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Ashbee, Edward and Hurst, Steven ORCID logoORCID:  
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**Edward Ashbee (Copenhagen Business School) and Steven Hurst (Manchester Metropolitan University)**

## **The Trump Administration and China: Policy Continuity or Transformation?**

**Keywords:** Trump; China; policy transformation; paradigms; interests; institutions

### *Abstract*

*The long-run consequences of the Trump presidency on US foreign policy have been a subject of debate. Policy towards China is one arena in which observers have argued that Trump's impact has been significant and is likely to outlast him. Indeed, it might be considered transformational. Many of the commentaries have, however, been largely anecdotal. So as to provide a more rigorous analysis of policy transformation we employ a previously developed framework that focuses on ideational shifts, the development of new or reconfigured interests that are allied to a particular policy, and institutional changes as a basis for change to be considered transformational and thereby enduring. Applying these criteria to Trump's China policy we argue that while there has been a paradigmatic change structured around the embrace of "strategic competition", there have been some, but rather more limited, shifts in the character of interest configurations and institutional structures. We nonetheless conclude that while policy transformation is incomplete the changes that Trump White House wrought have been profound and are very likely to shape the actions of future administrations.*

### **Introduction**

Donald Trump has been widely described as a "disrupter". Nonetheless, the extent to which he did or did not transform US foreign policy in ways that will endure remains a subject of controversy. For some the Trump presidency finally killed off liberal internationalism (Drezner, 2019; *Foreign Affairs*, 2018;

Ikenberry, 2018; Jervis et al 2018; Wright 2019) and / or accelerated the decline in the US's position as a global power (Cooley and Nexon, 2020). Others insist that, for all the rhetoric and bluster, President Trump's foreign policy was characterized by continuity rather than change (Abrams, 2017; Carafano, 2017; Dombrowski, 2018; *Foreign Affairs*, 2018; Herbert et al 2019; Nguyen, 2017; Porter, 2018).

Policy arenas should nonetheless be disaggregated. We consider US policy towards China which has been hailed as an arena where policy change was pronounced. Indeed, there are frequent references to the "transformation" of U.S. policy toward China" under Trump (Tang, 2020; Wang, 2019: 195 - 196; Allen-Ebrahimian 2021; Bosco; 2020) while the Trump administration itself described its policy towards China as "...the most significant United States foreign policy shift in a generation" (O'Brien, 2020: 3). Are these claims legitimate? We seek to contribute to the debate by considering the degree to which the recasting of the US's China policy can be considered a genuine transformation that will endure or whether the high drama of the Trump period will prove to have a more shallow and ephemeral legacy.

In order to do so we employ a revised version of an analytical framework for assessing change that we developed in an earlier article (Ashbee and Hurst, 2020). That framework draws upon approaches associated with historical institutionalism to identify three processes of change that taken together constitute a genuinely transformational policy change that will, by definition, endure for a sustained time-period. These are paradigmatic change at the ideational level, the development of new or reconfigured interest coalitions and shifts in the character of associated institutions. Applying this framework to Trump's China policy we conclude that while there is evidence of policy transformation in terms of a paradigmatic shift, change at the level of interests and institutions has been more limited. While there is evidence to suggest that changes in those areas may continue to deepen and could eventually take a transformational form it is too early to claim that a policy transformation has already taken place.

The article proceeds by providing a brief overview of the relevant foreign policy literature thereby illustrating the degree to which the concept of transformative policy change remains largely undefined. We then outline the analytical framework used here for that purpose. We finally assess Trump's China policy against the criteria established in the framework and draw conclusions on this basis.

### **Defining policy change**

After a slow start the question of change has secured greater attention in the foreign policy analysis (FPA) literature during recent decades.<sup>1</sup> Most of that literature has, however, concerned itself with the causes of change rather than its extent or durability (Kleistra and Mayer, 2001: 387). While some scholars have sought to establish typologies of change that effort has characteristically been undertaken in broad and generalized terms that are difficult, if not impossible, to operationalize (Hermann, 1990; Holsti, 1982; Rosati, 1994; Yang, 2010: 416).

Consequently, in order to develop an analytical framework for assessing the character of change, we look to other literatures, including accounts drawn from historical institutionalism and studies of American political development (APD). In particular, we draw upon paradigms, interest alignments and institutional structures (Gao, 2016: 15 – 17; Poteete, 2003; (Skowronek: 2011, 171). Taken together they shape the degree to which the arrangements that emerge from a period of change mark a radical and enduring policy departure. Each of these variables will be considered in turn.

First, durable policy transformation requires an ideational shift. Although far from rigid ideas are at least loosely structured within paradigms, defined as "a framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and the kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing" (Hall, 1993: 279). A dominant paradigm is

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the recent literature see Brazys, Kaarbo and Panke, 2017.

characterized by a taken for granted quality or status as "common sense" such that it effectively limits "... the range of alternatives policy makers are likely to perceive as useful" (Campbell, 2002: 22; Campbell, 2004: 93). A paradigm shift consequently involves the embedding of a new set of policy ideas that become the "new common sense"; and the relegation or "demotion" of those ideas that had prevailed formerly.

Nonetheless, the extent to which particular policy ideas will "fit" a paradigm should not be overstated. "Fits" are relative rather than absolute. Policy paradigms exhibit "...flexibility and malleability in the face of constantly shifting political contexts" (Carstensen and Matthijs, 2018: 434). Furthermore, there are tensions within paradigms insofar as they incorporate the old alongside the new. It follows that although paradigmatic change is indeed a shift in terms of "common sense" such change is also more tangled and "untidy" in character than accounts sometimes suggest: "... rarely if ever sweeping away the detritus of a previous order to construct a new one" (Lieberman, 2002: 702). Having said this, however, once the foundational assumptions around which a particular paradigm is structured shift in character in ways that endure it is legitimate to invoke the concept of paradigmatic change.

Second, ideas that are not tied to associated interests and constituencies are likely to have a lightly embedded and pliable character. However, those that have secured the adherence and allegiance of interest coalitions have supporters with an incentive to protect them so as to maintain perceived gains (Pierson, 2000). Transformational policy change therefore requires the rise of new interests and / or the formation of different coalitions between existing interests such that the interest bloc that underpins an existing policy is displaced by another. For example, the emergence of liberal internationalism as the over-arching paradigm for US foreign policy after 1945 was accompanied and supported by a reconfiguration of interests. The newfound alliance between internationally competitive northern industries, southern agricultural interests and the "Wall Street" wing of the Republican Party led to the

marginalization of the isolationist forces associated with the Mid-West and created an enduring societal coalition underpinning liberal internationalism (Kupchan and Trubowitz, 2007, 11-15).

Third, the embeddedness of policy ideas and thus their durability also requires changes in the character of both formal policy implementing institutions and more informal institutions resting upon operating procedures (Hall, 1992: 2). While there has been a retreat from the more rigid interpretations of path dependence and an increasing emphasis on gradualism in the literature, there is nevertheless a recognition that policy paths become increasingly “sticky” over time, with institutions developing a significant degree of inertia because of sunk costs, the impact of coordination effects and learning processes (Hannan and Freeman, 1977; Pierson, 2000). It follows that the development of associated institutions further embeds a policy regime. The advent of liberal internationalism paradigm for example was associated with creation of policy implementing institutions both within the structures of the US government (for example the National Security Council and the Department of Defense) and overseas (NATO, the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade). Those institutions, in turn, have developed an inertia that has contributed significantly to the longevity of the liberal internationalist paradigm. Nonetheless, the process of institutional change is likely to be lagged and variegated, with ideational and interest shifts preceding change at the institutional level

In sum, a dominant ideational paradigm backed by a supporting coalition of societal interests, in combination with related institutional structures, is likely to have a long-run resilience (Skowronek, 2011: 171).

### **Policy transformation**

We now assess, on the basis of the three criteria introduced above, the extent to which the policies pursued during the Trump years, and the changes they yielded, can be considered transformational.

**(1) *Paradigmatic shifts***

This section of the article argues that there was a process of paradigmatic erosion during the years before the 2016 presidential election that opened the way for a more ruptural shift from January 2017 onwards. The paradigm that had taken shape during the years that followed the diplomatic recognition of Beijing in 1979 crystallised in the latter half of the 1990s as the US established Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) with China and the country joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Despite fractures and strains, that paradigm endured until 2011 - 2012 when, as the Obama administration's "rebalancing" or Pivot to Asia was launched, a degree of paradigm erosion became increasingly visible. That erosion in turn enabled policy entrepreneurs in the Trump administration to engineer a paradigm shift.

The early period was shaped by what can be termed an engagement paradigm (Garrison and Wall, 2016). It suggested that China could be drawn into the established global order and, as Robert Zoellick, Deputy Secretary of State in the Bush administration, put it, become a responsible stakeholder in the international system (National Committee on U.S.- China Relations, 2005: 9).

First, there was an insistence that a sharp distinction could be drawn between China and the USSR since "China does not believe that its future depends on overturning the fundamental order of the international system. In fact, quite the reverse: Chinese leaders have decided that their success depends on being networked with the modern world." (National Committee on U.S.- China Relations, 2005:7). Growing economic interconnectedness would in the long run lead to political change because, in President Clinton's words, "in the knowledge economy, economic innovation and political

empowerment, whether anyone likes it or not, will inevitably go hand in hand" (Clinton 2000). It was also held that the US could play a significant role in leveraging China. As President Clinton made the case for PNTR he argued that "we can work to pull China in the right direction, or we can turn our backs and almost certainly push it in the wrong direction ..." (Clinton, 2000).

Nonetheless, paradigms rest upon cross-cutting policy ideas and contested understandings. As noted above, the old and the new co-exist. Alongside affirmations of faith in engagement there remained a degree of hedging against US-China relations taking a markedly different course. Some tensions were evident in the first year of the George W. Bush administration, which explicitly rejected the concept of a strategic partnership between the US and China while failing to posit a clear alternative. This led to a degree of policy "compartmentalization". In the words of Secretary of State Colin Powell, "China is a competitor, a potential regional rival, but also a trading partner willing to cooperate where our strategic interests overlap" (US Senate, 2001: 30).

The tensions in the engagement paradigm became more pronounced over time. This process was hastened by the seeming slowness of reform within China, concerns about Chinese efforts to establish *suzerainty* over the South China Sea (Feldman, 2019: 10) and a perception that it was becoming, in an adaptation of Zoellick's phrase, a "selective stakeholder" (Clinton, 2014: 75). The economic impact of the trade shock that followed China's accession to the WTO, and the increasingly large trade imbalances, were beginning to have an electoral resonance and, as a result, the hierarchy of ideas shifted so that representations of China as expansionist and mercantilist began to take precedence over affirmations that a cooperative relationship could be constructed. There was an increasing recognition that the US – China relationship as a whole might come to be defined by competition (The White House, 2015: 24).



The Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" emerged in 2011 within this broad context. The Pivot "... represented a reorientation of US grand strategy towards exerting systematic geopolitical, diplomatic and economic pressure balancing against China's rise" (Rolf, 2021: 234).<sup>2</sup> The US sought to extend cooperation with China but at the same time to step up its security guarantees to established Asian allies and put more emphasis upon freedom of navigation particularly in the East and South China seas (Löffmann, 2016: 95; Department of Defense, 2012: 2). Furthermore, there was a commitment to bolstering and managing the regional economic architecture through the development of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) as part of a process of strengthening multilateral institutions across the region.<sup>3</sup> As President Obama himself declared: "... we've got to make sure we're writing the trade rules in the fastest-growing region of the world, the Asia-Pacific, as opposed to having China write those rules for us" (quoted in Löffmann, 2016: 97).

In sum, while the defining elements of the engagement paradigm remained in place during the Obama years they were reordered in ways that emphasised competition with China thereby eroding much of the paradigm's former potency and paving the way for a later shift.

The paradigmatic shift once Trump took office was a hesitant, stumbling and contradictory process. Some moves, such as President-Elect Trump's phone call with Tsai Ing-wen, the Taiwanese president, appear to have been taken without an outstanding of the consequences (Rogin, 2021a: 3). Demands made to Japan and South Korea impeded efforts to draw them towards US policy initiatives. Despite

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<sup>2</sup> There are no clear dividing lines and some of the policy shifts, including a partial redeployment of naval capabilities, associated with the Pivot dated back to George W Bush's second term (Rolf, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> The decision to begin the negotiations that would lead to the TPP was originally taken by the Bush administration in February 2008 (Fergusson and Vaughn, 2011: 1).

early calls for US-Chinese cooperation, the threats and then the meetings with Kim Jong-Un created a degree of consternation in Beijing and White House advisors were uncertain about the direction that policy was taking (Glaser, 2018). Matthew Pottinger, Deputy national security adviser and widely regarded as a China policy architect, was simply one player amongst many (Rogin, 2021b). There were tensions amongst different factions within the administration between those who sought an economic “decoupling” between the US and China, those who foresaw a form of regime change through the displacement of the Chinese Communist Party, and those who argued that a hardline stance could secure a form of rebalancing or greater reciprocity between the two nations. And Trump himself had largely structured his 2015 – 2016 election campaign around trade-related issues and the threat to the US heartland rather than China’s strategic goals. He appears to have been pulled between the pursuit of a “grand bargain” around trade, the openly proclaimed efforts to create a personal bond with Xi Jinping (leading to a climbdown after action had been threatened against the Chinese technology company ZTE) (Bolton, 2020: 301 – 302; Economy, 2019: 23), the demands of those who sought the “containment” of China, and an attempt, that was in place well before the Covid-19 pandemic, to ensure that China served as the “Other” around which his 2020 re-election bid could be structured. Amidst this, there was the Phase One trade deal which was formally signed in January 2020 but little more (Davis and Wei, 2020: 368 – 385).

Nonetheless, notwithstanding the fractures within the White House and the equivocation about policy goals, the Trump years had a logic of action that culminated in the overall repudiation of the engagement paradigm’s foundational assumptions. This was expressed in its clearest form in the Cabinet Memorandum on the U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific drawn up by the National Security Council (NSC) in 2017 – 2018. Its public release just before President Trump left office may have been an attempt to set the agenda for his successor (National Security Council, 2017; Kenji, 2021).

First, the engagement paradigm was inverted through the designation of China as a “revisionist” power that was seeking to overturn the global order. The 2017 National Security Strategy declared that “a geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order is taking place in the Indo-Pacific region” (The White House, 2017: 45). It followed as a corollary that visions based upon engagement and cooperation or that economic development was drawing China toward becoming a status quo power were redundant. The framing of the relationship was now very much one that echoed the Cold War conflict with the USSR although the clash with China was not only ideological and strategic but also an economic war to be fought through the imposition of tariffs and other protectionist measures: “The competition with which we are faced is not China versus the United States. It is the Chinese Communist Party, with its Marxist- Leninist and mercantilist vision for the world, versus freedom-loving people everywhere” (The White House, 2020).

Second, the notion that the US could in some way “pull” China toward the established global order through positive inducements was discarded in favour of an emphasis on coercive instruments of power. As Secretary of State Mike Pompeo argued, China had to be induced to “change in more creative and assertive ways”; the US had to “force China to reckon with its intellectual property theft and policies that harmed American workers”; Washington and its allies needed to “draw common lines in the sand” and perhaps form a “new alliance of democracies”. And, in a hint at regime change, not only should the US get “tough” with China but it should also seek to “empower the Chinese people” to change China from within (Pompeo, 2020).

Third, whereas relations with China had formerly been understood in inter-governmental terms, the Trump administration and others within the federal government apparatus, increasingly embraced what was termed a “whole of society” approach. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was, it was said, undermining the US through universities, soft power organizations such as the Confucius Institutes,

research and development, and cyber espionage (Kranz, 2018). Furthermore, the CCP was, as both FBI Director Christopher Wray and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis asserted, going beyond the state structures and itself organizing a “whole-of-society” effort. Although questions have been asked about the capacities of the US state apparatus, the scale of the Chinese offensive had to be matched by the US (Rogin, 2021a: 111).

Fourth, the Asian region was reconceptualized. The term Asia-Pacific that had long been employed was largely displaced by “Indo-Pacific”.<sup>4</sup> While the latter term had been used at times in the past, the Trump administration’s embrace of it was consistent at all levels of government. It constituted the adoption of a different mental map that sought to pit Asian nations, above all India and an empowered Taiwan, against China (Wallis, Chinoy, Sambhi and Reeves, 2020: 4). It was a designation that China challenged. As China’s *Global Times* asserted: “The “Asia-Pacific” involves economic and cooperative connotations, while the term “Indo-Pacific” is directly associated with geopolitical competition and alliance confrontation” (*Global Times*, 2020).

## **(2) Interest reconfiguration**

Although there was not a reconfiguration of interests whereby new interests displace established constituencies, there was a significant shift *within* the core constituencies aligned with the US’s China policy.

Business lobbies had been a mainstay of the engagement paradigm. The US Chamber of Commerce and the Business Roundtable had for example spent an estimated ten million dollars on campaigning

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<sup>4</sup>The December 2017 National Security Strategy Document referred to the “Indo-Pacific” eleven times and the “Asia-Pacific” just once (White House, 2017).

for PNTR (Devereaux, Lawrence, and Watkins, 2006: 287; The Business Roundtable, 2000). Even before the advent of the Trump administration, however, business sentiment had become increasingly ambivalent about the China market. While China was still seen as an opportunity there was also increasing wariness. Whereas China had seemed in the 1990s to be moving toward a more open and transparent business environment, the momentum of economic reform had stalled even before Xi Jinping took power. There was also a strong feeling that government procurement practices favoured local companies, state-owned enterprises had inbuilt advantages, US firms were under pressure to transfer technology and that the strategy laid out in *Made in China 2025* would lead to the displacement of US firms in high-tech sectors (Congressional Research Service. 2020; The American Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai, 2018). One estimate suggested that intellectual property theft from US companies in 2017 alone could be valued at 600 billion dollars (Economy, 2019: 19).

Consequently, although peak business organizations came out in opposition to the Trump administration's use of tariffs it was the means, rather than the ends, that they opposed and their criticisms were muted. While the National Association of Manufacturers criticized the imposition of tariffs it added that "China's theft of American intellectual property and their use of unfair trade practices represent clear threats to manufacturers' competitiveness and the jobs of American manufacturing workers" and "welcomed President Trump's focus on addressing this serious problem". (National Association of Manufacturers, 2018; US Chamber of Commerce, 2019). In sum, while business interests distanced themselves from the administration's bellicosity they backed sustained efforts to secure changes in Chinese trade and market practices.

Second, there were comparable shifts in the character of what has been termed the knowledge regime, the: 'sets of actors, organizations, and institutions that produce and disseminate policy ideas that affect how policy-making and production regimes are organized and operate in the first place' (Campbell and

Pedersen, 2011: 167). In the US, thinktanks play a defining role. While some are resolutely bipartisan or lean to the left conservative thinktanks have been particularly influential in terms of both policy ideas and as a source of personnel for successive Republican administrations.

Once Trump took office, the Heritage Foundation and the Hudson Institute appeared closely aligned to the White House and while there was a degree of implied disdain for the president's abrasive unilateralism and impetuosity there was also a tacit acceptance across much of the knowledge regime that the US had to take a more assertive position with China on both economic and security issues (Dollar and Hass, 2021; Weiss, 2017, Shephard, 2017).<sup>5</sup> Many free market conservatives, most notably the late Martin Feldstein who had served in the Reagan administration, saw the trade war as a means by which China could be compelled to comply with the rules governing commerce (Feldstein, 2019).<sup>6</sup> Finally, there were some advocacy organisations and thinktanks at the edges of the knowledge regime, such as the Center for Security Policy, that sought to drive the policy agenda towards a more unrestrained embrace of the competition paradigm (Center for Security Policy, 2020).

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<sup>5</sup> In 2021 Secretary of State Mike Pompeo became a distinguished fellow at the Hudson Institute although it should be noted that Henry Kissinger, who is reportedly seen by China as a "reliable friend and a trusted interlocutor", is also affiliated (Rogin, 2021a: 5).

<sup>6</sup> There were exceptions. Some attached to the Cato Institute, the free market thinktank, questioned the claim that tariffs would induce structural reform in China and saw "decoupling" as dangerous insofar as it detached China from the constraints imposed by the logic of economic necessity (Carpenter, 2020).

The “Longer Telegram” published by the Atlantic Council at the beginning of 2021 in an echo of George Kennan’s 1946 warnings of Soviet intentions captured the mood. It accepted the policy shift but distanced itself from President Trump’s style: “.. while the Trump administration did well to sound the alarm on China and its annunciation of strategic competition with Beijing was important, its episodic efforts at implementation were chaotic and at times contradictory” (Anonymous, 2021: 6). There was, in short, a demonstrable shift towards thinking that was based upon competition with China as a starting point.

### (3) *Institutional change*

Institutional change has been less pronounced, partly because it is likely, *ceteris paribus*, to be lagged behind other forms of change. Policy ideas and the configuration of interests around a policy shift in character and then, in the wake of this, policy-implementing institutions are “adjusted” or reconfigured so as to secure and solidify those changed policy ideas and interests. A lack of significant institutional change may also be a consequence of institutional pliability. The executive branch has a wide degree of latitude in the exercise of trade authority, for example, which enabled Trump to pursue much of his trade war with China without the need for institutional restructuring.

Nonetheless, there were acts of institutional innovation in response to the perceived threat posed by Chinese access to “cutting edge technologies” (National Security Council, 2017; Rogin, 2021a: 12). The Foreign Investment Risk Review Modernization Act of 2018 (FIRRMA) expanded the scope of foreign investments subject to national security reviews by the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) in order to mitigate the threat posed by “foreign-government controlled transactions” and required the Commerce Department to submit a biannual report on Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in the United States (US Congress, 2018). The Export Control Reform Act of 2018

(ECRA), for its part, was intended to restrict the export of emerging and foundational "dual-use" technologies to China (US Congress, 2018). Both bills were passed after Trump had threatened to issue an Executive Order to restrict direct investment and technology flows to and from China unilaterally if appropriate legislation was not forthcoming (Chorzempa and Hufbauer, 2018).

If security issues are considered, the reconceptualization of the Asia-Pacific as the "Indo-Pacific" has already been noted. To the extent that this concept took on an institutional, as opposed to a purely discursive, form, the key development was the revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or "Quad" between the US, India, Australia and Japan. Largely moribund since 2008, the Quad reconvened at the initiative of the US at the November 2017 East Asia Summit (Panda, 2017) and met at ministerial level for the first time at the UN in 2019 (Panda, 2017; Fowler, 2019). In 2020 Mike Pompeo made clear the Trump administration's vision for the Quad:

“As partners in this Quad, it is more critical now than ever that we collaborate to protect our people and partners from the CCP's exploitation, corruption and coercion ... Once we've institutionalized what we're doing - the four of us together - we can begin to build out a true security framework” (quoted in Gallo, 2020).

As Pompeo's statement implies, the Quad had not developed a formal institutional framework by the time the Trump administration came to a close and it continued to have a largely undefined character. Nonetheless, there was evidence of increasing cooperation between the four countries, not all of it explicitly in the security sphere. For example, there were a series of bilateral and trilateral infrastructure development partnerships including the 'Asia–Africa Growth Corridor' and the 'Trilateral Partnership for Infrastructure Investment in the Indo-Pacific' which represented a form of 'soft balancing' and an effort



to counter China's efforts to increase its own regional influence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Ashbee, 2020; He and Feng, 2020). In 2020 all four states came together in the Malabar naval exercise for the first time (Pal, 2020). The following March a joint summit produced a statement whose target was obvious to most observers, articulating the four countries commitment to a "free, open rules-based order, rooted in international law to advance security and prosperity and counter threats to both in the Indo-Pacific and beyond" (The White House, 2021) Having initially responded to the revival of the Quad dismissively, Beijing seemed rather more concerned by late 2020, with a Chinese deputy foreign minister referring to it as an "anti-China frontline" and an "Indo-Pacific NATO" (*Times of India*, 2020).

Reviving the Quad was one aspect of the Trump administration's efforts to draw India more closely into US efforts to contain China. The Obama administration had made India a "major defense partner" in its last year in office (Gould, 2016) but under Trump there was a notable acceleration in the process of institutionalizing defence cooperation. The India-U.S. Strategic and Commercial Dialogue established by Obama was replaced by a 2+ 2 dialogue intended to give greater emphasis to national security cooperation. The new process brought together the defence and foreign ministers of each country in annual meetings which produced a series of agreements which, taken collectively ensured that "the paperwork required to ensure complete synergy and interoperability between the Indian and US military is complete" (Aryan, 2020). Furthermore, in August 2018, India was granted the status of Strategic Trade Authority Tier 1 (STA-1) allowing sensitive dual-use technology products to be exported to India by US companies, putting India in the same category as Israel and Washington's allies in NATO. 2019 saw the first ever tri-service bilateral military exercise between the two countries (Bowman and Gabel, 2019).

Finally, at the very end of 2020 the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) saw a significant commitment of new resources to the Indo-Pacific in the form of the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI), which committed \$6.9 over three years billion to regional security and to "deter Chinese malign behaviour" (Gould, 2020).

### **Conclusion: legacies and logics**

Change was thus most pronounced at the ideational level insofar as the definition of the relationship between Washington DC and Beijing in terms of geopolitical or strategic competition had acquired a "taken-for-grantedness" at both elite and public levels by the end of the Trump administration. While there was still public support for cooperation in areas like arms control and climate change and some opposition to outright confrontation there were clear increases in negative perceptions of China amongst the public (Pew, 2019; Smeltz et al 2020). And while there was a partisan divide, with Republicans more likely to take a harder line, Pew polling indicated that by 2019 52 percent of Democrats and 58 percent of Republicans agreed that China was a threat. There was also bipartisan public support for limiting technology transfer, barring Chinese firms from building communications networks in the US and strengthening relationships with traditional allies in East Asia rather than with Beijing (Smeltz et al, 2020).

The scale of policy embeddedness is also reflected in the degree of bipartisan consensus, at least at elite level. The president's 2018 imposition of tariffs on China was backed by Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer (NY) who declared that Trump was "doing the right thing" (Lauter and Kaiman, 2018). In 2020 eleven U.S. Senate Democrats put forward the America LEADS Act of 2020, (Labor, Economic competitiveness, Alliances, Democracy and Security), which sought to challenge China by committing more than \$350 billion to US business, research and development, STEM education, and training, backing allies and international organizations such as the World Health Organization and

taking action on human rights issues (Zengerle, 2020). And in December 2020 there was bipartisan backing in Congress for the Holding Foreign Companies Accountable Act which targeted China by allowing the removal of foreign firms from US stock exchanges if they fail to comply with auditing requirements (Elegant, 2020).

And while the Biden administration is speaking in more measured tones than its predecessor and will pay much more heed to allies and partners in both Asia and Europe the fundamental message will remain the same. In early 2021 the incoming co-ordinator for Indo-Pacific Affairs, Kurt M. Campbell, published an article in *Foreign Affairs* based upon the assumptions of the strategic competition paradigm. Warning that, "left unchecked, Chinese behaviour could end the long regional peace" he and his co-author proceeded on to outline a strategy for preventing such an outcome by maintaining a favourable military balance of power, restoring the legitimacy of the existing US-led order and coalition-building (Campbell and Doshi, 2021). And, when Biden's Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan met with Yang Jiechi in Anchorage in March 2021 they struck a forceful and assertive tone that shocked many commentators (Wright, 2021).

When it comes to interests the position is less clear-cut. Rather than a decisive reconfiguration there has instead been a significant shift in attitude *within* core interests, notably the business community and the "knowledge regime", toward alignment with the strategic competition paradigm. Whilst this is far from complete, it has set in train processes that are reinforcing the ambitions set by the Trump White House. While the prospect of economic "decoupling" between the US and China of which the administration spoke can be disregarded as a political pipedream (US institutional investment in China has continued to increase) (Kynge, 2021), there is a degree of impetus towards a degree of decoupling insofar as some firms are being drawn away from China and towards the nations of southeast Asia. In Vietnam, for example, labour costs are about half those in China and it has invested extensively in

economic infrastructure. At the least some firms are considering a “China plus one” approach so that investment is diversified between China and another country (Liu, Ly, Sieg, and Simanin, 2020).

Thus, while the situation remains fluid there has been a clear shift toward support for a more abrasive approach toward China amongst key interests. At the very least, whereas in the 1990s the business community had been a powerful force pushing for deeper ties to China, backed by a large part of the knowledge regime, by the end of the Trump administration there was no "politically influential constituency within the United States advocating for strengthening U.S.-China relations" (Hass, 2019). As with the ideational dimension, therefore, the incentive structure facing policymakers favours the continuation of strategic competition.

The institutional dimension is arguably the one where there has been least change, which is not unsurprising if we accept the argument that the pace of change is likely to lag behind that of the other two variables or that there may be reconfigurations within institutions. Trump's institution-building in trade policy was relatively limited but tariffs nevertheless have an independent logic in terms of both domestic and international consequences that have a direct impact upon firms and lobbying processes. As E E Schattschneider observed, the domestic economic interests that gain from the “shelter” that tariffs give them from foreign competition then seek through lobbying to maintain those tariffs and other restrictions on trade. These industries thus come to “.. form the fighting legions behind the policy.” (Schattschneider 1963, 288). Thus, while peak business organizations opposed the imposition of tariffs producers in some sectors, including computer keyboards, drones, and cellphone signal boosters which were concerned about alleged IP theft and low-cost competition from China, embraced them. (Kimball, 2019). Protectionist groupings such as the Coalition for a Prosperous America (CPA) conducted employment surveys to support their case and their lobbying efforts, claiming in early 2019 that Trump's tariffs had already created 261,000 manufacturing jobs in the USA (Industry Week, 2019).

When it comes to security the Quad is clearly not yet an "Asian NATO" or anything like it, despite Beijing's protestations, but there are developments which have the potential to lock in change. Perhaps the most notable of these is the deepening of US-Indian defence cooperation. As noted above, the agreements signed during the Trump administration have completed the legal basis for defence interoperability between the two nations and this has been accompanied by significant increases in defence sales, cooperation on developing defence technologies and bilateral military exercises (Smith, 2019: 7-11). This increasing integration of the two countries' militaries will inevitably generate a degree of institutional inertia as the costs of ending cooperation increase. It should also be noted that the commitment of increased military resources through the Pacific Deterrence Initiative is likely to be followed by calls to invest in long-range weaponry including long-range conventional cruise and ballistic missiles (Campbell and Doshi, 2021) which will almost certainly trigger a strategic response by China with the potential to lock-in a process of action and reaction.

In sum, while there are institutional developments that support the continuation of the strategic competition paradigm they are as yet relatively limited in scope. It will require the further institutionalization of the Quad and the US-Indian defence relationship, along with the further embedding of the strategic competition paradigm in US trade legislation before we can legitimately assert that there has been a significant change to the pattern of incentives created by institutional structures.

The claim that the Trump administration "transformed" US policy toward China is therefore on this reading premature. Whilst there are indeed some transformative elements, most notably at the ideational level, it is as yet too early to talk about policy transformation. Nonetheless, alongside the paradigm shift there are developments at the level of both interests and institutions which suggest that

an eventual transformation is perhaps more likely than not. Certainly, logics of action have changed.<sup>7</sup> As Trump left office, there appeared to be little scope for turning back and policymakers have every reason to double-down on strategic competition with China. Consequently, if US – China relations are considered, the Trump administration has left a significant legacy such that while policy transformation has not yet been accomplished it has been set in motion.

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<sup>7</sup> The concept of a logic of action refers to the clusters of goals, predispositions and purposes that shape the way in which actors select and structure their preferences. It thus rests upon a generalized and fundamental set of sentiments (Etienne and Schnyder, 2014: 367; Streeck and Thelen, 2005: 18).

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