

The Case of United States Views of Its Ties with China

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U.S. views of the People's Republic of China (PRC) have been hardening for at least two decades, from George W. Bush characterizing China in the 2000 presidential campaign and the first months of his presidency as a "strategic competitor," to the Obama administration's pursuit of a "pivot" to the Asia-Pacific in response to China's growing assertiveness, to the Trump administration describing China's rise as signaling the "return of an era of great power competition."¹ Does this trend reflect changes in U.S. self-conception and national identity? Evolving assessments of threat in light of Chinese behavior and what these imply about the regime's intentions? A reaction to shifts in the overall balance of power between the two countries, perhaps a reflection of a declining superpower facing a rising challenge, "tragically" destined to participate in a "contest for supremacy in Asia" that will ineluctably result in a "Thucydides trap" or war of hegemonic transition?² Or is it instead an inevitable clash between a liberal, democratic, rule of law capitalist hegemon and a resilient authoritarian challenger that is a communist dictatorship increasingly reliant on aggressive nationalism since the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre and evolving rapidly towards national socialism or fascism?³ While each of these perspectives provides some purchase on the recent developments in U.S. – China relations as seen from Washington, this chapter focuses on the role of national identity, arguing that identity is by no means the sole or best explanation, but that it is an important factor that should not be overlooked or underestimated.

A brief and necessarily oversimplified thumbnail sketch of the history of the field of international relations (IR) as taught in American political science graduate programs can provide some useful backdrop for understanding how identity shapes foreign policy. American approaches to IR often cover explorations of the roles of morality, philosophy, and psychology in explaining war (classical realism);⁴ balances of power and threat perceptions in explaining conflict (realism);⁵ and anarchy, self-help, and the polarity of international politics based on the distribution of capabilities in accounting for war and peace (structural or neo-realism).⁶ Other approaches focus on the importance of domestic regime type in explaining state action (liberalism);⁷ the role of international institutions in accounting for trade and other forms of cooperation (neo-liberalism or liberal institutionalism);⁸ and finally, since roughly the early 1990s, culture, identity, and iterated interactions in accounting for the emergence of international norms, images of the other, and changes in states' policy preferences over time (constructivism).⁹

This chapter explores the role of national identity, which lies somewhere between liberalism's focus on domestic regime type and constructivism's focus on the importance of iterated interactions and norms in accounting for change in the U.S. view of China. This is by no means intended to deny the value of other schools of thought in IR; indeed, given that the theoretical boundaries between these approaches are highly permeable, scholars all read and react to each other's insights, and no truly grand unified theory of international relations has emerged to definitively account for all aspects of international society.

National identity as a causal variable is still often seen as a difficult explanatory approach to employ in analyzing world politics; this is true for at least three reasons. First, identity is a challenging variable for which to select authoritative metrics. It is unclear whether it is best measured by senior leaders' speeches; public opinion surveys; demographic data; the frequency of attendance at religious institutions; content analysis of best-selling movies, music, and novels; or other proxies for gauging the preeminent themes defining a

society's identity. Second, national identity is highly contested and open to interpretation within states. While it *may* play a role as an independent variable in international affairs, it is *undeniably* also a dependent variable that is constantly being argued over, deployed, positioned and redefined by actors seeking to narrate the meaning of the nation as a strategy towards controlling it and using it for their own ends (whether these be magnanimous or selfish). Finally, national identity is seen by many observers as slow to change, perhaps too slow to permit its use as an explanation for specific foreign policy shifts. It certainly changes over time, but for some it is not entirely compelling to explain policy shifts that emerge over weeks, months, or a handful of years in terms of a variable as broad as national identity, which is usually assumed to evolve along longer timeframes.

Still, substantial evidence suggests that, even despite concerns that national identity is hard to measure, is always contested or multivalent, and in general is probably fairly slow in evolving, it is nonetheless worth considering as a factor influencing the current U.S. – China relationship. A starting point for IR theorists interested in the concept has often been Kenneth Waltz's notion of three "images" (or levels of analysis) for international affairs—that of the individual ("man," to use Waltz's gendered 1950's-era language), the "state," and "war" (or international society as a whole).¹⁰ In a seminal 1978 piece, Peter Gourevitch explored the relationship between international affairs and Waltz's "second image," looking at what he termed the "second image reversed: the international sources of domestic politics," noting that "war and trade" are the primary drivers by which countries' internal polities are shaped by external affairs.¹¹ Gourevitch's motivation for penning his article derived from a suspicion of any hard and fast boundary between international affairs and domestic politics. In the years since Gourevitch put forward his argument, numerous other scholars have carried the argument forward, most notably for the purposes of this essay, Thomas Christensen, whose 1996 *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino – American Conflict, 1947 – 1958* explored how American and Chinese leaders leveraged foreign threats to achieve domestic policy goals.¹² A contemporary study of security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific has found that, in the cases of Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Philippines, and Vietnam, national identity definitely plays an important role alongside other factors, such as the rise of China, concerns about U.S. relative decline or abandonment, and the cost growth in defense systems in shaping countries' decisions about security cooperation in the region.¹³ For his part, Paul McCartney has argued that a combination of second image reversed analysis, critical theory, and constructivism is helpful for showing how the arguments of foreign policy elites in the U.S. are similarly shaped by "international events and conditions" and in turn give expression to American identity through their foreign policy actions and the reactions to these.¹⁴

In looking at the foreign policy of the United States toward China, national identity issues have played an important role in American assessments of how to view and respond to China's rise in recent decades. Insofar as U.S. policy is most directly shaped by senior policymakers and elected politicians whose authority stems from popular elections and who must therefore ensure that they explain their actions in terms that are popularly accepted, this chapter relies on the imperfect but nonetheless useful proxy metric of official U.S. policy documents, and current and former senior leadership statements. It also takes note of arguments by prominent foreign policy commentators, as well as overall characterizations of the zeitgeist of the U.S. mood across two decades to explore the theme of how American identity can help explain changes in U.S. policy towards the PRC.

Additionally, while recognizing that the roots of bilateral tensions are not new,¹⁵ tensions between the U.S. and China have certainly been on the rise in recent years, most notably since 2000 and especially since 2008. While the focus of this essay is on U.S. national identity, that identity—at least insofar as is relevant to U.S. – China policy—has increasingly been framed around a series of value divergences that have led American leaders to make increasingly stark normative critiques of the PRC and articulate America’s self-identity in contradistinction to that of China (though, as the discussion of the second image reversed school above shows, the lines between national identity and foreign policy are permeable and causality can run both ways).

American Identity and China

As noted above, American national identity is not a fixed, immutable set of characteristics but one evolving as it is contested, deployed, adjusted, and continually rearticulated by various actors. During the two decades under consideration here, American identity has certainly included traditional themes such as individual freedom, human rights, and free markets. It has also included newer debates over American vulnerability (in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks and the Great Recession); about whether the country should seek to retain its traditional role as the leading global actor supporting the liberal international order or not (especially in light of the difficult wars in Afghanistan and Iraq); and arguments about whether or not the country’s political and economic systems are broken (highlighted by repeated government shutdowns, the Budget Control Act/sequestration, and the sense many Americans have that the economy does not work for them), and if so what should be done to fix these problems.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, during much of this period China has been held up as either a solution to some of the challenges America confronts in seeking to preserve the existing world order (climate change, global financial rebalancing, the nuclear non-proliferation regime) or as a threat to such an order in its own right. Probably uniquely among all of the other countries in the world during this period, there has also been a tendency among some of America’s most preeminent foreign affairs commentators—Thomas L. Friedman of *The New York Times*¹⁶ and Fareed Zakaria of *Newsweek*¹⁷ most notably, but others as well—to use China as something of a mirror, pointing to China’s strengths in economic and technological development, and suggesting that they pose a challenge to, spur, or occasionally even serve as a model for the U.S. in improving its own educational and developmental outcomes. Since 2017, some commentators have taken heart that the U.S. is finally recognizing the threat China poses to liberal democracy and American interests and values.¹⁸ By contrast, others have worried about a U.S. overreaction to China’s rise that might herald a return to Cold War fearmongering¹⁹ or enable racist stereotyping of all Chinese (even Chinese-Americans) as spies for Beijing,²⁰ harkening back to the communal tensions or possibly even internment camps Japanese-Americans were subjected to during World War II.²¹

Broadly speaking, the period from 2001 – 2009 corresponds to a time when the Bush administration articulated policies that reflected an identity focused on openness to cooperation with China should it step up its contributions to global order, focusing primarily on countering violent Islamist terrorism and North Korean nuclear proliferation. By contrast, in the period from 2009 to 2017, the Obama administration initially sought to elicit Chinese assistance in addressing global climate change and financial rebalancing, but increasingly

came to see Chinese Communist Party actions as aimed at undercutting the U.S. position in Asia. Since 2017, the Trump administration, while noting that “in the U.S., competition is not a ‘four-letter word,’” has nonetheless moved to characterize the CCP as “truly hostile to the United States and our values,” values that it has sought to redefine under the rubric of “America First.”²² These three phases are explored in turn below.

2001 – 2009: The Bush ‘43 Response to China

At the start of the 21st century, America was riding high economically on the back of the dot.com expansion. The Cold War was over, the Soviet Union had collapsed; China remained a weak, low- to lower-middle income country with a military that had little in the way of power projection capability; and perceptions of America’s military infallibility and might were widespread in the wake of the defeat of the Serbian regime’s efforts to crush Kosovo. In short order, however, the contested 2000 presidential election; the September 11th attacks; revelations about a widespread cover-up of sexual predation on American children by priests in the Catholic church; and a crisis in American capitalism brought on by the Enron scandal and the subsequent bursting of the dot.com bubble sowed seeds of anxiety. While the rapid toppling of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Saddam regime in Iraq restored a sense of confidence for many elites in American primacy and purpose, these were further shaken with the failure to capture Osama bin Laden, the emergence of durable and deadly insurgencies in both countries, and the revelations about gross incompetence in planning for the postwar situation in Iraq (symbolized most notably by the destruction and looting of the Iraqi National Museum and the Abu Ghraib scandal). By 2006, the descent of Iraq into a state of virtual civil war under the instigation of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s al-Qaeda in Iraq had left American foreign policy elites reeling.

China policy during these years, despite Bush’s intention as expressed during the 2000 presidential campaign to focus on Beijing as a “strategic competitor,” generally settled into a back-and-forth between the more hawkish policymakers associated with Vice-President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Don Rumsfeld, and U.N. Ambassador John Bolton, and more moderate policymakers, such as Secretary of State Colin Powell, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, and Secretary of the Treasury Henry “Hank” Paulson, with the latter group focused on finding ways to downplay confrontation and elicit cooperation on countering terrorism, the spread of nuclear weapons, and financial instability. Indeed, one key figure in the Bush policy team, Tom Christensen, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for China from 2006 - 2008, even noted in a 2001 article that “China does not appear poised to become a peer competitor of the United States,” though he warned that it could still “pose problems without catching up.”²³

Concerns about China were further downplayed in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, and with the U.S. engaged in a Global War on Terror (GWOT), China sought to position itself as a partner of the United States in confronting radical Islam, disingenuously portraying its efforts to crush Uighur identity and separatism in East Turkestan as part and parcel of the U.S. GWOT.²⁴ Seeking to encourage Beijing to follow the U.S. lead in bolstering the international order at a time when it was perceived as being under assault, Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick strove to present an attractive description of American values in a speech in 2005, in which he invited China to share in international leadership if the PRC were to adopt the posture of a “responsible stakeholder.” Zoellick argued that China could do so because:

It does not seek to spread radical, anti-American ideologies. While not yet democratic, it does not see itself in a twilight conflict against democracy around the globe. While at times mercantilist, it does not see itself in a death struggle with capitalism. And most importantly, China does not believe that its future depends on overturning the fundamental order of the international system.²⁵

While China throughout this period continued to grow its economy, expanded its investment in military modernization, sustained its repression of human rights domestically, and began laying the groundwork for a later shift towards reactive and then proactive assertiveness by pressuring India and Vietnam over territorial and maritime disputes, it did largely downplay tensions with the United States.²⁶ When cross-Strait tensions rose with Taiwan, U.S. policymakers intervened, pursuing “dual deterrence” of both the Hu Jintao regime in Beijing and the Chen Shui-bian administration in Taipei, the latter widely seen as “provoking” the PRC through steps aimed at achieving greater recognition internationally.²⁷ For the most part, however, the Bush administration was torn between a hawkish focus on Middle East policy and a more moderate approach that sought to manage China relations with the goal of extracting cooperation on issues ranging from countering North Korea’s quest for nuclear weapons by arranging the Six-Party Talks to pressing China for trade and currency rebalancing through the Strategic Economic Dialogue. The Bush approach was premised on the notion that, by virtue of its economic size and military strength, the U.S. could afford to manage the China challenge while focusing first and foremost on the threat posed by radical Islamist terrorism.

2009 – 2016: Obama’s Response to China

During the 2008 presidential campaign, then-candidate Obama sought to avoid the traditional approach of candidates adopting tough sounding positions on China during the campaign that had to be walked back after the candidate’s election. With the financial crisis of 2008 and the Great Recession raging as he came into office, a pair of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq going poorly, and Osama bin Laden still in hiding in Pakistan, the Obama administration sought to focus on restoring America’s economic strength and rebuilding respect for America’s global role abroad during its first months and years in office. In support of those goals, the administration sought to downplay differences with China over core issues such as human rights, with Secretary Clinton famously stating that “those issues can’t interfere with [cooperation aimed at addressing] the global economic crisis, the global climate change crisis, and the security crisis.”²⁸ Early on, Obama himself sought to set a new tone in U.S. – China relations, announcing during his 2009 summit with President Hu Jintao that:

We meet here at a time when the relationship between the United States and China has never been more important to our collective future. The major challenges of the 21st century, from climate change to nuclear proliferation to economic recovery, are challenges that touch both our nations, and challenges that neither of our nations can solve by acting alone.²⁹

Over time, however, the Obama team concluded that restoring American global leadership was unlikely to involve genuinely partnering with China in any meaningful sense. Probably no event led more directly to this conclusion on the part of the U.S. side with respect to

China's trustworthiness and willingness to partner than the failure of the COP15 climate change negotiations in Copenhagen in December 2009. While the Obama team went in prepared to negotiate hard in tandem with other world powers to preserve a livable global ecology, the Chinese side repeatedly took steps that ensured that only meaningless commitments to vague, non-numerical goals would be in the final agreement, paving the way for a post-conference propaganda push intended to lay the blame for the deal's failure at Washington's doorstep.³⁰ Given the Chinese treatment of Obama and the priority Obama had attached to climate change as an issue area for U.S. – China cooperation, the effect was pronounced.

Subsequently, the Obama team pivoted to a tougher policy towards China premised on a more competitive relationship, albeit one that still sought areas for cooperation.³¹ In November 2011 at a speech in Canberra, Australia, Obama articulated his "pivot" or "rebalance" to the Asia-Pacific, a policy intended to sustainably ensure U.S. influence and the defense of U.S. interests in the face of a rising China.³² The policy was a reflection of the administration's belief that Asia was a critical region for the future of U.S. interests, values, economic growth, demographic ties, and security; critics generally agreed with the approach but found it inexpertly and only episodically pursued, as well as insufficiently resourced.³³

Over the remainder of his time in office, Obama would repeatedly find China a challenge, despite his team's efforts to find opportunities for cooperation while managing the needs and pressures imposed by competition. Following his successful 2012 reelection, in November 2013 National Security Advisor Susan Rice spoke at Georgetown University about the U.S. goal in Asia and its relationship to China, stating that:

Ultimately, America's purpose is to establish a more stable security environment in Asia, an open and transparent economic environment, and a liberal political environment that respects the universal rights and freedoms of all... When it comes to China, we seek to operationalize a new model of major power relations. That means managing inevitable competition while forging deeper cooperation on issues where our interests converge—in Asia and beyond.³⁴

Faced with criticism over its embrace of the notion of a "new type of great power relationship" (a Beijing-originated construct); however, the administration quickly dropped this language as it became clear that China's vision of the relationship required substantial U.S. concessions and was far too adversarial to suit U.S. interests.³⁵ Shortly after the Rice speech, the Obama administration refused to join China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank initiative and encouraged other countries to refrain from joining as well (albeit with few successes).³⁶ The 2015 announcement that China was the lead suspect in the hacking of the Office of Personnel Management and had made off with millions of dossiers on applicants for a U.S. government security clearance further reinforced a negative image of the PRC as a malign actor among U.S. policymakers.³⁷ That image was reinforced when the FBI indicted a group of serving PLA officers for hacking private sector U.S. enterprises in 2014. While Obama managed to reach an agreement with Xi Jinping on avoiding a cyber war, also eliciting a promise not to militarize a series of artificial islands China had constructed in the South China Sea, personal promises by China's top leader would shortly be perceived by many as having been given in bad faith, further reinforcing the notion that Chinese leaders will lie, even to an American president.³⁸

In the waning months of the Obama administration, two final events served to further frame China's identity in contradistinction to that of the United States for many observers. First, when Obama visited Hangzhou to attend the G-20 meeting in September 2016, a dispute emerged over the stairs he could use to descend from Air Force One, ultimately leading the president to emerge from a set of access stairs that were not connected to the traditional red carpet, leading many to believe that the Chinese had deliberately snubbed the American president.³⁹ Donald Trump, running as the Republican nominee for the presidency, announced that if he were the president, he would have left the G-20 over the incident, arguing that Obama's decision to stay showed weakness and encouraged China not to respect the United States.⁴⁰ Finally, on December 15, 2016, a PLA navy ship seized a U.S. navy unmanned underwater vehicle operating legally in the South China Sea, reinforcing an image of China as disrespectful of international law and American power, with president-elect Trump railing against the Chinese action on Twitter as "unpresidential" and later suggesting that "We should tell China that we don't want the drone they stole back.- let them keep it!"⁴¹

2017 – present: The Trump Response to China

Throughout the course of the 2016 campaign for the White House, Trump sought to distinguish his proposed approach to the presidency from those of his predecessors, claiming that he would put "America First," "Make America Great Again," and stand up to foreign powers like China by not allowing the PRC to continue to "rape" America through unfair trade policies.⁴² On the eve of the 2016 election, two of Trump's top Asia advisors—Alexander Gray and Peter Navarro—penned an op-ed with *Foreign Policy* laying out what they described as the candidate's "peace through strength" approach to Asia. This approach, they argued, would be premised on voiding multilateral trade deals seen as unfavorable to the U.S., "rebuilding our military," and demonstrating an unquestioned "commitment to America's Asian alliances as bedrocks of stability in the region."⁴³

In the course of his first three years in office, Trump moved quickly to put his own stamp on U.S. foreign policy. The December 2017 *National Security Strategy* identified the return of an "era of great power competition," asserted that "there is no arc of history that ensures free economic and political system will prevail" and articulated a more competitive approach to China in response.⁴⁴ Subsequent high-level policy statements by Vice-President Pence in 2018 at the Hudson Institute noting China's turn towards aggression abroad and repression at home,⁴⁵ and at the Wilson Center in 2019, have clarified the issues at stake in the administration's view.⁴⁶ As statements by these and other senior administration officials, including domestically-focused officials such as Attorney General William Barr⁴⁷ and FBI Director Christopher Wray⁴⁸ and internationally-focused officials such as Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback,⁴⁹ have made clear, China is increasingly seen as an "existential threat" to the United States at home, challenging key tenets of American freedom, security, and identity.⁵⁰

In making their case, Trump administration officials have highlighted issues tied to America's values, domestic security, institutions, and identity, in addition to more traditional external security concerns. Areas that have received attention include China's domestic repression of religion and its "horrific" repression of the Uighur population,⁵¹ industrial espionage, and United Front activities in American educational institutions,⁵² as well as its aggressive

threatening of its neighbors. China's actions are openly characterized by senior Trump administration officials as revealing the true nature of the CCP, a nature that is seen as threatening to the United States' interests, values, and very identity as an open, rule of law democracy. In late 2019, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, speaking at the Hudson Institute, declared that "Today, we're finally realizing the degree to which the Chinese Communist Party is truly hostile to the United States and our values," and declaring that the CCP represented an organization with a competing set of "ideologies and values... [as] a Marxist-Leninist Party focused on struggle and international domination" that sought to present the world "an entirely different model of governance... in which a Leninist Party rules and everyone must think and act according to the will of the Communist elites."⁵³

Senior Trump administration officials have also regularly characterized the administration as standing up to China where previous administrations of both parties had failed to do so. The most notable articulation of such a view, tying China policy directly to the president's vision and ambitions to remake American identity, came in Pence's remarks at the Wilson Center in October 2019. Given their importance and how explicitly they tie U.S. identity and foreign policy together, these are worth quoting at length:

Past administrations have come and gone, and all were aware of these abuses. None were willing to upset the established Washington interests who not only permitted these abuses, but often profited from them. The political establishment was not only silent in the face of China's economic aggression and human rights abuses, but they often enabled them. As each year passed, as each factory closed in the heartland of America, as each new skyscraper went up in Beijing, American workers grew only more disheartened, and China grew only more emboldened...

...as history will surely note, in less than three years, President Donald Trump has changed that narrative forever. No longer will America and its leaders hope that economic engagement alone will transform Communist China's authoritarian state into a free and open society that respects private property, the rule of law, and international rules of commerce.

Instead, as the President's 2017 National Security Strategy articulated, the United States now recognizes China as a strategic and economic rival. And I can attest firsthand, a strong majority of the American people, in the city and on the farm, are behind President Trump's clear-eyed vision of the U.S.–China relationship. And the President's stand also enjoys broad bipartisan support in the Congress as well.

Over the past year with that support, President Trump has taken bold and decisive action to correct the failed policies of the past, to strengthen America, to hold Beijing accountable, and to set our relationship on a more fair, stable, and constructive course for the good of both of our nations and the world.⁵⁴

While some analysts have noted that Trump's approach to Asia has reflected both change and some surprising continuity (the latter often a function of structural constraints upon the power of the presidency imposed by the Congress as a co-equal branch of government),⁵⁵

observers have also pointed out that China policy has been one of the key areas where the Trump approach has been “transformative,” noting in particular the substantial uptick in public recognition of a threat from China to U.S. interests and values.⁵⁶

Of course, much of what has fueled a growing hardening of U.S. sentiment towards the CCP has stemmed from the responses Americans have felt toward Chinese actions. Constructivists note that iterated interactions over time can shape, remake, confirm, or deepen images of the other and the self. Among the steps China has taken in recent years that have elicited the strongest reaction from American observers must be counted Beijing’s refusal until late 2019 to regulate its production of the opioid fentanyl, much of which has ended up fueling a devastating addiction crisis in the United States;⁵⁷ its ambitions to dominate the future strategic heights of the global economy through its Made in China 2025 program, which former Trump advisor Steve Bannon has called “an existential threat to the West;”⁵⁸ the implications of the PRC’s ever-expanding Belt and Road Initiative;⁵⁹ its imprisonment of one million or more Uighurs in concentration camps;⁶⁰ and its development of facial recognition software, artificial intelligence, and a social credit scoring system.⁶¹ Also worth noting have been the 2018 revisions to the PRC Constitution to lift term limit restrictions so as to permit Xi Jinping to be president for life;⁶² its seizure of two Canadian citizens as hostages in the wake of the arrest of Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou on charges of bank and wire fraud;⁶³ and its efforts to peel away diplomatic recognition of Taiwan, interfere with that country’s free elections, and intimidate its population.⁶⁴ Collectively, such actions have reinforced to many American observers an image of China that is increasingly divergent from the direction Americans had long hoped engagement, inclusion in international society, and investment in China’s modernization and economic development would lead, an image that conflicts sharply and negatively with Americans’ own self-image, as well as their firm beliefs about the way the world should be.⁶⁵ While it is too early to say definitively, it would not be surprising if one effect of the COVID-19 coronavirus were to reinforce a sense that the very nature of China’s non-transparent, unaccountable, authoritarian regime was a direct cause of the threat the virus poses to American economic and physical well-being.

Conclusion

Changing trends in American national identity alone cannot account for the shifts in U.S. policy toward China; other factors, most notably Chinese actions, stated ambitions, and growing capabilities are clearly at least as important and likely more so. Yet, as the above review has argued, American national identity should not be overlooked or dismissed as a factor helping to account for changing policies from Washington, and one that shapes the language in which such policies are expressed and justified. As China has grown more powerful and more aggressive at home and abroad--on land, at sea, in the air, in space, and in cyberspace--and has undertaken steps to shape the future in ways that empower the CCP, it has increasingly provoked reactions that find resonance within American domestic debates over the nation’s political identity and place in the world.

A nation’s debates over its own identity and place in the world frequently involve reflecting on how other states of similar size, ambition, or influence are behaving in the global system, and for the United States China is clearly one of the most relevant counterparts. As such, as Washington has shifted its threat perceptions abroad as well as its policy priorities at home, it has seen China take on a greater role as a “pacing threat,” rival, adversary, and “other”

that requires greater efforts with which to compete, counter, and respond. Such a pattern appears likely to continue for years to come, given the size and shape of the two countries' power and interests, as well as the recent history of their interactions.

Endnotes

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- ⁴ Key classical realism texts include Thucydides, *A History of the Peloponnesian War* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1972); Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2015).
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