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A Course Correction in U.S.-China Relations: Understanding American Think Tanks' Policy Narratives

Su Jiangli¹

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Shanxi University, China

Abstract

American think tanks play important roles in its foreign policy making and their policy narratives about U.S.-China relations have great chances to influence or being factored into Biden administration's China policies. This article explores American think tanks' policy narratives advocating managing strategic competition and coordinating on global governance imperatives. It argues that when political discourse changes these narratives will help to make a real course correction in U.S.-China relations come true.

Keywords: Course Correction, Policy Narratives, American Think Tanks, U.S.-China Relations

Think tanks in the United States play unique roles in the country's foreign policy making. They are the bridge between increasingly complicated policy problems and policy solutions. They are also incubators of new ideas, forums for policy discussions and "talent tanks" for mid-to-high level government officials. They translate policy researches into insights and recommendations packaged to inform and meet decision-makers' needs. As the most consequential relations in the 21st century, China-U.S. relations are the major areas for American think tanks to exercise influence. This article will explore whether American think tanks' policy narratives advocating cooperation and managed competition will lead to a course correction in U.S.-China relations? This article will mainly focus on policy narratives, which emphasize that the U.S. and China need to work together to address pressing global challenges, provide public goods, build guardrails, welcome China's bigger role on the world stage, and seek to coexist with China. Specifically, the frameworks of competitive interdependence, managed strategic competition, competitive coexistence or cooperative rivalry and conditional competitive coexistence are given in-depth interpretation.

1. Why a Course Correction?

Since the Trump administration, America's policies towards China have become more and more aggressive. Biden Administration not only inherited most of its predecessor's confrontational policies but also has instituted new economic, security, and diplomatic policies to strengthen U.S. involvement in the Indo-Pacific. The administration has prioritized its strategies to outcompete China through high-profile events such as the publication of its Indo-Pacific Strategy, Secretary of State Antony Blinken's China policy speech, unveiling its Indo-Pacific Economic Framework with great fanfare, strengthening the role of Quad and signing into the law the CHIPS and Science Act of 2022. The administration's National Security Strategy released on Oct. 12, 2022, specifically singled China out

as “the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective.” (2022, p23) These policy moves obviously set a hostile tone for the bilateral relationship and rendered coordination on pressing global governance issues difficult to push forward.

However, in this context, quite a lot American think tanks’ policy narratives advance different policy options and believe a sustainable U.S. policy towards China should strike a balance between competition, rivalry and cooperation. John Ikenberry, co-director of Center for International Studies in Princeton University put forward that the United States and China “cannot be secure and stable alone; they can only be secure and stable together.” (2014, p59) Brookings Institution’s policy report, “Avoiding Wars: Containment, Competition, and Cooperation in US-China Relations”, also pointed out “there is often a false dichotomy between competition versus cooperation in U.S.-China relations. In fact, there are—and should be—elements of both competition and cooperation in both the economic and security spheres.” (Dollar et al, 2017, p2) In her article published in *Foreign Affairs*, Jessica Chen Weiss wrote that “U.S. politicians and policymakers are becoming so focused on countering China that they risk losing sight of the affirmative interests and values that should underpin U.S. strategy.” In the meanwhile, she also stressed the current course “threatens to undermine the sustainability of American leadership in the world and the vitality of American society and democracy at home.” (2022, p40)

In view of this, this article interprets American think tanks’ perceptions of the inevitability for a course correction in U.S.-China relations from the following aspects:

1.1. Respecting Half-Century’s Engagement History and Abandoning This Tradition Is Wrong

China experts and international relations scholars from think tanks, such as Brookings Institution, Harvard Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Peterson Institute for International Economy(PIIE), and Asia Society Policy Institute(ASPI) all think highly of valuing 50 years’ engagement tradition because it is irresponsible to appeal to domestic political winds by blaming history, which will destroy mutual trust and the credibility of the United States and reflects the hegemonic mentality of the U. S.. Graham Allison from Harvard Belfer Center, Ryan Hass and Jeffrey Bader from Brookings Institution firmly believe 50 years’ engagement reached the U.S. policy goals, was undertaken in the interest of the United States not as a favor to China and it is worthwhile to remember past win-win cooperations now. (Allison, 2021a; see also Putz,2021 Bader, 2018, p4) In “An Unsentimental China Policy”, published in *Foreign Affairs*, Graham Allison pointed out that instead of giving up on engagement policy “the administration should heed the entire lesson of five decades of U.S. foreign policy toward China: it works best when focusing realistically on geopolitical objectives essential to protect American interests, and worst when attempting to engage in political engineering to promote American values.” (2021) Similarly, ambassador J. Stapleton Joy from Wilson Center emphasized that “attacks on the supposedly failed China policy of the past forty years are based on the false premise” that the policy was meant to remake China in the United States’ image. (2018, p185)

1.2. Competition Is Inevitable, but Conflict Is Not

Even if competition is inevitable, conflict should definitely be avoided. The idea is resoundingly emphasized by quite a lot American think tanks. In the book event sponsored by Freeman Chair in China Studies, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Ryan Hass and Judy Blanchette had an in-depth discussion about his book, *Stronger: Adapting America’s China Strategy in an Age of Competitive Interdependence*, during which Hass said avoiding conflict with China is a sure thing to do for Biden Administration. He also repeated that both countries should keep competition within a tolerable range so that it would not tilt towards hostility when having an interview with Carter Center. (2021; see also Putz, 2021) More earnestly, Kevin Rudd, the president of ASPI warns about the dangerous consequences of forgetting the history of sleepwalking into wars so many times and points out lessons should be learned from the Cold War era when the U.S. and the former Soviet Union had established risk management mechanisms after the Cuban missile Crisis. In the *Foreign Affairs* article, “Rival Within Reasons?”, he wrote that “after the near-death experience of the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, the United States and the Soviet Union eventually agreed on a range of stabilizing arrangements.” (Rudd 2022 a) In the

keynote speech delivered at the 10th World Peace Forum at Tsinghua University, Rudd said, “to avoid sleepwalking into war, as our world has done too many times in the past, there is a deep interest on the part of all countries that both the U.S. and China construct a joint strategic framework to help maintain the peace—or at least to reduce the risk of war by accident.”(Rudd 2022 b) In light of this, Joseph Nye from Belfer Center emphasizes the importance of correct policy choice, and he thinks “if the United States plays it right, the rivalry with China could be healthy.” (2021)

1.3. Decoupling and Containment Will Not Work; New Cold War Mentality Is Outdated

Time and momentum for large-scale decoupling as well as containing China have become stories from a bygone age. Interdependence between U.S. and China will be inescapable in terms of trade, technology, academic and cultural exchanges. According to Ryan Hass’s analysis in his book *Stronger*, two countries with a bilateral trade balance of over 700 billion dollars decouple economic relationship “would reduce efficiencies, lower growth, and create inflationary pressure as goods and services become more expensive.” More importantly, it would “place global growth and stability at risk.” (2021a, p76) In his article “Cracking China”, Joseph Nye put forward that “it is mistaken to think the US can completely decouple its economy from China without enormous economic costs.” He also stressed that today’s China is not the Cold War era Soviet Union because China has learned to take advantage of market economy creatively and established closer economic ties with more countries in the world than the United States, which the former Soviet Union had never accomplished (2022). In this vein, new Cold War is a bad metaphor or analogy to understand U.S.-China relations, so containment is not a wise policy. Hass points out that “China is deeply embedded in the global economy. As such, containment is not an available option for dealing with China, given that few, if any, U.S. allies or partners would be receptive to aligning with the United States against China.” (Hass and Weiss, 2021) Similarly, PIIIE founder C. Fred Bergsten thinks, “the United States must in any event reject any efforts to contain China” because “containment cannot succeed as President Trump demonstrated.” (2022, p3) Actually, decoupling will disrupt supply chain and is not in line with the country’s comparative advantage. Biden administration’s decoupling is mostly unfolded in the high-tech field, especially the chip industry, but PIIIE experts Hufbauer and Hogan think the strategy of self-sufficiency is self-defeating. While China specializes in the production of simpler chips, the U.S. is advantageously positioned to produce more advanced chips. (2022)

1.4. Working Together to Tackle Global Governance Imperatives

Global governance needs diverse actors to coordinate collective actions on the planet level, especially countries like U.S. and China who share common interests to combat climate change, ensure public health security, maintain the sustainable development of world economy, control nuclear proliferation and innovate means to limit the side-effects of AI technology. China’s improvement of capabilities will benefit the United States and the international community. For example, Joseph Nye believes that “the US cannot solve these problems by acting alone, because greenhouse gases and viruses do not respect borders or respond to military force.” China’s beneficial initiatives will benefit the United States. “America thus has to cooperate with China while also competing with it.” (2021) In their report “Limit, Leverage, and Compete: A New Strategy on China”, Melanie Hart and Kelly Magsamen in Center for American Progress proposed that “where China’s strategic intent aligns with U.S. and broader global interests, the United States should seek to leverage rather than limit Chinese initiatives.” (2019, p21) They also suggested the U.S. partner with China on global sustainability efforts. (2019, p25) In the meanwhile, China’s past efforts to work with the U.S. to tackle pressing global challenges are acknowledged by American think tank experts. For instance, Yanzhong Huang from the Council on Foreign Relations puts forward that “the 21st century has witnessed China’s significantly expanded engagement in addressing global challenges including climate change, global health, counter-terrorism, anti-piracy operation, and nuclear nonproliferation.” (2017) Evan A. Feigenbaum, Vice President for Studies, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, stresses the positive collaborations in the past when U.S. and China could transcend the limitations of political, ideological and security tensions. He points out that “over the last twenty years, these two countries did coordinate, act in complementary ways, and help lead global responses to global threats—coordination happened despite their strategic tension.” (2020)

2. How Will a Course Correction Happen?

In addition to American think tanks' necessity narratives for a course correction in U.S.-China relations, they have also prescribed frameworks to make it happen. This article will focus on competitive interdependence proposed by Ryan Hass, managed strategic competition advanced by Kevin Rudd, competitive coexistence or cooperative rivalry put forward by Joseph Nye and Graham Allison, and conditional competitive cooperation envisioned by C. Fred Bergsten. The four frameworks seek to offer a new approach to deal with the bilateral relations and address the 21st century great power reality. They share several common features: the acceptance of China's greater role on the world stage; competitive and cooperative aspects of the relationship are equally important; managing strategic competition is mutually beneficial.

2.1. Welcoming China's Greater Role on the World Stage

Forging a new approach to deal with U.S.-China relations means the acceptance of China's rise. According to a major study of Belfer Center titled "The Great Rivalry: China vs. the U.S. in the 21st Century" directed by Graham Allison, the U.S. need to recognize that China is now a "full-spectrum peer competitor." (Allison 2021; see also Hass 2021a, p69) And Bergsten believes China will achieve economic parity with the U.S. sooner or later and the two countries will share global economic leadership eventually. "Unless it experiences unforeseen setbacks, China will achieve and maintain economic power roughly equivalent to the United States for the foreseeable future." (2022, p2)

In Ryan Hass's competitive interdependence, America's acceptance of China's greater role on the world stage encompasses that the U.S. must "recognize that it, too, is a revisionist power", acknowledge the legitimacy of China's requirements for modifying international institutions to reflect its increasing capabilities, and overcome American's reflective opposition to Chinese behaviors as well as the inertia of gaining political points on China by chasing domestic political winds. (Hass 2021a, p65-66; see also Hass, Kim and Bader 2022, p7) Hass elaborates on several occasions that the United States has been bending the existing international laws and rules in its own interests in terms of geopolitics, finance and trade. He also reiterates that the United States does not have a say in China's influence expanding behaviors like establishing development bank, building railways and pipelines. (Putz 2021; see also Hass 2021 b)

Bergsten calls for a conditional competitive cooperation, comprising collaborative US-China leadership on key global economic issues, conditional on each country's fulfilling its obligations in the international economic system. He proposes ten recommendations to achieve this, from granting China full voting parity with U.S. in the IMF to the U.S. engaging in Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank while China joining U.S.-led institutions to the recommendations to reinvigorate the global trade system. The two countries should also consult closely on systemic matters concerning global governance and providing public goods, be flexible about the balance of leadership on specific issues. For example, China has greater say on development finance, but the United States plays a more important role in international financial and monetary issues, while global and regional arenas are treated differently. Bergsten envisions an informal but operational G-2 leading the global economic order to lay the foundation for a prosperous and stable world economy. To enable this cooperation, he envisages a "functional decoupling", that is, a decoupling of economic issues from political and security topics. (2022, p387-419; see also Bergsten and Wang, 2022)

2.2. Cooperation despite Competition

The United States and China find themselves locked in a state of fierce competition but their abilities to cooperate define the future and development of both countries and affect the prosperity and stability of the whole world. Joseph Nye points out that "the US-China relationship is a 'cooperative rivalry', in which the terms of competition will require equal attention to both sides of the oxymoron." He also puts forward that power is a positive-sum game in the domain of global governance. (2021) Likewise, Graham Allison emphasizes the competitive coexistence of the United States and China because they have common shared interests of avoiding a nuclear war, mutually addressing climate change and making advances in economy, science and technology (Mecklin, 2022).

Ryan, Kim and Bader also highlight the needs to frame the bilateral relationship more broadly than the rigid version of competition. (2022) Therefore, the United States and China need to coordinate their efforts not only to address pressing urgencies but also to probe a way forward to deal with the negative side-products of AI, effective international assistance, debt relief, food shortage and global supply chain disruptions. Working together to maintain the sustainable development of the world economy, climate change and health security cooperations as well as reducing the risks of nuclear proliferation is just the beginning.

2.2.1. The Sustainability of the World Economy

A sustainable world economy depends on avoiding the Thucydides Trap, which is the idea that an established power like the U.S. is destined to come into conflict with a rising economic rival, and the Kindleberger trap, which implies a situation neither the incumbent power nor the rising power is willing to assume the responsibilities of global economic leadership and provide public goods leaving the world vulnerable to beggar-thy-neighbor policies most notably led to the Great Depression in the 1930s. Bergsten's prescription is the informal but practical G-2, the U.S. and China working together to lead the world economy. In light of the Kindleberger trap, Kevin P. Gallagher of CSIS believes the current economic order is under great restraint and in urgent need for leadership and cooperation. He thinks the United States and China can act unilaterally, take parallel actions and work together through multilateral mechanisms (2021).

2.2.2. Cooperation on Climate Change

Climate change is a global problem that requires global cooperation to address and China has great capabilities in this area, which creates great potential for U.S.-China cooperation. Nikos Tsafos of CSIS testified before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission on the topic of "China's Climate Change Strategy and U.S.-China Competition." She pointed out that "China has a commanding position in the supply chains for clean energy. But it is also a major economy, so it is impossible to imagine China not playing a role in supply chains." Tsafos believes it is not hard to imagine the United States and China finding an acceptable balance to mitigate the mistrust that each side sees depending on the other as their vulnerable points (2022). On the same occasion, in his testimony, Henry Lee from Harvard Belfer Center made the suggestion that "climate and energy may be an area where the benefits of greater coordination and cooperation may outweigh the costs." David Victor from Brookings thinks it is desirable to cooperate on practical topics when broader cooperation is impractical. To him, there are many low political risks but high social gains areas, such as carbon capture and storage, wind and solar energy technology development, advanced battery chemistries and high-speed rail. He especially puts premium on adopting a globalist perspective so that the potential of new technologies can be unleashed and wielded to address pressing challenges (2021). According to Sarah Ladislav of CSIS, as two of the most important countries for addressing climate change, it is impossible to achieve the goal of keeping global temperature rise to less than 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels without both China and the United States taking aggressive action to reduce emissions within the next decade (2021).

2.2.3. Health Security Cooperation

Health security threats represent another critical area for U.S.-China cooperation and it becomes more important than ever. There are expansive opportunities for the two countries to coordinate their efforts. CSIS commissioned Scott Kennedy and Yanzhong Huang from CFR to lead a working group to explore potential areas for U.S.-China cooperation and they have identified six concrete and actionable areas for collaborative work: vaccines and therapeutics, international travel, public health infrastructure, biosafety and biosecurity, supply chains, and countering disinformation. (2021, p5) Cheng Li and Ryan McElveen from Brookings also stress the potential benefits of the engagement of two largest economies in the world. They put forward a series of suggestions for U.S.-China collaboration, which includes resuming the tradition of public health cooperation, retaining strong ties within the medical community, helping to increase vaccine manufacturing capacity for the world, collaborating on drug development and confidence and capacity building for the future. (2021)

2.2.4. Non-Proliferation Cooperation

Obviously, U.S. and China have shared nonproliferation goals. Cooperation will not guarantee success in reining in growing nonproliferation challenges now and in the future, but the absence of such efforts will surely increase the risks. Brookings experts Robert Einhorn believes that the Biden administration must make every effort to carve out space for U.S.-China cooperation in the following areas: resuming the channels of engagement, curbing the North Korea threat, revitalizing nuclear security and nuclear energy cooperation and strengthening the NPT regime through actions like coordinating nuclear exporting policies, fixing withdrawal problem and promoting a successful reviewing conference (2021). Unfortunately, geopolitical competitions like the expanded activities of the U.S. in Indo-Pacific to shore up its allies' capabilities will compromise nonproliferation efforts. For example, James Acton of Carnegie Endowment points out the "new security partnership, AUKUS, will deliver nuclear-powered submarines to Australia. This sets a troubling precedent for nuclear nonproliferation policy." He also expressed that in his assessment, the nonproliferation implications of the AUKUS submarine deal are both negative and serious (2021). Hence, the cooperation is increasingly important.

2.3. *Managing Strategic Competition*

Amid heightened competition between the United States and China, Kevin Rudd repeatedly sounds the warning that the 2020s "will be the decade of living dangerously" (2021, p58). He advanced a framework of managed strategic competition. Managing competition also means the U.S. world order building efforts should not aim at isolating China and applying double standard should be avoided.

2.3.1. Redline, Guardrail Building, Managed Competition and Cooperation

Rudd prescribes four steps to manage U.S.-China competition. The first step is to set up principles and procedures for navigating each other's redlines to help prevent miscalculation by agreeing on some hard limits in the bilateral relationship, such as the U.S. literally strictly adhering to One-China Policy and both the U.S. and China cutting military drills and deployments in Asia. In this step, Rudd emphasizes the benefits of enhancing strategic predictability and believes "strategic deception is futile while strategic surprise is just plain dangerous." (2022 c, p318) The second step means to build guardrails in accordance with the hard limits being put into place and honored by the two sides. The hard limits should be established through the two countries' highest-level private communication and mediation rather than high-profile meetings and open announcements. The third step means competing openly but being restrained by the guardrails. They can continue to compete for strategic and economic influences, for trade and investments, as well as for military and technology capacities. They can even compete to boost their soft power, where China highlights the merits of Chinese development model and the United States continues to emphasize the importance of democracy and human rights. The fourth step is crafting space for strategic cooperation, which can start with confidence building actions like humanitarian assistance and natural disaster relief efforts in Asia. (c 2022, p 313-349; see also b2022; d 2022; 2021p70-71)

2.3.2. Positive-Sum Competition

If the United States frames U.S.-China competition from the lens of zero-sum game, it might fall into a trap of trying to put all its effort into outcompeting China and ignore revitalizing "an inclusive international system that would protect U.S. interests and values even as global power shifts and evolves." In the long run this will undermine the strengths and vision that "should be the basis for sustained American leadership." Thus, looking at great-power competition from a positive-sum perspective will enable meaningful discussions between the U.S. and China to agree on "plausible terms of coexistence and the future of the international system—a future that Beijing will necessarily have some role in shaping." (Weiss 2022) Rather than encouraging a more inclusive world order, the Biden administration's order-building efforts centered on establishing closely packed groups to isolate China, such as the Quad and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, will compromise its credibility and might backfire by burdening the international system it wants to sustain with geopolitical tensions and side-taking. In his *Foreign Affairs* article coauthored with Dani Rodrik, Stephen M. Walt of Belfer Center also points out the failure of Biden Administration to place the two countries' competition into a zero-sum context, and he notes that "far

from accommodating China within a multipolar system of flexible rules, the current approach seeks to contain China, reduce its relative power, and narrow its strategic options.” (2022, p153-154) Thus, the U.S.-led regional trade agreements, such as the newly launched Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, should focus on maximizing economic gains rather than countering and isolating China. (Rodrik and Walt, 2022)

Moreover, framing U.S.-China competition in a positive-sum context also means avoiding applying self-righteous double-standard. So far, the Biden Administration has shaped the U.S. as the leader of a more equal and inclusive international system on the one hand, but enforcing extremely devastating policies to contain the development of China’s high-tech industries. Jon Bateman of Carnegie Endowment argues that the administration’s extreme measures to slow down China’s high-tech development and coerce its allies to comply constitute applying double standard plus playing zero-sum game. For example, the US allies and partners will comply with the new export controls, due to the long arm of the US law. He also stresses that “US officials have focused intently on possible threats, imposed disproportionate measures, downplayed the complications, and strong-armed others into compliance.” (2022) According to Weiss, targeting Chinese surveillance technology firms more harshly than similar companies based in the United States, Israel, and other Western democracies when combating so called digital authoritarianism is also a case in point. (Weiss, 2022, p48)

3. Discussion

James McGann, the late renowned think tank researcher, defined think tanks as public policy research analysis and engagement organizations that generate policy-oriented research, analysis and advice on domestic and international issues to empower policymaker to make informed decision and help the general public to understand policy problems (McGann 2016, p10; see also Haass, 2002). The important functions of American think tanks include being a platform for policy experts and policy makers to exchange ideas, announce new strategic policy narratives and launch trial balloons; presenting policy makers with research reports, policy briefs and providing private consultations; giving testimonies at Congressional hearings; engaging with media and the public to influence the public opinion through publications, interviews, blogs, podcasts and video programs; convening policy actors for Track II or Track 1.5 dialogue. Thus, if their policy narratives cannot directly become policies, they can definitely factor into policy solutions, which sounds a hopeful note for the above policy frameworks and narratives. Ideas of building guardrails, competitive coexistence, competitive interdependence, and positive sum competitions are worth drilling into policy makers’ awareness.

However, in current U.S.-China relations, there are a lot of headwinds and uncertainties to make a real course correction to come true. A special feature of American think tanks is their long-term vision. Currently, they may have to beat the political headwinds to explore and popularize their policy narratives but when the political discourse changes, they may find champions to enact their policy solutions. (Weaver, 2002, p568; see also Rydliniski, 2020, p125) Therefore, in the words of Ryan Hass, a course correction in U.S.-China relations means forging ahead with sensible policy choices rather than chasing prevailing political winds to gain political scores through playing China cards (Hass, Kim and Bader, 2022, p7). Moreover, cooperations on pressing global challenges will create goodwill and a more favorable environment for Biden Administration to deliver on its promises, such as U.S. commitment to One China policy strictly. In this respect, for the above discussed policy frameworks to deliver the result of a course correction, think tanks also need to play a role in Track II or Track 1.5 diplomacy to bring together the two countries’ high level government officials, academics, business and trade associations to address problems of mutual interest and concern.

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