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Dignity, Technology, and Global Order New Approaches to Complex Challenges

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Organizational Inadequacy

If the preceding description of the consequential nature and urgency of these challenges is accurate, why is the policy community failing to actively and effectively address them? One important reason is that overcoming the pacing problem and Collingridge Dilemma is fundamentally difficult. It requires getting ahead of technology and engaging in *anticipatory governance*: imagining desired futures and building towards them from the present. Not only does this necessitate exploring and articulating desired futures, an exercise that runs risks of veering into utopian imaginings, but also considering and including in that process the numerous stakeholders of that future, which often extend beyond national boundaries and may conflict with near-term interests.

But another central reason has to do with organizational failures, or, perhaps more charitably, organizational inadequacies. In order to arrive at new approaches, it is important to first understand the structural limitations and deficiencies of existing organizations and how these contribute directly and indirectly to the lack of attention to long-term transnational challenges.

It is not news that managing competing interests between the United States and China is essential for global peace and prosperity. Since 2012, analysts have been broadly aware of the escalating dangers of a security dilemma, like what political scientist Graham Allison has called a Thucydides Trap, between the United States and China. Over the last five years, the bilateral relationship has further deteriorated to what is now regularly compared to a new Cold War. Experts have offered varying diagnoses of the deterioration, ranging from the increasing authoritarianism of Chinese leader Xi Jinping, to rising nationalism in the United States, to structural shifts in the global balance of power, to the failure of the liberal world order to respond to the myriad challenges of a globalizing world, including financial turbulence, rising social inequality, and accelerating climate change.

Yet with all the organizational expertise that is aware of these issues, the policy community is still doing a poor job at addressing the fundamental long-term strategic challenges, choosing instead to focus on near-term tactical

issues that may, counterintuitively, take us farther from a desirable strategic end-goal rather than toward it. Addressing these near-term policy issues is important, and some would argue should be the primary job of policy-focused organizations, but that doesn't change the fact that these organizations are not effectively addressing critical, long-term strategic issues.

There are a whole host of organizations that could and should be thinking about these challenges, from think tanks and policy research organizations, to universities, to government agencies, to foundations, to independent policy experts and pundits. Each has its own strengths, but none are ideally positioned, structured, or incentivized to address them. Our primary focus here will be on think tanks, those organizations that, on the surface, and often in their stated organizational missions, should be best positioned to diagnose and offer solutions to long-term policy challenges.

Think Tanks

Think tanks have been at the center of the discussion of what and who caused the deterioration of U.S.-China relations and what policy responses the United States should adopt. Over the last three years, scores of related reports, strategies, and articles have been produced by experienced, well-informed analysts at major think tanks. Yet despite this prodigious output, few breakthrough ideas or alternative frameworks have emerged.

The 2019-2020 lead-up to the change in U.S. administrations provided an excellent opportunity to compare think tank views on the U.S.-China relationship. Beginning in early 2019, think tanks began publishing China strategy recommendations, positioning themselves, their experts, and their policies for the new administration. Over the next year, at least ten major reports were issued on how the United States should respond to the "rise of China" or the "China challenge," each with their own take on a "strategic framework."

The Center for American Progress proposed a framework of "limit, leverage, and compete."¹² The Center for New American Security (CNAS) released a government-mandated report that has over 100 recommendations

12 Melanie Hart and Kelly Magsamen, *Limit, Leverage, and Compete: A New Strategy on China* (Center for American Progress, April 2019), <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2019/04/03/468136/limit-leverage-competes-new-strategy-china/>.

under the topics of sustaining conventional military deterrence, securing vital U.S. technological advantages, bolstering U.S. economic power and leadership, strengthening American diplomacy, competing over ideology and narrative, promoting digital freedom and high-tech illiberalism, and cultivating the talent to compete with China.¹³ CNAS published an additional report entitled “Total Competition” that outlines a strategy to confront China in the South China Sea.¹⁴ The Asia Society published a major report that couches recommendations in terms of “smart competition” with China.¹⁵ The Hoover Institution published a nearly 300-page report recommending “constructive vigilance.”¹⁶ The National Bureau of Asian Research published a report calling for “partial disengagement” as an approach to U.S.-China economic competition.¹⁷ The Atlantic Council’s report called for “‘managed competition’ to meet the full spectrum of challenges posed by China.”¹⁸ The Aspen Institute published a 170-page collection of essays from nineteen highly regarded experts.¹⁹

13 Ely Ratner, Daniel Kidman, and Susanna V. Blume, et al., *Rising to the China Challenge: Renewing American Competitiveness in the Indo-Pacific* (Center for New American Security, January 2020), <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/rising-to-the-china-challenge>.

14 Patrick M. Cronin and Ryan Neuhard, *Total Competition: China’s Challenge in the South China Seas* (Center for New American Security, January 2020), <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/total-competition>.

15 Orville Schell and Susan L. Shirk, et al., *Course Correction: Toward an Effective and Sustainable China Policy* (New York: Asia Society Center on U.S.-China Relations, February 2019), https://asiasociety.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/CourseCorrection_FINAL_2.7.19_0.pdf.

16 Larry Diamond and Orville Schell, eds., *China’s Influence and American Interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, November 2018), <https://www.hoover.org/research/chinas-influence-american-interests-promoting-constructive-vigilance>.

17 Charles W. Boustany Jr. and Aaron L. Freidberg, *Partial Disengagement: A New U.S. Strategy for Economic Competition in China* (Seattle: The National Bureau of Asian Research, November 2019), https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr82_china-task-force-report-final.pdf

18 Franklin D. Kramer, *Managed competition: Meeting China’s challenge in a multi-vector world* (Atlantic Council, December 2019), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/managed-competition-meeting-chinas-challenge-in-a-multi-vector-world/>

19 Leah Bitounis and Jonathan Price, eds., *The Struggle for Power: U.S.-China Relations in the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute, 2020), <https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/2020/01/TheStruggleForPower.pdf>. Of note, one of these, by Robert Blackwill, includes a recommendation for sustained strategic dialogue, stating “there is reason to doubt that either side at present is capable of mounting a serious strategic dialogue, but what is the alternative to giving it a try?” This is a rare case of someone still encouraging high-level dialogue.

The Council of Foreign Relations' January 2020 publication is called "Implementing Grand Strategy Towards China."²⁰

Despite often claiming to offer grand strategies, most of these reports focused on the near-term irritants in the relationship, such as trade disputes, the status of Taiwan, the South China Sea, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, the Belt and Road Initiative, military-civil fusion, influence operations, and industrial espionage. Each of them starts from a posture of national, geopolitical competition and aims to provide policymakers with tactical recommendations to seek advantage, often proposing policies that are a direct response to those of Beijing. These reports propose tactics to address near-term competition, disagreements, and potential flashpoints, but lack a clear end-goal beyond "winning" geostrategic competition. It is outside the scope of this project to assess the suitability or effectiveness of these recommendations as they pertain to the current array of challenges facing the bilateral relationship. Many of these efforts yield sensible guidance for policymakers, while others do not. But it is clear that they are recommendations for tactical responses and reactions to China's actions, barely touching upon an end-game or a sustainable, long-term strategic plan.

But is simply "winning geostrategic competition" a feasible, sustainable end-goal? If we carry these tactical policies and vision to their logical conclusions, have we arrived at a desirable place? Can America thrive without a sustainable and inclusive global order? In the face of entrenched, transnational challenges, a go-it-alone approach is inadequate. So, what is the American vision for the world order? More specifically, what is a positive vision that is both attractive to other nations and allows for the securing of U.S. national interests? During much of the 20th century, the framing strategic vision was a liberal world order, based on the free flow of people, information, goods, and capital, that would bring the greatest economic prosperity and political freedom to the greatest number of people. In recent years, numerous articles have proclaimed the failure of the liberal world order, but few have proposed anything to take its place. Limitations and constraints imposed by existing organizational architecture are partly responsible for this difficulty.

20 Robert D. Blackwill, *Implementing Grand Strategy Toward China: Twenty-Two U.S. Policy Prescriptions* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, January 2020), https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/CSR85_Blackwill_China.pdf.

In examining relevant organizational inadequacies, the following analysis focuses primarily on the institutional architecture that shapes and governs the types of policy advocacy that ultimately makes its way to the desks of policymakers. This is because what unites most of the current output from think tanks and other policy-related organizations is their relatively narrow, nationalist focus on how the U.S. can gain advantage over China. While this type of guidance certainly has its role, it fails to address challenges that are transnational in nature, complex in structure, and emerge over a longer time horizon.

It is no surprise that governments and government analysts think in terms of short-term national interests. Think tank analysts are simply responding to organizational, client-driven, and personal incentives. Before we turn specifically to the role of think tanks in U.S.-China relations, it is worth highlighting some of the general structural shortcomings that limit the effectiveness of think tanks across a broad range of policy domains.

While many of those working inside of think tanks undoubtedly feel that their work plays an important and constructive role in the policymaking process, public opinion polls do not share this perspective.²¹ Writing in *Foreign Policy*, Matthew Rojansky and Jeremy Shapiro put the matter bluntly: “if think tank experts have such great insight into policy, why are the outcomes so terrible so much of the time?”²² After a string of major foreign policy blunders, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan being notable examples,²³ it’s not surprising that think tanks are no longer seen as progenitors of wise counsel.

It is not just the public that is frustrated with think tanks. Even those within government often privately admit that think tanks too infrequently produce output that is both compelling and relevant. As stated by former State Department officials Anne-Marie Slaughter and Ben Scott, the traditional American think tank model “is too elitist, too narrow, and too slow.” The authors concluded, “the Progressive Era model of think tanks as extensions of technocrat-

21 Tom Hashemi and Aidan Muller, “Forging the think tank narrative US,” *Cast from Clay*, March 21, 2018, <https://castfromclay.co.uk/models-research/forging-the-think-tank-narrative-perceptions-usa/>.

22 Matthew Rojansky and Jeremy Shapiro, “Why Everyone Hates Think Tanks,” *Foreign Policy*, May 28, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/28/why-everyone-hates-think-tanks/>.

23 Many people would consider the last twenty years of U.S. policy towards China as falling into this category.

ic governance is no longer sufficient to make meaningful, large-scale progress in resolving public problems.”²⁴

Several shortcomings in the structure and incentives facing think tanks are readily apparent. First, those organizations best able to influence the policymaking process, owing to their robust network of connections to past, present, and future administrations, are often burdened by high operating costs, which necessitates a constant focus on fundraising. This is true for organizations as a whole and for the individual programs and researchers within them. Think tanks with robust endowments are increasingly rare, especially among nonpartisan and ideologically independent think tanks. Funding responsibilities are foisted upon the programs themselves in a relationship similar to that of tenants in a shopping mall: programs are generally welcome to stay if they cover their costs and contribute sufficient overhead to the parent organization. This constant drive for fundraising tends to redirect research priorities away from long-term, complex issues and towards more immediate, technical concerns (e.g., tax and regulatory policy). While such work can be effective, it crowds out focus on complex, long-term challenges. Researchers and analysts who are well positioned to think through the most pressing challenges instead spend copious amounts of time writing funding pitches and grant proposals, trying to intuit and respond to the priorities of funders.

Corporations and foreign governments are responsible for a significant amount of think tank funding. While governance policies at think tanks vary, with some instituting policies to guard against conflicts of interest, it is difficult for organizations that rely on this funding to avoid a gravitational pull towards those issues that are of most immediate concern to the funders. While it is often the case that research proposals pre-date the search for funding and many think tanks demand grant agreements that prohibit substantive funder input, this model of fundraising, in the aggregate, promotes a focus on a relatively narrow range of near-term interests.

Second, success at a think tank is usually measured first by fundraising, and second by “impact.” How impact is measured can vary, but it generally refers to the ability to point to how government has adopted or incorporated a researcher’s recommendations into policy or to media mentions. The

24 Anne-Marie Slaughter and Ben Scott, “Rethinking the Think Tank,” *Washington Monthly*, November 8, 2015, <https://washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/novdec-2015/rethinking-the-think-tank/>.

former results in a focus on recommendations that address near-term policy challenges. The latter results in experts spending inordinate amounts of time doing interviews with journalists to get their (and their organization's) name in the news cycle. Rarely are these interviews sources of deep insight; rather they are a symbiotic relationship created from journalists' needs to incorporate quotations from experts, and from experts' needs to be mentioned (e.g., "Jane Doe, from Major Think Tank, says 'U.S.-China relations are unstable and the upcoming presidential meeting will be a chance to adjust the tenor of the relationship.'").

Third, think tanks serve an important function as holding pens for human talent. This provides members of a prior administration with the time and space to digest lessons learned and a platform from which to communicate this to a wider audience. It also allows experts to perform research that can directly inform the policies of a current or future administration. One of the problems with this role as talent incubator, however, is that think tanks are increasingly viewed as places to create a portfolio of work whose primary purpose is to get noticed for a future position in government. The incentive for many young researchers is thus to craft relatively innocuous proposals for the next administration or critiques of the existing one, rather than grapple with the truly difficult long-term issues. Productivity is measured in numbers of papers and media mentions, rather than substance.

Fourth, the quality of research across think tanks varies widely. While some have built a reputation for thoughtful and pragmatic research and analysis, others serve merely as veneers for ideological interests. As Eric Alterman of Brooklyn College argues, "The research these organizations produce tends to be footnoted, but the footnotes themselves are often questionable, and ideological counterarguments are rarely entertained except in mocking tones."²⁵ Think tanks with commitments to certain ideological worldviews or political parties often focus on "defeating" competing worldviews and political parties rather than focusing on policy outcomes that could have impact beyond established group demarcations.

And despite the proliferation of think tanks and other policy-advocacy groups, there is a strikingly narrow band of conventional wisdom that con-

25 Eric Alterman, "The Professors, The Press, The Think Tanks—and Their Problems," *Academe* (May-June 2011), <https://www.aaup.org/article/professors-press-think-tanks%E2%80%94and-their-problems#.YW2lBp5KhOo>.

strains original, or at least divergent, thinking. Part of this might be by necessity—to remain relevant to the actual, existing policy process and surrounding debates—but on a number of more complex and long-term issues, where heterodox ideas are precisely what is needed, policy think tanks generally fail to be creative, reverting instead to group-think, if they are even focusing on these issues at all.

The efforts of think tanks to propose effective solutions to U.S.-China tensions are subject to the above-mentioned general shortcomings, but also reflect particularities of the bilateral relationship and the dynamics that shape it.

The first and most pronounced limitation of current China-focused think tank work is its overwhelmingly nationalist orientation. The vast majority of research focuses on advising the U.S. and allied governments on how to more effectively “compete” with China on a wide range of issues, from technology to military to economics. This, in itself, is not a defect of think tanks *per se*, as most relevant American policy organizations are oriented specifically to advising the U.S. government on how it can succeed in a competition or conflict with China. Yet it should come as no surprise that if organizations are structured primarily to advance national agendas, they will come up short on solutions to global challenges that don’t have a clear us-versus-them component.

For example, most American think tanks recognize that addressing climate change can and should be a shared endeavor of Beijing and Washington D.C., yet few organizations are advancing sustained efforts to forge enduring solutions that take into account both U.S. and Chinese interests. And on issues relating to technology, zero-sum thinking filtered through the lens of national security dominates the policy discussion. Again, this is not to deny that the American relationship with China often necessitates such an outlook, especially considering Beijing’s efforts to invest in technologies that will have profound effects on individual privacy and the ability of the Chinese military and Communist Party to project power regionally and globally. But the overwhelming focus on the short-term issues relating to technology is crowding out research on how both the United States and China have near-existential stakes in forging solutions across a range of technology governance issues.

Other Organizations and Individuals

While the focus of this section is primarily on the role of think tanks, it is worth briefly addressing the limitations of other organizations, including academia, government, foundations, and independent policy experts, if only to accentuate the need for new organizational approaches.

Universities and other academic institutions are the repositories of massive amounts of relevant expertise. But despite the intellectual rigor of academic research, it is often too divorced from current policy context to be prescriptively useful. Academic institutions do not have policy advocacy as part of their organizational mission or DNA. In fact, in most of traditional academia, there is a cultural and institutional aversion to prescriptive policy work. This is not universally the case, however, as some universities recognize and value their contributions to the economic vitality of the region, nation, and world, and strive to contribute to solutions to global challenges. But this is not incentivized to nearly the same degree as other, more traditional academic endeavors, such as original scholarship and teaching.

Furthermore, the academic peer review process tends to discourage risk taking and encourage hyper-specialization, leaving academics less likely to address broader, multidisciplinary questions. There are some hybrid models hosted at universities, however, that seem to do a more effective job straddling the academic and policy worlds. Some relevant examples include Georgetown's Center for Security and Emerging Technology, Stanford's Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Harvard's Tobin Project, and the University of Edinburgh's Edinburgh Futures Institute.²⁶ However, on close inspection, the research at centers like these is often led by policy-oriented or technically expert affiliated research fellows, who are able to conduct the more applied research that traditional faculty incentives lead their tenured or tenure-track colleagues to eschew.

In addition to think tanks and universities, governments are also home to a huge amount of expertise. Unfortunately, aside from a few small hubs of innovation like the Department of Defense's Office of Net Assessment, government bureaucracy often gets in the way of meaningful long-term strategic work. Bureaucratic structures are so rigid that the usual outcome of looking at

²⁶ The host of this project, Johns Hopkins SAIS Foreign Policy Institute, also has a long history of this sort of policy research.

longer-term policy issues is establishing working groups, commissions, annual reports. What may have started with good intent simply turns into an annual reporting exercise, with each new report beginning the moment the current one is finished. Within government, some of the few places where innovation can sometimes be found are in corners of the intelligence community and special forces: these cultures are more likely to risk working outside existing structures and bureaucracies because effectiveness is more important to their missions than are processes.²⁷

Independent China analysts are also failing to address the big, strategic questions, focusing instead on the daily policy vibrations. With this emphasis on near-term policy movements and events, these experts and pundits increasingly depend on third-party collectors of information, such as listservs and specialized newsletters. These tools essentially serve as news aggregators that answer the basic question “what happened in China today.” Many expert consumers of this information simply repackage and relay this news to their respective companies and clients, positioning themselves as possessing the most current knowledge about that sector, rather than spending their time and expertise examining broader implications for big questions about the future.

This problem extends to many of the China specialists often quoted in the news media. The focus on getting one’s name into the news cycle rewards those who race to be first with the news or provide some clever comment or snarky quip. Hits and attention are currency, so experts are motivated to comment quickly on anything and everything, often simply posting links to breaking news from major media outlets. The Twitter-ization of expertise has resulted in the conflation of information and insight.

Many grantmaking foundations have their own shortcomings in this regard. Funders tend to gravitate to topics that may seem strategic or forward-thinking, but which are often fairly obvious issues du jour. Addressing complex, long-term challenges requires funders who are not afraid to take chances. Too many funders choose the topics, ask the specific questions, and push for certain results. It is, of course, a funder’s prerogative to direct their funds where they believe the funds will best serve the organization’s ends. But

27 Dominic Cummings, “#29 On the referendum & #4c on Expertise: ON the ARPA/ PARC ‘Dream Machine’, science funding, high performance, and the UK national strategy,” *Dominic Cummings’s Blog* (September 11, 2018): 18, <https://dominiccummings.files.wordpress.com/2018/09/20180904-arpa-parc-paper1.pdf>.

the most effective funders focus on investing in people, putting those people in a productive environment, and incentivizing them to figure out the problems and questions, as well as work towards solutions.

It should be noted that these shortcomings are not limited to organizations within the United States. These structural failings can be found across the world, exacerbated by the fact that each country, vis-à-vis China policy, is stuck in its own national silo: U.S.-China relations, Japan-China relations, Australia-China relations. Each country assesses the relationship primarily through a bilateral national lens, imposing a competitive framework on what is often subject to larger, complex, global dynamics. This “frog-in-a-well” syndrome limits both the questions that are asked and the solutions considered.

