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Think Tank Factors in the Obama Administration's Foreign Policy Decision-Making and China-U.S. Relations: Postprint

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] As an external brain trust for policy consultation, American think tanks play an extremely important and special role in the decision-making process of U.S. foreign policy toward China. Examining the policy positions and operations of American think tanks serves as a crucial observational perspective and basis for predicting and analyzing U.S. diplomatic strategies and policy formulation. [Method/Process] This study employs a case analysis approach to interpret the role of American think tanks in shaping China strategy and policy formulation during the Obama administration. [Results/Conclusion] The core pathway through which American think tanks influence foreign policy decision-making lies in becoming policy elites via the “revolving door” mechanism, entering the Cabinet team headed by the Secretary of State and the National Security Council led by the National Security Advisor. Due to his lack of diplomatic experience, Obama relied more heavily on Democratic-leaning think tanks and defense and security think tanks in foreign policy decision-making. During the early stages of his campaign, Obama was influenced by China-savvy think tank elites, attempting to have China share the hegemonic costs of his leadership in the world. In his first term, the Obama administration accepted policy proposals from think tanks represented by the Center for a New American Security and China hawk think tank experts, establishing the “Asia-Pacific Rebalance” strategy. Under the guidance of this strategic thinking, China-U.S. relations exhibited a high-start, low-finish trend, reflecting the reversals and regression in China-U.S. relations during the Obama era. A new round of great debate among American think tanks on China will also influence the repositioning of China policy by the next U.S. administration.

Full Text

Preamble

ChinaXiv Cooperative Journal: Think Tank Factors in the Obama Administration' s Foreign Policy-making and Sino-U.S. Relations

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] As external policy counsel, American think tanks play an extremely important and unique role in the process of U.S. diplomatic decision-making toward China. Examining the policy positions and operations of these think tanks provides a crucial observational perspective and empirical basis for predicting and analyzing U.S. diplomatic strategy and policy formulation. **[Method/Process]** This paper employs case analysis to interpret the role of American think tanks in shaping China strategy and policy during the Obama era. **[Result/Conclusion]** The core pathway through which American think tanks influence foreign policy decision-making lies in the “revolving door” mechanism that transforms policy elites into members of the cabinet led by the Secretary of State and the National Security Council led by the National Security Advisor. Lacking diplomatic experience, Obama relied more heavily on Democratic-leaning think tanks and defense security think tanks in foreign policy decisions. During the early campaign stage, Obama was influenced by China-savvy think tank elites, attempting to share the costs of global leadership with China. In his first term, the Obama administration embraced policy proposals from the Center for a New American Security and hawkish China experts, establishing the “Asia-Pacific Rebalance” strategy. Under this strategic guidance, U.S.-China relations exhibited a trend of starting high and ending low, reflecting the reversals and setbacks in Sino-U.S. relations during the Obama era. A new round of debate among American think tanks on China will influence the next U.S. administration' s repositioning of China policy.

Keywords: think tank; foreign policy-making; Obama Administration; Sino-U.S. relations

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The United States possesses the world' s largest number and highest caliber of think tanks and expert communities. These institutions devise strategies and navigate complex geopolitical landscapes, becoming indispensable organic components of the government decision-making chain with significant and unique influence—often termed the “shadow cabinet.”Examining the operations of American think tanks in presidential campaigns, Washington personnel changes, talent reserves, project establishment, strategic communication, and public opinion guidance provides an important observational perspective for predicting and analyzing U.S. diplomatic strategy and policy formulation. This paper comprehensively investigates the pathways through which American think tanks par-

anticipated in and influenced the Obama administration's foreign policy decision-making by reviewing the construction of elite teams, reliance on core think tanks, establishment of diplomatic strategies, and evolution of China perceptions during Obama's eight-year presidency. It further analyzes the correlation between American think tanks and the trajectory of Obama's China strategy and policy. This research also aims to provide an empirical methodology and a reference case for the intersection of think tank studies and foreign policy decision-making research in current academic circles.

1. Power Games Among Obama's Elite Team Under the "Revolving Door" Mechanism

When Obama entered the White House, the United States was suffering from a severe financial crisis, mired in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, suffering from a damaged international image, and facing criticism in the diplomatic and security domains. To address the dilemmas inherited from the Bush administration and to distance himself from interest group interference, Republican obstruction, the belligerence of neoconservatives, and divisions among heavy-weight Democratic factions, Obama needed to make substantial strategic and policy adjustments while building a loyal and highly effective foreign policy elite team. Consequently, in constructing his decision-making team and appointing officials, Obama—who came from a grassroots background but received an elite education at Harvard—focused his attention and energy on scholars and experts from American think tanks.

At the beginning of his presidency, Obama's policy elite team consisted of two distinct groups with stark contrasts. The first comprised seasoned political veterans capable of managing complex domestic and international affairs, forming the presidential cabinet. The second consisted largely of campaign team members who constituted the National Security Council. Compared to the first group, these were mostly post-Vietnam War generation members with distinct generational characteristics, lacking diplomatic experience and shallow political roots. Notably, most elite team members came from think tanks; among 36 key members, 29 had think tank backgrounds, with the Brookings Institution being the most represented, while the Center for American Progress, Center for a New American Security, Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation (FSI-CISAC), Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), and Council on Foreign Relations also contributed numerous scholars to the Obama administration.

1.1 In the First Term: Power Games Among Rival Teams Triggered "Wars Under Obama"

For cabinet appointments, Obama's inclusion of non-Democratic official Robert Gates highlighted the need for continuity in counterterrorism strategy. Susan Rice, who had "defected" from the Clinton camp, became Obama's most trusted

advisor. Her diplomatic philosophy emphasized dialogue over confrontation and promoting American “soft power” globally, making her one of the key architects of “Obamism.” Jeffrey Bader, who had worked in the Clinton administration, entered the NSC as head of Asian affairs (2009-2011) through Rice’s recommendation. Leon Panetta, a Democratic elder and veteran of three consecutive administrations with extensive experience resolving budget crises for Clinton and Bush, became qualified to serve as Obama’s second-term Secretary of Defense. Richard Holbrooke, chairman of the Asia Society and editor of Foreign Affairs, was appointed Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan due to his rich experience in diplomatic negotiations and dispute mediation, tasked with ending the counterterrorism war and achieving a dignified exit from Afghanistan. Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell, founder of the Center for a New American Security, founder of “Strategic Asia” consulting, director of the Aspen Strategy Group, vice president of the conservative think tank CSIS, and editorial board chairman of The Washington Quarterly, had handled Asian affairs at the Department of Defense during the Clinton era. During his tenure, the U.S. “Asia-Pacific Rebalance” strategy was formulated, with Hillary Clinton as its promoter and executor.

The most critical role in foreign and security affairs is the National Security Advisor (also known as the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs). Obama changed National Security Advisors twice in his first term—James Jones and Thomas Donilon. The latter, having experienced the Bosnia peace negotiations and NATO expansion, gained Obama’s approval during discussions on Afghanistan strategy and became the best candidate to succeed Jones. In practice, the NSC team he led overshadowed the cabinet team (Department of Defense and State), forming a new power center that created serious conflicts with Steinberg, Campbell, and Jones, which Secretary of Defense Gates called “a disaster at the White House” [1]. The composition of Obama’s first-term team had obvious competitive defects, earning it the nickname “team of rivals” [2]. Internally, NSC team members had some cohesion, but externally, conflicts between NSC members and the cabinet team were frequent and mutually antagonistic, described by outsiders as “wars under Obama” [2]. This manifested in both inter-party and intra-party struggles, most notably between Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Obama—from critical competitors to colleagues who stood side-by-side while secretly competing, and finally to inheritors of political legacies. The two clashed over State Department personnel authority (including ambassador appointments) and diverged on diplomatic stances (opposing forced removal of Mubarak and distancing from Israel), staging a real-life “House of Cards” drama.

1.2 In the Second Term: The NSC Team Successfully Defended Its Dominant Position in Foreign Policy-making

As partisan confrontation and political polarization in the United States became increasingly pronounced, Obama’s cabinet governance team gradually disinte-

grated in the second term. The real power core of the White House rested with young campaign advisors and assistants who had contributed during the election. Susan Rice's succession of Donilon as National Security Advisor meant that the main members of Obama's second-term national security team were completely renewed. Due to its expanded power, the NSC team under her leadership once grew to about 400 people. Among the newly appointed cabinet officials, Chuck Hagel and John Kerry more accurately served as executors of Obama's policies. Tony Blinken, who had worked at CSIS and the Center for a New American Security, was appointed Deputy National Security Advisor through Biden's recommendation. He participated in designing the Iraq withdrawal plan, Afghanistan strategy, air strike plans against ISIS, and Iran nuclear negotiations, playing a key "go-to guy" role in formulating Obama's Middle East policy, and was promoted to Deputy Secretary of State by the end of 2014.

Mark Lippert, Denis McDonough, and Ben Rhodes—who came from congressional staff and campaign backgrounds—had close relationships with Obama and directly participated in presidential decision-making, considered the "troika" of the NSC team [3]. Lippert served successively as Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian Affairs, Chief of Staff of the Department of Defense, and Ambassador to South Korea, promoting the revised U.S.-ROK Atomic Energy Agreement and deployment of the THAAD system, integrating South Korea into the U.S.-led theater missile defense system and becoming a key figure in Obama's Asia-Pacific strategy. McDonough from the Center for American Progress became the fourth White House Chief of Staff, participating in nearly all of Obama's important foreign and security policy decisions. Rhodes, who emerged from the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, was responsible for writing, interpreting, and selling Obama's foreign policy, rising from NSC Strategic Communications Director to NSC Chief of Staff and Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, and participated behind the scenes in secret U.S.-Cuba normalization talks and 促成了 U.S.-Iran nuclear agreements.

Traditionally, the Secretary of Defense position aligns with the presidential term, but this was not the case in the Obama era. From Gates to Panetta to Hagel, all were ridiculed as "Pentagon caretakers." In December 2014, Ashton Carter, a veteran arms control and non-proliferation expert with weak partisan coloring and a "Russia hand," replaced Hagel as Obama's final Secretary of Defense. He was one of the few "hawks" who explicitly supported Obama's "strategic pivot to Asia" and, after taking office, vigorously promoted active U.S. involvement in affairs around Russia and the North Korean nuclear issue. His appointment can be seen as the final interpretation and crystallization of Obama's foreign and security strategic legacy.

1.3 Misaligned Cabinet Composition and High Turnover Affected the Continuity of China Policy

The “revolving door” style turnover and misaligned composition of Obama cabinet members over eight years greatly affected the continuity and effectiveness of China policy. Cabinet officials responsible for China policy were mostly not core advisors, while core advisors were not “China hands.” In Obama’s first term, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton obviously adopted a “carrot and stick” approach in her China rhetoric, and think tank-affiliated Steinberg, Campbell, Bader, and Donilon also played certain roles in China policy decisions. However, except for Donilon, none were core decision-making members. In Obama’s second term, Rice, who became more involved in China policy decisions, maintained distance from four White House Asian Affairs Directors (Bader, Russell, McEwen, and 康达). Although Rice was a core member, she was not familiar with China affairs. Russell was evaluated as lacking policy thinking. Bader and Steinberg were criticized as being “too soft,” “docile,” and “too academic” on China. Campbell aroused intense Chinese dissatisfaction by aggressively pushing the “Asia-Pacific Rebalance.” Although “China hand” McEwen assisted Obama in formulating the second-term China policy framework, he was heavily criticized for being too soft in the face of China’s “assertive diplomacy” and resigned in June 2015 to join the Council on Foreign Relations, replaced by NSC Asia-Pacific Affairs Director and Deputy Chief of Mission to China 康达. The frequent personnel changes among key figures in Obama’s China policy circle more or less reflected the wavering and emotional nature of the Obama administration’s exploration of engagement with China.

2. Major Think Tanks Influencing Obama’s Foreign Policy and Their Perceptions of China

Understanding personnel changes and research directions at American think tanks serves as an important indicator for analyzing their influence on foreign policy decision-making. A key marker of think tank success is when their members enter government decision-making circles and their strategic research reports and policy recommendations receive government attention and adoption. By this standard, the following think tanks were particularly influential during the Obama era.

2.1 Democratic Party-affiliated Think Tanks

In the real context of partisan competition, party-affiliated think tanks play an especially prominent role during government transitions. After Obama took office, he successfully completed the Democratic Party’s return from ideologically diluted centrism to left-wing liberalism and progressive routes, powerfully promoting the development of think tanks with strong Democratic ideological coloring.

2.1.1 Brookings Institution Ranked number one globally, the Brookings Institution is one of Washington's mainstream academic think tanks. Due to its large scale, long history, and in-depth research, it is called America's "most influential think tank." As the Democratic elite's "shadow cabinet," the institution has nearly 100 senior fellows, with 36 entering the Obama administration, including National Economic Council Director Summers, UN Ambassador Rice, Deputy Secretary of State Steinberg, Deputy National Security Advisor Donilon, White House Office of Management and Budget Director Orszag, NSC East Asian Affairs Director Bader, and NATO Ambassador Daalder.

The Brookings Institution maintains a rational and pragmatic attitude on China issues, 倾向于 adopting a moderate policy line toward China, and played a major role in shaping the "engagement" policy toward China during the Clinton era. The institution currently operates three China research programs. The Center for East Asia Policy Studies was established earlier and was successively directed by renowned China experts Harry Harding, Nicholas Lardy, Bates Gill, and Richard Bush. In October 2006, funded by former Goldman Sachs President John Thornton, Brookings established its first country-specific research center in its history—the China Center—and became the first American think tank to establish an academic center in China. In the same year, the Tsinghua-Brookings Center for Public Policy was jointly founded by Tsinghua University and the Brookings Institution, providing an international exchange platform for scholars and policymakers from both countries.

As a "heavyweight" in China studies among American think tanks, Brookings has gathered the largest number and most influential "China hands," including the aforementioned experts plus Richard Haass, Strobe Talbott, Steinberg, Kenneth Lieberthal, Jeffrey Bader, Susan Shirk, David Shambaugh, Thomas Christensen, Michael O' Hanlon, and Chinese-American scholars such as Wu Yongtai and Cheng Li. Board Chairman John Thornton also teaches at Tsinghua University and describes U.S.-China relations as "interdependent prosperity or mutual destruction." Regarding candidates for U.S. Ambassador to China, three out of five (John Thornton, Kenneth Lieberthal, and David Shambaugh) came from Brookings, reflecting its deep reserve of China experts.

2.1.2 Center for American Progress The Center for American Progress has been strongly partisan and confrontational since its inception, serving as the policy arm of the Democratic Leadership Council and calling itself the "Democratic Party's think tank." It led organizational teams in Clinton's and Obama's campaigns and provided strong support. With Obama's victory, campaign team leader and center founder John Podesta and Vice President Barnes became White House Senior Advisor and Director of the Domestic Policy Council respectively, along with Denis McDonough and Carol Browner. The center's newly established Middle East Project and Sustainable Security Project will design a new U.S. national security strategy for the next Democratic administration focusing on the Middle East and alliance relations.

The center has strong influence in the security domain. Its 2007 report *Restoring American Military Power: Toward a New Progressive Defense Strategy for America* was almost entirely adopted by the 2010 U.S. defense budget draft [4], while another report *Orienting the 2009 Nuclear Posture Review: A Roadmap* also became one of the guides for the Obama administration's nuclear strategy adjustment and building a "new nuclear force" [5]. As a U.S. negotiator, Melanie Hart, Director of China Policy at the Center for American Progress, participated in U.S.-China climate change and energy cooperation negotiations. In her September 2015 testimony before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, she stated: "China has abandoned its 'hide and bide' diplomatic policy and is more willing to play a leadership role outside the developed country camp. Its overly assertive behavior harms U.S. interests and undermines the existing international order. The government should adopt a multi-track cooperative strategic model for U.S.-China relations, strengthening cooperation in areas where interests overlap, confronting conflicts head-on, and applying deterrence" [6].

2.2 Bipartisan Strategic Security Think Tanks

In the strategic and security domain, the traditionally values-emphasizing Democratic Party also deliberately created the new cross-partisan security think tank Center for a New American Security, while giving high attention and employment to the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments and Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation, which have close ties with Republicans and the Department of Defense.

2.2.1 Center for a New American Security The relatively defense-experience-poor Democratic Party carefully crafted the new think tank Center for a New American Security in 2007, focusing on national security defense policy. The center's Asia policy research concentrates on three aspects: responding to changes in Asia's power structure, consolidating alliance relations, and participating in Asian multilateral institutional arrangements. Many of its research results and policy recommendations were transformed into Obama's Asia policy strategy and practice.

At the center's annual meeting in late June 2015, China became the most eye-catching focus topic. The organizer conducted a questionnaire survey showing that "U.S.-China relations moving toward increasingly fierce competition" topped the list with an overwhelming 79%. Sixty-one percent believed that the so-called "China's hegemony in East Asia" was caused by America's (weak) policy in East Asia, and 51% of respondents considered "China an authoritarian state." Based on this survey data, Patrick Cronin, Director of the center's Asia-Pacific Security Program, called for "the next U.S. administration to remain far from drawing a line under the 'Asia Rebalance' policy, firmly transferring its economic, diplomatic, and military power to the Indo-Pacific region," echoing his May 13 testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review

Commission [7]. In May 2016, center President Richard Fontaine published an article in *The National Interest* titled “How China Sees World Order,” stating that “an increasingly powerful China aims to strengthen and shape the existing international order to achieve Chinese interests, sometimes 不惜 breaking existing rules. China’s call for Asian security to be maintained by Asians itself and its criticism of the U.S. regional security system show the possibility that the existing system could be replaced” [8]. Subsequently, in *The Wall Street Journal*, he attacked China over the South China Sea dispute ruling in favor of the Philippines, arguing that “ignoring the Hague International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea’s ruling, the United States should seize this opportunity to organize a coalition of opposition with Asian countries, formulate regional rules to constrain China, and enhance its own defense capabilities to increase the cost of China’s actions” [9].

2.2.2 Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments is a small think tank specializing in military research, with 17 full-time researchers and 2 visiting fellows. It relies on the Department of Defense’s internal think tank Office of Net Assessment, focusing on U.S. military budget analysis and strategic assessment, with the military as its primary client. CSBA researchers are basically required to have military service experience and maintain deep connections with the Department of Defense and other national defense departments. The center’s president, U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Krepinevich, was a capable assistant to former Department of Defense Net Assessment Office Director Andrew Marshall.

Since its establishment, CSBA has collaborated with the Net Assessment Office to jointly promote U.S. military reform and accelerate the pace of U.S. containment of China. Over the past 15 years, CSBA has conducted more than 20 war games targeting China for Marshall’s office and written dozens of research reports. In September 2000, the center held a large academic symposium titled “Beyond the Two-War Construct: Addressing the Anti-Access Challenge,” inviting numerous elite figures from U.S. politics, military, business, and academia. It identified China’s “anti-access and area-denial” capabilities as threatening U.S. force projection and proposed the “AirSea Battle” theory, playing a key role in building momentum and promoting consensus among U.S. decision-makers about the China military threat in the new era [10].

2.2.3 Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation (FSI-CISAC) This center is the largest and most prestigious defense and security think tank among American universities, dedicated to international security and arms control research and receiving research projects from the Department of Defense or Department of Homeland Security. Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice served there long-term, former Secretary of Defense William Perry has returned to the center, and renowned Chinese-American scholar Xue Litai conducts research on Chinese military strategy there. Five se-

nior officials in the Obama administration came from this center, including U.S. Representative to the UN Human Rights Council Eileen Donahoe, Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Stockton, Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul, NSC Democracy Affairs Director Jeremy Weinstein, and Presidential Domestic Policy Assistant Mariano-Florentino Cuéllar. In November 2006, the center launched the Managing Global Insecurity Project [11], with results compiled in *Power and Responsibility: Building International Order in an Era of Transnational Threats*, which comprehensively elaborated strategic recommendations for a multilateral international order based on responsible sovereignty and international rules, proposing a new international security concept—“responsible sovereignty.” This was called “articulating the new foreign policy of the new U.S. government” [12]. To echo the “China responsibility theory,” the center made special arrangements for simultaneous Chinese and English releases in both countries, encouraging China to become a “responsible major power” in the U.S.-led international system, hoping to influence and constrain how China exercises power, regulate China’s future international role, and share the costs of hegemonic governance. In 2014, Xue Litai stated in *China’s Grand Strategy for Engaging an Uncertain World* that “China lost the initiative in the South China Sea thirty years ago, and the change in U.S. stance played a decisive role” [13]. Regarding China’s land reclamation in the South China Sea, he predicted that a military crisis was brewing in the South China Sea. Once China forced a military showdown, the United States and its allies might emulate the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis model to exert military pressure on China. In this strategic game, the United States would have overwhelming advantages, and the consequences for China’s rise would be incomparably severe [14].

3. The Evolution of Obama’s China Policy

The 2008 financial crisis severely damaged U.S. international influence, and American global dominance faced severe challenges. Influenced by China-savvy think tank elites, Obama preset the prospects for U.S.-China relations before taking office. In his first term, after the fantasy of making China a “responsible stakeholder” was declared bankrupt, “China threat theory” rhetoric resurfaced. The Obama administration accepted the “Asia-Pacific Rebalance” strategic framework formulated by hawkish think tanks, and its China policy evolved from emphasizing cooperation to focusing on prevention [15]. In the second term, although decision-makers temporarily refocused on the Middle East, the pace of “rebalance” did not stop.

3.1 China-savvy Think Tanks’ Preparatory Influence on Obama’s Decision-making

As early as June 2007, presidential candidate Obama began establishing a foreign policy brain trust, including 15 American think tank “China hands” such as Jeffrey Bader, Harry Harding, Kenneth Lieberthal, Richard Bush from Brookings; David Lampton from Johns Hopkins University; Evan Medeiros from

RAND; former NSC Asia Director Susan Shirk; Derek Mitchell from CSIS; and Harvard's Roderick MacFarquhar. The concepts of "Chimerica" and "G2" proposed in 2007-2008 by Harvard Professor Niall Ferguson and Peterson Institute for International Economics Director Fred Bergsten were hotly debated, while seasoned figures like Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski joined the chorus. Kissinger proposed the concept of U.S.-China "co-evolution," advocating that both sides implement their own policies according to their own logic, moving bilateral relations from crisis management to defining common goals, from resolving strategic contradictions to avoiding them, and thereby building a "Pacific Community." It can be said that Obama's campaign team early on formulated China policy goals: demonstrating a welcoming posture toward China's rise, pushing China to comply with international laws and norms, and reshaping the Asia-Pacific security environment to ensure China would not emerge as a disruptive force. Upon taking office, Obama adopted an active China policy, with senior U.S. officials "flocking" to visit China and Hillary Clinton 高调 declaring the need to "row in the same boat" with China. The number of Chinese-American senior officials in the White House team reached five (Commerce Secretary Gary Locke, Energy Secretary Steven Chu, White House Cabinet Secretary Chris Lu, National Security Division General Counsel 方富宇, and White House Director of Public Engagement 陈远美). U.S.-China relations had a perfect start.

3.2 Hawkish Think Tanks and the Formulation of the "Asia-Pacific Rebalance" Strategy

After the Cold War, U.S. think tanks formed three factions on China policy: "containment," "engagement," and "conengagement" (engagement plus containment). The Bush administration's 2006 *National Security Strategy* confirmed Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick's "responsible stakeholder" formulation, making the hedging strategy of "engagement plus containment" the consensus of the U.S. strategic community—accepting the fact of "China's rise" while urging China to integrate into the U.S.-led international system as a "responsible major power."

To maintain U.S. hegemony, Obama followed this China line, hoping to strengthen U.S.-China relations and encourage China to assume more responsibility to help the United States emerge from the shadow of the economic crisis. To implement "China responsibility," Obama arranged a visit to China shortly after taking office. Before the visit, the Center for a New American Security created public opinion momentum by launching *China's Arrival: A Strategic Framework for a Global Relationship*, comprehensively interpreting the impact of China's rise on the Asia-Pacific region and U.S. global interests [16]. Within a short 11-day period from October 27 to November 6, the United States frequently introduced trade protectionist measures to increase Obama's bargaining chips with China. On November 15, Obama paid a state visit to China, declaring: "Unless the United States and China reach agreement, the world cannot smoothly resolve global challenges. The U.S. and China

should jointly demonstrate ‘leadership’ in addressing challenges.” Meanwhile, China clearly rejected the “G2” concept, offering three explanations: China is a developing country with a large population; China pursues an independent foreign policy of peace and does not ally with any country; and world affairs cannot be decided by one or two countries. Originally, economic and trade issues were the main axis of the visit, but Obama achieved little in opening China’s market or on the RMB exchange rate, thus facing fierce criticism from domestic China hawks and being labeled a “kowtow tour.”

After his first visit, Obama’s perspective underwent subtle changes, admitting he had overly high expectations for U.S.-China relations and underestimated China’s will and capability to defend its own interests. From the end of 2009, Obama’s attitude toward China began shifting to an increasingly confrontational tone, evolving from “Back to Asia,” to “Pivot to Asia-Pacific,” and finally to “Rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific.” The United States identified China as the target of its Asia-Pacific strategy’s preventive measures, and its China policy became increasingly tough.

The “Asia-Pacific Rebalance” strategic plan came from another group of American think tanks. Before Obama took office, the U.S. strategic community reflected on and debated the Asia-Pacific strategy, reaching consensus on increasing Asia-Pacific strategic investment. In 2007, Richard Armitage and Joseph Nye jointly submitted the second *Armitage Report*, which recommended strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance, stating that “Asia is key to establishing a world order most conducive to promoting U.S. interests, stability, and prosperity,” and that the U.S. must remain vigilant about challenges in East Asia [17]. In June 2008, the Center for a New American Security proposed a fundamental shift in thinking to develop a more comprehensive Asia strategy to advance U.S. interests amid the “eastward shift of power” [18]. On February 17, 2009, the Philippines passed the *Baselines Law* incorporating parts of the Nansha Islands and Huangyan Island as Philippine territory, causing the South China Sea issue to suddenly heat up and attract U.S. attention. Five major U.S. think tanks quickly responded with a joint report stating that the Asia-Pacific was more important to the U.S. than ever before, and that all means should be used to maintain leadership in the region [19]. The Center for a New American Security also released *The United States and the Asia-Pacific Region: Security Strategy for the Obama Administration* on February 24, recommending that the U.S. should shift the focus of its security strategy to the Asia-Pacific region, consolidate and update Asian alliances, and actively participate in Asian multi-lateral institutional arrangements to address challenges from emerging powers integrating into the international system [20]. In May, Vietnam separately submitted a South China Sea “outer continental shelf demarcation case” to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. Subsequently, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton first proposed the concept of “returning to Southeast Asia” at the ASEAN meeting in July. On September 24, Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg delivered a keynote speech at the Center for a New American Security on “this administration’s vision for U.S.-China relations,” proposing

the basic strategic demand of “strategic reassurance” for China, requiring China to prove its peaceful intentions to the U.S. and its allies. “Strategic reassurance” was actually a new version of the hedging policy of “both engagement and prevention.” While conditionally accepting China’s rise, the U.S. would simultaneously use economic, diplomatic, and even military means to coordinate defense with its allies in case engagement with China failed [21].

After a year of low-key discussion, Obama’s policy elites responded to domestic China hawk calls and formally implemented the “Asia-Pacific Rebalance” strategy in late 2011, characterized by “global contraction, Asia-Pacific advance; West Asia contraction, East Asia advance,” to address a China that was “no longer hiding its will.” Obama declared himself “America’s first Pacific President,” participated in multilateral frameworks such as the East Asia Summit and ASEAN Regional Forum, launched the TPP mechanism intended to dominate Asia-Pacific regional economic and trade affairs, and used East China Sea and South China Sea issues to woo allies and balance China.

During the implementation of the “Asia-Pacific Rebalance” strategy, U.S. think tanks continuously assessed and revised it for decision-makers’ reference. Hard-line think tank elites believed the “Asia-Pacific Rebalance” strategy suffered from serious underinvestment and minimal results, requiring greater promotion to ensure U.S. military superiority in the Asia-Pacific. Representative experts included Michael O’ Hanlon from Brookings, Michael Auslin from the American Enterprise Institute, and Brahma Chellaney from Johns Hopkins [22]. Some think tank experts believed that Japan’s lifting of “collective self-defense” could enable more active participation and cooperation with the U.S. “Asia-Pacific Rebalance” strategy, and that U.S.-Japan security cooperation should be strengthened, such as Joseph Nye’s *Japan’s Self-Defense Defense* [23] and Andrew Oros’s report *Japan’s Cabinet Seeks Changes to Its Peace Constitution* from the East-West Center [24]. Other think tank experts recommended incorporating Taiwan and Pakistan into the “rebalance” strategic system, reaffirming security commitments and obligations to regional allies, and explicitly opposing the use of force to change the security status quo, such as Council on Foreign Relations fellow Daniel Markey [25] and Project 2049 Institute researcher Ian Easton [26]. On January 19, 2016, CSIS released the report *Asia-Pacific Rebalance 2025: Capabilities, Presence, and Partnerships*, assessing the overall U.S. Asia-Pacific rebalance strategy, Asian interests and risks, capability gaps and deficiencies, and proposing more specific revision plans for U.S. strategy and force posture in the Asia-Pacific region toward 2025.

3.3 CSBA and the “AirSea Battle” Concept for Countering China

Military deployment was an important part of the Asia-Pacific Rebalance strategy, and the policy origins of this component were also closely linked to U.S. think tanks. In July 2009, Secretary of Defense Gates requested the Navy and Air Force to develop a new joint operational concept, launching a new operational concept jointly developed by both services. On May 18, 2010,

CSBA released the China operational concept report—*AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept* and *Why AirSea Battle?*—on Capitol Hill, explicitly targeting China as the main operational objective with a new operational concept to offset the rapidly strengthening “anti-access/area-denial” (A2/AD) capabilities of the People’s Liberation Army, maintain the military balance in the Western Pacific, and prepare for a possible Far East war in 2028. This sister report also became the most detailed plan to date on how the U.S. should respond if military conflict broke out between the two countries [27].

Under the guidance of “AirSea Battle,” the Pentagon conducted a global posture assessment, formulating plans for U.S. military deployment in the Asia-Pacific, seeking political sustainability, operational flexibility, and geographic dispersion of U.S. defense posture. Subsequently, Secretaries Panetta and Hagel carried out a series of military rebalance actions, including redeploying and strengthening forces in Northeast Asia, reaching new stationing agreements with Japan and South Korea, increasing troops on Guam, strengthening contacts with Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand, establishing new military cooperation with Australia and New Zealand, and expanding naval cooperation with India. These actions aimed to ensure regional military control, rely on maritime and air superiority, and depend on highly automated strategic C4ISR systems to provide strong guarantees for implementing hegemonic policies and military strategy.

In January 2012, the U.S. President and Secretary of Defense articulated military power projection issues in A2/AD environments in the document *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, incorporating “AirSea Battle” into the U.S. military’s joint operational concept system as the legal basis for operational guidance. Subsequently, the deputy chiefs of the four U.S. military services reached a memorandum of understanding, establishing the implementation framework for “AirSea Battle.” Under strong promotion by the U.S. government and military, “AirSea Battle” was formally written into the *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, elevated to official will, and integrated into U.S. defense policy and military operational doctrine.

After Obama’s reelection, the Asia-Pacific Rebalance pace did not stop. In January 2013, Brookings released the presidential briefing book *Big Bets and Black Swans*, including 11 specific strategies such as adjusting the “return to Asia-Pacific” approach and stabilizing the East China Sea situation. China expert Kenneth Lieberthal noted in the briefing that the rebalance strategy had produced expected effects, with Asian regional disputes showing intensified trends. It was time to rebalance the “rebalance” strategy, recommending that “the U.S. government should further encourage Southeast Asian countries to unite more closely while becoming more dependent on the United States” [28]. In August, Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work called for developing a third “Offset Strategy” to leverage U.S. advantages in big data, stealth technology, manufacturing, robotics, and directed energy to address China’s A2/AD challenges in the Western Pacific theater. Subsequently, the U.S. Congress convened multiple hearings with relevant experts on the strategic positioning, objectives,

implementation methods, and expected effects of the third offset strategy, while think tanks including CSBA, the Center for a New American Security, and CSIS intensively released multiple research reports further elaborating and detailing its strategic points.

4. Reassessment of China Policy by the U.S. Strategic Community

As China's comprehensive national power continues to rise, the U.S.-China interest distribution pattern changes, and U.S. capability to manage international affairs declines, American anxiety about China continued to rise during the Obama era, with unfriendly voices toward China emerging incessantly. Despite multiple in-depth "track-II diplomacy" exchanges between Chinese and American think tanks that failed to eliminate U.S. doubts, American think tank elites began reassessing China policy, further increasing uncertainty about the future direction of U.S.-China relations.

4.1 Reassessment and Repositioning of U.S.-China Relations

In the 1990s, former U.S. National Security Advisor Anthony Lake proposed the concept of "frenemy," which gained recognition in academic circles of both countries. Former U.S. Secretary of State Robert Zoellick's 2005 proposal of "responsible stakeholder" also received recognition from both sides. Today, the U.S. strategic community generally believes China policy is at a new "crossroads." David Shambaugh asserts that current U.S.-China relations have fundamentally changed compared to the past 40 years and have entered a new normal dominated by "competitive coexistence" [29]. Even Michael Lampton, America's chief "China hand" scholar, has expressed "deep concern" about the direction of bilateral relations, issuing a warning description that U.S.-China relations are approaching a "tipping point," representing the increasingly pessimistic view of U.S.-China relations rising in American media and think tanks in recent years [30]. These negative sentiments accumulated through a brewing process. On August 28, 2012, Graham Allison, Director of Harvard's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, wrote for the *Financial Times* under the headline "Thucydides' s trap has been sprung in the Pacific," using ancient history to illustrate contemporary issues: "The rapid rise of any emerging power will break the status quo. Currently, the U.S. and China face a situation similar to that of Athens and Sparta, and Britain and Germany before World War I, and must engage in candid consultations about potential confrontations and flashpoints while making substantive and painful adjustments" [31].

Subsequently, Joseph Nye [32], Zbigniew Brzezinski [33], Robert Zoellick [34], and others wrote articles citing Allison's formulation, and "Thucydides' s trap" instantly became the focus of debate in the U.S. strategic community. Elizabeth Economy [35], Harvard Professor Robert Kaplan, Brookings' Thomas Wright, and American Enterprise Institute's Thomas Donnelly shared the view that

“as China becomes a global power, it will inevitably have military conflicts with neighboring countries, challenge and replace U.S. leadership, and change the entire existing world political pattern” [36]. University of Chicago political science professor John Mearsheimer maintained his long-held view that although China currently lacks the military strength to become a regional hegemon, it will ultimately control Asian politics and security, and future U.S.-China competition in Asia may occur against a background where war could break out at any moment [37]. From the perspective of realist “fatalism,” the “Thucydides’ s trap” has inevitability: the rise of great powers inevitably leads to conflict, confrontation, and ultimately war with hegemonic or established powers—this is the logic behind the “tragedy of great power politics” that negates China’ s peaceful rise [38]. From an ideological perspective, engagement advocates believe that the strategic orientation of democratic transformation of China and its integration into the U.S.-led international system and order instead helped China’ s dual rise in economic and military fields, yet its domestic political system did not undergo substantive change, and it increasingly challenges the existing international system through actions such as establishing the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone, building reefs in the South China Sea, proposing the “Belt and Road Initiative,” and creating the AIIB. The U.S. engagement strategy toward China has failed.

As a senior advisor to the Office of the Secretary of Defense Policy Office and the Hudson Institute, conservative strategic expert Michael Pillsbury promoted his book *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China’ s Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* on February 3, 2015. He compared the U.S.-China competition to a marathon to negate all views supporting U.S.-China relations development: China’ s publicly available historical materials and political discourse have consistently demonized the United States; China’ s culture of “wu wei” (non-action) prevents America from understanding its true intentions; Mao Zedong personally launched a strategic deception program in 1955 that duped the U.S. into providing technological and resource support; Chinese political hawk views are guiding foreign strategic thinking; “building a new type of major power relations” is a slogan; China aims to surpass the United States as a global superpower by 2049 and seize global political and economic dominance from American hands; U.S.-China confrontation is inevitable [39]. As a witness to U.S.-China diplomatic normalization and a China advisor valued by the Pentagon, his views carry considerable influence in the U.S. strategic community.

In April 2015, the Council on Foreign Relations published the report *Revising U.S. Grand Strategy Toward China*. The report argued that “increasing evidence shows that long-term strategic differences between the U.S. and China cannot be fundamentally changed, and President Obama and his senior advisors have made overly mild judgments about China’ s strategic objectives. The United States should substantially adjust its China strategy, placing the balancing of China’ s rise at the center of its grand strategy, replacing the original approach of integrating China into the international system...injecting new vitality into Asian alliances and jointly launching offensive or defensive geo-economic and

geo-political military operations” [40].

On March 21, 2016, Brookings released the report *A Framework for U.S. Policy toward China*. The report stated that “China poses unique challenges to the United States while also being an active participant in the existing international system, placing U.S. China policy in a dilemma.” Faced with this situation, the report offered contradictory policy options [41]. It recommended that future U.S. China policy should avoid “black and white” approaches and seek a “middle path,” building “cooperative consensus” more through case-by-case cooperation. This is the American version of “using two hands for two purposes”—having cooperative intentions while not abandoning confrontation—with guidance, regulation, and proactive shaping as the main ideas of the report.

4.2 Track-II Diplomacy: Dialogue and Confrontation Between Chinese and American Think Tanks

Since 1998, Chinese and American think tanks have established a “track-II diplomacy” mechanism. In 2006, the high-level track-II dialogue was initiated by former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Today, track-II diplomacy has developed in depth, with scholars from both countries’ think tanks appearing in more than 100 dialogue mechanisms including the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, think tank summits, people-to-people exchanges, and academic discussions. Think tank diplomacy has become the main channel for communication between the two countries’ strategic communities and an important driver for developing U.S.-China relations. Faced with difficulties in U.S.-China relations, dialogue and exchanges between Chinese and American think tanks have become increasingly frequent and in-depth.

In 2012, Kenneth Lieberthal from Brookings and Wang Jisi from Peking University’s Center for International and Strategic Studies co-authored the report *Addressing U.S.-China Strategic Distrust* [42], pointing out that despite significant improvements in U.S.-China relations, the lack of mutual trust would make U.S.-China relations a long-term zero-sum game [43]. They identified the main causes of strategic distrust: first, different political traditions, value systems, and cultures between the U.S. and China; second, insufficient understanding of each other’s decision-making processes and relationships between governments, think tanks, and congresses; and third, divergent perceptions of dynamic power gaps. They hoped leaders, decision-makers, and think tank scholars from both countries could devise ways to resolve strategic distrust.

In February 2014, the Center for American Progress released Nina Hachigian’s book *Debating China: The U.S.-China Relationship in Ten Conversations* [44], using a letter format for 10 scholars from each country to deeply discuss the 10 most salient issues in U.S.-China relations, exchanging positions and ideas to provide a roadmap and intellectual support for building a “new type of major power relations.” Meanwhile, Peking University and the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) established a U.S.-China scholar cooperation

team, spending a year and a half completing the report *U.S.-China Relations in Strategic Domains* [45]. The report covered six major strategic domains in U.S.-China relations: nuclear, space, cyber, maritime, military-to-military relations, and people-to-people exchanges, representing the most comprehensive and cutting-edge thinking from mainstream academic and policy circles in both countries on these issues. The research team also conducted briefings and wind-down sessions for the U.S. NSC, State Department, Department of Defense, Congressional U.S.-China Working Group, Senate Armed Services Committee, and U.S. Pacific Command, receiving great attention from the U.S. strategic community.

On July 5, 2016, as the South China Sea arbitration case triggered heated international public opinion, nearly 50 elite scholars from both countries gathered in Washington for a “U.S.-China Think Tank South China Sea Dialogue” [46], engaging in a battle of tongues. The U.S. side had a strong lineup, including former Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte, former Ambassador to China J. Stapleton Roy, former senior officials from the State Department, Department of Defense, and NSC, as well as authoritative experts from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Brookings, CSIS, and the Stimson Center. This dialogue profoundly demonstrated that the South China Sea issue is not only about interests and legal disputes among parties but, more importantly, about ideological and discourse power competition. The outcome of the competition depends on national maritime strategic awareness and international rights protection awareness, as well as think tank research capabilities, agenda-setting capabilities, and international operation capabilities.

Currently, a major debate on China policy is unfolding in the United States, primarily among the U.S. strategic community composed of think tanks, diplomatic experts, and government officials. The debate focuses on: Has the U.S. policy of engagement with China pursued by successive administrations since Nixon’s visit to China failed? How should the prospects of U.S.-China relations be assessed? Is conflict inevitable? Should the next U.S. President substantially adjust or even change China policy? An increasing number of American political, academic, military, media, and business figures have become involved to varying degrees, and both the breadth of participants and depth of issues in the debate are unprecedented. In 2017, coinciding with the inauguration of newly elected President Trump, the outcome of this debate will have direct and profound impacts on the formulation of future U.S. diplomatic strategy and policy toward China and the direction of U.S.-China relations.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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