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THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION AND THE UNITED STATES' CHINA ENGAGEMENT POLICY

Nicholas Khoo¹

The longstanding post-1972 consensus supporting a US policy of engagement with China has been eroded by increasing dissatisfaction with developments in China's domestic and foreign policies. As a consequence, a policy of near full-spectrum US engagement has been replaced by a more conditional posture where conflict increasingly outweighs cooperation. This article describes the relationship's breakdown during the Trump administration. It then evaluates two major competing explanations for the deterioration. These emphasise either the role of the concept of identity, or aspects of power politics, specifically, state interests and the distribution of capabilities. In a concluding section, the implications of a more confrontational Sino-US relationship for New Zealand are discussed.

Keywords: US engagement policy; Sino-US conflict; identity; neorealism; state interests; distribution of capabilities; New Zealand non-alignment.

Introduction

US-China relations have faced many challenges since Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong brokered a dramatic diplomatic rapprochement in 1972, but none as serious as the present.¹ At the present time, contention is the dominant characteristic in issue areas ranging from trade and military affairs, to human rights and democracy. Indeed, even before the Trump administration came to power, a consensus had developed among US China specialists that US engagement policy with China had failed, even as debate existed on what policy to replace it with.² Thus, in 2015, Harry Harding, a leading China expert, lamented the poor state of the US-China relationship. According to Harding, "present [US China] policy is widely believed to have failed."³ Looking to the future, his concern was that the US-China relationship would become "essentially competi-

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tive or even degenerate into open rivalry.”⁴ That time has come. Since 2017, there has been open acknowledgement in the United States of “geopolitical competition”⁵ and “strategic competition”⁶ with China, and serious discussion of how to “decouple” the relationship.⁷ Meanwhile, the Chinese perspective is that policies pursued by the US, particularly during the Trump presidency, are responsible for the present state of the relationship.⁸ As the Biden administration takes over the policy reins, this article establishes that the era of a near full-spectrum US policy of engagement with China has ended,⁹ replaced by a more conditional posture that reflects a greater US tolerance for conflict.¹⁰ It then proceeds to evaluate two major competing explanations for this development. These emphasise either the role of the concept of identity, or aspects of power politics—specifically, state interests and the distribution of capabilities. A final section discusses the implications of heightened Sino-US rivalry for New Zealand.

A Policy Unraveled

The unraveling of the US policy of engagement with China occurred over a sustained period in the post-Cold War era, culminating in the Trump administration’s adoption of a policy designed to actively seek changes in Chinese behavior in multiple spheres, both domestic and international. The first major document outlining this change was the administration’s December 2017 *National Security Strategy* (NSS). In an interview to introduce the NSS, National Security Adviser Herbert McMaster commented that China was a “revisionist power” that “was undermining the international order.”¹¹ In a significant departure, the NSS questioned the fundamental premise of engagement that had underpinned US China policy since 1972.¹² The NSS opined that “China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region,”¹³ a region where Beijing is “using economic inducements and penalties, influence operations, and implied military threats to persuade other states to heed its political and security agenda.”¹⁴ While critical of aspects of Chinese policy, the three previous NSS documents (in 2002, 2010 and 2015), had not adopted such stark language. These reports referenced “managing competition from a position of strength,”¹⁵ underlined that “a pragmatic and effective relationship between the United States and China is essential to address the major challenges of the 21st century,”¹⁶ and emphasised co-operation even while acknowledging differences.¹⁷

The administration’s January 2018 *National Defense Strategy* doubled down on the new line, noting that “the central challenge to US prosperity and security is the re-emergence of long-term, strategic competition by...revisionist powers,” a category which it identified as including, among others, China and Russia.¹⁸ The document reintroduced the concept—previously used in 2000 by then presidential candidate George W. Bush¹⁹—that China is a “strategic competitor” of the US.²⁰ The 2019 *Department of Defense Indo-Pacific Strategy* report buttressed this perspective, cataloguing China’s revisionist policy practices,²¹ even while highlighting the erosion of the US’s regional deterrence

posture.²² This was followed by the February 2020 *United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China* report, which called for a “clear-eyed assessment of the Chinese Communist Party’s intentions and actions, a reappraisal of the United States’ many strategic advantages and shortfalls, and a tolerance of greater bilateral friction.”²³

Given that China’s post-1978 economic growth model has been predicated on a robust relationship with the US, the unraveling of US engagement policy is a disastrous outcome.²⁴ Nonetheless, at the same time, this development is also a confirmation of a longstanding Chinese world-view. To be specific, there has been a persistent assertion by both official and non-official Chinese sources of the US’s alleged malign view of China’s rise. As early as the 1990’s, references were being made by Chinese analysts to a US intent to ‘contain’ China’s rise.²⁵ This feature of Chinese commentary has strengthened over time. In a not so-veiled reference to the US, a Chinese government Defence White Paper released in October 2000 declared that: “No fundamental change has been made in the old, unfair and irrational international political and economic order. Certain big powers are pursuing ‘neo-interventionism,’ ‘neo-gunboat diplomacy,’ and ‘neo-economic colonialism,’ which are seriously damaging the sovereignty, independence, and developmental interests of many countries, and threatening world peace and security.”²⁶ No doubt, this stance reflected the incoming George W. Bush administration’s more robust stance toward China during that year’s presidential campaign. Despite a contentious start that was marked by the EP-3 crisis of April 2001, the imperative of prosecuting the Global War on Terror after 9/11 focused US attention on maintaining a stable relationship with China throughout Bush’s two-term tenure,²⁷ even as it kept its eye on balancing China’s rising power.²⁸ Frictions intensified as the Obama administration responded to China’s growing post-2008 global financial crisis power position by articulating a ‘rebalancing’ to the Indo-Pacific policy over the course of the 2010-2011 period.²⁹ The Chinese reaction to this development was far from monolithic.³⁰ Nevertheless, it was not uncommon to hear recycled claims from Chinese academics that the US was adopting a policy “posture [that is] seemingly intent to contain China.”³¹

And Chinese grievances have escalated with the Trump administration’s adoption of a more robust China policy, exemplified by US trade policy since early 2018.³² This watershed development was underpinned by longstanding and specific complaints by the US Treasury Representative’s Office.³³ It quickly became clear to the Chinese leadership that the US was not going to back down on its demand for a renegotiation of the economic relationship. Accordingly, a Phase One agreement was reached in late 2019, taking effect on 15 January 2020.³⁴ In an ironic twist, Trump’s signature achievement on China was torpedoed by a combination of idiosyncrasies. Specifically, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership’s historically well-established proclivity to place the party’s image before their citizens’ health interacted with President Trump’s bizarre

decision-making in respect to the coronavirus pandemic, with catastrophic consequences.³⁵ Despite having been directly and repeatedly notified of the pandemic in January, Trump took what is manifestly insufficient action.³⁶ As a consequence, we have a full-blown global health crisis, with nearly 500,000 American deaths registered to date, the highest of any country in the world.³⁷ There is now no realistic way for China to meet the terms of the agreement.³⁸ And, to compound matters, rather than cooperate to solve the most pressing international health crisis in a century, Beijing³⁹ and Washington have politicised the issue.⁴⁰

In the meantime, the US has hardened its stance on China. The administration laid out its critique of China in a systematic quartet of public speeches over the June-July 2020 period. These involved the National Security Advisor, the FBI Director, the Attorney General, and the Secretary of State.⁴¹ Indeed, it is difficult to think of a sphere in the relationship that has not been targeted by the administration.⁴² US sanctions on China have ranged from adding Chinese entities⁴³ to two separate blacklists, the first list overseen by the Commerce Department and the second managed by the Department of Defense;⁴⁴ requiring Chinese news agencies operating in the US to register foreign government operatives, thus subjecting them to the same rules governing Chinese diplomats;⁴⁵ barring specific Chinese officials responsible for implementing its widely criticised national security law on Hong Kong from entry into the US;⁴⁶ enacting legislation against US investments in companies owned or operated by the Chinese military;⁴⁷ reaching a finding that China is pursuing a policy of genocide toward its Uighur minority in Xinjiang;⁴⁸ tightening visa rules for Chinese Communist Party members who visit the United States;⁴⁹ launching a vast investigation of Chinese efforts to acquire research by scientists employed by US universities and research institutes,⁵⁰ even as the administration publicly warns of China's efforts to exploit US universities in various ways;⁵¹ and targeting Beijing's strategic neuralgia by deepening US relations with Taiwan.⁵²

These actions have prompted a furious Chinese response. On 25 May 2020, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi declared that American politicians "are taking China-US relations hostage and pushing us to the brink of a new Cold War."⁵³ On 9 July, Wang opined that the China-US relationship "is faced with the most severe challenge since the establishment of diplomatic ties."⁵⁴ In his view, the US's China policy has reached a "point of paranoia" where "it seems as if every Chinese investment is politically driven, every Chinese student is a spy, and every cooperation initiative is a scheme with hidden agenda."⁵⁵ Tensions culminated on 24 July, with the Trump administration's decision to order the closure of China's consulate in Houston, the charge being that it was serving as a hub for espionage activities.⁵⁶ It bears noting that Chinese media focused particular fury on US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.⁵⁷

Even as the Chinese government invoked the spectre of a 'New Cold War,' the Trump administration contended that the metaphor was an inadequate one to characterise bilateral conflict. An authoritative 2019 Chinese government White Paper on China's role in the world lauded the contributions of its post-1978 development model, counseling that "cooperation is the only correct choice for the two countries,"⁵⁸ before advising that "the US should abandon the Cold War mentality,"⁵⁹ and disassociate itself from a "surging" trend in world politics of "hegemonism and power politics."⁶⁰ Echoing this line, Chinese foreign ministry official Hua Chunying "urge[d] relevant officials in the United States to abandon the Cold-War mentality and zero-sum game mindset, adopt an objective and rational view towards China and China-US relations, and focus more on promoting mutually beneficial cooperation to better serve the two peoples and the people around the world."⁶¹ For its part, the Trump administration rejected the containment metaphor, pointing out that the challenge presented by China represents a level of complexity that exceeds that of the Soviet Union. Thus, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo noted: "This isn't about containment. Don't buy that. It's about a complex new challenge that we've never faced before. The USSR was closed off from the free world. Communist China is already within our borders."⁶²

Explaining the Unravelling

How can we explain the unravelling of the US engagement policy with China, and the accompanying tolerance for a relationship where aspects of conflict prevail over cooperation? Space considerations limit our review to what are arguably the two most influential explanations—identity theory and neorealist theory.

There is a burgeoning research programme on the concept of identity in great power politics, where the China-US relationship is prominently featured.⁶³ Identity as a source of intense conflict in US-China relations comports with the rhetoric of some of the major participants in the relationship.⁶⁴ On the US side, various reports since 2017 have juxtaposed ideological regime differences with standard inter-state power struggle to explain the deterioration in relations.⁶⁵ Thus, the 2017 NSS described the Sino-US relationship as one of the "power contests" facing the US in world politics, which it characterised as "fundamentally political contests between those who favour repressive systems and those who favour free societies."⁶⁶ In his introductory statement for the 2019 *Department of Defense Indo-Pacific Strategy* report, Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan singled out the CCP-led China as typifying the phenomenon of "inter-state strategic competition" where "geopolitical rivalry between free and oppressive world order visions" is "the primary concern for US national security."⁶⁷ The February 2020 *United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China* report added specificity to this, acknowledging "long-term strategic competition between our two systems,"⁶⁸ "a system rooted in Beijing's interpretation of Marxism-Leninism ideology,"⁶⁹ and calling for "a competitive approach to the People's Republic of China."⁷⁰ Finally, the State

Department Policy Planning Staff's November 2020 report on China noted that "the Chinese Communist Party has triggered a new era of great power competition,"⁷¹ stating that "in the face of the China challenge, the United States must secure freedom."⁷²

The emphasis by the US on regime-based identity differences has been mirrored by China. That this has occurred is also not surprising. China's state identity manifestly reflects its Marxist-Leninist ideology, with the CCP at the vanguard. The leadership of the Peoples' Republic of China views itself as an exemplar of a state that practices "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," which according to Xi Jinping, the President and Secretary-General of the CCP, offers "a new option for other countries and nations that want to speed up their development while retaining their identity."⁷³ And central to PRC identity are the "Four Cardinal Principles," first articulated by Deng Xiaoping in 1979, and advanced as the "basic prerequisite for achieving modernization."⁷⁴ These principles are enshrined in the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, establishing the Party's dominance over China's politics and society on a Marxist-Leninist basis.⁷⁵ And, consistent with the foundational Marxist-Leninist texts, the Chinese leadership believes in "building a socialism that is superior to capitalism, laying the foundation for a future where we will win the initiative and have the dominant position."⁷⁶

The differences in the two state's identity-based self-perceptions are stark. And so are the differences on the significance of these diverging identities. In the Chinese self-conception, a Marxist-Leninist China pursues an "independent foreign policy of peace" and "will never seek hegemony or engage in expansion."⁷⁷ Accordingly, China "absolutely reject[s] the Cold War mentality and power politics."⁷⁸ In contrast, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has highlighted the CCP's identity as a source of conflict in bilateral relations, declaring in early 2020 that the CCP is "the central threat of our times."⁷⁹ In Pompeo's view, "today, China is increasingly authoritarian at home, and more aggressive in its hostility to freedom everywhere else... If the free world doesn't change Communist China, Communist China will change us."⁸⁰ Accordingly, "the old paradigm of blind engagement with China simply won't get it done. We must not continue it. We must not return to it."⁸¹

The Sino-US dyad manifestly involves states with deeply contrasting identities, but what is the specific causal role and impact of identity in the bilateral relationship? Are identity dynamics the reason for the unravelling of the US engagement policy, and with it, the wider Sino-US relationship? Closer inspection suggests important empirical and methodological reasons for caution.

First, while recognising that some level of identity-based friction is inevitable in relations between states organised on such different governing principles, substantial empirical evidence suggests that the US is able to confidently coexist with a Chinese communist state that does not share its liberal democratic capitalist identity.⁸² A similar generalisation can be made for China. Despite significant identity-based differences,

the US has had a very robust engagement policy with China since 1972. In broad terms, the Chinese economic miracle is "Made in the USA." The US has been the top export market for China for much of the post-1972 era. Not to put too fine a point on it, without the ability to export to the US market, there would be no China economic miracle. And China has been a major export market for the US.⁸³

The goal of US engagement policy since 1972 has been to substantially affect Chinese foreign and domestic policy, to incentivise China to operate in ways that are consistent with US interests.⁸⁴ To this end, US engagement policy has survived a number of specific and serious challenges in the post-Cold War era including: the CCP's Tiananmen era crackdown from 1989-92; the Clinton administration's MFN-Human Rights linkage policy from 1993-94; the Taiwan Straits crisis of 1995-96; and Taiwanese leader Chen Shuibian's disruptive role in the Sino-US relationship from 2001-08. Until very recently, the US successfully balanced the imperative to provide for its own security as well as its alliance partners in the strategically significant East Asian region, even while integrating China into the international system. The near full-spectrum version of this policy was a strategic choice which yielded substantial benefits to the US and its regional allies and partners, but has clearly run its course. To the extent that serious conflict has erupted, as discussed below in the section on neorealist theory, it is principally because China has acquired the capabilities and the resolve to challenge US policy in East Asia in the post-2008 era that Washington has had to engage in sustained pushback against Chinese policy.

Second, as part of a broader identity research programme, it is unclear if the concept provides us with sufficient conceptual leverage to cogently analyse US-China relations. In this respect, analysts who have posited identity as the principal determinant in Chinese foreign policy are now either unable to explain China's turn toward a more contentious stance, and/or are implausibly citing changes in the identity concept as reasons for pessimism. For example, in focusing on identity as a core explanatory variable,⁸⁵ Kang contends that fears over China's rise are "empirically unfounded,"⁸⁶ and that there exists a strong shared regional understanding about "China's preferences and limited aims."⁸⁷ In this view, rather than viewing China as a threat, present-day East Asian states are mimicking their predecessors in previous epochs who identified Chinese regional hegemony with stability.⁸⁸ Kang's perspective is simply unable to provide a convincing explanation for China's more robust post-2009 foreign policy.⁸⁹ Alternatively, David Shambaugh argued in 2005 that China was gradually shedding its "identity of historical victim."⁹⁰ However, just a few years later, identity is cited as the key reason for an increasingly assertive Chinese Asia policy.⁹¹ Could China's state identity have changed so quickly? This seems highly unlikely. Indeed, if identity is so malleable, it draws our attention to the fact that the claims on behalf of the concept are a case of spurious causation, masking the operation of more fundamental variables outlined below.

Neo-Realist Theory and the United States' China Engagement Policy

How then can we explain the trajectory of the United States' China engagement policy? Two reasons—the timing of contemporary Sino-US conflict escalation and the historical record of US relations with non-liberal democratic states—strongly suggest that the course of the relationship is more convincingly understood with reference to concepts in neorealist theory—the distribution of capabilities and state interests.⁹² Moreover, moving forward, in practical policy terms, an interest based US policy toward China is much more likely to sustain a workable relationship than one based on identity convergence.

First, consider the timing of conflict escalation in the Sino-US relationship. Bilateral relations from 1991-2008 were far from smooth.⁹³ But it was only at the tail end of the Hu Jintao era, and particularly after Xi Jinping assumed the mantle of CCP Secretary General in November 2012, and sought to systematically project China's rapidly expanding post-2008-09 global financial crisis power onto the international sphere, that the US responded with the adoption of a more robust China policy. In other words, bilateral relations sharply deteriorated after China acquired sufficient material capabilities and demonstrated a revisionist state posture toward US regional interests.⁹⁴ This point is recognised even in what is arguably the US government's most identity-focused report on China in recent years, the State Department's *2020 Elements of the China Challenge*. Notwithstanding the report's heavy focus on aspects of China's ideological identity and emphasis on its corrosive role in bilateral relations,⁹⁵ it nevertheless states that ultimately, "China is a challenge because of its conduct."⁹⁶ This makes eminent sense since China's identity as a Marxist-Leninist state has remained broadly constant throughout the post-1978 reform era, while its conduct has changed because of rising capabilities and revisionist state interests.

Second, a review of the historical record of US relations with non-liberal democratic states suggests that a state's values, a synonym for identity, are a significant problem in bilateral relations only when there is already an underlying strategic competition based on the balance of power and conflicting state interests. The most prominent example in this respect is the US-Soviet relationship, where cooperation with the Soviet Union during World War Two was replaced by intense Cold War rivalry.⁹⁷ As in the contemporary China case noted above, Soviet identity remained broadly constant throughout this period. What changed was Moscow's capabilities to challenge US foreign policy. For states that are not in strategic competition with the US, a state's identity and values present no barrier to cooperation. The US has a well-established record of cooperating with states with vastly different ideological identities.⁹⁸ Indeed, the Sino-US containment of Soviet power in the second-half of the Cold War is one of the most prominent examples of this phenomenon.⁹⁹ This historical pattern in US foreign policy continues to this day. Thus, the US NSS 2017 report highlighted China's authoritarian ideology¹⁰⁰

as a major problem in Sino-US bilateral relations, even while stressing that in its relations with allies and partners, many of whom are not liberal democratic, “we are not going to impose our values on others.”¹⁰¹

Third, an interest rather identity-based relationship has a much greater likelihood of being sustained by Beijing and Washington. It is important to note that notwithstanding copious discussion highlighting ideological differences, key Trump administration documents on China are careful to specify a US willingness to cooperate with China when interests overlap. The 2017 *National Security Strategy* notes that Chinese “intentions are not fixed,” and that the US “stands ready to cooperate across areas of *mutual interest* (italics added).”¹⁰² Similarly, the 2019 *Indo-Pacific Strategy* report states that “the United States is prepared to support China’s choices to the extent that China promotes long-term peace and prosperity for all in the Indo-Pacific, and we remain open to cooperate where our *interests align* (italics added).”¹⁰³ The 2020 President’s Office report states that “we welcome cooperation when our *interests align* (italics added).”¹⁰⁴ On this score, it is encouraging that President Biden has repeated that the US “is ready to work with Beijing when it is in our interest to do so,”¹⁰⁵ even as he has described China as the US’s “most serious competitor.”¹⁰⁶ And, it bears noting that given Biden’s less divisive international posture than Trump, some Chinese expect him to be more effective than his predecessor in exerting US pressure on China.¹⁰⁷

US-China Relations in a Biden Presidency: Implications for New Zealand

The policy consequences for New Zealand of a correct understanding of the basic causes of the unravelling of the US engagement policy with China in the post-2020 US Presidential election era cannot be overstated. A China that is viewed by the US as a challenge because of its Marxist-Leninist identity is an existential threat, where coexistence is an unacceptable outcome. In contrast, a China that is viewed as a challenge because of its expanding capabilities is one that, even if it poses a considerable problem for US policy, can conceivably be managed with a judicious combination of engagement, internal economic restructuring, inter-state balancing, and alliance management.

New Zealand understandably seeks to sustain a relationship with both China and the United States. In the face of escalating conflict between the US and China, can New Zealand weather the ensuing storm? Precisely because both China and the US are seeking as many partners and allies in their emerging competition, there is reason for cautious optimism in the short-run. That said, this interregnum is neither reason for complacency, nor a substitute for hard-headed analysis of New Zealand’s options. Certainly, as David Parker, the previous Minister for Trade and Export Growth has affirmed, there needs to be a diversification and consolidation of New Zealand’s economic partnerships, even as preparation is made for an increasingly less benign external security environment.¹⁰⁸ In this respect, negotiating a US-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement to match the China-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement makes eminent sense.¹⁰⁹

Beyond the short-term, Wellington's dilemma, which is similar to that of multiple states in the Asia-Pacific is this: what is the appropriate foreign policy to adopt when our number one trading partner (China since 2017), is also in a rivalry relationship with the state that underpins our regional security since 1945 (the US)? It is difficult to think of a more challenging strategic conundrum for New Zealand. Structural incentives reinforce Wellington's psychological preference for non-alignment. As a preferred policy option, significant structural economic and domestic political incentives point in the way of New Zealand seeking to maintain a position of non-alignment in a bipolar Sino-US regional order. Non-alignment has the benefit of maintaining the trade and investment link with China while establishing a minimum basis for cooperation with the US across a spectrum of issues. The question is whether this posture, which frankly, has been Wellington's de facto policy throughout the post-Cold War era, is sustainable in the face of escalating US-China rivalry. This remains to be seen. But even if nonalignment is achievable for Wellington, it is an illusion to think that it will be costless. For one thing, New Zealand will lose the maximal benefits of alignment with either China or the US. Worse still, nonalignment may easily backfire. How so? Non-alignment may very well be interpreted as neutrality to Wellington; it could easily mean something else to Beijing and Washington. Wellington could end up in a situation where either (or both) Beijing and Washington equate nonalignment with appeasement, opening the door to various levels of implicit or explicit coercive diplomacy from these states. Our remaining analysis focuses on the status of Wellington's relationship with Beijing and Washington.

China presents New Zealand with a dilemma because core norms that resonate deeply with New Zealanders' sense of their identity as a liberal democratic nation are simply not shared with China.¹¹⁰ Moreover, a foreign policy of deep engagement with China pits many aspects of New Zealand's identity against its economic interests. Up to now, hard economic interests have won out. Moving forward, China has been our number one trading partner since 2017, and that aspect of our relationship can be expected to strengthen. As the vaccine for the coronavirus is disseminated, we can anticipate, among other things, a further consolidation of our trading relationship, with the free trade agreement updated in January 2021, increased numbers of Chinese students studying at our tertiary institutions once borders open, and increased two-way tourism and investment.¹¹¹ On the broader foreign policy front, we can anticipate both sides to build on ties even as there is an implicit "agree to disagree" stance over specific issues, such as treatment of non-Han majority in Tibet and Xinjiang, political developments in Hong Kong, and the high-profile territorial disputes in the South China Sea and East China Sea.

Post-Cold War US-New Zealand relations have principally involved relationship repair. In this respect, the watershed event is clearly Wellington's prohibition of nuclear vessels in its waters in 1984.¹¹² New Zealand's non-nuclear posture prevented practical alliance

cooperation under framework of ANZUS. Extensive efforts to resolve the issue proved unsuccessful. And in August 1986, the United States suspended its ANZUS security obligations to New Zealand, with Secretary of State George Shultz stating that “we remain friends, but we are no longer allies.”¹¹³ Nevertheless, relations have improved with the passage of time.

On 4 November, 2010, the US (represented by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton) and New Zealand (represented by Prime Minister John Key and Foreign Minister Murray Stuart McCully) signed the Wellington Declaration, establishing a “New Strategic Partnership.”¹¹⁴ This was followed up in June 2012 with the Washington Declaration.¹¹⁵ The Declaration calls for closer bilateral security cooperation, including increasing cooperation in the South Pacific, building New Zealand’s capacity in peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. By February 2013, comfort levels had risen enough that Prime Minister Key stated in an interview that “the relationship between New Zealand and the United States has never been better.”¹¹⁶ Indeed, notwithstanding Wellington’s aversion to the nuclear dimension of great power politics, it is worth noting that there is a significant continuity in Wellington’s foreign policy. New Zealand’s participation in the ‘Five Eyes’ intelligence sharing network has been unaffected by the ANZUS termination.¹¹⁷ Here, New Zealand’s geographical asset to the US lies in the area of signal intelligence, with facilities in Tangimoana, near Palmerston-North in the North Island, and in Waihopai Valley, near Blenheim in the South Island.¹¹⁸

Progress in bilateral relations is underlined in the 2017 NSS report, where New Zealand is identified as “a key US partner contributing to peace and security across the region.”¹¹⁹ Thus, President Biden inherits a relationship that in many respects is quite robust. And New Zealanders are positively disposed to reengage with a US that is more integrated in international institutions; focused on boosting regional economic interdependence; and less transactional in bilateral relations. Biden’s statement that he wants to consult with allies and friends in developing his administration’s China strategy will register well with the New Zealand government and electorate.¹²⁰ That said, the double-edged sword nature of Biden’s statement for New Zealand foreign policy has gone unnoticed and should be food for thought.¹²¹ In any case, at a symbolic level, it will certainly be noted in Wellington that Biden backed up his statement by including Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern in his round of personal telephone conversations with key US allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific region on 23 November 2020, well before he had a conversation with Xi on 10 February 2021.¹²² The challenge will be to build on the potential for bilateral relations that were unrealised during the Trump administration.

Conclusion

Sino-US relations were in deep trouble well before the Trump administration, which dealt the coup de grace to a US policy of near full-spectrum engagement with China. What has replaced that policy is best described as a competitive interest-based

relationship, deeply rooted in great power politics. And given the structural origins of this rivalry, there is little reason to expect substantial improvements during President Biden's tenure. The central argument of this article—that power politics rather than state identities is the basic driver of the US-China relationship—illuminates a matter of the highest national interest for New Zealand. Moving forward, some of the more important questions facing New Zealand foreign policymakers are a corollary of the faltering Sino-US relationship. These include the following: How might New Zealand respond to a weakening and/or a strengthening of the cornerstone of the Asian security complex since 1945, namely, the US-alliance network? What is New Zealand's back up plan if, after the inevitable post-vaccine growth, regional growth stalls for whatever reason? How exactly should New Zealand diversify its sources of economic growth? How should we respond to the use of asymmetrical economic and/or military power by the major powers in the international system? What is our strategy for heightened great power politics in our immediate regions, the South Pacific and the Antarctic? Admittedly, these are challenging questions to grasp, and easier to pose than to answer. And, it may be that we have the good fortune to never have to put our answers to these questions into practice. But not to confront them is as ill-advised as indulging in nostalgia for a continuation for a liberal order that has already receded, as reflected in the unravelling of the post-1972 US China engagement policy.

- 1 For an overview of the relationship from 1972-91, see Harry Harding, *Fragile Relationship: The United States and China Since 1972* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 1992). For an overview from 1989 to 2020, see Nicholas Khoo, *China's Foreign Policy Since 1978: Return to Power* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2020), pp.57-101.
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- 3 Harding, "Has U.S. China Policy Failed?," p.95.
- 4 Harding, "Has U.S. China Policy Failed?," p.119.
- 5 Office of the President of the United States [OPUS], *National Security Strategy, 2017* (Washington DC: 2017), p.45. Available at <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/articles/new-national-security-strategy-new-era/>.
- OPUS, *National Security Strategy, 2017*, p.25.
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120 "According to Biden, "The best China strategy, I think, is one which gets every one of our — or at least what used to be our — allies on the same page. It's going to be a major priority for me in the opening weeks of my presidency to try to get us back on the same page with our allies." "Biden Made Sure 'Trump Is Not Going to Be President for Four More Years,'" *New York Times*, 2 December 2020. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/02/opinion/biden-interview-mcconnell-china-iran.html>.

121 As my colleague Reuben Steff has commented: "New Zealand should be careful what it wishes for — the US will want more out of its allies to challenge China. Even if this is generally a rhetorical statement of diplomatic negotiating positions, China could interpret this as US allies and partners 'siding' with the US against Chinese interests." Author's email exchange with Reuben Steff, 15 February 2021.

122 "Ardern Speaks with US President-elect Joe Biden," *Radio New Zealand*, 23 November 2020. Available at <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/political/431262/ardern-speaks-with-us-president-elect-joe-biden>; "Readout of President Joseph R. Biden Jr. Call With President Xi Jinping of China," US Department of State, 4 February 2021. Available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/02/10/readout-of-president-joseph-r-biden-jr-call-with-president-xi-jinping-of-china/>.