China's growing power and authoritarianism have prompted a hardening of interpretations of Beijing’s rise in an expanding list of western nations, as relations worsen on a seemingly daily basis.¹ In this article, I seek to account for shifting framings of China in three key cases of this trend—the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom.² In each, optimism has given way to concern, but in distinct ways.

The US framing of China's rise has shifted from an economic opportunity to be ‘engaged’ to the threat of a rival challenging ‘American power, influence, and interests,’ with which the US is locked in ‘strategic competition’.³ That transformation, while effected under President Trump, looks likely to remain under a Biden administration.⁴ Australia’s framing has followed a similar arc, from engagement to ‘standing up’ to Beijing. However, Canberra’s frame is rooted as much in national security as in national identity—the cultural, economic and strategic aspects of securing Australia in a China-dominated Asia.⁵ The UK, for its part, has neither rejected cooperation nor adopted a clear competitive focus; but a longstanding economic opportunity frame is increasingly challenged by a national security frame. While many see positive relations with Beijing as central to Britain’s post-Brexit global role, concern over developments such as the crackdowns on democracy in Hong Kong suggest a possible enduring shift in the UK’s framing of its relations with China.⁶

¹ ‘Pushback on Xi’s vision for China spreads beyond US’, Wall Street Journal, 28 Dec. 2020, https://www.wsj.com/articles/pushback-xi-china-europe-germany-beyond-u-s-1160976287. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 13 Jan. 2021.)
⁶ ‘Hong Kong elections: UK and allies condemn moves to “undermine democracy”’, BBC News, 9 Aug. 2020,
Changing framings of China’s rise are an indispensable vehicle for exploring the origins of new strategies towards Beijing. Broader than individual policies, yet more concrete than foreign policy traditions and state identities, frames provide the conceptual resources for governmental action, defining the bounds of thinking on a given topic, within which policies cohere. As such, the tracing of changes in framings of China offers the potential to identify possible future policies.

Drawing on field theory from sociology, I connect differing framings of China to the dynamics of the US, Australian and UK national security fields. Popular across the social sciences, field theory remains underutilized in International Relations. Where it has been deployed, it has tended to be applied to supranational fields, such as the EU. However, field theory also offers a dynamic view of political contestation at the state level, with significant value added in comparison with prominent alternatives.

Fields are relatively well-bounded spaces in which agents struggle over some specific form of power or capital. ‘Field is a macrolevel concept denoting the local social world in which actors are embedded and toward which they orient their actions,’ sociologists Jeffrey Sallaz and Jane Zavisca explain. Fields structure contestation around principal divisions and distinctions, producing a limited number of credible positions, and at times a strong common sense or doxa. National security fields are composed of actors including political parties, lobbyists and decision-makers—typically highlighted by foreign policy analysts—but also academics, business leaders and think-tankers, evading a singular logic of competition (for example, parties struggle for political power, think-tankers for influence and academics for intellectual prestige.). Field theory views foreign policy frames as the outcome of ongoing field-based struggles to interpret international objects as certain types of issue—as problems, opportunities, or something in between. Frames are shaped by the structure of fields understood as the distribution of influence, the rules and norms by which the struggle is carried on, and the distribution of world-views and dispositions. The operative question, in short, is how the respective structures of given fields promote individuals with certain views and dispositions in relation to China, and not others.

Framing China’s rise in the US, Australia and the UK

Drawing on an original set of interviews (132 in total) with China experts, and an array of primary and secondary sources, I develop a descriptive comparison of the US, Australian and UK national security fields and trace their influence on framings of China’s rise. I highlight three key features. First, the US field features a belief—absent in Australia and the UK—that China’s rise can be either arrested or prevented, which gives rise to intense framing contestation and occasional frame turnover. I root this dynamic in the system of professional appointments and a large and intense ‘marketplace of ideas’. I then identify the key positions or ‘stances’ produced by each field, from which key actors have shaped the differing interpretations of China’s rise and its meaning. The election of Donald Trump—who was strongly critical of overreliance on China—empowered key individuals across the US government who shifted the predominant framing of China from potential challenger to current threat. The smaller fields in Australia and Britain feature fewer and less intense voices. The China debate in Australia has centred on a small number of top-level government officials and advisers and a few high-profile journalists, while in the UK a handful of MPs have taken up the cause of changing British minds about China’s rise.

The article thus offers a unique perspective on China’s rise. Whereas current debate has centred on China’s diplomacy, domestic politics, foreign policy and military policy, on individual countries’ views of China, and on the broader questions of China and US hegemony, or regional politics, this paper foregrounds the processes underpinning a hardening of responses to China’s rise in three important cases. The first half develops an in-depth account of the changing framings of China’s rise in the US, Australia and the UK. The second half describes how the national security fields of the US, Australia and UK have produced these distinct framings. A conclusion draws out the main theoretical and empirical implications.

15 For more details on these interviews, see the section on ‘China’s rise and the US, Australian and UK national security fields’ below.
20 Astrid Nordin and Mikael Weissman, ‘Will Trump make China great again? The Belt and Road Initiative and international order’, International Affairs 94: 2, 2018, pp. 231–49.
Framing China’s rise in the US, Australia and the UK

From engagement to strategic competition

Though the term ‘engagement’ was coined by the administration of George H. W. Bush, in fact it had framed America’s approach to China for many years previously, from the secret meetings between Nixon and Mao in 1972, through crises such as Tiananmen, to and beyond its high point in 2000 when Bill Clinton steered China’s accession to the WTO through a sceptical Congress. Successive administrations hoped that ‘engagement’ could induce China to become, in the words of Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick in 2005, a ‘responsible stakeholder’ in international society. Much of the current hostility towards engagement stems from the view that WTO accession reflected a utopian hope that America could change China.

Engagement did not go unchallenged. In 2007, the journalist James Mann labelled US policy ‘fantastical’, blind to Beijing’s enduring hostility to freedom and human rights. Mann echoed the earlier perspective of a self-described ‘Blue Team’—a playful reversal of the war-gaming strategy of Red Teaming—who decried Clinton’s China policy as either wilfully ignorant or corrupt. While George W. Bush came to office promising a tougher line on China, this—like every other foreign policy priority—was upended by 9/11. Even so, Bush initiated a ‘pivot before the pivot’—a shift to the Asia–Pacific taken before Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s higher-profile initiative of 2010.

Despite a stronger focus on the Asia–Pacific, and despite increasingly fraught US–Chinese relations after Xi Jinping’s accession in 2012—including controversy over a ‘Great Power competition’ frame emerging from the Pentagon—engagement remained the overarching frame until Trump’s election in November 2016. Critical of China on the campaign trail, and drawing on concern in the broader
China field. Trump installed a China team who rejected the premises of engagement. In high-profile speeches, Vice-President Mike Pence, Deputy National Security Advisor Matt Pottinger and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo all detailed American concerns about China, including the mass internment of Muslims in Xinjiang, and the hegemonic aspirations of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The rejection of engagement, however, encompassed a number of distinct economic, military and ideological rationales, creating tensions in Trump’s China policy. In the economic sphere, trade adviser Peter Navarro and US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer spearheaded a trade war launched in July 2018, responding to longstanding concerns about discriminatory Chinese trade practices, including forced technology transfer and intellectual property theft. Concern over the economic fallout of this policy, however, raised tensions between Navarro, Lighthizer and their security-orientated allies on the one hand and the markets-focused Treasury Secretary, Steven Mnuchin, on the other. The ban placed on sales of technology to Huawei is indicative of the tensions between the security and economic perspectives: with no evidence of national security breaches yet emerging, cause and effect are difficult to separate.

In the military-security sphere, figures such as H. R. McMaster, National Security Advisor in 2017–2018, elevated ‘strategic competition’ to the status of principal China frame, the concept being fully elaborated in four coordinated speeches during the spring and summer of 2020 by Pompeo, Attorney General Bill Barr, National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien and FBI Director Christopher Wray. Controversial comments by Kiron Skinner, then Director of Policy Planning, to the effect that the US and China faced a ‘clash of civilizations’, were indicative of a broader ideological view held by some close to Trump, such as Steve Bannon. A further tension thus arose between, on the one hand,
David M. McCourt

the critique of engagement as having tried to change China, and, on the other, the increasing focus on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as the fulcrum of Washington's problems—necessitating a 'whole of society' approach, with regime change seemingly the only acceptable outcome. 44

Such tensions aside, the coronavirus pandemic caused further deterioration in US–China relations, cementing the strategic competition framing. 45 Delays in Beijing’s acknowledgement of the emergence of COVID-19, together with alleged undercounting of Chinese cases and failure to allow WHO scientists access to the disease’s epicentre, raised suspicions about China’s motives. Republicans, led by Trump, have been eager to blame the ‘China Virus’ on Beijing. 46 The closure of American and Chinese consulates in Chengdu and Houston, respectively, visa bans imposed by China on American journalists and by the US on members of the CCP, and the closure of hundreds of US-based Confucius Institutes have further weakened relations.47

While perhaps not amounting to a ‘consensus’, deep concern over China is a rare bipartisan issue in Washington. 48 Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer, for example, pushed Trump to try to gain more trade concessions from Beijing in 2019, 49 while House Leader Nancy Pelosi has aired confrontational views over the crackdown in Hong Kong. 50 Prospects of a return to engagement are thus far less likely than the prolongation of tensions, even a ‘new Cold War’. 51

Standing up to Beijing

On the face of it, Australia presents a similar story of the end of a cooperative frame forged amid the opening of diplomatic relations in 1972, 52 leading to a rapid

44 A tension encapsulated in Pompeo’s choice of the Nixon Library in Yorba Linda, CA, for his major speech of 20 July 2020 on ‘Communist China and the free world’s future’ (see n. 42 above).
downturn of relations. However, the timing and nature of the shift have been distinct from the analogous phenomenon in America.

Australia’s engagement with China was underpinned by the vast potential of uniquely complementary economies—Australia providing raw materials, financial services and higher education, and China finished products. An engaged frame was also backed by the view that Australia could ‘hedge’ between China and the US, sure in the knowledge that Canberra would, ultimately, side with America. The 2012 white paper *Australia in the Asian century*, commissioned by then prime minister Julia Gillard, represented the peak of engagement. Detailing the opportunities afforded by ‘Asia’s rise’, the paper challenged Australia to become ‘a more Asia-literate and Asia-capable nation’.

And yet in Australia, as in America, optimism did not go unchallenged. From the late 1990s, some began to see China as a possible problem. The US vs China choice ministers vocally hoped to avoid was nevertheless visible between the lines of the 2000 defence white paper. Domestically, too, harbingers of later controversies could be seen, for example during a 2008 rally in Canberra to ‘protect’ the Olympic torch—on its way to Beijing—which drew over 10,000 Chinese Australians, drowning out pro-Tibet protestors. Nonetheless, until the mid-2010s, opportunity remained the operative Australian China frame, ‘committed to strong and constructive ties’ with Beijing.

Views began to shift markedly in 2016 and 2017 under Malcolm Turnbull as elite and public opinion on China changed. A first set of events centred on United Front activities revealed by journalists such as John Garnaut and in a series of television exposés. Most shocking were details of intimate relationships between senior government figures and prominent Chinese and Chinese Australians—including the 2016 case of the then New South Wales Labor Party Senator Sam Dastyari, discovered to have taken money from donors linked to the CCP.


55 Nick Bisley, ‘“An ally for all the years to come”: why Australia is not a conflicted US ally’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 67: 4, 2013, pp. 403–18.


62 ‘United Front’ here refers to groups seeking to organize Chinese–Australians and Chinese in Australia to act in accordance with PRC interests and following its direction. John Garnaut, ‘Australia’s China reset’; ABC’s *Four corners*, e.g. https://www.abc.net.au/4corners/red-flags/11604156.
critique, Clive Hamilton outlined a ‘complex, subtle and deeply institutionalized set of inducements and threats designed to shape how outsiders talk, think and behave’ originating with the CCP.\(^63\) For Hamilton, the Dastyari affair ‘exposed the rot at the heart of Australian democracy’.\(^64\) In late 2017, the Turnbull government introduced a four-part package of national security and foreign interference laws, aimed at preventing such interference by authoritarian states, including China.\(^65\)

A second, connected, origin of the ‘reality check’ was the growing list of actions betraying a changed China—from cyber-attacks to threats aimed at Taiwan.\(^66\) Beijing’s response to the 2016 judgment in the South China Sea tribunal shifted the views of many in Canberra away from hedging and towards new security policy thinking—a process that continues.\(^67\) Central to the strategic response was the foregrounding of the concept of the ‘Indo-Pacific’,\(^68\) providing the rationale for invigorating defence and security ties with the US, India and Japan via the ‘Quad’—a security grouping explicitly downplayed during the prime ministerial tenure of Kevin Rudd\(^69\)—and the ‘Five Eyes’ intelligence alliance.\(^70\)

Rudd’s scepticism about the Quad echoes similar tensions in Australia’s changing China frame. Domestically, the furore over Hamilton’s Silent invasion—criticized by some as ‘neo-McCarthyite’—and concern over the effects of the new National Security Legislation Amendment are indicative.\(^71\) Worry that new measures would lead to targeting of the Chinese-Australian community were given substance by Tasmanian Senator Eric Abetz’s pointed request of three Chinese Australians during recent testimony to state ‘whether they are willing to unconditionally condemn the Chinese Communist Party dictatorship’.\(^72\) Rory Medcalf’s written testimony shows the fine line that those hoping to raise ‘criticism of influence by the Chinese Communist Party’ while reassuring ‘Chinese-

\(^{64}\) Hamilton, Silent invasion, p. 85.
Australians that they are included, welcomed and cherished as integral to … this multicultural nation’ have to tread.\textsuperscript{73} Other examples of concern that national security measures have gone too far include the recently blocked sale of dairy firm Lion as ‘contrary to the national interest’,\textsuperscript{74} which strikes some as quite unlike the sale in 2011 of Darwin Port to the Chinese-owned firm Landbridge, which initiated closer oversight by the Foreign Investment Review Board of overseas purchases of Australian businesses.

There has also been tension between Australia’s China ‘reality check’ of standing up to Beijing—with US support—and a parallel desire to avoid what some perceive as Washington’s ideological crusade.\textsuperscript{75} Comments made recently by Foreign Affairs Minister Marise Payne alongside Mike Pompeo highlight not only the convergence of policy towards China, but also a marked difference in language and tone.\textsuperscript{76} Australia’s leaders want the US to compete in the Asia-Pacific, and to compete to win—but for its own reasons.\textsuperscript{77} Australia’s ban on Huawei is illustrative. Noted approvingly in Washington,\textsuperscript{78} the initial exclusion was made in 2012 for the straightforward reason of technological sovereignty.\textsuperscript{79}

In both Australia and the US, a high-level rethink has led to policies less concerned about angering Beijing, with Canberra the first national capital to suggest an international investigation into the origins of COVID-19.\textsuperscript{80} Both cases have also ended up in tit-for-tat diplomacy, including the shocking episode of a top Chinese official sharing a fake image of an Australian soldier abusing an Afghan civilian.\textsuperscript{81} And both cases have featured a politicization of China policy, as Australian commentators ‘marshal themselves into hostile camps … [the] “China hawks” who want to stand
up to Beijing, and ... those who see America’s power in Asia as on the wane, and urge a careful debate on how Australia can fend for itself’. 82 Yet Australia’s China frame remains pragmatic, as exemplified in recent remarks by Prime Minister Scott Morrison, firmly casting Australian strategy within an Indo-Pacific frame, rather than the threat frame popular in the Trump administration. 83

In search of a frame?

The UK represents another example of a hardening of views towards the People’s Republic, interrelated with, yet distinct from, the US and Australia. As in Australia, the British turn has not been effected as a dramatic framing shift, but rather as a matter of how to address troubling issues in the bilateral relationship while retaining hope for improved ties. In the UK, China is ‘neither perceived as a … kind of existential security threat nor … a kind of massive opportunity that’s going to solve everything’. 84 The issue of Chinese students, for example, has taken on a national security aspect in the US—including whether Chinese students should study STEM subjects. 85 In the UK, the question remains the pragmatic one of whether to increase or decrease the annual allocation of 54,000 visas. 86

Like Australia’s, the UK’s engagement with Beijing centred on economic opportunity, peaking in the early to middle 2010s, when prime minister David Cameron (in office 2010–2016) and chancellor George Osborne embraced Beijing, the latter famously backpacking around China. 87 Osborne committed the UK to joining the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and sought Chinese investment in British industry, including the high-speed rail line HS2. 88 Economic optimism was mirrored by pronouncements of strategic cooperation. The 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) trumpeted the value added offered by bilateral relations. The 2015 iteration mentioned China more often (19 times as against three in the earlier edition), and was also arguably more optimistic, noting how ‘we do not expect to agree with the Chinese government on everything ... our aim is to build a deeper partnership with China, working more closely to address global challenges’. 89

84 UK interview A. To maintain confidentiality, I have refrained from identifying interviewees by name, using letters in their place, contextualizing comments as far as possible.
88 ‘Osborne’s plan was to get Chinese communists to fund the Conservative Party policy to destroy the Labour Party in northern England. Kind of neat’: UK interview C.
Cameron’s successor, Theresa May, was less optimistic—a perspective grounded in her background in home affairs and connections to the security services. Even so, optimism arguably lasted longer in London than in Washington or Canberra. In the past two years or so, however, familiar issues of concern—notably Chinese actions related to Hong Kong and its response to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic—have amplified the voices of China sceptics. It has suddenly dawned on many Britons, one insightful analysis notes, ‘that China’s rise to great power status is no longer a future prospect, but an uncomfortable reality that has to be dealt with in the present.’ Fears of strategic overreliance on China have underpinned bipartisan calls for a tougher line, amid worsening public views of China. Notably, Beijing’s imposition of a new national security law prompted London to open an unprecedented route to citizenship for up to 2.6 million Hong Kongers.

The timing of the UK case can be explained, in part, by the lingering effects of Brexit. On the one hand, Brexit ‘totally obliterated everything else from the political agenda’. At the same time, the search for a new ‘global Britain’ role on the world stage after Brexit offers two distinct China options: engage with Beijing, or lead a global liberal democratic pushback against it. A memorandum written in February 2018 for the House of Commons International Relations Committee captured the first: to ‘continue to be a successful global foreign policy player’, global Britain should ‘encourage and support China’s greater cooperation in helping resolve global challenges’ through mechanisms such as the Global Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, established in 2015. Sceptics, meanwhile, recommend the second option of leading the western democratic response to China’s rise, a choice so far declined by the Johnson government, but clearly seen as an option, for example, in former foreign secretary Jeremy Hunt’s notion of a Britain at the centre of an ‘invisible chain’ of nations that share its values.
The latter idea has gained a small but significant number of supporters, including former Labour foreign secretary David Owen, and former Conservative leader Iain Duncan Smith. For Smith, ‘the free world has marched somewhat blindly ... into the embrace of a Chinese Communist Party that has very clear and strategic understandings about how it wishes to dominate a whole series of areas, both in the marketplace and in geopolitics.’ Such views have been supported by voices from both Canberra and Washington pushing for Britain to adopt a tougher position. Recent vacillations over whether to grant Huawei access to Britain’s 5G network indicate the cross-cutting pressures. Led by Pompeo, the US lobbied hard for a ban, citing concerns about the company’s statutory ties to the CCP, and wondering publicly about the UK’s continued access to the ‘Five Eyes’ intelligence network. In late January 2020, Johnson announced a compromise, whereby Huawei would be allowed access to non-critical parts of the network, citing Britain’s own intelligence assessments against those of the US, and implicitly pushing back against the portrayal of China as a threat. A few months later, however, Johnson performed a U-turn, announcing that Huawei would be out of the network by 2027, a date recently brought forward to September 2021.

With events rapidly unfolding, there is the possibility of an increased salience of the threat frame within and across the major parties. For now, however, the official UK view remains practical, mirroring Canberra’s pragmatic pushback, keeping the door to cooperation open. A conclusion stated in March 2019 by the Foreign Affairs Select Committee still holds: ‘There does not appear to be a clear sense either across Government or within the FCO of what the overarching theme of a new policy towards China should be.’

100 Judah, ‘UK–China clash’.
101 See the prominent US China sceptics lending their support to the views expressed in Rogers et al., Breaking the China supply chain.
108 Geddes, ‘UK–China relations’.
China’s rise and the US, Australian and UK national security fields

What explains the nature and timing of changing frames of China’s rise in these three cases? The commonsense explanation points to differing national interests. What this account misses, however, is how interests emerge and change. In this sense, a quip by Boris Johnson that Wales is closer to China than is New Zealand conveys something Johnson probably did not intend: that national interests require interpretation through frames, no matter how self-evident.

Here I deploy field theory to conceptualize the interconnected struggles over the meaning of China’s rise. I draw on a range of sources. First, as part of a broader project on US hegemony and the rise of China, I use insights gained from 132 original interviews with China experts, including former policy-makers, academics, think-tankers, and for-profit consultants working in the China space. Of these, 106 were institutionally located in America, 14 in Australia and twelve in the UK, although many had experience in more than one field. Interviews were conducted between late 2016 and late 2020, and totalled over 100 hours. Interviewees ranged in age and experience, and were identified using the snowball sampling method.

The interviews provide a guide to the China segments of the distinct but connected national security fields in the US, Australia and the UK, which I augment with an exhaustive survey of primary and secondary materials. Such materials are voluminous, and include government policy statements and reports, speeches from key policy-makers, think-tank analyses, academic books and articles, and articles in newspapers and magazines. Data collection has been aided by membership of China-related electronic mailing lists (two in the US, one each in Australia and Britain) and attendance at multiple China-related events—including book launches and panel discussions during research trips to Washington DC, and academic meetings such as the Asian Studies Association annual conferences in 2018 and 2019. Together, the data represent a thorough coverage of the US, Australian and UK national security communities, as they have grappled with the issue of a rising China since 2016.

The US, Australian and UK national security fields and China

The first salient difference between the US national security field, on the one hand, and those of Australia and the UK, on the other, is that in the latter two China’s rise is as an inevitable feature of world politics in the twenty-first century, whereas the US field features an assumption, a doxa, that China’s rise is a problem in search of the correct US response. The May 2020 Strategic Approach to the People’s Republic of China reflects an assumption that ‘Americans feel that they can do something about China’s rise.’ Although it asserts that America ‘does not seek to contain

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Footnotes:
112 UK interview E, senior academic, Toronto, 29 March 2019. As one prominent UK columnist noted, ‘for...
China’s development’ or change China’s ‘domestic governance model’, like the engagement frame it replaces it too implies an ability to affect China’s rise. Laying out ‘Beijing’s challenge’ to America’s ‘way of life’, it describes how strategic competition can ‘compel Beijing to cease or reduce actions harmful to the United States’ vital national interests.’

Again, accepted wisdom suggests that at the heart of this difference lies a matter of differential levels of power—the fact that the US simply can do more than Australia or Britain. From a field theory perspective, however, taken-for-granted agency is a contingent feature of the US national security field, a field of unparalleled size and intensity, where an intense struggle among multiple stakeholders frames issues such as China’s rise as actionable for policy-makers. On any given day, a ‘permanent conference on China’ in Washington features speeches, panels, congressional testimonies and a myriad other events. Although the US field has hubs beyond Washington, notably New York and Hawaii, the US capital is ‘the epicenter of China watching’ (for a visual summary of the institutional landscape, see figure 1). In both Australia and the UK, the national security fields are smaller and less geographically concentrated, and the debate over foreign policy less intense. Moreover, organizations like the (Australian) Lowy Institute, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) and the (British) Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) are part of an international ‘marketplace of ideas’, deeply interconnected with the US national security conversation.

Thus, while government and private funding for such institutions is far more substantial in the US than in either Australia or the UK, economic power fails to explain the intensity of the US field. Rather, the root cause is a feature central to the US state: namely, the system of political appointments to policy-making positions. The expansive ecology of national security organizations acts as a holding place for those hoping to enter, or having just left, government. From there, the struggle over influence is at once professional and deeply political, as individuals hoping to enter government seek influence via forceful claims to expertise and the maintenance of their prominence and relevance in matters of national security.

Americans ... it very quickly comes round to the question “What does America do? Should we try to thwart them, co-opt them?” ... In Britain, we don’t think that way’ (UK interview D, journalist, London, 7 July 2018). The White House, United States strategic approach to the People’s Republic of China, pp. 1, 8.

The White House, United States strategic approach to the People’s Republic of China, pp. 1, 8.


Compared to the large Washington think-tanks, ‘most British operations are shoestring operations’; UK interview G, think-tank director, London, 9 July 2018.

Academic literature on the political appointees system is surprisingly sparse. See Thomas Medvetz, Think tanks in America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), and the Revolving Door Project, www.therevolvingdoorproject.org.

This struggle goes beyond the influence of business elites: see e.g. Naná de Graaf and Bastiaan van Apeldoorn, ‘US–China relations and the liberal world order: contending elites, colliding visions?’, International Affairs 94: 1, 2018, pp. 113–31.

656

International Affairs 97: 3, 2021
A signature artefact of the US national security field is thus the tendency towards (often sizeable) swings between engagement and toughening with respect to certain issues, countries or regions (such as China), as incoming administrations bring in new approaches and energy. The issue is partly one of party politics and

a politicized think-tank space: Republican administrations draw more heavily from conservative establishments, such as the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), while Democrats have their own equivalent sources, such as the Brookings Institution and the Council on Foreign Relations, among others. Foreign policy attitudes often transcend partisan divisions, however, demonstrating that the tendency towards framing turnover reflects the broader dynamics of the ‘revolving door’ in and out of government.

The same dynamics are not operative in Canberra and London, which feature greater separation between the government, universities, businesses and think-tanks. In Britain and Australia, ‘foreign policy, international relations, [is] the job of government not the job of universities to do’.\textsuperscript{124} If the ‘UK government has a China crisis … it turns to its own resource base’,\textsuperscript{125} and the same is true in Australia. In neither Britain nor Australia, moreover, is China expertise a matter of party affiliation: ‘China hands … are neither Labour people nor Tory people … We talk to both.’\textsuperscript{126} Separation between the government, universities and the business world is both reflected in and furthered by aspects of Canberra and London that typically are rarely mentioned: the high cost of living in London as compared to Washington;\textsuperscript{127} and the geographical separation of Canberra from the economic centres of Sydney and Melbourne.

The respective China sectors of the national security fields in Australia and the UK reflect this separation. A standout feature of each is the predominance of unique forms of China expertise: in the Australian case, among journalists, and in the British, among political risk advisers and corporate consultants.\textsuperscript{128} In Australia, journalists such as John Garnaut, Peter Hartcher, Rowan Callick and others have driven the discussion in ways not mirrored in Britain or the US. Although US journalists, notably Josh Rogin and John Pomfret from the \textit{Washington Post} (and NSC Asia Director Matthew Pottinger is also a former journalist) have been prominent voices, journalists have not led the debate as they have in Australia.\textsuperscript{129} In the absence of the array of think-tanks and research institutes in Washington DC, the British equivalent is the prominence of ‘little niche organizations below the radar … discreet offices in the city or West End or Mayfair … doing due diligence [and] corporate risk’.\textsuperscript{130}

\textbf{Ending engagement in the US, Australia and the UK}

The above outline presents in broad brushstrokes the unique structural dynamics of the US, Australian and British national security fields. How does this matter? The major aspect of a field theory of differential framings of China’s rise is the set

\textsuperscript{124} Australia interview A, senior academic, via video call, 5 March 2018.
\textsuperscript{125} UK interview G, think-tank director, London 9 July 2018.
\textsuperscript{126} UK interview G.
\textsuperscript{127} UK interview G.
\textsuperscript{128} UK interview B, journalist, London, 24 July 2018.
\textsuperscript{129} Australia interview A, think-tank senior fellow and former journalist, via video call, 19 Feb. 2020.
\textsuperscript{130} UK interview B.
of possible stances and counter-stances the respective fields produce, shaping the struggle to frame China as an international issue.

Trump’s election brought to the centre of US policy a view of China that was becoming increasingly popular in certain sectors in the national security community: that engagement had been a failure, and that a new frame was needed for a CCP bent on global hegemony. Trump ‘made it OK to call China bad’.\footnote{Australia interview B, think-tank fellow and former senior government official, via video call, 8 Nov. 2020.} Elements of this view long preceded Trump’s entry into the White House, resonating through organizations funded by the Department of Defense, such as the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments,\footnote{Jan van Tol, Mark Gunzinger, Andrew F. Krepinevich and Jim Thomas, AirSea battle: a point-of-departure operational concept (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 18 May 2010), https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/airsea-battle-concept.} human rights groups,\footnote{Juan Pablo Cardinal, Jacek Kucharczyk, Grigorij Meseznikov and Gabriela Pleschova, Sharp power: rising authoritarian influence (Washington DC: National Endowment for Democracy and International Forum for Democratic Studies, Dec. 2017), https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Sharp-Power-Rising-Authoritarian-Influence-Full-Report.pdf.} and the annual reviews of the twin congressional commissions established in 2000 alongside China’s accession to the WTO—the US–China Economic and Security Review Commission and the Congressional–Executive Commission on China (CECC).\footnote{See, respectively, https://www.uscc.gov/annual-reports; https://www.cecc.gov/publications/annual-reports.} Trump himself, departing from his predecessors’ approach by offering no top-level direction aimed at preserving good relations with China—as his early phone call to Taiwanese leader Tsai Ing-wen indicated—empowered a group of strong China sceptics to fundamentally reframe Sino-US relations.\footnote{See Committee on the Present Danger—China, https://presentdangerchina.org/about.}

Rhetorical reframing found support—and inspiration—from conservative members of Congress, and commentators and experts previously considered radical on China. Notable among these were former Trump adviser Steve Bannon, the re-formed Cold War Committee on the Present Danger—China,\footnote{Newt Gingrich, Trump vs China (New York: Center St, 2019); Charles Creitz, ‘Gordon Chang warns China is “going to push a President Biden around” and US “must push back”’, Fox News, 7 Dec. 2020, https://www.foxnews.com/world/gordon-chang-china-push-biden-around-dangerous.} Newt Gingrich and Gordon G. Chang, all of whom promote the ideological view expressed in administration justifications for strategic competition.\footnote{Pompeo, ‘Communist China and the free world’s future’.} As Pompeo noted: ‘We have to admit a hard truth … if we want to have a free 21st century … the old paradigm of blind engagement with China will not get it done.’\footnote{Alex Isenstadt, ‘GOP memo urges anti-China assault over coronavirus’, Politico, 24 April 2020, https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/24/gop-memo-anti-china-coronavirus-207244.} A group of strongly anti-CCP Republican members of Congress, including senators Marco Rubio (Florida)—chair of the human rights-focused CECC—and Tom Cotton (Arkansas), have used ideological language, language also evident in a Republican Party memo on how to use the issue of China to electoral advantage.\footnote{See Committee on the Present Danger—China, https://presentdangerchina.org/about.}

The framing shift was facilitated by the weakening of countervailing (i.e. pro-engagement) constituencies. Trump largely excluded business groups such
as the US–China Business Council, while many large businesses in any case welcomed the new approach—at least initially—in response to increasingly unfavourable business conditions in China. The absence of China-expert financial figures such as Henry Paulson in the Trump administration is thus telling, although Treasury Secretary Mnuchin found himself cast into the role of the engager on account of his concern over souring relations on the markets. Other constituencies isolated as Trump ‘drained’ the Washington ‘swamp’ were the main foreign policy think-tanks, prompting organized pushback in the form of op-eds and open letters—initiatives prompting their own counter-arguments.

Criticism of engagement came, then, from beyond the Republicans’ right wing, preventing the politicization of China policy—as demonstrated by the failure of attempts to paint Biden as ‘Beijing Joe’. Criticism of engagement came not only from human rights groups, with significant support from key congressional Democrats, but also from former government officials and typically pro-engagement sectors of the national security field. An influential early article by former insiders Kurt Campbell and Ely Ratner proclaimed that America had ‘got China wrong’, signalling an important shift in the centre of gravity on China in the US national security field. Taking these shifts together with a military establishment that after 2015 was no longer preoccupied with counterterrorism and small wars, the weight of the national security field inclined towards a tougher line. Even those calling for a more restrained policy towards China had to acknowledge Beijing’s deeply troubling behaviour.

The Australian national security field has given rise to a different set of stances, and a contrasting form and timing of the country’s framing of China. Rather than emerging from a turnover of administration, Australia’s tougher view emerged from within the government—centrally, former prime minister Malcolm Turnbull and a small group of ministers and advisers. Turnbull was ‘a China booster [who] changed his position’.

147 Fravel et al., ‘China is not an enemy’.
Highlighting the important role of the media in the Australian field, the policy shift was effected partly in response to a confidential report on Chinese domestic interference, requested by Turnbull and composed by John Garnaut—China correspondent for Fairfax Media (2007–2013) and Asia–Pacific editor (2013–2015). Turnbull reportedly chose Garnaut in order to elicit fresh thinking not beholden to established modes in Canberra. While too much could be made of the choice (Garnaut is not only a journalist, but also the son of Ross Garnaut, adviser to former prime minister Bob Hawke and Ambassador to China from 1985 to 1988), the centrality of journalists in the Australian case speaks to an important difference between that and the US case. Unlike the China experts—broadly defined—central to the US frame change, Australian journalists define China as a question for Australia, both geopolitically and in terms of Australian society—features largely absent from the US framing of China as a threat to American hegemony and freedom, very broadly understood.

As in the US, however, government-led rhetorical changes led to the taking of positions in the national security field, as well as in the broader public debate on China. Those concerned about worsening relations split into two principal groups. First, businesses and their main associations have sought to lobby individual ministers and shape the debate to foreground the mutual benefits of trade.149 James Laurenceson, for one, has pushed back against the claims of Clive Hamilton and others that Australian businesses and universities are in thrall to China.150 The pro-business group has made common cause, second, with groups of mostly left-wing academics, who have raised concern over the potential for policies aimed at Beijing to take on a racist, neo-McCarthyite tinge. Contending letters over the National Security Legislation Amendment (Espionage and Foreign Interference) of December 2018 identify the major groups. A first letter, signed principally by humanities academics, and featuring high-profile individuals such as Stephen Fitzgerald—Australia’s first Ambassador to the PRC—and prominent think-tankers Jane Golley, Linda Jakobsen and Geremie Barmé, raised concerns about the harm the bills could do to Chinese Australians’ rights, specifically their rights to participate fully in politics.151 Testimony during the bill’s passage echoed these concerns, backed by letters of support from Human Rights Watch and Australian Lawyers for Human Rights, in sharp contrast to the role of human rights organizations in the US.

These groupings are not purely a reflection of the politics of Sino-Australian relations. A major strand of the anti-racist critique is a profound distrust of possible American influence in Australian politics.152 This includes a concern that Canberra...
might become involved in imperialism-by-proxy, given weight by the ideological rhetoric of Pompeo and others. American interest in Australian policies aimed at standing up to Beijing—as ‘canaries in the coal mine’, in the words of one interviewee—is here a double-edged sword, the Australian public consistently expressing support for government statements of an independent approach.153 Domestically, concern over the anti-China perspective of the Rupert Murdoch-owned News Corp wing of the Australian media plays a similar role. Pompeo’s decision to give an extended interview to the relatively fringe Sky News television programme Outsiders on his May 2020 visit, in which he suggested the US ‘would simply disconnect’ should Victoria go ahead with a planned Belt and Road programme,154 provided grist to the mill of those, such as Kevin Rudd, already deeply worried about News Corp’s influence.155

Supporters of Turnbull’s tougher line are also split. On one side is a cross-party group of parliamentarians styling themselves ‘Wolverines’ and including Liberal MP Andrew Hastie and Labor Senator Kimberley Kitching,156 self-identifying as opponents of the CCP and supporters of the US. A second group of mostly think-tankers and academics, by contrast, seek to tread the finer line between red-baiting and unsustainable optimism about China. In an open letter of 27 March 2018, supporters of the new national security legislation echoed the need for civil debate and inclusivity. The signatories, who included a substantial number of scholars of international politics, expressed concern at ‘a number of well-documented reports about the Chinese Communist Party’s interference in Australia’.157 As Rory Medcalf argued in his written testimony to a parliamentary committee, however, ‘How we respond to foreign interference in Australia is … not solely a national security issue. It is a fundamental test of Australian social inclusiveness, cohesion, equity and democracy.’158 Unlike its counterpart in the US, the debate in Australia is ‘country-agnostic’: measures are ‘designed to apply to any country’s misbehavior, be it China, Russia, or the United States’.159

The British national security field has not replicated the type of China stances seen in the US, nor, consequently, a paradigmatic frame change. The debate over Huawei is indicative. In the UK, unlike in the US, until January 2020 the Huawei question remained narrowly defined as one of control over critical national infra-

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159 Garnaut, ‘Australia’s China reset’.
Framing China’s rise in the US, Australia and the UK

structure—as in Australia after 2011—rather than one tied to the CCP and China’s rise. Government policy was driven by recommendations from the National Cyber Security Centre—part of the UK signals and intelligence services (as in Australia by its equivalent Australian Security Intelligence Organisation)—doubtless with background input from the City of London conscious of Brexit.160 There have thus been fewer loud voices calling either for Huawei’s participation to be allowed as part of an overall strategy of courting China, or for banning it as part of a broader narrative of the Chinese threat.161

The UK field thus features a relatively narrow set of China-sceptic stances. One such stance draws explicitly on the importance of US views in Britain. Pompeo’s visit in January 2020 to lobby for a ban on Huawei amplified the views of a number of concerned parliamentarians, raising doubts about post-Brexit trade relations with Washington. In addition to Iain Duncan Smith, Conservative MP Bob Seely and former head of MI5 Sir Richard Dearlove prominently dissented from the government, contributing to a Henry Jackson Society report warning of the risks of Huawei’s participation that featured input from American and Australian analysts, including former White House 5G adviser Robert Spalding, and Tom Uren and Danielle Cave from the Australian think-tank ASPI.162 Connections among populist right-wing media organizations are illustrated by the Daily Mail’s adoption of a well-defined China-sceptic position.163

Another stance emerges from a position similar to that of Canberra’s ‘Wolverines’. The China Research Group, for example, set up by Conservative MPs Tom Tugendhat and Neil O’Brien to ‘promote debate and fresh thinking about how Britain should respond to the rise of China’, seeks to take a broader view of ‘the longer term challenges and opportunities associated with the rise of China’.164 In terms similar to those of Australian journalist Peter Hartcher, an early report by Charles Parton frames UK–China relations as a ‘values war’, featuring ‘some divergence’, rather than ‘decoupling’.165 The China Research Group’s values-centric approach has found a sympathetic hearing with new opposition leader Keir Starmer, who has sought to define a Labour Party position on China closer to that of Tugendhat than to those of Johnson and the previous coalition government.166

161 See e.g. George Magnus’s balanced analysis: George Magnus, ‘Britain’s Huawei controversy has wider important significance’, 27 April 2019, https://georgemagnus.com/britains-huawei-controversy-has-wider-important-significance.
164 See ‘What is the China Research Group?’, https://chinaresearchgroup.org/about.
165 Charles Parton, Not Cold War, but a values war; not decoupling, but some divergence, China Research Group, 2 Nov. 2020, https://chinaresearchgroup.org/research/values-war.
166 Declan McDowell-Naylor, ‘UK–China relations: Labour need to communicate a consistent and clear stance...
Yet the group also emphasizes its aim to ‘explore opportunities to engage with and work with Chinese people, companies and government’. In so doing, it highlights the narrow range of possible positions on China, rendering unlikely in Britain the sort of cross-field coalition in support of a paradigmatic reframing of relations with China that has been witnessed in the US.

Conclusion

This article has questioned the commonsense view that the ongoing turn away from cooperative framings of China has followed a similar path in the US, Australia and the UK, and has been made for similar reasons, namely changing objective national interests vis-à-vis an increasingly authoritarian and expansionist Beijing. Although such a perspective has a powerful grip on the thinking of policy-makers and commentators alike, it pays insufficient attention to the specific nature and timing of changing frames on China’s rise in each case. Illustrating the usefulness of field theory to foreign policy analysis, the article has drawn much needed attention to the starting premises, taken-for-granted assumptions and principal positions on China that emerge from the interconnected US, Australian and UK national security fields. The argument has important implications for the fields discussed here, and others besides.

For the Australian and UK fields, which are similar in structure, the article highlights the singular effects of the US national security field on the American framing of China’s rise, a frame communicated strongly by the Trump administration to Canberra and London, and likely to drive developments under a Biden presidency. The US sense of urgency, and the sharp shift in framing from engagement to strategic competition, is a reflection of the dynamics of the US national security policy-making process, particularly the intense think-tank–research-policy nexus and the incentives created by the system of political appointments. More than simply a matter of changing administrations, the swift downfall of engagement followed a paradigmatic turn away from a cooperative, hopeful frame towards one rooted in Great Power competition.

The question this poses—as some Australian policy-makers in particular are keenly aware—is whether strategic competition offers more promises than pitfalls for Canberra’s and London’s own attempts to navigate their bilateral relations with Beijing. Will strategic competition force policy-makers into a US-or-China choice many might prefer to avoid? The same question will apply, to greater and lesser extents, beyond Australia and the UK, as the US promotes its changed view of China in the Indo-Pacific, Africa and Latin America, in countries and regions developing their own interpretations of the implications of China’s rise.


169 McDowell-Naylor, ‘UK–China relations’.

Framing China’s rise in the US, Australia and the UK

The perspective developed here thus also has important implications for the China debate in the United States. Specifically, it offers a theoretically driven answer to the question why the US has so far struggled to persuade its allies of the virtues of Washington’s new framing of the China challenge.\footnote{‘China drives a wedge between Europe and the United States’, \textit{Washington Post}, 1 Jan. 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/china-drives-a-wedge-between-europe-and-the-united-states/2021/01/01/d9a298ae-458b-11eb-839a-cf4b7b7c48c_story.html. See also Uri Friedman, ‘America is alone in its Cold War with China’, \textit{The Atlantic}, 17 Feb. 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/02/us-china-allies-competition/606637/.} Put simply, the American understanding of China’s rise has emerged from the US national security field, and reflects less well the interpretations made in Canberra and London. To be sure, Australian policy-makers desire a United States deeply committed to the Indo-Pacific, economically, diplomatically and strategically, and fear a Washington doing too little more than one doing too much. But they do so for reasons of Australia’s identity as a multicultural democracy in an increasingly China-dominated Asia, an identity ill served by conflictual Great Power relations that direct Beijing’s ire onto Canberra. And although the UK is a larger global player, British leaders too fear the downturn in relations with China portended by an era of Great Power competition. The smaller, less intense and more centralized Australian and UK fields militate against the sort of sharp frame shift on China witnessed in the US since 2017.

In the words of one long-time UK China watcher, ‘China is the world’s largest Rorschach test … the closer you look, the less you understand about China and the more you see about yourself.’\footnote{UK interview C, journalist and think-tank researcher, by telephone, 14 Feb. 2019.} Illustrating this view, the present article has demonstrated how the US, Australian and UK national security fields have given rise to distinct debates on how to frame China, featuring specific policy positions, and have generated unique policy changes in each case. The rise of China poses challenges to the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom that, although similar on the surface, are specific to each context; and this specificity should be reflected in their respective national debates, as policy-makers and China experts search for balanced, fact-based and reasoned responses to China’s continued growth in economic and military power.