

FROM GLOBALISATION “FRIEND” TO GLOBAL “FOE”: THE EVOLUTION OF THE US STRATEGIC NARRATIVE ON CHINA’S RISE

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ABSTRACT

The United States’ strategic narrative on the rise of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has evolved throughout a half-century of changing world orders and mutual perceptions of strategic intent. From the early 1970s and during the last two decades of the Cold War, the US saw a bipolar world in which it sought to assist China’s own rise as a partner in Soviet containment and economic globalisation. During its “unipolar moment” in the post-Cold War era, Washington maintained strong economic engagement but increasingly perceived Beijing as an uneasy partner and rising competitor. With the acknowledgement of the transition towards multipolarity, a bipartisan consensus emerged in Washington about the necessity to contain China’s rise as a global political and military power and to blunt its challenge to the “rules-based order” (RBO). The evolution from globalisation “friend” to global “foe” points to three directions of the current US strategic narrative on China’s rise: defending the RBO, de-coupling to secure Western-normed globalisation, and shaping the Indo-Pacific security environment. The paper concludes that while the US has succeeded in aligning the three forms of strategic narrative (system, identity, and policy), it faces considerable challenges, including from China’s counter-narratives.

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Reaching the *Sine Qua Non* of China's Containment

For US policymakers throughout the Washington establishment, containing China's rise has become a *sine qua non*. From Donald Trump to Joseph Biden, from bipartisan consensus in the Congress to Treasury's sanctions against Chinese entities, from the State Department's alliance-building in the Indo-Pacific to the Pentagon's new bases and arms supplies to Beijing-wary partners in the East and South China Seas, there is overwhelming evidence the US has shifted its China containment policy to higher gear. American foreign policy scholars, to a large extent, backed up this policy with reference to the Cold War cases of Soviet containment. While debating and periodically casting doubts about its effectiveness, "in the great debate over how the United States should respond to an increasingly assertive China", many commentators have advocated a ready-made solution: containment (Mueller 2023). Brands and Gaddis argued that "it is no longer debatable" that the US and China "are entering their own new cold war", and suggested taking advantage of containment's application during the US-Soviet rivalry (Brands and Gaddis 2021, 10). Indeed, Brands underlined that to "succeed against a rising China, the US must relearn the lessons of containment" (Brands 2021). On the other side, Nye has argued that "this is not like Cold War containment", and that "meeting the China challenge will require a more complex strategy that leverages the alliances and rules-based system we created" (Nye 2023). Nevertheless, the understanding in Beijing has been unequivocal: for Chinese President Xi Jinping, "the Western countries led by the United States have implemented all-round containment, containment and suppression on our country, bringing unprecedented severe challenges to our development" (Yiu 2023).

While Beijing's potential has never been out of the focus of US global eyesight since the formation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the perception of the "China threat" has evolved over decades. Since the outset of the 21st century, this evolution has incrementally turned Beijing from an ideological competitor, albeit an economic partner in globalisation, into a rival and menace not only to Washington's foreign policy and security interests in the Indo-Pacific but also to the "rules-based world order" it had been dominating since World War II.

Achieving foreign policy bipartisanship in Washington can hardly be taken for granted. Nevertheless, historically, the fight for the dominant bipartisan narrative has brought some of the most extraordinary successes for US foreign policy, such as the creation and expansion of NATO or the Marshall Plan, as well as some of its most disastrous foreign involvements. It was, indeed, on a bipartisan basis that the Congress adopted the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in August 1964, which became the legal basis for the US prosecution of the

Vietnam War (Office of the Historian of the US Department of State 2023) before being repealed in 1971. It took half a century for another bipartisan "green light" to war to be revoked: in March 2023, the US Senate voted to repeal the 2002 Authorization for Use of Military Force against Iraq, which had led to the US war on Iraq over the alleged threat of weapons of mass destruction from Saddam Hussein (Jalonick 2023).

Thus, it was not surprising that some experts cast doubts about the implications of the dominant China narrative in Washington after the bipartisan vote of the US House of Representatives to establish in January 2023 the Select Committee on the Strategic Competition between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The Committee's objective is to examine "the status of the Chinese Communist Party's economic, technological, and security progress and its competition with the United States" (Aldin and Olmem 2023), a rivalry that its chairperson Mike Gallagher framed as "an existential struggle" (Al-Jazeera 2023).

In turn, the formation of the dominant "China threat" narrative inside Washington has facilitated a US strategic narrative aimed at persuading foreign stakeholders about the need to contain Beijing's rise, primarily in the Indo-Pacific but also at the global level.

The study of strategic narratives involves the study of communication and power in international relations, both of which are changing rapidly, particularly in terms of Sino-American relations. In order to understand this dynamic and logic, the paper looks at the evolution of the US strategic narrative on China's rise from the beginning of Washington's engagement with Beijing in the late 1960s until today.

The Perfect Storm for Strategic Narratives

The first quarter of the 21st century has been a perfect storm for strategic communicators. The era of reflexive modernization features an incessant struggle for the redefinition of values, labour, societal links, and state orders (Beck, Bonss, and Lau 2003). The network society, powered by the Internet as the decisive technology of the information age, empowers individualism and self-communication as it transcends the limitations of time and space for the production, distribution, and use of information (Castells 2013). The post-Cold War "unipolar moment" is giving place to a transition towards multipolarity and early sketches of a future multipolar order. In these constellations of uncertain change, organisations and states vie for power, trust, and legitimacy through strategic communication about their preferred outcomes. They need to construct meaning and tell a persuasive story about the nature of the state and the

international system, their own identity, role, task, and sequence of action. At the same time, they need to acknowledge the opportunities and limitations of the new media ecology, including illusions of control over interpretation by recipients.

Strategic communication, a concept of organised persuasion, represents a “system of coordinated communication activities implemented by organisations in order to advance their missions by allowing for the understanding of target groups, finding channels and methods of communication with the public, and developing and implementing ideas and attitudes that, through these channels and methods, promote a certain type of behaviour or opinion” (Mitić 2016, 9). To “promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman 1993, 52), politicians use “framing” as a rational rhetorical strategy to “angle” arguments presented to the public (Leimbigler and Lammert 2016), as “frames” have the capacity to provoke different reactions of the public depending on the element of reality they are accentuating or hiding. Thus, strategic framing is an integral part of strategic communication, which seeks to “use message frames to create salience for certain elements of a topic by including and focusing attention on them while excluding other aspects” (Hallahan 2008, 4856). In turn, by punctuating some and hiding other elements, strategic framing opens a field for potential conflict and contestation among different actors promoting their frames (Fiss and Zajac 2006, 1174). Yet frames cannot be fully understood without narratives, just as narratives cannot function without frames. In the process of strategic communication, organisations thus use frames and discourse to shape “strategic narratives”, “a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international relations in order to shape the opinions and behaviour of actors at home and overseas” (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Rosselle 2013, 248). These narratives are a “tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate” (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Rosselle 2013, 3). Strategic narratives describe the desired outcomes and steps to achieve them. They aim to persuade target stakeholders to join the endeavour. One way to achieve the aim is through the short-term objective of using narratives “with the intention of structuring the responses of others to developing events” (Freedman 2006, 22). Or, in the long term, “getting others at home and abroad to buy in to your strategic narrative can shape their interests, their identity, and their understanding of how international relations works and where it is heading” (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Rosselle 2013, 3).

Narratives consist of actors who use discourse, including images, symbols, analogies, metaphors, history, and frames, to tell a persuasive story. They also consist of events (i.e., summits) and plots (i.e., crises), or “storylines”: “sense-making organisational devices tying the different elements of a policy challenge

together into a reasonably coherent and convincing narrative" (O'Tuathail 2002, 617). O'Tuathail sees "geopolitical storylines" as sets of arguments that provide "a relatively coherent sense-making narrative for a foreign policy challenge", that is "refined and deepened through public argumentation and debate" (O'Tuathail 2002, 619). He distinguishes them from "geopolitical scripts", which use arguments from storylines but are concerned with the "pragmatics of foreign policy performance" and are a "tacit set of rules for how foreign policy actors are to perform in certain speech situations and how they are to articulate responses to policy challenges and problems" (O'Tuathail 2002, 619). O'Tuathail particularly points to the fact that these sets of rules present "discursive software" of foreign policy practice, which contains "scripted elements and sequences" but is sufficiently flexible to allow for adaptation in exchanges with the media and diplomats, depending on the situation (O'Tuathail 2002, 620). Adaptation, of course, is one of the key elements of a successful strategy. Thus, in order to have a coherent narrative, a foreign policy actor needs to craft a storyline through a set of arguments but also needs a script to shield, execute, validate, and promote policy. It needs to successfully navigate through the script in order to achieve the desired end state of the storyline.

Yet frames, arguments, storylines, and scripts do not appear out of nowhere. They have to be formed and created in a process that might involve deliberation at the policy level and/or debate in the public sphere, as it includes a number of state and non-state stakeholders. In addition to formation, as Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Rosselle argue, the communication process around strategic narratives includes their projection and reception (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Rosselle 2017, 9-10). Projection involves the analysis of the difficulties strategic communicators encounter in the new media ecology. Reception, too, relies strongly on the media ecology, as it might involve deliberation within society and personal interpretation of the narratives or their constituent parts. This is where the network society plays an important part, as it is an individual choice on where and how to get information, how to work with it, and how to interpret or recast it further through the network. Thus, there is no certainty that reception will be positive from the point of view of the strategic communicator. There are multiple obstacles and possible contestation from other relevant stakeholders at every step of the process, from finding the right choice of frames and storylines to crafting the right tools, channels, and methods of projection to the strategic counter-narratives of opposing state and non-state actors—a clash of narratives—up to the interpretation schemes of individual recipients.

Strategic narratives can take three main forms (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Rosselle 2013). First, about the international system and how the political actors behind strategic communication understand it. Second, about the identity that political actors aim to project within the international order they conceived.

Finally, about policy, since the strategic narratives of political actors influence the development of policies. As Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle argue, “an actor able to align system, policy, and identity narratives has a greater chance of influence” (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Rosselle 2017, 2-3). Research on strategic narratives can encompass any or all of these forms and stages of the communication process.

The Evolution of the US Strategic Narrative on China’s Rise

Partners in the Cold War Soviet Containment and Globalisation Expansion

The predominance of the “China threat” was not always the key feature of US narratives on Beijing. True, for the first two decades since its formation in 1949, the People’s Republic of China was seen by Washington as having a “spoiler role” in Asia, and the US tried to keep Beijing at bay. But with the US army getting more and more entangled in the Vietnam War failure and with the Soviet Union pursuing an active foreign policy and security role globally, the prominence of China’s geopolitical importance for balancing power in Asia returned to the focus of US policymakers. In 1967, Singapore’s long-standing Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew advised then US Vice President Richard Nixon that, given the unresolved border issues between the USSR and the PRC, “there was much to be gained by engaging China” (Switzer 2015). Nixon followed up on the advice several months later in a *Foreign Affairs* article in which he argued that it was in the US interest to take China out of “angry isolation” (Nixon 1967). From 1969, US diplomats took steps to “move Washington and Beijing away from intense mutual animosity and towards a close, albeit wary, strategic alignment against a common foe”, resulting in US State Secretary Henry Kissinger’s visit in 1971 and President Nixon’s visit in 1972, the year in which his administration ended an effective trade embargo in place since the formation of the PRC (Friedberg 2022). From then on, both Nixon and his Cold War-era successors invested in multi-faceted partnerships and engagements with Beijing. The US provided China with a plethora of tools aimed at not only balancing the “Soviet threat” but also laying the grounds for Beijing’s meteoric economic rise in the late 1970s. A number of these tools were military, from satellite imagery on Soviet troops up to non-lethal military equipment, such as transport aircraft or radar systems. Others were education and people-to-people, as dozens of thousands of Chinese were invited to study at US universities. Perhaps more prominently, there were diplomatic and economic incentives: the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1979 and the granting, that same year, of the status of most-favoured trading nation (Friedberg 2022). Combined with the early visible and successful signs of Deng Xiaoping’s policy of “reform and opening-

up”, these incentives and interactions led the Ronald Reagan administration to suspend the prohibition of arms sales to the PRC and to treat it, in the words of US Secretary of State Alexander Haig, as a “friendly non-aligned country” (Meijer 2016). The Reagan administration’s decision was viewed as “providing major lethal capability in the arsenal of the ‘awakening giant’” as a result of a “highly visible psychological deterrent to overall Soviet strategic planning and as a reaffirmation of United States interest and presence in the Asian-Pacific region” (Downen 1982, 67). At the same time, there were warnings about the potential “hazards” of such a policy, including possible threats in the region from China’s new military capabilities, which might prove the US policy to be “essentially destabilising” (Downen 1982, 67). Nevertheless, throughout the 1980s, Washington continued its China policy with a three-way objective: first, enhancing Beijing’s military in line with US geopolitical aim to put pressure on Moscow; second, upgrading China’s economic prowess and finding a partnership role for Beijing in the globalisation process that would be in line with the interests of the US and its commercial powerhouses; and third, encouraging internal political reforms in China with the aim of softening its resistance to Western liberal democratic principles.

A Post-Cold War Cooldown: Between Opportunities and Waking Up to New Realities

The June 1989 events on Tiananmen Square attracted harsh criticism from all US stakeholders, many of whom expressed frustration at the political direction of Chinese reforms. With the Cold War over and the Soviet threat in retreat, Washington policymakers have considerably lost geopolitical interest in China’s security role. The economy was a completely different story, as business interests coalesced to insist on keeping trade with China as normal as possible. While the George H.G. Bush administration stopped selling arms to Beijing, it refused to revoke the status of the most-favoured trading nation. The US business push, spearheaded by the likes of Boeing, Lockheed, General Motors, Exxon, General Electric, Intel, and Coca-Cola, was instrumental in keeping strong economic ties with China, particularly since the Chinese economy, from 1991 to 1993, grew by an astounding 60 percent (Friedberg 2022). As Friedberg argues, by the mid-1990s, the US had adopted a “dual-edged strategy”, a combination of two-decade-long engagement and a military balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region. While balancing would “preserve stability” and “deter aggression” despite China’s economic rise, engagement would reduce the possibility of confrontation with the US and Western countries “by welcoming Beijing into the US-dominated, post-Cold War international system. American policymakers hoped to persuade China’s leaders that their

interests lay in preserving the existing order, adapting to its rules, and adopting its values rather than seeking to modify or overthrow it" (Friedberg 2022).

However, at the height of the US unipolar momentum—the 1999 NATO aggression against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia—the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, which killed three Chinese journalists, sparked not only a tremendous public outcry in China but also led to a strategic change of perception in Beijing over relations with the US and caused a “turning point” for the “shift in Chinese thinking on the matter of tolerance of US forces in Asia” (Kim and Lee 2002, 114). The Chinese leadership saw in the Belgrade bombing “the onset of a new era of US unilateralism” and, shortly after, adopted the “New Security Concept”, which aimed to “improve the view towards a multipolar world order as a response to US global dominance” (Ghiselli 2021, 23). According to Gries, “in post-Belgrade China”, a “Manichean, black-and-white view of China-US relations” developed, and the bombing of the Chinese Embassy can be viewed as a “turning point in China-US relations” (Gries 2001, 26). After the NATO aggression, China became concerned about the establishment of “coalitions of the willing” and the consequences this could have for international interference in the issues of Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang (Pang 2005, 88).

Yet, in parallel, China expressed a desire to continue working at the multilateral level with the US. Only three months after the NATO aggression, in September 1999, the G20 was founded. With the green light from Washington, China joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001. From the point of view of Washington, despite China’s fury at the NATO violation of international law during the 1999 bombings, Beijing was still ready and interested in playing its part in the globalisation process within the US-led international liberal order.

Uneasiness, however, took hold in both capitals. Victorious in the 2000 and 2004 elections in Taiwan, Chen Shui-bian from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) expanded his discourse on “Taiwan independence”. The perception of threat increased in Beijing, which saw no coincidence in the organisation of Western-sponsored “colour revolutions” around the Russian Federation and a series of protests that it viewed as threats to its own territorial integrity and sovereignty in Hong Kong from 2004 onward, in Tibet in 2008, and in Xinjiang in 2009. Following the Arab Spring and the “Jasmine Revolution” in Tunisia, protests evoking “jasmine” were organised in a dozen Chinese cities in 2011.

In the United States, the mood was changing too. Think tanks were noticing that since 2007, Beijing has undertaken a variety of actions to push its maritime claims in the East and South China Seas by increasing patrols and training exercises, laying groundwork for development in disputed waters, and generally increasing assertiveness in disputes with Japan (Diaoyu/Senkaku islands) as well

as with Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei (Swaine 2013). In combination with Beijing's deployment of anti-access, area-denial (A2/AD)-type weapons on China's military periphery, this assertiveness was seen as an indication of China's challenges to the so-called "first island chain" from Japan to Southeast Asia, a key component of the US strategy to dominate the Western Pacific (Swaine 2013). Furthermore, Western policymakers, initially puzzled by the deployment of the Chinese navy's anti-piracy task force in the Gulf of Aden in 2008, began to see it as a "strategic forward deployment, contributing to the rise of Chinese sea power in the Indian Ocean" (Henry 2016). At the same time, Russian President Vladimir Putin was becoming increasingly vocal and active against NATO expansion to the East and the US-dominated unipolar world, calling instead for multipolarity, in which great powers such as China would help create a more balanced global order. China's global glow was particularly brightened by its crucial contribution to the world's economic growth after the 2008 financial crisis. Beijing was increasingly seen as acting beyond the expectations and role the US had projected for it in the globalised economy and post-Cold War order. The US strategic narrative was on the brink of change. Engagement was still on, but there was an increasing push for more containment. After years of focus on the Middle East and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it was time to turn back to the Asia-Pacific. The US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton claimed in a 2010 speech that the South China Sea was a matter of US national interest, which the *New York Times* saw as "opening a new source of potential friction with China" (Landler 2010) and Beijing as "virtually an attack on China" (Huffington Post 2010). The US developed the Air-Sea Battle Doctrine in 2009-2010, an operational doctrine aimed at countering China's growing military capabilities and possibly confronting it (Ford 2017). This, in turn, further irritated Beijing, while it did not fully reassure US allies, causing instead "strategic uncertainty" (Bitzinger and Raska 2013). The scene was set for Barack Obama's "pivot to Asia". And for the turn towards US-China rivalry.

Rise of Multipolarity: When Friend Turns to Foe

The election of Xi Jinping as China's new leader in 2013 was tentatively seen in Washington as a chance for a restart, which was marked by an early visit and meeting with Obama. Yet, while initial interactions were relatively cordial, US policymakers began to acknowledge a strategic change in Beijing from the early 1990s policy of Deng Xiaoping's "hide capabilities and bide time" (*Tao Guang Yang Hui*) to the late 2000s-early 2010s policy now widely promoted by Xi: "striving for achievement" (*Fen Fa You Wei*). In presenting arguments for the new policy, eminent Chinese scholar Yan Xuetong in 2014 argued that it seeks to create new friends in the international arena by allowing them to take

advantage of China's rise. Yan argued in his approach to "moral realism" that Beijing should selectively reward those who "want to have a constructive role in China's rise", while punishing those who are hostile. Strategic allies, he argued, are more important than economic profit (Yan 2014).

Following this line, Beijing proposed a wide array of statecraft instruments (Mitić 2023). China began its island building in the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands in 2013, and by 2015, it had surpassed the US Navy in total size. Furthermore, Beijing increased military drills with its key strategic partner, the Russian Federation, in pursuit of operational experience and boosted cooperation within the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Perhaps most visibly, China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, which it complemented with the creation of various bilateral and multilateral partnerships, including in Europe with the "16+1" cooperation format with Central and Eastern European countries, many of which are NATO and EU members. Yet, grappling with the entanglement in Afghanistan and Iraq, the resurgence of terrorist threats from the Islamic State (IS), and the 2014 Ukraine crisis over Crimea, the Obama administration appeared distracted. The rise of the BRI was left largely unchallenged. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD), known as the "QUAD", created as a strategic security dialogue between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States in 2007, remained on hiatus. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the centrepiece of Obama's "pivot to Asia", was signed only in 2016, just months ahead of the presidential elections won by Donald Trump.

Upon his arrival in the White House, in a matter of months, Trump dramatically changed what he perceived as Obama's "too little, too late" policy towards China. His administration designated China as a "strategic competitor" at the end of 2017. Washington energised the "China threat" narrative, under which the US boosted "China watchdog" networks and started denouncing China-related initiatives, such as the BRI (Mitić 2022). Trump's administration in early 2018 imposed a 25-percent tariff on steel and a 10 percent tariff on aluminium imports before pursuing a few months later a 25 percent tariff on 818 categories of goods imported from China worth 50 billion dollars, thus effectively provoking a "tariff war" with China (Fetzer and Schwarz 2020). Washington instituted restrictions on the export of a variety of critical technologies and enhanced scrutiny of investments. Trump worked to prevent Chinese companies from taking advantage of their technological progress, both at home, where he used security concerns to ban Huawei and ZTE equipment from being used by the government (US Congress 2018), and internationally, where he put Huawei on the list of sanctions for cooperation with Iran and lobbied Central and Eastern European countries from allowing the Chinese company to build its 5G network, thus following his "Clean Network" security initiative with the objective of securing the networks from what it called "untrusted vendors" (Karásková et al. 2021).

Furthermore, the US imposed restrictive measures against Chinese entities over human rights in Xinjiang, setting up the direction for the EU to follow (Trailović 2021). In the context of China's containment, the Trump administration reinvigorated the "QUAD", which had been left aside throughout Obama's administration, and increased arms sales to Taiwan worth 18 billion dollars (Forum on the Arms Trade 2023), with a particular high point being the sale of 66 F-16V fighter jets for 8 billion dollars (Browne 2019). A particularly hard-line discourse was taken against the Communist Party of China, harshly denouncing what it called the CCP's political influence operations and particularly blaming it for the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Near the end of his mandate and ahead of the 2020 elections, Trump's presidential office released the "United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China" (White House 2020). In the document, the White House expressed both its disappointment with the effects of US policy towards China since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1979 and its grave concern about the negative effects Beijing's regional and global ambitions could have on US interests. The US hoped that "deepening engagement would spur fundamental economic and political opening in the PRC and lead to its emergence as a constructive and responsible global stakeholder", but more than 40 years later, it had become evident that the CCP "has chosen instead to exploit the free and open rules-based order and attempt to reshape the international system in its favour" (White House 2020). Furthermore, the White House argued that "the CCP's expanding use of economic, political, and military power to compel acquiescence from nation states harms vital American interests and undermines the sovereignty and dignity of countries and individuals around the world" (White House 2020).

As Friedberg argues, Trump "produced a sharper, more rapid shift in US policy that might otherwise have occurred and accelerated the ongoing erosion of support for the old policy of engagement", while "Republicans and Democrats were able to agree on the need for a change in the US's China policy, and, for the first time, ambitious figures in both parties began to compete to see who could stake out the tougher stance" (Friedberg 2022).

Saving the RBO: The Washington Consensus on Confronting China's Challenge

The nascent bipartisan consensus was confirmed when Trump's successor, Joseph Biden, chose Rush Doshi, a Brookings Institute foreign policy expert, as the National Security Council's Director for China. Doshi's 2021 book "The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order" offered a blueprint of the Biden administration's perceptive account of China's rise and threat to

US interests, which did not diverge much from the one expressed by Trump, and thus (re)confirmed a bipartisan view in Washington of the growing need to confront Beijing more decisively (Doshi 2021). In the book, Doshi argues that China aims to displace the US's position as a hegemon short of war. In the regional and global order, a hegemon owes his position to three "forms of control used to regulate the behaviour of other states: coercive capability (to force compliance), consensual inducements (to incentivize it), and legitimacy (to rightfully command it)" (Doshi 2021, 3). Indeed, the forms of control to which the US statecraft repertoire had successfully contributed for decades. However, rising states, like China, apply strategies to displace the hegemon, and they pursue them in sequence. The first strategy is to "blunt the hegemon's exercise of those forms of control, particularly those extended over the rising state"; the second is to "build forms of control over others", particularly in the home region; and finally, when the first two are completed, the third strategy is "global expansion, which pursues both blunting and building at the global level to displace the hegemon from international leadership" (Doshi 2021, 4). Doshi argues that this template can be seen in China's "strategies of displacement" of the US, which have evolved over time and in sequence. Its first strategy of displacement (1989-2008) aimed to blunt American power over China following Tiananmen Square, the Gulf War, and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The second strategy (2008-2016) aimed to build regional hegemony in Asia following the Global Financial Crisis and the diminishment of US power. Finally, referring to Xi Jinping's quotes about "great changes unseen in a century" (2018) and "time and momentum on our side" (2021), Doshi argues that, following Brexit, Donald Trump's elections, and the coronavirus pandemic, Beijing has launched a "third strategy of displacement, one that expands its blunting and building efforts worldwide to displace the United States as the global leader" (Doshi 2021, 4).

Biden's China policy reflected Doshi's perceptions and aimed at building alliances and competing with Beijing. With Trump gone and some of his antagonising moves towards allies left behind, Biden was ready to upgrade his predecessors' policies with Western multilateralism. As State Secretary Anthony Blinken said in 2022, "from day one", Biden's administration sought to "re-energise America's unmatched network of alliances and partnerships and to re-engage in international institutions (...), encouraging partners to work with each other (...), and standing up new coalitions" (Blinken 2022). Blinken argued that "we cannot rely on Beijing to change its trajectory. So, we will shape the strategic environment around Beijing to advance our vision for an open, inclusive international system" (Blinken 2022).

Shaping was already one of the preferred US instruments of statecraft since the end of the Cold War. As Wolfley argues, it is not a new concept per se.

Kissinger noted at the outset of his book on diplomacy that in every century a great power seeks to "shape the international system in accordance with its own values" (Kissinger 1994, 17); the Reagan administration used the concept of "shaping the international environment" in economic terms (Wolfley 2021); and Nye argued that "soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others" (Nye 2005, 5). Wolfley looks at "military shaping" as "the use of the military to proactively build a more favourable environment by changing military relationships, the characteristics of other militaries, or the behaviour of allies" through attraction (of allies), socialisation (changing of norms), delegation (of responsibilities), and assurance (from alliances such as NATO) (Wolfley 2021). He argues that "shaping relies primarily on attraction, legitimacy, persuasion, and positive incentives and less on uses or threats of force" (Wolfley 2021).

All these are features of strategic communication and strategic narratives. Indeed, in order to attempt to shape the international environment regarding its China strategy, the Biden administration needed a strategic narrative aimed at persuading allies and boosting alliances. Thus, the Biden administration geared its strategy narrative in three directions: political, economic, and military.

Defending the "Rules-Based Order"

In Western liberal circles, the Trump presidency and the post-Brexit era were associated with the rise of "populism" and "illiberal democracy". It was thus not surprising that in his electoral campaign and upon arriving at the White House, Biden sought to promote his administration as the Trump anti-thesis in many areas.

One of the key features has been the assertive promotion of the "rules-based order" (RBO) as an updated variant of the Western liberal international world order. As Blinken underlined, "our purpose is not to contain China, to hold it back, to keep it down. It is to uphold this rule-based order that China is posing a challenge to" (Scott 2021). Examining the inflation of RBO in Washington's discourse, Walt argued, half-jokingly, that "a ready ability to use the phrase 'rules-based international order' seems to have become a job requirement for a top position in the US foreign-policy apparatus" (Walt 2021). The RBO has been interpreted in two ways. First, as a concept based on principles of international law plus "the standards and recommendations of international standard-setting organisations and conferences and rules made by non-state actors" (Dugard 2023, 225). Second, as "the United States' alternative to international law, an order that encapsulates international law as interpreted by the United States to accord with its national interests" (Dugard 2023, 225). Talmon considers that the term "rules-based order", in fact, "blurs the distinction between binding and non-binding rules, giving the impression that all States and international actors are subject to

this order, irrespective of whether or not they have consented to these rules” (Talmon 2019). He points to the fact that while international law is “general and universal”, the “rules-based order seems to allow for special rules in special–sui generis cases” (Talmon 2019).

Perhaps the most prominent interpretation of “sui generis” cases under the RBO has been the case of the “unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo” in 2008, masterminded by Western powers despite strong warnings by Moscow and Beijing. But just because the RBO is based on creating the perception that a “rule” should be accepted, it implies that it depends on persuasion, and thus a strategic narrative to accompany it. Thus, the Biden administration opted for using the RBO as one of the key elements of its strategic narrative on China, although this was not a complete novelty (Breuer and Johnston 2019). The RBO, according to this narrative, has been under threat by illiberal actors, most notably the Russian Federation and China. The distinction between “democracies” and “authoritarian regimes” has indeed been one of the foundations of the Biden administration’s attempts to portray two opposite camps, most notably at the “Summit for Democracy”, first held in December 2021. When Russia launched its military operation in Ukraine several months later, in February 2022, the US discourse on the RBO only grew stronger and more pervasive in various Western fora, largely reproduced by various stakeholders and becoming a regular feature of declarations by organisations such as NATO.

Indeed, the discourse on the “rules-based order” has been useful in garnering support from Western allies, particularly as it replaces a more confrontational concept of containment. The result of Washington’s efforts can be seen in the declarations of leading Western organisations. Thus, the EU points out that China has a “special responsibility in upholding the rules-based international order” (European Council 2023); NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg is arguing that China is “increasingly challenging the rules-based international order” (Lee and Woo, 2023); the G7 Hiroshima statement underlined that a “growing China that plays by international rules would be of global interest” (White House 2023); while the Japanese media argued that the preservation of the “rules-based order” will be “the first priority of the G7 summit” (Nagy 2023), noting that “China’s global ambitions” are one of the key challenges for the RBO.

“De-coupling” to Secure Western-Normed Globalisation

In the economic sphere, the US has promoted a strategic narrative aimed at challenging China’s technological advances as “intrusive” and “undemocratic”. In addition to arguing against Beijing’s investment in critical infrastructure of Western countries, as had been done by Trump over the 5G, the Biden

administration put a particular accent on semiconductors. After banning American sales to Chinese chip manufacturers in 2022, Washington created a new alliance— "Chip 4"—uniting Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, with the aim to ensure a stable supply of semiconductors and reduce Chinese involvement (Kyodo News 2023).

One of the key elements of the US strategic narrative on China has been the "threat framing" of Beijing's policies by numerous US-financed think tanks, media, and policymaking reports. It was reinforced through a network of "China watchdog" researchers, journalists, and influencers with the objective of collaboration on the analysis and exposure of implications of Chinese policies and activities in various fields, from private business through academia and (dis)information up to civil society and technology (Mitić 2022). This narrative is based on frames exploiting the crafted imagery of China's "systemic ills" and "geopolitical ambitions", with the objective of depicting China's cooperation with international partners as toxic, undesirable, and dangerous, thus encouraging repulsion of cooperation, fostering disappointment, and facilitating crippling criticism (Mitić 2022).

China's BRI has been a particular target of the US strategic narrative, which has evolved since 2013. In the first several years, during the Obama administration, the narrative was more focused on the identification, questioning of its strategic intent, and expression of worry, while during the Trump administration, since 2016, the focus has been on the warning about the "BRI threat" and the call to action against BRI-related projects. During the Biden administration, this narrative was pushed one step further as it began to focus on disrupting the BRI framework of cooperation per se. Thus, the closest US partners in Europe, the Baltic states, withdrew from the China-Central and Eastern European Countries (China-CEEC) format (originally the "16+1" format).

Besides encouraging passivity and/or exit from BRI-related initiatives, the US also worked on creating alternatives. The formation of the G7 Partnership for Global Investment and Infrastructure (PGII) and the EU Global Gateway are part of the latest phase, which aims to overperform the BRI. The US first created the Blue Dot and the Development Finance Corporation (DFC) before integrating them in 2021 into the Build Back Better World initiative during the Biden administration. The initiative was finally repackaged in 2022 with the PGII of the G7, with the objective of "competing" and "combating" the BRI (Lemire and Mathiesen 2022). Furthermore, according to key EU officials, the European Union integrated its own BRI rival version, the "Global Gateway", into the PGII (Borrell 2022). The strategic narrative of the PGII is an alleged "superiority of values" against the BRI, with its projects being described as "environmentally-sound", "labour-responsible", "value-based", "transparent" and "democratic".

The US also expanded its economic alliances in the Indo-Pacific. In May 2022, the US launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), a major trade initiative aiming to expand Washington's economic leadership in the Indo-Pacific region, which was joined by 13 countries, accounting for 40 percent of the global economy (Manak 2022). While US officials dubbed it an "alternative to China's approach", Beijing media sharply criticised it, calling the initiative "economic NATO" (Banerjee 2022).

The US has also shown adaptability, a key feature of strategic communication, by adopting the term "de-risking" proposed by the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, as a more acceptable wording for the policy of "de-coupling" from the Chinese economy, which the US had been proposing (Von der Leyen 2023). The term was subsequently taken up by the G7 at the 2023 Hiroshima statement, stating that the G7 is "de-risking, not de-coupling" (White House 2023), although for Beijing, "de-risking is just de-coupling in disguise" (Xinhua 2023).

Shaping the Indo-Pacific Security Environment

As argued by Wolfley, providing (and upholding) assurances is one of the key elements of the military shaping of the international security environment operated by the US. For Washington, this is key to the attractiveness of US-led alliances, such as NATO (Article 5). While no "Asian NATO" exists per se, flirting with the concept and establishing mechanisms that resemble the founding blocks of a future Indo-Pacific US-led alliance have been particularly upgraded in the last several years. In that light, the February 2022 release of the Indo-Pacific Strategy by the Biden administration can be perceived as an "American vow" to the region (Lađevac and Stekić 2023).

One of the key elements has been the US policy towards Taiwan, which Japan and South Korea look upon as an important example of assurance to Washington's partners. In that sense, for the US strategic narrative in the region, it is key to first frame the "threat" of China's military rise. This includes "China's peaceful reunification", which would dramatically change the regional security dynamics (Stekić 2023). The second frame is the "opportunity" of US alternatives—through both bilateral and multilateral mechanisms—an update to John Foster Dulles's Korean war-era "island chain strategy". For the US narrative, it is important to stick to the commitments to Taipei's "sufficient self-defence capacity" under the US Taiwan Relations Act (US Congress 1979). Thus, despite heightened tensions caused by the visit of Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi in August 2022, Biden's administration authorised a further 10 billion dollars in military-purpose grants to Taiwan under the 2023 National Defence Authorization Act (DeLisle 2023). In the context of the Ukraine

conflict, Biden repeatedly stated that the US would defend Taiwan in the event of China's attack. This position was praised by Taipei but harshly criticised by Beijing (Ni 2022). Furthermore, in February 2023, Washington updated the 2014 Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement with Manila, giving the US access to four extra bases in the Philippines in addition to the previous five, with a key geostrategic positioning overlooking the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. The US Marine Corps furthermore opened Camp Blaz, its first base in 70 years, on the US Pacific Island of Guam, which is considered a possible place for the outbreak of conflict with China (Lendon 2023). In early 2023, Washington signed agreements on boosting mobility for the 12th US Marine Littoral Regiment on the island of Okinawa and improving anti-ship capabilities in case of a Chinese attack in Taiwan, as well as the deployment of fighter jets and aircraft carriers and the expansion of combined military exercises in the Korean Peninsula. Perhaps strategically even more important was the Washington shuttle diplomacy aimed at restarting strained relations between its two strategic allies in the region, Seoul and Tokyo, which resulted several months later in a trilateral summit under Biden's auspices at Camp David (Boot and Terry 2023).

The US marked three other important regional successes for its alliance-building strategic communication in 2023. In March, it unveiled the details of the AUKUS (Australia, UK, US) deal on nuclear-powered submarines, which is seen by analysts as key "from the standpoint of deterring Chinese aggression within the next ten years" (Townshend 2023). That same month, at the meeting of the QUAD in New Delhi, the foreign ministers of the US, India, Japan, and South Korea took a "direct shot at China", underlying that they view with concern "challenges to the maritime rules-based order, including in the South and East China Sea" (Lee 2023). Finally, in addition to Tokyo announcing a possible opening of NATO's first office in Asia, the NATO summit in Vilnius hosted Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea, whose presence at the summits of the North Atlantic alliance has now been normalised, despite the initial 2022 diplomatic objections to the US initiative by some key European members.

Conclusion

In 50 years of relations with the People's Republic of China, the US strategic narrative has evolved through unexpected phases of world order changes, an often interconnected Sino-American rise to leadership in globalisation, as well as a changing perception of mutual strategic intentions. As discussed earlier, Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle introduced three forms of strategic narrative: system (how an actor perceives the international order), identity (how an actor projects his identity within the order), and policy (how an actor constructs and explains his actions). In line with these forms, we can distinguish

three key phases in the evolution of the US narrative. In the first period, from the late 1960s until the late 1980s, the US saw a bipolar world in which China was contributing to the containment of Soviet expansion. Within this order, the US projected its narrative as both “leader of the free world” and contributor to the geopolitical balance of power in Asia. China was portrayed as both a partner in Soviet containment and a willing recipient of support for its entry into economic globalisation. In the second period, lasting from the early 1990s until the early 2010s, the US narrative was in line with the Washington-led “unipolar moment”, in which it saw itself as the undisputed leader mopping up the rest of the post-Cold War debris and maintaining the globalisation momentum in which China was growing as a necessary yet uneasy partner and rising competitor. The narrative on US policies focused more on engagement in the 1990s before moving incrementally to containment and dispute in the late 2000s. The third period, roughly from the mid-2010s, focused on the unwilling US acknowledgement that a transition towards multipolarity was in sight and that the Western “rules-based order” was challenged by China and Russia. The US sees itself as the defender of the RBO, and the narrative is focused on shaping its policies and those of its allies around China through containment policies and an all-out rivalry, albeit short of war.

Table 1: The evolution of the US strategic narrative on China’s rise

| | System | Identity | Policy |
|--|---|---|---|
| Cold War (1970s-1980s) | Bipolar world, with China playing the balancing act in Asia | The US is the leader of the “free world”, promoting China’s strengthening and partnership in Soviet containment | Engagement and support for China’s economic and military rise |
| Post-Cold War unipolar moment (1990s-2000s) | Unipolar world under US dominance | The US is the undisputed global leader, “mopping up” challenges to its dominance and maintaining the globalisation momentum in which China is growingly an uneasy partner and rising competitor | Balancing between engagement (particularly in the 1990s) and incremental containment (from the 2000s) |
| Transition towards multipolarity (2010s-2020s) | The Western “rules-based world order” is challenged | The US is the defender of the order challenged by China | Shaping of allies around China-containment policies, all-out rivalry short of war |

Source: Author.

Throughout the eras, the US has succeeded in aligning the three forms of its strategic narrative. It has shown adaptability to change, persuasiveness directed at allies, and coherence between words and actions. This has led to the formation and strengthening of Western alliances around the US narrative on China's rise, including the need for its containment. On the other side, Trump's administration, Doshi, and Friedberg would argue that, over the last several decades, Washington "got China wrong", with all the negative implications for its statecraft repertoire and strategic narrative, which now need a remedy.

Challenges indeed remain. First, at home in Washington, a tension looms between achieved bipartisan consensus and rising competition on "China toughness", which might entrap the White House strategic narrative. An example of this tension was Pelosi's 2022 visit to Taipei. Nevertheless, in reference to O'Tuathail's concepts, Pelosi's visit can also be seen as a script that fits the "geopolitical storyline" of US containment of China and assurances to Taipei, thus showing the panoply of Washington's strategic communication arsenal. Second, the US strategic narrative will need to secure more permanent support from the EU member countries, which will not be an easy task given hesitations from some of the key members, who are cautious about the effects of de-coupling/de-risking from China. Third, while the strategic narrative effort has been successful among Western allies and countries interested in China-containment in the Indo-Pacific, it has not gained ground in the Global South in general. Indeed, the projection, and particularly the reception, of the US strategic narrative could be an important area for further study. One just needs to look at the examples of countries that have joined US policies, but with reservations, if not opposition, from important domestic stakeholders unwilling to follow Washington's narrative. In the Philippines, Manuel Mamba, the governor of the Cagayan province, opposed Manila's decision to allow the US access to new military bases for fear of "jeopardising Chinese investment and becoming a target in a conflict over Taiwan" (Agence France-Presse 2023). In Japan, Denny Tamaki, the governor of Okinawa, also opposed the increase in US military presence, arguing that "the possibility of China's aggression into Taiwan is almost zero", and that the risk of war comes mainly from a potential declaration of independence by Taipei (Oswald 2023). Fourth, and most importantly, in terms of challenges, the US strategic narrative faces and will continue to face China's (counter-) narrative. Indeed, China has marked a number of important successes related to its strategic communication. Over the last two years, Xi has launched three new global initiatives: the Global Development Initiative (2021), the Global Security Initiative (2022), and the Global Civilization Initiative (2023), which are all rooted in Chinese strategic communication aimed at working towards a multipolar order and indivisible

security opposed to the expansion of military alliances such as NATO. Combined with the 2023 enlargement of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (Iran) and the BRICS (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and Argentina), these initiatives now constitute a solid ground for contesting the US strategic narrative and a fertile ground for the study of current and future global narrative competition.

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**ОД „ПРИЈАТЕЉА“ У ГЛОБАЛИЗАЦИЈИ ДО ГЛОБАЛНОГ „ПРОТИВНИКА“:
ЕВОЛУЦИЈА СТРАТЕШКОГ НАРАТИВА САД О УСПОНУ КИНЕ**

Апстракт: Стратешки наратив Сједињених Америчких Држава о успону Народне Републике Кине (НР Кине) еволуирао је током пола века мењања светских поредака и узајамних перцепција стратешких намера. Од раних 1970-их, и током последње две деценије Хладног рата и биполарног света, САД су настојале да помогну у успону Кине као партнера у економској глобализацији и обуздавању СССР. За време „униполарног тренутка“ пост-хладноратовске ере, Вашингтон је одржавао снажан економски ангажман, али је све више перципирао Пекинг као нелагодног партнера и конкурента у успону. Суочавајући се са транзицијом ка мултиполарности, у Вашингтону се појавио двопартијски консензус о неопходности обуздавања успона Кине као глобалне политичке и војне силе и отупљивања њеног изазова „поретку заснованом на правилима“. Ова еволуција од „пријатеља“ до „противника“ указује на три правца актуелног америчког стратешког наратива о расту Кине: одбрану „поретка заснованог на правилима“, раздвајање ради обезбеђења глобализације по нормама Запада, те обликовање безбедносног окружења у Индо-Пацифику. Рад закључује да, иако су САД успеле да ускладе три форме стратешког наратива (систем, идентитет, политике), он се суочава са значајним изазовима, укључујући кинеске контранаративе.

Кључне речи: спољна политика САД; раст Кине; односи САД-Кина; Индо-Пацифик; стратешки наратив; стратешка комуникација; мултиполарност; обуздавање.