

The Construction of US-China Strategic Competition: A LLM-Advanced Analysis

Titus C. Chen^{*}
National Chengchi University
Taiwan
titusccc@nccu.edu.tw

Shihyi Albert Chiu
Tunghai University
Taiwan
albert6811@thu.edu.tw

Working paper prepared for presentation at the 122nd Annual Meeting of the American Political
Science Association, Boston, Massachusetts, September 2026.

Please do not cite or circulate without the authors' written permission

^{*} Corresponding author.

Abstract

That US-China relations have turned competitive is widely agreed; when the turn came, and what drives Beijing's adversarial posture toward Washington, are not. Existing accounts disagree on the periodization, and they attribute China's adversity toward the US variously to nationalism, growing capabilities, core interests, or Beijing's reading of American intent without testing these factors against one another. Adopting a perceptual approach, this paper identifies the emergence and development of US-China rivalry in each side's official discourse and tests those candidate drivers. Classifying more than 100,000 *People's Daily*, Chinese Foreign Ministry, White House, and US State Department documents from 2001 to 2025 with a Large Language Model (Google Gemini), we trace each side's characterization of the other at daily frequency. The US-China rivalry, we find, crystallized sequentially rather than simultaneously. American uncertainty about Chinese intentions eroded steadily as the conviction that China is a competitor or a revisionist took hold. Washington's discourse turned durably adversarial in March 2018; Beijing reciprocated in May 2019, and with that mutual turn a new Cold War in US-China relations took shape. Time-series modeling then shows that none of Beijing's own self-perception narratives—nationalist, capability, or interest—predicts its subsequent adversity toward the US. Instead, it is prior confrontational US statements that harden Chinese posture within one or two days, whereas the Trump presidency itself adds nothing beyond these daily signals. China's competitive posture toward Washington is thus reactive and pragmatic rather than ideological: American policy narratives help set the trajectory of the great power rivalry, and how each side addresses the other's core interests is where de-escalation may begin.

Keywords: Great power rivalry, China, the United States, computational social sciences, content analysis, Large Language Model

Introduction

Great power rivalry is among the most consequential and most contested phenomena in international politics, and the deterioration of relations between the United States and China since the late 2010s offers its most recent illustration. That the bilateral relationship has taken a decisively more competitive turn is widely agreed; what scholars and observers continue to debate are the timing, sources, and contours of that change. Structuralists pointing to material indicators have charted the rise of Chinese capabilities against American ones and concluded that the conditions for sustained great-power competition are now in place, though they disagree about when those conditions consolidated. Constructivist-leaning scholars tracing elite and media discourse have documented a hardening of mutual threat perceptions but have struggled to specify what tipped the rhetorical balance, and when. Narrative accounts have located the rupture in particular moments: a White House strategy document, a Politburo meeting, a tariff announcement. The available accounts thus span an analytical spectrum from structural forces to individual choices, yet none has produced a periodization that the others accept, nor has the field identified the factors driving US-China rivalry with the kind of empirical clarity and precision that would settle the disagreement.

This paper adopts a perceptual approach to explain these puzzles. We first identify, with empirical precision, the key moments at which US-China rivalry crystallized. Rather than inferring those moments from material trends or reconstructing them from policy decisions, we measure them in the official discourse of each side, locating the points at which Washington's and Beijing's characterizations of the other shifted from a cooperative to a competitive orientation. We then undertake to identify which perceptual and ideational factors most closely accompany the adversarial posture of China, the rising power, toward the United States, the incumbent hegemon. The existing accounts in policy and scholarly debate variously emphasize Chinese nationalism, Beijing's assertion of expanding national capabilities, its articulation of core national interests, and its reading of American competitive intent, but they offer little systematic evidence about which of these factors are most significantly associated with the intensity of Beijing's adversarial framing of the United States since 2001. We test these candidates against one another using complex time-series models.

Our empirical strategy assembles two corpora of official discourse spanning 2001-2025: *People's Daily* and Ministry of Foreign Affairs briefings on the Chinese side, White House and Department of State briefings on the American side. We process them through a Large Language Model (LLM) configured to classify each document along theoretically informed perceptual dimensions. The classification scheme distinguishes how Beijing characterizes itself (nationalist narratives, articulated national interests, national capability claims), how Beijing perceives the United States and the bilateral relationship, how American officials express uncertainty about Chinese intentions, and how American officials frame China as competitor or revisionist. Two analytical instruments then probe the resulting aggregate data. Structural-break analyses identify when each side's cooperative orientation shifted to competitive outlook. Time-series modeling examines which perceptual and ideational factors co-vary with the intensity of Chinese adversarial posture toward the United States.

The picture that emerges is consistent and, in several respects, counter-intuitive. On the American side, official uncertainty about what Beijing wants fell across the period, while the framing of China as a competitor rose in two pulses—one around the early 2010s, the other in early 2018—together amounting to a transition from the engagement logic that prevailed before to the competitive logic that has prevailed since. Nevertheless, the two sides did not shift together: Washington's adversarial turn comes in March 2018, more than a year before Beijing's reciprocal adversarial turn in May 2019. China's competitive turn is more moderate than the American one, and partially reverses from 2023 onward. The findings hence allow the US-China rivalry to be dated with a precision the existing literature lacks.

Furthermore, the time-series models identify how China's adversarial posture toward the US is structured, and it is not what the conventional wisdom on Chinese assertiveness would lead one to expect. Neither nationalist ideology nor self-described national power is associated with Chinese adversarial framing at any time horizon—not even on the same day. When Beijing hardens its posture, it does so in the language of national interest and of perceived American competitive intent; yet these frames are the vocabulary of adversity rather than its precursor—none of China's self-perception narrative indicators, measured one or two days in advance, predicts its adversarial posture toward the US. What does predict it is American behavior: confrontational US signals register in Beijing's discourse within one or two days and cooperative signals dampen it, while the

presidency of Donald Trump, once these daily signals are accounted for, does not. These findings point to a Chinese competitive posture that is pragmatic and reactive rather than ideological and self-propelled, an interpretation that departs from how the US-China rivalry is commonly framed and understood in Western policy debates.

The remainder of the paper develops these arguments in five movements. We first situate our approach against the structuralist-materialist accounts that have dominated the literature of great power rivalry, identify the empirical anomaly that motivates the perceptual alternative, and develop that alternative as an analytical framework. The next section elaborates on research design and methodology: we describe the corpora, the LLM-based classification scheme, the validation work that establishes the reliability of the resulting measures, and the adopted time-series models. The third section follows to present the key observations from data analysis. We trace the shift in how American officials characterized Chinese intentions, identify the moments at which each side's discourse tipped from net-cooperative to net-adversarial, and locate the emergence and consolidation of the new Cold War. The fourth section then specifies and estimates the time-series models that connect Beijing's adversarial posture to its perceptual inputs and to American discursive indicators. A concluding section consolidates the contributions, considers the policy implications, and identifies the limits of the analysis and the lines of research it opens.

Structuralist-Materialist Accounts of US-China Rivalry

The dominant theoretical framework for explaining the trajectory of US-China relations in the past two decades has been of the structuralist-materialist nature—the proposition that the distribution of material capabilities across the international system determines the character of great power interaction. From this vantage point, the deterioration in US-China relations is neither accidental nor primarily the product of domestic politics, leadership personalities, or ideological incompatibility. Rather, it is the predictable consequence of a shifting balance of power. As China's economic, military, and technological capabilities have grown to approximate, and in some domains match, those of the United States, the structural conditions that sustained a relatively stable post-Cold War order have given way to the competitive dynamics characteristic of bipolar or near-bipolar systems.

Uncertainty, security dilemma, and offense-defense differentiation

The theoretical foundations for understanding US-China strategic competition as a structural phenomenon were laid well before the bilateral relationship itself became adversarial. For structuralist theories, states operate under conditions of irreducible uncertainty about one another's intentions. In an anarchic system lacking a central authority to enforce agreements or reveal private information, states cannot know with confidence whether their counterparts are motivated by security-seeking or by expansionist (greedy) ambitions (Glaser, 1997, 184). This uncertainty is not a contingent feature of particular dyads but a structural condition of international anarchy itself (Glaser 1997, 195). Jervis (1978) argues that uncertainty about other states' intentions in an anarchic international system gives rise to the security dilemma, whereby efforts by one state to enhance its security may inadvertently threaten others and undermine the prospects for mutual cooperation. This insight—that self-perceived defensive measures can be perceived as offensive threats, generating self-reinforcing cycles of threat perception—remains the bedrock upon which subsequent structural analyses of US-China competition have been built.

Jervis (1978, 201) demonstrates that uncertainty can be partially ameliorated “when offensive and defensive postures are different,” since distinguishable postures remove “much of the uncertainty about the other's intentions that contributes to the security dilemma.” But where such differentiation is unavailable—as is increasingly the case in the US-China military competition

across cyber, space, and dual-use domains (Biddle and Oelrich 2016; Anderson and Press 2025; Burdette 2025)—uncertainty becomes a fertile ground for security dilemma, driving each side to adopt worst-case assumptions about the other’s motives and to invest in capabilities that the other perceives as threatening. This structural uncertainty is remarkably prescient for analyzing US-China military dynamic in the Western Pacific, where power-projection capabilities, anti-access/area-denial systems, and dual-use technologies blur the line between defensive and offensive intent (Christensen 2001; Biddle and Oelrich 2016).

Glaser (1992) refined Jervis’s framework by showing that the appropriate mix of competitive and cooperative policies depends on an adversary’s intentions: purely competitive strategies may be warranted against an expansionist state, whereas a state that is both greedy and insecure may require a combination of competition and reassurance. This distinction later became central to debates over whether China is a revisionist power or a security-seeking state caught in a spiral of mutual threat perception (Johnston 2003, 2013; Kastner and Saunders 2012; Kim, Taffer, and Zhang 2020).

In his 1997 revisitation of the security dilemma concept, Glaser sharpened the analytical framework further, defining the dilemma as existing when “the means by which a state tries to increase its security decrease the security of others” and identifying the “spiral model,” which “describes how the interaction between states that are seeking only security can fuel competition and strain political relations” (Glaser 1997, 171, 174). The critical question Glaser raised—why an action-reaction process does not simply leave both states’ security unchanged—pointed to the asymmetric and escalatory nature of security competition: “the adversary’s reaction will in turn reduce the state’s security” because each round of the spiral introduces new uncertainties about intentions and capabilities (Glaser 1997, 174). Applied to the US-China context, this framework illuminates why the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” and China’s military modernization could each be experienced by the other side as a threatening departure from the status quo, even if both were motivated ostensibly by defensive considerations.

Structuralist accounts of the inevitability of US-China competition

John Mearsheimer’s offensive realism offers the starkest structuralist account of US-China rivalry. In *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Mearsheimer argues that “international politics has

always been a ruthless and dangerous business, and it is likely to remain that way” (Mearsheimer 2014, 2). The competitive imperative is embedded in the system itself: “there are no status quo powers in the international system, save for the occasional hegemon that wants to maintain its dominating position over potential rivals,” because “great powers are rarely content with the current distribution of power; on the contrary, they face a constant incentive to change it in their favor” (Mearsheimer 2014, 4–5). Applied to US-China relations, this framework predicts an intensifying struggle for regional hegemony in the Indo-Pacific, one that is structurally determined regardless of the intentions or goodwill of leaders on either side (Colby 2021; Beckley and Brands 2022; Friedberg 2022). Mearsheimer’s more recent work extends this analysis to the contemporary multipolar transition. Writing in 2025, he observes that “we are now in a multipolar world” where “great power war is once again a possibility and security competition among the great powers—China, Russia, and the United States—is intensifying” (Mearsheimer 2025, 7).

Brian Fong’s neo-offensive realism synthesizes structural theory with regional dynamics, with a focus on US-China competition in the Indo-Pacific. Fong identifies a structural shift from balanced multipolarity (1992–2007) to unbalanced multipolarity (2008–present) in the Indo-Pacific. Under the unbalanced multipolar structure, China has emerged as a potential hegemon with significant relative power asymmetry, which structurally disposes the region toward intense great power competition (Fong 2024). Framing the US-China relationship through the metaphor that “one mountain cannot accommodate two tigers,” Fong characterizes the current situation as a “tale of two hegemons” unfolding across the Indo-Pacific (Fong 2024, 9). His structural analysis identifies a self-reinforcing escalatory cycle: “China’s rise as a potential hegemon in the Indo-Pacific has prompted the US, as a distant hegemon from the Western Hemisphere, to come onshore to restore regional power balance, while the US’s balancing efforts have in turn heightened China’s endeavours to seek centrality in the Indo-Pacific” (Fong 2024, 9). This formulation captures the action-reaction dynamic that Jervis and Glaser theorized at the dyadic level, but situates it within the specific strategic context of the Indo-Pacific (Heiduk 2021; Chan and Lee 2024; Heath and Thompson 2018).

Not all structuralist analyses characterize US-China competition as a manifestation of unbalanced multipolarity. Jennifer Lind’s 2024 study, for instance, argues that bipolarity more accurately describes the current structural condition. The central claim is straightforward: as China’s

aggregate capabilities grew to a point where no other state apart from the United States could plausibly serve as a peer competitor, the international system transitioned from unipolarity to bipolarity, and with that transition came the intensified competition that structural theory predicts (Tunsjø 2018; Brooks and Wohlforth 2016). Lind (2024, 29-30, 41) argues that China's rise to superpower status has produced a bipolar system whose structural pressures help explain the deterioration and intensification of US-China competition.

Yan Xuetong's analysis arrives at a similar structural conclusion from a Chinese perspective. Writing that "the year 2019 saw the curtain rise on a US-China bipolar rivalry quite different from the Cold War US-Soviet bipolarity," Yan argues that this "US-China bipolar configuration will nevertheless remain in place for at least for two decades, or perhaps longer" (Yan 2020, 313, 334). His characterization of the emerging order as one of "uneasy peace, where there is no direct war and few proxy wars" captures the structural realist expectation that bipolarity constrains but does not eliminate competition (Yan 2020, 334). Notably, Yan's dating of bipolarity's onset to 2019 trailed closely the period (2017-2018) when the Trump administration formally adopted the language of "strategic competition" (Zhao 2019; Winkler 2023).

Defensive realism and the proposition of competition management

Stephen Walt's defensive realism presents a structurally informed but more contingent account of US-China rivalry. While accepting that competition between the United States and China is structurally driven, Walt emphasizes that the intensity and trajectory of this competition are not foreordained. In his 2025 assessment of the intra-realist debate, Walt argues that "defensive realism recognizes that great power competition cannot be eliminated and that it is therefore important" to manage US-China security dilemma "through acts of restraint or cooperation" (Walt 2025, 45–46). Walt's historical analysis draws on cases where rising powers successfully signaled status quo intentions. The implication for US-China relations is that structural competition need not follow the maximalist trajectory that offensive realism predicts—but that the window for such reassurance narrows as capabilities grow and mutual threat perceptions harden (Glaser 2015; Desch 2025; He and Feng 2025).

Also, Kang, Wong, and Chan (2025) introduce an important counterpoint within the structuralist framework. While accepting the empirical reality of China's material rise, they challenge the

prevailing interpretation of what these capabilities portend. They observe that “in U.S. academic and policymaking circles, the conventional wisdom is that China wants to dominate the world and expand its territory” (Kang, Wong, and Chan 2025, 47), a characterization they find insufficiently grounded in evidence of actual Chinese narratives and behavior. This skepticism about inferring intentions from capabilities echoes defensive realism’s caution against the worst-case assumptions that potentially exacerbate the security dilemma (Johnston 2019; Kim and Kim 2022).

Marc Trachtenberg’s 2025 analysis complicates the structural narrative by interrogating the “rules-based order” framework through which US-China competition is frequently understood. Trachtenberg examines how post-conflict moments generated orders in which a victorious power that had “received a windfall of ‘power assets’” faced a choice among hegemonic, cooperative, or disengaged strategies (Trachtenberg 2025, 17). His analysis challenges the conventional narrative that the post-1945 liberal international order was straightforwardly benign, noting that the conventional view oversimplifies the causal relationship between hegemonic engagement and international stability (Trachtenberg 2025, 15). For the US-China context, Trachtenberg’s structural analysis suggests that the current competition is not simply about China challenging “rules” but about the deeper structural question of how rising powers relate to orders constructed by and for the incumbent hegemon (Schweller and Pu 2011; Ikenberry, Parmar, and Stokes 2018).

US-China security dilemma as a structural feature: temporal consolidation

The existing literature of US-China competition reveals a clear temporal pattern. In the early 2000s, scholars like Johnston (2003) began debating whether China’s rise would inevitably trigger competitive dynamics, with the key question being whether engagement could mitigate mutual threat perceptions or whether structural factors would drive the relationship toward rivalry regardless of intentions and engagement.

The period from approximately 2010 to 2020 saw the discussion of US-China security dilemma intensify dramatically. Liff and Ikenberry (2014) described how the security dilemma “foments military competition and arms races, even wars, that each state would prefer to avoid if only it could receive credible commitments of the other side’s peaceful, or status quo, intentions,” generating “a tragic action-reaction spiral of military competition that leaves both sides poorer and less secure” (Liff and Ikenberry 2014, 54). The Obama administration’s pivot to Asia, China’s

assertiveness in the South China Sea, and the Trump administration's embrace of strategic competition transformed the bilateral relationship in ways that multiple scholars documented (Allison 2017; Johnston 2017; Quek 2018; Cunningham 2019; Goldstein 2020; Wu 2021).

Since 2020, the US-China security dilemma has increasingly become a structural feature of the Western Pacific. Hiim and Fravel (2023) show that it has contributed to significant shifts in China's strategic posture, while Zhang (2023) links the security dilemma directly to broader strategic competition. Recent scholarship further extends the concept into the ideological domain, where defensive efforts to protect domestic legitimacy may be interpreted by rivals as offensive challenges to their own ideological integrity (Jie 2020; Cho 2025). The dilemma now spans military, technological, economic, and ideological domains, making reassurance increasingly difficult without risking the appearance of strategic concession (Breuer and Johnston 2019; Bulman 2021; Hiim, Fravel, and Trøan 2023; Pearson, Rithmire, and Tsai 2022; Hiim and Tunsjø 2025; Talmadge and Rovner 2023; Malkin and He 2024; Schindler et al. 2023; Landwehr-Matlé, Oppermann, and Lambach 2025).

The limits of structuralist-materialist explanation

The structuralist-materialist literature seeks to offer parsimonious accounts of why US-China security relations have deteriorated (Scobell 2021; Zhang 2022; Müller 2024). The core argument—that the redistribution of material capabilities from unipolarity toward bipolarity generates competitive dynamics that are largely independent of leaders' intentions—can be found across offensive and defensive realist traditions, across American and Chinese scholarly communities, and across empirical studies of military, economic, technological, and ideological competition. Whether one dates the intensification of bilateral competition to 2008 (Fong 2024), the mid-2010s (Lind 2024), 2019 (Yan 2020), or views the transition as still underway (Mearsheimer 2025), the directional assessment is shared: the structural conditions for intensified great power competition are firmly in place.

Yet the structuralist-materialist accounts, for all their explanatory power, confront a major limitation that motivates the present study. Structural conditions—the relative distribution of state capabilities—create likely and permissive conditions for great power rivalry to emerge or escalate, but they do not dictate when or where it emerges, nor do they specify the mechanisms through

which rivalry is activated, sustained, or intensified. Structuralist theories can tell us that competition is probable given a particular distribution of power, but they cannot identify the precise timing of great power competition, nor can they account for variation in its intensity over time. Whether the fluctuations in bilateral rivalry that have characterized the recent US-China relationship followed sequentially shifts in structural conditions is a question that structural factors alone cannot answer.

Moreover, the structuralist-materialist literature lacks a systematic, longitudinal analysis of how US-China relations have evolved over extended periods. Scholars in this tradition tend instead to anchor their assessments of when and how the bilateral relationship shifted on discrete events that they individually deem significant—a particular military confrontation, a notable policy pronouncement, or a visible diplomatic rupture. Different analysts, selecting different events as inflection points, arrive at divergent and even contradictory accounts of when structural competition began, when it intensified, and what drove each transition—with no agreed-upon criteria for adjudicating among these competing periodizations. This episodic, event-driven approach to periodization is neither systematic nor empirically replicable; it relies on impressionistic judgment rather than on consistent criteria applied across the full temporal arc of the US-China relationship.

From Structural Conditions to Perceptual Processes

This limitation is not merely academic. If structural theories are correct that bipolarity or near-bipolarity inevitably produces great power rivalry, then the analytical task reduces to documenting the manifestations of an outcome already foretold. But the present study does not simply assume, as structural analyses do, that US-China rivalry is bound to escalate or intensify. Rather, it seeks to unveil the explanatory mechanisms of rivalry itself: whether, how, and why the rivalry emerges or escalates. Asking these questions compels us to move beyond the structural level of analysis. As Desch (2025, 157) argues, the strategic choices available to the US for dealing with the rise of China are not structurally predetermined; grand strategy in the context of power transitions reflects deliberate choices of national leaders, not the inexorable logic of the balance of power. To explain not merely that competition exists but when and how it unfolds requires moving beyond the structuralist-materialist framework to examine the perceptual development that mediates between structural conditions and foreign policy outcomes, and through which US-China rivalry is constructed, sustained, and intensified.

The perceptual approach: intentions, motives, and unit-level knowledge

The move from structural to non-structural variables of great power rivalry begins with a foundational insight from the security dilemma literature itself: rivalry is not determined solely by material forces but, more importantly, is a perception that emerges from a cognitive process at the state level. What crucially matters is the judgment call on the rival's intentions or motives—a judgment that cannot be easily derived from the rival's material capabilities alone. Whether a rival is defined as a *security seeker* that wants to maintain the status quo, or as a “greedy” state harboring non-security, expansionist, or revisionist motives, is supremely important to the nature of the bilateral relationship in its next phases.

Robert Jervis's treatment in *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* establishes the theoretical architecture for this distinction. Jervis identifies two competing models of international interaction—the *deterrence model* and the *spiral model*—that rest on diametrically opposed assessments of the adversary's intentions. The deterrence model holds that “great dangers arise if an aggressor believes that the status quo powers are weak in capability or resolve,” and prescribes

that “the state must display the ability and willingness to wage war” to prevent an expansionist adversary from pressing its challenges (Jervis 1976, 58–59). The spiral model, by contrast, locates the underlying problem not in a flaw in human nature or in the aggressiveness of a particular adversary, but “in a correct appreciation of the consequences of living in a Hobbesian state of nature”—an anarchic system in which “each state is protected only by its own strength” and where “most means of self-protection simultaneously menace others” (Jervis 1976, 62–63). As Jervis observes, “when we compare deterrence and spiral theories, what is most striking is that they give opposite answers to the central question of the effect of negative sanctions” (Jervis 1976, 78). Which model is appropriate depends crucially on the perceived nature of the adversary—a determination that is fundamentally perceptual.

Charles Glaser’s refinement of the security dilemma framework deepens this perceptual turn. In his 1997 revisitation, Glaser argues that in addition to the two offense-defense variables that Jervis highlights, “there are two additional variables that influence the magnitude of the security dilemma: the extent of the adversary’s greed and the extent of the adversary’s unit-level knowledge about the state’s motives, in particular, knowledge gleaned by studying the inner workings of the state and its leaders. These are not structural variables and therefore, quite appropriately, do not play a central role in Jervis’s discussion of the security dilemma” (Glaser 1997, 189–190). Glaser’s intervention is significant because it acknowledges that the security dilemma’s severity depends not merely on structural variables but on assessments of the adversary’s *motives*, which are unit-level knowledge and fundamentally perceptual in character. Whether a state concludes that its rival is a “pure security seeker” or a “greedy” state depends on inferences drawn from observed behavior, and these inferences are susceptible to both rational updating and psychological bias.

Glaser’s framework makes explicit that these perceptual variables are pivotal for determining the nature of strategic interaction. The critical variable is not the distribution of national material capabilities but the *perception* of what those capabilities are intended to achieve (Glaser 1992). Yet the inferential process is fraught with uncertainty of distinguishing between military buildups driven by legitimate security concerns and those signaling expansionist intent (Glaser 1997, 192). This inherent challenge lies at the heart of US-China rivalry analysis. As He and Feng (2025) argue, explaining the nuanced policy shifts in US-China relations requires incorporating the roles of

leadership and domestic politics into the analysis of foreign policy, recognizing that individual agency interacts with structural constraints.

Temporal disparity: Structural conditions and the emergence of subjective adversity

If what matters is not simply the distribution of capabilities but how those capabilities are *perceived*, then a critical question arises: when did the United States begin to perceive China as a strategic competitor, and does this timing correspond to the structural shift toward bipolarity? The existing literature reveals a striking temporal disparity between the formation of structural conditions favoring competition and the emergence of subjective adversity toward the other side.

Multiple and conflicting accounts exist regarding the timing of US-China rivalry. Structural analysts date the onset of bipolarity or near-bipolarity to various points: Lind (2024) traces the structural transition to the mid-2010s. Yan (2020) dates it to 2019. Fong (2024) identifies 2008 as the turning point from balanced to unbalanced multipolarity, while Mearsheimer (2025) characterizes the current moment as an evolving multipolar system. Yet the discursive and policy shift toward open strategic competition did not neatly align with these structural thresholds. As Winkler (2023) demonstrates through the conceptual genealogy, it was only “since 2017” that “both the Donald J. Trump and Joseph Biden administrations have advanced the concept [of strategic competition] as a goal to pursue, rather than as something to be aware of, manage, or stabilise” (Winkler 2023, 336). This discursive shift marks a perceptual transformation that cannot be explained by structural variables alone.

Scobell (2021) provides a constructivist account of this temporal mismatch. He argues that “the Washington-Beijing rivalry of the early twenty-first century was neither preordained nor an aberration. It was constructed as domestic constituencies in each country were socialized toward confrontation” (Scobell 2021, 69). The mechanism was not structural but domestic-political. By the 2010s, “as this rivalry had become far more visible, the pro-cooperation coalitions in the United States and China had splintered and been supplanted by pro-confrontation coalitions” (Scobell 2021, 82). Scobell’s periodization is revealing: structural competition may have become possible by the 2000s as China’s capabilities grew, but the *subjective* perception of rivalry was mediated by domestic coalition dynamics, which shifted on a different timeline than the distribution of material capabilities.

Fong's (2024) retrospective analysis reinforces this point: the scholarly debate on China's rise shifted from relative optimism to deep pessimism over two decades. The shift in scholarly consensus suggests that the material foundation of structural rivalry alone did not compel the competitive turn. Rather, the perceptual recalibration lagged behind structural changes in ways that structural theories cannot adequately explain.

Uncertainty and ambiguity of Chinese intentions: The evidence of perceptual factors

Liff and Ikenberry (2014) illustrates the centrality of perceptual factors on the US-China security dilemma. Writing at a moment when the bilateral relationship had not yet crystallized into the open strategic competition, Liff and Ikenberry observe that “widespread concerns about the objective reality of China's rapidly increasing military capabilities are exacerbated by its low military transparency, which deepens general uncertainty and specific worries about its capabilities and intentions” (Liff and Ikenberry 2014, 57). Their argument is that the security dilemma between the US and China is driven fundamentally by America's *uncertainty* about China's intentions, not by a settled judgment that China is a greedy actor.

The importance of perceptual dynamics is further evidenced by the role of domestic narratives in shaping US assessments of Chinese intentions. Breuer and Johnston (2019, 429) indicate that “in the digital media age, narratives emerge when ‘memes’—discrete, widely circulated images/descriptions of the Self or Other—are connected into coherent stories that eventually coalesce into a master narrative of rivalry.” Their analysis provides “preliminary evidence that the RBO [rules-based order] meme and the ‘revisionist China’ narrative may be crowding out other, less malign narratives about China's rise” (Breuer and Johnston 2019, 429). This crowding-out dynamic illustrates how perceptual shifts can become self-reinforcing: once a particular narrative gains dominance in elite and media discourse, alternative interpretations of Chinese behavior become increasingly difficult to sustain, regardless of the underlying evidence.

Likewise, Kang, Wong, and Chan (2025) challenge the prevailing US view of China as an expansionist power, arguing instead that “China's aims are limited” (50) and largely oriented toward regime stability and domestic priorities. The divergence between this assessment and the dominant Washington consensus illustrates the core insight of the perceptual approach: the same

Chinese behaviors can generate sharply different interpretations depending on prior assumptions about Beijing's intentions.

Yang and Keller (2025) document this perceptual hardening through survey data on American elite attitudes, while Kuang and Hearn-Branaman (2025) trace the transformation in US news coverage of China over a ten-year period, showing how media framing has shifted from relatively balanced portrayals to overwhelmingly negative characterizations. Ooi and D'Arcangelis (2018) examine discourses of "Othering" in US media representations of China, suggesting that the construction of China as a threat is as much a product of domestic identity politics as of observed Chinese behavior. These findings collectively suggest that the shift from uncertainty to certainty about China's intentions—the perceptual precondition for the policy shift from engagement to strategic competition—was driven at least as much by domestic political and discursive dynamics as by changes in Chinese material capabilities or behavior.

From security dilemma to strategic competition: The perceptual shift

The preceding investigation points to a critical perceptual transition in US-China relations: a shift from uncertainty about China's intentions to increasing certainty of China's "greedy" motives. In the terminology of Jervis and Glaser, this represents a transition from the *spiral model* (with security dilemma as the key feature) to the *deterrence model* that highlights strategic competition. Breuer and Johnston (2019, 432-433) frame this transition as a shift "from uncertainty about the intentions of the Other (and thus the prudence of preparing for worst case possibilities) to certainty about the malign intentions of the Other (and thus the necessity of coercion to deal with the worst case reality)." This tipping point—the moment at which ambiguity about Chinese intentions hardens into conviction of China's malign goals—marks the decisive perceptual transformation that has reshaped the US-China relations.

When did this shift occur? The literature offers divergent answers, each reflecting different analytical emphases. Scobell (2021, 70-71) dates the critical transition to the mid-2000s, when "the benefits of bilateral ties to domestic constituencies in the United States and China were less tangible" and "perceived losses began to outweigh perceived gains of U.S.-China comity," resulting in the displacement of "pro-cooperation coalitions" by "coalitions of confrontation." Winkler (2023) locate the decisive rhetorical shift in 2017-2018, when the Trump administration's

National Security Strategy (NSS) formally labeled China a “revisionist power” and a “strategic competitor.” Friedberg (2022) suggests that the perceptual change was long overdue, arguing that “China today is far from the liberal, open, market-oriented, status quo power that many had expected to emerge” and that “Beijing is now pursuing openly revisionist aims.”

The debate over whether China is a status quo or revisionist power—which has generated a substantial scholarly literature in its own right (Johnston 2003; Taylor 2007; Larson and Shevchenko 2010; Kastner and Saunders 2012; Aziz 2016; Zhao 2018; Chan, Hu, and He 2019; Natalizia and Termine 2021; Panda 2021; Friedberg 2022)—is itself evidence of the perceptual foundations of US-China rivalry. That scholars continue to disagree about whether China seeks to preserve or overturn the existing international order demonstrates that the available evidence of Chinese behavior admits of multiple interpretations.

The policy implications of this perceptual shift are substantial. If the United States perceives China as a security seeker that wants nothing more than maintaining the status quo—a state whose military modernization is driven by legitimate security concerns—then US-China rivalry may be understood as a *security dilemma* best analyzed through the *spiral model*. Under this interpretation, the competitive dynamics are tragic but remediable: both sides are trapped in an action-reaction cycle fueled by mutual insecurity. Under the security dilemma framework, the appropriate policy response was one of engagement, dialogue, and confidence-building mechanisms designed to ameliorate the spiral of mutual mistrust. As Jervis argues, “the security dilemma cannot be abolished, it can only be ameliorated. Bonds of shared values and interests can be developed” (Jervis 1976, 82). In Glaser’s terms, a state can communicate its benign intentions through costly signals: “a security seeker can communicate information about its motives only by adopting a policy that would be costly for a greedy state but not for itself” (Glaser 1997, 181). Arms control agreements, unilateral restraint, and defensive military postures can all serve this signaling function, reducing the adversary’s uncertainty about the state’s motives and thereby ameliorating the security dilemma. As Liff and Ikenberry (2014) argue, diplomatic bargaining can mitigate security dilemma dynamics by improving communication and encouraging reciprocal restraint. This logic broadly underpinned US China policy from the 1990s through the mid-2010s, reflecting a predominantly spiral-model interpretation of the bilateral relationship.

If, however, the US perceives China as pursuing non-security goals—as an expansionist or revisionist actor seeking to change the security status quo in the Western Pacific, to displace American primacy, or to restructure the rules-based international order in its favor—then US-China rivalry is no longer a security dilemma in a spiral model but enters into a *deterrence model* where, as Jervis writes, the defender must display “the ability and willingness to wage war” to prevent the revisionist power from pressing further challenges (Jervis 1976, 58). Under the deterrence model, conciliation and reassurance are not merely ineffective but counterproductive: “moderation and conciliation are apt to be taken for weakness” by a revisionist adversary, and “the other’s friendship cannot be won by gratuitous concessions” (Jervis 1976, 59–60). Under this assessment, the appropriate policy response shifts from the spiral model’s prescriptions of transparency, reassurance, and confidence-building to the deterrence model’s prescriptions of capability enhancement, alliance consolidation, and credible commitments to push back against revisionism. The US can only check the perceived Chinese expansionism by deploying strong deterrent measures against China. As Kang, Wong, and Chan (2025, 48) note, “those who believe in this China threat call for increasing U.S. military expenditures and showing ‘resolve’ toward China.” The dramatic reorientation of US grand strategy since 2017—encompassing military reinforcement across the Western Pacific, the AUKUS partnership, semiconductor export controls, and the strengthening of the Quad—reflects this perceptual shift from spiral-model engagement to deterrence-model competition.

The distinction between these two frameworks could not be sharper: the spiral model prescribes reassurance while the deterrence model prescribes firmness; the spiral model fears overreaction while the deterrence model averts underreaction. As Jervis observes, “policies that flow from deterrence theory... are just those that the spiral model claims are most dangerous” (Jervis 1976, 84).

It is the *indeterminacy* of this assessment—the impossibility of resolving with certainty whether China is a security seeker or a greedy state—that makes the perceptual approach indispensable for the study of US-China rivalry. Structural analyses can establish that competition between the United States and China is probable; but only an examination of how American and Chinese policymakers perceive each other’s motives can explain when rivalry intensifies and which perceptual factors drive it. It is precisely in this domain that the present study makes its

contribution. Drawing on Natural Language Processing (NLP), LLM-enhanced text classification and time-series modeling, this study analyzes US and Chinese diplomatic narratives to provide systematic, longitudinal evidence of how American perceptions of China have evolved—specifically, from uncertainty to certainty about Beijing’s intentions, and from a spiral-model logic of engagement to a deterrence-model logic of competition. It further asks whether American diplomatic narratives have, in turn, reinforced China’s adversarial posture.

Research Design and Methodology

This paper empirically investigates the perceptual dynamics underlying US-China great power rivalry from 2001 to 2025. Drawing on the literature reviewed above—particularly the distinction between security-seeking and revisionist motives—we operationalize the key perceptual variables through a systematic content analysis of official discourse on both sides of the rivalry. Specifically, we trace how Chinese state media and diplomatic communications characterized China’s relationship with the United States, and how US government officials framed China’s intentions, over a twenty-five-year period spanning five US administrations and three Chinese leaderships.

Data and sources

Our empirical analysis draws on two parallel corpora of official documents. On the Chinese side, we compile all articles from *People’s Daily* (Renmin Ribao) that substantively address the United States, covering 2001 through 2025. As the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee, *People’s Daily* serves as the most authoritative channel through which Beijing’s policy orientation and strategic assessments are communicated to domestic and international audiences (Brady 2008; Stockmann 2013). We supplement the *People’s Daily* corpus with press briefings from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) over the same period, which capture Beijing’s diplomatic messaging in a more interactive, response-driven format. Together, these two sources yield a comprehensive record of how the Chinese party-state frames the bilateral relationship. To select US-relevant content, we filter Chinese documents for the presence of key terms including “the United States [美国],” “the US [美方],” “the US government [美政府],” “Washington [华盛顿],” “White House [白宫],” “US Department of State [美国务院],” “US military [美军],” “the West [西方],” and “NATO [北约].” The combined Chinese corpus comprises 86,977 documents (71,167 from *People’s Daily* and 15,810 from Chinese MFA press briefings).

On the US side, we assemble all China-related press releases, statements, and press briefings issued by the White House and the Department of State from 2001 to 2025. White House documents include presidential statements, press briefings, and remarks from senior administration officials across the Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden presidencies. State Department documents encompass

press briefings, press releases, and speeches by the Secretary of State and other senior State Department officials. To isolate China-relevant content, we filter documents for the presence of key terms including “China,” “Chinese,” “PRC,” “Beijing,” “Taiwan,” “Hong Kong,” and “South China Sea,” as well as the names of Chinese leaders. For White House press briefings, which typically cover multiple policy areas in a single transcript, we extract only those speaker turns that contain China-related references, ensuring that our classification operates on substantively relevant text rather than entire transcripts. The resulting US corpus comprises 14,990 documents, of which 13,638 contain at least one China-related sentence.

Large Language Model-Assisted Content Analysis

To classify documents across multiple theoretically grounded dimensions, we employ Google’s Gemini large language model (LLM) as an automated content classifier. The application of large language models to political text analysis has gained significant traction in recent political science scholarship (Haltermann 2025; Le Mens and Gallego 2025; Ornstein, Blasingame, and Truscott 2025; Di Leo et al. 2025; Timoneda and Vera 2026). Compared to conventional dictionary-based or supervised machine learning approaches, LLMs offer a distinctive advantage in their capacity to interpret semantic nuance, contextual meaning, and implicit argumentation—capabilities that are essential when the analytic task involves identifying latent perceptual stances rather than counting explicit keyword occurrences (Grossmann et al. 2023; Bail 2024). Traditional computational methods are constrained in their ability to detect evaluative tones, implied threats, or complex ideas that emerge from the interplay of multiple sentences. LLMs, by contrast, can process natural-language instructions that articulate abstract classification criteria, enabling them to apply nuanced conceptual definitions rather than rigid pattern matching (Liu and Shi 2024; Macanovic and Przepiorka 2024).

We employ Google’s Gemini 2.5 Flash Lite for all classification tasks. To ensure deterministic and reproducible outputs, we configure the model with a temperature parameter of 0 and constrain its response format to structured JSON. Each document is processed individually against a detailed prompt that specifies the conceptual definitions and classification criteria for each dimension, and the model returns both a binary classification label (0/1) and a brief textual rationale for each decision. The inclusion of rationales serves a dual purpose: it provides transparency into the

model's reasoning process and enables systematic auditing of classification decisions during the validation phase.

Chinese-side classification

For the Chinese corpus, we classify each *People's Daily* article and Chinese MFA press briefing on six binary dimensions that capture the key perceptual components identified in our theoretical framework. Each dimension is classified through a separate, dedicated prompt that provides detailed classification criteria, concrete examples, exclusion rules, and required evidence standards.

The six dimensions capture two perceptually distinct aspects of Chinese official discourse, each anchored in a distinct strand of the theoretical literature. The first three—Chinese nationalism (cn_nationalism), China's national interest (cn_interest), and China's self-conceived national power (cn_power)—capture Beijing's self-perception: its identity claims, articulated interests, and capability confidence. Their selection follows Fong's (2024) neo-offensive realist framework, which integrates unit-level ideational forces into a structural account of great power competition: while system-level power distribution sets the direction of rivalry, unit-level factors shape the pace of a particular state's engagement in structural rivalry (Fong 2024, 21–24). Fong identifies precisely the three ideational factors our measures operationalize. Nationalism—"a powerful ideology that shapes a state's foreign policy behaviours" (Fong 2024, 24)—is the paradigmatic unit-level accelerator, presumably multiplying Beijing's revisionist intentions (Fong 2024, 21). National interests are "the perceived priorities that a great power seeks to pursue regarding its external environment," whose exact content "is defined by the evolving political process within a country" and may change over time (Fong 2024, 27). The offensive realist logic Fong retains holds that a state's perception of its own relative power position supplies the incentive for assertive behavior (Fong 2024, 17, 21–22), making capability self-confidence the third element of the unit-level profile. Together, these three dimensions operationalize the self-understanding that conditions Beijing's perception and interpretation of American behavior and the bilateral relationship.

The remaining three—China-US power competition (power_compete), China-US cooperation (cnus_coop), and China's adversity to the US (cn_adversarial)—capture Beijing's perception of the

United States and the bilateral relationship: whether Washington is perceived as a security seeker, a greedy state seeking to contain and suppress China, or a partner amenable to positive-sum engagement. They operationalize the running judgment Beijing forms about whether the bilateral relationship is best read through the spiral model or the deterrence model, and correspond to the unit-level knowledge variables that Glaser (1997, 189–190) identifies as constitutive of motive assessment under conditions of anarchy and uncertainty. The six dimensions thus jointly operationalize the two sides of the perceptual approach developed above: how Beijing sees itself (Fong's unit-level ideational profile) and how it perceives the United States (the intent-perception variables at the heart of the spiral and deterrence models).

1. Chinese nationalism (*cn_nationalism*): Whether a Chinese corpus article invokes themes of national rejuvenation, patriotic sentiment, civilizational distinctiveness, or the historical narrative of national humiliation and/or revival. The prompt requires that classification be grounded exclusively in the article's explicit text. This dimension captures three specific pathways to a positive classification: (a) narratives of national rejuvenation, national pride, or national glory—including references to the “Chinese Dream,” “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” and expressions of national confidence such as “the East is rising while the West is declining”; (b) the historical narrative of national humiliation by foreign powers followed by China's resurgence—including references to the “century of humiliation,” foreign aggression, and China's determination to never again be subjugated; and (c) appeals to Chinese national identity that invoke shared ancestry, blood ties, cultural heritage, or historical memory to construct a sense of belonging to the “Chinese nation” (*Zhonghua minzu*)—particularly in cross-strait contexts involving Taiwan. Importantly, the prompt specifies hard thresholds: the humiliation narrative requires the co-occurrence of aggression/humiliation narratives and explicit China references; general patriotic mobilization language (e.g., “defending the homeland,” “a just war”) without identity or humiliation-revival narratives is excluded; and references to a “community of shared future for mankind” are classified as global governance rhetoric rather than Chinese nationalism unless they co-occur with explicit national identity markers.

2. China's national interest (*cn_interest*): Whether a Chinese corpus article explicitly articulates issues in terms of China's core national interests, sovereignty, or territorial integrity. The prompt employs a whitelist-based approach: classification requires the co-occurrence of (a) a China

reference term from a predefined whitelist and (b) an interest-articulation trigger term from a separate predefined whitelist. This design ensures that classification captures only direct, explicit statements of Chinese national interests rather than general moral criticisms of other countries' behavior. The prompt explicitly excludes moralized language (e.g., “smearing China,” “lies,” “hegemonic logic”) and references to “other countries’ internal affairs” unless the text specifically names China as the object.

3. Chinese national power (*cn_power*): Whether a Chinese corpus article highlights China’s growing strength across military, economic, or technological domains. The prompt defines three distinct pathways to a positive classification: (a) relational power—where China’s strength is framed in comparison to a weakened or declining adversary; (b) deterrent power—where external actors are warned of consequences backed by China’s demonstrated or implied capabilities; and (c) absolute power—where China’s national capabilities are described as increasing, or where concrete Chinese military exercises and operations are reported. Each pathway requires specific textual evidence: relational power requires both a China quote and a comparative quote; deterrent power requires an adversary quote, a warning quote, and a capability quote; and absolute power requires either capability-increase evidence or specific military action documentation.

4. China-US power competition (*power_compete*): Whether a Chinese corpus article characterizes US-China relations in terms of strategic rivalry, competition for influence, or zero-sum dynamics—specifically framing the United States as seeking to contain, encircle, isolate, or suppress China. The prompt instructs the classifier to identify explicit references to US containment, encirclement, isolation, suppression, or interference directed at China across multiple domains. The prompt also specifies that implicit references to “external forces” in Taiwan-related contexts should be treated as references to the United States, reflecting the established usage pattern in Chinese Communist Party discourse. Content that merely discusses China’s growing strength or international influence without framing the US as an adversary is excluded. Following the perceptual approach, this dimension operationalizes Beijing’s perception of American intent—the dynamic judgment about whether Washington is acting as a security seeker pursuing legitimate objectives or as a greedy state whose aims extend to containing and suppressing China. It is the Chinese-side analogue of the spiral-to-deterrence judgment, captured in Beijing’s own evaluation of Washington.

5. China-US cooperation (*cnus_coop*): Whether a Chinese corpus article frames the bilateral relationship in terms of shared interests, constructive engagement, or positive-sum dynamics. The prompt captures references to bilateral exchanges, dialogue, cooperation, coordination, and mutual benefit across various domains. The prompt explicitly limits the scope to direct US-China interactions: discussions of US relations with third countries are excluded. Content that merely discusses China's growing international importance without referencing bilateral cooperative dynamics is also excluded. In perceptual terms, this dimension captures the residual presence of spiral-model framing in Beijing's discourse—the extent to which the bilateral relationship is still being interpreted through the logic of shared interest rather than through the logic of deterrence and zero-sum competition.

6. China's adversity to the US (*cn_adversarial*): Whether a Chinese corpus article adopts a confrontational, accusatory, or combative stance toward the United States regarding its China-related policies, positions, or attitudes. The prompt defines a three-element gate that must be satisfied simultaneously: (a) a US actor element—identifying the United States government, its officials, institutions, or major media outlets as the agent; (b) a China/China-related object element—establishing that the US action in question pertains to China, including Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet, and other China-related political issues; and (c) a negative assessment element—identifying criticism, condemnation, or negative characterization of the US actor's China-related policy or behavior. The prompt provides extensive guidance on boundary cases: demands that the US cease specific China-related actions (e.g., arms sales to Taiwan) are classified as negative assessments; third-party condemnation of US China policy also qualifies; but cooperative appeals (“we hope the US will work with China to...”) do not constitute negative assessments unless accompanied by explicit criticism elsewhere in the same article. Criticisms of US domestic issues unrelated to China are excluded, as are criticisms of general US foreign policy principles (e.g., “Cold War mentality”) unless explicitly linked to specific China-directed policies.

US-side classification

For the US corpus, we implement a two-step classification procedure. In the first step, the LLM extracts all sentences from each document that directly mention or substantively relate to China,

Chinese officials, US-China relations, Taiwan, Hong Kong, or the South China Sea. Sentences are extracted verbatim, preserving the original language without paraphrase or summarization. This extraction step ensures that the subsequent classification operates exclusively on China-relevant content, preventing the model from being influenced by unrelated portions of documents that may address multiple policy areas.

In the second step, the LLM classifies the extracted sentences on four binary dimensions. Like their Chinese-side counterparts, these dimensions are derived from the perceptual framework developed above, and they operationalize its two components on the American side. The first two capture the valence of Washington's day-to-day signaling toward Beijing—the competitive and cooperative signals that the security dilemma literature treats as the raw material of action–reaction dynamics between rivals. The latter two capture the two poles of the intent-assessment continuum that separates the spiral model from the deterrence model: uncertainty about China's intentions, the perceptual condition that Liff and Ikenberry (2014) identify as the engine of the US-China security dilemma, and the settled judgment that China is a competitor or revisionist power, the "certainty about the malign intentions of the Other" that Breuer and Johnston (2019) highlight as the key indicator of rivalry. Each dimension is classified through a dedicated prompt with detailed criteria, exclusion rules, and concrete examples.

1. US-China tension (*disagreement*): Coded as 1 if the extracted sentences contain explicit criticism, direct accusations, confrontational language, or clearly negative characterizations of specific Chinese policies or actions—including condemning Chinese behavior, demanding China stop or change specific actions, listing grievances or disputes in a critical tone, or using negative qualifiers (e.g., “unfair,” “aggressive,” “provocative,” “destabilizing”). Disagreement can also be implicit when cooperative language masks underlying disputes—such as listing demands or concessions China must make, framing the relationship as competitive, or calling for transparency on military matters in a way that signals concern. Coded as 0 if the sentences are purely factual, neutral, or cooperative. Diplomatic language that merely acknowledges areas of difference without criticism does not count (e.g., “we discussed trade issues,” “we encourage greater openness,” or “we’d like to see progress” are neutral unless accompanied by explicit criticism). Passing mentions of China in the context of other countries’ policies (e.g., sanctions on Iran where China is mentioned tangentially) do not count unless China itself is criticized.

2. US-China good will (*cooperation*): Coded as 1 if the extracted sentences reference shared objectives, constructive dialogue, or positive engagement directly between Washington and Beijing on specific issues. Cooperation can co-exist with tension in the same document: if the sentences show both criticism and constructive engagement, the cooperative elements are coded as 1. Coded as 0 if purely adversarial, neutral/factual, or if the positive framing is exclusively about China's strategic intent. China appearing in a list of multiple countries engaged in multilateral diplomacy (e.g., P5+1 on Iran, six-party talks participants) does not count unless the text highlights specific US-China bilateral cooperation within that framework. Generic or factual references to dialogue, meetings, or discussions without substantive cooperative content do not count (e.g., "we discussed China," "dialogue is continuing," or "we are in touch" are neutral). Third-party contexts where the cooperation is between the US and another country regarding China (e.g., US-Israel discussions about arms sales to China) do not count.

3. Uncertainty about China's intent (*intent_uncertainty*): Coded as 1 if the extracted sentences clearly express uncertainty, anxiety, or worry about China's policy, its intentions, or its lack of transparency regarding intentions. This includes questioning why China is pursuing a military buildup or modernization without explanation; expressing that the US does not know whether China's behavior is defensively motivated; calling on China to be transparent about the purposes of its strategic actions; or noting that China's actions have unexplained or ambiguous implications (e.g., "China's military spending increased but did not explain why"). Coded as 0 if the sentences convey a clear assessment of China's intent—whether positive or negative—even if that assessment is critical. Statements that clearly characterize China as a threat, competitor, or revisionist power are not uncertainty; they reflect a settled judgment. Demands for COVID-19 data, transparency about virus origins, or accountability for specific events are not intent uncertainty unless they explicitly question China's broader strategic motivations. Generic diplomatic language about "avoiding misunderstandings" or "managing competition responsibly" does not count unless accompanied by explicit expressions of uncertainty about China's intentions. This dimension captures the perceptual condition that the security rivalry literature identifies as central to the onset and escalation of rivalry: the inability of one state to determine whether the other's behavior is driven by insecurity or by ambition (Jervis 1978; Glaser 1997).

4. China as competitor or threat to the US (*competitor_revisionist*): Coded as 1 if the extracted sentences clearly and unambiguously characterize China as competing with the United States for regional or global leadership; seeking to undermine, challenge, or replace US regional or global leadership; acting as a revisionist power that threatens the US and its allies; or driven by ambitions to reshape the international or regional order in its favor. Also coded as 1 if the US frames itself as competing with China or welcomes China as a competitor (e.g., “we welcome stiff competition with China,” “the challenge of great power competition with China”), or if the statement characterizes China’s competition as unfair or unjust (e.g., “predatory trade practices,” “economic aggression,” “unfair competition”). The language must be explicit and unambiguous. Coded as 0 if no such explicit characterization is present. Statements that only imply, suggest, or indirectly insinuate competitor/revisionist intent do not count. Merely acknowledging differences or managing the relationship without using competition/threat/rival language does not count. This dimension captures the perceptual assessment consistent with the deterrence model, in which China is perceived as a greedy state whose ambitions extend beyond legitimate security needs.

These dimensions are not mutually exclusive: a single document may simultaneously express cooperation on specific issues while characterizing China as a strategic competitor, or may convey both uncertainty about China’s intentions and criticism of specific Chinese actions. This allows us to capture the ambiguity and internal tension that often characterize official perception of a rival’s intentions—precisely the kind of perceptual indeterminacy that the security rivalry literature identifies as central to the dynamics of great power competition.

Validation

The validation of LLM-assisted classification follows a multi-stage protocol that combines human annotation with iterative prompt refinement, consistent with emerging best practices in computational social science (Grimmer and Stewart 2013; Patil, Heston, and Bhuse 2024; Bunt et al. 2025).

For the Chinese corpus, the author has conducted a comprehensive validation exercise. The author randomly sampled 1,523 documents from the full corpus and classified each sampled document according to the theoretically grounded definitions specified above (Campbell et al. 2013; Harry, Sturges, and Klingner 2005; Saldana 2016). These human-coded labels constitute the reference

standard against which the LLM’s classification outputs are evaluated. The authors then initiated an iterative prompt refinement process. The classification prompt was applied to the human-coded sample, and the model’s outputs were compared against the reference standard using Krippendorff’s alpha for inter-rater reliability and F-1 scores for classification performance. Where discrepancies emerged—manifested as elevated rates of false positives or false negatives—the prompt was revised to address conceptual misalignments between the model’s interpretation and the researcher’s intended definitions. This cycle of comparison, diagnosis, and revision was repeated across multiple rounds until the LLM’s classification outputs demonstrated satisfactory convergence with the human-coded reference. Importantly, this refinement process was bidirectional: in several instances, the rationales generated by the LLM revealed inconsistencies in the human annotations—cases where coder fatigue or labeling drift had produced erroneous classifications—prompting corrections to the reference standard itself (Heseltine and von Hohenberg 2024; Nahum et al. 2025).

Table 1 reports the final validation metrics for each of the six Chinese-side classification dimensions. The validation sample comprises 1,523 articles randomly drawn from the Chinese corpus, with each article coded by the authors.

Table 1. Validation metrics of Chinese-side classification dimensions

Dimension	Krippendorff's Alpha	F-1 score
Chinese nationalism (cn_nationalism)	0.963	0.963
China's national interest (cn_interest)	0.905	0.918
China's national power (cn_power)	0.823	0.824
China-US power competition (power_compete)	0.906	0.914

China-US cooperation (cnus_coop)	0.944	0.951
China's adversity to the US (cn_adversarial)	0.887	0.898

For the US corpus, the author followed an analogous validation protocol. A sample of 275 documents (2% of the US corpus) was randomly drawn from the entire corpus, and the authors annotated each sampled document on the US-side dimensions. Human labels were compared against the LLM classification outputs using the same reliability and performance metrics. The prompt was iteratively refined until convergence was achieved, with bidirectional refinement correcting both the prompt and the human reference standard where the LLM's rationales revealed coding inconsistencies. Final validation metrics for the US corpus are as follows:

Table 2. Validation metrics of US-side classification dimensions

Dimension	Krippendorff's Alpha	F-1 score
US-China tension (disagreement)	0.861	0.937
US-China good will (cooperation)	0.868	0.927
Uncertainty about China's intent (intent_uncertainty)	0.763	0.783
China as competitor or threat to the US (competitor_revisionist)	0.906	0.931

Time-series analytical framework

To analyze the temporal dynamics of perceptual shifts in US-China rivalry, we aggregate document-level classifications into daily time series. For each day in the 2001–2025 period, we compute the proportion of documents classified as positive (coded as 1) on each dimension, yielding daily proportion series for all Chinese and US classification variables. Days on which no documents appear in the corpus are recorded as missing at the aggregation stage, reflecting the absence of data rather than an affirmative assessment. For estimation, however, the ARFIMAX framework requires complete, equally spaced daily series; missing days are therefore coded as zero—treating official silence as the absence of signal—prior to fractional differencing. This choice is conservative: if silence in fact carries information, coding it as zero attenuates the estimated coefficients toward zero rather than inflating them. As a direct test, we added an indicator for days on which no documents had been issued at the relevant lag; the indicator is precisely null ($b = 0.0004$, $p = 0.90$) and all other coefficients are unchanged (see Section A.8 of online appendix), confirming that the zero coding does not distort the estimates.

The combined daily dataset comprises 9,131 rows (one per day from January 1, 2001 to December 31, 2025). On the Chinese side, the pooled *People's Daily* and MFA corpus yields data on 9,019 of these days. On the US side, White House and State Department documents appear on 5,706 days, with 5,667 days having coverage from both sides. The US series exhibits more frequent gaps due to the publishing patterns of government press offices, particularly on weekends and holidays.

We employ Bai-Perron structural break analysis (Bai and Perron 1998, 2003) to identify statistically significant shifts in the trajectory of key variables over the twenty-five-year period. The Bai-Perron test is a widely used econometric procedure for detecting multiple structural breaks in time-series data. The method partitions the series into segments by identifying break points at which the mean level shifts significantly, with the number and location of breaks determined endogenously by minimizing the sum of squared residuals subject to a penalty criterion—in this case, the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC), which balances model fit against parsimony. Unlike approaches that impose break dates based on prior knowledge of political events, the Bai-Perron procedure allows the data to identify when structural shifts occurred, providing a more rigorous and less assumption-dependent basis for periodization. By identifying break points in the Competition-Cooperation Balance and other indicators, we can assess whether perceptual shifts in

official discourse align with—or diverge from—the timing of structural changes in the material distribution of capabilities, thereby testing the core proposition of the perceptual approach.

For the time-series modeling of bilateral perceptual dynamics, we employ an Autoregressive Fractionally Integrated Moving Average with Exogenous Variables (ARFIMAX) specification. This modeling choice is motivated by two empirical properties of our data. First, daily proportion series derived from political discourse exhibit long-memory characteristics—persistent autocorrelation structures that decay hyperbolically rather than exponentially—which standard ARMA or ARIMA models are ill-equipped to capture. Fractional integration allows us to model this long-range dependence parsimoniously through a single fractional differencing parameter d , estimated via maximum likelihood. Second, the ARFIMAX framework accommodates exogenous regressors, enabling us to estimate the association between one side’s perceptual shifts and the other’s subsequent discourse while controlling for the dependent variable’s own temporal dynamics.

Our primary dependent variable is China’s adversarial posture toward the United States (*cn_adversarial*), measured as the daily proportion of Chinese documents classified as adversarial. This variable captures the degree to which Beijing’s official discourse adopts a confrontational stance toward Washington on any given day—the observable manifestation of the perceptual dynamics theorized in our framework. We model how shifts in both Chinese self-perception and US signaling correspond to changes in the intensity of Beijing’s adversarial posture toward Washington over time.

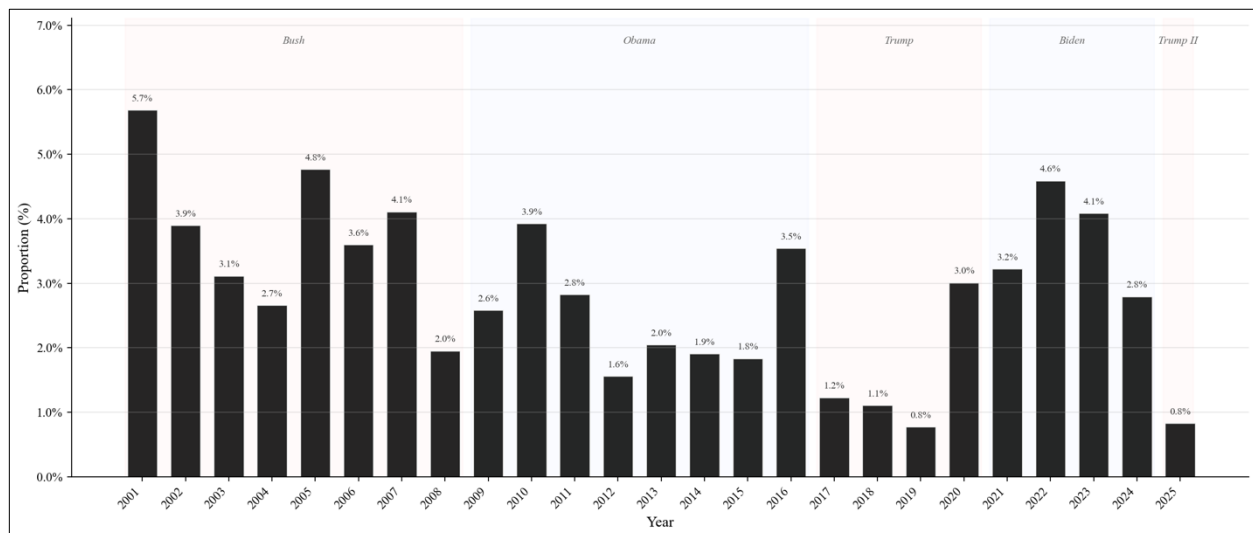
On the Chinese side, the independent variables include the daily proportions of five narrative dimensions that capture the key components of Beijing’s strategic self-assessment: Chinese nationalism (*cn_nationalism*), national interest framing (*cn_interest*), Chinese power and capability (*cn_power*), power competition (*power_compete*), and US-China cooperation (*cnus_coop*). These variables allow us to assess which elements of China’s evolving self-perception—its nationalist sentiment, its confidence in its own capabilities, or its framing of the bilateral relationship as competitive versus cooperative—are most strongly associated with the intensification or moderation of its rivalry toward the US.

On the US side, the independent variables are the lagged daily proportions of the two valence dimensions: disagreement/tension (*us_disagree_prop*) and cooperation/good will (*us_coop_prop*). The use of lagged US variables—rather than contemporaneous values—reflects the temporal logic of cross-national signaling: Beijing's adversarial posture toward the US on a given day more plausibly reflects what Washington has communicated in preceding days than same-day utterances. The twelve-to-thirteen-hour time difference between the two capitals reinforces this logic (see Footnote 2 below). By including both as predictors of China's rivalry, we can evaluate whether—and to what degree—US signals of confrontation correspond to a more adversarial Chinese response, and conversely, whether cooperative US signaling is associated with a moderation of Chinese rivalry.

Observations: From Uncertainty of Intent to Subjective Adversity

Figure 1 presents the annual proportion of US official statements expressing uncertainty about China's intentions from 2001 to 2025, drawn from 13,638 White House and State Department documents. The measure captures the share of diplomatic texts in which US policymakers explicitly questioned, expressed anxiety about, or acknowledged not knowing China's strategic motivations—language that signals the kind of perceptual indeterminacy that Liff and Ikenberry (2014) identify as the engine of the security dilemma. The data reveal a striking downward trend from 2001 through 2019: intent uncertainty averaged 3.8% during the first Bush Jr. term, declined to 3.6% in his second term, fell further to 2.7% and 2.3% across the two Obama terms, and collapsed to just 1.0% during the first Trump administration (2017–2019). A linear trend over this nineteen-year span yields a slope of -0.18 percentage points per year ($r = -0.76$, $p < 0.001$), indicating a statistically significant and substantively meaningful decline in the frequency with which US officials expressed uncertainty about what China wants.

Figure 1. Annual proportion of US statements expressing uncertainty about China's intentions



This pattern provides direct empirical evidence for the perceptual transition that the existing literature has theorized but not systematically measured. Scholars have argued that US-China security competition was originally driven by genuine uncertainty about China's intentions, and that the decisive shift in American posture occurred when that uncertainty gave way to certainty about China's malign motivations. The data confirm that this transition was not a sudden rupture but a gradual, administration-by-administration process of perceptual hardening. The Trump

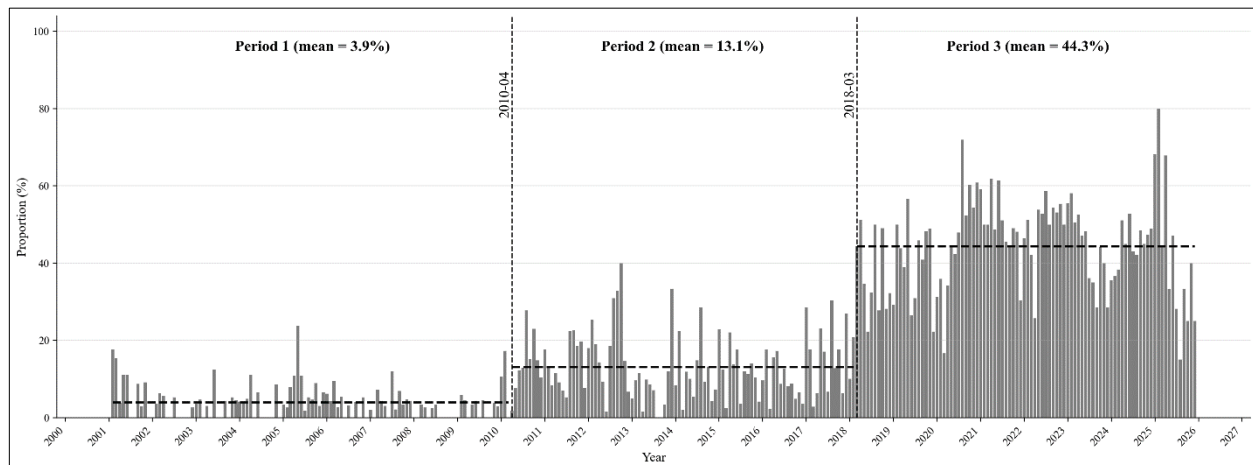
administration represents the culmination of this trajectory: by 2017–2019, the proportion of uncertainty-expressing statements fell to its lowest point in the entire time series (0.8%–1.2%), consistent with the administration's formal designation of China as a "revisionist power" and "strategic competitor" in the 2017 National Security Strategy. The near-disappearance of uncertainty language during this period suggests that by the late 2010s, US policymakers had largely resolved the perceptual ambiguity that had characterized earlier periods—moving, in Jervis's and Glaser's terms, from a spiral-model posture based on uncertainty to a deterrence-model posture premised on a settled judgment of China's "greedy" motives. The post-2019 partial rebound in uncertainty perception (averaging 3.1% during 2020–2025) does not contradict this broader trajectory but reflects a different source of anxiety: the COVID-19 pandemic introduced acute uncertainty not about China's long-term strategic orientation but about how Beijing handled the outbreak, its transparency regarding the virus's origins, and its responsiveness to international inquiry. This pandemic-driven uncertainty was episodic and issue-specific rather than structural, layered atop a baseline of perceptual certainty about China's competitive intentions that the Trump era had consolidated.

The resolution of uncertainty is only one side of the perceptual transition theorized in the literature. As Breuer and Johnston (2019) argue, the decisive shift in US-China relations involved also the emergence of a specific conviction: that China is a competitor, a revisionist power, or a threat to the US-led international order. The decline of uncertainty and the rise of competitor framing are analytically distinct—one measures the erosion of perceptual ambiguity, the other measures the consolidation of a particular threat assessment—and they need not move in lockstep. To trace the second dimension of this perceptual transition, we turn to the proportion of US official statements that explicitly characterize China as a strategic competitor, a revisionist actor, or a threat to American primacy.

Figure 2 presents the results of a Bai-Perron structural break analysis applied to the monthly proportion of US competitor/revisionist statements from 2001 to 2025. The analysis identifies two statistically significant structural breaks, dividing the twenty-five-year series into three distinct periods. The first period, spanning from February 2001 to March 2010, is characterized by a very low mean proportion of competitor/revisionist framing (3.9%). During this extended phase, which encompasses the entirety of the Bush Jr. administration and the first year of the Obama presidency,

US official discourse rarely framed China in explicitly competitive or revisionist terms. This is consistent with the engagement-era consensus in which, as Scobell (2021) notes, pro-cooperation coalitions dominated the policy landscape and the bilateral relationship was managed primarily through the lens of the spiral model—emphasizing dialogue, confidence-building, and the management of mutual uncertainty rather than strategic competition.

Figure 2. Structural break analysis of monthly US competitor/revisionist framing of China



The first structural break occurs in April 2010, after which the mean proportion of competitor/revisionist statements rises more than threefold to 13.2%. This timing is substantively significant to the US-China relations: it coincides with a period of rising friction over China's declaration of the South China Sea as a 'core interest,' heightened cyberattack concerns, and disputes over US arms sales to Taiwan and the Dalai Lama's visit to Washington—a cluster of events that triggered what Johnston (2013) identified as the "new assertiveness" debate in US policy circles. The Obama administration's subsequent announcement of the 'pivot to Asia' in October-November 2011 and its reframing as a "rebalance to Asia" in 2012 were in many respects policy responses to the perceptual shift that was already underway by mid-2010. The second period, extending from April 2010 through February 2018, represents a phase of incipient rivalry in which competitor framing was present but not yet dominant. During these eight years, roughly one in eight US official statements characterized China in competitive or revisionist terms—a meaningful departure from the near-absence of such language in the prior decade, yet still far from the levels that would follow.

The second structural break occurs in March 2018, inaugurating a third period with a dramatically elevated mean of 44.3%—more than a tenfold increase over the first period. This break point falls just months after the December 2017 National Security Strategy formally designated China a “strategic competitor” and a “revisionist power,” and coincides with the onset of the US-China trade war in early 2018. That the data-driven break point aligns so closely with this well-documented policy inflection lends confidence to both the measurement approach and the substantive interpretation. From March 2018 onward, nearly half of all US official statements mentioning China employed competitor or revisionist framing, and this elevated level has persisted through the Biden and second Trump administrations with no sign of reversion. The structural break analysis thus confirms that the shift to strategic competition was not temporary but represented a durable transformation in the perceptual foundations of US China policy.

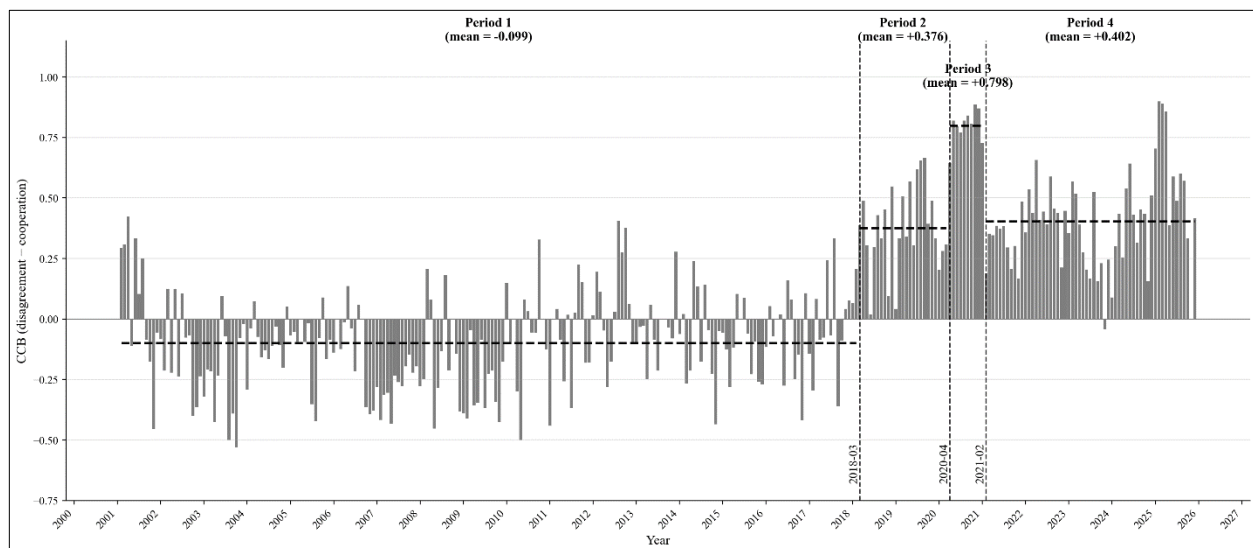
Read alongside the intent uncertainty findings, the structural break analysis reveals the two faces of the perceptual transition that the literature has theorized. As US uncertainty about China’s intentions declined steadily from 2001 to 2019, competitor/revisionist framing rose in two discrete steps—first moderately after 2010, then sharply after 2018. The two trends are complementary but not redundant. Together, they trace the transition from Jervis’s spiral model—in which the United States managed a security dilemma under conditions of genuine ambiguity about Chinese motives—to the deterrence model, in which American policymakers had consolidated the judgment that China pursues “greedy” objectives and must be checked through competitive balancing rather than reassured through engagement.

Analyses so far examined individual dimensions of American perceptions. We now turn to a composite measure that captures the net orientation of each side’s diplomatic discourse: the Competition-Cooperation Balance (CCB). For the United States, the CCB is computed as the monthly proportion of official statements coded as expressing disagreement or tension minus the proportion coded as expressing bilateral cooperation or goodwill. For China, the CCB is computed as the monthly proportion of official statements coded as expressing China-US power competition minus the proportion coded as expressing China-US cooperation. A positive CCB indicates that competitive or rivalry framing predominates over cooperative framing in a given month; a negative CCB indicates the reverse. By reducing a multidimensional classification to a single directional

indicator, the CCB provides a parsimonious basis for comparing the trajectory and timing of adversarial shifts on each side of the dyad.

Figure 3 presents the results of a Bai-Perron structural break analysis applied to the monthly US CCB. The analysis identifies three structural breaks, dividing the series into four distinct periods. The first and longest period, spanning from February 2001 through February 2018, is characterized by a mildly negative mean CCB of 0.099, indicating that cooperative framing modestly outweighed competitive framing across seventeen years of US official discourse on China. This extended period of net cooperation mentality encompasses the Bush Jr., Obama, and early Trump administrations—a span during which, despite episodic tensions and a gradual rise in competitor framing (as documented in the preceding section), the overall balance of US diplomatic language remained tilted, however slightly, toward cooperation.

Figure 3. Structural break analysis of overall US perception of China (CCB)

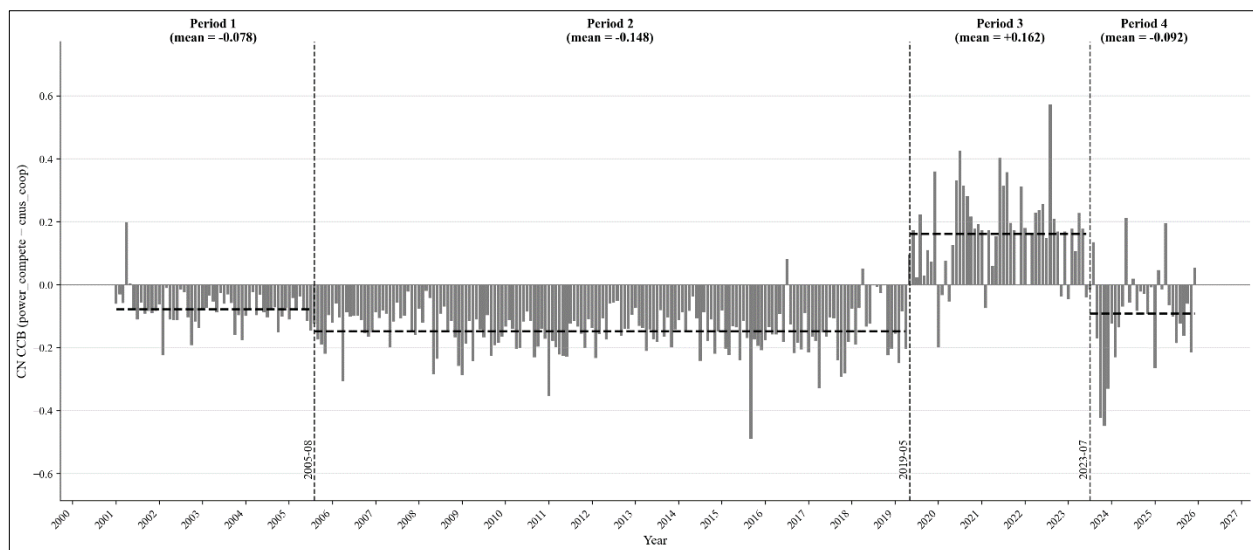


The first structural break occurs in March 2018, inaugurating a second period with a sharply positive mean CCB of 0.376. This break point—identical to the one identified in the competitor/revisionist framing analysis—marks the onset of the US-China trade war and the operationalization of the “strategic competition” framework articulated in the December 2017 National Security Strategy. The third period, from April 2020 through January 2021, registers the highest mean CCB in the entire series (+0.798), reflecting the remarkable escalation of adversity triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which nearly every dimension of US official

discourse on China was dominated by confrontational framing. The fourth period, beginning in February 2021 with the Biden administration, settles at a mean CCB of 0.402—lower than the COVID-era peak but still firmly in competitive territory and more than four times the magnitude of the pre-2018 cooperation-dominant baseline. The Biden and second Trump administrations thus consolidated, rather than reversed, the structural shift to adversarial predominance.

Figure 4 presents the corresponding Bai-Perron structural break analysis for the Chinese CCB. The results reveal a markedly different temporal pattern. The analysis identifies three structural breaks, again producing four periods, but the timing and direction of these shifts diverge noticeably from the US pattern. The first period (January 2001 to July 2005) shows a mildly negative mean CCB of 0.078, and the second period (August 2005 to April 2019) deepens the cooperative orientation to -0.148. For nearly two decades—from 2001 through the first months of 2019—Chinese official discourse maintained a net and increasingly cooperative stance toward the United States, with competitive framing consistently outweighed by cooperation framing.

Figure 4. Structural break analysis of overall Chinese perception of the US (CCB)



The decisive Chinese shift occurs only in May 2019—*more than a year* after the US turned competitive toward China in March 2018. The third Chinese period (May 2019 to June 2023) registers a mean CCB of +0.162, the only period in which Chinese discourse becomes net competitive. Moreover, unlike the US pattern, in which adversarial predominance has persisted without reversion since 2018, China's fourth period (July 2023 to December 2025) shows a return

to negative CCB (-0.092), suggesting a diplomatic recalibration toward more cooperative framing. The asymmetry is stark: the United States shifted to sustained competitive posture after early 2018 and has remained there; China followed with a delayed and more moderate competitive shift in 2019, then reversed course by mid-2023.

The May 2019 break point corresponds to a rapid-fire sequence of escalatory events that can be traced with considerable precision. In late April 2019, the CCP Politburo Standing Committee rejected a near-complete draft trade agreement that US and Chinese negotiators had assembled over five months, deeming its enforcement provisions an unacceptable intrusion into China's domestic governance; the draft was returned to Washington gutted substantially (Davis and Wei 2020, chapter 1; Pei 2026, 205, 209). Trump responded by raising tariffs on \$200 billion worth of Chinese goods from 10 to 25 percent on May 10 and placing Huawei on the Department of Commerce Entity List on May 16. Beijing's discursive counterpunch followed: between May 23 and May 31, *People's Daily* published nine consecutive commentaries under the authoritative byline "Zhong Sheng" (钟声), arraigning the United States for rule-breaking, bad faith, and hegemonism. That these political, economic, and discursive events cluster precisely at the structural break our empirical analysis identifies is unlikely to be coincidental; it provides granular, process-level corroboration that the shift captured by the Bai-Perron analysis reflects a genuine inflection in Beijing's posture rather than a statistical artifact.

The sequential timing of these structural breaks provides empirical evidence for the mutual reinforcement of competitive mentalities that the security rivalry literature has long theorized but rarely measured and analyzed at the ground level. The US shift to adversarial predominance in March 2018 preceded the Chinese shift by fourteen months. This temporal ordering is consistent with an action-reaction dynamic in which the American adoption of a strategic competition framework was followed by a reciprocal hardening in Chinese official discourse. Scobell's (2021) argument that the US-China rivalry was "constructed as domestic constituencies in each country were socialized toward confrontation" finds quantitative support in this lagged pattern: the rivalry mentality did not emerge simultaneously on both sides but propagated from Washington to Beijing with a measurable delay. At the same time, the Chinese adversarial shift was likely associated with reinforced American threat perceptions, exhibiting the kind of self-reinforcing pattern that Jervis

(1978) and Glaser (1997) described: each side's competitive posture confirming the other's worst-case assessment and further narrowing the space for cooperative engagement.

These findings speak directly to the temporal question that has divided the structuralist literature, which has offered widely divergent accounts of when US-China competition reached a point of no return. Fong (2024) dates the structural shift to 2008, Lind (2024) to the mid-2010s, Yan (2020) to 2019, and Mearsheimer (2025) characterizes the transition as ongoing. If structural conditions were the proximate cause of mutual adversity, one would expect the US and Chinese CCB to shift approximately in tandem with the relevant structural transition—and with each other. Instead, the data reveal a pattern that is difficult to reconcile with purely structuralist explanations. The US CCB remained net cooperative until March 2018, well after the structural turning points that Fong or Lind suggest (2008 and the mid-2010s respectively). The Chinese CCB remained net cooperative until May 2019—more than a decade after the structural conditions supposedly favoring competition had consolidated. And the two sides shifted at different times, with the US leading and China following, rather than both responding simultaneously to the same structural condition. Of the competing periodizations, Yan's (2020) dating aligns roughly with our empirical finding that China's CCB turned net competitive in 2019, yet even here our analysis offers greater temporal resolution—pinpointing the shift to May of that year rather than to the year as a whole.

The redistribution of capabilities may have created the permissive conditions under which competition could intensify, but the activation and timing of the competitive shift aligned temporally with perceptual and policy-level factors—the Trump administration's decision to formally reframe the relationship as strategic competition, the escalatory dynamics of the trade war, and the contemporaneous shock of the COVID-19 pandemic. China's delayed adversarial response, followed by partial reversion, further suggests that Beijing's competitive posture was more reactive than structurally determined—closely associated with the specific character and intensity of American pressure rather than simply with the shifting balance of material capabilities. The CCB analysis thus supports the perceptual approach advanced in this study: while structural theory identifies the background conditions for great power rivalry, it is the perceptual dynamics—the construction, transmission, and mutual reinforcement of adversarial mentality—that most closely track when and how rivalry intensifies.

These findings also bear on the broader question of when a US-China "new Cold War" came into being, as the deterioration of bilateral relations during the 2018–2019 period has been widely characterized in these terms (Davis and Wei 2020). Our empirical analyses precisely date its recognizable emergence to Beijing's reciprocal competitive turn in May 2019. The distinction matters analytically: a Cold War in the strict sense is constituted not by one side's competitive framing but by the mutuality of adversarial perception that propels and sustains the rivalry.

This perceptual account, however, faces a distinct interpretive challenge from Beijing's official narrative, which attributes the 2018 rupture to unilateral American provocation rather than to any shift in perception. On this view, the Trump administration manufactured hostility toward a previously cooperative relationship, pathologizing China's benign rise to justify a premeditated containment agenda. The temporal sequence documented above lends Beijing's claim surface plausibility: the United States shifted first in March 2018, and China followed fourteen months later. Yet the retrospective testimony of senior Trump administration officials directly responsible for the 2017-2019 policy transformation converges on a fundamentally different interpretation, one that reinforces rather than undermines the perceptual approach advanced here. Their accounts frame the American shift not as freshly brewed hostility but as a delayed perceptual reckoning with accumulated Chinese behavior, locating the rupture's origin in Washington's cognitive transformation rather than in any contemporaneous provocation.

John Bolton, Trump's second National Security Advisor during the decisive 2018-2019 escalation, insisted to colleagues at the Buenos Aires G20 that US-China rivalry "wasn't a trade dispute but a conflict of systems" (Bolton 2020). Bolton's framing is analytically decisive: if the perceptual rupture reflected American recognition of systemic incompatibility rather than a specific grievance, its timing must be explained by when that recognition crystallized, not by any individual Chinese action. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reinforces this interpretation by locating the origin of US adversarial posture toward China in decades of prior Chinese behavior that successive US administrations had declined to confront. Pompeo's claim that "the CCP has engaged in economic war against the United States for decades" (Pompeo 2023) positions the 2018 break not as a response to new Chinese provocation but as the moment American policymakers' perceptions finally caught up with long-standing Chinese practice.

Herbert R. McMaster, the Trump presidency's first National Security Advisor and principal architect of the 2017 National Security Strategy, articulates the perceptual turn itself most explicitly. He describes the 2017 NSS document as formalizing “the abandonment of ‘cooperation and engagement’ with China” (McMaster 2024), framing the document not as a new guideline imposed on a cooperative relationship but as the institutional recognition that the engagement-era premise—that economic integration would facilitate Chinese political liberalization—had empirically failed. The competitive turn came as the produce of a reassessment of prior American assumptions. Indeed, calls for a more anticipatory strategy toward the CCP had circulated in American media and policy circles for decades before the 2018 competitive turn. Charles Krauthammer’s 1995 *Time* essay titled “Why We Must Contain China” explicitly rejected the Clinton administration’s engagement strategy and called instead for the early containment of China. Similarly, Aaron Friedberg argued in *A Contest for Supremacy* (2011) that American leaders were failing to act quickly enough to counter China’s growing power. These arguments suggest that the logic of preventive balancing had long existed within the American foreign-policy debate before elements of it were incorporated into executive-branch perceptions and policy under the Trump administration. Taken together, these accounts support the central claim of this study: the 2018 rupture co-emerged with profound perceptual transformation within the American foreign policy establishment. It was when American policymakers’ threat perceptions consolidated, not when Chinese behavior changed, that the competitive turn crystallized.

Modeling China's Adversarial Posture toward the US

The analyses presented above established two key empirical findings. First, American uncertainty about China's intentions declined steadily from 2001 to 2019, while competitor/revisionist framing rose in two discrete steps—after 2010 and again after 2018. Second, the Competition-Cooperation Balance analysis revealed that the United States shifted to sustained adversarial predominance in March 2018, while China's adversarial shift followed fourteen months later, was more moderate in magnitude, and partially reversed by mid-2023. These findings demonstrate that the bilateral competitive dynamic was neither simultaneous nor symmetrical: the American perceptual transformation preceded and was likely associated with Beijing's reciprocal hardening. What remains to be examined is what co-varies with the intensity of China's adversarial posture toward the United States at any given point in time—and specifically, whether Beijing's confrontational stance is more closely associated with its own domestically generated ideational factors or with the character and intensity of perceived American competitive pressure.

To address this question, we extend the perceptual approach developed in the preceding sections into the modeling framework. The classification dimensions correspond to two perceptually distinct sets of indicators: those that capture Beijing's self-perception—its identity, articulated interests, and capability confidence—and those that capture Beijing's perception of the United States and the bilateral relationship. Following Glaser's (1997, 189–190) argument that motive assessment in security dilemma dynamics depends on unit-level knowledge about a rival's intentions, we model Chinese adversarial posture as a function of these perceptual inputs, supplemented by lagged measures of US discursive behavior that operationalize, at the daily level, the spiral-to-deterrence transition documented in the descriptive analysis. This specification allows the model to distinguish two interpretations the perceptual approach treats as theoretically separable: whether Chinese adversarial posture co-varies more closely with Beijing's self-perception or with its perception of American competitive intent.

On the Chinese side, we include five narrative indicators drawn from the classification of 86,977 *People's Daily* and Chinese MFA articles. Three indicators capture Beijing's self-perception—the identity claims, articulated national interests, and capability confidence through which the party-state understands itself and conditions its interpretation of American behavior. The proportion of Chinese nationalist ideology (cn_nationalism) captures Beijing's promotion of national

rejuvenation narratives, patriotic sentiment, and the historical memory of national humiliation—the identity-formation dimension that constitutes Beijing’s national self-image and provides the cognitive lens through which external challenges, including American behavior, are interpreted. The proportion of China’s national interest articulation (cn_interest) measures how intensely Chinese official discourse invokes core national interests, sovereignty, and territorial integrity—the dimension of self-perception that articulates what Beijing understands itself to be defending and pursuing. The proportion of China’s national power articulation (cn_power) tracks narratives highlighting China’s growing military, economic, and technological capabilities—the material foundation that, when articulated, reflects leadership confidence in China’s capacity to sustain competitive behavior.

The remaining two Chinese indicators capture Beijing’s perception of the bilateral relationship and of American intent. The proportion of US-China competition articulation (power_compete) measures the extent to which Chinese official discourse frames bilateral relations in terms of strategic rivalry, containment, and zero-sum dynamics—specifically characterizing the United States as seeking to contain, encircle, or suppress China. The proportion of US-China cooperation articulation (cnus_coop) measures cooperative framing—references to bilateral dialogue, shared interests, and constructive engagement—and captures the residual presence of spiral-model framing in Beijing’s discourse.

On the US side, we include two narrative indicators as exogenous variables: the proportion of US official statements coded as expressing *disagreement or tension* and the proportion coded as expressing *cooperation or goodwill*. These two US-side variables operationalize, at the daily level, the spiral-to-deterrence transition documented in the descriptive analysis: rising daily proportions of disagreement and declining proportions of cooperation are the discursive expression of the same perceptual shift from spiral-model engagement to deterrence-model competition that the Bai-Perron analyses identify at the monthly scale. Including US disagreement and cooperation as exogenous regressors allows us to examine the action-reaction proposition: if China’s adversarial posture toward the US co-varies with American pressure, lagged US disagreement should be positively associated with Chinese adversity and lagged US cooperation negatively associated with it. This specification also enables us to compare two interpretations—that China’s adversarial

stance is more closely associated with Beijing's internal self-perception or with the exogenous covariate of American competitive behavior.

The dependent variable is China's adversarial posture toward the United States (*cn_adversarial*), measured as the daily proportion of Chinese articles adopting a confrontational, accusatory, or combative stance toward the United States regarding its China-related policies. This dimension was classified through a rigorous three-element gate requiring the simultaneous identification of a US actor, a China-related object, and a negative assessment—a design that ensures the measure captures directed adversity rather than general diplomatic friction. As the most direct indicator of Beijing's competitive posture at the discursive level, *cn_adversarial* is the variable theorized within the perceptual approach to co-vary with Beijing's self-perception, its perception of American intent, and/or the daily expression of the spiral-to-deterrence transition in US discourse.

In sum, the model specification follows from the perceptual approach: China's adversarial posture is modeled as a function of three self-perception variables, two perceptions of the bilateral relationship, and two exogenous US covariate variables. This specification allows us to compare the narrative components covarying with China's adversarial stance—examining whether Beijing's internally generated narratives or Washington's externally imposed competitive pressure most closely tracks the intensity of Chinese adversity toward the United States across the 2001-2025 period.

Time-series modeling: ARFIMAX specifications

Having established the theoretical justification for our variable selection, we now turn to the estimation strategy. Our objective is to model the daily dynamics of China's adversarial posture toward the United States in association with Chinese narrative indicators and lagged US signaling variables across the 2001-2025 period. We employ an Autoregressive Fractionally Integrated Moving Average with Exogenous Variables (ARFIMAX) model. The ARFIMA class of models was introduced by Granger and Joyeux (1980) and Hosking (1981) to capture long-memory processes—time series whose autocorrelation functions decay hyperbolically rather than exponentially, indicating persistent dependence structures that standard ARMA or ARIMA models cannot properly accommodate. Box-Steffensmeier and Smith (1996) demonstrated the applicability of the ARFIMA framework to political time series that exhibit fractional integration-

-a property we confirm in our data through conflicting results on the Augmented Dickey-Fuller test ($DF = -9.55$, $p < 0.01$, rejecting the unit root null in favor of stationarity) and the KPSS test ($p = 0.01$, rejecting the null of level stationarity), a diagnostic pattern consistent with long-memory behavior (Baillie 1996). The estimated fractional differencing parameter $d = 0.277$ confirms that our dependent variable exhibits long-range dependence that would be mis-specified by either a stationary ARMA model ($d = 0$) or a unit-root ARIMA model ($d = 1$).

We estimate the model using a two-step procedure following the approach described by Jensen and Nielsen (2014) and applied in political science by Grant and Lebo (2016). In the first step, we estimate the fractional differencing parameter d via maximum likelihood using the *fracdiff* package in R and apply fractional differencing to both the dependent and independent variables. In the second step, we fit an ARIMA(1,0,1) model with the fractionally differenced exogenous regressors. The five Chinese narrative indicators are entered at a two-day lag ($t - 2$) to ensure strict temporal precedence over the dependent variable; because constructing these lags is infeasible for the first two days of the series, the estimation sample comprises 9,129 daily observations. To ensure valid inference in the presence of residual heteroskedasticity--confirmed by the Breusch-Pagan test in all four specifications ($p < 0.001$)--we report Heteroskedasticity and Autocorrelation Consistent (HAC) standard errors computed via the Newey-West estimator (Newey and West 1987). Variance inflation factors are below 5 across all four specifications (maximum 3.8), indicating no problematic multicollinearity among the regressors.

We estimate four nested model specifications to assess the robustness of our findings and to evaluate competing accounts of temporal variation in China's adversarial posture. Each specification shares the same dependent variable (*cn_adversarial*) and the same five Chinese narrative indicators (*cn_nationalism*, *cn_interest*, *cn_power*, *power_compete*, *cnus_coop*), all entered at a two-day lag ($t - 2$) to ensure that the narrative measures temporally precede the outcome they are asked to explain. The lag structure for the US variables—two days for disagreement and five days for cooperation—was selected through AIC-based comparison across lags 1 through 5.²

² Because Beijing is twelve to thirteen hours ahead of Washington, a US statement dated day $t - 2$ reaches Beijing between the evening of $t - 2$ and midday on $t - 1$, Beijing time—in time to be processed during the editorial day of $t - 1$ and to appear in the People's Daily issue dated t , which goes to press the night before. Statements dated $t - 1$, by

Model 1 (Chinese narratives only) is a preliminary specification that includes the five Chinese narrative indicators together with two controls. The first control is *xi2*, a dummy indicator for the onset of Xi Jinping's second term beginning at the 19th Party Congress in October 2017. This indicator captures the consolidation of Xi's "new era" foreign policy framework and the formal articulation of "great changes unseen in a century" (百年未有之大变局)—a discursive shift that may have independently co-varied with the baseline level of adversarial rhetoric toward the United States. The second control variable is a linear time trend (*day_index*) that absorbs drift in discourse patterns. By excluding the US signaling variables, this specification establishes whether China's adversarial posture can be predicted from the prior configuration of its own official discourse alone.

Model 2 (Baseline) adds the two lagged US signaling variables to Model 1 while retaining the same controls. Model 2 specification hence isolates the incremental contribution of US signals to the prediction of China's adversarial posture, over and above China's own narrative momentum. Model 3 (Trump administration) adds a dummy for the Trump administrations in office (*trump_office*, coded as 1 from January 20, 2017 through January 19, 2021 and from January 20, 2025 onward, with the intervening Biden years coded 0) to the baseline specification. This model examines whether the Trump administration's confrontational posture toward China—beyond its expression through the disagreement and cooperation variables already in the model—exhibits an additional association with China's adversarial discourse. If the *trump_office* variable is significant, it would suggest that the Trump presidencies co-vary with Chinese adversity toward the US through channels beyond those captured by the daily US signaling variables. Conversely, insignificance would indicate that the daily US signaling variables and the *xi2* level shift already absorb the Trump administrations' contribution.

contrast, largely arrive after that issue has closed. The two-day calendar lag therefore corresponds to a one-working-day reaction in Beijing's own publicity cycle and is the earliest lag at which a newspaper response is possible, which is why the AIC selects it over a one-day lag. MFA press briefings, conventionally held at 3 p.m. Beijing time, can respond to US statements from the preceding US calendar day. Consistent with this, the AIC selects a one-day lag for US disagreement in the Xi second-term subsample (online appendix, Table B3), where briefings constitute a larger share of the corpus. Because the data record dates but not times of day, a finer alignment is not feasible; the calendar lag is the appropriate unit, and its substantive meaning is "the next editorial cycle."

Model 4 (year fixed effects) replaces the political dummy variables and the linear time trend with year fixed effects (yr_2002 through yr_2025, with 2001 as the reference category). This specification provides the most flexible accounting for temporal heterogeneity, absorbing any year-specific variation—whether political, economic, or crisis-related—that might otherwise be conflated with the association between narrative indicators and China's adversarial posture. The year fixed effects model serves as a robustness check: if the narrative indicators retain their significance and direction after absorbing all year-level variation, this provides strong evidence that the associations reflect within-year covariation in discourse dynamics rather than across-year trends that might spuriously correlate with both the regressors and the outcome. Additionally, inspecting the pattern of year fixed effects allows us to identify which years, accounting for narrative content, exhibited unusually elevated or depressed adversarial posture—providing a further basis for comparison with the structural break analysis.

Across all four specifications, we report both immediate and long-run effects. The long-run effect is computed as $\beta/(1 - \phi)$, where ϕ is the autoregressive parameter, representing the cumulative impact of a one-unit change in the explanatory variable after the AR dynamics have fully dissipated—approximately three to four days given the estimated AR(1) coefficients. The fractional integration parameter d adds a slower, hyperbolic persistence component beyond the AR dynamics, meaning that shocks to the system continue to exert diminishing but non-negligible effects over longer horizons. This dual persistence structure—rapid AR decay overlaid with slow fractional memory—is substantively appropriate for diplomatic discourse, where today's discursive stance reflects both immediate reactions to recent events and the longer-term institutional momentum of official narratives.

Table 3 presents the results of the four ARFIMAX models. The estimated fractional differencing parameter $d = 0.277$ confirms the presence of long-memory dynamics in China's adversarial posture, with the autoregressive parameter ϕ ranging from 0.372 (Models 2 and 3) to 0.389 (Model 4). Adding the US signaling variables improves model fit substantially: the AIC falls from -8,053 in the Chinese-narratives-only Model 1 to -8,081 in Model 2, and Model 2 yields the best fit on the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC = -7,989) across all four specifications. Model 4's marginal AIC advantage (-8,084) does not survive the BIC penalty for its twenty-four additional

parameters (BIC = -7,835), indicating that the year fixed effects do not improve predictive performance sufficiently to offset their complexity.

Table 3. ARFIMAX model results: determinants of Chinese adversarial posture toward the US

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Chinese narrative indicators				
<i>(t – 2)</i>				
Nationalist ideology (<i>cn_nationalism</i>)	0.0203 (0.0425)	0.0227 (0.0424)	0.0228 (0.0424)	0.0251 (0.0423)
National interest (<i>cn_interest</i>)	-0.0003 (0.0231)	-0.0007 (0.0230)	-0.0007 (0.0230)	-0.0022 (0.0229)
National power (<i>cn_power</i>)	0.0296 (0.0288)	0.0285 (0.0289)	0.0285 (0.0289)	0.0301 (0.0292)
Power competition (<i>power_compete</i>)	-0.0210 (0.0229)	-0.0218 (0.0230)	-0.0218 (0.0230)	-0.0251 (0.0225)
Cooperation (<i>cnus_coop</i>)	0.0012 (0.0104)	0.0009 (0.0105)	0.0009 (0.0105)	0.0016 (0.0108)
US signaling variables				
US disagreement (lag 2)		0.0192*** (0.0052)	0.0192*** (0.0052)	0.0187*** (0.0051)
US cooperation (lag 5)		-0.0097* (0.0042)	-0.0097* (0.0042)	-0.0097* (0.0041)
Controls				
Linear time trend (<i>day_index</i>)	0.0000 (0.0000)	0.0000 (0.0000)	0.0000 (0.0000)	
Xi Jinping's new era (<i>xi2</i>)	0.1600** (0.0507)	0.1570** (0.0496)	0.1566** (0.0489)	
Trump administration in office (<i>trump_office</i>)			0.0013 (0.0234)	
Year fixed effects	No	No	No	Yes
<i>Fractional d</i>	0.2767	0.2767	0.2767	0.2767
<i>AR(1) φ</i>	0.3748	0.3722	0.3715	0.3888
<i>AIC</i>	-8,053	-8,081	-8,079	-8,084
<i>BIC</i>	-7,975	-7,989	-7,980	-7,835
<i>N</i>	9,129	9,129	9,129	9,129

Notes: HAC-corrected (Newey–West) standard errors in parentheses. Two-step ARFIMAX estimation: fractional differencing (d estimated via MLE) followed by ARIMA(1,0,1) with exogenous regressors. Chinese narrative indicators are entered at a two-day lag ($t - 2$) to ensure temporal precedence over the dependent variable. US signaling lags selected through AIC-based comparison across lags 1 through 5. *trump_office* is coded 1 during the Trump administrations in office (January 20, 2017–January 19, 2021 and from January 20, 2025 onward) and 0 otherwise, including the Biden years. Model 4 includes year fixed effects (yr_2002 through yr_2025, with 2001 as the reference category). ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05, .p < 0.1.

The most striking feature of the results is the stability of the core coefficients across all four specifications. For every one of the five Chinese narrative indicators and the two US signaling variables, the point estimate shifts by less than 0.005 across specifications--under one-fifth of a standard error in every case--and the standard errors and significance levels are effectively unchanged: the Chinese narrative indicators are uniformly insignificant, and the US signaling variables remain significant with the same signs and comparable magnitudes, regardless of which temporal controls are included. This stability arises because the core predictors are largely uncorrelated with the temporal controls—variance inflation factors (VIF) remain below 3.8 across all specifications—and because fractional differencing removes the long-run trends that period-specific controls would otherwise absorb. The robustness of the core estimates across specifications that range from a Chinese-narratives-only preliminary model to a saturated year fixed effects model provides strong evidence that the estimated relationships reflect genuine within-period covariation in discourse dynamics rather than artifacts of any particular temporal specification.

The central finding of Table 3 concerns what the Chinese self-perception narrative indicators do *not* do: entered at a two-day lag, none of the five Chinese self-perception framing indicators predicts Beijing's adversarial posture toward the US. This null result is sharply informative when set against the contemporaneous estimates reported in the online appendix: measured on the same day, power competition framing (*power_compete*) and national interest articulation (*cn_interest*) are strongly associated with China's adversarial posture toward the US (0.719 and 0.167, both $p < 0.001$). Nevertheless, these associations decay almost entirely within one day (-0.101 and 0.040 at $t-1$) and vanish by two days (-0.022, $p = 0.34$, and -0.001, $p = 0.98$, at $t-2$). The same pattern holds for cooperation framing (*cnus_coop*: -0.017 at t , -0.032 at $t-1$, 0.001 at $t-2$). This decay profile indicates that the large same-day coefficients reflect the co-occurrence of narrative frames within the same day's official discourse rather than any temporally prior narrative driver: power competition and national interest framing are not forces that build today and propel adversity tomorrow. China's official discourse, in other words, exhibits no autonomous narrative momentum: yesterday's self-perception frames carry no information about today's adversarial posture. Full estimates for the contemporaneous and one-day-lag specifications are provided in the online appendix.

Nationalist ideology (*cn_nationalism*) and national power discourse (*cn_power*) are insignificant at every temporal horizon—contemporaneously (0.047, $p = 0.22$, and 0.022, $p = 0.44$), at one day (0.016 and -0.033), and at two days (0.023, $p = 0.59$, and 0.029, $p = 0.32$). The insignificance of nationalism is noteworthy given the prominence of nationalist sentiment in popular accounts of Chinese foreign policy assertiveness. Our results suggest that, at the level of official state media discourse, nationalist rhetoric is not associated with China's adversarial posture toward the US at any horizon—neither as a same-day correlate nor as a temporally prior driver—once power competition and national interest framing are accounted for.

Against this null backdrop, the lagged US signaling variables carry the entire temporally identified signal. US disagreement (lag 2) shows a positive and significant association with Chinese adversarial posture (0.019, $p < 0.001$; long-run effect 0.031), indicating that confrontational US signals are registered in Chinese state discourse within two calendar days--effectively the next editorial cycle in Beijing time. US cooperation (lag 5) shows a significant negative coefficient (-0.010, $p < 0.05$; long-run effect -0.016), indicating that cooperative US signals co-vary with reduced Chinese adversarial rhetoric at a somewhat longer horizon. The asymmetry in both timing and magnitude—hostile signals registered faster and more strongly than cooperative ones—is consistent with a competition-sensitive reactive posture. That the only variables with predictive power over China's adversarial posture are the other side's prior signals as Beijing perceived them, while China's own prior self-perception frames predict nothing, is the strongest evidence in our data for the reactive interpretation.

Turning to the temporal controls, the Xi Jinping second-term dummy (*xi2*) is significant in Models 1 through 3 (0.157–0.160, $p < 0.01$; long-run effect 0.25), indicating that Xi's second term is associated with a substantial increase in adversarial posture even after accounting for the lagged Chinese narrative indicators and US signals. The linear time trend (*day_index*) is insignificant throughout, suggesting no residual drift beyond what is captured by the substantive predictors and the *xi2* control. The Trump-in-office dummy, added in Model 3, is entirely insignificant (0.001, $p = 0.96$), indicating that the Trump administrations' association with Chinese adversarial discourse

is fully absorbed by the daily US signaling variables and the α_2 level shift.³ China's adversarial posture co-varied with the specific content of US signals rather than with the structural fact of the Trump presidencies per se.

In Model 4, the year fixed effects trace a clear escalatory arc: the coefficients are significant for 2018 (0.138, $p < 0.05$), 2019 (0.247, $p < 0.01$), 2020 (0.258, $p < 0.001$), 2021 (0.252, $p < 0.001$), 2022 (0.165, $p < 0.05$), and 2024 (0.195, $p < 0.01$), with 2023 and 2025 falling just short of conventional thresholds ($p = 0.09$ and $p = 0.05$). The pattern--onset with the US-China trade war in 2018, a plateau across the COVID-19 pandemic years of 2019-2021, and partial moderation thereafter--closely mirrors the structural break analysis, with the two methods identifying the same inflection points independently. Critically, the core coefficients in Model 4 remain essentially unchanged from Models 2 and 3, confirming that the estimated associations between US signaling variables and China's adversarial posture are not confounded by unobserved year-level heterogeneity.

To assess whether these findings reflect dynamics specific to Xi Jinping's second term, we re-estimated Models 2 through 4 on the subsample beginning with the 19th Party Congress on October 24, 2017 ($N = 2,989$ days after lag construction). The substantive picture remains unchanged. The five lagged Chinese narrative indicators remain uniformly insignificant within the subsample. Power competition framing and national interest articulation, the dominant same-day correlates in the contemporaneous specification, carry point estimates of 0.001 ($p = 0.97$) and 0.008 ($p = 0.78$) at $t-2$, confirming that even in the most escalatory period of the series, China's adversarial posture toward the US cannot be predicted from the prior configuration of its self-perception discourse. Nationalism, critically, remains insignificant at every horizon within the subsample (0.051, $p = 0.46$, at $t-2$; point estimates near 0.050 with p -values between 0.37 and 0.40 in the contemporaneous specification reported in the online appendix). The null finding on nationalism is thus not an artifact of combining observations from before and since Xi's second term: even within the very period in which nationalist sentiment is most commonly invoked in accounts of Chinese assertiveness, Beijing's official discourse does not bear out the connection.

³ In the contemporaneous specification reported in the online appendix, a modest Trump-in-office level effect appears—0.031, $p < 0.05$ —but it does not survive the temporal-precedence specification adopted here.

The subsample does diverge from the full series, however, in the strength of bilateral reactivity. The association between lagged US disagreement and Chinese adversarial posture rises from 0.019 in the full series to 0.026 since Xi's second term, while the negative coefficient on lagged US cooperation more than triples in magnitude, from -0.010 to -0.035 (both $p < 0.05$). Within the subsample, the administration-in-office contrast is null: days under the Trump administrations do not differ from Biden-era days once the daily US signals and year-level structure are accounted for (-0.014 , $p = 0.65$), and the year fixed effects reproduce the familiar arc: rising sharply in 2018-2019, plateauing at their maximum through 2020-2021, and moderating only partially thereafter. Taken together, these results indicate that the period since Xi's second term is characterized not by an autonomous, internally generated competition but rather by an intensified perceptual coupling between US policy signals and Chinese ones. This intensified reactivity is precisely the discursive signature one would expect after the perceptual transition documented in the structural break analyses: once both sides had settled into the deterrence model—the United States from March 2018, China from May 2019—each side's posture became conditioned on the content of the other's competitive signals rather than on residual uncertainty about its intentions.

The Xi second-term subsample thus captures the US-China rivalry in its consolidated form, corroborating at the daily frequency what the structural breaks dated at the monthly frequency: by Xi's second term, US-China relations had completed the passage from spiral-model ambiguity to deterrence-model competition. Full specifications and results for all robustness check models, including the contemporaneous and one-day-lag variants, are provided in the online appendix.

Conclusion

This study set out to interrogate the dominant structuralist-materialist framework for explaining US-China great power rivalry. Structuralist theories locate the source of bilateral competition in the shifting distribution of material capabilities, but confront an embarrassing empirical fact: scholars working within this tradition have dated the onset of bipolar rivalry to widely divergent points of time. We advance the perceptual approach as an alternative account that is grounded in Jervis's spiral/deterrence distinction and Glaser's argument that motive assessment under uncertainty depends on unit-level knowledge of a rival's intentions, not simply on the distribution of material capabilities alone. The perceptual approach treats the question of the adversary's intent—whether, under uncertainty, a rising power is a security seeker or a greedy state—as analytically central rather than as a residual to be assumed away.

To operationalize the perceptual framework, we apply an LLM-advanced research design to classify documents and conduct two sets of empirical analyses. Bai-Perron structural break analyses identify discrete shifts in the monthly Competition-Cooperation Balance for both sides. ARFIMAX time-series modeling at daily frequency assesses whether China's adversarial posture is driven by the prior configuration of Beijing's self-perception—nationalist ideology, national power, national interest, and its framing of the Sino-US relationship—or by prior American signaling of competition and cooperation.

The findings yield a coherent empirical picture. American uncertainty about Chinese intentions declined steadily from 2001 to 2019, while competitor/revisionist framing rose in two discrete steps (after 2010 and again in early 2018), mapping a perceptual transition from spiral-model engagement to deterrence-model competition. The United States shifted to sustained adversarial posture in March 2018; China's reciprocal shift followed fourteen months later in May 2019, was more moderate in magnitude, and partially reversed by mid-2023. The time-series models sharpen this picture of reciprocity into a finding about temporal structure. Within any given day, China's adversarial posture is expressed through the language of national interest and of US-China power competition—not through nationalist ideology or assertions of national capability. But none of these narrative configurations, entered at a lag, predicts the next days' adversarial posture: China's official discourse exhibits no autonomous narrative momentum. The only temporally prior variables with predictive power are American ones. Lagged US disagreement signals associate

positively with Chinese adversarial discourse toward the US within two calendar days (one day or two), and lagged US cooperation signals associate negatively at a somewhat longer horizon. Chinese nationalism—prominent in popular accounts of Beijing's assertiveness—is associated with China's adversarial posture at no horizon whatsoever. The Trump administrations, by contrast, show no additional association with Chinese adversarial discourse beyond these daily signaling variables, suggesting that what mattered was the content of American discourse as Beijing perceived it, rather than the Trump presidencies.

These findings advance three contributions to the scholarship on great power competition. Theoretically, they support the perceptual approach as a compelling alternative to structuralist-materialist accounts of great power rivalry. Both American assessment of Chinese intent and Chinese assessment of American intent emerge as central to the rivalry's dynamics—and in a more specific form than that broad claim might suggest. Beijing's adversarial posture is articulated in response to its perception of American competitive intent, not as a product of the self-congratulatory language of nationalism or national power; and its day-to-day movement tracks the content of prior American signals rather than the momentum of China's own discourse. This pattern extends Glaser's claim about the centrality of motive knowledge: Beijing behaves more as a state continuously updating its assessment of American motives, not as one propelled by an internally generated ideological program.

Methodologically, LLM-enhanced text classification addresses a longstanding empirical issue: the inability of regex- and dictionary-based approaches to reliably attribute sentiment to its originator and target. Because the LLM receives prompts that articulate the conceptual definitions directly, it can distinguish a Chinese statement's adversarial framing of the United States from incidental US-related vocabulary—a capability that enables the measurement of targeted adversity at daily frequency over a quarter-century. Substantively, the analysis offers granular temporal resolution that has so far eluded both structural periodizations and qualitative process-tracing accounts—dating the emergence of the new Cold War to March 2018 and its consolidation, as a mutually constituted rather than unilaterally activated phenomenon, to May 2019.

The findings carry several policy implications. First, the reactive temporal structure of Beijing's adversarial posture suggests that US policy narratives are not consequence-free. Confrontational American signals are registered in Chinese state discourse and are associated with subsequent

hardening of Beijing's adversarial posture, while cooperative signals are associated with its moderation at a somewhat longer horizon. Prior configurations of China's self-perception narratives, by contrast, predict nothing. In our data, the content of American discourse is the single most reliable antecedent of Chinese adversarial rhetoric. This indicates that diplomatic discourse as an authoritative indicator of state intent is far from cheap talk; rather, it is a material input shaping the trajectory of bilateral adversity.

Second, the composition of Chinese adversarial discourse carries diagnostic value. When Beijing hardens its posture, it does so in the language of national interest and of US-China power competition. This is a compositional finding, not a causal one: as the lagged models show, these frames do not build up in advance and propel subsequent adversity—they are the vocabulary in which adversity is expressed on the day it appears. Nationalism and national-power articulation, by contrast, are associated with adversarial posture at no horizon—neither as same-day correlates nor as temporally prior drivers. These null findings challenge conventional accounts that attribute Chinese assertiveness either to ideological fervor (nationalism) or to capability-driven hubris. The prominence of interest-based and competition-based framing points instead to a more pragmatic logic, in which Beijing's confrontational rhetoric is organized around the tangible stakes it perceives itself to be legitimately defending and the competitive intent it attributes to Washington, rather than the symbolic registers of nationalism or capability-based confidence. Policy responses calibrated against the symbolic dimensions of Chinese posture risk targeting factors that play no measurable role in Beijing's adversity toward the US. How each side characterizes and addresses the other's treasured interests is where de-escalatory space may lie.

Third, the contrasting patterns of American and Chinese adversarial posture toward each other carry a major policy inference. American competitive perception of China, once consolidated, has persisted across two presidential transitions. The structural break analysis registers no reversal under either the Biden administration or the second Trump administration. Beijing's posture, by contrast, hardened later and has partially reversed since mid-2023. This asymmetry yields a counterfactual lesson. The strategically consequential window for managing rivalry trajectory lies upstream of the hegemon's transition from the spiral model to the deterrence model—during the years when American uncertainty about Chinese intent was declining but had not yet collapsed. For US-China relations, that window ran from roughly the early 2010s through 2017. Intent-

clarifying engagement and reassurance from Beijing during this period--the kind of costly signaling Glaser identifies as the principal mechanism for ameliorating the security dilemma--could plausibly have slowed the perceptual hardening that the 2017 NSS later formalized.

Several limitations bound these conclusions and point toward productive lines for future work. The study analyzes discourse rather than observable behavior; while official statements are the most authoritative channel for signaling, discourse is not identical with the underlying decision processes that produce military deployments, economic measures, or diplomatic actions, and linking the perceptual variables developed here to behavioral outcomes would strengthen the causal interpretation. The analysis documents association rather than causation; the lag structure ensures that the US signaling variables temporally precede the outcome, but temporal precedence cannot rule out unobserved confounding—events that move both American and Chinese discourse within the same window, particularly during shock periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic—and quasi-experimental designs exploiting exogenous variation in discursive signaling could provide sharper identification. The focus on official state-level discourse omits sub-national or non-executive actors—legislatures, provincial leaderships, expert and policy communities, mass publics—whose perceptual dynamics may diverge from those of central executives and whose role in propagating or moderating adversarial narratives merits further investigation. The bilateral focus also excludes third-country dynamics that may mediate the US-China relationship; extending the framework to triadic configurations—US-China-Russia, US-China-EU, US-China-ASEAN—would test whether the perceptual mechanisms identified here generalize beyond the focal dyad. Finally, the LLM-enhanced classification framework developed here is applicable beyond the US-China context, and replication across other major-power dyads—US-Russia, EU-China, Japan-China—would establish whether the reactive, interest-based structure of adversarial discourse identified here reflects a general feature of great power rivalry or a feature specific to the present case.

References

- Allison, Graham. 2017. *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Anderson, Nicholas D., and Daryl G. Press. 2025. "Access Denied? The Sino-American Contest for Military Primacy in Asia." *International Security* 50(1): 118–151. <https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC.a.7>.
- Aziz, Haseeb. 2016. "Is China a Revisionist Power: An Analysis." *Strategic Studies* 36(4): 1–16. https://www.issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/SS_Haseeb_bin_Aziz_N0-4_2016.pdf.
- Bai, Jushan, and Pierre Perron. 1998. "Estimating and Testing Linear Models with Multiple Structural Changes." *Econometrica* 66(1): 47–78. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2998540>.
- Bai, Jushan, and Pierre Perron. 2003. "Computation and Analysis of Multiple Structural Change Models." *Journal of Applied Econometrics* 18(1): 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jae.659>.
- Bail, Christopher A. 2024. "Can Generative AI Improve Social Science?" *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 121(21): e2314021121. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2314021121>.
- Baillie, Richard T. 1996. "Long Memory Processes and Fractional Integration in Econometrics." *Journal of Econometrics* 73(1): 5–59. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-4076\(95\)01732-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-4076(95)01732-1).
- Beckley, Michael, and Hal Brands. 2022. *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Biddle, Stephen, and Ivan Oelrich. 2016. "Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Antiaccess/Area Denial, U.S. AirSea Battle, and Command of the Commons in East Asia." *International Security* 41(1): 7–48. https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00249.
- Bolton, John. 2020. *The Room Where It Happened: A White House Memoir*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

- Box-Steffensmeier, Janet M., and Renée M. Smith. 1996. "The Dynamics of Aggregate Partisanship." *American Political Science Review* 90(3): 567–580. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2082570>.
- Brady, Anne-Marie. 2008. *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Breuer, Adam, and Alastair Iain Johnston. 2019. "Memes, Narratives and the Emergent US–China Security Dilemma." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32(4): 429–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1622083>.
- Brooks, Stephen G., and William C. Wohlforth. 2016. "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century: China's Rise and the Fate of America's Global Position." *International Security* 40(3): 7–53. https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00225.
- Bulman, David J. 2021. "The Economic Security Dilemma in US–China Relations." *Asian Perspective* 45(1): 49–73. <https://doi.org/10.1353/apr.2021.0013>.
- Burdette, Zachary. 2025. "The U.S.-China Military Balance in Space: Implications for Future Warfare in the Pacific." *International Security* 49(4): 71–118. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00509.
- Campbell, John L., Charles Quincy, Jordan Osserman, and Ove K. Pedersen. 2013. "Coding In-Depth Semistructured Interviews: Problems of Unitization and Intercoder Reliability and Agreement." *Sociological Methods & Research* 42(3): 294–320. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124113500475>.
- Chan, Lai-Ha, and Pák K. Lee, eds. 2024. *China-US Great-Power Rivalry: The Competitive Dynamics of Order-Building in the Indo-Pacific*. London: Routledge.
- Chan, Steve, Weixing Hu, and Kai He. 2019. "Discerning States' Revisionist and Status-Quo Orientations: Comparing China and the US." *European Journal of International Relations* 25(4): 613–40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066118804622>.
- Cho, Sungmin. 2025. "The Ideological Security Dilemma in International Relations: The Case of US–China Ideological Competition." *Perspectives on Politics*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592725104106>.

- Christensen, Thomas J. 2001. "Posing Problems without Catching Up: China's Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy." *International Security* 25(4): 5–40. <https://doi.org/10.1162/01622880151091880>.
- Colby, Elbridge A. 2021. *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Cunningham, Fiona S., and M. Taylor Fravel. 2019. "Dangerous Confidence? Chinese Views on Nuclear Escalation." *International Security* 44(2): 61–109. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00359.
- Davis, Bob, and Lingling Wei. 2020. *Superpower Showdown: How the Battle between Trump and Xi Threatens a New Cold War*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Desch, Michael C. 2025. "Balancing Away from War: How the USA and China Can Side-Step the Thucydides' Trap." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 18(2): 151–72. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poaf001>.
- Fong, Brian C. H. 2024. "US-China Relations in Retrospect: Revisiting the Debate of Realists, Liberals, and Constructivists." *Asian Perspective* 48(4): 575–97. <https://doi.org/10.1353/anp.2024.a944262>.
- Fong, Brian C. H. 2024. *US-China Rivalry: Great Power Competition in the Indo-Pacific*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Friedberg, Aaron L. 2011. *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Friedberg, Aaron L. 2022. *Getting China Wrong*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Glaser, Charles L. 1992. "Political Consequences of Military Strategy: Expanding and Refining the Spiral and Deterrence Models." *World Politics* 44(4): 497–538. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2010486>.
- Glaser, Charles L. 1997. "The Security Dilemma Revisited." *World Politics* 50(1): 171–201. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887100014763>.

- Glaser, Charles L. 2015. "A U.S.-China Grand Bargain? The Hard Choice between Military Competition and Accommodation." *International Security* 39(4): 49–90. https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00199.
- Goldstein, Avery. 2020. "China's Grand Strategy under Xi Jinping: Reassurance, Reform, and Resistance." *International Security* 45(1): 164–201. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00383.
- Granger, Clive W. J., and Roselyne Joyeux. 1980. "An Introduction to Long-Memory Time Series Models and Fractional Differencing." *Journal of Time Series Analysis* 1(1): 15–29. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9892.1980.tb00297.x>.
- Grant, Taylor, and Matthew J. Lebo. 2016. "Error Correction Methods with Political Time Series." *Political Analysis* 24(1): 3–30. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pan/mpv033>.
- Grimmer, Justin, and Brandon M. Stewart. 2013. "Text as Data: The Promise and Pitfalls of Automatic Content Analysis Methods for Political Texts." *Political Analysis* 21(3): 267–297. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pan/mps028>.
- Grossmann, Igor, Matthew Feinberg, Dawn C. Parker, Nicholas A. Christakis, Philip E. Tetlock, and William A. Cunningham. 2023. "AI and the Transformation of Social Science Research." *Science* 380(6650): 1108–1109. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adi1778>.
- Harry, Beth, Kimberley M. Sturges, and Janette K. Klingner. 2005. "Mapping the Process: An Exemplar of Process and Challenge in Grounded Theory Analysis." *Educational Researcher* 34(2): 3–13. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X034002003>.
- He, Kai, and Huiyun Feng. 2025. "International Relations Theory and US–China Competition: A Theoretical Exploration." *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 27(1): 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481251391643>.
- Heath, Timothy R., and William R. Thompson. 2018. "Avoiding U.S.-China Competition Is Futile: Why the Best Option Is to Manage Strategic Rivalry." *Asia Policy* 13(2): 91–120. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ASP.2018.0027>.
- Heiduk, Felix, ed. 2021. *Asian Geopolitics and the US–China Rivalry*. London: Routledge.

- Heseltine, Michael, and Bernhard Clemm von Hohenberg. 2024. "Large Language Models as a Substitute for Human Experts in Annotating Political Text." *Research & Politics* 11(1): 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20531680241236239>.
- Hiim, Henrik Stålhane, and Øystein Tunsjø. 2025. "The U.S.-China Stability-Instability Paradox." *International Security* 50(1): 152–81. <https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC.a.8>.
- Hiim, Henrik Stålhane, M. Taylor Fravel, and Magnus Langset Trøan. 2023. "The Dynamics of an Entangled Security Dilemma: China's Changing Nuclear Posture." *International Security* 47(4): 147–87. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00457.
- Hosking, Jonathan R. M. 1981. "Fractional Differencing." *Biometrika* 68(1): 165–176. <https://doi.org/10.1093/biomet/68.1.165>.
- Ikenberry, G. John, Inderjeet Parmar, and Doug Stokes. 2018. "Ordering the World? Liberal Internationalism in Theory and Practice." *International Affairs* 94(1): 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix277>.
- Jensen, Andreas Noack, and Morten Ørregaard Nielsen. 2014. "A Fast Fractional Difference Algorithm." *Journal of Time Series Analysis* 35(5): 428–436. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jtsa.12074>.
- Jervis, Robert. 1976. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Jervis, Robert. 1978. "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma." *World Politics* 30(2): 167–214. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009958>.
- Jie, Dalei. 2020. "The Emerging Ideological Security Dilemma between China and the U.S." *China International Strategy Review* 2(2): 184–96. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-020-00059-3>.
- Johnston, Alastair Iain. 2003. "Is China a Status Quo Power?" *International Security* 27(4): 5–56. <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228803321951081>.
- Johnston, Alastair Iain. 2013. "How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?" *International Security* 37(4): 7–48. https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00115.

- Johnston, Alastair Iain. 2017. "Is Chinese Nationalism Rising? Evidence from Beijing." *International Security* 41(3): 7–43. https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00265.
- Johnston, Alastair Iain. 2019. "China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing's International Relations." *International Security* 44(2): 9–60. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00360.
- Kang, David C., Jackie S. H. Wong, and Zenobia T. Chan. 2025. "What Does China Want?" *International Security* 50 (1): 46–81. <https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC.a.5>.
- Kastner, Scott L., and Phillip C. Saunders. 2012. "Is China a Status Quo or Revisionist State? Leadership Travel as an Empirical Indicator of Foreign Policy Priorities." *International Studies Quarterly* 56(1): 163–77. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2011.00697.x>.
- Kim, Sung-han, and Sanghoon Kim. 2022. "China's Contestation of the Liberal International Order." *The Pacific Review* 36(6): 1215–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2022.2063367>.
- Kim, Tongfi, Andrew Taffer, and Ketian Zhang. 2020. "Is China a Cautious Bully? A Response." *International Security* 45(2): 187–93. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_c_00386.
- Krippendorff, Klaus. 2018. *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Krauthammer, Charles. 1995. "Why We Must Contain China." *Time*. <https://time.com/archive/6727705/why-we-must-contain-china/>.
- Kuang, Xianwen, and Jesse Owen Hearn-Branaman. 2025. "Ten Years of Transformation: A Comparative Analysis of American News Coverage on China during Xi's Initial and Fifth US Visits." *Global Media and China* 10(2): 182–98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20594364251328291>.
- Landwehr-Matlé, Jakob, Kai Oppermann, and Daniel Lambach. 2025. "Great Power Competition for Global Leadership in Artificial Intelligence (AI): Reconstructing AI Narratives of the United States, China, and the European Union." *Review of International Studies* 52(1). <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210526001776>.

- Larson, Deborah Welch, and Alexei Shevchenko. 2010. "Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy." *International Security* 34(4): 63–95. <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2010.34.4.63>.
- Liff, Adam P., and G. John Ikenberry. 2014. "Racing toward Tragedy? China's Rise, Military Competition in the Asia Pacific, and the Security Dilemma." *International Security* 39(2): 52–91. https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00176.
- Lind, Jennifer. 2024. "Back to Bipolarity: How China's Rise Transformed the Balance of Power." *International Security* 49(2): 7–55. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00494.
- Malkin, Anton, and Tian He. 2024. "The Geoeconomics of Global Semiconductor Value Chains: Extraterritoriality and the US-China Technology Rivalry." *Review of International Political Economy* 31(2): 674–99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2023.2245404>.
- McMaster, Herbert R. 2024. *At War with Ourselves: My Tour of Duty in the Trump White House*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Mearsheimer, John J. 2014. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, rev. ed. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Mearsheimer, John J. 2025. "War and International Politics." *International Security* 49(4): 7–36. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00507.
- Müller, Thomas. 2024. "Narratives, Knowledge Objects, and the Making of Great Power Competition." *Global Studies Quarterly* 4(3): ksae059. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksae059>.
- Natalizia, Gabriele, and Lorenzo Termine. 2021. "Tracing the Modes of China's Revisionism in the Indo-Pacific: A Comparison with Pre-1941 Shōwa Japan." *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica* 51: 83–99. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2020.28>.
- Newey, Whitney K., and Kenneth D. West. 1987. "A Simple, Positive Semi-Definite, Heteroskedasticity and Autocorrelation Consistent Covariance Matrix." *Econometrica* 55(3): 703–708. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1913610>.

- Ooi, Su-Mei, and Gwen D’Arcangelis. 2017. “Framing China: Discourses of Othering in US News and Political Rhetoric.” *Global Media and China* 2(3–4): 269–83. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059436418756096>.
- Ornstein, Joseph T., Elise N. Blasingame, and Jake S. Truscott. 2025. “How to Train Your Stochastic Parrot: Large Language Models for Political Texts.” *Political Science Research and Methods* 13(2): 264–281. <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2024.64>.
- Panda, Jagannath P. 2021. “China as a Revisionist Power in Indo-Pacific and India’s Perception: A Power-Partner Contention.” *Journal of Contemporary China* 30(127): 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2020.1766906>.
- Pearson, Margaret M., Meg Rithmire, and Kellee S. Tsai. 2022. “China’s Party-State Capitalism and International Backlash: From Interdependence to Insecurity.” *International Security* 47(2): 135–76. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00447.
- Pei, Minxin. 2026. *The Broken China Dream: How Reform Revived Totalitarianism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Pompeo, Mike. 2023. *Never Give an Inch: Fighting for the America I Love*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Quek, Kai, and Alastair Iain Johnston. 2018. “Can China Back Down? Crisis De-escalation in the Shadow of Popular Opposition.” *International Security* 42(3): 7–36. https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00303.
- Saldaña, Johnny. 2016. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Schindler, Seth, Ilias Alami, Jessica DiCarlo, Nicholas Jepson, Steve Rolf, Mustafa Kemal Bayırbağ, Louis Cyuzuzo, Meredith DeBoom, Alireza F. Farahani, Imogen T. Liu, Hannah McNicol, Julie T. Miao, Philip Nock, Gilead Teri, Maximiliano Facundo Vila Seoane, Kevin Ward, Tim Zajontz, Yawei Zhao. 2023. “The Second Cold War: US–China Competition for Centrality in Infrastructure, Digital, Production, and Finance Networks.” *Geopolitics* 29 (4): 1083–1120. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2023.2253432>.

- Schweller, Randall L., and Xiaoyu Pu. 2011. "After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline." *International Security* 36(1): 41–72. https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00044.
- Scobell, Andrew. 2021. "Constructing a U.S.–China Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific and Beyond." *Journal of Contemporary China* 30(127): 69–84. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2020.1766910>.
- Stockmann, Daniela. 2013. *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Talmadge, Caitlin, and Joshua Rovner. 2023. "The Meaning of China's Nuclear Modernization." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 46(6–7): 1116–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2023.2212871>.
- Taylor, Nicholas. 2007. "China as a Status Quo or Revisionist Power? Implications for Australia." *Security Challenges* 3(1): 29–45. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26458849>.
- Trachtenberg, Marc. 2025. "The Rules-Based International Order: A Historical Analysis." *International Security* 50(2): 7–54. <https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC.a.11>.
- Tunsjø, Øystein. 2018. *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics: China, the United States, and Geostuctural Realism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Walt, Stephen M. 2025. "Hedging on Hegemony: The Realist Debate over How to Respond to China." *International Security* 49(4): 37–70. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00508.
- Winkler, Stephanie Christine. 2023. "Strategic Competition and US–China Relations: A Conceptual Analysis." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 16(3): 333–56. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poad008>.
- Wu, Riqiang. 2021. "Assessing China-U.S. Inadvertent Nuclear Escalation." *International Security* 46(3): 128–62. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00428.
- Yan, Xuetong. 2020. "Bipolar Rivalry in the Early Digital Age." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 13(3): 313–41. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poaa007>.

- Yang, Yi Edward, and Jonathan W. Keller. 2025. "Perceptions of China among American Elites: Sources and Change 1979–2022." *Journal of Chinese Political Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-025-09911-y>.
- Zhang, Baohui. 2022. "From Defensive toward Offensive Realism: Strategic Competition and Continuities in the United States' China Policy." *Journal of Contemporary China* 31(137): 793–809. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2021.2010885>.
- Zhang, Biao. 2023. "Polarity and Strategic Competition: A Structural Explanation of Renewed Great Power Rivalry." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 16(4): 383–405. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poad012>.
- Zhao, Minghao. 2019. "Is a New Cold War Inevitable? Chinese Perspectives on US–China Strategic Competition." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 12(3): 371–94. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poz010>.
- Zhao, Suisheng. 2018. "A Revisionist Stakeholder: China and the Post-World War II World Order." *Journal of Contemporary China* 27(113): 643–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1458029>.