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# The Changing U.S. China Watching Community and the Demise of Engagement with the People's Republic of China

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## Abstract

Recent years have seen the rapid descent of relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC). Hopes for cooperation in places of common concern like climate change gave way to strains in almost all areas. In place of “engagement,” the administration of Donald J. Trump adopted a tougher approach of “strategic competition” that its successor so far has continued. This article explores the relationship between the demise of engagement and opinions coming from the American China expert community. Specifically, it questions the impact on engagement of five secular dynamics that these China authorities have experienced—generational turnover; the field's vast expansion and diversification; increased disciplinary specialization; the enhanced prominence of the generalist in national security discussions in place of China specialists; and changes in the media leading to more skeptical journalistic voices on U.S.-PRC relations. Without over-emphasizing either the influence of the expert community on U.S. decision-making, or underplaying the more repressive and authoritarian actions of the Chinese Communist Party, this article suggests that the China expert community has been more of a factor in the end of engagement than current accounts of academics and commentators acknowledge.

## Keywords

U.S. foreign policy – People's Republic of China – expertise – engagement – strategic competition

Recent years have witnessed the rapid deterioration of relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC).<sup>1</sup> Hopes for cooperation in places of common concern such as climate change, prominent during the Obama administration, have given way to clashes in almost all areas, including a trade war, curtailment of diplomatic exchanges, and a mutual sanctions regime.<sup>2</sup> In the place of "engagement," the administration of Donald J. Trump adopted a tougher approach of "strategic competition" that President Joseph R. Biden Jr. so far has continued.<sup>3</sup> The shift is significant because engagement weathered numerous crises, as successive U.S. administrations refrained from sustained criticism of Beijing, even after damaging events, notably the Tiananmen Square Massacre.<sup>4</sup> U.S. leaders isolated specific disagreements, from human rights to trade distortion practices, from broader questions of the national interest. Then Deputy Secretary of State Robert B. Zoellick, for example, gave a succinct justification for engagement in 2005, urging PRC's leaders to continue on the journey to becoming a "responsible stakeholder" in international affairs, and labeling engagement a remarkable success.<sup>5</sup> Even mounting evidence from the early 2000s of Chinese expansionist military aims—especially in the South China Sea—did not budge successive administrations from

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- 1 Suisheng Zhao, "Engagement on the Defensive: From the Mismatched Grand Bargain to the Emerging US-China Rivalry," *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, no. 118 (July 2019): 501–18; Orville Schell, "The Death of Engagement," *Wire China*, 7 June 2020, <https://www.thewirechina.com/2020/06/07/the-birth-life-and-death-of-engagement/> (accessed 24 November 2021).
  - 2 National Security Strategy, February 2015, p. 12, [https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015\\_national\\_security\\_strategy\\_2.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf). (accessed 24 November 2021); "Trump Targets WeChat and TikTok, in Sharp Escalation with China," *New York Times*, 19 August 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/06/technology/trump-wechat-tiktok-china.html> (accessed 24 November 2021); "U.S. blocks imports of Chinese goods it says are made with force labor," *Washington Post*, 14 September 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/09/14/us-bans-imports-china-forced-labor/> (accessed 24 November 2021).
  - 3 U.S. Department of Defense, "United States Strategic Approach to The People's Republic of China," 20 May 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2193725/united-states-strategic-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/> (accessed 24 November 2021).
  - 4 "Did President George H. W. Bush Mishandle China?," *China File*, 4 December 2018, <http://www.chinafile.com/conversation/did-president-george-hw-bush-mishandle-china> (accessed 24 November 2021); Richard C. Bush, "30 Years after Tiananmen Square, a look back on Congress' forceful response," 29 May 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/05/29/30-years-after-tiananmen-square-a-look-back-on-congress-forceful-response/> (accessed 24 November 2021).
  - 5 "Robert Zoellick's Responsible Stakeholder Speech," National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, 21 September 2005, <https://www.ncuscr.org/content/robert-zoellicks-responsible-stakeholder-speech> (accessed 24 November 2021).

pursuing engagement.<sup>6</sup> While significant downturns in U.S.-PRC relations have occurred in the past, most recently under George W. Bush, this time circumstances appear different.<sup>7</sup>

What changed? This paper explores the relationship between engagement's demise and the opinions coming from the American China expert community. Specifically, it questions the impact on engagement of five secular—dynamics that these China authorities have experienced in recent years—generational turnover; the China field's vast and ongoing expansion and diversification; increased disciplinary specialization and a growing gap between the Ivory Tower and the Beltway; the increased prominence of the foreign policy generalists in national security discussions over the PRC in place of China specialists; and changes in the media landscape leading to more skeptical journalistic voices on U.S.-PRC relations. The article's aim is not to provide an alternative causal explanation of engagement's demise. Without over-emphasizing either the influence of expert communities on U.S. decision-making or underplaying actions of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that betray a repressive, authoritarian turn,<sup>8</sup> its goal rather is to suggest the American China community of experts has been more of a factor in the end of engagement than current accounts of academics and commentators acknowledge.

Addressing the topic of engagement's end from this perspective is an unusual tack for an observer of this transformation to take. The views of scholars and area experts are only one, typically limited, input into foreign policy making when it receives consideration alongside the priorities of the military and intelligence services, and the activities of lobbyists and business associations.<sup>9</sup> Why should incremental changes in the American China studies community have any impact on assessments of U.S. national security? None of the current three major ways of explaining engagement's downfall centers the China field. The first explanation focuses on engagement's policy failings. For critics Kurt M. Campbell and Ely S. Ratner, the PRC "defied American expectations," exposing as fanciful U.S. policy-makers' hopes of influencing Chinese

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6 Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 90–120.

7 Nina 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.

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

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

development.<sup>10</sup> A second explanation centers the shifting balance of global power coupled with a new authoritarianism in Beijing.<sup>11</sup> From this viewpoint, the PRC's rise follows a historical pattern—"The Thucydides Trap"—wherein rising and declining leading states enter a spiral of mistrust that frequently ends in conflict.<sup>12</sup> A final common-sense explanation for the shift away from engagement stresses the policy preferences of President Donald J. Trump.

Underpinning each account is the assumption that, to the extent that American China experts have been influential, it is only as implementers of Trump's agenda—throughputs of larger political and geopolitical forces. Yet, although Trump was a vocal China critic before entering office<sup>13</sup> and brought in advisers of a similar mindset—such as economic historian Peter K. Navarro<sup>14</sup>—important questions remain from these accounts. First, the connection between engagement's replacement and its "failure" is less than clear-cut. While the PRC has not liberalized, as many of engagement's proponents have implied,<sup>15</sup> engagement has been beneficial massively to both sides, at least in aggregate economic terms. In short, engagement may not have *failed* so much as *succeeded too well*, in a specific—economic—understanding of the term "success" and for only a fraction of Americans.<sup>16</sup> Equally, explanations relying on the balance of power and the growing threat from the PRC leave unexplained the questions of *why*, *how*, and *when* U.S. national security policy-makers recognized that the PRC's rise and troubling behavior was threatening to the United States. Why did neither the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis nor the April 2001 Hainan Island incident—featuring the PRC's capture of 24 American aviators—lead to the sort of strategic rethink of 2015 to 2017? Finally, while no account of the change in U.S. PRC policy can neglect the effect of

10 Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, "The China Reckoning," *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 2 (2018): 60–70.

11 John J. Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order," *International Security* 43, no. 4 (Spring 2019): 7–50.

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

13 Good Morning America, ABC, 3 November 2015, [https://archive.org/details/WMUR\\_20151103\\_120000\\_Good\\_Morning\\_America](https://archive.org/details/WMUR_20151103_120000_Good_Morning_America) (accessed 24 November 2021); Josh Rogin, *Chaos Under Heaven: Trump, Xi, and the Battle for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2021), 8–11.

14 Rogin, *Chaos Under Heaven*.

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

16 Neil Thomas, "Matters of Record: Relitigating Engagement with China," *Macropolo*, 3 September 2019, <https://macropolo.org/analysis/china-us-engagement-policy/> (accessed 24 November 2021).

Trump's election, a narrow focus on Trump hides other factors, such as signals of earlier changes in American views that predate the 2016 election.<sup>17</sup>

Drawing on over 120 original interviews with U.S.-based China watchers, this article shows that engagement was not just a U.S. policy, but the mainstream view on U.S.-PRC relations held across a set of institutionalized relationships between the U.S. government and the American China expert community prior to Trump's election in November 2016. Although far from uniform—vocal critics of engagement have been present in the field since the opening to the PRC in the 1970s, and skepticism was growing during President Barack Obama's second term—the U.S. China watching community largely shared the view that good relations between the United States and the PRC were, in the end, in Washington's interests. This was most clearly true of the U.S. business community, eager to reap the reward of trade and investment in China,<sup>18</sup> and tacitly so at the top ranks of a military preoccupied with events in Eastern Europe and the Middle East well into the 2010s. It was also true among the top ranks of U.S. China watchers.

When one understands engagement as more than a strategy or policy, the American China watching community comes into focus as a factor in its construction, maintenance, and thus—inevitably—also its recent replacement. Trump's national security team notably did not feature the same types of individuals associated with engagement as had prior administrations. After Trump's election in November 2016, new faces with distinct professional and personal trajectories—individuals such as National Security Council (NSC) Asia Director Matthew F. Pottinger, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and advisors such as Navarro and Stephen K. Bannon—led the new administration and installed a paradigm shift in the U.S. strategy toward Beijing. In other words, individuals holding different kinds of China credentials than had predominated under engagement replaced this existing policy approach with strategic competition. The expansion of the American China professional field, its specialization and separation from the policy sphere and shifts in the type of knowledge it foregrounds, represent important conditioning factors in

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17 Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter's speech on May 2016 was indicative. Foreshadowing National Security Strategy (NSS) 2017, Carter declared that the United States was entering a new era of great power competition with Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC). "Secretary of Defense Ash Carter's Naval Academy commencement address," 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> (accessed 24 November 2021).

18 See, for example, Ho-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 (July 2021): 1004–27.

U.S.-PRC policy. Far from mere background, such changes are critical for how to understand engagement’s rise, its ultimate demise, and what comes next.

The following account draws on semi-structured interviews the author conducted between late 2017 and September 2021 with 121 U.S.-based China experts. Interviewees ranged in age and experience from current and former diplomats, including former ambassadors to Beijing, to prominent academics and think tankers, to junior and aspiring China experts. Table 1 provides a breakdown along with further details about the interviews. The author identified subjects using the snowball sampling method. He sought a balanced coverage of the field, not only demographically, but regionally and professionally,

TABLE 1 Professional Breakdown of Interviewees

<b>Primary professional affiliation<sup>19</sup></b>	<b>Sub-field or department</b>	<b>Number of interviews</b>	<b>Notes and additional information</b>
Current and former civilian and military policy-makers	State	7	Includes a recent former assistant secretary at the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs and two former ambassadors to Beijing
	Defense and Intelligence	2	Former National Intelligence Council director and former assistant secretary of defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs
	Trade	1	U.S. trade representative office at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing.
	Other	4	Includes former U.S. naval intelligence officer and former staffer for a Republican senator with a strong interest in China

19 Many interviewees had multiple current and past affiliations. Therefore, Table 1 includes the primary affiliation either when the author conducted the interviewee or for the period the interview covered.

TABLE 1 Professional Breakdown of Interviewees (*cont.*)

Primary professional affiliation	Sub-field or department	Number of interviews	Notes and additional information
Academia	Political Science	25	Includes Massachusetts Institute of Technology (2); George Washington (2), University of California at San Diego (4); Wisconsin; University of California at Berkeley; Georgetown; Pennsylvania; Michigan; Columbia; Harvard; Miami; Princeton
	History	7	Includes Michigan State; University of California at Irvine, Riverside, and Berkeley; Harvard; Oxford
	Sociology	10	Includes Harvard (3); George Mason; University of California at San Diego; Pennsylvania; Johns Hopkins
	Anthropology	1	Columbia
	Economics	2	University of California at San Diego and University of California at Davis
	Law	5	Seton Hall; Fordham; George Washington; Pennsylvania; Michigan
	Business	2	Harvard (2)
	Chinese Studies	3	University of California at Davis; University of Southern California; Pennsylvania



TABLE 1 Professional Breakdown of Interviewees (*cont.*)

Primary professional affiliation	Sub-field or department	Number of interviews	Notes and additional information
Think tanks and federally-funded research and development centers		31	Includes Center for Strategic and International Studies (4); School of Advanced International Studies (3); Center for Naval Analyses (2); Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2); RAND Corporation (2); The Wilson Center (2); Inter-American Dialogue; National Bureau of Asian Research; Council on Foreign Relations; Atlantic Council; Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments; Center for a New American Security; Brookings Institution; MacroPolo
Congressional commissions		3	U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission (2); Congressional-Executive Commission on China
Journalists		9	Includes <i>Jane's Defense Weekly</i> ; <i>The Diplomat</i> (2); <i>Sinica</i> ; <i>Sinocism</i> ; <i>New York Times</i> ; <i>Washington Post</i> .
Non-governmental organizations		5	Includes World Bank; National Endowment for Democracy
Private industry, especially consulting, law, banking		5	Includes Covington; RWR Advisory; Wall Street China Hedge Fund
Cultural organizations		1	Asia Society

to include interviews with journalists, consultants, and researchers representing the whole political spectrum of Washington, D.C.-based think tanks, in addition to academics from across the social sciences, humanities, and law. To maintain confidentiality, this article refrains from naming the interviewees, using letters to identify distinct individuals, while situating each interviewee's position in the American community of China experts to contextualize their comments as far as possible.

Interviews lasted an average of 61 minutes, totaling well-over 100 hours.<sup>20</sup> Each interview followed a similar arc—beginning with recounting the interviewee's educational and professional trajectory before covering the state of the American China watching community and U.S. PRC policy, including the ongoing debate about the merits and demerits of engagement and what might replace it. Interviews frequently diverged from the author's set questions as conversation uncovered previously unexplored issues, most notably when discussion shifted from engagement to the longer history and sociology of the China community—resulting in the identification of the five key processes that the article will explore below. In addition to data from the interviews, this article draws on fieldwork 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 the University of California at San Diego (December 2018) and the annual meetings of the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) in 2018 and 2019. Finally, the article draws on data the author has gained from membership since early 2018 on two China-focused listservs, which have provided well over 100,000 e-mails containing almost exhaustive coverage of media and government sources.<sup>21</sup> Together, these data underpin the following close account view of engagement's replacement.

What then is, or *was*, engagement? Few assessments explicitly define the term, using instead an implicit vision of engagement as a foreign policy “strategy” or “approach” tying together U.S. policy toward the PRC since 1972.<sup>22</sup> Yet engagement is a recent invention. As one interviewee explained, engagement is a retrospective, *post-hoc* construction. As he explains, “you didn't have people

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20 Those seeking further information about the interviews can contact the author. The author conducted the interviews under the University of California's Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol no. 1036710.

21 In thanks to moderators who kindly facilitated membership, the author has refrained from naming the listservs.

22 See, for example, James 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.

calling engagement a strategy . . . as a coherent thing from [Richard M.] Nixon to Obama . . . [and] it just became a catch-all in a sense people have started critiquing.”<sup>23</sup> A former long-time State Department official confirmed this impression. “I do not recall any debate over ‘engagement’ per se with China; for that matter, the word ‘engagement’ rarely entered into the language of the 70s and 80s,” he recalled. Rather, the term

only began to be heard frequently during the Bush administration, as President [George H. W.] Bush, National Security Adviser [Brent] Scowcroft and Secretary of State [James A.] Baker [III] sought to enunciate a new rationale for maintaining close ties with China—despite the Tiananmen Square atrocity, despite the halting of political “reform,” despite the vanished Soviet threat. The new policy rationale put stress on (1) China’s rising global influence . . . ; (2) China’s growing openness to U.S. investment and growing importance as a U.S. market . . . [; and] (3) the prospect that through “engagement” China would “evolve” into a thriving market economy within a non-communist/socialist state structure.<sup>24</sup>

Engagement as a U.S. strategy in dealing with the PRC therefore has a relatively short history and definitions of it vary and are imprecise.

A Google Ngram, admittedly a crude measure, backs up these accounts (see Figure 1).

“Engagement with China” hardly appears before the end of the Cold War, but it increases exponentially over the 1990s, before declining from 2000 until the end of the data in 2008. This suggests that engagement was an artifact of the 1990s political debates over the most-favored-nation (MFN) trade status and World Trade Organization (WTO) membership. The lack of mention of it before 1989 suggests as well that recent use of the term lumps together qualitatively different debates and political contexts. This helps explain, in turn, why “engagement” is absent from two prominent 1990s texts on U.S.-China relations.<sup>25</sup>

23 Interview A.

24 Interview B.

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

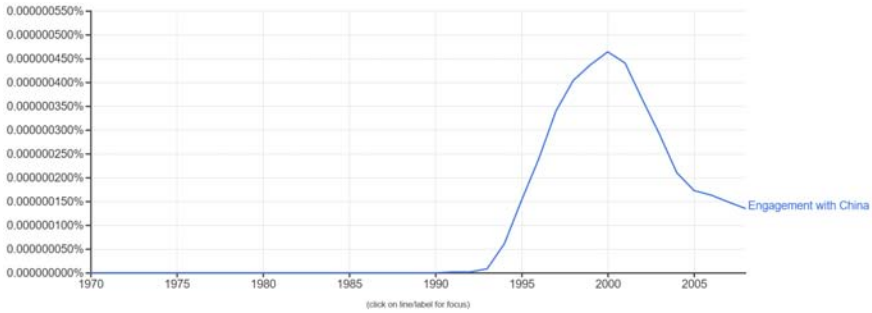


FIGURE 1 Google Ngram of “Engagement with China”

If engagement is not a strategy, approach, or policy, what is, or *was*, it? Analysis should proceed from how commentators used the term in political and expert struggles, rather than as the label for a consistent strategy. What events, aims, and motivations in the history of U.S. PRC policy are combined under the label “engagement?” Most importantly, who self-identifies as an “engager” and who distances him/herself from the word and its policy manifestations? From this perspective, engagement was more than a foreign policy strategy—it was a set of linkages between the government and outside institutions producing credentialed experts to fill China-related roles. Engagement was a reflection of personal and professional investments in and dispositions toward positive U.S.-PRC relations of a group of American experts from think tanks and research centers to universities and for-profit businesses, including law firms, consultancies, and media organizations. In other words, engagement both produced and was the product of a certain type of China professional—the *engager*.

As a worldview or set of professional dispositions, engagement was, at least in part, an artifact of the American China watching community, the history of which is thus relevant to the discussion here.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, although larger and more diverse than during its early years in the Cold War, as this article explores below, the field retains strong traces of—scars from even—its historical development. Forged in the U.S. rise to globalism after the end of World War II, the community suffered more than most from the effects of McCarthyism, as leading scholars such as Owen Lattimore saw charges of Communist sympathizing

26 See Fabio Lanza, *The End of Concern: Maoist China, Activism, and Asian Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); James R. Lilley, *China Hands: Nine Decades of Adventure, Espionage, and Diplomacy in Asia* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004). For a first-hand account, see Richard Baum, *China Watcher: Confessions of a Peking Tom* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011).

ruin their careers.<sup>27</sup> Lattimore was born in China, a trait he shared with many of the best American Sinologists and China Hands for more than one generation after the war, including John Paton Davies Jr. and J. Stapleton Roy.<sup>28</sup> McCarthyism decimated China scholarship in the United States, leaving peering beyond the “Bamboo Curtain” into the PRC from the Universities Service Center in the British-controlled Hong Kong (founded in 1962) as the only chance for American China watchers at first-hand knowledge of China.<sup>29</sup> Against this background, the vast cultural and economic exchanges the opening to the PRC in 1972 made possible and subsequent normalization in 1979 of diplomatic relations, brought with it a sense of optimism and opportunity.<sup>30</sup> The feeling held sway into the 21st Century, as the U.S. China field spread from early hubs at the universities of Michigan, Columbia, Harvard, Stanford, and California at Berkeley to the expansive array of think tanks, research centers, and for-profit analytic firms that populate today’s China watching community.

From this community, people like Michel C. Oksenberg, Ezra F. Vogel, Susan L. Shirk, and Kenneth G. Lieberthal—among many others—moved into and out of the U.S. government, from where they promoted engagement. A leading think tank China expert—deeply involved in promoting improved U.S.-PRC relations since the late 1970s—explained how for the last eight administrations, some version of a group of colleagues and friends of theirs had been in a position of influence over the general direction of U.S.-China relations:

Susan [L. Shirk, deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asia, 1997–2000] was in . . . Lieberthal was in, Mike Oksenberg [a member of President Jimmy Carter’s National Security Council (NSC) with responsibility for China, 1977–1980] was in. Dick Solomon [member of the NSC under President Nixon] before was in. Those were all in this group. . . . William Perry [secretary of defense, 1994–97] was in this group. Even at the beginning, Ashton Carter [secretary of defense under President Obama, 2011–2013] . . . and then . . . he got, sort of, mugged by reality I guess and

27 See Robert P. Newman, *Owen Lattimore and the “Loss” of China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

28 See John Paton Davies Jr., *China Hand: An Autobiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

29 See Anthony Austin and Robert Clurman (eds.), *The China Watchers* (New York: Pyramid Books, 1969).

30 See Cheng Li (ed.), *Bridging Minds Across the Pacific: U.S.-China Educational Exchanges, 1978–2003* (Boulder, CO: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005); David Lampton, Joyce A. Madancy, and Kristen M. Williams, *A Relationship Restored: Trends in U.S.-China Educational Exchanges, 1978–1984* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1986).

began to migrate a bit on this topic. [Kurt M.] Campbell [assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs under President Obama, 2009–2013] maybe a little bit.<sup>31</sup>

All these China experts as diplomatic advisors promoted U.S. engagement with the PRC.

One surely can question the coherence of the engager group. A number of older China experts that some once considered fellow travelers—notably journalist Orville H. Schell III, legal scholar Jerome A. Cohen, and historian Odd Arne Westad—now have moved markedly in the direction of the critics of engagement, as their participation in recent reports on U.S. PRC policy that the Asia Society and Hoover Institution have circulated demonstrates.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the pro-engagement group has not remained static. Nonetheless, engagement was clearly more than a governmental strategy or a set of policy beliefs located solely in the State and Defense departments and the NSC. Engagement was a set of personal and professional dispositions to view U.S. national interests as tied to positive U.S.-PRC relations that political appointments from a particular group within the American China expert community installed into the upper reaches of the U.S. government from the Reagan presidency through the Obama administrations. Interviewees described the institutional and personal connections underpinning engagement in varied ways. Individuals like J. Stapleton Roy—distinguished scholar at the Wilson Center and later assistant secretary of state for intelligence and research—and Winston Lord—special assistant secretary to the national security advisor 1970–1973 and director of the Policy Planning Staff 1973–1977—figure prominently. Roy and Lord personify the deepening connections between the PRC and the United States over the last four and a half decades. In particular, they embody the commitment to the Three Joint Communiqués of February 1972, January 1979, and August 1972 the United States and the PRC signed, including the U.S. commitment to the PRC's sovereignty through intentionally ambiguous language in relation to the status of Taiwan.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Interview C.

<sup>32</sup> See, respectively, Task Force on U.S. China Policy, "China's New Direction: Challenges and Opportunities for U.S. Policy," Asia Society, <https://asiasociety.org/center-us-china-relations/chinas-new-direction-challenges-and-opportunities-us-policy> (accessed 26 November 2021) and Larry Diamond and Orville Schell (eds.), "China's Influence & American Interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance," Hoover Institution, 29 November 2021, <https://www.hoover.org/research/chinas-influence-american-interests-promoting-constructive-vigilance> (accessed 26 November 2021).

<sup>33</sup> For a good overview, see Richard C. Bush, "A One-China Policy Primer," Center For East Asia Policy Studies at Brookings, East Asia Policy Paper, 10 March 2017, <https://www.brookings>.

The end of engagement is at base a disruption in these interconnections. The Trump administration, in short, stopped listening to the type of people who previously predominated in U.S. PRC policy. However, the end of engagement is more than a story of expert turnover from supporters to opponents of engagement. Trump's election has fostered a politicization of the PRC in U.S. national security circles, driving a wedge into a community that previously had a high degree of bipartisanship. The PRC, put simply, was for a long time not a political issue capable of generating a recognizable divide such that one set of advisors could replace another. From the opening in 1972 well into the 1990s, China expertise crossed party lines—most agreed that although the PRC was a potential future challenge, with a dubious human rights record and a problematic claim on Taiwan's sovereignty, it nevertheless was in U.S. interests to engage Beijing. Trump's election upended this bipartisan consensus. As Trump turned away from traditional forms of expertise, this empowered PRC critics in government and beyond, fracturing the China expert community into supporters and opponents of Trump, with various shades of gray in between.

While the failure of engagement debate is seemingly a battle over policy and the ideas underpinning it—with defenders crediting engagement with the PRC with forty years of peace, and critics countering that engagement rested on false promises and frustrated hopes—one can understand the debate better as an artifact of the changing relationship between the American China expert community and the U.S. government. The debate is a “Washington thing,” a senior China watcher told me; it reflects how the “beast” of U.S. strategy making works.<sup>34</sup> Some degree of engagement—not the strategy—is inevitable between two countries that share such deep economic and personal connections. The need to replace the engagement strategy is thus a reflection of the process of strategy-making in Washington.

The following section assesses the impact of five key developments in the American China watching community on engagement as a set of relations between the China field and the government—generational turnover; the field's expansion; increased specialization leading to a gap between the Ivory Tower and the Beltway; the increased prominence of the foreign policy generalist in national security discussions about the PRC; and changes in the media landscape leading to more skeptical journalistic voices on U.S.-PRC relations. Once again, without over-estimating the community's influence on U.S. PRC policy, nor downplaying the very real changes in Chinese behavior observers

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edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/one-china-policy-primer-web.pdf (accessed 26 November 2021).

34 Interview D.

have witnessed in recent years, widening the aperture in this way represents a more complete perspective on the end of engagement with the PRC. For most interviewees, generational turnover, the first key development in the American China watching community, is a significant factor underpinning differing reactions to the shift away from engagement. Younger generations seem less optimistic about the PRC and the prospects for improved U.S.-China relations, and more willing to adapt to strategic competition. "It's just a different generational outlook," one senior journalist, for example, explains. Younger people do not hold the same "romance" with the PRC as their senior colleagues.<sup>35</sup>

The discourse of generations within the China field is ubiquitous. Within the academy, China scholars often place themselves on "family trees" of advisors and their students, from the founders of the field of China Studies—John King Fairbank, A. Doak Barnett, and Robert A. Scalapino—to current doyens such as Harvard University's Elizabeth J. Perry, Stanford University's Alice Lyman Miller, and others. In the separate but linked policy community, meanwhile, there is a separation generationally among older established engagers from the "up-and-comers" in their thirties and early forties. As one interviewee explained, "each generation is very much shaped by the dynamics that frame its decision . . . to become people who study China."<sup>36</sup> Members of the oldest generation, this interviewee—now in government serving in the Biden administration—continued,

primarily are people who learned Chinese in the U.S. military or in the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency]. [There are] many people in that category. Then there is a "smaller number" of senior China watchers whose parents were missionaries.<sup>37</sup>

The children of missionaries—J. Stapleton Roy among them—were a common reference point, "living history"<sup>38</sup>—individuals who had witnessed vast changes in China over the course of their careers, and participated in key moments in the opening to China, from the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars to the secret meetings with PRC founder Mao Zedong.

While some senior engagers pushed back against the trade war and the increasingly harsh rhetoric in op-eds, speeches, and open letters,<sup>39</sup> the sense

35 Interview E.

36 Interview F.

37 Interview G.

38 Interview H.

39 See M. 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/>



was that—disagreements over style and tone aside—junior China watchers agreed on the need for pushback against Beijing. As one younger China expert explained,

I don't think that Engagement has been as big a failure as a lot of people seem to be wanting to paint it . . . [T]here's definitely problems in the relationship. But . . . we tried to playing nice with China, we tried diplomacy. Well that didn't work so let's try something else.<sup>40</sup>

While not rejecting engagement, therefore, a generational division underpins a degree of comfort for many embracing the role for the United States of strategic competitor.

For the senior generations, however, “engagement” is less a political or intellectual argument than a life-long commitment. One senior think tanker explained how the initial expectations of older American China watchers were limited:

All of us . . . we were not expecting to ever get in to China and know people. In other words, we expected to go through a career and never really talk to a resident Chinese person in the leadership or in society. . . . We always thought we would be dealing with refugees. People who escaped that system and try to understand that system from outside.

But with the opening, he continued, previously unimaginable opportunities opened. “Our careers totally did not follow the pattern we thought,” he remarked. “And it's all been not all, but almost all positive change.”<sup>41</sup> While perhaps not sharing the same experiences as their forebears, many members of subsequent generations were inspired to study Chinese when the PRC was an exotic subject and destination, an emerging ally in the Cold War or not-yet-rival in the early post-Cold War period, and a reforming—if not democratizing—country in the 1980s. For them, too, engagement—not the strategy—has brought, on balance, enormous rewards.

By contrast, one interviewee observed, the younger generation, born in the Cold War's later phases or the post-Cold War era, have “only ever known a resurgent and powerful China.”<sup>42</sup> For them, the notion that the PRC is thus a

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opinions/making-china-a-us-enemy-is-counterproductive/2019/07/02/647d49d0-9bfa-11e9-b27f-ed2942f73d70\_story.html (accessed 28 November 2021).

40 Interview H.

41 Interview C.

42 Interview F.

“normal” country, even a normal great power, comes naturally. They frequently cite the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the fallout from the global financial crisis here as key experiences, signaling that the PRC’s long-heralded rise at last had occurred. For one long-time engager, the effect has been a form of “generational triumphalism” built on a “new opportunity in the U.S. China community—the structure of conflict . . . the opportunity structure for looking for opportunities and planning for conflict with China . . . exposing the evils of China, and so forth and so on.” In this interviewee’s view, the younger generation sees it as “time for you oldsters to move the hell out of the way.”<sup>43</sup> Researcher and consultant Jonathan D. T. Ward provides one explanation for this attitude:

My generation of scholars and China specialists learned Chinese and studied the country in the Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping years. While established experts held forth on the rise of China and the fate of the world in general, younger people were putting in our 10,000 hours, living in the country, speaking with China’s people, reading reams of primary documents in the Chinese language, and learning what is true.<sup>44</sup>

The generational divide therefore is rooted in the very different experiences of older and younger members of the American China watcher community.

Despite the foregoing, one should avoid simplistic conclusions about the effects of generational turnover. While younger generations lack the long-standing and romanticized connections to China, this does not translate straightforwardly into hawkish or doveish dispositions. Younger generations, many interviewees explained, are perhaps more likely than their predecessors to be critical of the United States, sharing a concern over issues like climate change and the potential negative effects of a strong anti-PRC stance for the Asian-American community. At the same time, greater salience of human rights issues and an unwillingness to sweep Beijing’s actions under the rug in the hopes of cooperation, push in the opposite direction. In sum, while generational turnover in the U.S. China field is surely part of any full account of engagement’s downfall—even if only because most China watchers believe it to be so—the story goes beyond generational shifts to broader social dynamics in the China watcher community.

Generational turnover in the American China watcher community has occurred alongside its expansion and diversification. From a small and relatively collegial group—as compared with the old Sovietologists—the

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43 Interview I.

44 Jonathan D. T. Ward, *China’s Vision of Victory* (Fayetteville, NC: Atlas Publishing, 2019), xxviii.

American China community has compartmentalized and fragmented.<sup>45</sup> As one interviewee reminisced, an annual dinner of China Hands—journalists, diplomats, and think tankers—that congregated in the 1980s would be impossible today because the American China community has ballooned to multiple thousands.<sup>46</sup> Interviewees dated the explosion in the number and variety of U.S. China watchers differently. Most, however, suggested that it has been over the last fifteen to twenty years that the size of the community has mushroomed. As late as the late 1980s and into the 1990s, Asia was still a backdrop to U.S. foreign policy. In the early 1980s, only the Brookings Institution and Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) had serious capacity in Washington, D.C. for studying the PRC. Subsequent years have seen a proliferation of China-related positions at the major think tanks and research organizations, as well as an increase in the number of think tanks themselves, including the Center for a New American Security (CNAS, founded in 2007), the Center for American Progress (CAP, started in 2003), the Global Taiwan Institute (GTI, initiated in 2016) and, beyond the Beltway, the School of Global Policy and Strategy at the University of California at San Diego (beginning in 1986).

The number of specialists on the PRC in the U.S. government has mirrored this expansion. At the State Department, “now there is virtually no desk . . . that doesn’t need a China expert,” a senior academic explained.<sup>47</sup> From cyber to climate to global fisheries, the PRC impacts U.S. interest formation requiring specialist understanding. “When I was in Beijing” during the late 1970s, one ex-diplomat recalled, “the entire staff of the U.S. Liaison Office numbered 25.” A few years later, the American mission had grown to approximately one hundred. When this interviewee returned in the late 1980s as head of section in the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, he supervised thirteen officers with a staff of some 250. Later, as a political appointee under President George W. Bush, “the embassy in Beijing had metastasized to a behemoth of well over 1,000 staff while my old political section had grown to 30 plus officers with comparable numbers in the economic section.”<sup>48</sup> The sheer size of the community, here solely within one section of the U.S. Embassy in the PRC, militated for this interviewee against close personal contacts compared to subsequent generations.

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45 On the latter, see David C. Engerman, *Know Your Enemy: The Rise and Fall of America's Soviet Experts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

46 Interview E.

47 Interview J.

48 Interview K.

The China field's expansion is far from a negative phenomenon, bringing with it more specialized knowledge and openings for a wider range of individuals than traditionally. As one mid-career think tanker explained,

we have a far wider variety now of younger people with really strong China backgrounds. . . . It used to be . . . [a] cohort of top China scholars and everybody would just sort of listen to them. But now it's a lot more dynamic.<sup>49</sup>

As one think tanker stated, China watchers are everywhere in Washington, D.C. providing knowledge on a plethora of issues. Take pandas, for example:

If you talk about zoologists and the community in the United States that wants to protect Pandas in, in China, right? Those are China [watchers]. If you want to know about Pandas, go over to the *Resources for the Future*.<sup>50</sup>

An important recent pattern, then, in the American China community is its spectacular growth, not just in terms of numbers, but the diversity of its expertise.

Nonetheless, many interviewees lamented the greater polarization or, one might say, fractionation, of the community, and the consequent decline of the “engager” as a particular social type, coming from a specific location within the American China community, with an associated set of pro-cooperation dispositions. In the recollection of one journalist, “there was tremendous togetherness from how small the community was in the '70s.” A bond formed in part because “you couldn't get to China,” the “whole legacy of McCarthyism,” and shared educational trajectories at the small number of top departments—like the universities of Michigan, Stanford, and Harvard—where many China experts trained. With the opening came, he enthused, “a tremendous sense of change, and of relief”—and opportunity.<sup>51</sup>

As one senior engager explained, with the opening to China,

our careers very much began. We saw ourselves . . . picking up where the people who taught us began. And that is engage, engaging China. [China's subsequent growth] created so many opportunities, in business, in NGOs [non-government organizations], in government for engagement

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49 Interview L.

50 Interview C.

51 Interview E.

in China, and the field grew substantially. So it wasn't just those that were carrying on the mission of the people who had engaged in China.

The field's expansion, however, renders its boundaries less well defined. "[I]f you're interested in economic questions then the boundary includes the federal reserve system, Wall Street, corporations, with vice presidents for international relations have big departments that deal with China . . . [and] the bigger a community gets and the more specialized, the less of a sense of community," the senior engager elaborated. "More pluralism, more impersonal relationships, propping up more factionalism" was, he added, the natural result.<sup>52</sup>

Alongside expansive growth, the American China community has diversified and specialized. Although "very cliché, China's so big," one junior think tanker noted. "There's so much going on that you really have to specialize . . . to have a competitive advantage."<sup>53</sup> The trend is not limited to the Beltway, but extends across academia. Nor is it new. Already in 2011, political scientist Kevin O'Brien chronicled the tradeoffs between the field's deepening through specialization and a "hollowing out" of the core.<sup>54</sup> The process underpins what many consider a growing gap between the academy and the policy community, bringing with it the weakening of the scholarly community and the disappearance of a particular type of China scholar-cum-policy-maker—the *engager*.

O'Brien's target—political science—offers a good example. There, disciplinary incentive structures—particularly the rise of quantitative methods and hypothesis-testing methodology, including most recently, experiments—have pushed against the formation of generalist China expertise. "Political science [has] a real hierarchy of methods . . . [and] it makes sense that somebody who wants to be successful . . . would seek to do the things that are most applauded and rewarded," one interviewee observed.<sup>55</sup> More clearly scientific approaches occupy top status, tied also to the academic job market. "If the job market is producing, if the high tech people are to invest," another interviewee noted, "they tend to distort it [as students] flock in that direction."<sup>56</sup> "If you have to choose between Chinese [language] and computer modeling," one retired political scientist argued, "you should do computer modeling." Yet, the trend is especially problematic in research areas like international relations (IR). "I tell students who are interested in . . . Chinese foreign policy . . . they should

52 Interview C.

53 Interview H.

54 Kevin J. O'Brien, "Studying Chinese Politics in an Age of Specialization," *Journal of Contemporary China* 20, no. 71 (September 2011): 535–41.

55 Interview F.

56 Interview M.

definitely not go into political science," he explained. "They should go do diplomatic history . . . [because] when you have a magic method which solves all problems for all places and people, why would you do something as parochial as caring about China?"<sup>57</sup>

Other disciplines repeat this trend, with different wrinkles, but the same implications of the formation of broadly trained China experts. Economics provides a stark case, with few positions for China economists. For one China scholar, "economics doesn't think they need a China economist . . . [but] what they need are particular models of analyzing data."<sup>58</sup> "The profession in general has left the real world behind," he continued,<sup>59</sup> leaving little room to focus on any particular country or region, however important for the global economy, like the PRC.<sup>60</sup> The case of sociology, for example, is indicative in part because a close connection between the academic and policy worlds was, for a while, possible, personified in individuals like the late Ezra F. Vogel at Harvard University. The question is whether the reproduction of individuals respected within the discipline, active in the broader China studies community, and public facing is still possible. As one pre-tenure Ivy League sociologist explained, "it's very difficult to be a China scholar and a sociologist because nowadays departments want to have sociologists instead of China people." Newly hired faculty are pushed away from area studies outlets towards the top disciplinary journals—"China Quarterly doesn't count." A senior faculty member in her department told the author that "I'm glad that you are not doing things as the old generation of China folk did, because that doesn't really work in sociology nowadays." Absent a comparative sub-field—like political science—"there's no intrinsic reason to have a China person."<sup>61</sup>

History, finally, is perhaps the exception that proves the rule—where it remains possible, at least in theory, to specialize on China and still remain connected to the broader concerns of the Asian studies communities. Concerns about over-specialization persist, to be sure, notably concerning over-specialization on the topic of PRC history.<sup>62</sup> Worries over history concern more what would happen if the strong job market for China scholars subsides—"if history goes out, the game is over," one interviewee warned.<sup>63</sup> But the case of history also helps repudiate the simplistic conclusion that the China field is weakening

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57 Interview N.

58 Interview J.

59 Interview O.

60 Interview P.

61 Interview Q.

62 Interview R.

63 Interview M.

as a result of disciplinary specialization and professionalization. As the disciplines close off avenues for China-specific scholarship, O'Brien explains, the "periphery" strengthens because new opportunities—inside the academy and out—present themselves, as desire for China knowledge from business, the media, and think tanks increases.<sup>64</sup> As one political scientist noted,

political science departments stopped wanting to hire area studies people at all and so a lot of people engaged in these political science stuff and IR with China found it hard to get jobs. And being frustrated, they ultimately would go with the think tanks or government work.<sup>65</sup>

Why struggle over a tenure track job—potentially far away from where one might prefer to live—when well-paying research jobs are available in Washington, D.C. and elsewhere?

The effects of these trends go beyond the concerns of this article. For many interviewees, however, the core issue is the tradeoff between detail and the ability to see the "big picture." Many argued that analysis of the PRC is improving—"granular is better."<sup>66</sup> But for a former diplomat, too much knowledge of the trees and not enough of the forest take "us away from the ability to synthesize from disparate elements of the relationship and away from interdisciplinary examination of China."<sup>67</sup> One senior political scientist recounts urging one Ph.D. of theirs to "expand a little." While good work,

it is very narrow and because their demands of being convinced of something are really high. [They've] written a very, very tight dissertation. It's a typical kind of research now that has five different kinds of evidence that all point at one thing. . . . I said you don't just need to repeat what you've said, we believe you now. . . . [N]ow use up a little bit what you've earned to explain to us what's—expand beyond it . . . speculate.<sup>68</sup>

Numerous interviewees thus suggested that the U.S. academy is not training "broad gauge" China experts, as graduate school instruction hammers home early the need for specialization and the search for deep but narrow empirics.

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64 O'Brien, "Studying Chinese Politics in an Age of Specialization."

65 Interview S.

66 Interview T.

67 Interview U.

68 Interview M.

A salient consequence is a lack of debate in the now fragmented China field, and a feeling of mutual incomprehensibility across disciplines. “I’m reading *China Quarterly* less now than I used to,” one senior academic confessed. “There’s less history in it, and it’s more kind of narrow and dry.” This retired political scientist further explained how “in recent years . . . teaching and researching about China [has become] a little less exciting because there’s much less debate.”<sup>69</sup> Discussions among experts like whether the PRC was blazing a path to a better future slowly have disappeared.<sup>70</sup> Disciplinary professionalization has rendered cross-disciplinary debate difficult if not impossible. As one historian explained, the feeling is one of speaking different languages. “I didn’t feel that I was speaking a different language from [political scientists] Dick Solomon or Mike Oksenberg or Ken Lieberthal,” he explained. “We came out of enough of the same world . . .”<sup>71</sup>

The overall effect of these trends is impossible for an observer to gauge. In part, the assessment of decreased influence may be more perception than reality, with reminiscences of the influence of prominent China field figures such as Lieberthal and Shirk in government poorly reflecting the persistent gap between the Ivory Tower and academia. For one prominent China historian, however, the impact seems clear—“the scholarly China-watching community is frankly less important” than it used to be.<sup>72</sup> Attempts to bridge the chasm between the scholarly field and the world of policy—such as the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations’ Public Intellectuals Program (PIP) and American University’s *Bridging the Gap Project*—reflect the growing divide they seek to overcome.<sup>73</sup>

Whatever the truth of perceptions of a growing separation between the China field and the policy community in Washington, D.C., several interviewees pointed to a related decline of the China generalist, and consequent rise in the public debate on the PRC of the foreign policy/national security generalist. As one Beltway think tanker noted, in the policy analysis community, “if you’re too general, you’re vulnerable,” leading to the specialization pressures described above, making “the *China* generalist a dying species [emphasis added].” At the same time, however, greater media appetite for commentary on all things

69 Interview T.

70 Interview V.

71 Interview W.

72 Interview J.

73 Public Intellectuals Program, National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, <https://www.ncuscr.org/program/public-intellectuals-program> (accessed 29 November 2021); *Bridging the Gap*, International Policy Summer Institute, <https://bridgingthegapproject.org/> (accessed 29 November 2021).



China offers rewards to those willing to talk on a range of topic, whether in one's wheelhouse or not, the same interviewee noted, with audiences

assuming you should know everything about everybody in the Chinese government. And poverty eradication and economic growth . . . , futurology, technical advance[s] and U.S.-China relations and China-everything else relations.

Thus, at the same time as the China generalist is declining, he lamented, the putative China expert—a label mostly self-applied inside the Beltway—“basically has to be able to comment on everything.”<sup>74</sup>

Enter the U.S. foreign policy/national security generalist. Early in the shift from engagement to strategic competition in 2018, one senior political scientist sensed a rising prominence in the public debate of the non-China-expert. “China . . . will be taken over by the generalists, rather than by the area studies people,” he remarked, adding that “I think . . . the people who know about the world market and economics or people who know about military strategy or stuff like this rather than China people.” With increased salience of the PRC across the U.S. government, “it’s going to go less and less to so-called China specialists . . . [because] to know about China you don’t have to know about China.”<sup>75</sup>

The centrality of military-security strategists, such as Elbridge A. Colby and Hal Brands, and a militarized frame on the PRC question, is a case in point.<sup>76</sup> In his recent *Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*, Colby, a former deputy assistant secretary of defense for Strategy and Force Development, lays out a comprehensive military approach to counter the PRC’s growing international influence. Historian Brands—who shares with Colby government experience in strategy and planning as special assistant to the secretary of defense for Strategic Planning (2015 to 2016)—explores the lessons of the Cold War for the U.S. response to the PRC challenge. To label Colby and Brands as “not knowing about China” is unfair—both are well read and deeply engaged on the topic of how China. The point, rather, is that they

74 Interview X.

75 Interview N.

76 See Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021); Hal Brands, *The Twilight Struggle: What the Cold War Teaches Us About Great-Power Rivalry Today* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, forthcoming 2022).

bring a specific type of knowledge and experience to the conversation—military-security expertise—framing the issue of the PRC in a specific, militarized, fashion.

Other examples of the trend towards increased prominence of generalists include Harvard University political scientist Graham Allison, whose *Destined for War* brought the notion of the “Thucydides Trap”—familiar in IR scholarship—to the PRC debate. The Thucydides Trap refers to the Greek historian’s location of the origins of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE) in the fear the rise of another state (Athens, here the PRC) aroused in an established one (Sparta, read the United States). Allison’s generalist status was unquestioned, and his position in favor of engagement with Beijing acknowledged, but more than one interviewee suggested that one was not to take *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* as a serious piece of scholarship on the question of contemporary U.S.-PRC relations.<sup>77</sup> Niall Ferguson of Harvard University and later Stanford University was another common reference, whose concept of “Chimerica” conferred prominence in the debate far outstripping his regional knowledge.

Beyond the rise of the military-security strategist and IR generalist, an increased prominence of China in the writings of national security commentators in the mainstream media furthers the trend toward generalists predominating in the policy debate on the PRC. The *Washington Post*’s Josh Rogin has been a strident critic of the CCP, translating the Trump administration’s strategy to the broader public.<sup>78</sup> Midway through the Trump administration, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks identified a tougher view of the PRC as a bipartisan issue in Washington, D.C.<sup>79</sup> More recently, Nicholas D. Kristof and Thomas L. Friedman have each questioned the Biden administration’s understanding of the PRC threat.<sup>80</sup> But the trend is not unidirectional. Not all

77 Interview Y.

78 See, for example, Josh Rogin, “If China wants a better relationship with the U.S., it must behave better,” *Washington Post*, 18 June 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/if-china-wants-a-better-relationship-with-the-us-it-must-behave-better/2020/06/18/fd9e50b0-b18d-11ea-8758-bfd1d045525a\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/if-china-wants-a-better-relationship-with-the-us-it-must-behave-better/2020/06/18/fd9e50b0-b18d-11ea-8758-bfd1d045525a_story.html) (accessed 29 November 2021).

79 David Brooks, “How China Brings Us Together: An existential threat for the 21st century,” *New York Times*, 14 January 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/14/opinion/china-economy.html> (accessed 29 November 2021).

80 Nicholas Kristof, “Biden’s Nightmare May Be China,” *New York Times*, 30 January 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/30/opinion/sunday/foreign-policy-china.html> (accessed 29 November 2021); Thomas L. Friedman, “Is There a War Coming Between China and the U.S.?” *New York Times*, 27 April 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/27/opinion/china-us-2034.html> (accessed 29 November 2021).

national security generalists are PRC-skeptics. Former political scientist and Cable News Network (CNN) talking head Fareed Zakaria, for one, has spoken out strongly against demonizing the PRC and the risks of economic decoupling.<sup>81</sup> In so doing, Zakaria has echoed the views of prominent engagers, like the Quincy Institute's Michael D. Swaine. IR scholar Stephen M. Walt, meanwhile, has questioned the commonplace viewpoint that few countries prefer the Chinese to the U.S. vision of international order.<sup>82</sup> Each redirects the focus of attention regarding the PRC to U.S. domestic politics. As the Council on Foreign Relations' Richard N. Haass puts it, good foreign policy "begins at home."<sup>83</sup>

What is significant, therefore, is not the rise of the generalist *per se*, but rather the marginalization of a particular type of pro-engagement U.S. China policy expert who—in previous years—might have made arguments similar to those of Swaine, Walt, Ryan Hass, and others, *without* association of being pro-Beijing. The issue is less the substance of the debate—the nature and extent of China's global ambitions—than its structure and participants. Changes in the media landscape form a vital final component of that structure.

Alongside the China community's expansion, professionalization and separation from the national security arena, and the emergence of the generalist, the decline of engagement also has taken place against the backdrop of vast changes in the media landscape associated with the rise of the Internet—the "most significant transformation of the field in the last 15 years."<sup>84</sup> No longer do established academic formats and mainstream media like the *New York Times* provide the only or indeed main outlet for PRC-related content; social media platforms like Twitter, podcasts, online magazines, and an array of newsletters and listservs offer alternative venues for participating in the marketplace of ideas.<sup>85</sup> Once again, the effects of these changes are far from unidirectional

81 See, for example, Fareed Zakaria, "The New China Scare: Why America Shouldn't Panic About Its Latest Challenger," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-12-06/new-china-scare> (accessed 29 November 2021).

82 Stephen M. Walt, "The World Might Want China's Rules," *Foreign Policy*, 4 May 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/04/the-world-might-want-chinas-rules/> (accessed 29 November 2021).

83 Richard N. Haass, *Foreign Policy Begins at Home: The Case for Putting America's House in Order* (New York: Basic Books, 2013).

84 Interview Z.

85 See, for example, Kaiser Kuo, "How do Chinese People view the United States?," 26 November 2021, <https://supchina.com/> (accessed 29 November 2021); Sinocism Podcast, <https://sinocism.com/> (accessed 29 November 2021); China: The big picture, Axios, <https://www.axios.com/world/china/> (accessed 29 November 2021); "When will China get off coal," ChinaFile, 8 November 2021, <https://www.chinafile.com/> (accessed 21 November 2021); The

nor necessarily a matter of “good” or “bad.” What one can say, however, is that changes in the media sphere reflect and are reflected in a move away from older settled relations between the American China watching community and the U.S. government—a set of relations embodied in the *engager*. As one prominent China journalist explained, foreign correspondents no longer drive American understandings of China:

There was a period of time—and I think it kind of lasted up until the early 2000s—when a group of journalists in China could really set the agenda for kind of how the country looks at China. John Burns, Fox Butterfield in the early days at the *New York Times* . . . they were pretty serious people who were really important setting the agenda. . . . You don't have that anymore . . . [or] the view that Obama was weak on China. Where did that come from? It came from journalism. Or [the narrative that] George W. Bush was disengaged from China. He actually wasn't, but it came from journalists.<sup>86</sup>

With shrinking numbers of foreign correspondents, the ability of journalists to dictate the predominant message on China has weakened.

One should not read the new role of traditional journalist in a crowded media landscape as a complete diminution of journalist influence on U.S. China policy. Alongside the rise of generalist national security experts, a number of generalist foreign affairs journalists have been influential in chronicling the PRC challenge—including Evan Osnos of the *New Yorker* and Josh Rogin of the *Washington Post*. Nonetheless, the expansion of outlets has underwritten a kind of democratization of China knowledge—providing, one interviewee commented, “massive amounts of material about China by people with the kind of qualifications that did not used to qualify, did not used to justify inclusion into the ranks of the watchers of China.” American China watchers no longer need a degree from one of a handful of top China or Asian Studies programs to participate, but can transfer many different forms of knowledge into recognized insights. As a result, the same interviewee remarked, the field “is made up of young people who have much more time in China than their elders did by virtue of the way things were in the 1960s and '70s,” meaning the

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China Beat: Blogging How the East Is Read, <http://thechinabeat.blogspot.com/> (accessed 21 November 2021); Cleo Paskal, “Foreign Intervention Complicates Solomon Islands Unrest,” 29 November 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/> (accessed 29 November 2021).

86 Interview AA.

younger cohorts have “better language, more time in country (sometimes 6, 7, 8 years),” even though their “formal training” might “not [be] as good.”<sup>87</sup>

The new mediascape offers fertile terrain for what one might call a more agentic narrative for U.S.-PRC relations than what engagement offered. Rather than a narrative of slow, incremental change, in the hope of nudging the PRC toward a more democratic future—a tale ill-fitting with the current regime in Beijing—the expansive community sits better with a narrative of rethinking what has gone before and adapting U.S. policy to new realities. Whereas the engagement frame struggled to incorporate increasing evidence of authoritarianism within the PRC, the plethora of voices urging greater concern about China from the ever-expanding media landscape fuels strategic competition—what the Trump administration referred to as a “whole of society” approach to the PRC.<sup>88</sup>

In turn, therefore, the new mediascape also has an elective affinity with a certain type of China specialist—the *strategic competitor*—one generationally more similar in terms of their views of China, U.S.-PRC relations, and how one goes about being a China expert, than the *engager*. In concrete terms, figures such as Ely S. Ratner—Biden’s appointment for assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs—one might say to have more in common on the PRC with Matthew F. Pottinger—Trump’s NSC Asia director and later deputy national security advisor, than with his Democratic predecessor Shirk, despite partisan affiliation. Shirk, in turn, might share more with someone like Richard L. Armitage, deputy secretary of state under George W. Bush.

A key feature of the new media landscape is a growing prominence of social media, Twitter being the most important forum. “To tweet or not to tweet,” interviewees ask themselves. Once again, no hard and fast rules emerge. A figure like the German Marshall Fund’s Bonnie S. Glaser—a long-time and successful China watcher—betrays the assumption that Twitter is a young person’s game—Glaser has close to 20,000 followers and, one interviewee notes, is “huge in China.”<sup>89</sup> Yet, Glaser represents a certain type of policy-oriented expert. An early-career PRC watcher at an Ivy League business school exemplifies a different sentiment: “There’s a reason I’m not on Twitter . . . [which is

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87 Interview Z.

88 National Counterintelligence and Security Center, “National Counterintelligence Security Strategy of the United States of America 2020–2022,” [https://www.dni.gov/files/NCSC/documents/features/20200205-National\\_CI\\_Strategy\\_2020\\_2022.pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/NCSC/documents/features/20200205-National_CI_Strategy_2020_2022.pdf) (accessed 29 November 2021).

89 Interview AB.

that] the temptation is to comment on every ongoing thing.<sup>90</sup> As one popular podcaster hypothesized,

the '80s and the '90s [were] a time when people were more narrowly drilling down into their own research areas, and . . . maybe they didn't have personalities like they do now. Now . . . a lot of journalists themselves have a [public] personality, for better or for worse, social media—especially Twitter—has given a lot of people sort of this platform . . . to engage in discussions and debates that aren't within their strictly-defined wheelhouse.<sup>91</sup>

For another senior think tanker and self-identified engager, however, “frankly, I think you can read your e-mail and do Twitter or you can do serious work, but it's hard to do both.”<sup>92</sup>

Another crucial sector of the changing media landscape that the rise of Internet has facilitated is the many listservs that provide a permanent forums for discussion and debate about China and U.S.-PRC relations. The most popular China-related listserv today has well over 1,000 members, and while only a few post with any regularity, the nature of the discussions are an important determiner of trends in the community. As one of the moderators explained, the leading China listserv is an “indicator” of American views and U.S. policy. Not a cause, to be sure, but “it's following . . . I don't think it can exist entirely separately, in part because a lot of the people who influence policy, whoever is in power are participants, and some of them very active ones.”<sup>93</sup>

The leading China listserv is, however, “an artificial environment” that extreme voices of whatever variety are liable to take over. Indeed, other, smaller listservs have cropped up, most with a notably critical view of the PRC. Recently, a more negative view has taken hold on online forums. “People don't write . . . and say ‘Oh, look what China did that's good,’” one long-time member of the biggest China listserv noted.<sup>94</sup> “The tone of [the main listserv] has really shifted,” another international law scholar observed how

back in those days . . . it was dominated by—Let's, just to be, to oversimplify greatly, right? We'll say panda huggers. [Recently,] the tone . . . has

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90 Interview AC.

91 Interview AD.

92 Interview C.

93 Interview AE.

94 Interview AF.

changed a lot. Now the panda huggers—It used to be that the dragon slayers complained it was dominated by panda huggers. They still do, but completely incorrectly. Now, they're just—It's just habit. Now the panda huggers complain its dominated by the dragon slayers. And I think the panda huggers are correct. There's a lot more dragon slaying than panda hugging going on . . . now.<sup>95</sup>

While conceptually enjoyable, one can read too much into the use of shorthands such as “panda hugger” and “dragon slayer,” which suggest the existence of coherent and static groups, ill-fitting with the reality of individuals holding shifting opinions.

That said, the issue here is less seeking causes for changed U.S. policies than interpreting shifting collective sentiments, tied to certain dispositions among American China watchers. While some enthusiastically engage in contentious discussion, others do not. One senior China historian and longtime list member offers this assessment of the situation:

There is this group of people that want to be very aggressively critical of China and will sort of jump on anyone that says anything that's a little different. . . . I never participated much anyway unless it was exactly a historical issue that I thought I could add to the discussion but, even now, I hesitate even further. I just [don't want to get] into some sniping match with some[one] . . . [which is] just a waste of time.

For this historian, the result is that “it's become much less informative, even though many still would prefer . . . I don't want to say more sympathetic, but sort of wanted to have open discussions.”<sup>96</sup>

This article has sought to widen the aperture on engagement's demise to the American China watching community. Why? Was the shift not a straightforward matter of the policy preferences of the Trump administration, convinced—not without good reason—that Beijing has turned forever away from the rules-based international order? Without seeking to downplay former President Trump and his China-skeptic national security team, nor a hardening of Chinese foreign and domestic policies, the shift away from engagement also has been a distancing from a particular view of the PRC embodied in the dispositions of a certain type of China watcher. As such, the institutional bases of engagement in the American China community, and changes therein over

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95 Interview AG.

96 Interview R.

time, are not incidental background factors, but critical to an understanding of the formation of American views of the PRC.

The case of the failed U.S. Senate confirmation of State Department official Susan A. Thornton to become assistant secretary of state in 2018 is indicative of the dynamics of a politicized China policy, and the challenges those seeking to profess a pro-engagement position face. Thornton, acting assistant secretary of state for East Asia and Pacific Affairs (2017–2018), retired in August 2018 after it became clear the Republican-dominated Senate Foreign Relations Committee likely would block her confirmation to assume the position permanently. For her supporters, Thornton was one of the few true China experts left in the highest positions of the Trump administration. As a career State Department official and Mandarin speaker, Thornton had the sort of expert credentials interviewees considered imperative for anyone holding high office in relation to the PRC.<sup>97</sup> For critics, Thornton's purported expertise was less important than her association with engagement. Florida Senator Marco A. Rubio in particular opposed Thornton, who has staked a reputation as a strong critic of the PRC. For Rubio, Thornton was an engager, one of her supporters being Daniel R. Russel, senior director for Asian Affairs on President Obama's NSC—himself an engager.<sup>98</sup>

The Thornton case demonstrates the limitations of explanations of engagement's demise based either on its policy failings, the shifting balance of global power, or the priorities of the Trump administration when it comes to the PRC. Ultimately, the end of engagement is an intimate story of struggle over U.S. China policy among a discrete and relatively small number of individuals in the government and the U.S. China policy community, as well as—indirectly—the broader China watching field in the United States. In the end, approaches like engagement change because people change, and institutions too—either new policy-makers arrive, change their mind, or are able to make statements that they previously could not. What made Thornton unpalatable, again, was not her credentials, but her association with the engagers. “The difference,” one former State Department official before the end of the Trump administration put it, “is that, you know, the Matt Pottingers of the world and the John Boltons and the Peter Navarros and the [Robert] Lighthizers of the world . . . [now] they're calling the shots.”<sup>99</sup> While the Trump administration too has left the

97 Interview C.

98 See Carol Morello, “Tillerson scores a personnel win, as top East Asia adviser is nominated,” *Washington Post*, 24 December 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/tillerson-scores-a-personnel-win-as-top-east-asia-adviser-is-nominated/2017/12/24/fdbd20a-e743-11e7-a65d-1ac0fd7f097e\\_story.html?undefined=&wpisrc=nl\\_headlines&wpmm=1](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/tillerson-scores-a-personnel-win-as-top-east-asia-adviser-is-nominated/2017/12/24/fdbd20a-e743-11e7-a65d-1ac0fd7f097e_story.html?undefined=&wpisrc=nl_headlines&wpmm=1) (accessed 30 November 2021).

99 Interview AF.



stage, those in charge of U.S. China policy share a skeptical view of relationship between the current leaders in Beijing with their predecessors. They also represent a different set of linkages with an American China watching community—more politicized, specialized, often in the form of military-security expertise, and separated from the academy than ever before.

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