



# The Washington Quarterly

ISSN: 0163-660X (Print) 1530-9177 (Online) Journal homepage: [www.tandfonline.com/journals/rwaq20](http://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rwaq20)

## The Elusive Consensus: Diverging US Views on Competition against China

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To cite this article: Alex Yu-Ting Lin & Robert Ralston (2026) The Elusive Consensus: Diverging US Views on Competition against China, *The Washington Quarterly*, 49:1, 159-179, DOI: [10.1080/0163660X.2026.2639843](https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2026.2639843)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2026.2639843>



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Published online: 27 Mar 2026.



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# The Elusive Consensus: Diverging US Views on Competition against China

Conventional wisdom suggests that, for about a decade, there has been a consensus within the United States about China.<sup>1</sup> Allegedly, since the “China reckoning” around the late 2010s, the United States finally came to see the inevitable truth: that China is a threat to the United States and the current order.<sup>2</sup> Various segments of US constituents presumably share this view, and it spans across policy issues and informs debates about US strategy toward China.<sup>3</sup> The US-China trade war is but a manifestation of this broader philosophy: China is a threat, and economic competition against it is a critical

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*The Washington Quarterly* • 49:1 pp. 159–179  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2026.2639843>

element of containing China because war is often being waged in economic domains.<sup>4</sup>

But does this China consensus actually exist? Who within the United States finds China threatening, and by how much? Furthermore, what kinds of diplomatic signals from China, if any, might alleviate the perception of threat, among whom, and by how much? Answering these questions is important for assessing if such consensus truly exists and should be uncritically accepted as the premise for US strategy toward China, or whether such “consensus” is a mirage that cultivates a false sense of certainty that the US-China rivalry is inevitable and unlimited in scope.

To answer these questions, we conduct an original survey on US foreign policy experts (i.e., policymakers, think tank researchers, and academics) and the US public—in collaboration with the Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) Survey administered by the Global Research Institute at the College of William and Mary—to assess their perceptions of China’s intentions and various scenarios of US-China competition in the context of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Launched in 2013, the BRI is a high-profile initiative that involves large infrastructure projects around the globe including railways, ports, energy pipelines, and highways, as well as special economic zones. The BRI is a multidimensional policy issue—not just an economic one—that serves as a highly appropriate test of the claim that a consensus about China exists across various policy areas. As China expert Nadège Rolland suggests, “focusing only on specific components or dimensions of the BRI ... risks missing the point that all of these aspects are part of a comprehensive vision with a potentially global reach.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, as a 2019 Brookings Institution report argues, while the BRI “began with a predominantly economic focus, it has taken on a greater security profile over time.”<sup>6</sup>

On the security front, analysts argue that the BRI can improve China’s ability to perform military missions by capturing ports of strategic import and compromise “necessary logistical support the US may need to support an ally while simultaneously collecting intelligence on US military operations.”<sup>7</sup> These security considerations persist even into the second Trump administration, which is concerned about the impact of the BRI in the Western Hemisphere, and specifically the security implications of China controlling the Panama Canal.<sup>8</sup> More broadly, analysts have also argued that it might displace US-led institutions, help China secure greater influence, and “reinforce the ... narrative that China is moving to the center of global economic activity [and] strength.”<sup>9</sup>

Our results find weak evidence for the so-called consensus about China—both in terms of threat perception and how Chinese signals are perceived. There are areas of clear disagreement and areas of potential agreement, and superimposing a so-called consensus about the China threat over these nuances can stifle debate. Instead, it is by acknowledging and describing the divergent US views on competition against

China that analysts can identify real areas of agreements and disagreements—and interrogate why they exist through logic and evidence. Designing US grand strategy based on such an elusive consensus can also drive the United States further away from a vast number of countries in the Indo-Pacific which have clearly and consistently signaled that they do not share the US appetite for zero-sum (military) competition.<sup>10</sup> Thus, artificially creating and/or sustaining a consensus where there is not one will drive the United States away from the strategic realities that it has to confront—both domestically and internationally.

We should be clear about what this article is and is not about. Our aim is to highlight that the so-called consensus that has been accepted as an article of faith and used to motivate arguments is much more superficial than conventionally assumed. In recent months, analysts are beginning to argue that the putative consensus is unraveling, especially given the (second) Trump administration’s policies toward China,<sup>11</sup> and that the US public is “reversing course” and warming up to the prospect of engaging or cooperating with China.<sup>12</sup> Here, we go a step further: the consensus has always been overstated—even before recent times.

**O**ur survey results find weak evidence for the so-called consensus about China

But our position is not to assert that China is not a threat, or that nobody in the United States finds this to be true. Instead, we argue that the putative consensus is overstated and masks important differences in views. There is much more room for debates based on exchanges of different views, which can reduce the possibility for groupthink and misplaced certainty. Indeed, the need to compete against China has become a truism in policy debates. Yet, the purpose, scope, feasibility, and costs of competition are often ill-identified, and the need to define the ends-means of competition and manage escalation is often too easily dismissed. In this context, cultivating a “marketplace of ideas”<sup>13</sup> would help policymakers and analysts devise a measured strategy which balances between competing against China where competition is warranted, managing tension where it is possible, and cooperating where it is beneficial.<sup>14</sup> This issue-by-issue approach, especially when supported by rigorous logic and evidence, would improve US policy toward China.

## Stakes and Expectations

We examine two central policy questions: (1) how do different US audiences assess the threat that China poses? and (2) how do different US audiences react toward Chinese diplomatic signals in scenarios of competition?

### Threat Perception against China

Political scientist Daniel Drezner lamentingly reports that Republicans and Democrats increasingly frame their policies around the notion that China is a threat, with the Cold War often invoked as an analogy.<sup>15</sup> Scholars Michael Brenes and Van Jackson characterize the consensus as “creeping across Congress, the Presidency, and large swaths of the electorate.”<sup>16</sup> Historians Hal Brands and John Gaddis assert that Chinese President Xi Jinping has declared a new Cold War against the United States, and a “rare bipartisan consensus in the United States has accepted the challenge.”<sup>17</sup> Brands further suggests that this consensus is valuable because “going soft on China will be a hard lesson for the US.”<sup>18</sup> Political scientist David Shambaugh asserts that “there now exists a quite strong bipartisan consensus for pursuing a toughened China policy; not only have Democrats and Republicans in Congress found consensus on the underlying rationale and elements of a hardened China policy, but it spans across various professional sectors.”<sup>19</sup> Researchers Christopher Carothers and Taiyi Sun argue that this consensus emerged in 2017, “with many bipartisan bills mandating meaningful action on trade, technology, diplomatic and military affairs, and human rights issues.”<sup>20</sup> The received wisdom therefore suggests that various US constituents are converging on the China threat across various different policy areas.

In contrast, political scientist Jessica Weiss argues that there is, and should be, “ample space for debate based on expertise and analysis, because the apparent hardening of the US consensus on China is shallower and wobblier than it appears.”<sup>21</sup> In fact, there are a few major dividing lines at which one can expect disagreement among different types of US constituents. First, whether there is truly a bipartisan consensus between Republicans and Democrats has

**T**here are a few major dividing lines among different types of US constituents

never been systematically demonstrated—just asserted. Even if both parties have become relatively more supportive of competing against China compared to the engagement era, it does not follow that they now agree on how threatening China is, or how (much) to compete against it. Researchers Ali Wyne and Ryan Haas argue that even if Republican and Democratic policymakers have come to see China as a potential competitor, there is

not necessarily a consensus within the United States regarding China. Instead, they suggest that questions such as whether China is becoming more powerful or plateauing (i.e., how threatening it is), and how the United States should structure its relationship with China, remain open.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, there are good reasons to believe that different constituents may have different views based on their professional socialization. Political scientist Keren Yarhi-Milo, for instance, argues that leaders and intelligence communities often differ in how they assess strategic situations and signals from potential adversaries given differences in training.<sup>23</sup> In the context of US-China relations, analysts of various stripes—ranging from self-identified security experts to East Asia experts—have long disagreed on the question of whether China’s rise is a threat, how much, and what to do in response.<sup>24</sup> Those who self-identify as security experts are more likely to see China as a threat because they are more likely to filter information about China via the lens of “great power competition” and various analogies from historical European wars.<sup>25</sup> Conversely, those who are area experts tend to assess strategic situations through contextual area knowledge, lowering their threat perception.

If the consensus exists, we expect different US constituents (e.g., policymakers vs. think tank community vs. academics vs. public; Democrats vs. Republicans) would largely share similar levels of threat perception of China. Conversely, we expect that self-identified security experts would be more threatened by China compared to self-identified East Asia experts.

### Assessing Chinese Diplomatic Signals

How do individuals assess various diplomatic signals in scenarios of competition against China? Analysts have long remained divided on whether diplomacy and signaling among states can reduce geopolitical tension. Some argue that states always have incentives to misrepresent their intentions; thus meaningful reassurance is impossible between them.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, others have proposed various ways in which states can reassure each other: sending costly signals, creating interdependence, or appealing to fairness.

For example, some argue that states can reassure each other through costly signals.<sup>27</sup> By accepting costs that aggressive states would not accept, these signals can help other states separate those with malign intentions from those without such intentions, ameliorating spirals of competition.<sup>28</sup> Others argue that states can reassure each other through interdependence.<sup>29</sup> For example, states—expecting future payoffs from economic exchange<sup>30</sup>—are sometimes incentivized to preserve positive-sum engagements. This logic was one of the wagers that informed US engagement strategy toward China in the past few decades: if China were willing to follow the rules, then it can be a responsible stakeholder (i.e., not a threat).<sup>31</sup> Finally, states can seek to reassure through appeals

**How do individuals assess various diplomatic signals in scenarios of competition against China?**

to fairness: political scientist Stacie Goddard, when assessing why Prussia was able to reassure European powers in 1864, argues that states are sometimes able to reassure others that their aims are limited by framing their demands around fairness.<sup>32</sup>

Given these competing arguments, we expect that 1) costly signals; 2) mutual gains signals; and 3) fairness demands from China may reassure US audiences.

## Putting the Consensus to Test

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To assess our expectations, we fielded parallel surveys on US foreign policy experts (N = 1270) and the US public (N = 1931) in December 2022. The expert survey was fielded in collaboration with the Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) Survey administered by the Global Research Institute at the College of William and Mary.<sup>33</sup> It includes (1) policymakers (assistant director-level or above) who worked on national security, trade, and development from the George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and first Donald J. Trump administrations (N = 255); (2) think tank researchers (N = 231); and (3) academics at US universities working on international relations (N = 789). Our results provide the first whole-of-society assessment on how various US constituents think about competition against China.

We focus on the BRI because we want to capitalize on the uniqueness of our US expert sample, which consists of elites working on national security, trade, and development issues. The BRI is understood broadly in Washington as a Chinese initiative with potential ramifications for the global economy, security, and international order. For example, former assistant secretary of defense for the Indo-Pacific Ely Ratner has outlined the specific security benefits that the BRI can provide for China including energy security, overseas military access, and generating an illiberal security order.<sup>34</sup> A common argument is that China can gain access to dual-use ports by debt-trapping countries, which can in turn improve China's ability to perform military missions around key flashpoints.<sup>35</sup> As political scientist Rush Doshi explains, "there is a long-standing political and military discourse in China that emphasizes access as opposed to base ... some of [the port acquisition via the BRI] is very clearly strategically motivated" and would create "geographic choke points" that compromise US military operations.<sup>36</sup>

Analyst Nadège Rolland further warns that if the BRI "unfolds as Beijing envisions ... the implications would certainly be far reaching: an integrated and interconnected Eurasian continent with enduring authoritarian political systems, where China's influence has grown to the point it has muted any opposition and gained acquiescence and deference; a new regional order with its own political and economic institutions, whose rules and norms reflect China's values and

serve its interests; and a continental stronghold insulated to some degree from American sea power.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, beyond economic implications, the BRI is a multi-dimensional policy issue that spans across economic, security, and institutional considerations. This makes the BRI a highly appropriate test of the claim that a consensus about China exists across various policy areas.

Our survey contained two parts. In one component, respondents were asked whether they agreed with the statement “The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a threat to US national interest” on a scale of 0–6, with 0 being not very threatening and 6 being very threatening. This measures the extent to which they see China as a threat. In another component, we asked respondents to assess various Chinese diplomatic signals meant to reassure the United States and manage tension. To this end, all respondents first read the following: “China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi was recently interviewed about the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) activities in Africa. At the press conference, Wang suggested that concerns about the BRI are overstated ...” Respondents were then randomly assigned to receive one of the scenarios (see Table 1):

**Table 1: Assessing Competing Diplomatic Signals from China**

Signal	Description
Control	Empty
Costly signals	<i>because the BRI is not about trapping countries with debt, so China is taking active steps to waive and restructure debt for countries in Africa. “The Belt and Road Initiative,” Wang argued, “is ultimately about sustainable economic development.”</i>
Mutual gains	<i>because the BRI creates economic growth, and that Africa—as well as the United States, if it chooses to become involved—can benefit from it. “The Belt and Road Initiative,” Wang argued, “is a non-zero-sum enterprise that generates benefits for all.”</i>
Fairness demands	<i>because the BRI is similar to US investment activities in Africa, so it is only fair that China is allowed to invest in Africa. “The Belt and Road Initiative,” Wang argued, “should not be subject to hypocritical criticisms and double-standards.”</i>

These scenarios are based on things that China has consistently done and/or said. We focus on Africa because, since 2014, US-China competition for influence in the region has been a salient policy issue, prompting the first US-African Leaders Summit in 2014 under the Obama administration and the second US-African Leaders Summit in 2022 under the Biden administration.<sup>38</sup> For the costly signals scenario, we model it after China’s pledge to waive or restructure debt for African countries that are at risk of defaulting.<sup>39</sup> This signal is costly because it is an action through which China incurs actual monetary costs via debt relief or restructuration. The signal is defensive because it addresses one of the most prevalent concerns about the BRI: that it is an

aggressive strategy that maliciously aims to trap countries with debt, allowing China to gain access to strategic assets.<sup>40</sup>

For the mutual gains scenario, we model it after a common Chinese foreign policy behavior: that geo-economic initiatives such as the BRI or the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) are framed as “non-zero-sum” and complement US-led institutions.<sup>41</sup> In the past, China has invited Japan—ostensibly its regional rival—to engage in joint ventures via the AIIB or BRI.<sup>42</sup> Japan was receptive out of mutual gains considerations.<sup>43</sup> We model our mutual gains appeals after a similar dynamic to assess whether respondents are receptive to a similar kind of appeal.

For the fairness demands scenario, we model it after another common Chinese foreign policy behavior: China framing its behaviors as being equivalent to what the United States does. For example, China often justifies its military activities in the South China Sea on the basis that the United States also conducts Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) in the region, so Washington should not “ask others not to militarize the region while [it] is sending military vessels there.”<sup>44</sup> Similarly in our scenario, China is appealing to fairness: China’s BRI activities in Africa are the same as US activities in Africa. Thus, the alleged logic goes, China is seeking fairness, and no more than that. In fact, this fairness scenario has become even more salient over time, as evidenced by the fact that Chinese officials often gesture to the second Trump administration that the premise for negotiating over the US-China trade war needs to be predicated on “fairness.”<sup>45</sup>

## Competing Views on Competition against China

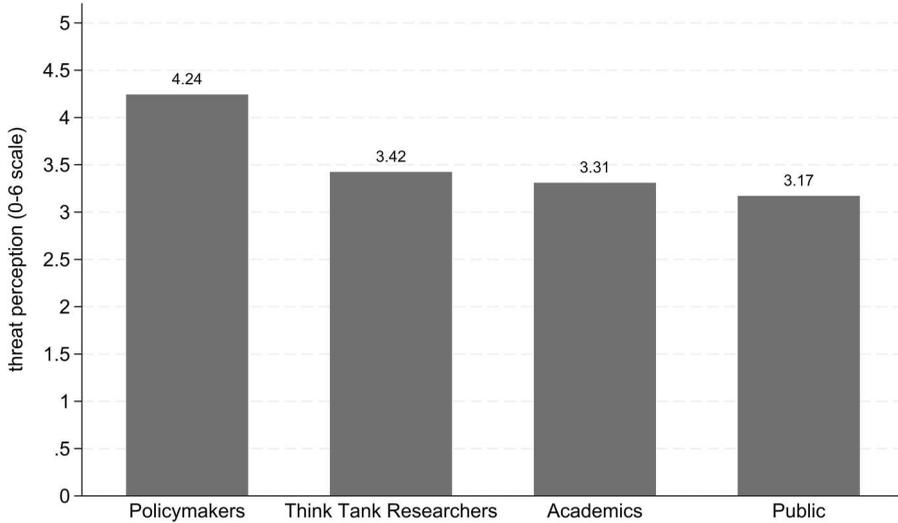
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Based on the above, we organize the discussions of our results as follows: (1) who is more or less threatened by China (is there a consensus among different subgroups)? and (2) do any diplomatic signals reduce the perception of threat by respondents (among which subgroups)?

### Threat Perception

We find weak evidence suggesting that experts and the public agree on the threat presented by China. [Figure 1](#) shows that policymakers tend to be much more threatened by China than think tank researchers, academics, or the public. There is a remarkable difference between how policymakers perceive the China threat relative to the rest of the society, with the differences ranging from 0.82 to 1.07 points on a scale of 0-6. Substantively, the results suggest that the average views held by think tank researchers, academics, and the public hover much more closely to “neutral,” whereas policymakers tend to

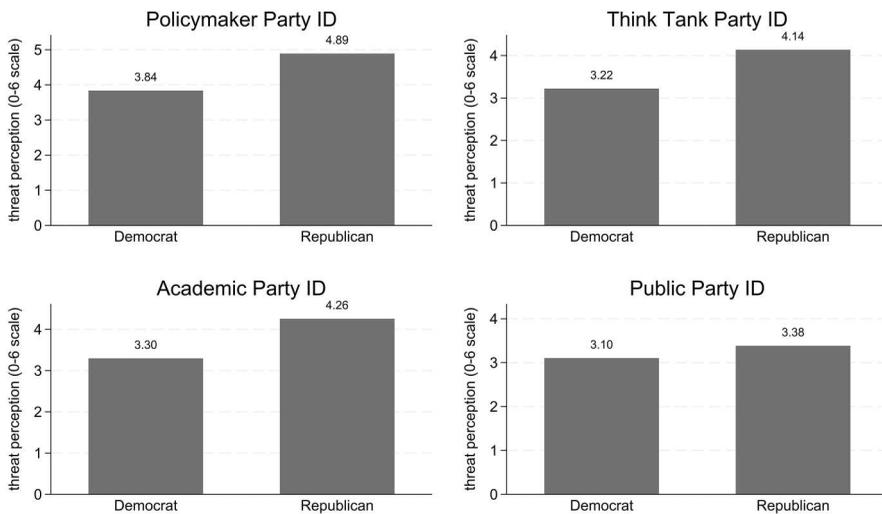
**Figure 1: Policymakers are Significantly More Threatened by China**



hover more closely to “threatened.” These results directly challenge the notion that there is an elite-public consensus regarding the China threat.

We also find weak evidence that there is a bipartisan consensus within the United States about China. Figure 2 shows that Democrats are less threatened by China compared to Republicans in all four samples. These differences range

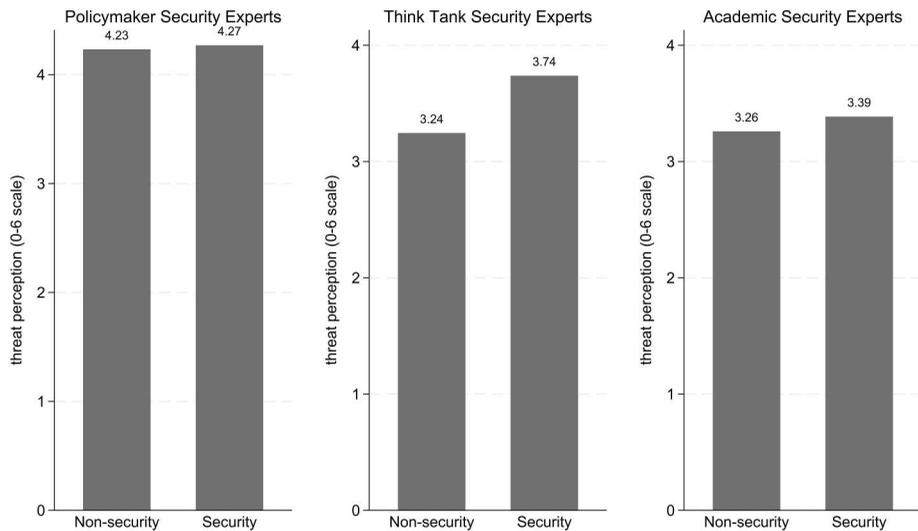
**Figure 2: Republicans are More Threatened by China**



from 0.28 points in the public sample to 1.05 points in the policymaker sample on a scale of 0-6. That we observe clear differences between how Republicans perceive China across all samples suggests that the bipartisan consensus is overstated—at both the expert and the public level.

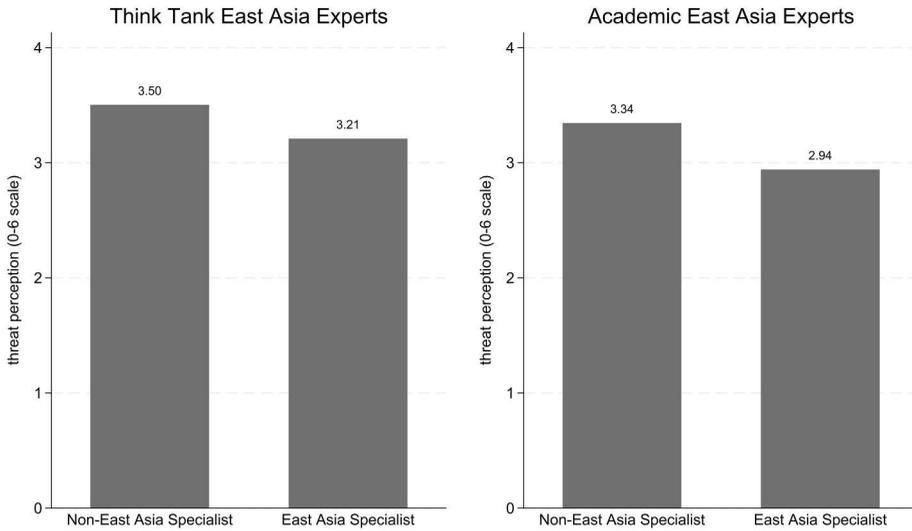
We also find that differences in expertise create significant variation in how analysts perceive China. [Figure 3](#) shows that those who self-identify as security experts are more threatened than non-security experts. This is especially true among think tank researchers, with the difference being around 0.5 points on a scale of 0-6.

**Figure 3: Security Experts are More Threatened by China**



In contrast, [Figure 4](#) shows that self-identified East Asia experts are less threatened, with differences around 0.30 to 0.40 points on a scale of 0-6. These two findings support the view that professional socialization creates differences in how analysts perceive strategic situations and whether a potential competitor is a threat or not.

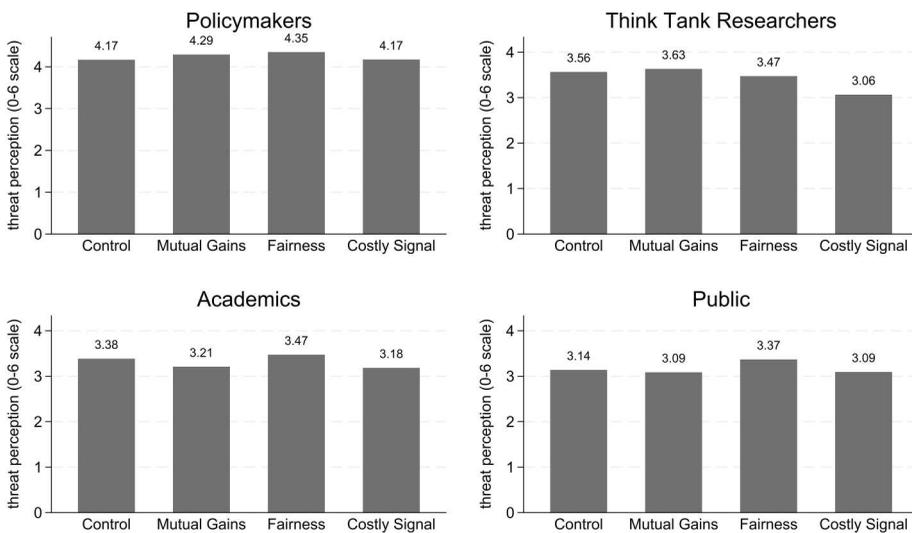
**Figure 4: East Asia Experts are Less Threatened by China**



**Diplomatic Signals**

We find that some signals tend to reassure some US constituents, whereas some tend to make some US constituents feel even more threatened. Figure 5 shows that costly signals of defensive intent from China lower the threat perception within the think tank researcher sample, with the effect being a difference of

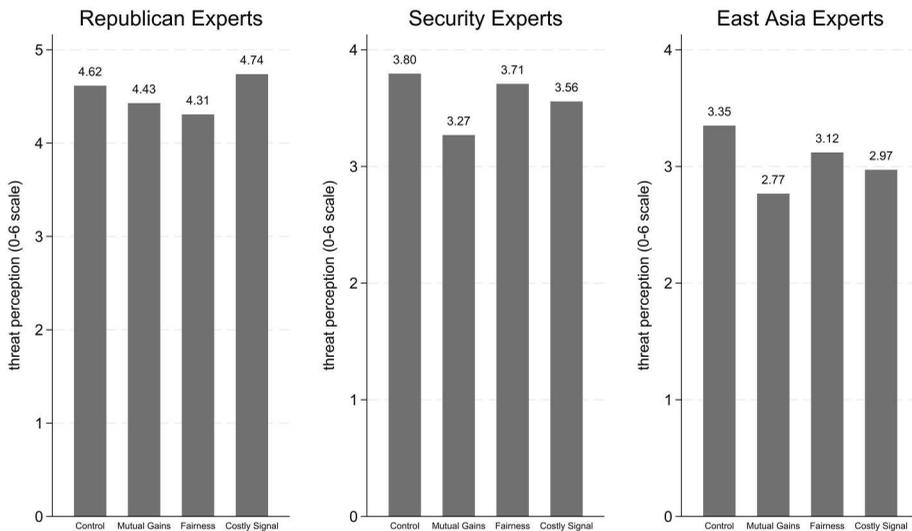
**Figure 5: Some Signals Reassure, Some Signals Provoke**



0.50 points on a scale of 0-6. In contrast, [Figure 5](#) shows that some Chinese diplomatic signals can create backlash effects. For example, policymakers and the public feel more threatened by Chinese appeals to fairness, with the difference being around 0.23 points on a scale of 0-6.

Finally, our results point to interesting points of convergence among certain subgroups who might otherwise disagree about China. [Figure 6](#) shows that appeals to mutual gains appear to be a cross-cutting commonality among Republican, security, and East Asia experts—who, as we suggested earlier, might otherwise disagree about China. Specifically, when compared to the control baseline, appeals to mutual gains lead to a reduction of approximately 0.53 points on a scale of 0-6 when it comes to threat perception across the three subgroups. Even among security experts who otherwise tend to be more threatened by China, appeals to mutual gains lead to a 0.50 points reduction in their assessment of the China threat.

**Figure 6: Mutual Gain as a Potential Cross-cutting Commonality?**



### Policy Implications

Our results suggest that the putative consensus within the United States about the China threat is overstated across various salient dimensions: elite vs. public; Republicans vs. Democrats; security vs. East Asia experts. Especially for the elite-public dimension, we find that US policymakers tend to be much more threatened by China than any other US constituents, often by a significant margin.

### The Value of Disagreement

On face value, one might think that this lack of consensus is worrying, especially at a time of rampant national polarization. Yet, healthy disagreement can clarify first-order questions of what it is that the United States is competing for and why, what is actually threatened, and establish limits of competition and theories of victory. Competition is a means, not an end. Debates can generate useful exchange of viewpoints, establish guardrails, and check potential biases.-

For example, our results suggest that security experts diverge in important ways from East Asia experts when it comes to threat perception of China. Yet, both groups can be subject to biases that can be checked through debate. Security experts often filter everything through the lens of “security competition” or “great power war”—especially through analogies of European historical wars—and this can restrict frames of references.<sup>46</sup> These frames can push some security experts to oversimplify reality and overattribute malicious intent, such as overstating the extent to which the BRI is designed as a coherent grand strategy. Instead, China scholar Min Ye highlights the domestic political-economic considerations that underpin BRI activities, such as reducing overcapacity and opening foreign markets for Chinese firms, rather than a well-defined, coherent grand strategy.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, scholar Todd Hall rightly highlights the opposite potential problem: the dangers for East Asia experts to “get too close to the problem” and become preoccupied with granular details of particular elements of Chinese politics while losing sight of the broader implications for strategy debates.<sup>48</sup> For example, the BRI may not be designed as a coherent grand strategy and may instead be driven by domestic priorities, but it does not follow that China gains no geopolitical influence through it.

**P**olicymakers tend to be much more threatened by China than any other US constituents

Thus, reasonable exchange of viewpoints between analysts of various stripes, while being cognizant of the limitations of their approaches *and* the potential strengths of other approaches, would improve policy debates about China’s rise. Overconfidence in one’s views can be prevalent and dangerous—and it is through debate that effective guardrails can be established against the deleterious effects of misplaced certainty. For example, in a recent study, scholar Jeffrey Friedman argues that national security officials tend to be overconfident and, most importantly, that this overconfidence can generate suboptimal results. As he reports, “when participants estimated that statements had a 90 percent chance of being true, those statements were true just 58 percent of the time [and] if participants had made every one of their judgments with less certainty, 96 percent of them would have improved their performance.”<sup>49</sup>

In the context of US-China relations, extreme narratives of China posing an existential threat and extreme narratives of China posing no threat are good for capturing attention. But they can both (re)produce biases and introduce misplaced certainty. As scholars Jennifer Mitzen and Randall Schweller explain, sometimes it is precisely misplaced certainty, rather than uncertainty, that drives tragic spirals of interstate competition.<sup>50</sup> The threat that China poses is likely real in many ways. Yet, the threat that China poses is also likely inflated in many other ways. It is by debating with logic and evidence from various informed perspectives that policy analysts can rightsize the China challenge.

### **Mix of Optimism and Pessimism**

Second, our results regarding the assessment of Chinese diplomatic signals suggest a mix of optimism and pessimism. On one hand, one might point out that policymakers have a much higher level of threat perception compared to all other US constituents *and* do not seem to be reassured by any Chinese diplomatic signals. From this, a pessimistic conclusion one might draw is that US-China relations will continue to deteriorate because policymakers might be fixated on a particular view about China that is very hard to dislodge—with the analogy being the problems that plagued policy processes before the 2003 Iraq War.<sup>51</sup>

Yet, if there is one lesson that should have been taken from the Iraq War, it is the importance of developing and guarding a marketplace of ideas to avoid similar outcomes. This marketplace “helps to weed out unfounded, mendacious, or self-serving foreign policy arguments.”<sup>52</sup> It can only be cultivated to the extent that groupthink might sometimes be ameliorated *and* that there are other parts of the US population that might be open to reassessing US-China relations. Our results from the think tank sample suggests cautious optimism.

For example, scholars Neil Ketchley and his collaborators, through a quantitative text analysis of US think tank reports about the BRI in Africa, note that the BRI has become “shorthand [for] China’s increasing influence in the region ... [which] manifests in superficial descriptions of the BRI followed by declarative statements asserting that China is now an important actor in [the region] and a threat to key US interests that justify policy interventions.”<sup>53</sup> This is set against the reality that actual BRI impact in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region remains modest at best, regardless of what measure one uses: the low number of BRI projects in the region either in absolute or relative terms compared to projects funded by the World Bank, or in terms of the low level of indebtedness toward China that MENA countries exhibit.<sup>54</sup> One explanation that these authors advance is that foreign policy think tanks have become “politically entrapped in a narrative ... and that US foreign policy

analysts are simply operating in an echo chamber, in which certain claims [about China/the BRI] have come to be repeated uncritically by others.”<sup>55</sup>

However, our result—that costly signals of defensive intent reassure the sample of US think tank researchers by a magnitude of 0.5 points on a 0-6 scale—suggests that even if an echo chamber does exist, it is not unbreakable. Instead, our results suggest that think tank researchers do react differently to new information rather than simply dismissing it or contorting it to fit their prior beliefs about China and the BRI. It importantly suggests that there are concrete actions that China *can* take, should it decide to take them, that will help manage US-China competition even at the US elite level. Rather than dismissing these possibilities because of a misplaced belief in the elusive consensus, a productive possibility for managing US-China tension is for the United States to concretely identify what it would like to see from China.

The foregoing conversation points to the fact that (1) groupthink is possible—but not unsolvable; and (2) there is a potential for a marketplace of ideas coming from non-policymaker communities. This is not to say that the policymakers are necessarily wrong, and those in non-policymaking capacities who are open to reassessing China are necessarily right. Policymakers may very well be right—but they should be right for the right reasons. However, it is to say that having a healthy marketplace of ideas will encourage individuals with different views on China to be crystal clear about their reasoning and evidence, with the potential benefit of improving US policy toward China by limiting the deleterious effects of shaky conjectures.

**T**here is a potential for a marketplace of ideas coming from non-policymaker communities

Yet, the fact that the US policymakers and the public find Chinese appeals to fairness to be more threatening also highlights room for concern. Fairness is often bound by how the sender and recipient perceive their relationship. If the recipient does not see the sender as an equal, then what one side sees as demands for fairness may be perceived as threatening by the other side<sup>56</sup>—because the recipient may believe that the sender is “asking for more than it should be.”<sup>57</sup> What China perceives as demands for fairness may very well be perceived by the United States as challenges to US primacy. This implies that the United States and China may be in the process of navigating their relative status: perhaps the United States has not internalized the belief that China may need to be recognized as an equal. It is precisely during this navigation period—where disconnects in understanding as to what China can legitimately claim under “fairness” before the United States finds such claims threatening—that there is the most potential for instability. This is concerning because Chinese officials often state that fairness is one of the core premises on which any US-

China trade negotiations—or US-China relations in general—must be based. In other words, China’s demands for fairness are likely to persist, and if the United States finds this threatening, this may be a cause of potential US-China tension.

### **Mutual Gains Based on Pragmatism?**

Third, the fact that security experts and East Asia experts are both reassured by mutual gains signals from China by a considerable margin—despite otherwise disagreeing about the China threat—suggests that perhaps a more minimalist understanding of mutual gains may nevertheless serve as the basis for post-engagement US strategy toward China. The original engagement formulation was based on a thicker, maximalist articulation: that economic engagement with China would lead to economic *and* political liberalization in China, which would in turn stabilize US-China relations.<sup>58</sup> This vision is no longer the premise that guides US grand strategy. Yet, an alternative that replaces it is also yet to emerge and crystallize. In this context, our results provide suggestive evidence that even if the more maximalist articulation of engagement no longer resonates with US constituents, perhaps a thinner, minimalist articulation based on mutual gains might still serve as the basis for US grand strategy moving forward.

In this thinner articulation, mutual gains might be driven by pragmatism rather than ideals about driving economic and/or political liberalization in China. Perhaps the original articulation was overly optimistic when it comes to liberalizing China. Yet, as policy analysts Jonathan Pollack and Jeffrey Bader note, the United States and China may not be able to decouple because “China is now the world’s lead trading state, deeply integrated in supply chains involving U.S. allies and partners ... and its products ... are competitively priced and welcomed in global markets.”<sup>59</sup> Indeed, despite downward spirals in US-China relations, decoupling altogether seems impractical, especially in today’s global economy.<sup>60</sup> The primary reason is because there may be a subset of resources, goods, or services that the United States and China may not be able to secure from alternative sources and/or at acceptable cost.<sup>61</sup> US-China economic interactions based on these premises and revolved around this subset of items are pragmatically necessary and beneficial for both sides even without the lofty ideals of liberalization. We do not want to overstate this possibility based on a survey. Yet, the possibility is at least worth highlighting, especially in light of the recent ceasefire in the US-China trade war as of spring 2026.

### **Consensus Is Elusive, but That Might Not Be Bad**

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Our bottom line is straightforward: for the putative consensus about China to guide US policy debates, it must exist beyond the most superficial of ways.

Using a unique whole-of-society sample involving US experts and the US public, we find weak evidence for the claim that there is a consensus about China. Instead, we find clear areas of disagreement among a variety of dimensions: elite vs. public; Republican vs. Democrat; or security experts vs. East Asia experts. Furthermore, we also find weak evidence suggesting that China cannot reassure the United States. Instead, we find a mixed set of results where sometimes Chinese signals can indeed reassure some audiences, whereas in other circumstances they can provoke some audiences. In other words, consensus about China within the United States remains elusive at best.

Yet, this might not be a bad thing. We suggest that the lack of consensus—or perhaps more aptly framed as the potential for healthy debate—can lead to optimal outcomes too. Creating or sustaining an artificial consensus where there is not one can compromise the rightsizing of the China challenge and stifle intellectual exchanges which establish guardrails against misplaced certainty. While certainty provides cognitive comfort, it can also lead to overconfidence and flawed outcomes, such as runaway escalation<sup>62</sup> or engaging in competition for its own sake.<sup>63</sup> Instead, it is by carefully describing the competing US views on competition against China, such as they are, that analysts can identify real areas of agreement and disagreement—and debate based on informed logic and evidence. This marketplace of ideas can help create a measured strategy which balances among competition against China where it is warranted, management of tension where it is possible, and cooperation where it is beneficial.

**We also find weak evidence suggesting that China cannot reassure the US**

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