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Background Analysis and Implications of Military Researchers on China in US Defense Think Tanks: Case Studies of Project 2049 Institute, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, and Center for Naval Analyses (Postprint)

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Date: 2018-10-19T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] US defense think tanks assemble the top-tier experts, scholars, and military/government personnel in the defense field. The background information of their China-focused researchers holds significant reference value for China in building defense think tanks with Chinese characteristics. [Method/Process] Through open-source intelligence channels, background information was collected on 21 China-focused military researchers from three defense think tanks—the Project 2049 Institute, the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA), and the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA)—and comprehensive analysis was conducted on their backgrounds in military, academic, experience in China, and employment history. [Results/Conclusion] The study found that China-focused military researchers at US defense think tanks possess deep military backgrounds, high academic qualifications, rich experience in China, and extensive cross-institutional and cross-sectoral experience between think tanks, military, and government departments, while generally maintaining a tough stance toward China. In light of this, when building talent teams for new-type defense think tanks with Chinese characteristics, emphasis should be placed on absorbing high-quality retired officer groups, establishing smooth talent cross-assignment mechanisms, prioritizing foreign exchange work for think tank personnel, cultivating a group of leading think tank talents, building first-rate defense think tanks with Chinese characteristics, and providing strong intellectual support for building a world-class military.

Full Text

Preamble

The Analysis and Enlightenment of Chinese Military Researchers' Background in U.S. Defense Think Tanks—Taking Project 2049 Institute, Center for Naval Analyses, and Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments as Examples

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] U.S. defense think tanks have assembled the most top-tier experts, scholars, and military-government personnel in the defense field. Analyzing the background information of their China-focused researchers holds significant reference value for constructing defense think tanks with Chinese characteristics. **[Method/Process]** Through open-source intelligence channels, this study collected background data on 21 China military researchers from three defense think tanks—Project 2049 Institute, Center for Naval Analyses (CNA), and Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA)—and conducted a comprehensive analysis of their military, academic, experience in China, and employment backgrounds. **[Result/Conclusion]** The findings reveal that these researchers possess profound military backgrounds, high academic qualifications, rich experience in China, extensive cross-institutional and military-government cross-appointment experience, and generally adopt a hard-line attitude toward China. In view of this, when building new-type defense think tanks with Chinese characteristics, we should prioritize absorbing high-quality demobilized military officers, establish smooth talent cross-appointment mechanisms, emphasize foreign exchange work for think tank personnel, cultivate a contingent of leading think tank talents, create first-rate defense think tanks with Chinese characteristics, and provide strong intellectual support for building a world-class military.

Keywords: United States; Defense Think Tanks; Researchers; Background Analysis

Classification Number: G251

According to the “2017 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report” released by the University of Pennsylvania’s Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP) on March 1, 2018, there were 7,815 think tanks worldwide in 2017, with 1,872 located in the United States—the largest number globally. Among the top 104 defense think tanks, the U.S. possesses 22, demonstrating the strongest capability. Li Jian, Director of the Zhiyuan Defense Strategy Research Institute, collectively refers to those think tanks that focus on national security, defense strategy, military strategy, strategic assessment, and operational concepts, indi-

rectly or directly providing decision-support services for the military and defense industry, and operating independently of the formal system as “defense think tanks.”

In recent years, as China has continued to rise, its military strengthening process has also accelerated. Consequently, U.S. defense think tanks have particularly intensified their research on Chinese military issues. Serving as the government’s “external brain,” these think tanks have continuously collected intelligence information on China’s national defense and military construction in all directions. Through scientific analysis and precise assessment, they produce a series of reports and articles that influence major U.S. political, economic, military, and diplomatic decisions by submitting them to key military and government officials, holding public forums and conferences, testifying before Congress, and publishing journals.

Li Cheng, Director of the John L. Thornton China Center at the Brookings Institution, believes that “the most critical element for a think tank is talent, not funding.” A crucial factor enabling these defense think tanks to exert significant influence is their assembly of top-tier experts, scholars, and military-government personnel in the defense field. In the realm of China military research, these researchers’ qualifications are particularly outstanding. Therefore, analyzing and studying the backgrounds of China-focused military researchers in U.S. defense think tanks, and understanding the characteristics of their talent pool, holds important significance for comprehending our strategic rival and constructing defense think tanks with Chinese characteristics.

2. Introduction to the Three Defense Think Tanks

Numerous U.S. defense think tanks conduct research on Chinese military issues, with particularly prominent ones including Project 2049 Institute, Center for Naval Analyses (CNA), and Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA). Project 2049 Institute is a micro-think tank primarily researching cross-strait relations, established in January 2008 and headquartered in Arlington, Virginia. It pays close attention to China’s military power development and is an originator of the “China military threat theory.” The institute advocates increased U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, vigorous development of U.S.-Taiwan relations, and strengthening of Asia-Pacific alliances to contain and block China’s development.

The Center for Naval Analyses is an important think tank for the U.S. Navy, headquartered at the University of Rochester in New York and directly led by the Department of the Navy. It primarily conducts research on naval strategy and tactics. CNA pays close attention to the development of the Chinese Navy and has established a dedicated China Studies Division. In July 2017, the think tank released a report analyzing the role and significance of China’s Djibouti base, which generated considerable response within U.S. military, government, and media circles. The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments was

founded by retired Army Lieutenant Colonel Andrew F. Krepinevich. This think tank previously proposed concepts such as Air-Sea Battle and the Third “Offset Strategy,” which have had enormous impact on U.S. military and government circles and have been applied to strategic practice.

As the saying goes, “Although there are many sparrows, you don’t need to analyze each one; dissecting one or two suffices.” Analyzing the backgrounds of China-focused military researchers from these three think tanks provides representative insights for understanding the overall background of such researchers across U.S. defense think tanks. To this end, the author collected background information on 21 China military research experts from these three think tanks through several open-source intelligence channels, including official think tank websites, mainstream news media sites, and publications. The analysis examines their military backgrounds, educational backgrounds, think tank exchange and appointment experiences, China-related experiences, research fields, and attitudes toward China from multiple perspectives, with primary results presented in Table 1 .

3. Background Analysis of China-Focused Military Researchers in Defense Think Tanks

Personnel in defense think tanks are typically divided into six categories: board of directors, administrative staff, researchers, visiting scholars, interns, and advisory committees (some think tanks have special international advisory committees). The board of directors, composed primarily of former military-government officials and prominent figures from business and academia, is responsible for appointing presidents and senior executives, formulating and supervising think tank budgets, establishing major plans, and ensuring think tank independence. Advisory committees consist of senior officials and renowned university professors, many of whom are internationally recognized scholars with high reputations and influence. Generally, board members and advisory committees rarely engage in basic research. Visiting scholars rotate frequently and have complex compositions, including both scholars and government officials. Interns are few in number, primarily assisting researchers with related work, and lack experience and influence. The main body of defense think tanks is researchers, accounting for over 50% of personnel. In large defense think tanks like RAND Corporation, administrative staff and researchers are separate, while in smaller think tanks like Project 2049 Institute, researchers simultaneously hold administrative positions.

The research target of this study is China-focused military researchers, with two main criteria: first, they must be current researchers at the think tank; second, their primary research direction must be Chinese military issues, with notable achievements. Project 2049 Institute is a think tank specializing in China issues. Except for one researcher who focuses on China-Myanmar relations and human rights movements, the remaining six researchers—Richard L. Armitage, Mark Stokes, Ian Easton, Rachael Burton, Emily David, and David Gitter—all con-

centrate on Chinese military research with fruitful results. CNA's China Studies Division has 20 staff members, nine of whom conduct Chinese military research: James Bellacqua, Roger Cliff, Lukas Filler, Heidi Holz, Kevin Pollpeter, Mark E. Rosen, Albert Willner, and Bronson Percival. CSBA currently has six experts conducting Chinese military research: Ross Babbage, Toshi Yoshihara, Jack Bianchi, Sharif H. Calfee, Evan Montgomery, and Carl Rehberg .

After identifying the research subjects, authoritative background information was obtained from their think tank official websites or military/government websites. Their reports and articles published on think tank websites and news media, their published works, and their congressional testimony were reviewed. From this information, their military backgrounds, educational backgrounds, think tank exchange and appointment backgrounds, China-related experiences, research fields, and attitudes toward China were analyzed. The main results are presented in Table 1 .

Table 1 Statistical List of Researchers' Background of U.S. Defense Think Tanks

Note: Military background refers to previous service in the military or Department of Defense; Educational background primarily counts personnel with master's and doctoral degrees (Kevin Pollpeter from CNA is a doctoral candidate); China-related experience refers to study, work, or living experience in mainland China, Taiwan, or Hong Kong; Attitude toward China primarily counts those with hardline positions .

3.1 Military Background

Among the 21 China-focused military research experts, 14 have served in the U.S. military or relevant Department of Defense departments, including seven from the Navy, two from the Air Force, one from the Army, and four from the Department of Defense, indicating a high proportion of retired military personnel.

Moreover, these retired officers have rich employment experience. For example, Richard L. Armitage, Chairman of Project 2049 Institute, graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy, served in the Vietnam War, worked as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia and Pacific Affairs in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and also served as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. Executive Director Mark Stokes (Shi Mingkai) served in the U.S. Air Force for over 20 years, worked as an executive for several major U.S. companies stationed in Taiwan after retirement, and subsequently served as Director of the Office of China, Taiwan, and Mongolia in the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. Among eight researchers from CNA's China Studies Division, four have military experience, including three from the U.S. Navy and one from the U.S. Army.

In addition to rich employment experience, many experts have participated in

drafting important strategic documents. For instance, Evan Montgomery from CSBA participated in drafting the National Defense Strategy and the Nuclear Posture Review Report. Experience in drafting important national strategic documents cultivates these experts' macro strategic vision while enabling them to apply their defense research results to national strategic practice, greatly expanding the influence of both themselves and their think tanks.

A “revolving door” mechanism exists in U.S. think tanks, where government personnel and think tank researchers flow between each other following government transitions after elections. Many former officials move to think tanks for policy research, while think tank researchers have opportunities to assume key government positions. This mechanism allows think tank influence to permeate all aspects of policy formulation. A similar “revolving door” mechanism exists for defense think tanks. The U.S. officer hierarchy presents a “pyramid” structure, with promotion becoming increasingly difficult at higher levels. For officers engaged in strategic research, this represents a “threshold,” prompting many to choose think tank work upon reaching the rank of lieutenant colonel. For example, CSBA founder Andrew Krepinevich was an Army lieutenant colonel during his service. Retired officers with rich experience and long-term defense researchers constitute the backbone of U.S. defense think tanks, and the flexible “military-civilian revolving door” mechanism injects vitality into defense think tanks operating outside the formal system.

3.2 Educational Background and China-Related Experience

Among these 21 experts, there are seven PhDs, one doctoral candidate, and ten master's degree holders, indicating high educational attainment. Their majors primarily include international relations, international politics, Chinese studies, and Asian studies—fields closely related to China research that provide a solid academic and theoretical foundation for their subsequent work. In addition to these majors, some researchers possess interdisciplinary knowledge backgrounds. For example, Sharif H. Calfee from CSBA majored in computer science for his graduate studies, providing new perspectives for his subsequent strategic research. Lukas Filler, a researcher at CNA's China Studies Division, is a U.S. Naval intelligence specialist who has worked at the U.S. Special Operations Command, Naval Special Warfare Command, and intelligence departments of the Naval War College. His professional intelligence analysis expertise provides tremendous assistance for his research on Asia-Pacific issues, Chinese security strategy, and the South China Sea issue.

Furthermore, 13 researchers have experience studying, working, or living in China. Their institutions primarily include China's National Defense University, Peking University, Tsinghua University, Fudan University, Tsinghua-Carnegie Global Policy Center, Johns Hopkins University-Nanjing University Center for Chinese and American Studies, Guangxi Normal University, and Harbin Institute of Technology. Their work and study locations are concentrated in major cities such as Beijing, Taipei, and Hong Kong, with 11 experts proficient in

Chinese.

Additionally, some researchers have participated in China-related military operations with deep understanding of the Chinese military. For example, CNA researcher Jeffrey Becker participated in planning for the “Rim of the Pacific” (RIMPAC) military exercise, spent time on several Chinese warships, and possesses relatively in-depth understanding of the Chinese Navy. He published an article analyzing Chinese naval leadership in a Naval War College publication that generated significant response. Sharif H. Calfee from CSBA, during his tenure as captain of the destroyer USS McCAMPBELL, led the warship in more than ten military operations in the East China Sea, South China Sea, Sea of Japan, Indian Ocean, and other surrounding waters, and also participated in the “Malabar” maritime joint exercise. His research fields include Pacific/South China Sea maritime strategy and future naval construction, and these China-related military experiences have greatly facilitated his professional research.

3.3 Cross-Appointment Experience

Among these 21 China-focused military researchers, eight have cross-appointment experience, which mainly falls into two categories: cross-appointment within think tanks and exchange appointments between military and government departments.

Many think tank experts choose to cross-appoint at different think tanks while continuously exploring the frontiers of their research fields. For example, Roger Cliff from CNA’s China Studies Division has worked at prominent think tanks such as the Atlantic Council, Project 2049 Institute, and RAND Corporation. Bronson Percival has served as a visiting fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore and the East-West Center. While at the Atlantic Council, Roger Cliff’s research focused on East Asian security issues, with many results concerning China’s South China Sea issues. After moving to Project 2049 Institute, he began focusing his research on the Chinese military, and later transferred to RAND Corporation, where he received professional strategic assessment training that opened new methodological approaches for his subsequent research. His publication, *China’s Military Power: Assessing Current and Future Capabilities*, has had wide influence, and its assessment methodology draws on RAND Corporation’s strategic assessment models. The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and East-West Center have accumulated relatively rich experience in Asian, particularly Southeast Asian, security research, and Bronson Percival’s experience at these two think tanks also laid a foundation for his subsequent research on South China Sea issues and Southeast Asian and Indian Ocean maritime security.

Additionally, some think tank experts transfer to military and government departments for exchanges, assuming key positions and applying their defense strategic research to strategic practice. For example, Robert Work, former U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense, previously served at defense think tanks such as

CSBA and the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), and also served as Deputy Secretary of the Navy. During his time at think tanks, he authored numerous research articles on naval and maritime strategy, particularly proposing countermeasures against anti-access/area-denial that directly promoted the introduction of the U.S. military's "Air-Sea Battle" strategy. After becoming Deputy Secretary of Defense in 2014, Robert Work proposed the "Third Offset" to maintain U.S. advantages, which essentially responded to military challenges from major powers such as China and Russia. On October 27, 2014, CSBA released *Toward a New Offset Strategy: Exploiting U.S. Long-Term Advantages to Restore U.S. Global Power Projection Capability*, providing recommendations for the U.S. Department of Defense's relevant policies.

Cross-appointment experiences between think tanks and military-government departments help these experts continuously explore and focus on their research fields, learn and absorb distinctive research experiences from various think tanks, establish new collaborative research teams to improve their research capabilities. Simultaneously, cross-appointments to military and government departments help them apply their research results to strategic practice, enhancing the status and influence of their think tanks.

3.4 Research Fields and Attitude Toward China

Through concentrated analysis of these 21 experts' research fields, we find that current U.S. defense think tank research on China's military primarily concentrates on China's military modernization, cross-strait issues, South China Sea issues, Asia-Pacific situation, China's space program, and cyber strategy. This reflects, from another perspective, the achievements of China's military strengthening in the new era and the evolution of issues surrounding China.

By analyzing these experts' reports and related publications, we find that 62.5% (13) of the experts hold a hardline attitude toward China's rise, believing that China's development will challenge U.S. status and advocating that the U.S. military and government adopt strong containment strategies against China. For example, Ian Easton from Project 2049 Institute published an article in *The Diplomat* on March 29, 2017, titled "Trump Must Boost Taiwan Arms Sales Now," arguing that mainland China's military enhancement will "invade" Taiwan and that the U.S. must increase arms sales to Taiwan to ensure its security. Toshi Yoshihara from CSBA, in his representative work *Red Star over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy*, discusses from the U.S. standpoint and assumptions the concepts, strategies, and capabilities of Chinese naval operations, assessing how the rise of Chinese sea power will affect U.S. maritime strategy in Asia. The author argues that China is laying the groundwork to challenge U.S. superiority in Asian waters and that unless the U.S. makes adjustments, China will pose a challenge to U.S. strategic position.

According to incomplete statistics, among U.S. think tanks, 38% are conserva-

tive, 43% are moderate, and 19% are liberal. Generally, conservatives advocate a hardline attitude toward China. In U.S. defense think tanks, the proportion of conservative-leaning think tanks is far higher than in other think tanks, primarily for the following reasons. First, as China's comprehensive national strength has rapidly developed, the "China threat theory" has resurfaced in U.S. defense think tanks. Since the end of the Cold War, with China's rapid economic growth and accelerated military modernization, the U.S.-China security dilemma has been difficult to resolve, leading the U.S. to believe that strategic confrontation between the two countries is inevitable. To cater to this viewpoint and need, U.S. defense think tanks closely monitor China's defense strategy and military development, actively promoting the "China threat theory," with some of their viewpoints partially incorporated into the Pentagon's assessments of China's military power. Second, the "strong country must seek hegemony" mindset is deeply ingrained among researchers at U.S. defense think tanks. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a member of the World Trade Organization, China plays an increasingly important role on the global political and economic stage. Some experts at U.S. defense think tanks believe that the rise of great powers inevitably challenges the hegemon's status and the existing international order, and that China will, like historically rising powers, challenge current U.S. hegemony and the Western-dominated international system.

Since the new era, China's national power has continuously increased, and military strengthening has achieved tremendous success. Meanwhile, U.S. defense expenditures have been shrinking, and its military superiority has been challenged. Consequently, these China military researchers at U.S. defense think tanks generally harbor a psychology of concern, viewing China's rise as a major threat to U.S. security. On December 18, 2017, the White House released the *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, and on January 19, 2018, the Department of Defense released the *National Defense Strategy*. Both reports list China as the number one "competitor," deeply influenced by these think tanks' research results. Simultaneously, it can be predicted that as U.S.-China competition intensifies, the attitudes of U.S. defense think tank researchers toward China will become increasingly hardline.

4. Implications for Building a Talent Pool for Defense Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics

In the *2017 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report*, China has 512 think tanks selected, ranking second globally in quantity. However, among the top 104 defense think tanks, only the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) and China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) are listed, indicating a noticeable gap. A crucial factor is the disparity in defense think tank talent pools.

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Comrade Xi Jinping has proposed a series of new ideas, viewpoints, and requirements on building new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics. In January 2015,

the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council issued the “Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New-Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics,” clarifying the characteristics of scientific research work in these think tanks and striving to achieve transformational development. Among these, building new-type defense think tanks with Chinese characteristics holds important significance for studying rival countries’ military development, grasping the initiative in military competition, and providing intellectual support for building a world-class military.

Through analyzing the backgrounds of China-focused military research talents at three typical defense think tanks—Project 2049 Institute, CNA, and CSBA—we find they possess profound military backgrounds, high academic qualifications, rich experience in China, extensive cross-institutional and military-government cross-appointment experience, and generally hardline attitudes toward China. This provides the following enlightenment for talent pool construction in new-type defense think tanks with Chinese characteristics.

First, prioritize absorbing high-quality demobilized military officer groups. Every year, tens of thousands of officers leave military service, especially since the 2015 military reform, when large numbers of officers and civilian cadres transferred to civilian sectors. Under current policies, most demobilized officers and civilian personnel are assigned to local government departments, while some self-employed officers choose entrepreneurship or find jobs independently, with few joining think tanks. Among these demobilized officers, many are high-quality talents with advanced education and rich command experience, possessing tremendous advantages in military defense research. They represent a valuable asset. If they could join defense think tanks to continue strategic research, it would greatly promote the development of defense think tank research.

Second, leverage the “talent reservoir” function for personnel cultivation. In the United States, the president has the authority to form a cabinet and nominate personnel. Therefore, during each government transition, there are substantial personnel changes. Think tanks actively recruit these high-end talents with government experience. After transferring to think tanks, these individuals can further organize and refine their ideas from their tenure, making them more theoretical. When suitable opportunities arise, these talents may also assume government positions and practice their ideas. In this two-way process, think tanks act as a reservoir, retaining many high-quality talents and providing them with numerous opportunities. When building talent pools for new-type defense think tanks with Chinese characteristics, we should find ways to absorb and retain such talents, continuously strengthening the talent pool.

Third, establish smooth talent cross-appointment mechanisms. Throughout the U.S. military officer and defense think tank talent cultivation mechanism, an important lesson is the job rotation system. U.S. military regulations stipulate that officers generally should not serve in the same position for more than four years, with a maximum of six years, after which they must rotate. The U.S. military often adopts comprehensive, large-span job rotations for officers

to enrich their experience and increase opportunities for inter-service and inter-departmental command or coordination. Among defense think tank researchers, a considerable proportion also have cross-appointment experience. In the process of building China's defense think tank talent pool, establishing smooth talent cross-appointment mechanisms between think tank-think tank and think tank-government would help transform defense think tanks into places for training and storing talent. Think tank experts could apply their research results to military-government strategic practice while better disseminating military and government defense concepts to think tanks, creating two-way interaction that expands influence and continuously promotes the improvement of defense think tank research levels.

Fourth, emphasize foreign exchange work for think tank personnel. Among U.S. defense think tank researchers focusing on China, many have work and study experience in China, are proficient in Chinese, and possess deep understanding of China, enabling them to write incisive, penetrating in-depth reports. For Chinese defense think tank researchers to better study rival countries' defense strategies, they must emphasize foreign exchange work, engage in more exchanges with military, government, and think tank personnel from rival countries, genuinely grasp their strategic thinking patterns, and truly achieve "know yourself and know your enemy" to produce truly meaningful research results.

Governing a country requires talent as a matter of urgency. What countries value is talent; what think tanks value even more is talent. Research on the backgrounds of China-focused military researchers at U.S. defense think tanks enlightens us that when building talent pools for new-type defense think tanks with Chinese characteristics, we should prioritize absorbing high-quality demobilized military officers, establish smooth talent cross-appointment mechanisms, emphasize foreign exchange work for think tank personnel, cultivate a contingent of leading think tank talents, create first-rate defense think tanks with Chinese characteristics, and provide strong intellectual support for building a world-class military.

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Data for this article was collected through June 7, 2018.

Hardline attitude toward China primarily refers to the belief that China' s rise threatens the Taiwan Strait situation and Asia-Pacific security, poses significant challenges to U.S. advantageous position, and advocates for containment measures against China.

The “Rim of the Pacific” (RIMPAC) exercise is the world' s largest multi-national maritime joint exercise, initiated by the U.S. Third Fleet to ensure maritime channel security and joint counter-terrorism for Pacific Rim countries. The Chinese Navy first participated in RIMPAC in 2014.

“Who' s at the Helm: Leadership in China' s Navy” [N] *U.S. Navy War College Review*, 2016.

The “Malabar” maritime exercise began in 1992 as a bilateral U.S.-India exercise in the Indian Ocean. Since 2007, navies from Japan, Australia, Singapore, and other countries have successively joined, continuously expanding its scale. *The Times of India* stated that this exercise aims to address “Chinese submarines frequently appearing in the Indian Ocean.”

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

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