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## Imagining China: Exploring the Discursive limitations on Foreign Policy

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Imagining China:  
Exploring the Discursive limitations on Foreign Policy

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
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## *Introduction*

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There exists a common anxiety, among American scholars and politicians alike, surrounding China's rise to power. It is argued that an ascendant China, and the impact it will have on the established world order, is the most pressing geostrategic challenge of this era.<sup>1</sup> Never before has a nation risen so fast, to such an extent. Since China's opening and their free-market reforms in 1979, it has seen GDP growth averaging 9.5% through 2018, a pace described by the World Bank as "the fastest sustained expansion by a major economy in history."

<sup>2</sup> Moreover, as China rises, so does its political influence and military capabilities. For nearly a century, the U.S. has been the dominant military power in the Pacific. This balance of power is being challenged as China has continued to grow its presence in the hemisphere. Xi Jinping himself has said "It is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia, and uphold the security of Asia."<sup>3</sup> This perpetuates the perception that China could be a revisionist state, with the objective of altering or undermining the U.S. world order. There is an idea that China could become a security issue, that it will try to use its growing influence to reshape the rules and institutions of the international system to serve its own interests<sup>4</sup>. Contemporary China's rise to power has been compared to Imperial Germany, Cold War Soviet Union, and even an aggressive U.S. plying for regional power. A growing China, therefore, is a

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<sup>1</sup> Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?," *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, December 5, 2016),

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>.

<sup>2</sup> "China's Economic Rise: History, Trends, Challenges, and ...," EveryCRSReport.com, June 25, 2019, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33534/96>.

<sup>3</sup> Evan Osnos, "The Future of America's Contest with China," *The New Yorker* (Condé Nast, January 6, 2020), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/01/13/the-future-of-americas-contest-with-china>.

<sup>4</sup> John G. Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West: Can the Liberal System Survive?" *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 1 (2008): 23-37. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20020265>.



growing threat to the U.S. and the world. This 5,000-year-old civilization with 1.3 billion people, is not just going to disappear. It is a “chronic situation” that must be dealt with.<sup>5</sup>

The predominant approaches to the China problem are understood to be engagement or containment. Engagement seeks to incorporate a rising power into the pre-established international order, while avoiding and eliminating any revisionist tendencies. Engagement is sought, through open channels of communication and material incentives, socializing a rising power with the norms and values that define the existing international order.<sup>6</sup> Many China and foreign policy specialists hold that enmeshing China in as many international regimes and binding commitments as possible so as to minimize its potential for disruptive behavior and allow for its smooth integration into the international order.<sup>7</sup>

The groundwork for contemporary Sino-American engagement was laid with President Richard Nixon’s visit to China in 1972, after nearly a quarter century of non-communication. The Nixon administration was the original architect of a U.S. foreign policy on China built around engagement, seeing the opportunity to integrate the PRC peacefully into the international order. This growth of U.S.-China relations was disrupted by the Tiananmen massacre of pro-democracy demonstrators in June 1989. The Clinton Administration sought to stabilize the relationship with China, through a policy of “comprehensive engagement.” Strides towards this included China's accession to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the Chemical Weapons Convention, and the Biological Weapons Convention. The last two decades, with the rapid and undeniable rise of China, have seen especially interesting

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<sup>5</sup> Graham Allison, “The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?”.

<sup>6</sup> Michelle Murray. “Conclusion.” In *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations: Status, Revisionism, and Rising Powers*, 205–6. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> David Shambaugh, "Containment or Engagement of China? Calculating Beijing's Responses." *International Security* 21, no. 2 (1996): 180-209. doi:10.2307/2539074.

developments in efforts of engagement. In 2000, President Bill Clinton signed the U.S.-China Relations Act of 2000, establishing normal trade relations between the two countries and paving the way for China to join the World Trade Organization in 2001. In a speech five years later, Deputy Secretary of State Robert B. Zoellick urged China to fulfil its duty as a rising power by serving as a “responsible stakeholder” in the world order.<sup>8</sup> In 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton first outlined the Obama administration’s “Pivot to Asia” in an essay for *Foreign Policy*. The underlying principles of this foreign policy strategy include re-engagement with regional organizations, a continued effort to build a cooperative relationship with China, advancement in free and fair trade, and economic partnerships, and support for “fundamental human rights.” Later, in 2014 U.S. President Barack Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping issued a joint statement on climate change, pledging to reduce carbon emissions.

On the other end of the spectrum is containment. Containment emerged as an official U.S. strategic foreign policy, during the Cold War, in response to the threat of the Soviet Union widening its sphere of influence. Containment is the aim to restrict the power and influence of a rising power, by raising the price of realizing revisionist aims. This is pursued through means such as, the threat of material punishment like economic sanctions or force, and measures to curb influence by balancing a rising power's growing military capabilities. The goal is to thwart further growth of a rising state’s power and to prevent significant challenges to the established international order.

In practice, U.S. foreign policy on China has never been simply engagement or containment, but rather an interesting hybrid between the two. In almost every example of a

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<sup>8</sup> Robert B. Zoellick, “Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?,” September 21, 2005. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/s/d/former/zoellick/rem/53682.htm>.

seemingly engagement driven China policy, efforts toward containment are looming not far behind, or are the thinly veiled true goal. This is especially apparent in Obama's "pivot" to Asia. The main proponents of this policy involve the U.S. establishing military, economic, and diplomatic ties with countries near and bordering China. The U.S. has ramped up its naval presence in the South China Sea, overseen a transfer of some of the most advanced naval and air force systems to the Pacific theater, and it has reaffirmed defense assurances to Japan covering territory challenged by China.<sup>9</sup> While the Trump administration's Foreign Policy on China is hard to pin down, it is clear, just through the so called trade war, that a classic engagement strategy is not the goal. In July of 2020, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo even declared in a speech that the era of engagement with the CCP is over, warning China to change its behavior and respect the rules of the international order.

Engagement expects China to subserviently and harmoniously fold into the U.S. led world order, and containment works to forcibly thwart the power and influence of China, in order to maintain this established international order. U.S. foreign policy, then, functions on the basis that China is subordinate to the U.S., and must always remain so. In other words, a world order not led by the U.S. is completely unimaginable. Foreign policies do not recognize China as China, but instead as a projection of U.S. expectations. China, thus, is not permitted to exist in the international stage on its own terms. The goal of this paper is to confront the consistent shortcomings of U.S. foreign policy on China. I propose that discourse dictates and limits the way that the U.S. can perceive and, thus, approach China. Discourse on China is limited, thereby limiting the possibilities of foreign policy

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<sup>9</sup> Mong Palatino, "Obama in Philippines: 'Our Goal Is Not to Contain China'," *The Diplomat*, April 29, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/04/obama-in-philippines-our-goal-is-not-to-contain-china/>.

In the first section of this paper I lay out a framework for analyzing U.S. discourse on China. I make the argument that discourse on China is a particular kind of discourse influenced by what Edward Said has defined as Orientalism. Orientalism can be broadly described as an essentialist and reductionist discourse that ascribes indispensable characteristics to the non-West, or Orient, situating it as the West's ultimate other. For the purposes of this paper I follow Michel Foucault's definition of discourse as a historically contingent social system that produces knowledge and meaning. With this in mind, I propose the limits of discourse lie in three of its main functions, (1) the structuring of binary oppositions; (2) the construction of perceived realities; and (3) the creation and reaffirmation of identities. I argue that the U.S. imagination on China is informed by a vast array of contradictory images, that all exist as true within the discursive framework. From here, I explore how discourse works to limit U.S. foreign policy more specifically.

The second section of this paper traces and examines U.S. discourse on China and its effects on foreign policy. This investigation begins with President Richard Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger's 1972 trip to the People's Republic of China, which commenced modern Sino-American diplomatic relations. I will use this as a framework to navigate discourse and foreign policy on China during the Obama administration. My aim is to illuminate the ways that discourse has limited foreign policy approaches to China. I do this by discursively analyzing speeches, political rhetoric, policies, interviews, news media, and more. I will further scrutinize the significance of discourse in delving into common U.S. anxieties about China.

Finally, I will solidify the arguments by showing that U.S. imagination on China remained the status quo, even under the controversial presidency of Donald Trump. Interestingly, Trump is able to discern a failure of China policy, and seems to try to break with the norm. However, the U.S. imagination is so dominant in American understanding of China, he is unable to transcend the limits of discourse or limited foreign policy. I then briefly convey Joe Biden's perpetuation of this framework, before looking towards the future of Sino-American relations. Through this paper it becomes abundantly clear that U.S. foreign policy approaches that do not take China on its own terms, become increasingly more unacceptable as it continues to become a more powerful figure.

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## *Chapter 1*

### *On Discourse*

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*In the long history of our associations with China, these two sets of images [of a wonderfully civilized and brutally barbaric place] rise and fall, move in and out of the center of people's minds over time, never wholly displacing each other, always coexisting, each ready to emerge at the fresh call or circumstance, always new, yet instantly garbed in all the words and pictures of a much written literature, made substantial and unique in each historic instance by the reality of recurring experience... Our emotions about the Chinese have ranged between sympathy and rejection, parental exasperation, affection and hostility, love and fear close to hate.*

–Harold Isaacs, *Scratches on Our Minds: American Views of China and India*

There are noticeable themes and common narratives in the way China is talked about in the U.S.. It is commonplace and unsurprising to hear officials boast their “toughness” on China, or criticize others lack-there-of, while employing rhetoric that characterizes China as both drastically inferior to the U.S. and a great existential threat. China has, in recent years has been an increasingly prevalent point of nationalist discussion, especially as it continues to rise on the world stage. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has stated that it must be ensured that “China retains only its proper place in the world” and Newt Gingrich has claimed China is “the greatest threat to us since the British Empire in the seventeen-seventies, much greater than Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union.”<sup>10</sup> This rhetoric is not unique to republicans, it traverses the bounds of party politics. In the final debate for the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Joe Biden pledged that, if elected, he would force China to “play by the international rules.”<sup>11</sup> This reflects more than simply the desire of the U.S. to remain the world’s hegemonic superpower. There are actually

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<sup>10</sup> Osnos, Evan, and Jianying Zha. “The Future of America's Contest with China.” *The New Yorker*. Accessed May 15, 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/01/13/the-future-of-americas-contest-with-china>.

<sup>11</sup> Owen Churchill, “Trump-Biden Final Debate: China 'Will Be Forced to Play by International Rules',” *US-China Relations*, October 23, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/3106728/mute-buttons-ready-final-donald-trump-joe-biden-debate>.

discursive limits that define the way the U.S. can approach China. Discourse is extremely influential in the production of social, cultural, and political practices. Michel Foucault defines discourse as a historically contingent social system that produces knowledge and meaning. In this line, discourse is a set of statements that creates a particular way of seeing and thinking about a given topic. Discourses can be understood as systems of signification that construct social realities. Therefore, it is not the material world that conveys meanings, but rather, people construct meaning by modes of signification represented in discourse. Through shaping and creating meaning systems, discourses gain the status and currency of “truth.” Stepping outside of the structure of meaning and truths of a discourse, can be attributed only to deviance or abnormality.

These limitations consequently influence the objectives, operation, and execution of foreign policy. To approach foreign policy discursively, is to place emphasis on the linguistic construction of reality. Actors are constructed and become articulated within particular discourses. Agents of foreign policy, then, function within a discursive space that imposes meanings on their world and constructs a reality. To be accepted, actors and policies themselves, must fit into the reality that has been constructed and established in a society. Foreign policy reflects discourse, constructing a particular kind of international order consisting of various kinds of national identities. Barnett and Duval define power as the production, in and through social relations, of effects that shape the capacities of actors to determine their circumstances and fate. Productive power is the constitution of all social subjects with various social powers through

systems of knowledge and discursive practices of broad and general social scope.<sup>12</sup> The concept of power in international relations points to the role of discourses in contingently producing a defined global order and actors tied to their self-understandings and established reality. The conundrum of the foreign policies towards China, then, are side effects of the limits of established discourses. The strange duality in the U.S. discourse on China is a manifestation of the immensely varied array of favorable and unfavorable images, notions, attitudes, impressions, and experiences (real and exaggerated) that make up a particular U.S. imagination on China.

To recognize the full extent to which discourse affects U.S. approaches China, it is important to understand what exactly discourse does. Discourses can be characterized by 3 central functions, (1) they are structured largely in terms of binary oppositions, by which objects are distinguished from one another. Such oppositions can embody and reproduce certain patterns of thinking; (2) they construct regimes of truth and epistemic realities, which define what can be thought and said about a particular subject; and (3) they create and reaffirm identities.

Firstly, discourses construct binaries. Ferdinand de Saussure proposed that meaning in language is obtained, through binary opposition. Each unit of language being defined in reciprocal determination with another. All systems in Western thought have been founded upon the logic of binary oppositions, such as man/woman, old/young, good/evil, sun/moon, man/woman, birth/death, black/white. Commencing the post-structuralist movement, Jacques Derrida claims that one side of the binary is always given a more privileged position than its

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, "Power in International Politics." *International Organization* 59, no. 1 (2005), 55.



opposite, that one term is "marked" as positive and the other as negative. These contrasts are inherently mutually exclusive, something cannot be both old and young at the same time. To give anything an identity, to make claims about what it is, is necessarily also to say what it is not. In this sense, presence contains absence. Therefore, the presence of any one quality is dependent on the implication of the absence of its binary opposite.<sup>13</sup> Derrida maintains, speech must necessarily articulate the binary oppositions constructed in text if it is to make any sense whatsoever.

In certain ways U.S. discourse is informed by a broader tradition of Western construction of non-Western cultures, that Edward Said defines as Orientalism. This is an essentialist and reductionist discourse that ascribes indispensable characteristics to the non-West, defining it as the West's ultimate other. This constructs the world in terms of a series of binary oppositions—East vs West, "Occident" vs "Orient"—that produce the East as the mirror image of the West: where "we" are rational and civilized, "they" are impulsive and barbaric; where "we" are modern and progressive, "they" are despotic and stagnant; where "we" are honest and compassionate, "they" are backwards and uncultivated.<sup>14</sup> Considering the dynamic of mutual exclusivity, because the non-West, is impulsive and barbaric, it can never be rational and civilized; because it is despotic and stagnant, it can never be modern and progressive, and so on. Thus, in the East vs. West binary, the West is granted the privileged position, with the East being marked as negative. These binaries, then, work to establish global and cultural hierarchies of power and dominance.

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<sup>13</sup> Vivien Burr, *An Introduction to Social Constructionism*. London: Routledge, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> Hugh Gusterson, "Nuclear Weapons and the Other in the Western Imagination." *Cultural Anthropology* 14, no. 1 (1999): 111-43.

Orientalism is certainly a stitch in the fabric that constructs the U.S. imagination on China. However, the state of discourse on China cannot be explained solely by generic Orientalism. In fact there are other, entirely contradictory, images that are simultaneously present in the discursive construction of China. More than just the East vs. West binary, American images of China largely exist as paradoxical binary pairs, simultaneously a superior civilization and an inferior people. As Harold Isaacs writes, “our notions of Chinese traits have included sage wisdom and superstitious ignorance, great strength and contemptible weakness, immovable conservatism and unpredictable extremism, philosophical calm and explosive violence.”<sup>15</sup> On the one hand, centuries worth of powerful imagery of China’s ancient greatness widely attributes qualities such as wisdom, honor, and stoicism to the Chinese people. On the other hand, there exists quite another set of images of China’s inferiority, a China in need of the sympathetic goodwill and high moral intent that makes up the American identity, along with a conception of Chinese cruelty, barbarism, and inhumanity. All of these binaries and images of China exist simultaneously in discourse. The collection of positives and negatives that construct the U.S. imagination of China, fluctuate as the main concentration of discourse, but never disappear completely, often existing simultaneously, always ready to be revived to meet the current circumstances.

The second function of discourses is that they created regimes of truth and epistemic realities. Discourse is a set of statements that creates a particular way of thinking about a given topic. Foucault notes that discourse produces practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak. It restricts the way of thinking because it forms knowledge, for there is no

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<sup>15</sup> Harold R. Isaacs, *Scratches on Our Minds: American Images of China and India*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015) 64.

knowledge outside discourse. Discourse is productive and reproductive, of the knowledge it defines. This knowledge is always produced by effects of power within a social order, and this power prescribes particular rules and categories which designate preconditions for legitimating what is and is not accepted within the discursive order. In order for any knowledge to be accepted as legitimate, it must conform to the established truths within the discursive order,

discourses are not simply groupings of utterances, grouped around a theme or an issue, nor are they simply sets of utterances which emanate from a particular institutional setting, but discourses are regulated groupings of utterances or statements with internal rules which are specific to discourse itself.<sup>16</sup>

By pre-determining the categories of reason by which statements are accepted as knowledge, discourses create an epistemic reality.<sup>17</sup> Discourse, then, determines the parameters of what can be thought and understood. Foucault proposes that “we know perfectly well that we are not free to just say anything, when we like or where we like,” for we are conditioned to conform to dominant discourses.<sup>18</sup> Foucault uses the ideas of “power” and “knowledge” to signify that power is established through accepted forms of knowledge and “truth.” Each society has its regime of truth, the discourse which it accepts and establishes as true, the means by which statements are distinguished as true or false, and the status of those tasked with maintaining what counts as true.<sup>19</sup>

Images of China as inferior have been at the forefront of general Western conceptions of China, since the 19th century. Following the first Opium War of 1839, China came to be viewed as “a victim and subject, source of profit, object of scorn, and ultimately, by Americans, as a

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<sup>16</sup> Sara Mills, *Discourse* (London: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*.

<sup>19</sup> Michel Foucault and Michel Senellart, *The Birth of Biopolitics Lectures at the College De France, 1978-1979* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

ward.”<sup>20</sup> Up until 1949, U.S. contact with China was most heavily characterized by the impact of American missionaries in China. Along with all of the essentializing truths that make up the U.S. imagination, most Americans, importantly, regarded the Chinese to be receivers of American missionary saviorism. The American missionary enterprise in China lasted over a century and came to involve thousands of missionaries, the investment of millions of dollars, and a highly emotional parental attachment to China. It was through missionaries that the U.S. became economically and politically involved in China, all three having complementary and intertwined goals. After all, if China had the largest population of souls to enlighten, it could also become the largest population of U.S. customers, and a land of endless opportunities for American trade and investments. Moreover, the notion of saving China through the influence of Christianity is not a far jump to saving China through the influence of American liberal democratic ideals and values. This has established an “elaborate structure of guardianship, benevolent purpose, sympathetic goodwill, and high moral intent that still surrounds the American self picture in relation to China and the Chinese.”<sup>21</sup>

At the same time, while the specific American discourse on China has been to a great extent rooted in missionary associations, this does not upend the entrenched images of China that arouse both admiration and fear in Americans. The impression of China as one of the world’s oldest and most cultured civilizations is crucial to its construction in the U.S. imagination. China had invented things like “paper, movable type, the compass, porcelain, gunpowder, and had great sages, poets, and artists long before the Western man himself was civilized.”<sup>22</sup> While the respect and admiration for China are grounded in the imagery of its great past, these feelings are

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<sup>20</sup> Isaacs, Harold R. *Scratches on Our Minds: American Images of China and India*. 97

<sup>21</sup> Isaacs, Harold R. *Scratches on Our Minds: American Images of China and India*. 124

<sup>22</sup> Isaacs, Harold R. *Scratches on Our Minds: American Images of China and India*. 89

maintained in discourse without any definite placement in its impressively long enduring history. Contradictory to the notions of both China's peaceful weakness, is the representation of China as cruel or dangerous—very much related to the general Orientalist trope of “Oriental barbarism” and the widespread “Yellow Peril.” Discourse on China can instantly recall images of female infanticide; foot binding; the distressing violence of the anti-Christian, anti-imperialist Boxer Rebellion; Communist terror; and arguably the most productive of these images is that of the terror induced Mongol ruler and conqueror Genghis Khan and the “hordes” of Mongol warriors. Thus, imagination on China is further rooted in the Orientalist and racist concept of “Yellow Peril”: the existential fear that the danger the “faceless, nameless hordes of people ” in the Asia-Pacific pose to the Western world. Thus, even when these images are not at the forefront of discourse, there is the understanding of China as some sort of “sleeping dragon”—which could someday reawaken to embody its full formidable form.

Despite the contradictions and inconsistencies, all of these representations exist as simultaneously true in the discursive framework that defines China. This discourse does not engage with the China that exists in reality, it engages with a construction and understanding of China that exists only in the U.S. imagination. This imaginary China is simultaneously a great and long enduring nation, an inferior and weak country in need of U.S. guidance, and a cruel and violent land with an endless supply of warriors. U.S. discourse, therefore, is not truth but (mis)representation, and all representations are created and shaped by discourse and power structures.<sup>23</sup> In Said's words, “knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control.”<sup>24</sup> Therefore by

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<sup>23</sup> F. Varol, “Edward Said vs Michel Foucault: the Divergence of Perspectives on Knowledge, Truth and Power.” (2017) 323.

<sup>24</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2019) 36.

“knowing” China, the U.S. perpetually concludes both its distinctive role as China’s benevolent keeper; and also China’s position as an experienced and treacherous threat.

Lastly, discourses work to establish identities. Discourse is productive, and what is being produced are ideas and statements that constitute the whole of the object being defined. Discursive representation is done from a position of exteriority, where the object is defined and discussed by an external narrative. The producer of a particular discourse is excluded from being the potential object of essentialist representation. More than this, the producer’s identity is constructed through the construction of the object it works to define. Those represented are rendered mute while the producer of such ideas gains strength and identity.<sup>25</sup> To reintroduce the theory of Orientalism—Said argues that “the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.”<sup>26</sup> The existence of the Western identity is dependent on the implication of the absence of its binary opposite, so—“we” are rational and civilized *because* “they” are impulsive and barbaric; “we” are modern and progressive *because* “they” are despotic and stagnant; “we” are honest and compassionate *because* “they” are backwards and uncultivated; and so on. By producing and reproducing its imagination of China, the U.S. is simultaneously constructing and guaranteeing its own identity. That which falls outside the bounds of dominant discourse, is not only marked as deligitimate, it actually threatens the national identity that the U.S. has created.

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<sup>25</sup> Louisa Schein, “Gender and Internal Orientalism in China,” in *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*, ed. Susan Brownell and Jeffery N. Wasserstrom (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 385-411.

<sup>26</sup> Said. *Orientalism*.

There is the theory that states do not merely seek physical security but also ontological security, or the security of self-identity. States are thus not only interested in survival but also in the continuation of the self in the international order—the self being the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice.<sup>27</sup> States become attached to established roles and routines because they sustain self-identity, providing ontological security. Jennifer Mitzen argues that routines (cognitive and behavioral) are followed even when they are destructive and endanger the actor. Self identity is sustained through narratives, that link behavior to self understanding.<sup>28</sup> Profound challenges to state identity, or disruptions to routine, upset established beliefs and generate anxiety. These anxieties are quelled by the return to the entrenched routines and narratives. The identity of the U.S. is created and maintained, in part, through the discursive construction of China. Thus, foreign policy, which functions within this discursive framework, is a routine by which the U.S. protects this identity. Of course, foreign policy then is not informed by the physical reality of China, but an imaginary construction of China. The contradictory truths attributed to China requires a foreign policy that maintains a superior-subordinate relationship with China, but also properly recognizes the potential power and danger of the so-called “sleeping dragon.” Thus, is the basis of the confused and limited containment and engagement approaches to China. The established truths and epistemic realities of China created by discourse are being simultaneously exasperated and challenged by the very real China, especially as it continues its spectacular rise on the world stage. However, forgoing

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<sup>27</sup> Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma,” *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (2006): pp. 341-370, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066106067346>.

<sup>28</sup> Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (Routledge, 2014).

this discourse, and recognizing the true China that actually exists in reality, would mean threatening U.S. identity. The friction between the actual nation of China, and the China that exists only in U.S. discourse, shakes the claims to global dominance the U.S. imagines for itself. The fixed nature of discourse and modern U.S. foreign policy, while extremely limited and limiting, works to quell the anxiety that China induces, affirming the exclusive right to global authority the U.S. imagines for itself.

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## *Chapter 2*

### *Imagining China*

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#### *Part 1: Richard Nixon*

*we simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations.*

–Richard M. Nixon *Asia after Viet Nam*<sup>29</sup>

The year 1949 proved to have momentous effects on the formulation of the post-World War II international order. In October of 1949, following the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) triumph in the Civil War and the Nationalist Party's retreat to Taiwan, Mao Zedong declared the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC.) The defeat of the Nationalist Party came as an unwelcome shock to Americans, who envisioned China, under the leadership of Chang Kai Shek (a practicing Christian,) as an idealized "free" and "democratic" ally and subservient pupil, that would learn how to be a good liberal state in the new U.S. led world order. As the most populous state in the world, China would benefit the U.S. economically, through its potential production capabilities, and strategically, in the Cold War competition between the U.S. and Soviet Union. Instead, the U.S. gained a new rival and the Cold War extended into East Asia. This commenced a period of estrangement in Sino-American diplomatic relations, and a U.S. foreign policy focused solely on containment, which lasted over twenty years.

After two decades dedicated to containing the threat of China, in July of 1971, the world was stunned by the announcement that U.S. President Richard Nixon would be travelling to the PRC, to pursue the normalization of relations between the two countries. And on February 21st, 1972 President Nixon, accompanied by his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, made

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<sup>29</sup> Richard M. Nixon, "Asia After Viet Nam," *Foreign Affairs*, October 1967.

history as the first U.S. president to step foot in the PRC and the only one to meet Chairman Mao Zedong. This seven day trip, culminating in the jointly issued Shanghai Communique, set in motion a new era of Sino-American relations, and publicly presented the U.S. 's intention of rapprochement with China. Nixon, however, first introduced the notion of rapprochement years prior, in a 1967 *Foreign Affairs* article, before he was even president. He again referred to it indirectly, in his 1969 inaugural address, where he says, “Let all nations know that during this administration our lines of communication will be open. We seek an open world—open to ideas, open to the exchange of goods and people—a world in which no people, great or small, will live in angry isolation.”<sup>30</sup> In a climate where no American leader had even publicly referred to the PRC by its proper name, (opting instead for Communist or Red China) these indirect allusions to a Sino-American relationship were the first steps in a long process of complex and subtle diplomacy that eventually brought about a reconciliation between the two nations. These remarks further represent the shift to a political discourse on China that is still dominant to this day. While Nixon newly introduced engagement as a foreign policy strategy, in respect to the PRC, ideas of containment lay not far below the surface. In fact there exists a confused duality between the two approaches, which have contradictory but intertwined goals.

It would seem astounding that an American president who built a career on hostility to Communism and a Chinese leader who had raised a whole generation on anti-American imperialism, came to shake hands in front of the world, after twenty years of silence. However, from the very beginning of his presidency, Nixon apparently recognized the importance of reestablishing communication with China. Up until 1949, U.S. contact with China was most

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<sup>30</sup> Richard M. Nixon “First Inaugural Address.” (speech, Washington DC, January 20, 1969).

heavily characterized by the impact of American missionaries. As such, Americans, the same Americans who chose most of the countries leaders, “had to a remarkable extent come to see Chinese as objects of benevolence, as wards under kindly American guardians who knew better than the Chinese did what was good for them on earth and in heaven.”<sup>31</sup> It was this line of thinking that brought about powerful emotions related to the “loss” of China, which generated “deep parental sorrow and aroused righteous anger and meriting just punishment of isolation,” feeling the Chinese had “bitten the hands that fed them.”<sup>32</sup> These years of a nearly total severance in communication between the two nations, left room for U.S. imagination to fill in the gaps left by the lapse in interaction with China. One of the images that was produced in this process was China as a figure to be feared. Bearing in mind the geopolitical context of the Cold War, this was certainly related to China’s communist association to the Soviet power system. However, from the fall of the Chinese Nationalist Party in 1949, the PRC was deemed as more radical than the Soviet Union and the more antagonistic of the two Communist states.

The identification of China as a threat first came especially to the forefront of discourse, upon its entrance into the Korean War, where it proved to be an unexpected military match to the United States. In an interview for Harold Isaac’s book, a former high official of the Eisenhower administration remarked “I was brought up to think that the Chinese couldn’t handle a machine. Now, suddenly, they are flying jets!”<sup>33</sup> China was almost instantly transformed from a scorned and passive weakling into an aggressive and formidable potential foe. This allowed for the images of the “untrustworthy Orient” to flourish in a new and seemingly tangible context, breathing new life into the extremely antiquated notion of the Chinese warrior. Suddenly, the

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<sup>31</sup> Isaacs, Harold R. *Scratches on Our Minds: American Images of China and India*. 125

<sup>32</sup> Isaacs, Harold R. *Scratches on Our Minds: American Images of China and India*. 190

<sup>33</sup> Isaacs, Harold R. *Scratches on Our Minds: American Images of China and India*. 226.

“hordes” of barbaric Mongol warriors, violently expanding their empire, reemerged centuries later as the People’s Liberation Army, imagined to be superior only in their seemingly limitless supply of expendable human lives. By the time Nixon entered office in 1969, with the Korean War long over, the U.S. was facing international humiliation over its role in the unwinnable Vietnam War—which it entered largely in an attempt to restrain the spread of China’s influence. At the same time, friendly relations between the Soviet Union and People’s Republic of China broke down in the early sixties and in the first year of Nixon’s presidency the two countries engaged in a seven month hostile border conflict that threatened the possibility of war. Thus, the Soviet Union came to embody the most pressing threat to China. The trauma over the “loss” of China, had been surpassed by more contemporary traumas, while it was also becoming increasingly evident that efforts towards complete physical containment were less than effective. Pursuing a renewal in relations with China was, to a great extent, an effort to confront and quell the threat the U.S. perceived China to be. This in turn reintroduced emotional attachments to images of the “good Chinese people,” who deserved, and needed, America’s paternal leadership.

On the other hand, rapprochement was assuredly motivated by a legitimate desire to enjoy a relationship with China. The so-called loss of China did not merely devastate Americans emotionally, it physically cut off over 800 million potential customers to American industry. Thus, leading up to rapprochement, the U.S. imagination was simultaneously creating nightmares about China’s danger, and fantasies about the millions of frustratingly unmaterialized Chinese consumers. A Sino-American relationship further offered the U.S strategic benefits. For one, in the context of the Cold War, bringing China to American’s side of the struggle could give the U.S. more leverage with Moscow; and additionally China’s cooperation was crucial to

bringing the war in Vietnam to a close. It moreover would serve the U.S. interest, and support its imagined claim to global hegemony, to have influence over the largest population in the world.

With the newly emerging political discourse surrounding rapprochement, came the notion that the PRC and U.S. represented the world's most "consequential bilateral relationship."<sup>34</sup> This certainly was particularly informed by the perception that China could possibly present an exceptional threat to the peace and safety of the world. It was up to the U.S., as the most powerful nation in the world—who has historically imagined its unique role as China's keeper—to confront and stifle this threat. In the same Foreign Affairs article that Nixon first raised the idea of engagement, he also states that China is "the world's most populous nation and Asia's most immediate threat."<sup>35</sup> Thus, the successful 1972 presidential trip to China is notoriously referred to as "the week that changed the world." In preliminary discussions with Chou En-lai, Kissinger asserted that the President was personally committed to improving Sino-American relations "for the sake of our two peoples and for the sake of the world."<sup>36</sup> Later, in one of his multiple toasts throughout his time in China, Nixon remarked that if the American and Chinese people are enemies, "the future of this world we share together is dark indeed. But if we can find common ground to work together, the chance for world peace is immeasurably increased."<sup>37</sup> After his initial secret trip to China, Kissinger reported to Nixon that the groundwork had been laid for them to "turn a page in history," but the PRC would turn out to be an "implacable foe" if the rapprochement were to go wrong.<sup>38</sup> Discourse represented China to

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<sup>34</sup> Henry Kissinger, *On China* (London: Penguin, 2012).

<sup>35</sup> Richard M. Nixon, "Asia After Viet Nam."

<sup>36</sup> Chou En-Lai and Henry Kissinger, "Memorandum of Conversation," The National Security Archive (The White House, October 20, 1971), <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB70/doc10.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> Richard M. Nixon, "Transcript of the Toasts by Premier Chou and President Nixon," *The New York Times*, February 22, 1972, 14.

<sup>38</sup> Richard M. Nixon, "CHINA," in *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Warner Books, 1979), 554.

inherently possess the capacity to be incredibly dangerous, and foreign policy consequently had to realize and address this danger. Nixon's foreign policy goals were genuinely optimistic about a relationship with China, but indeed reflected the conception that China is dangerous. Engagement was looked upon as something that could diminish the threat of China, as it would give the U.S. the access necessary to condition and guide China to be a well behaved state. In a confused way, engagement was sought as an alternative method to achieve similar goals to containment.

The prospect of rapprochement went hand in hand with a vision of incorporating China into the liberal world order. Following the end of the Second World War, the U.S. was left in a unique place of power to take the lead in constructing a new world order that reflected its own interests. It was through this process that the U.S. established its identity as the most powerful nation in the world—with an exclusive claim to global hegemony and authority. This post WWII world order was developed, throughout the second half of the 20th century, around norms and institutions that both demonstrated and reinforced the international dominance of the United States. Throughout the years of Sino-American severance, it became increasingly unacceptable for China to function outside of the liberal global order. In Nixon's statements of support for a Sino-American relationship, direct and indirect, there is a recurring emphasis on China's position vis-a-vis the international community. In his *Foreign Affairs* piece, Nixon argues "we simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations...There is no place on this small planet for a billion of its potentially most able people to live in angry isolation."<sup>39</sup> In Nixon's first Foreign Policy Report to Congress (1970,) the first significant public step towards

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<sup>39</sup> Richard M. Nixon, "Asia After Viet Nam."

rapprochement, the section on China begins, “the Chinese are a great and vital people who should not remain isolated from the international community.”<sup>40</sup> These moments epitomize the U.S. motives for rapprochement. Opening China up to the international community, meant socializing it to be a well behaved and valuable member of the U.S. led world order, which called for subservience to U.S. authority and influence. This would not only neutralize the threat of a free-willed China, but also rehabilitate the “proper” relationship between the U.S. and China. With the previously established image of China as the United States’ ward, it was only natural that this superior-subordinate relationship be fully realized through China’s participation in the U.S. dominated world order. In fact, in the discursive construction, it is necessary that China and the U.S. fulfill their respective roles.

By the Nixon administration, the U.S. identity was inextricably tied to its place in the global order. The subordination of China had historic roots in the U.S. imagination, but was further grounded in a new discourse that accounted for American global hegemony. In his book, *On China*, Henry Kissinger offers some reflections on U.S. strategy towards China during the Nixon administration. On Nixon’s new approach to foreign policy, he writes “Nixon was committed...to giving America a dynamic role in reshaping the international order just emerging piece by piece.”<sup>41</sup> He goes on to say that Nixon viewed the goal of rapprochement as an opportunity to “redefine the American approach to foreign policy and international leadership. He sought to demonstrate that... the United States was in a position to bring about a design for long-term peace.”<sup>42</sup> China’s incorporation into the world order would place the most populated country in the world under U.S. influence and in a position that served U.S. interests. It would

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<sup>40</sup> Richard M. Nixon, “CHINA,” in *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (1979), 544-580.

<sup>41</sup> Henry Kissinger, *On China*.

<sup>42</sup> Kissinger, *On China*.

further facilitate a more dominant presence in Asia, a vast region the U.S. had yet to successfully establish its authority. The desire to bring China into the international order, however, was not simply a move to further U.S. leadership. There is imagined to be something particularly special about China that requires careful monitoring, but also presents the need for a properly functioning Sino-American relationship.

During the decades of non-communication with the PRC, the U.S. had full diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Even after his defeat, the U.S. continued to support its old friend Chiang Kai-shek, recognizing Taiwan and its government (the Republic of China) as the true and legitimate China. As such, the ROC held a seat as one of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) as well as the UN General Assembly and other major international organizations. Taiwan relied upon its close relationship with the U.S. and place in the world order for economic and military support, primarily for security from the much larger mainland China. Under the Nixon administration, as rapprochement with the PRC became a concrete goal, U.S. policy towards Taiwan began to change drastically. In July of 1971, 17 UN members, led by Albania, requested that a question of the "Restoration of the lawful rights of the People's Republic of China in the United Nations" be placed on the provisional agenda of the UNGA.<sup>43</sup> The next month, a second item was added to the provisional agenda, at the request of the United States. This item reflected the opinion of the U.S. that the United Nations should recognize both the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China.

Nixon reflected that it was hard for him to take this position and disappoint the U.S.'s "old friend and loyal ally." While he would continue to honor the economic and military

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<sup>43</sup> "(XXVI). Restoration of the Lawful Rights of the People's Republic of China in the United Nations," United Nations (United Nations).



commitments to Taiwan, he felt “national security interests of the U.S. lay in developing relations with the PRC.”<sup>44</sup> The actual U.S. delegation to the UN, was much more committed to Taiwan, diligently lobbying to preserve its seat. As such, Ambassador George H. W. Bush was extremely concerned with the fact that Kissinger's preparatory trip to the PRC, was to coincide with the UNGA's decision on the membership of China. He thought this would undermine U.S. efforts to keep Taiwan's place in the U.N., and wanted the dates to be adjusted. However, Nixon believed that “rapprochement with Beijing had priority over Taiwan's UN status and the schedule was left unchanged.”<sup>45</sup> On 25 October 1971, as Kissinger was returned from China, the General Assembly voted to admit the People's Republic of China to the UN and expelled the Republic of China. Taiwan, Nixon said, must know that Washington is engaging with the PRC, “not because we love them. But because they're there.”<sup>46</sup>

Images of China's ancient greatness, offered the idea that Communism would not withstand the long tradition of China's great culture. On the other hand, images of China's as a U.S. ward, raised the assumption that the inferior people could not withstand total severance from the United States. It was extremely significant, then, that this long enduring nation, under a new and antagonistic political structure, had prevailed for so long completely without U.S. help. More than this, there was the frightening memory of the surprising defeat of Americans by a Chinese army in North Korea. It was clear that the People's Republic was not going anywhere, so it might as well be brought to the side of the U.S.. At the same time, Americans bore the parental responsibility and guilt of the “loss of China.” It was the guardian's fault that the good

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<sup>44</sup> Nixon, “CHINA,” in *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*. 556.

<sup>45</sup> William Burr, ed., “The Lead-Up to Nixon's Trip to China: U.S. and Chinese Documents and Tapes,” National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 70, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB70/>.

<sup>46</sup> National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, White House Tapes, Oval Office, Conversation No. 532-17. June 30, 1971.

Chinese wards were subject to the cruelty of Communism. Thus, rapprochement gave Americans the hope of fulfilling their benevolent duty—saving the Chinese people through the model of liberal democracy.

It is important to explore the discursive paradoxes that arise with the dual images of China. How could inferior and good people simultaneously embody the world's greatest threat? On the one hand, this allows the U.S. to imagine itself, along with its Western allies, as holding a place at the top of a hierarchy of cultures. On the other hand, the essentializing notion of China's "Oriental barbarity," seemingly proven by their role in the Korean War, constructs it as an unpredictable and menacing figure. This threat would only get worse, as the PRC develops as a nation, though the idea that it could ever rival the power of the United States is unthinkable. The U.S. is still grappling with this conundrum to this day. China was never supposed to be a powerful player on the World stage. The discursive reality of both China and the U.S., are challenged by any success realized by China. However, these challenges do not undermine the U.S. imagination on China, instead they further demonstrate the threat China poses.

This discourse of Chinese antagonism was much deeper than the Cold War fear of Communism, or even the war in Vietnam. For almost a generation before Nixon took office, there existed a perception that the PRC was the most alarming entity in international relations. While Nixon consistently employs rhetoric that portrays China as a threat or dangerous, the actual grounds for this belief are never explicitly elaborated upon. In one of the many toasts during his time in the PRC, he himself even said, "There is no reason for us to be enemies. Neither of us seeks the territory of the other. Neither of us seeks domination over the other. Neither of us seeks

to stretch out our hands and rule the world.”<sup>47</sup> Nixon makes many claims along the same lines as the statement, “if we do not find a way to, despite our differences, to have discussions, we are on a collision course years ahead, which would be very, very serious.”<sup>48</sup> However, it is not plainly clear why exactly this very serious collision course would come about. In a 1965 interview with Edgar Snow, Mao Zedong even blatantly asserted that he had no intention of initiating aggression with the United States, stating that China is “not going to start the war from our side; only when the United States attacks shall we fight back... As I’ve already said, please rest assured that we won’t attack the United States.”<sup>49</sup>

The gravity attributed to China, to influence the future conditions of the world was highly due to the sheer size of its population. Nixon recognized China’s status as the most populous country in the world as an indication to its potential as a nation, and more than this, its potential as both a threat and a valuable asset. Nixon himself said, “The potential of China, though obscured to most American observers by its isolation, was such that no sensible foreign policy could ignore or exclude it.”<sup>50</sup> On the one hand, China’s size could allow it to extend its alarming presence on the world stage. On the other hand, the U.S. could possibly have influence over the largest population in the world. Thus, Kissinger reflects that Nixon’s most remarkable foreign policy achievement was “the opening to one-fifth of the world population.”<sup>51</sup> By the Nixon administration, it seemed the size of China had simply become too important to ignore. Engagement, then, both moved towards promising strategic authority over a nation on the rise,

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<sup>47</sup> President Nixon, “Transcript of the Toasts by Premier Chou and President Nixon.”

<sup>48</sup> Richard Nixon, “Transcript for Conversation 92-1 Excerpt 2,” February 29, 1972, <https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/virtuallibrary/tapeexcerpts/china-92-1b.pdf>.

<sup>49</sup> Henry Kissinger, *On China*.

<sup>50</sup> Nixon, Richard M. “CHINA,” in *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*.

<sup>51</sup> Henry Kissinger, *On China*.

but also sought to confront and contain the possibility of a more powerful China. A Sino-American relationship would not only save China from itself, but would also save the world from China. Reflecting on his trip, Nixon writes,

two impressions stand out most vividly. One is the awesome sight of the disciplined but wildly—almost fanatically—enthusiastic audience at the gymnastics exhibition in Peking, confirming my belief that we must cultivate China during the next few decades while it is still learning to develop its national strength and potential. Otherwise we will one day be confronted with the most formidable enemy that has ever existed in the history of the world.<sup>52</sup>

Thus is the epitome of U.S. ambivalence towards China. Discourse on China dually understands the U.S. to hold the role of paternalistic savior to China, and China to hold the role of an antagonistic threat. A logical foreign policy, therefore, must necessarily take into account both of these truths. The U.S. understanding of China demands a hybrid foreign policy approach of containment and engagement, despite a multitude of contradictions. This is again exemplified by Nixon's comparison of diplomatic relations with the PRC to American domestic social reform, where he says, "In each case dialogues have to be opened; in each case aggression has to be restrained while education proceeds."<sup>53</sup>

It is through his trip to the PRC, that Nixon fully recognizes China as a "sleeping dragon." The images of China's potential to be a violently frightening foe already existed in the U.S. imagination, now grounded by contemporary contexts. Not only was China one of the oldest nations, but the most populated, and had at one point been the most advanced and powerful country on earth. At the same time, Yellow Peril associations characterize China, as an East Asian nation, to pose an inherent threat to Western values and civilization. This danger is only intensified by China's Communist ideology. Nixon's understanding was that a powerful

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<sup>52</sup> Nixon, Richard M. "CHINA," in *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*. 577.

<sup>53</sup> Nixon, Richard M. "Asia after Viet Nam."

China, outside the influence of the U.S., would be the most formidable foe that ever existed, because it would embody a physical threat, with an endless supply of soldiers; a threat to the world order, as a despotic and country; and a threat to U.S. hegemony and identity.

The epistemic reality of China created by discourse, is evidently abundant with contradictions. In the same essay that Nixon pronounced China to be Asia's greatest threat, he also wrote

Japan's gross national product (\$95 billion) is substantially greater than that of mainland China, with seven times the population. Japan is expected soon to rank as the world's third-strongest economic power, trailing only the United States and the Soviet Union. Along with this dramatic economic surge, Japan will surely want to play a greater role in both diplomatically and militarily in maintaining balance in Asia.<sup>54</sup>

This inconsistency is further underlined by the claims that the PRC actually needs the protection of the United States. In discussions on U.S. military presence in Europe, Japan, and naval forces in the Pacific, Nixon told Chou En-lai that if the U.S. withdrew from these areas of the world “the dangers to the United States would be great—and the dangers to China would be even greater.”<sup>55</sup> Preserving the military establishment is further important for the U.S. to maintain an ideal level of influence around the world. Despite the desire to establish Sino-American relations, the U.S. still had the desire to curb the influence of the PRC in Asia, and uphold its own. The regime of truth that this discourse establishes leaves no room for China, as a nation, to be imagined as anywhere near as powerful as the U.S., at this time it was not even the most powerful country in Asia, but it also remains true that China embodies an immense threat to the world.

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<sup>54</sup> Nixon, Richard M. "Asia after Viet Nam."

<sup>55</sup> Nixon, "CHINA," in *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*. 566.

## Part 2: Barack Obama

*"That is a sleeping dragon. Let him sleep! If he wakes, he will shake the world."*

-Napoleon Bonaparte

It would seem that Nixon was entirely accurate to predict China's great national potential. With its economic reform and opening beginning in the late seventies, China has maintained its place as one of the most rapidly growing economies. By the beginning of the Obama administration in 2008, it was the world's second largest economy and held the largest current account surplus and foreign exchange reserves.<sup>56</sup> By this time too, China's military was the third strongest in the world, maintaining a continuous and focused effort on military modernization and enhancement.<sup>57</sup> In the less than fifty years since Nixon and Mao reopened a Sino-American dialogue, China emerged in the twenty-first century as one of the world's leading superpowers. Despite the many changes that both China and the U.S have experienced since 1972, discourse and foreign policy on China have remained consistent since the Nixon administration. The U.S. imagination on China is firmly established, while the real China grows and changes. If the U.S. considered China to be the most alarming global presence in 1972, when the PRC was still very new, China as a global superpower is basically unacceptable. As such, the very real, and undeniable, rise of China is pointed to as one of the biggest challenges the U.S. will have to face in this century. Anxieties over the growing power of China go deeper than the fear of great power displacement. The U.S. imagination perceives there to be something exceptional about China, that renders it an inherently threatening entity. Part of the Obama administration rhetoric

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<sup>56</sup> C. Fred Bergsten, *China's Rise: Challenges and Opportunities* (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2008).

<sup>57</sup> "Military Powers Ranked since 2005 According to Global Firepower," Global Firepower - World Military Strength, accessed March 1, 2021, <https://www.globalfirepower.com/global-ranks-previous.php>

on China claimed a readiness to welcome China's growing influence and desire to collaborate with China on global issues. However, any deviation from U.S. global leadership is seen as assertiveness or aggression on the part of China. Furthermore, President Obama majorly shifted American foreign policy from a focus on the Middle East, and the War on Terror, to the Asia-Pacific region, a move outwardly intended to check China's influence. In fact, hardly any effort was made to conceal the true policy objective of containing China. From the establishment of modern discourse on China, under Nixon, the U.S. imagination has left no room for China to truly exist on the world stage.

While U.S. discourse and policy on China have broadly stayed in place since 1972, there are actually interesting parallels between specific contexts of Nixon's policy of rapprochement and Obama's pivot towards Asia. Richard Nixon entered office in 1969, in the throws of the disastrous American war in Vietnam. The U.S., believing itself to be the most powerful nation in the world and the standard for peace and freedom, was internationally humiliated by its involvement in a costly and violent war that it could not win. As one of the main actors in the Vietnam War, the PRC was still a newly established country, nowhere near a superpower, but clearly a nation on the rise, after a long period of domestic and international turmoil. Forty years later, Barack Obama was elected president, while the U.S. entered year seven of the War on Terror, with no end in sight. Like Vietnam, the War on Terror has ended up being a long winded, unnecessary, and internationally embarrassing failure. At the same time, China was again entering into a new era, no longer a brand new country, but a brand new global superpower. During the Nixon and Obama administrations, respectively, China's existence was recognized as an issue that required special attention at the forefront of American foreign policy. It is in these

cases, where China takes a central position in the American political dialogue, that the consistencies of U.S. discourse and policy on China, with all of their contradictions and shortcomings, are most pronounced.

It is interesting to explore the limits imposed on foreign policy by considering how little the actual bilateral relationship between China and the U.S. changed in the many years since Nixon's visit. While rapprochement was initiated in 1972, and Sino-American relations were officially normalized six years later, in the Obama administration there is still the rhetoric around the "seeking" a friendly relationship or "exploring" a possible partnership. While China has been consistently considered "one of the most challenging and consequential bilateral relationships the United States has ever had to manage," the Obama administration after 40 year apparently searching for some common ground amid the supposed vast differences. Probably most important, however, is the fact that the Obama administration sought the fulfillment of the same roles that envisioned during the Nixon administration. In his memoir, Obama writes that following a speech he gave in China, he "left the town hall acutely aware the winning over this new generation depended on my ability to show that America's democratic, rights-based, pluralistic system could still deliver on the promise of a better life."<sup>58</sup> Obama engages with missionary images of China as a U.S. ward. He operates under the idea that people in China, not only need, but want to be saved by American liberal democracy. As, Hillary Clinton writes,

It flows from our model of free democracy and free enterprise, a model that remains the most powerful source of prosperity and progress known to humankind. I hear everywhere I go that the world still looks to the United States for leadership. Our military is by far the strongest, and our economy is by far the largest in the world. Our workers are the most productive. Our universities are renowned the world over. So there should be no doubt

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<sup>58</sup> Obama, Barack. *A Promised Land*. London, UK: Penguin Books , 2020. 481.



that America has the capacity to secure and sustain our global leadership in this century as we did in the last.<sup>59</sup>

The U.S. then is cast not only in the role of benevolent guardian, but indisputable hegemonic superpower.

Obama entered into office as the self-proclaimed “first Pacific president,” declaring that the U.S. had become too disengaged from Asian regional issues and needed to restore and enhance its level of engagement there. These sentiments were parodied by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who declared America to be in its “Pacific century,” writing that one of the most important duties of twenty-first century American foreign policy is to increase diplomatic, economic, and strategic investments in the Asia-Pacific region, which would support the broad effort to secure and sustain America’s global leadership.<sup>60</sup> The rationale for the rebalance was logical, the Asia-Pacific region makes up almost half the world’s population and has increasingly moved towards the global political and economic center of gravity. Jeffery Bader, the senior director for Asian Affairs on the National Security Council in Obama’s first term, asserts that one of the key elements of the administration’s Asia policy, was a strong China strategy that rested on three pillars:

(1) a welcoming approach to China’s emergence, influence, and legitimate expanded role; (2) a resolve to see that its rise is consistent with international norms and law; and (3) an endeavor to shape the Asia-Pacific environment to ensure that China’s rise is stabilizing rather than disruptive.<sup>61</sup>

While the U.S. claimed an openness to the rise of China, in practice, foreign policy was concentrated on thwarting China’s global influence and leadership. A more powerful China will

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<sup>59</sup> Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>.

<sup>60</sup> Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century.”

<sup>61</sup> Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2013).

only be accepted, so long as it stays within the confines of U.S. constructed world order. Any deviation from the global liberal norms or proposed amendments, is not tolerated and exemplifies China's danger. The only way to alleviate the threat of China, is to ensure that it is subject to U.S. authority, or at the very least does not infringe upon it. While engagement was the principal characteristic of U.S. overall Asia policy, it actually worked to contain China, largely by reinforcing the domination of American influence in the region.

The overall Asia strategy included six main lines of action—strengthening bilateral alliances, participation in regional multilateral institutions, expanding trade and investment, constructing a growing comprehensive military presence, deepening relationships with emerging powers, along with advancing democracy and human rights.<sup>62</sup> The administration emphasised the importance of engagement in the region, building new relationships and strengthening old ones. It was a stated priority of the Obama administration to “strengthen cooperation among partners in the region, leverage their significant and growing capabilities to build a network of like-minded states that sustains and strengthens a rules-based regional order and addresses regional and global challenges.”<sup>63</sup> The U.S. sought to shape and immerse itself in the architecture of the Asia-Pacific, so that American values and interests could be advanced in the region. More than this though, was the effort to prevent China from extending its own interests and influence in the region. Establishing relationships with China's neighbors is claimed to be an effort to ensure that China's rise is stabilizing and constructive. However, Hillary Clinton revealed the true objective, when she expressed that “working with more allies and partners will provide a more robust

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<sup>62</sup> Hillary Clinton, “America's Pacific Century.”

<sup>63</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, “FACT SHEET: Advancing the Rebalance to Asia and the Pacific,” National Archives and Records Administration (National Archives and Records Administration, November 16, 2015).

bulwark against threats or efforts to undermine regional peace and stability.”<sup>64</sup> This threat, of course, is posed by the rising China. In arguments for a strong and sustained presence in Asia, the Obama administration positioned the U.S. in the role of global protector. The pivot towards Asia, was apparently just as much for the benefit of the region, as the U.S. would serve as a much needed protector and guardian for Asian countries and their interests, especially from the ever threatening China. While speaking in Japan, Obama noted that, “these alliances continue to provide the bedrock of security and stability that has allowed the nations and peoples of this region to pursue opportunity and prosperity that was unimaginable at the time of my first childhood visit to Japan.”<sup>65</sup> More than this, the administration insisted that a significant U.S. presence is actually appreciated by the majority of Asian states. Jeffery Bader alleges that the region sees the U.S. as,

a source of innovation, trade and investment, ideas, and educational opportunities; as the protector and provider of global public goods such as freedom of the seas and an open trade and investment system; as protector of the weak and defenseless against aggression... In their eyes, America is an essential stabilizing force as rising powers, principally China but also India, gain influence.<sup>66</sup>

Presumably, all sides would benefit from bilateral relations with the U.S., even China. The U.S. would “accept” China’s growth, serve as a stabilizing force for other Asian states, and demonstrate its own capacity for leadership. In reality, the Obama administration was pursuing strategic relationships as a means of containing China. The U.S. wanted to solidify influence over Asian states and condition them with American values. Leveraging present and future regional partners would, hopefully, lower the possibility of China expanding its influence and

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<sup>64</sup> Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century.”

<sup>65</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by President Barack Obama at Suntory Hall”. Suntory Hall, Tokyo, Japan, November 14, 2009.

<sup>66</sup> Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy*. 5.

gaining power. The U.S. needed to be to be the dominant authority in the region, so that China would not have the chance to be.

Obama professed to believe in a “smarter kind of American leadership,” saying that the U.S. “leads best when we combine military power with strong diplomacy; when we leverage our power with coalition building.”<sup>67</sup> Obama’s rebalance conveyed military power as a tool that would support deeper engagement and stronger partnerships in the Asia-Pacific. However, the increase in military focus on the Asia-Pacific was a relatively unambiguous strategy of containment. In January 2012, the Department of Defense released *Sustaining US Global Leadership – Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, as a move to refocus the Pentagon’s priorities and capacity. The Defense Strategic Guidance declares that “while the U.S. military will continue to contribute to security globally, we will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region.”<sup>68</sup> China’s ascension to superpower status has naturally included advancement in military capabilities and thus the U.S. would balance these capabilities with its own, and check China’s influence and power. The necessity behind this military rebalance, is the management of China’s power and influence. In the same month the Pentagon released the *Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC)*, which outlines how the U.S. is to maintain, in the face of anti-access or area-denial, operational access to any region of the world—be it sea, land, air, space or cyberspace. The document states that “as a global power with global interests, the United States must maintain the credible capability to project military force into any region of the world in support of those interests.”<sup>69</sup> While no adversary is explicitly named, anti-access and area-denial is usually associated with claims of China’s disrupting freedom of navigation in the South China

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<sup>67</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President in State of the Union Address”. Washington, D.C., January 20, 2015.

<sup>68</sup> Department of Defense *Sustaining US Global Leadership – Priorities for 21st Century Defense*. January 5, 2012.

<sup>69</sup> Department of Defense, *Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC)*, January 17, 2012.

Sea. A component of the JOAC was the *Air-Sea Battle* concept, whose intent was to properly integrate air, land, naval, space, and cyberspace forces to develop the capabilities to “deter and, if necessary, defeat an adversary employing sophisticated antiaccess/area-denial capabilities. It focuses on ensuring that joint forces will possess the ability to project force as required to preserve and defend U.S. interests well into the future.”<sup>70</sup> This went along with the announcement by Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Jonathan Greenert that by 2020 the U.S. planned to increase its allocation of naval ships and aircraft from a 50-50 split between the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean to 60 percent of assets assigned to the Pacific Ocean.<sup>71</sup> This was to include six aircraft carriers, a number of cruisers, destroyers, combat ships, and submarines; the deployment of 2,500 U.S. Marines in Australia, Littoral Combat Ships in Singapore; F-22s and MV-22 Ospreys in Japan; establishing fully capable Marine Air-Ground Task Forces in Japan, Guam and Hawaii; hosting military forces at the Subic Bay base for the first time in 20 years; upgrading army capabilities in Korea; and increasing military exercises in the region.<sup>72</sup> Forging a broad-based military presence in the region would physically support the effort to curb China’s influence (and physically contain it if necessary) and counter any interference to American interests.

Foreign policy considered it strategically important for the U.S. to not only participate, but lead in the most important multilateral regional organizations. The U.S. sought to shape the institutional and economic architecture, in order to reinforce the norms and rules of the liberal international order. Obama was committed to strengthening the role of regional organizations,

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<sup>70</sup> Department of Defense, *JOAC*

<sup>71</sup> Leon E. Panetta, “The US Rebalance Towards the Asia-Pacific”. 11<sup>th</sup> annual IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, June 2, 2012.

<sup>72</sup> Leon E. Panetta “Leon E. Panetta: US's Pacific Rebalance.” Mint, December 31, 2012. <https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/JvMPtZbLzILPUGY5rslwQI/USs-Pacific-rebalance.html>.

including the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), and the East Asian Summit (EAS.) U.S. institutional leadership was a crucial step for the goal of promoting democratic values and defending universal values across the region. A stronger relationship with ASEAN, and its related organizations, was considered especially significant for the economic, strategic, and military interests of the U.S. and “an underpinning of a broader Asian equilibrium.”<sup>73</sup> There are immense anxieties about China's potential influence in relation to the U.S. led world order. Thus, the stated mission of the U.S.-ASEAN partnership, is “building and sustaining a rules-based order in the Asia-Pacific, one in which countries can pursue their objectives peacefully and in accordance with international law and norms.”<sup>74</sup> Since Nixon, the world order has been considered a means through which the threat of China could be contained and it is unacceptable to think that China could have an equal say to the U.S. and upset the established order. Multilateralism in Asia and the push for universal (American) values in the region are intended to counter China’s growing clout.

The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), signed in 2016, was a decisive signal of the U.S.’s commitment to holding a position of authority in the region. President Obama announced in November 2009 the U.S.’s intention of participating in TPP negotiations in order to accomplish an ambitious, Asia-Pacific trade agreement that reflects U.S. priorities and values. The TPP was “central to the U.S. vision of Asia’s future and its place in it” and a critical step toward “the strategic goal of revitalizing the open, rules-based economic system that the United States has

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<sup>73</sup> Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy*. 4.

<sup>74</sup> Office of the Press Secretary. “FACT SHEET: Unprecedented U.S.-ASEAN Relations.” Washington, D.C., February 12, 2016.

led since World War II.”<sup>75</sup> For the U.S., the TPP was a strategic channel through which it could play a leading role in writing the rules for an important region during a pivotal moment of global transition. The TPP’s promise was to promote economic growth; job creation and retention; enhance innovation, productivity and competitiveness; and raise living standards and reduce poverty in member states. The free-trade agreement was proposed between Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, the U.S., and Vietnam. These countries represented 40 percent of global GDP and about a third of world trade.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, the TPP would put 40 percent of the world economy on the side of the U.S., which could counter the 16 percent of global GDP that China held by Obama’s final year in office.<sup>77</sup> China’s dazzling economic growth was central to its growing global ascension, the TPP was a window of opportunity to curb China’s rise at the source. By creating a trade zone covering a portion of East Asia would further deepen the U.S.’s role in Asia’s economic framework, and hopefully isolate China. Recognizing the upward trajectory of China, this kind of engagement was intended to establish the U.S. as a permanent fixture in regional affairs. Deputy Secretary of State Anthony Blinken stated that involvement in multilateral institutions, like the TPP, send “the strongest possible message to other countries in the region that we’re there for the long haul...it has the tremendous potential, to be a magnet to move other countries in the direction of the highest possible standards.”<sup>78</sup> These standards, of course, are those set by the U.S. example.

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<sup>75</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, “FACT SHEET: Advancing the Rebalance to Asia and the Pacific,” National Archives and Records Administration (National Archives and Records Administration, November 16, 2015).

<sup>76</sup> Michael Froman, “Remarks by Ambassador Michael Froman at the Council on Foreign Relations: The Strategic Logic of Trade,” (June 16, 2014).

<sup>77</sup> “China: Share of Global Gross Domestic Product 2026.” Statista, April 7, 2021.

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/270439/chinas-share-of-global-gross-domestic-product-gdp/>.

<sup>78</sup> Antony J. Blinken “Remarks at Center for a New American Security,” (2015).

Daniel Russel, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, claimed that the focus of the TPP is not on China, saying that “this is not an anti-China deal. This is a pro-U.S., pro-Asia-Pacific, trade deal that does so much to set high standards that we can’t afford not to ratify it.”<sup>79</sup> Anthony Blinken, too, claimed that the TPP, and rebalance in general, were “not about isolating China or keeping it down or containing it.”<sup>80</sup> He even asserted that there was hope that China would someday be a part of the TPP. Obama’s Asia policy, as a whole, was built around the language of engagement—bilateral engagement, multilateral institutional engagement, even engagement with China. The rebalancing effort actually included the objective of building a sturdy relationship and strategic partnership with China. However in his 2016 State of the Union address, Obama urged the approval of the TPP, under the argument that it was necessary for ensuring that the U.S. did not lose authority to China. He states,

We forged a Trans-Pacific Partnership to open markets, and protect workers and the environment, and advance American leadership in Asia. It cuts 18,000 taxes on products made in America, which will then support more good jobs here in America. With TPP, China does not set the rules in that region; we do. You want to show our strength in this new century? Approve this agreement. Give us the tools to enforce it. It’s the right thing to do.<sup>81</sup>

The U.S. could not let China, the most populous country in the world, shape the future of the most populous region in the world. If China were to be the dominant influence in Asia, then it would have more dominant influence globally. In the U.S. imagination, as the influence of China grows, so too does its threat to the world order, and the world. Not only did the U.S. want to integrate the norms of the liberal order into the framework of the region, it wanted the region to be integrated into the framework of the liberal order. The rebalance also sought to strengthen

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<sup>79</sup> Daniel R. Russel, “Perspectives on U.S. Policy Toward the Asia-Pacific.” U.S. Department of State, (2016).

<sup>80</sup> Antony J. Blinken, “Remarks at Center for a New American Security,” (2015)

<sup>81</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks of President Barack Obama – State of the Union Address As Delivered”. Washington, D.C., January 13, 2016.



international institutions—such as the G-20, the IMF, the Financial Stability Board, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank—and ensure that they are more inclusive of Asia-Pacific states. While engagement with states and institutions in Asia worked towards containing the threat of China’s growing influence, China as an entity would still remain threatening in the U.S. imagination. Assistant Secretary Daniel Russel noted that from the outset, President Obama had a clear objective of seeing that a rising China integrate into the Asia-Pacific system of rules and of international law.<sup>82</sup> Of course, this was in addition to the objective of shaping the Asia-Pacific region to reflect the liberal international order and American leadership. From the time of Sino-American rapprochement, the U.S. has sought China’s full absorption into the world order, not just as a participant but a subservient and malleable constituent.

Nixon sought China’s integration into the established world order as a way to address its threatening presence. The expectation was that China could play a more constructive role, presumably adapting to the U.S. model, within the system rather than outside of it. Since then, China has become a major fixture in some of the most prominent international institutions—including the UN, the WTO, the G-20, the World Bank, and the IMF—along with holding a seat as one of the permanent five Security Council members. A principle of the Obama administration’s China strategy was that “China should not be considered an inevitable adversary, but rather a potential partner in resolving critical global issues.”<sup>83</sup> Still, China remains a threatening presence in the U.S. imagination, exacerbated by its progressively growing power. In accordance with the administration’s engagement based strategy, Obama declared that the

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<sup>82</sup> Daniel R. Russel “Perspectives on U.S. Policy Toward the Asia-Pacific.”

<sup>83</sup> Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy*. 23.

U.S. “welcomes China's effort to play a greater role on the world stage.”<sup>84</sup> According to deputy secretary of state James Steinberg, the administration’s vision for Sino-American relations operated with an appreciation for the insight that began with Nixon, recognizing “that the long-term interests of the United States were better served not by trying to thwart China’s ambitions, but rather to explore the possibility of whether China could become a partner with the United States.”<sup>85</sup> In fact, the U.S. actually called for China to take on bigger responsibility in global issues. In a 2014 interview for the New York times, Obama expressed that while the United States has been left with bearing the burdens of upholding international security, prosperity, and overall global good, the Chinese are ‘free riders,’ “they have been free riders for the last 30 years, and it’s worked really well for them.”<sup>86</sup> By dubbing China a global free rider, the President indicated that the country was benefiting from the U.S. constructed international system without shouldering the responsibilities.

The U.S. apparently sought out a cooperative partner in China, one that would work alongside the U.S. in addressing global challenges. The idea was, China and the U.S. have common interests in addressing these challenges and would mutually benefit from collaboration. Obama identified the most pressing global challenges as: economic recovery and stability; climate change; nuclear proliferation; and transnational threats.”<sup>87</sup> In the early years of Obama’s presidency, the U.S. was suffering, domestically and internationally, from the effects of the 2008 financial crisis. The Obama administration had to work to reverse the view that the crisis had

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<sup>84</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by President Barack Obama at Suntory Hall”.

<sup>85</sup> James B. Steinberg, “James Steinberg, [Obama] Administration's Vision Of The U.S.-China Relationship”. Center for New American Security, Washington, D.C., September 24, 2009.

<sup>86</sup> Thomas L. Friedman. “China as a Free Rider.” The New York Times, August 9, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000003047788/china-as-a-free-rider.html>.

<sup>87</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at the U.S./China Strategic and Economic Dialogue”. Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center, Washington, D.C., July 27, 2009.

permanently damaged U.S. global leadership. Meanwhile, China was the second largest global economy and held more than \$700 billion in U.S. debt and enormous amounts of foreign currency reserves, making it a necessary partner for U.S. interests domestically and abroad.<sup>88</sup> The U.S. called upon China to take on more responsibility in tackling climate change, as the two countries are the largest emitters of CO<sub>2</sub>, representing around 40 percent of emissions globally. Obama also pushed for China's support in the punishment states seeking nuclear weapon capabilities and the fight against terrorism in the Middle East. This went along with the criticism of China for its economic and diplomatic ties with "bad actors" like Iran and North Korea, along with benefiting from investments in Iraq without working to deal with the local conflict. China has been involved in international efforts to confront these issues. Secretary Clinton pointed to the role of China in economic recovery, writing that, "in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, the United States and China worked effectively through the G-20 to help pull the global economy back from the brink."<sup>89</sup> China joined efforts with the U.S. in taking on a leadership role in tackling the climate crisis.<sup>90</sup> The countries confirmed their joint entrance into the Paris Climate Agreement on September 3rd, 2016. Obama himself asserted that China played a critical role in economic recovery from the global financial crisis, has promoted security and stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and is committed to the global nonproliferation regime.<sup>91</sup>

China's expanded role on the international stage, or even its presence, is only accepted when it is in line with U.S. interests. Any attempt, by China, to exist autonomously as a superpower or make its own contribution to the world order, is rejected by the U.S. and

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<sup>88</sup> Obama, Barack. *A Promised Land*. 2020. 475.

<sup>89</sup> Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century."

<sup>90</sup> "U.S.-China Joint Presidential Statement on Climate Change," March 31, 2016. The White House.

<sup>91</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Barack Obama at Suntory Hall".

perceived as actively unsettling. In a 2013 speech at the Indonesian Parliament, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the establishment of an Asian infrastructure investment bank.<sup>92</sup> President Xi emphasised the harmonious, nonrevisionist nature of China's vision for the bank, stating the intention for cooperation bilaterally, multilaterally, regionally, and with existing multilateral development banks.<sup>93</sup> This new international development bank would provide financing for infrastructure projects in Asia. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) was formally established in December of 2015 with 57 founding members and officially opened for business on January 16, 2016. According to the AIIB's Articles of Agreement, the purpose of the Bank was to:

- (i) foster sustainable economic development, create wealth and improve infrastructure connectivity in Asia by investing in infrastructure and other productive sectors; and (ii) promote regional cooperation and partnership in addressing development challenges by working in close collaboration with other multilateral and bilateral development institutions.<sup>94</sup>

Not only does the AIIB, as a multilateral institution, work within the expectations of the established international order, it also shows China's interest in taking on more global responsibilities—which is exactly what the U.S. claimed it wanted. However, this initiative was taken as a direct challenge, and rival, to the international lending bodies that reflect of American interests, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank (ADB.) Fearing the institution to be a vehicle for Chinese influence the U.S reacted with steadfast opposition to the AIIB, trying to marginalize the bank's impact and pressure its allies against participation. Though outwardly, the White House's opposition to the

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<sup>92</sup> Xi Jinping "Speech to Indonesian Parliament". Jakarta, Indonesia, October 2, 2013.

<sup>93</sup> Xi Jinping "Address to the APEC CEO Summit". Bali, Indonesia October 19, 2013.

<sup>94</sup> Articles of Agreement, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. December 25, 2015.

AIIB presented as the fear that it would undercut the “high standards” set by established U.S. led institutions.

Despite the U.S.’s best efforts to alienate and delegitimize the AIIB, some of its top allies have become members, including South Korea, Australia, the U.K, Germany, France, Italy, and Canada. Upon the U.K.’s announcement that it would be a founding member of the bank, the Obama administration responded that the U.S. is “wary about a trend toward constant accommodation of China, which is not the best way to engage a rising power.”<sup>95</sup> The overall U.S. approach towards China, in general, believed indulgence and accommodation of, so-called, “assertive Chinese conduct” could “embolden bad behavior.”<sup>96</sup> The stark condemnation of the U.K.’s entrance into the bank emphasizes the extent to which Washington wanted to keep allies away from, and indeed contain, the bank. As such, the U.S. has resolutely turned its back on any opportunity for AIIB membership. The U.S.’s stance on the AIIB presents a multitude of contradictions. For one, the Obama administration’s vision for the Asia-Pacific was stated to include the desire to see “emerging partners shaping and participating in a rules-based regional and global order.”<sup>97</sup> At a deeper level of course was the objective of preventing rising powers from acting outside of, or undermining, the world order that has prevailed since WWII. Still, the AIIB doesn’t challenge the status-quo of global governance as it largely conforms to the models of the existing institutions of the “rules-based” order. Moreover, the lack of U.S. participation in the investment bank is inconsistent with the policy of using engagement as a means to shape the region to be in line with American influence and the established order. Obama stressed the

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<sup>95</sup> Geoff Dyer and George Parker, “US Attacks UK’s ‘Constant Accommodation’ with China.” *Financial Times*. March 12, 2015.

<sup>96</sup> Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy*. 7.

<sup>97</sup> Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century”.

importance of playing a substantial role in shaping the future conditions of Asia. However, being an AIIB outsider diminishes the capacity to address the Obama administration's concerns about the environmental, human rights, and institutional standards of the bank or the notion that it would serve as a vehicle for China to further its interests unchecked, which are supposedly the very reasons for not joining. The U.S.'s refusal to participate in the AIIB illustrates the U.S.'s refusal to accept any initiative led by China. Upon the U.S.'s arrival as a superpower, it was able to take a commanding position in the construction of a world order that represented its values and interests. The PRC, not only was left out of the construction of the world order, but as a superpower is being restrained from playing a hand in the adjustment of the world order to reflect its own interests and values, obliged to conform to the domination of U.S. authority in the established order.

Not only did the U.S. reject China's contribution to the world order, there is little room for China to grow its influence in the pre existing multilateral economic institutions. In fact, the creation of the AIIB cannot be unrelated to China's dissatisfaction with these institutions. China lobbied for years about the need for structural reform of the ADB and the IMF, so as to give emerging economies a larger say. The Asian Development Bank has been dominated by the U.S. and Japan since its creation in 1966. In the IMF too, the U.S., as the largest shareholder, has had by far the most influence and power. Obama's deputy secretary of state asserted that the international community must "ensure that new powers like China can take their rightful place at the table without generating fear or mistrust. That means making the institutions more inclusive so that they reflect the world of today, rather than the world of 1945 or the 1970."<sup>98</sup> However,

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<sup>98</sup> James B. Steinberg, "James Steinberg, [Obama] Administration's Vision Of The U.S.-China Relationship".

China's attempts to reconcile its influence in the ADB with the size of its economy have not been fruitful. China is the largest economy in Asia, though only the third-largest shareholder in the ADB, holding less than half the voting power of both the U.S. and Japan during the Obama administration. IMF reform was in fact proposed by the G-20 in 2010 (though it did not enter force until January of 2016) which would double China's voting power, making it the third-largest shareholder. However, under the proposed reforms U.S. voting power (16.5 percent of total votes) was still to be over double that of China (6.068 percent of total votes.)<sup>99</sup> Additionally, with 16.5 percent of total votes, the U.S. would still have the unique veto power over major decisions, as the approval of major IMF decisions requires a supermajority vote of 85 percent of members. Thus, it would be able to control China's influence within the IMF. As the U.S. has the power to veto increases in member's quota share, with larger proportions of quota equating to greater say in how the IMF is run. China's rise has brought into question whether the international order is meant to work for everyone. Indeed, despite its best efforts to claim otherwise, the world order was made by the U.S. and for the U.S.

What becomes apparent is that Obama's foreign policy does not take China on its own terms. In fact, the discursive space that dictates foreign policy on China actually prevents taking China on its own terms. While Obama called upon the world to embrace a "new era of engagement based on mutual interests and mutual respect," he still functions within a dominant discourse that has perpetuated the same limitations on foreign policy, since its establishment.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> *Quota and Voting Shares Before and After Implementation of Reforms Agreed in 2008 and 2010*. International Monetary Fund. [https://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/pr/2011/pdfs/quota\\_tbl.pdf](https://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/pr/2011/pdfs/quota_tbl.pdf)

<sup>100</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President to the United Nations General Assembly." United Nations Headquarters, New York, NY, September 23, 2009.

The discursive shortcomings grow increasingly pronounced as China takes up more space on the world stage. While the Obama administration tried its best to convey an engagement based foreign policy approach, there is, by design, limited room left for the real China to exist. The Obama administration consistently emphasised its sincere belief that,

in an interconnected world, power does not need to be a zero-sum game, and nations need not fear the success of another. Cultivating spheres of cooperation -- not competing spheres of influence -- will lead to progress in the Asia Pacific.<sup>101</sup>

However, this has become increasingly more untrue, as the divergence between China in the U.S. imagination and the real China becomes more apparent.

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<sup>101</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Barack Obama at Suntory Hall".



## *Conclusion*

### *The Present and the Future*

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The primary goal of this paper was to present the argument that U.S. foreign policy on China is limited by discourse. I identified three important functions of discourse to be the production (and reproduction) of (1) binary oppositions; (2) regimes of truth and epistemic realities; and (3) social identities. By nature, discourses construct social realities that function within frameworks of meaning, thereby defining what is knowable and true about a given subject. In other words, there can be no legitimate truth outside the bounds of a discursive framework. Necessarily operating within these fixed systems of knowledge, foreign policies are both the product and reproducers of discourses. Through the process of Sino-American rapprochement, a hegemonic discourse was established that has since defined how China is understood by Americans. This particular discourse is informed by a vast array of conflicting images that together constitute what I refer to as the U.S. imagination on China. Within the framework of this discourse, all of these images are simultaneously true, despite the contradictions this raises. That means China is definitively superior and inferior; heathen and humanist; wise sage and "barbaric Orient;" peaceful and violent; a U.S. ward and a U.S. foe.

In parallel with this discourse emerged a U.S. foreign policy on China that perpetually seeks the inconsistent objectives of both containment and engagement. Through the analysis of the discursive representations of China and specific foreign policies of Nixon and Obama, respectively, it became evident that U.S. foreign policy does not recognize the physical reality of China. This is because foreign policy must necessarily function within the framework set by discourse, so the U.S. is limited to seeking a foreign policy based on the ambivalent construction

of China that exists exclusively in its imagination. While I chose to explore my argument through the analysis of these particular presidents, that does not mean this phenomenon is associated exclusively with these two instances. In fact, because discourse reproduces the knowledge it defines, the same limitations remained constant throughout the six administrations between Nixon and Obama's presidencies. Specific images of China fluctuated in and out of the center of discourse, at different points in these almost four decades, but always remained inextricable from the whole understanding of China.

As a figure who publicly resolved to disrupt the American political status quo, Donald Trump represents an especially interesting juncture in this hegemonic discursive framework. During his campaign for the 2016 election, Trump vowed that as president he would "shake the rust off America's foreign policy."<sup>102</sup> Indeed Trump's presidency is largely regarded as a profound departure from traditional methods of post-WWII U.S. leadership. The Trump administration's general foreign policy broke from the traditional view that U.S. interests are rooted in its widespread involvement in the world order and global affairs, instead emphasizing nationalism with the "America First" policy. Trump himself is widely regarded as an anomalous figure, and indeed in certain moments transgressed the boundaries of conventional presidential discourse. However, while Trump did seem to recognize a shortcoming in U.S. foreign policy, he did not overcome or fundamentally shake the strong foundation of the U.S. imagination on China.

Some of the Trump administration's actions do seem to fully diverge from certain positions that have been central to China policy since Nixon. Most significantly, The Trump

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<sup>102</sup> Donald Trump, "Foreign Policy Speech." Center for the National Interests, Washington, D.C., April 27, 2016.

administration deviated from the traditional U.S. foreign policy that emphasized American global leadership, alliances, and promoting the rules-based order. The foreign policy of “America First,” appeared to reject the world order that the U.S. worked so hard to create and maintain. While it's hard to pinpoint the specifics of this policy, it is related to Trump's argument that other nations have been able to use the global order to take advantage of the U.S., or infringe upon U.S. interests. After all, the U.S. largely attributes China's growing power to its participation in the international economic system America designed. The slogan of “America First” has prominent historical associations with nationalist and isolationist approaches to international relations. Seemingly in line with this, the Trump administration withdrew from a number of multilateral agreements (including the TPP, the INF Treaty, and the Paris Climate Agreement,) criticized and lessened engagement with such institutions as the UN and WTO, and alienated some of the U.S.'s closest allies. Many saw these moves as the abdication of global leadership, bringing into question the future of the liberal international order and U.S. hegemony.

These moves both physically and symbolically reversed many of the objectives of the Obama administration's China policy—which was inherently based in maintaining global leadership through the support of the international order. Of course this is in line with a broad theme of rolling back Obama's legacy, however Trump's stance on the world order sets him apart from the vision for China that has been sought since Nixon. Having said that, the reasoning behind Trump's skepticism about the world order, actually demonstrates that he functions within the same discursive space as his predecessors. Instead of looking to the world order as a tool for perpetuating U.S. interests, Trump believes it does not support U.S. interests *enough*. In his inaugural address Trump lamented, in what was assuredly a reference to China, “we've made

other countries rich while the wealth, strength and confidence of our country has disappeared over the horizon.”<sup>103</sup> Any disruption the Trump administration presented to the tradition of world order based foreign policy strategies, was not a foregoing of U.S. global dominance. In fact, Trump was attempting to convey that U.S. power demanded to be acknowledged and accounted for. While a definite breach in norms, Trump was engaging with the discourse that legitimizes the U.S.’s exclusive right to international hegemony and leaves room only for U.S. interests. The administration’s lean towards a more unilateralist policy was informed by the idea that American interest should be perpetuated by the international community, without question or accommodation.

The idea that the fulfillment of American interests should be sought by all was very much intrinsic to the U.S.’s construction and maintenance of the world order. However, in reality, neither the world order nor whatever alternative Trump originally thought he was offering can make U.S. interests the exclusive prerogative of international affairs. To state the obvious, this is because outside of the U.S. imagination there are other interests that exist. The exit of the U.S. from multilateral agreements actually left room for China to garner more influence and take on larger roles of leadership—which was decidedly what the U.S. did not want. Above all the strategic objective of protecting U.S. hegemony from China remained integral to U.S. foreign policy.

The Trump administration supposedly ended the engagement based foreign policy approach to China that had been sought by every president since Nixon. According to the White House, China policy in the 21st century was a failure and needed to be reworked. The

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<sup>103</sup> Donald Trump “Inaugural Address.” Washington, D.C., January 20, 2017.

administration's strategic approach to China recognized that while engagement was sought with the genuine hope that China would adapt to be a constructive and responsible global stakeholder, over the span of 40 years this has still not played out in the way the U.S. envisioned. Instead, Donald Trump aimed to build a policy that demonstrated a “tough on China” stance. Trump did not recognize that foreign policy on China had long been inadequate, but his attempts at a revised foreign policy function within the same discursive frame that has defined foreign policy for generations. While Trump is the only president that has explicitly stated to be seeking something other than engagement, from the beginning engagement has been contradictorily tied to the objectives of containment. The Obama administration presented an especially dazzling language of engagement that thinly veiled a foreign policy focused on thwarting China’s influence. The shortcomings of the U.S. imagination on China have become increasingly more prevalent with China’s rise in the 21st century. China’s changing role on the one hand, becomes more and more irreconcilable with its discursive reality, while on the other hand aggravates images that define China to be a threat.

Pursuing a policy of engagement was of importance in regards both to the image of China as an American ward and the image of China as a sleeping dragon. Nixon’s biggest takeaway from his first trip to China was that the U.S. must cultivate China before it realizes its full potential. He warned that if this civilizing mission failed, China would become the most formidable enemy that has ever existed in the history of the world. By the Trump administration, the U.S. had not only failed to materialize the image of China as a subservient pupil to the U.S., China has, in fact, established itself as one of the most powerful nations in the world. It would then seem that the sleeping dragon has been awakened, if not already awake. Therefore, images

in the U.S. imagination that define China as dangerous and an enemy are especially at the forefront of discourse. Thus, regardless of its legitimate foreign policy objectives, China has been progressively characterized as more and more assertive and an inherent threat to U.S. interests. The confirmed threat of China, imagined to be more realized than ever, required the U.S. to react with a proper strategy for defending its interests. Therefore, the Trump administration's claims to putting aside engagement based China policy is not necessarily a deviation from the status quo, but actually a manifestation of the authority of discursive representation.

The "tough on China" rhetoric is an important way for the U.S. to assuage its ontological security as China transgresses the identity discourse constructed of it. Thus, as China takes up more space on the world stage, the U.S. is bearing in mind the need to protect its exclusive right to global authority. While the Obama administration rejected the notion that the U.S. and China were engaged in a strategic rivalry, the Trump administration framed Sino-American relations as a new era of great power competition. Before the world was hit with the Coronavirus pandemic in 2020—which fueled Yellow Peril discourse—one of the most striking and controversial policies of the Trump administration was the trade war it initiated with China. The Trump administration demonstrated that its approach to China would be more confrontational than in the past, employing policies of straightforward punishment. While the legacy of the Trump administration's China policy is still unfolding, the trade war seemed to hurt the U.S. economy structural imbalances of the U.S.-China trade relationship have yet to be resolved. Interestingly, former president Obama considers a more hardline approach to China to be legitimate. He reflected "if we hadn't been going through a financial crisis, my posture toward China would

have been more explicitly contentious around trade issues... But I couldn't have a trade war in 2009 or 2010."<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, the Biden administration announced that all American tariffs will stay in place for now.

In fact, Joe Biden's campaign and first few months as president, further demonstrate the persistence of this dominant discursive framework. China has, for decades, been used as a tool for political polarity in domestic politics. In the months leading up to the 2020 presidential election, candidates Donald Trump and Joe Biden engaged in a sort of battle to prove who is 'tougher' on China. Both candidates rolled out political advertisements critiquing their opponent's stance on China, positioning themselves as foreign policy foils. While this was intended to distinguish the candidates from one another, they were actually exemplifying the hegemony of the discourse on China. The advertisement released by Trump cast Biden as too soft on China. The phrases, "Biden protected China's feelings... Biden stands up for China... while China tries to cripple America" flash across the screen while clips of Biden saying "They're not bad folks, folks" and "The growth of China is overwhelmingly in our interest" play in the background. The video concludes with "Biden: bad for America," meaning that Biden is bad for America because he is supposedly not tough enough to stand up against China, who then must be some sort of enemy. While there are some unsubstantiated claims about Biden in this ad, the overall theme fits within the framework of the dominant discourse and the regime of truth that establishes China as a threat.

The advertisement aired by Biden's team engages in the same discourse, and therefore is granted legitimacy. This video responds to the claims that Biden is too friendly with China, by

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<sup>104</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, "Why Obama Fears for Our Democracy," *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, November 16, 2020), <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/11/why-obama-fears-for-our-democracy/617087/>.

slamming Trump for being too soft and trusting of the Chinese government in the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic. While this is a critique of President Trump, Biden's actually political opponent, China is displayed as the true adversary in this short video. The advertisement asserts, "Trump rolled over for the Chinese he took *their* word for it" and that "Trump praised the Chinese 15 times in January and February as the coronavirus spread across the world." The ad brands China's government, and its people, as untrustworthy. Trump is faulted for not being an effective enough protagonist to confront a threatening China. The video further demonstrates that Biden will hypothetically be a more masculine and tough leader, equipped to put China in its proper place, that is, subordinate to the U.S.. Biden says in a clip, "I would be on the phone with China making it clear: We are going to need to be in your country. You have to be open. You have to be clear. We have to know what's going on." In the attempt to distinguish their respective stances on China, Joe Biden and Donald Trump demonstrate that the "stances" they can take are limited. If they were not to conform to the hegemonic discourse, there would be no authority in their claims.

The Biden administration has regrounded foreign policy in the liberal international order and strength of American global leadership. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken revealed that he thinks that China's goals are based on the belief that "it can be and should be and will be the dominant country in the world."<sup>105</sup> As such, in his first speech to congress, Joe Biden himself plainly stated that America is "in competition with China and other countries to win the 21st

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<sup>105</sup> O'Donnell, Norah. "Secretary of State Antony Blinken on the Threat Posed by China." CBS News. CBS Interactive, May 2, 2021. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/antony-blinken-60-minutes-2021-05-02/>.



Century.”<sup>106</sup> This language, that characterizes global leadership as something to be won, is a shift from the fear that China will present a disruption to the world order or will seek revisionist aims. The fear now is that China will completely upend the world order. Thus, it is a contradiction for Blinken to say,

I want to be very clear about something. And this is important. Our purpose is not to contain China, to hold it back, to keep it down. It is to uphold this rules-based order that China is posing a challenge to. Anyone who poses a challenge to that order, we're going to stand up and defend it.<sup>107</sup>

Discursively, China represents a threat to the U.S. world order on the basis of its rising position of power. In this moment, where power competition and harsh stances are legitimate policies, the U.S. very plainly seeks to contain China. The U.S. continues to present an increasingly contradictory and increasingly limited discourse on China as it fails to reconcile its imagination with reality. While this essentialist misrepresentation of China has always been extremely problematic, the inability to consider China on its own terms is both dangerous and unsustainable. For, in reality, a future world where China is the most powerful state is not unthinkable.

What would it mean for the U.S. to take China on its own terms? What would a truly progressive policy on China entail? What would a China inclusive, or even a China led world order look like? Is it even possible for the U.S. to transcend discursive limits on its own prerogative? It is important to look towards the future of Sino-American relations. I unfortunately do not have the facilities to dismantle a hegemonic discourse, with which American identity is so inextricably intertwined. However, I do know that this would necessarily

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<sup>106</sup> Joseph Biden, “Remarks by President Biden in Address to a Joint Session of Congress” (Speech, Washington DC, April 28, 2021), U.S. Capitol.

<sup>107</sup> O'Donnell, Norah. “Secretary of State Antony Blinken on the Threat Posed by China.”

require the U.S. to grapple with the identity it has constructed for both China and itself. This effort would need to be a collaborative effort that involves more than just politicians and policy experts. In fact, the task might certainly have to be initiated outside of the political sphere altogether. I do suggest that an increased diversity in voices that are permitted to speak and are actually heard might be a significant starting point.

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