no single international order exists. In some regional and issue-specific areas China strongly upholds the global order, such as over arms control agreements, open trade, and the norm of sovereign independence.¹³⁸ Anti-engagers reject such arguments, and the attempt to nuance the debate over US China policy they typify. Especially for many in the military and intelligence, 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.”¹³⁹ As one China scholar with military experience explained, you could ask theoretical questions such as, “Is China really challenging the international order?” but for people in the Defense Department, “We don’t care ... the weapons systems the Chinese are developing can only be understood as targeting the United States.”¹⁴⁰

¹³³Interview L.

¹³⁴Interview M.

¹³⁵Interview N.

¹³⁶Interview N.

¹³⁷Alastair Iain Johnston, “Is China a Status Quo Power?” *International Security* 27, no. 4 (Spring 2003): 5–56.

¹³⁸Alastair Iain Johnston, “The Failures of the ‘Failure of Engagement’ with China,” *Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 99–114.

¹³⁹Interview O.

¹⁴⁰Interview P.

Opponents of engagement see in its senior defenders' views the doubling down on four decades of head-in-the-sand thinking on China. For 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 America as the leading superpower, beginning with removing the US Navy from the western Pacific.¹⁴¹ One leading critic of engagement explained the issue as follows: "For 40 years we engaged. We engaged on [the engagers'] advice, on their expert testimony ... they were all the intellectual foundation for advising every administration, Republican and Democrat[,] to engage, to engage, to engage ... 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."¹⁴² For the anti-engagers, the facts are clear: the Chinese "are out to clean our clocks."¹⁴³

Institutionalized Engagement Skepticism

Strategic competition did not emerge only with the ascent of the anti-engagers in the Trump administration. What might be termed "engagement skepticism" was already a visible position associated with particular individuals and institutions, notable among them human rights and military-security organizations. From there, engagement skeptics kept a close eye on developments in Beijing, especially after China's 2001 accession to the WTO. In so doing, these institutions afforded engagement skepticism and its adherents the necessary legitimacy within the China field to perform a different type of China expertise to the engagers—a posture more forthright in its assessments of China, especially the CCP, yet still grounded in recognized Chinese expertise.

During the debate over Chinese WTO accession, many opponents feared it would remove American leverage over Beijing—notably in the human rights sphere. As a quid pro quo, two congressionally funded commissions were created to oversee China's behavior on an ongoing basis. The first was included as a provision within the legislation that gave China permanent Most Favored Nation status. The task of the CECC is to "monitor the acts of the People's Republic of China which reflect compliance with or violation of human rights, in particular, those contained in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."¹⁴⁴ A second commission, the USCC, was

¹⁴¹Pillsbury, *Hundred-Year Marathon*.

¹⁴²Interview B.

¹⁴³Interview B.

¹⁴⁴"Legislative Mandate, H. R. 4444," 10 October 2000, <https://www.cecc.gov/about/legislative-mandate>.

created three weeks later on 30 October, and tasked to “monitor, investigate, and report to Congress on the national security implications of the bilateral trade and economic relationship” between the United States and China.

The scope of research and testimony the CECC and USCC seek is objective, spanning the engagement community and its critics within the China field. As such, the twin commissions have provided an outlet for both pro- and anti-engagement views. A February 2007 USCC hearing is indicative. The commission heard from Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Thomas Christensen, who articulated the George W. Bush’s administration’s vision of a China “that is more open, transparent, and democratic,” contributing to “a global system that has provided peace, security, and prosperity to America, China, and the rest of the world.”¹⁴⁵ Noting, tellingly, that China was not yet the “responsible stakeholder” so envisioned, Christensen said that “encouraging China to move in that direction continues to be the foundation of our policy; the question, as this Commission has correctly pointed out, is how we can most effectively do that.”¹⁴⁶

The commission also heard, however, from China skeptics whose ideas have formed a key part of the shift from engagement to strategic competition. Journalist James Mann argued in in terms strikingly similar to those used after 2017, that US policymakers were operating with a mistaken paradigm, with “Americans, particularly in our political and business elites, regularly talk[ing] as though China is inevitably destined for political change as well [as economic].”¹⁴⁷ For Mann, the engagers were wrong: “While China will certainly be a richer and more powerful country 25 years from now, it could still be an autocracy of one form or another. Its leadership ... may not be willing to tolerate organized political opposition any more than it does today.”¹⁴⁸ Navarro testified the same day, telling the commissioners, “While American politicians, policymakers, and journalists remain dangerously preoccupied with events in the Middle East, China has emerged, largely unchallenged, as an economic superpower with an ever-growing ability to exert significant influence over U.S. economic, financial and political institutions.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵Thomas J. Christensen, “The State of U.S.–China Diplomacy,” before the U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission,” 2 February 2007, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2.1.2007christensen_thomas_statement.pdf.

¹⁴⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷James Mann, “Before the U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission hearing on ‘U.S.–China Relationship: Economics and Security in Perspective,’” 1 February 2007, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2.1.2007mann_james_statement.pdf.

¹⁴⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹Peter Navarro, “Testimony of Business Professor Peter Navarro before the U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission,” 1 February 2007, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2.1.2007navarro_peter_statement.pdf. The USCC heard testimony from Navarro’s future colleague, Robert Lighthizer, concerning China’s predatory trade practices in 2009.

Engagement skepticism also had an institutional home in a set of organizations funded by the Department of Defense's Office of Net Assessment (ONA), under the directorship of strategist Andrew Marshall, himself convinced of the long-term threat China poses and the need for concrete planning.¹⁵⁰ So-called ONA shops, such as the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) and, later, Project 2049, have focused on the balance of forces in the Pacific theater.¹⁵¹ The CSBA, under the leadership of Andrew Krepevech, took the lead in envisioning and conceptualizing possible conflict with China, putting out in 2010 the influential concept paper coining the term "Air-Sea Battle."¹⁵² Michael O'Hanlon and James Steinberg, both associated more with engagement than its critics, later warned of the concept becoming a self-fulfilling prophesy.¹⁵³ Nonetheless, as one interviewee told me, the CSBA's strong position on the long-term threat from China is now firmly at the center of US strategic discussions on China: "we [at the CSBA] have stayed where we [were]" on China; "the rest of the community [came] to us."¹⁵⁴

Though engagement was predominant at the top levels of the government until the second Obama administration, therefore, the professional community of China watchers featured a lively discussion about developments in Chinese politics, economy, and society, one far more variegated than critics of a pro-engagement groupthink. Together, the USCC, CECC, and ONA shops preserved a space within the China community for forthright and increasingly skeptical voices. In so doing, they institutionalized legitimate engagement skepticism.

To this point, I have emphasized the role of political—"us versus them"—contestation and struggles over professional status—different types of expertise itself—in the shift in US China strategy from engagement to strategic competition. Engagement's demise cannot be fully captured by political and professional contestation, however. Amplifying both processes was an intensely personal struggle, which underpinned the crystallization of the engager and anti-engager groups, with important implications going forward.

¹⁵⁰See Julian E. Barnes, "Andrew Marshall, Pentagon's Threat Expert, Dies at 97," *New York Times*, 26 March 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/26/us/politics/andrew-marshall-dead.html>.

¹⁵¹For example, Ian Easton, "China's Top Five War Plans," Project 2049 Institute Policy Brief 19-001 (2019), https://project2049.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Chinas-Top-Five-War-Plans_Ian_Easton_Project2049.pdf.

¹⁵²Greg Jaffe, "U.S. Model for a Future War Fans Tensions with China and Inside Pentagon," *Washington Post*, 1 August 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-model-for-a-future-war-fans-tensions-with-china-and-inside-pentagon/2012/08/01/gJQAC6F8PX_story.html.

¹⁵³Michael O'Hanlon and James Steinberg, "Beyond 'Air-Sea Battle': A Military Concept That Challenges Policymakers," *Washington Post*, 23 August 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/beyond-air-sea-battle-a-military-concept-that-challenges-policymakers/2012/08/23/8fd4f8fa-ed31-11e1-9ddc-340d5efb1e9c_story.html.

¹⁵⁴Interview Q.

Engagement Gets Personal

In US foreign policy, key decisions and initiatives are tied to the identifiable individuals, and the bureaucratic battles they waged.¹⁵⁵ Engagement was no different, becoming connected to a small number of people, with Henry Kissinger at the apex.¹⁵⁶ Engagement became, and will likely remain, a lightning rod for emotive personal dispute.

Engagement and the Justification and Vindication of Lives and Careers

The end of engagement, one interviewee explained in February 2019, generated a lot of “personal antipathy in the community ... a lot of [the anti-engagers] are ones whose career didn’t go so well because they were sidelined because they were not on the [right side].”¹⁵⁷ Trump’s rejection of engagement emboldened such anti-engagers. “For them ... what I’m seeing is a lot of real personal ... vindication.”¹⁵⁸ Long “marginalized ... [as] the China hawks ... [T]he scaremongers in the eighties and nineties are coming back and saying, ‘we were right.’”¹⁵⁹

Support for the shift to the strategic competition among many China experts has been, consequently, tied to an emotive sense of having been ignored, both their viewpoint and expertise disparaged. As one engagement skeptic, a retired intelligence officer, explained, while the engagers were talking to scholars, liberal elites, and friendly policymakers in China, people like them were reading classified military intelligence that presented a different aspect to China’s rise. “Before 2012,” pro-engagement China experts “ridiculed people like me They mocked us. They said we were uneducated ... Yet, guys like me were reading what the Chinese were saying.”¹⁶⁰ For them, the end of engagement was a vindication of decades of frustration, as they tried unsuccessfully to raise the alarm in Washington.

For engagers, the dynamic was reversed. Many of their careers were spent under that paradigm, especially those which coincided with the opening in the 1970s and early ’80s, allowing them to visit a China few Westerners had seen since 1949. As one prominent think tanker described, “We were not expecting to ever get in to China ... we expected to go through a career and never really talk to a resident Chinese person in the leadership or in society ... our careers [were] almost the exact opposite of

¹⁵⁵James Mann, *About Face: A History of America’s Curious Relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 11.

¹⁵⁶David Cohen, “Kissinger Doesn’t See China as an Immediate Military Threat to Taiwan,” *Politico*, 21 November 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/11/21/kissinger-china-taiwan-summit-biden-523139>.

¹⁵⁷Interview R.

¹⁵⁸Interview R.

¹⁵⁹Interview R.

¹⁶⁰Interview B.

what we thought [they] would be.”¹⁶¹ Positive feelings toward China followed since, from this interviewee’s perspective, their career had tracked the enormous change in China—“not all ... but almost all positive.”¹⁶² The effect is a deep attachment to China, and engagement, for intertwined personal and professional reasons.

Another interviewee pointed to a former business-association leader—central to the 1990s opening of China to US investment—as someone whose entire professional life is at stake in the engagement debate. This individual “clearly experiences the turn [away from engagement] as saying he wasted his life and so he almost doesn’t want to hear the conversations ... you can see him tuning out ... I think he’s feeling ... that no one wants to listen to him anymore.”¹⁶³ For this 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 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.”¹⁶⁴ The idea that years of scholarly labor have been wasted is a difficult notion to accept.

Personal disputes are not a recent aspect of the China community. A series of disagreements punctuate engagement’s history, with strong critics such as William Triplett, Bill Gertz, and Pillsbury offering fervent criticism of engagers, including Eric McVadon (former naval attaché in Beijing), Dennis Wilder (former national security director for China, 2004–2006), and Paul Heer (national intelligence officer for East Asia, 2007–2015). Even more strident personal charges have their lineage in the activities of the so-called Blue Team during the late 1990s, which accused the Clinton administration of being enmeshed in webs of corruption with the PRC that included hundreds of thousands of dollars in Chinese contributions to the national committee of the Democratic Party, the theft of American military technology, and Chinese espionage activities in the United States.¹⁶⁵

Such accusations entered the political mainstream via a June 1998 report of a House Select Committee on National Security Concerns with the PRC, released after redaction by Republican chair Christopher Cox.¹⁶⁶ Though a group of leading security scholars rebutted the report’s conclusions as “inflammatory” and based on serious mischaracterizations and

¹⁶¹Interview D.

¹⁶²Interview D.

¹⁶³Interview M.

¹⁶⁴Interview M.

¹⁶⁵Interview B. See, for example, “Ex-DIA Analyst Admits Passing Secrets to China,” *Washington Times*, 23 June 2006.

¹⁶⁶*Report of the Select Committee on U.S. National Security and Military/Commercial Concerns with the People’s Republic of China*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1999), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CRPT-105hrpt851/pdf/GPO-CRPT-105hrpt851.pdf>.

oversimplifications,¹⁶⁷ the broad sense that US intelligence agencies had missed important warning signs regarding the PRC gained traction in Washington. At the Pentagon, the ONA issued a December 2020 report critical of US intelligence on the issue of Taiwan's defense.¹⁶⁸ Blue Team members also took part in a commission tasked with overseeing CIA analysis on China, which found no evidence of explicit bias, but an "institutional predisposition" to minimize issues of concern in relation to China.¹⁶⁹

Hidden during the Bush Jr. and Obama administrations, Trump's election unearthed the roots of engagement's personalization. The views of the staunch anti-engagers and Blue Teamers found strong support among the proponents of ideological competition with Beijing in and around the Trump administration. Personalization of engagement extended across the community, amplifying engagement's politicization and further weakening it as a frame and policy within the China community's professional status competition.

The American China Field After Engagement

The US-China bilateral relationship will likely be the most consequential in world politics for the remainder of this century, with implications beyond the specter of conflict to the governance of common issues, from nuclear proliferation to climate change. Existing and conceivable explanations of recent developments, however, contain blind spots. Seeing engagement as a singular strategy adopted since the 1970s, they fail to recognize the shift to strategic competition as a paradigmatic turnover across the nexus between the US government and the China professional field. Using new insights from the sociology of expertise to capture the conflictual dynamics underpinning paradigmatic turnover, this article has traced how relatively stable, if not uncontested, relations between the government and the American China field were transformed under Trump. Though China policy has never been the product of universal consensus, Trump's election deepened China policy's politicization, offering China-skeptic professionals the mainstream opportunities hitherto denied them, and weakening via fragmentation an engager community forced onto the intellectual and political defensive. The argument has important implications both for the debate over what has and should come after engagement, and for how IR scholars

¹⁶⁷Alistair Iain Johnston, W. K. H. Panofsky, Marco Di Capua, and Lewis R. Franklin, *The Cox Committee Report: An Assessment* (Stanford, CA: Center for International Security and Cooperation, December 1999), <https://carnegieendowment.org/pdf/npp/coxfinal3.pdf>.

¹⁶⁸See "Panel Finds CIA Soft on China," *Washington Times*, 6 July 2001, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2001/jul/6/20010706-024147-1037r/>.

¹⁶⁹"Panel Finds CIA Soft on China."

might better theorize the relationship between knowledge and policy formation in the United States and beyond.

First, distinguishing between engagement as policy, frame, and community allows for a more pointed assessment of developments since Trump. Has the paradigmatic shift consolidated or been rolled back? Is the China community fragmented? If a new bipartisan consensus has emerged, what mechanisms explain it?

Evidence suggests the paradigmatic shift away from engagement holds.¹⁷⁰ Biden's China team has retained most of strategic competition: a focus on winning a competition with China over changing it, alongside a newly prioritized Indo-Pacific frame for US national security policy.¹⁷¹ Like engagement, however, "hegemonic" would appear too strong to describe strategic competition. Numerous experts are critical of the frame, its policy manifestations, and the strategic competition group. Some are older engagers who find themselves outside the mainstream. Others are junior experts, skeptical of the competition frame's military-security focus. Strategic competition is more "predominant" than hegemonic.

To the extent that there is a "new bipartisan consensus" in Washington, the evidence is also mixed. Consensus on what, precisely? US China experts—competitors and engagers—realize that strategic competition is the new operative frame for US-China relations. But there is no consensus that this is (a) appropriate or (b) a positive development. The notion of a bipartisan consensus does have purchase, however, in relation to Congress specifically, which features widespread bipartisan hostility toward China. Yet here too, there remain attempts to politicize China, notably from Republicans hoping to carve out a more hawkish view than the Democrats.

Foregrounding the social dynamics underpinning the struggle over engagement highlights how views might further polarize—the small group of engagers on one side, the broad coalition of anti-engagers the other—with implications for what follows. The issue is in part rhetorical: some measure of "engagement" with China will undoubtedly be necessary—whether "partial" engagement in the economic sphere, or military cooperation on matters such as securing North Korean nuclear weapons in the event of regime collapse.¹⁷² But because politics by nature tend toward the black and white—"us" versus "them"—the danger is that expert voices critically analyzing new proposed strategies may be ignored because of who

¹⁷⁰Josh Rogin, "Biden Doesn't Want to Change China. He Wants to Beat It.," *Washington Post*, 10 February 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/02/10/biden-china-strategy-competition/>.

¹⁷¹See *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* (Washington, DC: White House, February 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

¹⁷²Respectively, Charles W. Boustany Jr. and Aaron L. Friedberg, "Partial Disengagement: A New U.S. Strategy for Economic Competition with China," National Bureau of Asian Research Special Report 82 (November 2019); Oriana Skylar Mastro, "Conflict and Chaos on the Korean Peninsula: Can China's Military Help Secure North Korea's Nuclear Weapons?" *International Security* 43, no. 2 (Fall 2018): 84–116.

they are or where they stand, not what they argue. Foregrounding the personalization of engagement suggests a key issue is the practical one of getting fervent critics of a given policy together with strong supporters to share ideas, talking to, not past, one another.

Beyond US-China relations, this article contains important theoretical takeaways for how security scholars should account for the interconnections between ideas, knowledge production, and policy formulation. IR scholars still tend to under- or overplay the role of ideas in policymaking. Scholars either ignore ideas and their holders as mere throughputs of larger structural forces such as the balance of power or economic interests. Alternatively, they view ideas transported into the government by influential individuals as determinative of policy thereby “captured” or a product of “groupthink.” I demonstrate instead the constant presence of expert struggle, as members of knowledge communities engage in part-political, part-professional, and part-personal contests over national security frames, policies, and competencies to staff key government positions. In so doing, knowledge communities exert influence that is indirect, yet central to the making of US foreign policy.

At the same time, this article shows how security scholars can avoid an unnecessary opposition between viewing the ideas as either held intrinsically—as a matter of belief—or purely for strategic purposes in political struggles.¹⁷³ Critics of my argument might suggest that I downplay the most straightforward explanation for the shift from engagement to strategic competition: that many of America’s China experts have simply changed their minds about how much of a threat China poses. Yet the Trump administration’s rejection of engagement was more than a changing of minds; it was a paradigmatic turnover with policy, frame, and community faces. The end of engagement thus illustrates how policy ideas are rarely held either intrinsically or strategically, but in some combination of the two, as individuals engage in political, professional, and personal contestation over policy and the frames and groups that justify it.

Normatively, finally, engagement’s demise highlights the serious implications that can flow from the entanglement of expertise and foreign policy contestation. The barriers to mutual intelligibility between the ivory tower and government are high enough without scholarship’s dismissal as partisan.¹⁷⁴ Whatever one’s view of engagement, the US national security community should strive to function as a community: furthering the shared goal of prudent and effective policy. Rational policymaking should be a normative goal, not an analytical starting point—even Mill recognized individuals do not, in reality, enter the marketplace of ideas as equals. Ad

¹⁷³See also Goddard and Krebs, “Rhetoric, Legitimation, and Grand Strategy.”

¹⁷⁴Desch, *Cult of the Irrelevant*.

hominem attacks regarding individuals' personal and professional investments, or expertise, are both damaging. A diversity of opinions should be encouraged, or else calls for course changes can take on extreme forms. The Cold War offers an important historical reference point. The politicization of Chinese and Russian expertise—and the 1950s and 1960s—weakens America's knowledge base for more than a generation. If we agree, normatively, that a new Cold War is best avoided, that diplomacy is more cost effective than deterrence, and that some form of engagement is thereby always a good idea, highlighting the social and professional factors affecting decision making serves as a useful guide to promote a healthier foundation for the relationship between knowledge communities and US foreign policy.

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