

Undergraduate Research Assistantship Report, 2024
US-China Relations since the 1970s

This academic year, I had the unique opportunity to assist Professor Elizabeth Ingleson in her research on US-China relations throughout the 20th century. This work revolves around the Professor's upcoming book project, titled "China and the United States since 1949: An International History". My research has mostly focused on the conceptualisation of "engagement" and "strategic competition" between 1970-2024. More specifically, I looked into the two terms' evolving use in American policy documents. I also investigated current-day academic debates on the concepts' meaning and relevance, both in American and Chinese scholar communities. My main tasks involved assessing primary sources –namely declassified White House archives- and critically contrasting articles and books written by leading US-China relations experts.

Methods

I began my research by compiling a database containing all articles relating to US-China relations published in several renowned historical journals. I included all works published between 2000-2024, whose topics related to the 1970-2024 period, and deliberately selected only articles written from a US analytical standpoint. These strict parameters helped rapidly narrow down my search for relevant publications.

I then compiled a second database including a range of American policy documents. I divided these into two categories: one including White Papers, telegrams, declassified reports, and the other speech transcripts. I thus compiled lists of key documents for all US administrations between 1969-2024, ranging from President Nixon and President Biden. Archives were selected according to their relative importance to the administration that issued them, based on citation count in the scholar literature and historical impact. These search criteria proved more difficult to apply for more recent documentation, which required in-depth fact-checking.

Lastly, I selected 25 contemporary academic articles on US-China diplomatic dealings since 1970, read them thoroughly, then contrasted them with one-another. I sought to identify key trends, debates and disagreements in the conceptualisation of US-China "engagement" and "strategic competition". I focused my analysis on American proponents of either model, and critically contrasted their arguments to uncover *how* historical narratives emerge in academia. This preliminary work, put into context by my previous archival research, informed an extensive literature review.

Results

Redacting a comprehensive literature summary and analysis yielded several key results. First of all, both US and Chinese scholars concur that the notion of "engagement" no longer accurately describes US-China relations. Friendly cooperation has ceased to be the key denominator of their diplomatic relations, which have instead drastically veered towards intense competition. A second major finding is that both US and Chinese academics also concur in describing current inter-state relations as revolving around "strategic competition". The latter term refers to antagonistic rivalries between the world's two greatest powers, spanning a complex matrix of commerce, technological and security issues.

This broad consensus on the current state of US-China relations is steeped in recent White House documentation, which has increasingly referred to “strategic competition” as the United States’ new foreign policy guideline in the Far East. That same documentation’s opacity with regards to long term policy goals, however, has also dug deep rifts among academia’s “China Watchers”. Most notably, scholars in the United States and China deeply disagree on strategic competition’s resilience as a policy framework. Many argue instead that, once China’s rise in power has slowed and international relations have stabilized, engagement may once again rise to the fore. Others warn of the increasing possibility for conflict.

Scholar communities thus appear divided between proponents of resilient strategic competition and resilient engagement. This dichotomy creates a very narrow frame of foreign policy analysis, and ignores the great margin for conceptual overlap between “engagement” and “strategic competition”. Indeed, both terms remain loosely defined in the literature, and do not seem inherently opposed to one-another. A minority of scholars have thus crafted alternative frames of analysis, such as “conengagement” (spanning a spectrum ranging from competition to engagement) and “hedged engagement”. Despite being vaguer, these conceptual frameworks help escape an often unclear and meaningless division between “competition” and “cooperation” as drivers of foreign policy.

In practice, scholars concur that “engagement” and “strategic competition” are deeply interrelated terms, steeped in Cold War imagery and lexicon. US administrations may have historically alternated between using “engagement” or “strategic competition” as policy label and justification. Yet conceptually, US-China relations have comprised a host of interdependent competitive and cooperative behaviours, spanning various fields. This phenomenon holds especially true since the 1991 end of the Cold War and the Bush administration. Our core finding is that both concepts are two sides of a single coin, and largely overlap in foreign policy spectra.

Overall, US and Chinese scholars may benefit from “thinking out of the box”, and should perhaps consider conceptualizing the US-China relationship along fresh lines, free from Cold War references and symbolism.

Personal Experience

Having specialised on China during my first two years of Bachelor, this Research Assistantship helped deepen my knowledge of China from a uniquely transversal perspective, combining history and international relations. This opportunity also allowed me to hone my research skills and methodology. The work habits and tools I acquired during this program will keep shaping my future academic endeavours. I particularly enjoyed the even distribution between research time dedicated to primary sources and more theoretical scholar articles. Contrasting both to this depth and extent proved extremely interesting.

Working with Professor Ingleson, and benefiting from guidance and feedback on various research tasks proved an incredibly enriching experience. I thoroughly look forward to reading her upcoming. I am also grateful to the entire US Phelan Centre team, and especially Ade and Joss, for their continuous support throughout this program.