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The Rise of the China Threat:

The Development of the China Discourse in the U.S.

Administrative Documents in 2010-2021

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The relationship between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China is arguably one of the most closely observed relationship on a global scale. The state of the relationship between these two superpowers determines much of multilateral relationships. For decades, the U.S. mainly maintained peaceful and constructive relations with the PRC, as an attempt to keep the nation open and receptive to foreign actors. However, with China's rapid development in the 21st century, the relationship began to change. Gradually the U.S. became concerned of the true intentions of the PRC and of the challenges China's development presented to the U.S. in multiple fields.

This thesis observes these changes in the bilateral relations during the Obama and Trump administrations. The aim is to analyze how the China discourse has developed in 2010-2021, and how the U.S. administrative documents reflect its relations to China from the perspective of International Relations theories. The analysis is conducted from chosen administrative papers and documents concerning the national security of the United States. These texts include documents such as the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy, and regional strategies concerning Asia. With discourse analysis, this thesis observes the gradual transition from diplomatic neutrality and cultural respect toward a formation of threat perceptions and strategic competition.

The administrative documents revealed a notable change in the China discourse, reflecting a shift from cooperative liberalism to strategic realism as the core narrative. The Obama administration maintained the U.S.-China relations from a perspective of peaceful cooperation and showed careful diplomacy when discussing China. However, the tone of the China discourse experienced a gradual shift toward realism, when the Obama administration began questioning the intentions of China and reflected concern on intellectual espionage conducted by the Chinese government. From the perspective of indirect illocutionary intentions, the Obama documents were filled with indirect discussions on repressive governments and challenging ideologies that are threatening the liberal world order.

The China threat assessment truly sparked during the Trump administration, when direct accusations and provocative means were directed at China. Despite a peaceful and cooperative beginning of U.S.-China relations during the Trump administration, the relationship quickly turned hostile. The Trump administration relied on direct illocutionary acts by promising to meet the challenges China posed and return the United States to its leadership position in all fields. The administration abandoned the liberal notions the U.S. had promoted before and faced China with a strategy based on principled realism. The familiar cooperative coexistence was now replaced with a strategic competition for global hegemony.

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1. Introduction

Since the stabilization of the U.S. – China relations more than half a century ago, the relationship has undergone significant changes from the U.S. either attempting to engage China or contain it. These fluctuating attempts have intensified the tension between the two superpowers, and a possible conflict could have tremendous consequences, both regionally in the Asia-Pacific and worldwide. The assertiveness of the rising China has demanded a more comparative approach from the U.S. administration in the 21st century. Today, the U.S. observes China challenging its global leadership position, and the administrations of the 21st century are responding accordingly to defend the hegemonic position of the United States. Gradually, the time of engagement and cooperation is being replaced with a constant power competition.

This chapter provides a brief introduction to the fluctuations of the relationship of the United States and China. While the focus of this paper is on the administrations of Barack Obama and Donald J. Trump, it is important to understand how the relationship has evolved during the previous decades and what were the general strategies of previous U.S. administrations concerning China. The consequences of earlier approaches affect the policies implemented today.

U.S.-China Relations from the Eighteenth to the Twenty-first century

U.S.-China relations began in 1784, when the first American ship reached the harbors of Canton. (Wang 2013, 1.) Ever since, the then newly established United States and the gradually declining Qing empire had regular economic, social, cultural, and political contacts. The young nation-state of the U.S. joined the global trade hub of Asia, and gradually gained a strong position among the imperial powers in the regional markets. While the U.S. advanced its economic development, the Qing empire failed to utilize the opportunities the imperial powers and the U.S. provided with trade. For example, the empire lacked the institutionalized strategies to capitalize the flowing foreign currencies. (Wang 2013, 21.)

However, the establishment of the early relations introduced these two nations to each other, even though it seemed more beneficial to the United States, which was quickly on its way to a powerful nation-state. During the following century, the Qing China had to

endure the defeat in the Opium Wars, the American 'Open Door' doctrine, and the unfair treaties conducted by the imperial powers and the United States. (Wang 2013, 45.) The Opium Wars (1839-42, 1856-60) between Britain and Qing China, provoked by the trade, especially on opium, remark as the starting point for the 'century of humiliation' for China. The 'century of humiliation' has ever since been a constant reminder in China, especially when the country was led by Mao Zedong, of their past relationship with the Western powers, and how these nations took advantage of the Chinese, and therefore, leaving the nation in a stagnated state. (Scott 2008, xi.) While the relationship between Britain and China deteriorated during the wars, the United States increased its involvement in Qing China, focusing on more diplomatic and respectful bilateral relations, and eventually obtaining treaties considered more beneficial than those of the imperial nations. (Wang 2013, 54.)

In the aftermaths of the Second Opium War, the United States conducted the 'Open Door' policy. Unlike the imperial states, which were pursuing Chinese territory, the U.S. focused on sustaining an open trade with China, while defending its administrative and territorial integrity from the imperial powers. (Wang 2013, 60.) However, the policy closely supported the American commercial interests by treating the nation as an open trade hub with unequal agreements for the Chinese. Additionally, it strongly relied on Chinese political and economic reforms. China, however, perceived the American attempts as 'economic aggression' and an imperialist way to 'exterminate China' (Wang 2013, 62). This notion was not directed to the U.S. alone, but to all the nations aiming to take advantage of China with unfair treaties. Despite the perspective, these attempts to shape the Chinese society in favor to the pursuits of American interests was the prevailing geopolitical strategy of the United States from the early stages of the bilateral relations.

In the turn of the 20th century, the two nations entered an era of new geopolitical challenges. The Qing empire was overthrown by the first Republic of China in 1912, which began to form its new governance and economic models based on outside influences from the Western world. Moreover, the new Republic pursued equal treatment from and inclusion in the international system. Meanwhile, the United States was pursuing global hegemonic position while the Europe was at war. Gaining global economic and political power, the U.S. begun constructing a liberal international system, with a seemingly strong indication that the United States should function as its

spokesman. As for bilateral relations, China relied on the global leadership position on the U.S., especially as it was confronted by the imperialist Japan.

China became a relative concern for the U.S. when the Chinese civil war broke between the Nationalists (Kuomintang) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Despite opposing communism, the U.S. did not directly aid the Nationalists, except for against Japanese invasions. By 1949, the Nationalists were driven to Taiwan, and the mainland (the People's Republic of China, PRC) was now under the rule of the CCP. In the West, the main concern was who was that who 'lost China' (The Office of the Historian of the U.S. Department of State 2000.) Whether the CCP became eventually the stronger party because of the Soviet intervention to the civil war, or the lack of American support for the Kuomintang remains a debate. According to the China White Paper conducted by the Truman administration, the U.S. remained neutral in the civil war, because the American intervention would have not made a difference in the outcome. Therefore, the Truman administration was considered willing to leave China for the Communists. (The Office of the Historian of the U.S. Department of State 2000.) Supposedly, the U.S. did not officially support the Nationalists in the Chinese civil war to prevent aggravation of the U.S.-Soviet relations, and therefore reducing risks of misinterpretation for a provocation to a war with the Soviet Union.

During the following decades the relationship between the U.S. and the PRC was mainly determined by the American relationship with Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan, and by the regional wars between communist and democratic systems. While never officially at war against each other, U.S. and China fought on the opposite sides in the Korean war in the early 1950s, and in the following Vietnam war until mid-1970s. However, the tension escalated to a near armed conflict between the U.S. and the PRC during the Taiwan Strait crises in 1954 and 1958, when the PRC conducted aggressive military actions towards the ROC. (Zhang 2019, 190.) As a result, the U.S.-China relationship was tense and lacked mutual trust, and the only official connections were the occasional ambassadorial talks until the early 1970s.

In 1960, President Eisenhower became the first U.S. president to make an official visit to a Chinese government, when he visited Chiang Kai-Shek in Taiwan. (The Office of the Historian of the U.S. Department of State 2000.) This visit supported the notion of the U.S. defending the Nationalists by discouraging the mainland from invading the

sovereignty of Taiwan. Additionally, the U.S. kept pushing economic reforms in Taiwan – shaping it to fit the liberal international system.

In the 60s, the Sino-Soviet relationship estranged, and the Nixon administration made retrospective efforts to improve the U.S.-China relations. Instead of isolating China, the U.S. focus was on isolating the Soviet Union from its satellite states. However, during the preceding administrations of Kennedy and Johnson, the main China policy revolved around the containment attempts of the communist PRC. As for the Nixon administration, the strategy focused on forming bilateral relations and building on mutual trust. For example, the Nixon Doctrine meant reducing U.S. military commitments in the Taiwan Strait. (The Office of the Historian of the U.S. Department of State 2000.)

Due to the lack of diplomatic relations, the relationship was mainly maintained by the ambassadorial discussions held abroad, throughout the 1960s the relationship was influenced heavily by the distrust and the uncertainty of the political intentions, reciprocally. However, the ambassadorial talks became fruitful in the early 1970s, when the U.S. National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger organized a secret visit to China. (The Office of the Historian of the U.S. Department of State 2000.) After meeting with Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, Kissinger paved the road for the normalization the official relations between the nations and opened the communication between the heads of state.

The diplomatic relationship between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China took a significant step forward in 1972 when President Nixon met with Chairman Mao to establish the outlines of the newly stabilized – yet not officially diplomatic – relationship. In a communique, they agreed on issues that are still relevant today in bilateral relations concerning regional affairs; each nation should have the sovereignty of their own territory, neither should intervene in the internal or external affairs of the other, and a military conflict should be avoided at all costs. In addition, both parties agreed not to seek regional hegemony in the Asia-Pacific, and the U.S. agreed to reduce its military capacity in Taiwan when regional tensions were less significant. (The Office of the Historian of the U.S. Department of State 2019.) These aspects were to become the foundation on which to build mutual trust and cooperation. Since then, the U.S. has applied different strategies to accommodate and influence China's development.

The American desire to ‘shape China politically, socially, religiously, economically, and strategically’ has prevailed since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1979 during the Carter administration. (Shambaugh 2010). The U.S. attempts of shaping, engaging, integrating, and strategically hedging China have been the cornerstones of the U.S. strategic approach to the region. To influence the development of China, different U.S. administrations have implemented these strategies differently, yet all in the pursuit of American interests abroad. This American desire to shape the Chinese society to its likeness has been on-going for centuries.

However, during the past decades, the shaping strategy mainly focused on nongovernmental interaction: the U.S. aimed to develop the educational and scientific communication between the two societies. By enabling scientific exchange, funding programs, and forming nongovernmental organizations in China, the U.S. hoped to push Chinese institutions towards liberalism and openness by teaching the Chinese society of Western values and democracy. According to Shambaugh (2010), eventually this was expected to lead to a liberalization of the political system. This type of strategy resembled much of the interaction U.S. had with China in the late 19th century: missionary work with paternalist features. (Shambaugh 2010).

The shaping strategy, however, contributed to bilateral tension and distrust. For example, the bilateral relations experienced frictions during the Regan administration (1981-1989), when the U.S. openly strengthened the partnership with Taiwan, while the following administration of George H.W. Bush (1989-1993) had to deal with the global disapproval of Chinese behavior in its suppression of democratic demolitions in Tiananmen in 1989. (CFR 2020.)

To further impact in the shaping of the Chinese society, the U.S. applied a strategy of engagement. However, after the Tiananmen incident, the term ‘engagement’ became a synonym for tough negotiations over sensitive issues (Shambaugh 2010). The early U.S. engagement with China was based on advancing American interests, democracy, and changing Chinese behavior to fit the international box of norms. However, as Bader notes (2018), maintaining relations, especially after 1989, have been difficult and frustrating, but the U.S. administration has believed that the benefits have outweighed the challenges.

While the shaping strategy focused on shaping the Chinese society, the engagement strategy was aimed at the governmental level. An important aspect of this strategy was building bilateral cooperation. Especially, after the Cold War, forming closer relationships (ministerial, provincial, city, and university ‘sister’ relationships) was essential for relieving hostility and clearing the air. According to Shambaugh (2010), forming institutionalized cooperation at different levels – engaging China – could function as a buffer: with a foundation of strategic cooperation, if conflicts were to arise, the U.S. could effortlessly continue governmental interactions through other levels.

Engagement became an official strategy during the Clinton administration (1993-2001). The administration applied a strategy of constructive engagement to promote cooperation. After the tensions caused by the Tiananmen incident in 1989, a strategy based on economic and academic cooperation aimed to reestablish the communication between the nations. Additionally, the strategy aimed to re-enable the close U.S. participation in the rapid economic development of China. (Shambaugh 2010.)

Alongside with China’s development came perceptions of its intentions: the lack of transparency in Chinese actions contributed to the global uncertainty towards China. When mere engagement with the Chinese government did not advance governmental transparency, the U.S. aimed to integrate China into the international institutions. When integrated, China could apply to the international rules and norms, and contribute to global governance (Shambaugh 2010). Therefore, its actions would become more transparent.

As a part of the integration strategy, the U.S. advocated China’s inclusion to the World Trade Organization in 2001. In the 21st century, the Chinese economy enjoyed rapid economic development. While China was proving its economic capabilities, the U.S. requested China to take on more global responsibilities. As a part of the integration strategy, the U.S., with the rest of the international community, hoped that integration to international organizations would gradually lead to political reforms in China and to the liberation of Chinese institutions, benefitting the Chinese society and the global economy. Nevertheless, China kept rising but did not integrate to the international system in the way the U.S. anticipated.

The lack of transparency behind China's intentions accumulated the uncertainty in the Sino-U.S. relations, and when the strategy of integration seemed unsuccessful, the administration of George W. Bush (2001-2009) implemented an approach of strategic hedging. An important part of this strategy was to strengthen relationships with alliances and partners in Asia, surrounding China with a solid network of strategic and military cooperation. According to Shambaugh (2010), this strategy would apply pressure on China to comply with international norms and place the U.S. in a position of strength.

By 2010 China had already replaced Japan as the second largest economy in the world after the U.S., creating more tension in the U.S.-China relations. The Obama administration (2009-2017) introduced a new approach towards Asia: the pivot. Regionally, this meant that the U.S. increased its presence in the area, contributing to the hedging strategy of the previous Bush Administration. However, the strategy showed signs of engagement: the U.S. emphasized the importance of cooperation with China and keeping the lines of communication open. Nevertheless, tensions were intensified by the U.S. accusing China of a theft of intellectual property and condemning its militarization at the South China Sea. (CFR 2020.)

A driving force of the U.S. rebalance strategy (the pivot) was the strong American belief that the increased U.S. presence was welcomed in the Asia-Pacific. This might have been the case among U.S. allies and partners, but from China's perspective the pivot was possibly alarming: the U.S. was moving closer to China's borders. Nevertheless, this strategy of the Obama administration considerably strengthened the U.S. position in Asia. Simultaneously, China began to extend its own influence in economic and diplomatic domains, most notably with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a grand investment campaign to connect China closer to the west of Asia via new sea and train routes leading all the way to Europe and Africa.

This rising assertiveness of China was noted by the Trump administration (2017-2021). (NSS 2017, IPSR 2019.) To answer the challenges of China's rising power, the administration approached China from a competitive perspective, a strategy notably different from the predecessors': the unpleasant reality of the strategic competition and the battle for regional (and eventually global) hegemony demanded readjustments in the

U.S. policies toward China. While abandoning the previous strategies of engaging and cooperating with China, the Trump administration promoted a strategy of disengagement. For example, initiating trade war by imposing tariffs on Chinese imports, restricting visa admissions for Chinese students and academics in specific technological fields, and controlling Chinese investments in the United States all contributed to disengaging from bilateral cooperation rather than engaging in it. China is seemingly responding reciprocally.

However, despite the proclamations by the succeeding Trump administration, the previous engagement strategies have proven to be successful in some areas. For example, the Obama administration succeeded in the negotiations concerning Chinese-led cyberattacks on intellectual property: they obtained a commitment from the Chinese government on a sensitive issue, and reportedly the amount of Chinese-led cyberattacks declined. (Bader 2018.)

Nevertheless, the opinions of the Trump administration were clearly stated in the *National Security Strategy* of 2017: China is a revisionist power with an intention of replacing U.S. leadership in Asia-Pacific. (NSS 2017.) However, Shambaugh (2018) argues that Trump administration's decision to withdraw from specific international organizations and agreements only intensified the shift of geostrategic power to China's advantage. To answer the assertiveness of China, the U.S. requires a strategy which balances competition with peaceful coexistence. (Shambaugh 2018, 87.) However, to balance strategic competition of the global leadership position with a peaceful coexistence seems unlikely: the fierce battle for technological or economic superiority and the change in the diplomatic China discourse especially during the Trump administration, made it challenging to deepen the bilateral trust and cooperation.

The Trump administration adopted an approach of 'fundamental abandonment of largescale interaction and engagement, a change in the long-term foundation of the relationship being undertaken without serious public discussion of the costs and benefits, or of the risks and opportunities' (Bader 2018). Therefore, the administration had, without thorough consultation, let the bilateral relationship deteriorate, and by disengaging, pursued a strategic competition in multiple domains instead. According to Bader (2018), the prevailing assumption within the administration was that disengagement from China automatically meant containing, isolating, and militarily

hedging China. Due to economic interdependence, however, a complete disengagement would have severe consequences on the American economy.

To the end of the Trump administration disengagement prevailed as the dominant approach in the Sino-U.S. relations. For example, during the final months of his presidency, Trump conducted reports on how to approach China from a perspective of containment. From the documents of Trump administration observed for this thesis, it is evident that the U.S. under the Trump administration was driven by the notion of winning.

For the Biden administration (2021-), the Trump administration left a bilateral relation so fractured and filled with distrust that it will be a challenge for the Biden administration to build a stable and prosperous relationship between China and the United States. Whether Biden, who acted as the Vice President for Barack Obama, will return to strategies implemented by the Obama administration or applying novel strategies to diminish the consequences of the hostile approaches pursued by the Trump administration, only time will tell.

2. Theoretical framework

Today, U.S. and China are entangled in a comprehensive competitive relationship, extending to ‘the geostrategic, geoeconomics, geopolitical, military, cultural, scientific, technological, innovation, and many other domains’ (Shambaugh 2018, 85). Shambaugh (2012) believes the U.S. and China are interlinked in a competitive cooperation – ‘coopetition’, and despite the competition, the two superpowers must coexist. However, he argues that the competition is indirect, rather than direct: both nations conduct regional policies to pursue their own interests, rather than focus on countering one another. (Shambaugh 2018, 125.) Nevertheless, tensions rise as the secondary power challenges the primary power, and the possibility of a power transition intensifies the tensions in ‘coopetition’.

The U.S.-China relationship can be conceptualized from the perspectives of different theories. These multiple frameworks observe the dynamics of the relationship, and according to Shambaugh (2012), not one of them can fully describe the complexity of it. He explicates the relationship through the principal international relations theories of realism and liberalism. These theories are diverse and have multiple approaches when observed through the perspective of U.S.-China relations.

Realism

From the realist perspective, the likes of John Mearsheimer believe that ultimately all nations seek power and are displeased with the current status quo. As an offensive realist, he argues that a conflict between China and the U.S. is inevitable, and therefore, as a preventive action, the U.S. should contain China’s rise. (Mearsheimer 2018.) Realists believe that conflicts are a natural consequence of a hegemonic struggle. Still, they argue that maintaining hegemony for the U.S. is, in fact, a status quo, while China’s pursue for hegemony is seemingly threatening. To meet the threatening challenge, according to the realist approach, the U.S., with its network of allies and partners in the region, should apply strategic hedging towards China, containing its rise. (Shambaugh 2012.)

Mearsheimer (2014) argues that U.S. is the center of the unipolar international system, and other great powers, such as China and Russia, pose challenges to the U.S.

hegemony. In 2014, Mearsheimer believed that, in time, China would become a peer competitor, launching a global game of power politics. For the U.S. to efficiently respond to this rise, the administration required a strategy based on realism to meet the challenge. Mearsheimer (2014) further argues, that offensive realism, as an international relations theory, corresponds the current situation of great power politics: if China continues its rapid economic development, it will attempt regional hegemony. The U.S. will, however, try to prevent this, and likely will be supported by most of China's regional neighbors, such as Japan, India, and Singapore. (Mearsheimer 2014, 4). This resembles the strategic hedging approach, and according to Mearsheimer (2014, 5), containing China's rise with a network of alliances and partners will eventually lead to tremendous security tensions in the Asia-Pacific region.

Mearsheimer (2014, 6) argues, that every powerful nation seeks to maximize their power and gain regional leadership, while simultaneously controlling the rising attempts of other powerful nations. His theory of offensive realism is built upon five assumptions of the world that shape the behavior of nations; the international order is anarchic rather than hierarchical; all nations have offensive military capabilities; the impossibility of predicting a state's intentions; survival is a nation's primary goal; and nations will conduct their strategies accordingly to survive. Therefore, to survive, a nation must be able to obtain and project as much power as possible. According to the theory, when a nation is regionally powerful, its survival is protected. (Mearsheimer 2014, 6.) For example, the U.S. has established its regional hegemony in the Western hemisphere: no nation there has the power to challenge it. According to Mearsheimer, China pursues the same hegemonic position in Asia. (Mearsheimer 2014, 7.)

According to the power transition theory (Organski & Kugler 1980, Friedmann 2011, He 2017), when a rising power reaches the capacity of the ruling power, the ruling power is expected to act. For example, Graham Allison believes that a conflict in the U.S.-China relations is most certain. This conflict, that Allison calls the 'Thucydides Trap', is inevitable from a historical perspective: in the past 500 years, 16 times a rising power challenged the ruling power. From these, 12 ended in a war. (Allison 2019.)

Amidst the rivalry, the parties are conflict-prone to outside tensions. According to Allison (2019), in the U.S.-China relations, especially Taiwan raises the potential of an unwanted military conflict. Taiwan is a primary interest for China, and the

independency attempts of Taiwan, and the U.S. support of it, could escalate to a conflict due to the uncertainty of the extend of China's unification intentions. (Allison 2019.) For the past U.S. administrations, the Taiwan issue has been an asset in the bilateral relations. The U.S. presence in the Taiwan Strait and the East and South China Seas intensifies the bilateral tensions, reciprocally expanding China's military expansion in the region.

Despite the interference of a third party, there are other frictions in the bilateral relations that might spark a conflict. For example, China is constantly challenging the U.S. leadership in different domains. Initiated by the fear of being displaced by China in leading fields, the U.S. has revised its China strategies during the past administrations. For example, the Trump administration replaced the engagement and cooperation-focused strategies of the Obama administration with a containment strategy, abandoning the ideas of common prosperity and placing America first. This strategy has required parallel actions from China, gradually accumulating tensions.

According to offensive realism, containing a rising China is most effective and realistic defense strategy for the United States. (Mearsheimer 2014, 27.) Building strong regional networks and restraining the expansion of Chinese military and influence projection in Asia-Pacific, enable the U.S. to maintain its position of strength. Therefore, Mearsheimer argues, the United States, as an offshore balancer, needs to 'come onshore when the local powers cannot contain the potential hegemon by themselves' and thus lead the containment efforts (Mearsheimer 2014, 27).

Mearsheimer (2014, 27) introduces three approaches to the containment strategy: a strategy to prevent wars, a strategy to slow down Chinese economy, and a strategy of a rollback. The strategy of preventive war is not a viable option because of China's nuclear deterrent: launching a war consequently leads to the possible usage of weapons of mass destruction. Neither would slowing down China's economic rise prove an efficient containment strategy, because the economies of China and the U.S. are too intertwined: any containment would negatively impact the economy of the United States and its allies and partners. While the gradual economic slow-down would positively impact American security, it is not outweighed by the economic consequences. According to Mearsheimer, the third approach of a rollback strategy is the most realistic of the three. In the rollback strategy, the U.S. would approach pro-Beijing nations with

an intention of regime change to a more pro-American leader. (Mearsheimer 2014, 27-29.)

In 2014 Mearsheimer projected that if the security competition between U.S. and China were to intensify, conflicts are inevitable. He believes it to be unlikely for conflicts to lead to military confrontation, but conflicts of competitive nature are certain to occur. For example, building defense capabilities, conducting assertive national security strategies, creating threat perceptions, launching trade wars, and placing travel restrictions all contribute to the U.S.-China security competition. (Mearsheimer 2014, 36-37.)

As realists believe that nations ultimately seek power, security is an essential national policy. According to Vuori (2008, 66), the theory of securitization categorizes security issues as a special type of politics, which authorizes the application of special policies to ensure the security requirements of a nation are met. He believes that securitization can be used to legitimate political purposes in non-democratic political orders, such as China. (Vuori 2008, 66.) He argues that securitization theory is often applied to democratic political systems, as it is assumed that, for example, totalitarian systems do not need the legitimization in their political actions the way a democratic system would. Therefore, as political leadership itself is already justified in a totalitarian system there is no need to legitimize moving special issues to security concerns. According to Vuori, the totalitarian leadership alone is not enough to justify political actions: the political system needs to practice persuasion and coercion to survive. The securitization theory identifies issues that threaten the security of the nation, more precisely, threatens the nation's core values. (Vuori 2008, 68-69.)

Maintaining security is a powerful political tool: politicians use security speeches as means of justifying political purposes, rather than providing information on the reason of the securitization. (Vuori 2008, 71.) Vuori argues, that a securitization functions as a 'complex illocutionary speech act', meaning a multifaceted act of proclaiming and legitimating a security issue without the need of reasoning with the audience. Therefore, administrations use means of suggesting, requesting, declaring, or explaining why special issues have become national security issues. (Vuori 2008, 75-76.) The means of securitization are effective when the aim is to portray another nation as a national security threat. For example, the 2017 *National Security Strategy* of the Trump

administration functions as a means of portraying China as a national security threat. However, whether the accusations are based on real issues or on mere assumptions, is for to the audience to interpret.

The threat perception targeted at China is not a new discourse in the United States. The 'China Threat' theory has shaped the U.S. strategies towards China since the late 19th century. This theory has had several distinctions, like the "Yellow Peril" in the late 19th century West or the "Red China menace" in 1950s United States. While the discussion has fluctuated, in the turn of the 1990s, the threat discussion returned stronger alongside with the extensive economic and military expansion of China. In the 21st century, the threat perception has spread to issues, such as cyber security and environmental security. (Jin 2011, 270-271.)

According to Buzan, in the policies of the U.S. administration, especially that of George W. Bush, there was a strong proposition to portray China as a strategic competitor, thus contribute to the 'China Threat' theory. He suggests, that if the succeeding administrations continue this discourse, it will be impossible for China to continue its rise in a peaceful manner. This realist approach suggests that the U.S. administrations are, in fact, threatened by China's rise. Buzan believes China's rise will eventually challenge the hegemonic position of the U.S. and the rules of the international system. (Buzan 2010, 23)

Liberalism

While the core of realism lies in nations seeking hegemonic power and protecting their own security, the values of liberalism reflect moral values and ideas through domestic and civil policies, which contribute to the good of the societies. Rather than pursuing power, together the nations contribute to an international community built on common rules and norms. According to Shambaugh (2012), the liberal thought is built on the freedom of the individuals, free trade, and democracy. They believe that despite of competitive relationships, due to interdependency democratic nations do not fight wars with one another. Therefore, the theory of interdependency falls under the umbrella of liberalism. The likes of Joseph Nye (Nye & Keohane 1971) have argued that due to the economic interdependency, nations are less likely to avoid conflicts and build on cooperation. However, autocratic governments, which are not as accountable to the

society as democracies are, have a tendency for aggressive behavior. (Shambaugh 2012.)

Shambaugh (2012) explicates that there are three main aspects of the liberal theory in the U.S.-China relations: republican liberalism in the form of democracy, commercial liberalism in the form of free trade, and liberal institutionalism in the form of global governance. The liberal values of democracy (such as freedom and human rights), while resisted by the authoritarian Chinese Communist Party, have been the cornerstones of U.S.-China debates for decades. The U.S. policies have advocated these values in their strategies towards China when applying the approaches of shaping or integration. The importance of free trade is centralized in the liberal theory, and integrating China to the international institutions, such as the WTO, would contribute to the common prosperity. The international norms adopted from such institutions were expected to gradually liberalize Chinese institutions from within. (Shambaugh 2012.) While the prevailing international order is liberal, with the United States as its spokesman, China has been expected to integrate to it. The likes of Ikenberry (2012) argue that China has an alternative motive. According to him, ultimately China aims to alter the existing international system with its own authoritarian ideologies and values, which generally oppose those of the liberal theory. (Ikenberry 2012.)

The concerns of the liberal theories focus on the position of China, whether it will accept the status quo of the international system or take on a role of a revisionist state with an intention to alter the system to its favor. Alistair Iain Johnston (2003) argues that China, as a rising power, would naturally be interested in altering the international order more suitable for its objectives. However, he believes that the past Chinese diplomacy indicates that the China shows signs of status quo, but they are often overlooked by the challenging and revisionist China discourse that prevails. (Johnston 2003, 6.) The American desire to shape the Chinese society and integrate it to the American values-based international system has been a core objective in the American China policy for decades. Therefore, the idea of China as a status quo state is ideal: China would remain less assertive and would not have the opportunity to threaten the United States. However, especially during the Trump administration, the discourse on China as a revisionist nation replaced the liberal aspirations of China's status quo. According to Johnston, these notions of more realist dispositioning of China were prevailing also during the administration of George W. Bush (Johnston 2003, 7).

Whether China truly abandoned its status quo position, Johnston argues it was not quite so. For example, he believes that the Chinese government has not attempted to directly alter the rules of the international system. However, China has shown reluctance to accept some of these rules. Johnston further argues that while China has not directly embraced all the rules, it has scarcely introduced new ones. (Johnston 2003, 23.)

Nevertheless, Johnston believes that China shows more signs of status quo: China is integrating to the international system. Even though reluctantly abiding to some of the rules, it is part of global trade. Johnston further argues that the Chinese government has not shown concrete evidence to revisionist actions, not by altering the liberal rules-based international system or by replacing the U.S. hegemonic position. (Johnston 2003, 49.)

Yan Xuetong and Zhang Zhexin believe that the engagement and integration strategies of past administrations, and especially that of the Obama administration, have demanded reciprocal actions from China. For example, the rebalance strategy launched by the U.S. has compelled China to accommodate in its own way – by answering the challenge. Zhang (2019) argues that the further regional engagement, strategic hedging, and increased U.S. military presence in China's 'backyard' have resulted in China taking initiative and enhancing its regional position. This, in turn, has increased China's assertiveness in the eyes of the United States, contributing to the threat perception.

According to Yan (2010, 263), the U.S. rebalance strategy and China's reciprocal assertiveness contributes to a 'theory of superficial friendship' where both China and the U.S. are trying to maintain an illusion of cooperation. This illusion, supported by diplomatic courtesy, hides the bilateral disagreements on primary issues behind a curtain of collaboration in issues of less importance. For example, for China, two great contributors to this are the rising Chinese nationalism and its rapid economic development, that have made China bolder when it comes to maintaining Sino-U.S. relations. (Yan 2010, 263-265.) Seemingly, the U.S. rebalance strategy intends to answer these challenges which complicate the relationship. However, the Trump administration abandoned notions of liberalism and diplomatic courtesy. Instead, they met the China challenge from a competitive, realist perspective.

From the U.S. perspective, its strategies of shaping and integration contribute to China's inclusion to the international system. Alongside with China's integration to international organizations and its growing capabilities came expectations: China should participate in the sharing the burdens of global responsibilities carried by other great powers.

"China's Responsibility" theory sparked in the 1990s, during the Clinton administration. The U.S. strategy towards China was engaging it to ensure its integration to the international system. Therefore, to be accepted as a member of the community, China needed to become a responsible actor. According to Jin (2011), the Clinton administration, however, lacked a strong China-policy, and the succeeding administration of George W. Bush applied a containment strategy towards China, which they perceived as a 'strategic competitor'. Therefore, the threat perception seemingly prevailed over the need to make China an equal international contributor. However, during the second term of the Bush administration, the policy changed to 'encouraging China to become a responsible 'stakeholder'', and to build a solid foundation of cooperation in the Sino-U.S. relations, pushing the threat perception to the background. The theory of 'China's Responsibility' became an international China discourse (Jin 2011, 272), and the question of the role of China as a status quo or a revisionist state became more relevant in the administrative discussions.

The discussion in the 21st century focuses on the issues of the responsibility theory: the responsibility China carries does not commensurate with China's capability. According to Jin (2011), the resistance in full integration on China's behalf raises uncertainty whether China will integrate to the U.S.-led international system and adhere to the rules and norms of it. Therefore, the strategy behind the theory suggests that, via integration, the U.S. aims to shape China to fit the current international order, which promotes the U.S. values. (Jin 2011, 274.)

The starting point of this thesis is that the international relations theories of realism and liberalism are reflected in the administrative discussions of the past U.S. administrations. The following chapters analyze U.S. administrative reports and notions with a purpose of finding correlations between the strategies the U.S. has applied towards China and how they discuss China from the perspective of international relations theories of realism and liberalism. This thesis focuses on the U.S. administrations of Barack Obama and Donald Trump. These two administrations and

their strategies and approaches differ notably: the Obama administration reflected notions of liberalism, while the Trump administration implemented strategies based on realism. Therefore, observing the U.S.-China relations and the changes in it during these two administrations offer interesting insights to how the relationship developed from publicly content and cooperative friendship to a hostile, strategic competition for leadership.

3. Data collection and methods

The U.S.-China relations has been under close observation for decades. The past U.S. administrations have implemented strategies with aims of shaping, engaging, and integrating China to the U.S.-led international system. At times, the U.S. has altered its approach to containing China, and hedging it with a strong network of allies and partners.

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze; how China is portrayed in specific U.S. national reports; what strategies Obama and Trump administrations have applied to China and how do they differ; how the strategies applied by these administrations reflect the international relations theories of realism and liberalism; observing the reasons behind the chosen theories; and whether these different theories form a threat perception or reflect diplomatic neutrality in the administrative documents. Both administrations acknowledged China's rapid rise but had generally different approaches to accommodate its development. Therefore, the purpose of the analysis is to observe the changes in the tone of the China discourse, the reasons behind it, and their possible implications to the public perception of China.

This thesis will analyze the U.S.-China relationship from the perspective of the United States and focus on how the official China discourse, as represented in the documents, has evolved since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1970s. The introduction will discuss the relationship in general, however, the main emphasis is on how the discussion has changed during the administrations of Barack Obama (2009-2017) and Donald J. Trump (2017-2021). The relationship will be analyzed through International Relations theories of realism and liberalism. These distinctive discourses have multiple sub-theories, such as the power transition theory, the China threat theory, or the theory of securitization. These theories reflect the strategies the U.S. administrations have applied to China, such as engagement, hedging, or containment.

This thesis observes the China discussion in U.S. reports concerning national security, national defense, and the U.S. regional strategies for Asia. The analysis focuses on the reports by the administrations of Barack Obama and Donald J. Trump. Majority of the reports are conducted by the personnel of the Department of Defense; however, the analysis also includes notions from individual members of the administration. This is

due to the attempt to find similarly topical documents from both administrations, and for example, unlike the Trump administration, the Obama administration did not conduct a specific report of their strategies toward Asia-Pacific. Therefore, this thesis relied on remarks and articles from both the President and the Secretary of State, which introduced the Obama administration's Asia policies.

To interpretate the message conveyed in the administrative documents, a discourse analysis offers the necessary tools: it observes the content of the discourse, the usage of language, and how it is organized. (Gill 2000, 175.) For this thesis, a discourse analysis is used to observe how the two administrations use language in administrative documents to, for example, make accusations or portraying themselves and others. According to Johnstone (2017, 77), in political speeches discourse are often determined by the initial intention of the speaker and whether the purpose of the speech is met. This is closely linked to the language used. A discourse analysis helps to interpret the illocutionary actions taken in the written text, meaning, when observed in a context, what illocutionary speech acts take place, what is the intention of the text, and whether the intention is met? For example, using performative verbs (such as 'I promise' or 'I order') clearly indicates the intention of the text. However, avoiding performative verbs and being indirect about the illocutionary actions is considered a more polite approach to convey a message, because it leaves more room for interpretations by the audience. (Johnstone 2017, 78-79.) For the documents analyzed for this thesis, both direct and indirect illocutionary actions take place: there is a notable gradual transition from indirect illocutionary intentions during the Obama administration to direct intentions by the Trump administration.

Therefore, a discourse analysis is suitable for this thesis, as the purpose is to observe how the China discourse has changed from liberalism towards more realist perspectives. Therefore, an analysis on the terminology and the deliberate and indeliberate perceptions created though specific connotations, and their relations to either liberalist or realist theories is essential. It helps to spot these observations and follow their development as well as their consequences. As the intention of this thesis is to create a vision of the prevailing China discourses during the Obama and Trump administrations, and how it has developed during their presidential terms, therefore, a discourse analysis is useful in observing how the notions of the theoretical framework are presented in the chosen administrative documents.

The analysis is divided into three chapters: National Security Strategies, National Defense Strategies, and Regional Strategies for Asia. These reports will be observed through the lens of international relations theories, more precisely realism and liberalism. While the spectrum of these prevailing international theories is vast, the analytical framework of this thesis focuses on theories complementing the engagement and containment strategies implemented by the U.S. administrations. This includes theories which discuss the threat perception and those supporting peaceful coexistence.

The first chapter (4. National Security Strategy) discusses how China is presented in the light of U.S. national security. Both administrations conducted *National Security Strategies*: Obama published two (one for each term), and Trump published one. In addition, the Trump administration published an additional report directed at China: the *U.S. Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China*. These national security reports, and the strategic approach, which further implements the *National Security Strategy* of Trump administration concerning China, discuss how the actions of China are affecting the U.S. security and prosperity. The National Security Strategy was chosen for this thesis because the report discusses the threats and the current world order the U.S. perceives. Therefore, these reports (with the addition of the strategic approach) offer a good premise on how the U.S. observes the world, its own role in it, and whether revisionist powers are aiming to challenge the U.S. hegemonic position.

The following chapter (5. National Defense Strategy) observes the defense strategies of the United States, and the U.S. preparedness to counter behavior which threatens its national security, prosperity, and values. While the Obama administration reflected rising challenges in its *Defense Strategic Guidance* and *Quadrennial Defense Reviews*, China was not as straightforwardly discussed. However, the Trump administration, in its summary of the classified *National Defense Strategy*, explicates in detail how China's global assertiveness impacts the defense strategy of the United States. These reports were chosen for observation due to their nature: they detect the potential threats to the U.S. and the world and discuss means to defend the liberal international order from malign behavior.

The third analysis chapter (6. Regional Strategies for Asia) discusses the U.S. regional approaches to Asia. These two administrations defined the region differently: the

Obama administration discusses the region of Asia-Pacific, while the Trump administration refers to Indo-Pacific, seemingly due to its intentions of including India to the region. For the region, the Obama administration lacked official regional strategic reports, therefore for the purpose of this thesis, a speech by President Barack Obama to the Australian Parliament was analyzed. In the remarks, the President introduces the 'rebalance strategy'. In addition, an article written by the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was observed, in which the rebalance strategy is explained in detail. These documents reflect how the U.S. perceived China, and what is its role in the strategy. The Trump administration published two reports concerning their strategies to Asia: *Indo-Pacific Strategic Report*, and *United States Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific*.

The final chapter discusses the differences in the administrative approaches towards China presented in the observed documents and how they reflect the notions of academic discussions introduced in the theoretical framework. The comparison focuses on the general findings of the reports; how China is portrayed in the documents; how the terminology and tone of the China discussion reflects the opinions of the administration; and how the strategies applied to China correlate with the international relations theories of realism and liberalism. The analysis is based on the author's observations and interpretations of the documents. These findings are supported by the theoretical framework.

4. National Security Strategies

The purpose of a National Security Strategy (NSS) report is to provide the outlines for the U.S. objectives and interests in both national and global scale and explain how they contribute to the national security. The NSS, which is conducted by the President and their administration, discusses ‘the United States’ international interests, commitments, objectives, and policies, along with defense capabilities necessary to deter threats and implement U.S. security plans’ (Office of the Secretary of Defense). The following chapter discusses the portrayal of China in these security strategies of both Obama and Trump administrations. The Obama administration published two NSS reports, one for each presidential term (2010, 2015), while the Trump administration published one NSS report (2017). In addition, the Trump administration conducted the *United States Strategic Approach to The People’s Republic of China* in May 2020, which further implements the approaches towards China presented in the 2017 NSS.

The NSS reports by the two administrations differ greatly in their tones of discussion. However, the issues covered in these reports were generally the same. The main objectives are to expand U.S. presence in Asia and build a solid network of like-minded nations to promote American values of democracy and human rights. The future threats and challenges the complex and rapidly changing environment of the region were assessed in a similar manner, but only the Trump administration bluntly addresses the origins of such challenges (China).

The Obama administration has a more diplomatic approach, and in both of its reports the discussion concerning security issues stayed optimistic and avoided direct accusation towards rivaling nations. Challenges were acknowledged, but the challengers remain ‘adversary’. The Trump administration, however, took a different approach. The 2017 NSS emphasized the importance of transparency for the people of America to have a clear understanding of the challenges the U.S. faces home and abroad. While these challenges had not changed dramatically since the presidency of Obama, the narrative turned from diplomatic statements to provoking accusations. In the NSS of the Trump administration, the key concern was directly addressed: China was the challenging competitor, and with its revisionist ideologies it threatens the U.S. leadership in both regional and global context.

4.1 Obama administration

During the Obama administration, the main strategy towards China shifted from a comprehensive engagement to a rebalancing strategy. In the engagement approach the focus was on welcoming and integrating China into the international community and sharing the benefits the inclusion offers. Reciprocally, the community was expecting China to reform its economic and political systems, contribute regionally, and share the global responsibilities. However, China kept developing on its own terms and was not molded into the liberal and democratic framework the U.S. had hoped for.

This fear of China's rising power forced the Obama administration to change its approach. With further investment of time, effort, money, and military presence in the region the U.S. formulated a new strategy: the rebalance to Asia. In it, the engagement approach was not abandoned, but was supported with the new pivoting strategy, allowing U.S. to further penetrate the Asia-Pacific region and establish stronger economic, political, and military presence there. The following chapter introduces the *National Security Strategies* of 2010 and 2015, and describes how China, as an emerging power, was positioned in the U.S. vision of the international order during the Obama administration.

4.1.1 Comprehensive engagement strategy

The 2010 *National Security Strategy* (NSS) was published one year after the presidential inauguration of Barack Obama. At the time, China had already replaced Japan as the second biggest economy in the world, being second only to the United States. This rise of China demanded a more comprehensive approach from the U.S in its foreign policy. However, despite China being on a consistent rise, the 2010 NSS does not directly reflect to the challenges it poses or articulate its strategic approaches. Focusing on constructive cooperation with nations worldwide, the document lacks a realistic approach towards future threats and instead reflects an opportunistic vision of the future.

In 2010, the Obama administration had a clear approach: to accept and maintain rising global competition through comprehensive engagement. This meant active participation with the U.S. allies and friends in promoting its values in the fields of security,

prosperity, and democracy. The intention of such engagement was to find solutions to global issues, build stronger international organizations, and observe the intentions of closed regimes. As for those nations that did not share the American values, an emphasis was on building cooperation and mutual trust. This kind of a constructive cooperation was considered essential to regional security and prosperity. (NSS 2010, 8-13.) In Asia, the U.S. focus was on constructing a reliable partnership with China. While the NSS acknowledged that China had become a center of influence, it emphasized the importance of pursuing an effective partnership based on cooperation on issues of global and regional concern. Because China was emerging as a strong regional power, it was also expected to participate in sharing more of the global responsibilities.

In addition to its own engagement strategies, in the NSS the U.S. acknowledged that China had engagement attempts of its own: to expand its power and influence globally. However, as the administration pointed out, some emerging powers posed threats to security by not abiding to international rules, while others (the U.S. included) used their growing influence to build sustainable partnerships. (NSS 2010, 12-13.) While this statement was not directly aimed at China, the NSS strongly suggested that China could be considered as one of those reluctant, emerging nations.

When it comes to the international order, the NSS acknowledged China's growing influence, further emphasizing the importance of constructive cooperation. Instead of portraying China as an assertive nation that rapidly spreads its influence worldwide, U.S. approached the situation from a positive perspective: if the mutual respect between the two nations remained strong, China's rise could raise opportunities for U.S. as well. A bilateral relationship was considered critical for reaching global objectives, and China was expected to assume the role that comes with its emergence – a role of greater responsibility in global affairs. (NSS 2010, 42.)

When further discussing the approaches the U.S. has concerning China, there is a clear division between embracing a China that contributes to the international community and plays by the Western values, and condemning a China that disrupts the international order by pursuing its own objectives. In the NSS, the U.S. encouraged China to make choices that contributed to the common peace, security, and prosperity. However, the administration was prepared to monitor the growing military modernization of China

and act accordingly to any possible hostilities. Thus, building a constructive cooperation was necessary to reduce the risk of misunderstandings. Nevertheless, U.S. acknowledged that these two nations would not agree on every issue yet stated that cooperation should not come at the expense of compromising the American values. (NSS 2010, 41-43.)

Overall, this NSS was not a direct attack towards China nor its actions. The emphasis was on building a constructive cooperation between the two nations. The discussion concerning China consisted of rather positive notions of China's further integration to the international community, and acknowledgements of its growing influence and power. The tone remained reflective, rather than provocative.

Throughout the NSS, the discussion concerning China was surprisingly passive. The Obama administration did not directly accuse China of transgressions, nor did it address China in any sensitive topic, like human rights issues. When such issues were discussed, however, the blame was on the unnamed, 'hostile', 'repressive', or 'adversarial' nations or on governments that restricted their citizens from accessing information. So, whether these issues were addressed towards China, that decision was left to be made by the readers themselves.

The liberal notions of the theoretical framework were strongly reflected in the report: China was expected to contribute to the common prosperity by supporting free trade and by integrating to the international community, which shared liberal values. While realist perceptions of China's intentions and military actions caused concerns, the main tone of the report was to cherish the opportunities strong bilateral trust offered.

4.1.2 Rebalancing to Asia

In 2015, the U.S. had further developed its engagement strategy in Asia-Pacific. The rebalance to Asia, or 'the pivot', meant a strategic commitment to the region, and a deeper devotion of time, resources, and presence in there. Even though the rebalancing strategy reshaped the engagement to Asia-Pacific, the discourse concerning China remained similar with that of the 2010 NSS.

Globally, the U.S. refocused its vision towards Asia-Pacific from the instabilities of the Middle East. This meant more bilateral agreements and further integrating to regional multilateral institutions and strengthening the solid base that already existed. China had continued its consistent rise to a regional power, now spreading its influence worldwide. Therefore, in the 2015 NSS, further integration – and more importantly, more responsibilities – were expected of China. Aspiring tensions are acknowledged in the report, but any disagreements are concealed under the illusion of a constructive, strategic partnership.

The second *National Security Strategy* report of the Obama administration emphasized rebalancing Asia, meaning a formation of deeper relations and presence in the region, rather than engaging it from afar. The existing relationship with China was described as ‘unprecedented’ and special credit to China was given on the successful cooperation with the U.S. in global climate issues. However, the assertive actions of China in the Asia-Pacific region were not neglected, as the U.S. vowed to continue to monitor the military modernization and the tensions China caused in the South China Sea. (NSS 2015.) Still, the focus of the 2015 NSS was on cooperation, and China’s rise was embraced with open arms. However, this was to be on the terms of the United States: aspiring China was welcomed, but only if it played by the rules of the international community. (NSS 2015.)

More was expected of China as its capabilities grew mightier. However, the NSS implied that China did not contribute enough to the international community or share global responsibilities, like other powerful nations did. (NSS 2015, 4.) While China was expanding its power regionally, the NSS had a focus point on the bilateral instability: China’s rapid expansion and the uncertainty of its intentions, for example with its military modernization. The lack of transparency behind the behavior of China stirred the stability in the South China Sea, where territorial disputes occurred between China and the ASEAN nations. While this was acknowledged in the report, the NSS did not directly accuse China of conducting any malign actions in the region. However, the NSS condemned (in general) all irresponsible and aggressive behavior, attacks, and coercion, while encouraged and supported open dialogue and peaceful resolution of the dispute. (NSS 2015, 13.)

As for promoting and defending the U.S. values, such as human rights, freedom of speech, or democracy, the NSS acknowledged that ‘repressive’ and ‘adversarial’ nations did not abide to the international rules, which support these liberal values. While these nations were not identified, listed challenges, such as citizens’ restriction of accessible information, censorship, denying political opposition, and corruption could all be applied to China. (NSS 2015, 20-21.)

In general, the sources of hostility were not articulated in the report, but there were linkages between China and assertiveness, for example, when discussing the ‘rise of China’ in the NSS, it was often categorized or associated with the ‘aggression of Russia’. (NSS 2015, 4). This portrayed China as an aggressive nation as well, and this association reflected a negative tone over China’s economic development. While the direct general discussion concerning China remained passive or cooperation-focused, the NSS did acknowledge aggressiveness in Chinese behavior: for example, the U.S. declared to continue to deter and defend the American intellectual property against any cyberattacks initiated by the Chinese government. (NSS 2015, 24). This was the only direct articulation of aggressive or threatening behavior from China mentioned in the NSS reports by the Obama administration, indicating the securitization was not an essential part of the liberal approaches of the United States.

While in the 2010 NSS, the U.S. was more optimistic that China would contribute to the global responsibilities and fulfill the requirements above, it is evident that in the 2015 NSS the U.S. was not as optimistic anymore. The rebalancing strategy and further strengthening regional alliances with nations surrounding China implied that the U.S. was placing more pressure on China to comply with the international rules and share global responsibilities. Seemingly, while the U.S. intention was not to contain China, it was to note that when China is showing reluctance to comply with the international norms, China distanced itself from the international community. In addition, the discussions of forming a ‘partnership’ with China had been abandoned: in the 2015 NSS, the Sino-U.S. relations were referred to as ‘constructive cooperation’. (NSS 2015, 24.) The administration recognized that competition was inevitable in this new form of relationship, and seemingly the U.S. aimed to manage this competition with a mixture of engaging, rebalancing, and hedging China strategically.

In the 2015 NSS, the overall tone of discussion concerning China continued the reflective patterns of the previous report. By reflecting similar notions of liberalism as the previous NSS, the report focused on the positive aspects of China's rise, rather than the challenges it posed. However, the report showed more traits or realist approaches than the predecessor: China was considered as a rising, challenging power with unclear intentions. However, the overall attitude towards China remained rather passive and optimistic: instead of challenging the international order, China would adjust to its role as a rising power and contribute to global responsibilities accordingly. Nevertheless, the Obama administration was seemingly increasing its deterrence towards assertive Chinese actions, for example in cyber security issues. Nevertheless, the 2015 NSS was not a transparent strategic approach. Rather, it reflected the regional and global instabilities and the U.S. preparedness to overcome them, without revealing the motives behind the objectives.

4.2 Trump administration

The engagement and rebalancing efforts of the Obama administration were abandoned shortly after the presidential inauguration of Donald J. Trump. Seemingly, China's economic and technological advancement demanded a revision of the U.S. strategic approach to meet the competition. In the NSS, the Trump administration pointed out that '[...] these competitions require the United States to rethink its policies of the past two decades - policies based on the assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners. For the most part, this premise turned out to be false' (NSS 2017, 2-3).

According to the 2017 NSS, the previous administrations failed to effectively respond to the long-term objectives of China. Therefore, the Trump administration conducted a more concise strategy to deter and defeat the hegemonic attempts of China in Indo-Pacific. The approach towards China changed from constructive cooperation to a consistent competition in all domains.

The Trump administration published an additional document entitled the '*U.S. Strategic Approach to The People's Republic of China*' (2020) to further implement the *National Security Strategy*. The strategic approach discusses the challenges China poses to the

U.S. national security objectives of protecting the American people, prosperity, values, and security, and how the U.S. was prepared to counter China's hegemonic challenge.

4.2.1 Competitive approach

The 2017 *National Security Strategy* by the Trump administration recognized the competitive nature of the current global affairs. The rising interdependence between nations, and especially the dependence towards China, was altering the U.S.-led international order. Gradually, the U.S. had been losing its competitive edge in multiple fields, while China had modernized its capabilities, now challenging the U.S. leadership in all domains. Therefore, to meet the China-challenge, the Trump administration conducted its 2107 NSS, basing it on 'principled realism'. The constructive cooperation and engagement attempt of previous administrations were replaced with a strategic competitive approach. (The White House 2017.) From the perspective of the NSS, this meant addressing the bilateral relations and the assertiveness of China as they were seen: a threat to the U.S. hegemonic position.

According to the Trump administration NSS, China, alongside with Russia, was challenging America and its influential position in the world. These rival powers were harming the collective security and prosperity by making economies less free and fair, modernizing their military capacities without proclaiming their intentions, and repressing their own peoples. In addition, the rival powers were discrediting democratic values with propaganda and spreading false news, which were forming a gap between the U.S. and its allies and partners. (NSS 2017.) Such aggressive and hostile behavior demanded the U.S. to maintain its leadership to secure global stability and defend it from malign and disruptive intentions. (NSS 2017, 2-3.)

According to the administration, because of the openness and transparency it promotes, the U.S. had lost its competitive edge, and adversarial powers had taken advantage of this situation. For example, they exploited infrastructure, interfered in political processes, and threatened the stability and prosperity of the United States. (NSS 2017, 7.) Additionally, China had participated in stealing intellectual property and conducting malicious cyber activities to gain competitive advantage and weaken American businesses (NSS 2017, 21). The liberalist notions of openness and transparency of the

Obama administration were seemingly denounced by the Trump administration, and the blame for the loss of a competitive edge was placed on Obama and the preceding administrations. A more realist approach of strategic competition was conducted to match the (assumed) Chinese intentions.

Concerned by the economic competition, the Trump administration stated that it would 'no longer turn a blind eye to violations, cheating, or economic aggression' and embraced nations that did the necessary reforms in their economies and politics and expanded their liberal economic trading systems (NSS 2017, 17-20). As for the competitiveness of China, according to the NSS, it challenged the U.S. economically, and aimed to restrict its access and operations regionally. Working patiently, contently, and discretely, China was trying to change the international order in its favor. Therefore, the U.S. declared its preparedness to meet this challenge by deterring, coercing, and constraining adversaries, supported by a vast network of like-minded nations. (NSS 2017, 26-28.)

As for promoting American values abroad, the U.S. was prepared to expose malicious Chinese activities, such as repressing free societies and spreading misinformation and propaganda. The U.S. has increased its preparedness to counter any possible ideological threat China posed to the international community. (NSS 2017, 35.) However, to maintain stability and liberal international order, the U.S. needed to rely on the like-minded nations in the Asia-Pacific to work together.

The U.S. took pride in its worldwide coalitions and pointed out that none of their adversaries had the same. Therefore, the U.S. focused on building positive relationships with aspiring partners worldwide to counter China's spreading ideologies that contradict those of the liberal world. According to the NSS, the administration acknowledged that, for example in Africa and Central Asia, China had presented itself as a more tempting partner through its investment campaigns. The U.S., on the other hand, has a value-based approach. Unlike China, which aimed to take advantage of other nations with its unfair agreements, the U.S. wished to help these nations, for example with advancing their democratic political interests or aiding in their security developments. (NSS 2017, 37-38.)

As for placing this containment strategy in a regional context, from the U.S. perspective, China was rapidly expanding its power worldwide. It had gradually advanced its influence in every region of the world. In this context, in the NSS, China was portrayed as a malign rising power, which intended to replace the U.S. leadership and threatens the regional and global security. According to the NSS, China has been placing heavier influence in regions of Indo-Pacific, Europe, and Africa, leaving the U.S. calling out for its allies and partners to resist the spread of its authoritarian trends, radical ideologies, and aggression, and to fight against unfavorable shifts of regional power. (NSS 2017, 45.) The NSS thoroughly discussed the challenges China poses in all parts of the world.

In the Indo-Pacific region, there was a competition between free and repressive world orders. (NSS 2017.) Like in Obama's NSS reports, the 2017 NSS welcomed a cooperative relationship with China. However, the report argued that China was taking advantage of the kindness of the U.S. and the international community. China was accused of using 'economic inducements and penalties, influence operations, and imply military threats' China aimed to 'heed its political and security agenda' (NSS 2017, 46). In addition, China was engaged in a geopolitical competition: its actions in the South China Sea were condemned by the U.S. as endangering and undermining regional stability with an attempt to limit U.S. access to the region. Thus, the U.S. leadership in the region was necessary, legitimated even, as they promoted order, sovereignty, and independence, rather than spread deterrence and oppression. Therefore, the U.S. would continue to increase its presence in the region in order to contain China's assertiveness. (NSS 2017, 46-47.)

Also in Europe, China was expanding its strategic goals and unfair trade practices. The NSS vowed to contain these attempts and restrict China's acquisition of sensitive technology. The U.S. called for unity in international organizations based in Europe to contain these malign actions. Similarly, in the Western hemisphere, the Chinese influence was intensifying through state-led investments and loans. Additionally, the extension of its power has been supported with ideological intentions. For example, the report argued that China was supporting the dictatorship in Venezuela and seeking to expand its military linkages in the region, thus openly opposing democratic values of the U.S. and its partners. (NSS 2017, 48-51.)

In South and Central Asia, the U.S. aimed to restrict China's influence by helping nations maintain their sovereignty and resist domination. Additionally, the U.S. was asking for resistance in Africa as well. There, China was expanding its economic and military presence, undermining the regional development by corrupting elites and dominating extractive industries. (NSS 2017, 50-52.)

Using the analytical framework of this thesis, it is clear that the *National Security Strategy* by the Trump administration emphasized its focus on realism. They abandoned the diplomatic and cooperative-focused strategies of the predecessors and addressed to global challenges as they were seen from a realist perspective: a rising China formed a competitive threat to the United States regional and global leadership. While the purpose of a NSS is to articulate possible challenges that undermine the security and prosperity of the United States, the 2017 NSS was therefore a direct declaration of China as a threat in all possible domains.

The dramatic articulation leaves no room for misinterpretations. China was considered as a malign, aggressive, and assertive nation with an ambition to reshape the international order according to its ideologies, control and manipulate the economic system in its advantage, and eventually replace the U.S. in its hegemonic position in Asia-Pacific, and eventually globally. So far, this competitive and realist approach from China has brought uncertainty and instability in global affairs, but the U.S. remained confident that history will repeat itself and America would win. (NSS 2017, 28.)

4.3 United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China

The *U.S. Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China* published in 2020 by the United States Department of Defense worked in accordance with the *National Security Strategy* by the Trump administration. As the 2017 NSS clearly addressed, despite reflecting on all the challenges the U.S. faced worldwide, the main challenger was China. This strategic approach further implemented the China policy of the United States. It was an acknowledgement of the strategic competition between the two superpowers, and a transparent action plan for the U.S. to maintain its regional and global leadership, to promote its values, and, as the strategy argued, to defend its nation as well as its allies and partners from the malign and aggressive behavior of China.

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in late 1970s, China has gone through successful reforms that has led to rapid economic development. However, according to the document, China did not develop in its economic and political opening in the way the U.S. had expected and hoped for. Instead, China took advantage of the free and open societies around, gradually forcing upon and reshaping the international order according to the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). (U.S. Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China 2020.) This behavior violated the values the U.S. promotes and the norms of the international system. Therefore, the U.S., led by the Trump administration, has shifted from the engagement strategy of its predecessors towards a competitive approach to counter this malign Chinese behavior, demanding more transparency in its actions. Despite of its accusive tone, the report was a competitive strategy based on principled realism, seeking constructive and cooperative engagement with China. (U.S. Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China 2020.)

The document discussed the U.S.-China relations from the perspective of protecting the four principles discussed in the NSS: protecting the American people, advancing American prosperity, spreading American influence globally, and maintaining peace home and abroad. The strategic approach addresses to the challenges the assertive China poses in three main fields: economy, liberal values, and security. The report articulates the necessary measures the U.S. needed to take to increase its preparedness to defend its global position.

The report argued that the Chinese trade practices were considered protectionist and harmful. Due to the global dependence on Chinese exports, China had gained a position where it could exploit international organizations and other nations to comply to its demands. Its actions were described as 'unreasonable' and 'discriminatory', and its restrictions exploit the global markets to its own advantage. This, according to the report, worked for the benefit of the CCP, and spread its ideologies and influence by pressuring nations into cooperation or agreements. Especially the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been labeled by the U.S. as a Chinese attempt to control larger regional spheres through unfair agreements, pressure, and extortion. (U.S. Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China 2020, 2-3.)

When it comes to China challenging the U.S. values of life and liberty, the message was similar with that of the *National Security Strategy*: China has entangled itself in a war of ideologies with the United States. Through malign behavior China has been turning its citizens and other nations against the beliefs and norms promoted by the U.S., threatening the security and economic prosperity of other nations. For example, academic freedom, a major ideological difference in bilateral relations, has been threatened by China. The report declared that the aggressiveness of China violates not only the academic freedom of its own people but threatened the integrity of the American research. Additionally, the report emphasized the proportion of propaganda the CCP spreads through its campaigns and initiatives, such as the BRI. (U.S. Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China 2020, 4-6.)

In security issues, China seemingly has been continuing its military activities in the Asia-Pacific, especially in the South China Sea, to spread its influence and strategic objectives. For example, alongside with the BRI, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been expanding its presence globally. Because of the lack of transparency in Chinese actions, they were interpreted in the document as threatening to the security interests of the United States. (U.S. Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China 2020.) In addition to the tensions China caused with its military modernization, the document discussed China's objectives in the field of information technology, where it aimed for leadership using malign and unfair tactics. For example, the PRC National Cyber Security Law required global companies, such as Huawei and ZTE, to reveal information to the CCP for its own strategic purposes, thus violating the U.S.-China bilateral agreements. (U.S. Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China 2020, 6.)

The Trump administration's approach to China was clear: the U.S. would not tolerate China's malign and threatening actions, its aggressive and coercive behavior, nor its unfair and oppressive treatment of peoples and nations. (U.S. Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China 2020.) The report acknowledged that the past administrations' attempts of cooperation and engagement with China have not been successful, making China an unsuccessful global contributor in the international community. China continuously has attempted to discredit democracy, spread false propaganda and contradicting ideologies, and oppose the U.S.-promoted values. Thus, the report argued that China aimed to replace the hegemonic position of the U.S. and

gradually separate the U.S. from its allies and partners. (U.S. Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China 2020, 7.)

According to the report, the U.S. has responded to these actions through 'principled realism' (U.S. Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China 2020): the U.S. acknowledged the strategic competition between the two nations and is prepared to respond accordingly to the global competition while defending its values. This did not mean trying to exclude China from regional and global organizations, but creating awareness of its actions and intentions, so other nations can resist its unfair practices and demand for openness and reciprocity. For the U.S. this meant protecting its interests, defending its institutions, and challenging China's attempts to reshape the world in its favor. (U.S. Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China 2020, 8-9.)

Seemingly, the focus of the document was to encircle China with stronger alliances and partnerships, rather than including it to the community. While cooperation and engagement were considered as an important part of the U.S.-China relations, they were exclusively discussed from the perspective of advancing the interests of the United States, emphasizing less on the shared advances, unless they benefit the regional or global community.

The rest of the document detailed the implementation of the strategic approach in accordance with the 2017 *National Security Strategy*. It had been acknowledged that this strategic approach to China was necessary, as the NSS was most directly targeted at China. This indicated the level of transparency the Trump administration was portraying, especially in contradiction to the transparency of the actions of China. The implementation section was a detailed description on how China was challenging the U.S. in its four main principles (1. Protect the American people, the Homeland, and the American way of life 2. Promote American prosperity 3. Preserve peace through strength 4. Advance American influence) from the perspective of national economic, political, and security policies.

In the first principle concerning the national security of the United States (Protect the American people, the Homeland, and the American way of life) the U.S. looked for means to counter the propaganda and false information spread by the Chinese

Communist Party, for example, through proper education and the support of academic freedom, nationally and globally. In addition to demanding transparency, the U.S. expected more reciprocity from Chinese officials and investors operating in the United States to prevent its malign intentions. The U.S. also searched for counteractions for Chinese espionage targeted at the American citizens, enterprises, and educational institutions. According to the document, the CCP collected information to support its own military modernization and gaining an economic advantage in different industries. (U.S. Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China 2020, 9-11.)

When it comes to the second principle of promoting American prosperity and protecting American enterprises, the U.S. had been taking measures to counter the unfair trade practices promoted by China by placing higher tariffs and restrictions reciprocally towards Chinese goods. Together with its allies and partners, the U.S. kept promoting an economic environment build on sovereignty, free markets, and sustainable development. (U.S. Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China 2020, 12-13.)

The third principle (Preserve peace through strength) was linked to the 2018 *National Defense Strategy* (chapter 5.2.1. Summary of the National Defense Strategy), which introduced the actions the U.S. was implementing within the nation to match the challenges China poses. These included counteractions such as the modernization of U.S. technological defense capabilities, strengthening alliances, and ensuring the freedom of navigation. (U.S. Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China 2020, 13.) Alliances and partnerships were a vital part of maintaining the U.S. hegemony. Like discussed in the 2017 NSS by the Trump administration, the network of like-minded nations the U.S. had acquired was something that China did not possess. Thus, an important part of preserving peace was to maintain strong networks globally. However, this included building a reliable relationship with China as well. The aim of the bilateral relationship here was to strengthen cooperation and communication to prevent conflicts, still reflecting notions of American liberalism. (U.S. Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China 2020, 14).

The fourth and final principle (Advance American influence) emphasized the values promoted by the United States, which were the foundation of a well-functioning regional and global world order. To maintain the U.S. hegemony and the international values and norms, the chapter introduced approaches for the U.S. to counter malign

Chinese activities, such as authoritarianism, censorship, human rights violations, and unfair trade practices. (U.S. Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China 2020, 14-15.)

The main theme in the *U.S. Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China* was the juxtaposition between the U.S. and China and their ideologies, with the U.S. portrayed as the hero, while China was the villain. The 'us' and 'them' positioning in the document suggested an U.S. approach of regional division between the U.S. allies and partners and China. China was portrayed as a malign and aggressive actor, with the intention of exploiting others for its own advantage. Therefore, the illocutionary actions in the document clearly aim to emphasize the threat that China poses to the U.S. national security, contributing to the China threat theory.

The terminology concerning China and its actions remained provocative and accusive. In its strategies, the Trump administration abandoned the diplomatic courtesy and careful addressing of China used by the Obama administration and supported its approach with direct and colorful exclamation of the current world order. However, while doing so, the document stayed loyal to the intentions of the administration: to reflect realism and transparency.

5. National Defense Strategies

The following chapter introduces the national defense strategies of the Obama and Trump administrations. These documents are based on the corresponding *National Security Strategies* of said administrations reflecting the objectives, challenges, and opportunities the U.S. faces in the changing complex environment.

The Department of Defense of the Obama administration published two types of documents reflecting the U.S. defense strategies: the *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR) and the *Defense Strategic Guidance* (DSG). The QDR reflects the *National Security Strategy* from the perspective of national defense capabilities. For example, it describes the preparedness of the U.S. military forces, how the military supports and promotes the U.S. values abroad, and how the U.S. prepares for future challenges. The Obama administration conducted two QDRs (2010 and 2014). The DSG is a detailed projection to the future challenges. It was published in 2012, and the purpose of the document is to function as a diplomatic guidance for the Obama administration, as well as for the following administrations, on how to maintain the U.S.-led international order, promote universal values, and build cooperative networks. The documents portrayed an optimistic view of the future and China's role in it.

During the presidency of Donald J. Trump, the *Quadrennial Defense Review* was replaced by a *National Defense Strategy* (NDS). The official NDS is classified, but in the sake of promoting administrative transparency, the Department of Defense published a synopsis for the public. While the synopsis is not a detailed defense strategy, it does convey the main U.S. objectives, concerns, and approaches to meet the challenges of the complex world. Based on realism, the document bluntly addressed China as a number one security concern for the United States.

5.1 Obama administration

The Obama administration's national defense strategies went through major shifts during Obama's presidency. The first *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR) of 2010 was of a nation at war. The conflicts in the Middle East targeted the QDR's focus to the region, offering a vague perception of the challenges elsewhere. However, the *Defense Strategic Guidance* (DSG) of 2012 projected the challenges and opportunities the U.S.

faced in the rapidly changing world, emphasizing the preparedness of the U.S. military forces to defend the liberal international system from countering ideologies and aggressive actors. Finally, the QDR of 2014 articulated the rebalancing and engagement strategy to Asia-Pacific, which had risen as a priority alongside the conflicts in the Middle East.

The role of China in the national defense documents experienced a gradual shift in its importance. Its rise was acknowledged already in the QDR 2010, but its actual threat assessment was not articulated. The same theme continued throughout the two documents, with a gradual recognition of the extension of China's military might and of the uncertainty of its intentions.

5.1.1 Defense Strategic Guidance

The *Defense Strategic Guidance* (DSG) of 2012 entitled "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense" introduced the strategy of the U.S. military development for the coming decade. The guidance implemented the strategic interests and defense priorities presented in the 2010 *National Security Strategy* by the Obama Administration. The objective was to protect the security, prosperity, and the human dignity by assessing global challenges and threats together with like-minded nations, while ensuring the continuation of the liberal international order. To maintain the U.S. influential leadership and superiority, and to reach the objectives, investments on developing the U.S. technological preparedness, such as the intelligence, surveillance, and the cyber capabilities of the U.S. military force, were considered essential.

The DSG presented the reshaped global security priorities after a decade of war in the Middle East and implemented an engagement strategy to the region of Asia-Pacific. This guidance was created to function as an action plan to meet the future challenges until 2020, and to guide the administrative decision-making concerning military priorities. However, the presented objectives and plans of actions were to be achieved through more sustainable approaches: the reduction of the defense budget was seemingly the core purpose of the document, rather than the objectives themselves. As the DSG aimed to work as a guideline to reduce the U.S. military spending of the Joint

Force remarkably by 2020, the goal of this strategic guidance was to indicate the areas of priority for spending reductions without risking the national security capabilities.

In addition to discussing the instabilities in the Middle East, the document declared the importance of the rebalance towards Asia-Pacific for the sake of sustaining global security. While the existing alliances and partnerships have formed a solid foundation for common security and prosperity, the U.S. acknowledged the importance of other networks, such as cooperation with China.

As a part of the rebalance strategy, and to maintain U.S. global influence, the U.S. must strengthen its military presence and capabilities in the Asia-Pacific. The economic drive in the region brings forth opportunities for the U.S., but the rise of regional competition could challenge the security and eventually the prosperity of nations. During the following decades, China was expected to challenge the U.S. regional position and gain opportunities of challenge the international order. To meet the underlying regional challenges, the document highlighted the importance of ‘building a cooperative bilateral relationship’ with China for the sake of ‘peace and stability in East Asia’ (DSG 2012, 2). According to the DSG, the military modernization of China, and the lack of transparency in its actions, had alarmed the region, and had to be accompanied with a reciprocal military presence of the United States to ensure the application of international laws, peace, and freedom of access. (DSG 2012, 2).

As for the economic challenges the region faces, adversaries (both state and non-state) were posing challenges to shared values and norms, and have the ability for espionage and cyberattacks, threatening the prosperity and security of not only U.S., but of its allies and partners as well. Additionally, these anonymous adversaries were opposing norms and promoting anti-access. However, like typical in a document during the Obama administration, adversary actors were not directly addressed (an exception on terrorist organizations) but only described by their actions. For example, in the document, adversaries conduct cyber espionage and attacks on the United States but are left anonymous. (DSG 2012, 3). This contradicts the transparency attempts of the U.S. government and was a far more diplomatic approach than that of the following Trump administration.

In the DSG, the U.S. Joint Force rebalanced its approaches to meet the challenges posed by these anonymous adversaries. The document introduced approaches to meet objectives vital to the succession of stable homeland security and prosperity, such as countering terrorism and aggression, operating freely in anti-access areas and in cyberspace, and promoting liberty and human rights. The strategies were implemented in accordance with the 2012 *National Security Strategy*, with an aim to protect the interests of the United States. The action plans vaguely described the sources of the global challenges, making the strategies themselves seem equally vague. Nevertheless, the U.S. was prepared to ‘deny any aggressor the prospect of achieving his objectives’ (DSG 2012, 4).

As for projecting power in areas with threats of limited access, the document stated that ‘sophisticated adversaries will use asymmetric capabilities [...] to complicate our operational calculus’ (DSG 2012, 4). The DSG continued to declare that symmetric means, such as cyber warfare or ballistic missiles, were obtained by nations such as China and Iran to match those of the U.S. (DSG 2012, 4). These actions were to challenge or to restrict the U.S. access and free operation in the region.

The concerns towards China’s actions were not directly portrayed in the document. However, the potential of China rising to become a regional power was directly articulated twice. Firstly, the challenges related to China’s rise were acknowledged in association with the importance of building well-functioning relations with China to reduce the risk of misunderstandings. Secondly, the concerns behind China’s military modernization and the usage of symmetric means (anti-access) were discussed.

Despite of its developments and acknowledged potentials of Sino-U.S. relations, the relationship itself was vaguely discussed. The emphasis was on building a cooperative relationship, especially at the time of shifts in the geopolitical environment of the region. China’s rise was acknowledged, as were the potential threats it could pose to the security and prosperity of the United States. Therefore, the document emphasize that the Joint Force would be prepared to deter and defeat the aggression of any potential adversary at any given location. Regionally, the gradually rising challenge was acknowledged, as the DSG emphasized the geographical shift of the U.S. interest from the Middle East to Asia-Pacific.

When it comes to describing the bilateral relationship, the words concerning China were seemingly chosen carefully, without the intention of provocation. For example, the DSG emphasized on the importance of building a cooperative relationship for the sake of regional prosperity. However, the U.S. Department of Defense recognized that, in the future, China's rise to regional power had the "potential to affect the U.S. economy and our security in a variety of ways" (DSG 2012, 2) and that the military modernization of China needed more transparency to avoid future conflicts in the region. However, the report did not further elaborate how China could affect the U.S. economy and security, not positively nor negatively. Therefore, due to the lack of further elaboration in the documents, such declarations can be interpreted either way.

The emphasis of the DSG was on the U.S. objectives in the Asia-Pacific region, rather than on its relationship with China, nor on the consequences of its rise to a regional power. Despite being referred to as one of 'sophisticated adversaries [that] will continue to pursue asymmetric means to counter our power projection capabilities [...]' (DSG 2012, 4), the DSG discussed China in a passive tone throughout the rest of the document.

When it comes to the terminology used, the *Defense Strategic Guidance* followed the same diplomatic patterns of the *National Security Strategies* of the Obama administration. Threats and challenges were approached from a vague perspective, carefully avoiding direct blame or accusation. In the DSG, the issues and their sources were not directly discussed, except for cases which were internationally known, like the nuclear proliferation of North Korea or the conflicts in the Middle East. However, it is important to remember that while this document discussed the U.S. defense objectives, the DSG was seemingly constructed to primarily to function as a guidance on how to allocate the defense budget of the U.S. concerning the priority security concerns and projections of the future. Here, China and its actions were not considered a high priority threat.

5.1.2 Quadrennial Defense Review

The purpose of a *Quadrennial Defense Review* is to reflect the national defense strategy of the United States. The strategy includes, for example, the description of national and global challenges that poses threats the national defense, a development strategy for the military forces, and an assessment of future challenges. The reviews are formed in

accordance with the *National Security Strategy*, which identifies the challenges and opportunities the United States is facing.

The Department of Defense of the Obama administration conducted two *Quadrennial Defense Reviews*. The QDR of 2010 focused on prevailing wars in the Middle East and recognizing rising regional powers, while the QDR of 2014 was a strategy for preparation to meet future challenges, especially in the Asia-Pacific region.

The *Quadrennial Defense Review* of 2010 identified four strategic objectives for the United States: prevailing wars, deterring conflicts, defeating adversaries, and enhancing forces. In addition, it articulated the necessary actions the U.S. needed to take to maintain its leadership in the international system in the future. (QDR 2010, 2-3.) The review assessed the primary security concerns to the Middle East, more precisely to the development of a combat-credible military forces to win wars sustainably and effectively. It was conducted based on the 2008 *National Defense Strategy* of the Bush administration, reflecting approaches necessary to protecting the national security priorities and projections. (QDR 2010, 1.)

The main strategic objective of the 2010 QDR were in the Middle East. Additionally, the report showed concerns to the gradually changing international system, which was drifting away from the system the U.S. helped to build, a system based on U.S. values. Therefore, the U.S. needed to further engage likeminded nations to contribute to the common security and prosperity. (QDR 2010, iii.)

The 2010 QDR discussed China's rise to a regional power and addressed the concerns in the lack of transparency behind the Chinese military modernization. According to the document, the long-term intentions of China were seemingly to shape the international system with its political, economic, and military actions. However, China was not considered as a threat to the hegemonic position of the United States. The U.S. reflected confidence that it would 'remain the most powerful actor' and to do so 'it must increasingly cooperate with key allies and partners to build and sustain peace and security' (QDR 2010, 7). However, the review acknowledged the uncertainty in China's integration to the international community. Therefore, the U.S. needed to develop its long-term preparedness to meet the changing geopolitical trends that aimed to change the prevailing international system. (QDR 2010, 7.) A change would be harmful to the

international community, and especially to the United States as the core of the network sustaining it.

To deter and defeat threats posed by potential adversaries, the U.S. needed to strengthen its power projection worldwide. Especially the expansion of regional anti-access environments posed threats to the common security and prosperity. According to the QDR, the adversaries' anti-access strategies aimed to restrict other countries from entering specific regions and operate there. Additionally, these aggressive strategies often violate international laws. As for China, its massive military modernization, and the lack of transparency in its actions have the potential to threaten the regional security. (QDR 2010, 31.) In long-term, these actions could create anti-access environments in the Asia-Pacific region.

While the QDR recognized the looming presence of China affecting the regional and global stability with its own security and economic interests, the U.S. stayed true to its liberal values and welcomed a China that was willing to share the international responsibilities. With its growing might, China was expected to participate in the constructive contribution and burden sharing in international affairs. However, the lack of transparency in its political, economic, and military actions were casting a veil of mistrust over China's intentions, affecting regional stability. Nevertheless, the U.S. was willing to build a cooperative relationship with China on issues of mutual interest and strengthening communication channels to reduce conflicts brought by misunderstandings. (QDR 2010, 60.)

In the following 2014 *Quadrennial Defense Review*, the security priorities shifted from the Middle East to advancing American influence and leadership globally. New strategic challenges required rebalancing the U.S. Joint Force and stronger regional engaging to ensure strong networks of cooperation to meet the potential conflicts that could threaten the security and prosperity of the international order. Maintaining the U.S. leadership was vital to sustain the international order that promotes the U.S. values of peace, prosperity, and opportunity.

The QDR was consistent with the 2012 *Defense Strategic Guidance* and the 2010 *National Security Strategy*, reflecting the approaches of the Department of Defense in the rapidly changing security environments. These approaches included rebalancing to

the Asia-Pacific and maintaining there an environment that reflected the U.S. interests. Together with allies and partners, the U.S. would deter and defeat adversaries, build on regional stability, and project its power to regions where its assistance was most needed. (QDR 2014, v.) To defend the international system from attacks, the U.S. increased its preparedness to counter those challengers ‘who could employ advanced warfighting capabilities while simultaneously attempting to deny U.S. forces the advantage they currently enjoy’ (QDR 2014, vii). Therefore, the 2014 QDR introduced approaches necessary for the U.S. to maintain its leadership regionally and globally.

Protecting the stability of the Asia-Pacific region, its economy, politics, and security, has been a concern of the U.S. for more than a century. The economic development of nations has led to a systematic military modernization in the region, which in turn has created tensions and disputes. To contain the disruptive competition the QDR emphasized the importance of multilateral security organizations and agreements to prevent conflicts spurred by misunderstandings. Especially China was pin-pointed in the QDR. Like in the 2010 QDR, the main concern was the massive military modernization, and the lack of transparency in the intentions behind China’s actions. (QDR 2014, 4.) Additionally, China was seen to ‘continue seeking to counter U.S. strengths using anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) approaches and by employing other new cyber and space control technologies’ while achieving ‘air defenses that can restrict access and freedom of maneuver in waters and airspace beyond territorial limits’ (QDR 2014, 6-7). Restrictions of access challenged the U.S. regional presence, gradually threatening its ability to maintain its hegemonic position.

Thus, the Department of Defense continued to implement the rebalance strategy towards Asia-Pacific. Further engaging the U.S. in regional organizations and strengthening bilateral relations helped the U.S. to secure and maintain a stable and free environment: an environment prepared to deter and defeat conflicts that threaten common security and prosperity. (QDR 2014.) Hence, the U.S. was strengthening its military presence in the region, as well as its bilateral and multilateral military dialogues. With China and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), the Department of Defense aimed to build a relationship based on constructive cooperation. However, the QDR recognized the competitive nature of the U.S.-China relations and aimed to approach it with means that promote the international norms and values. (QDR 2014, 17.) An effective dialogue has the potential to reduce misunderstandings and helped to build mutual trust between the

two regional powers, and eventually facilitate discussions concerning regional security challenges, such as the nuclear proliferation of North Korea.

In both *Quadrennial Defense Reviews* the discussion concerning China remained diplomatic, carefully worded, and optimistic. This cautious approach was familiar from other official administrative documents of the Obama administration. Generally, the discussion remained the same in both QDRs, with recognition shown to China's rise and uncertainty towards its intentions. In neither document was China described as an eminent threat to the United States. However, in the 2014 QDR, it was acknowledged that China could become a potential threat in the future if it were to continue its military modernization and if its leaders continued refusing to show transparency in their decision-making.

The 2010 QDR recognized China as a regional power but was not entirely concerned that its rise would threaten the U.S. hegemony in Asia-Pacific. While there were concerns towards China's actions, the focus of the bilateral relations was emphasized on building cooperation between the two nations. Four years later, in the 2014 QDR, the strategic approach was fully targeted at Asia-Pacific, where China was described as a force looking for ways to counter the U.S. actions in the region.

While its long-term intentions remained uncertain, China was seen as a more concrete challenge to the United States than before, through for example A2/AD restrictions. However, the importance of diplomatic and military cooperation between the United States and China was described as an essential part of the rebalancing strategy in both QDRs. This approach reflected optimism in the nature of the relationship: China was not necessarily challenging the hegemonic rule of the region but could become an equal contributor in maintaining the stability in Asia-Pacific. Nevertheless, the changes in the region were noted by the U.S., as rebalancing the engagement strategy to the region became a priority action in 2014 QDR. Simultaneously, the discussion concerning China changed its tone from recognition to a more cautious perception of its actions and its long-term intentions. However, the terminology used in both QDRs did not reflect a picture of a too concerned U.S. nor of a truly malign and evil China.

Nevertheless, the lack of transparency in China's actions and the military modernization were discussed on several occasions in both QDRs. The mistrust caused by this

behavior was acknowledged to potentially be a threat to the security and prosperity of the region and of the United States. There were no specific action plans discussed in the review towards the actions of China, as the strategic approaches were discussed in a more general level and were not targeted at a specific state or non-state actors, unless when discussing terrorist organizations, the wars in the Middle East, or the nuclear threats of North Korea.

5.2 Trump administration

The Trump administration conducted a *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) in 2018 as an alternative to the *Quadrennial Defense Review*. While the official document is classified, the Department of Defense published a summary of the strategy, which articulated the global challenges and the preparedness of the U.S. Joint Force in deterring and defeating aggression.

While the Obama administration had a diplomatic approach in their documents, the Trump administration based its strategy on realism: the U.S. was once again seen to be at war. Only this time it was a war of strategic competition and the main challenger in all domains was China. The NDS seemingly functioned as a defense strategy in countering China's malign and aggressive actions, while defending the Indo-Pacific region from China's hegemonic attempts.

5.2.1 Summary of the National Defense Strategy

The 2018 *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) is an official, yet classified, document stating the strategic defense objectives of the United States under the leadership of Trump administration. The NDS replaced the *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR) of previous administrations. Presented by the then Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis, the NDS works in accordance with the 2017 *National Security Strategy* (NSS), observing the threats the changing security environment poses from the perspective of national defense capabilities.

The unclassified synopsis of the *National Defense Strategy* of 2018, entitled 'Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge', introduced the strategic approach of the United States to protect the nation from the global instabilities. This

meant the development of a competitive military force (the U.S. Joint Force) to deter and defeat foreign aggression. The global strategic competition that was gradually challenging the international order, and the eroding U.S. leadership in it, had forced the Department of Defense to reshape its priorities from its predecessors. (NDS 2018, 1.) Instead of combating terrorism, the focus was now on defeating the strategic competitors and eliminating their threats. Following this logic, the NDS introduced approaches to deter China's 'predatory economics', Russia's border violations, and North Korea's 'outlaw actions and reckless rhetoric' (NDS 2018, 1).

For the U.S. to gain a competitive advantage and maintain its influential leadership required effective development of its military forces, as well as strengthening of its regional networks of allies and partners. Seemingly, maintaining its position was vital for the prosperity and national security of not only the U.S. but of other nations as well, and losing the competitive advantage would lead to radical changes in the international rules-based system and the economic freedom of nations. Thus, developing the preparedness and resiliency of the Joint Force helped keeping the U.S. geopolitically in a position of strength. (NDS 2018, 1.)

The threat was eminent, as was stated in a brief concerning the NDS by Deputy Assistant of Defense for Strategy and Force Development Elbridge A. Colby. (Garamone 2018.) It stated that the erosion in military advantage with China would eventually lead to the decline of the U.S. influence in the Indo-Pacific region, and later globally. Additionally, the shifts in regional hegemony would be harmful to the alliances and partnerships in the region. Thus, the NDS articulated the approaches necessary to achieve an advantage in the competitive nature of global affairs. However, Colby clarified that the summary was not a confrontation of threats, but a declaration of the reality of the situation. (Garamone 2018).

The NDS declared China and Russia to be the main concerns in the strategic environment of the United States. Like discussed in a previous chapter concerning the 2017 NSS, these two revisionist nations had forced a strategic competition, which challenged the current international system with their 'authoritarian model – gaining veto authority over other nation's economic, diplomatic, and security decisions' (NDS 2018, 2).

More specifically, China exploited the goodwill of international organizations with an aim to shape them to fit its purposes. With its military modernization, China intimidated its neighbors and threatened their sovereignty. In its predatory economics, China used malign and unfair practices to maximize its economic might and the economic interdependence of other nations. While failing to provide the necessary transparency of its actions, China continued to intimidate the allies and partners of the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific region. (NDS 2018.) According to the NDS, the long-term goal of China was to replace the U.S. in its influential, economic, and military positions in the Indo-Pacific region with its own hegemonic objectives. Ultimately, its aim was to replace the U.S. leadership in a global scale. Additionally, these revisionist powers spread ideologies that violated the liberal values which were essential in securing the freely operating international community. (NDS 2018, 2.)

In the NDS, the U.S. acknowledged its deteriorating superiority across domains. While a decade ago the U.S. could control the conflict areas, now the competition over superiority had breached the borders of the United States, threatening the security of the American citizens. (NDS 2018, 3.) This contributes to the theory of securitization, with the U.S. positioning China and its actions as a threat to the U.S. national security. For example, in the NDS, cyber security violations by the adversaries were described as a threat to the privacy of individuals and the technologies of the American enterprises. The U.S. needed to develop its preparedness to deter technological aggression, protect itself against intellectual theft, and through innovation create a defense that would win the wars of the future. (NDS 2018, 3.)

The objectives of the Department of Defense were to ‘defend the homeland, remain the preeminent military power in the world, ensure the balances of power remain in our favor, and advance an international order that is most conducive to our security and prosperity’ (NDS 2018, 4). Maintaining these objectives required a clear-eyed assessment of China’s actions and a preparation for the challenges it posed today, as well as for the threats of its future actions, as it kept expanding its power and influence globally. Among the defense approaches were not only means vital for the U.S. national defense but means to protect its allies and partners worldwide from the malign and aggressive behavior of China. Strengthening alliances and partnerships would help to maintain the power balance, and the liberal values and norms promoted by the United States as prevailing ideologies of the international system. (NDS 2018, 4.) These values

were openly opposed by the revisionist powers and replaced with values repressive to sovereignty, security, prosperity, and human rights.

Entering this strategic competition required the U.S. to strengthen its national power in all domains. This meant not only its military and economic might, but its diplomacy and intelligence too. Nevertheless, due to the existing strength of the nation and according to the document, the U.S. could easily challenge its competitors. (NDS 2018, 4.)

According to the Department of Defense, this NDS, like the 2017 NSS, differed notably from its predecessors' strategies. Given the current complexity of the nature of the competitive rivalry, the U.S. needed to reshape its approaches to meet the challenges posed by the long-term strategic competitors. (NDS 2018, 5.) However, competition did not need to lead to conflicts. Despite the threatening demeanor and aggressive behavior of China, the U.S. was offering opportunities for constructive cooperation on issues advancing the American interests. Should conflict occur, the U.S. had its combat-credible forces, which are supported by vast networks of likeminded nations. Together with these networks, the U.S. would counterattack the coercion caused by the Chinese malign actions, such as economic exploitation, corruption, propaganda, and political and military intimidations. (NDS 2018, 5.)

The NDS was a transparent and direct document stating the reality of the situation: the U.S. is losing its competitive edge. China has been gaining on (and surpassing) the U.S. in multiple fields. The document provided approaches to restoring the U.S. leadership, while ultimately hindering China's hegemonic ambitions, and showing no tolerance towards challengers of leadership.

The terminology associated to the threat of China's rise is blunt, provocative, and accusive. The NDS articulated the actions and ambitions of China from a realistic and transparent perception. Instead of directing the blame on anonymous adversaries, the document (like the other documents by the Trump administration analyzed for this thesis) presented the world as they saw it. The discussion concerning China was generally negative throughout the NDS. Thus, the U.S. objective (far-searching, nevertheless) to build solid military relations and spark cooperation with China seems contradictory to the message the NDS was conveying.

In the synopsis, China was discussed from a perspective based on realism: the document assessed the threats China posed to the U.S. national security and prosperity and discussed the reasons accordingly. Despite the document provided being a summary of the classified *National Defense Strategy*, it openly articulated China to be the primary security concern. The discussion involving China had a provoking and accusing tone, repetitively describing China as a threat, a challenger, and a competitor with its aggressive and repressive actions. China was pictured as the common enemy of the liberal world order, not just an enemy to the United States. The NDS addressed China's actions, especially in the South China Sea, to be something all nations should be wary of.

The threat assessment was direct: China, as a 'strategic competitor' which continues 'to pursue a military modernization program that seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony [...] and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence' while 'undermining the international order from within the system by exploiting its benefits' (NDS 2018, 2). Seemingly, the document functioned as an appeal to the alliances and partners of the U.S. to resist and contain the Chinese efforts to reshape the international system in its favor.

6. Regional Strategies for Asia

Both the Obama administration and the following Trump administration made commitments to do more in Asia. While Obama's approach was the 'Rebalance to Asia' (the Pivot), which meant contributing more time, effort, and money necessary to maintain the U.S. engagement in the region, the Trump administration's vision of *Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy* made engagement in the region U.S. top priority, emphasizing on cooperation with its allies and partners to deter the assertiveness of China.

These strategies shared similarities: a common goal of maintaining the U.S. presence and hegemonic position in the region, while strengthening alliances and forming new partnerships. However, the actual approaches varied. The core objectives of the Obama administration were to establish a solid U.S. foothold in Asia-Pacific-based organizations and strongly integrate U.S. to them; building on U.S. regional military presence; and strengthening alliances and partnerships to form a solid foundation for regional prosperity, stability, and openness. The Trump administration's key focus in the region was to strengthen alliances and partnerships, while advancing and maintaining competitiveness in all domains. Seemingly, the U.S. agenda for the region was clear; to prevent China from spreading its influence and gaining a competitive edge; to counter Chinese propaganda by openly discussing China's malign actions; appealing to other nations not to settle for its unfair agreements; and to resist Chinese ideology which violates international rules and norms. To hinder China's rise and to protect the American prosperity, the Trump administration launched campaigns, such as the Trade War.

The Obama approach was objective and cautious. It acknowledged the competitive nature of U.S.-China relations yet avoided public and direct discussion on issues where opinions differed. The Trump administration, however, openly addressed to the issues and challenges they interpreted from Chinese actions. The tone was accusive and provocative and reflected a primary value the Trump administration promoted: transparency.

6.1 Obama administration

As of 2011, the Obama administration conducted multiple announcements concerning the refocus of U.S. engagement from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific region. This indicated a rising interest in the growing economic and diplomatic spheres in the region, and the attempt of the U.S. to further integrate its role in them. Increasing the U.S. influence in the region would help to maintain the U.S. regional leading position and promote the universal norms and rules in Asia-Pacific.

The U.S. has been engaging in the region for decades, but during the Obama administration's 'rebalancing' or 'pivoting' strategy more concise actions took place. The administration did not publish an official strategic approach to Asia-Pacific. For that reason, this chapter discusses an article written by the State Secretary Hillary Clinton in 2011 published in the Foreign Policy, and the remarks of President Barack Obama to the Australian Parliament published a couple months later.

6.1.1 Clinton's article for the Foreign Policy

An article for the Foreign Policy by the then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (October 11) articulated the need for diplomatic, economic, and strategic engagement in the Asia-Pacific to maintain the U.S. leadership position in a region where emerging powers, such as China, reside. Throughout decades the U.S. had helped to build the region's security and prosperity, and now it was time to re-align U.S. interests from the Middle East back to Asia-Pacific. Maintaining the leadership meant protecting and advancing U.S. prosperity, for example securing the freedom of commerce and navigation via sea lanes to ensure access to markets. Therefore, 'the pivot' was launched. (Clinton 2011). To ensure regional leadership, an effective regional engagement strategy was required.

This strategy reflected the American commitment to counter future security challenges of the region in six key objectives: strengthening alliances, cooperation with China, engaging with regional institutions, advancing trade and investment, expanding military presence, and promoting democracy and human rights. (Clinton 2011.)

Further engaging in bilateral security alliances contributed to the regional capability to counter aggressive behavior from states and prepare for future challenges. As for

emerging regional powers, such as China, the U.S. approach aimed to advance these nations' integration to the open and rules-based international order to ensure regional stability. The relationship with China was 'one of the most challenging and consequential bilateral relationships the United States has ever had to manage' (Clinton 2011). The U.S. strategy towards China was built upon a 'careful, steady, dynamic' approach (Clinton 2011), with an emphasis on building on issues of mutual interest.

The article acknowledged the contradiction in U.S.-China relations, with some Americans interpreting China's rise as a threat to the U.S. national security and prosperity, while some Chinese saw the American engagement in the region as a containment attempt of China's prosperous visions. Clinton rejected both of these approaches, proclaiming that the prosperities of both nations were closely intertwined and equally important for the development of one another. (Clinton 2011). Thus, a constructive cooperation was required to effectively handle the emergence of China and to put its regional potential to good use. Potentially, this could reduce the hostile perception of China and boost global cooperation.

To share global responsibilities and obligations between regional powers, the bilateral communication channels needed to 'translate positive words into effective cooperation' (Clinton 2011), meaning that both nations needed to work on transparent communication to eliminate threats of miscommunications that could escalate into conflict. This meant an open discussion identifying where both nations' interest met, and where they collided. As certain disagreements were to rise, the U.S. declared willingness to address them 'firmly and decisively [...] to avoid unrealistic expectations' (Clinton 2011). A foundation of a solid relationship, whether based on cooperation or competition, determined the future of the region. Thus, further integrating China into the international organizations and maintaining an open dialogue built on multilateral trust and contributed to working together to overcome regional challenges.

To reduce the risk of regional conflicts, the U.S. sought an effective military cooperation with China. China's extensive military modernization had the international community wary of the intentions behind its actions. Therefore, in the attempts to strengthen bilateral relations, the U.S. focused on the transparency of communication to clearly articulate the U.S. interest in the region, reciprocally expecting China to

‘overcome its reluctance’ and ‘work together [...] to discuss sensitive issues like maritime security and cybersecurity’ (Clinton 2011).

To ensure the continuing economic prosperity in Asia-Pacific, China needed to cooperate with the U.S. in maintaining an open and free commerce in the region. It was of national interest of the United States to demand fair business opportunities in China and fair competitiveness in the region. This demanded China to make serious economic reforms to ‘end unfair discrimination against U.S. and other foreign companies’, ‘end measures that disadvantage or appropriate foreign intellectual property’ and ‘allow its currency to appreciate more rapidly’ (Clinton 2011). Working towards reforms and restricting unfair competitiveness would benefit all the nations in the region.

Human rights violations in China have been a major concern for the United States. The U.S. has advocated for those detained or disappeared in China for speaking up or opposing the government, in accordance with the international laws promoted by the United States. A more transparent Chinese political system would increase not only the trust of the citizens of China, but of the international community. According to Clinton (2011), ‘China is placing unnecessary limitations on its own development’ when not abiding to the international rules and norms. Thus, the U.S. continued to promote its core values of democracy and human rights to encourage nations towards political reforms.

Clinton’s depiction of U.S.-China relations was by far the most descriptive, realistic, and transparent of the Obama administration’s publications reviewed for this thesis. The article by Clinton was a direct approach to meet the challenges the dynamic region of Asia-Pacific projected, and especially that of the assertive China. It depicted the bilateral relations from the perspective of both cooperation and competition, emphasizing the importance of working together to overcome regional and global security challenges. The liberal notions of cooperation and the inclusion to the international community prevailed in the article. China was expected, or at least hoped, to integrate and accommodate to the liberal values the international community promoted.

Despite of confronting China in areas of disagreement, the article maintained a diplomatic and respectful tone: it did not make direct accusations, aim to isolate China

from the international community, or project a threatening image of China. It did, however, stress the numerous ways in which China did not play by the international rules and norms. Instead of focusing on the harmful consequences China's actions have on other nations, including the U.S., the article emphasized that China was only harming its own development by undermining common agreements and manipulating outcomes. Nevertheless, the focus of the China discussion was on building a solid cooperation based on clear and direct communication.

6.1.2 Obama's remarks to the Australian Parliament

In his remarks to the Australian Parliament in 2011, President Obama stated the U.S. agenda to the region as an effort to 'advance security, prosperity and human dignity across the Asia-Pacific' (Obama 2011). Preparing to meet the future opportunities and challenges the region provided, the U.S. continued to strengthen its regional leadership, which had helped building the region to the prosperous center it was. The U.S. had contributed to and fought for the economic and democratic changes the regional nations had gone through, and 'will never allow it to be reversed' (Obama 2011). The attention to the region was considered necessary for the protection of American people and prosperity, especially due to the nuclear threats the region poses.

Promoting the U.S. values and strengthening the alliances and partnerships acted as the priority approach of the strategy. Rebalancing the region, according to the remarks of the President, meant ensuring regional security. The international order the U.S. promoted in the region contributed to the stability and prosperity of all nations: the international laws protect the human rights, and freedom of commerce and navigation. (Obama 2011.) Together with like-minded nations, strengthening these values and norms contributed to maintaining the security of Asia-Pacific.

The remarks revealed Asia-Pacific becoming the focus of the U.S. strategic interests. Closely linked to the national security and defense strategies, the rebalancing strategy demanded an increase of the U.S. military presence in the region. While in the position of the regional hegemon, the U.S. considered itself strong enough to deter aggression and defend itself and its allies from military threats of adversaries. Modernizing military capabilities and increasing its presence in Asia-Pacific reflected the U.S. drive to maintain its leadership position and deterrence against those who challenged it.

According to Obama, in the relationship with China, the U.S. emphasized the importance of effective cooperation. China's economic prosperity would serve the interest of many nations, the U.S. included. Thus, a peaceful rise was welcomed. The U.S. acknowledged that China's increasing influence has had positive impacts to the region, for example, in reducing nuclear tensions in the Korean Peninsula. Therefore, to manage regional stability and reduce the risk of misunderstandings, the U.S. wished to strengthen the communication networks in Sino-U.S. relations. Nevertheless, the U.S. protected firmly international rules and norms it promoted, and 'candidly' addressed Beijing with 'importance of upholding' these values and 'respecting the universal human rights of the Chinese people' (Obama 2011).

The economic prosperity of the region relied on the openness and transparency of markets. Thus, the U.S. advanced transparent and fair trade agreements with regional nations. To ensure the region's economic prosperity to be fair, sustainable, and in a continuing growth, the U.S. emphasized the importance of following international rules and norms. For the United States, a fair economic environment deterred the thefts of intellectual or technological property, eliminates corruption, defends human rights, demands democracy, and fights against climate change. (Obama 2011.) The remarks articulated the importance of democracy in economic prosperity. Democratic movements 'have succeeded [...] in Asia', while 'other models have [...] failed – fascism and communism [...] have failed for the same simple reason: They ignore the ultimate source of power and legitimacy – the will of the people' (Obama 2011).

The remarks acknowledged that the region had been separated by differing ideologies and political opinions, but nevertheless declared democracy to be most prevailing form of government. In addition, the U.S. declared to support civil societies all around Asia-Pacific for demanding transparency and accountability from their governments and defending human rights.

The U.S. was driven to reach these objectives in the region and stayed confident with its vision of a free and open Asia-Pacific, because the 'history is on the side of the free – free societies, free governments, free economies, free people' (Obama 2011). Obama argued, that to be the ideology the U.S. leadership and the formation of the alliances and the partnerships were based upon.

These remarks articulated the first intentions behind the U.S. strategy towards Asia-Pacific. The approach was diplomatic and carefully worded, making clear the opportunities and positive consequences of U.S. influence in the region, yet subtly discussing the regional concerns and threats. The sources of such regional issues were not, however, as directly discussed. For example, ideological differences in politics, such as democracy versus communism, in Asia-Pacific were acknowledged but there was no linkage to the Chinese Communist Party. This approach did not properly address the underlying challenges in Asia-Pacific nor discussed them from a realistic perspective. When the remarks did not directly identify the actual reasons behind potential regional instabilities which made the strategy, and the action plans sound vague.

In conclusion, there was a direct and an indirect discussion revolving around China. Directly, China was discussed in an optimistic tone, with a strong focus on cooperative relationship. Indirectly, the remarks discussed the failures of communist governments, the importance of protecting civil societies, and the intentions behind adversarial military modernization that threatened the regional stability and security. However, these notions were targeted to adversary nations, and were not directly associated with China. Nevertheless, in the light of regional events, these issues were applicable towards China.

The direct illocutionary intentions of the text portray liberal concepts by emphasizing cooperation and sustaining fair trade. However, as for indirect illocutionary intentions, the remarks indicated notions of realism: an ideological threat was said to be challenging global security and stability. While the remarks avoid direct accusations, the indirect illocutionary acts in the remarks strongly position China and its actions as a concern to the United States. These remarks show the gradual transition of the Chinese discourse from constructive engagement and inclusion to an open – yet still indirect – threat assessment which occurred during the Obama administration.

6.2 Trump administration

The Trump administration published two main reports concerning the Indo-Pacific region. During Trump's presidency 'Indo-Pacific' replaced the term 'Asia-Pacific', used

by the Obama administration, to reflect the importance of including the strategic partner India to the overall regional strategy.

The 2019 *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* emphasized the preparedness of the U.S. in the region and the importance of alliances and partnerships in maintaining U.S. regional presence. Through strong networks, the U.S. could deter, counter, or defeat the repressive and unfair competitiveness of China. While the purpose of the document was to project a strategic approach to the region, it rather acted as an assessment of Chinese actions in the region, and the importance of the U.S. networks in containing China's assertiveness.

In 2021, the administration released a declassified version of the *United States Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* accompanied by a statement by the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. The reason for the strategic framework was to further implement the 2017 *National Security Strategy* for the Indo-Pacific region. The bullet pointed document bluntly articulated the future threats and challenges for the region, and the U.S. preparedness to defend its hegemonic position. The aggressiveness of Chinese behavior was the key concern addressed in the strategic framework and in the statement.

6.2.1 Indo-Pacific Strategic Report

The *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* (IPSR) was published by the U.S. Department of Defense in June 2019. The report, entitled 'Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region', emphasized the importance of U.S. preparedness, presence, and alliances in the region. The shared vision of the Indo-Pacific region was for each nation to enjoy sovereignty, while pursuing economic prosperity by following shared rules and norms. However, according to the Department of Defense, the stability of the region was challenged by the repressive and competitive nature of China's behavior. (IPSR 2019.) Therefore, the aim of the U.S. articulated in the IPSR was to counter this malign behavior by developing its defense mechanism and strengthening its alliances and partnerships. Together, they would deter those who undermine the rules-based international order. (IPSR 2019.)

Both the 2017 *National Security Strategy* (NSS) and the 2018 *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) of the Trump administration articulated the U.S. preparedness to tackle the complex security concerns in the Indo-Pacific region. The IPSR was formulated based on them, thus it follows the similar patterns and tones of these two strategies. While the IPSR acted as an overall guidance to the whole region, it did single out China as the primary challenge for regional stability and approached regional challenges from a perspective based on realism: China was the number one competitor in all domains. Therefore, from the very beginning of the IPSR, China was bluntly stated as a threat to U.S. national security, as well as a threat to the economic prosperity and the freedom of nations regionally and globally, reflecting the notions of ‘the China Threat’ and securitization. The Secretary of Defense Patrick M. Shanahan in his forewords declared that China, under the guidance of the Chinese Communist Party, aimed to reorganize the regional balance in its favor through influencing operations, unfair trade practices, and its military modernization (IPSR 2019).

The report highlighted the goodwill of the United States in advocating China’s inclusion in international organizations, such as the World Trade Organization, in the hopes that China would integrate to the international community and contribute to the common prosperity. However, according to the IPSR, while China did enjoy the benefits joining the international system offered, the Chinese Communist Party undermined common rules and took advantage of other nations. By spreading its malign influence, rooted in contradicting ideology and propaganda, China has violated the norms and threatens the sovereignty of others. Even within its own borders, the Communist Party has discriminated, mistreated, and violated the rights and freedom of its people, values that strongly contradict those promoted by the U.S. and its allies. (IPSR 2019, 8-9.)

Globally, China’s cyber campaigns and militarization had caused tensions. Even during the Obama administration, the Chinese government was accused of cyber theft campaigns targeting the intellectual properties and technological information of foreign companies, American enterprises included. For the past decade, China’s military modernization has been noted: the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) had spread its military bases globally, and regionally increased its presence in the South China Sea and surrounding Taiwan. According to the Department of Defense, the aim of the Chinese militarization was to achieve first regional hegemony, and later global dominance. This indicated that the perception of the rise of China and the ‘China

Threat' extended beyond the regional concerns of Indo-Pacific. Now China was threatening the West with its military investments by improving its power projection, engaging in complex cyberspace operations, and by developing capabilities to block any access near China's borders. According to the IPSR, these notions threatened the common vision of free and secure Indo-Pacific. The sovereignty violations and aggressive military presence in the South and East China Seas gradually threatened the regional stability. Especially the military tension with Taiwan raised concerns in the report. (IPSR 2019, 8-9.)

Among the main concerns of the U.S. was the economic competition between the two nations, and especially the unfair trade practices China has used to advance its economic agenda. For example, the report argued that through penalties, military threats, espionage, theft, and diversion China has acquired its economic advantage and maintained its unfair trade agreements with other nations. (ISPR 2019, 9.) The report further emphasized that when nations prosper and spread their economic influence, it often brings along benefits for other nations as well, but with China, some of its economic investments have had negative effects to others, while greatly benefitting China itself. The Department of Defense judged these unfair practices advocated by China, which take advantage of many rising economies in the region, as well as globally. According to the IPSR, many nations have reported concerns of inconsistency, bribery, price manipulation, and unfair debt repayment obligations when dealing with China. (IPSR 2019, 9-10.)

Nevertheless, the U.S. emphasized that it did not aim to restrict China's fair and transparent investments or operations, yet it wished to articulate the concerns and inconsistencies in China's practices, such as China converting bilateral economic deals to granting PLA military access to these nations. According to the report, this coercive and aggressive behavior was reflected to all ends of the world. (IPSR 2019, 9-10.) It was not the economic and military actions per se that concerned the U.S., at least according to the IPSR, but the lack of transparency in China's behavior. This lacking reflects China's actions for a more threatening perspective, and this was how China was pictured in this report as well. Rather than bringing forth the positive aspects of China's prosperity, it focused on a threat perception, deepening the gap between 'us' (the U.S. and its allies) and 'them' (China).

To control regional tension, an important objective of the U.S. was to develop the military relations and the transparency in the communication between the U.S. and China. The Chinese military, challenging that of the U.S. in its capabilities, and its modernization has forced the U.S. to develop and innovate its military to effectively deter aggression and coercion the PLA poses. The regional uncertainty caused by the military modernization has increased the risk of misunderstandings and conflicts, which is why the strategic and policy dialogues initiated by the U.S. were considered necessary. To counter the malign behavior of China, the U.S. has pursued a constructive and cooperative relationship. Nevertheless, according to the IPSR, the U.S. was willing to cooperate with China, if its actions contributed to the regional and global stability and prosperity. (IPSR 2019, 10.)

The U.S. was prepared to defend and support its allies and partners from the aggressive campaigns of China. Especially in the case of Taiwan, the U.S. was committed to the Taiwan Relations Act, which has contributed to the regional stability and prosperity. The ultimate objective of China was to unify Taiwan with the mainland, and it was pursuing means to pressure and intimidate Taiwan with economic and military actions. For example, economically, China used economic leverage on other nations, trying to influence their diplomatic partnerships with Taiwan. Due to this economic pressure, in 2018 Taiwan lost three diplomatic partners to China. In military actions, China increased its presence in the Taiwan Strait, leaving the area conflict prone. (IPSR 2019, 31.) These Chinese actions violated the values of freedom and security the IPSR and the United States promoted. Therefore, the U.S. was committed to aiding Taiwan in its defense developments to deter China's aggression. (ISPR 2019.)

The IPSR constitutes as a blunt threat assessment of China's action in the Indo-Pacific region. The U.S. was prepared to defend the region's stability from the aggressive and malign intentions of China, and from its numerous campaigns used to achieve regional hegemony. China's methods were described as aggressive, threatening, and challenging to the liberal international order the U.S. promoted. Like in the NSS and the NDS reports, in the IPSR China was portrayed as a revisionist and an assertive power, that spreads its malign influence and propaganda. In addition to China, Russia, North Korea, and transnational challengers (extreme terrorism, for example) were considered as threats to regional and U.S. security. (IPSR 2019.) However, they were significantly less discussed in the report, unlike China, which was the primary subject articulated

under regional trends and challenges. The report itself reflected an ‘us versus them’ assessment, where the U.S. with its alliances and partners were positioned against the threatening and rogue states of China, Russia, and North Korea.

The IPSR articulated the challenges China poses to the community in Indo-Pacific in a straightforward and realist manner. It lacked the diplomatic approach familiar in the documents of the Obama administration, and the discrete and careful tone used when discussing China-related issues. The Trump administration abandoned the indirect indications of the diplomatic etiquette and openly discussed the challenges China poses to the U.S. regional hegemony.

The document created an image of a threatening and an aggressive China, which wishes to reshape the world according to its revisionist values. By accusing China of regional instability and projecting a future where – if the nations in the region do not resist – China will rule by intimidation and extortion. Hence, the U.S. seemed to appeal to these nations to choose a side between good and evil. The document bluntly portrayed China in a negative light, clearly stating the message of the United States: the nations are in a strategic competition, and the U.S. will not accept another hegemon in the Indo-Pacific.

6.2.2 United States Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific

In January 2021, the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, Robert C. O’Brien published a statement concerning the newly declassified *United States Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific*. The document worked as a specified guidance for implementing the 2017 NSS in the Indo-Pacific region. The release of the framework indicated the directedness the administration wanted to reflect when it came to dealing with national security and defense commitments. Even though the report focused on the Indo-Pacific region as a whole, the competitive relationship with China had a major role in the report and in the regional strategy was seemingly built around it.

According to the statement entitled *Free and Open Indo-Pacific*, the framework worked as a basis for campaigns concerning actions and policies related to Indo-Pacific. As an example, the statement introduced strategic reports, such as the *U.S. Strategic Approach to the People’s Republic of China*, the *U.S. Strategic Framework for Countering China’s Economic Aggression*, and the *U.S. Campaign Plan for Countering China’s*

Malign Influence in International Organizations. (Free and Open Indo-Pacific 2021.) As no other reports were mentioned by name, the framework seemed to act as a strategic approach towards China alone, rather than a general strategic approach to the region itself. The titles of the aforementioned reports indicated that China was considered not only as a competitive challenger to the U.S., but as a malign and aggressive actor in a global scale and in multiple fields.

In the statement, the Chinese Communist Party was positioned as the main cause of the regional instability due to its violations against the freedom and sovereignty of other nations, and the revisionist nature of its behavior. O'Brien argued that the regional approach of the U.S. was different from that of China, as the aim of U.S. was to ensure that all nations could preserve their freedom, rather than restrict, control, and dominate the regional processes. (Free and Open Indo-Pacific 2021.) The message conveyed in the statement of *Free and Open Indo-Pacific* was that the nations of Indo-Pacific should rely on the American leadership based on liberty and join the U.S. in counterattacking the violating and repressive ideologies spread by China.

The declassified *United States Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* itself was a document explaining the primary challenges and interests for the U.S. concerning the security of the Indo-Pacific region. In addition, it reflected the plans of action for the U.S. to pursue its regional objectives. When observed in its entirety, however, the Framework seemed like an action plan to hinder the hegemonic nature of the rise of China.

The document started by stating the three primary issues challenging the U.S. national security: defeating the revisionist influence of China by promoting liberal U.S. values in Indo-Pacific; minimizing the threat North Korea posed to U.S. and its allies; and advancing and maintaining U.S. economic leadership. The very first bullet point of the document noted the malign and revisionist threats China poses to the liberal economic order, and how the U.S. aimed to counter the China threat, as the prosperity of the U.S. was stated to depend on the U.S. maintaining its regional and global leadership. (U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific 2021, 1.)

The following chapter in the framework introduced the regional (and global) assumptions the U.S. had concerning the Indo-Pacific region. Out of the 14-point list,

China was mentioned in 8 of them. The remaining 6 points concerned the formation of alliances to deter conflict, territorial disputes, and shifts in regional balance, which all could be linked to China. The strategic competition between the two nations was acknowledged, as are the ideological differences in the fields of politics and economy. The threat China posed, and its spreading influence, challenged the U.S. by negatively impacting the economic prosperity and the national security of the nation, as well as its alliances and partners. (U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific 2021, 2.)

According to the framework, the U.S. believed that China aimed to distort the relationship between the U.S. and its alliances and partnerships, recreate regional and international rules and norms for its own benefit, posed military threats all across the region, malignly gained access to intellectual property and eventually an advantage in the field of technology, and repressed its own people and other free societies (U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific 2021, 2).

In its action plans, the U.S. shared the commitments it is willing to make to reach the desired objectives. For example, concerning alliances and partnerships, the U.S. was warning other nations about the ‘strings attached’ in the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, reflecting the aggressive economic plans of China. According to the framework, the U.S. aimed to enhance its diplomacy to counter the illusion created by Chinese disinformation that the regional hegemony of China cannot be prevented. As for Taiwan, which is one of the key conflict topics in the U.S.-China relations, the U.S. continued to loudly support the development of the Taiwanese defense mechanism to deter Chinese aggressive behavior on its shores. (U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific 2021, 4-5.)

Countering China’s growing influence had an action plan of its own, mainly focusing on issues concerning the economy, the ideological differences, and the military modernization. Economically, the U.S. pursued free and open Indo-Pacific. China threatened this vision with its unfair trade practices rooted from the Chinese Communist Party’s desire to dominate the field at all costs. The U.S. objective to counter the economic issues focuses on building a regional consensus to reveal such unfair practices. As for maintaining the advantage in technology and innovation, the U.S. would prevent China from the acquisition of U.S. strategic capabilities and monitor its

investments in the United States. (U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific 2021, 6.)

Ideologically, the U.S. kept promoting values of democracy, liberty, and human rights throughout the region through the development of public diplomacy to point out the benefits of such values. This was to counter the repressive ideologies of China and to maintain the U.S. influential sphere. Militarily, the U.S. was deterring the threats the Chinese military modernization posed by denying Chinese dominance and defending partners from Chinese coercion by spreading knowledge about the malign intentions of Chinese behavior, especially in its intelligence activities. (U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific 2021, 7-8.)

Nevertheless, the U.S. welcomed a cooperative relationship with China. According to the framework, the previous cooperation attempts had been more beneficial on China's behalf, therefore, reciprocally the U.S. aimed to negotiate a relationship based on constructive and results-oriented diplomacy (U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific 2021, 8).

Since the Trump administration had had no issues with directly addressing China-related issues, it is not surprising that the *U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* was straightforwardly addressed towards China. It followed notions of the *National Security Strategy* and the *National Defense Strategy* of the Trump administration and addressed the same issues: in the pursue of 'free and open Indo-Pacific', the U.S. aimed to widen the gap between 'us' (the U.S., its allies, and partners) and 'them' (China).

The terminology concerning China was negative and accusive, as its actions were described as 'exploiting', 'challenging', 'dominating', 'damaging', 'asserting', and 'compelling'. To reach the desired regional end-states, the U.S. had to convince its allies and partners worldwide to resist China, its malign influence, and its unfair bilateral and multilateral agreements. Only through a strong network of like-minded partners the revisionist and coercive China could be countered. (U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific 2021, 3.)

Even though throughout the report the tone of discussion was negative, it did offer an ultimatum for China to cooperate (in agreements preferable to the U.S.), showing a

contradictory aspect of the hegemonic struggle. The U.S. clearly aimed to maintain its leadership by not allowing China to acquire too much of a foothold in the region. In accordance with the power transition theory (by for example Friedman 2011), the U.S. – by encircling and further disengaging China from its neighbors – hinders the spread of Chinese influence, preventing China from controlling the region. Judging by the tone of the report, the U.S. seems to rely on its allies and partners to resist China’s aggressive behavior by emphasizing how China has taken advantage of them and the international organizations, and how China as a regional leader, unlike in the U.S.-led system, would prove to be less beneficial to its neighbors.

7. Analysis and Discussion

This chapter discusses the perspectives in which China has been discussed in U.S. administrative documents in the areas of U.S. national security, U.S. national defense, and regional U.S. strategies towards Asia in relation to international relations theories. The findings are discussed in a chronological order, starting from the first *Quadrennial Defense Review* of the Obama administration in 2010 and finishing with the *U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific*, published during the final month of Trump's presidency in January 2021. During this decade, the administrative discourse on China has undergone a significant change from optimistic cooperation to strategic competition. The following reflects on the findings of the administrative documents with an intent to point out the gradual change in the China discourse from optimistic liberalism to defensive realism. Therefore, the documents are discussed in a chronological order, rather than thematically.

The findings are divided into two subsections: the China discussion in the documents and remarks of the Obama administration, the China discussion in the documents of the Trump administration, and a discussion on the major differences between these two administrations. In addition, the following subchapters reflect the tone of the discussion: in the terms of terminology, how does the documents portray China? Are there clear correlations to different international relations theories? In essence, the aim is to answer research questions and articulate the perspectives in which China is discussed in different documents and analyze the tone in which its actions are described.

7.1 The Obama Administration

In the documents conducted by the Obama administration, the general discussion concerning China remained optimistic. Throughout Obama's presidency, the Sino-U.S. relations were observed from a perspective of constructive cooperation: all the documents observed for this thesis emphasized on the importance of cooperation, and especially on maintaining an open communication in military relations. Globally, China was expected to continue its integration to the international system and organizations and assume a share of global responsibilities. The overall tone of the discussion concerning China remained diplomatically neutral and reflective, and the possible tensions and threats were discussed carefully without a risk of misinterpretation or

provocation. Gradually, the potential threats posed by China were discussed more frequently during the later years of the administration, however, simultaneously referring to the opportunities China's integration would provide regionally and globally. The administration avoided addressing China as a cause of any tension or instabilities.

The administration applied strategies of engagement, integration, and strategic hedging to complement China's rise and the spread of its influence. The approach retained notions of liberalism, while gradually observing the relationship from a realistic perspective. Nevertheless, the documents remained reflective and opportunistic, and avoided direct discussion over sensitive issues concerning China.

The 2010 *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR) reflected the engagement strategy applied by the United States to shape China's rise. The QDR promoted the liberal values advocated by the administration and retained a neutral projection of China. The document emphasized on the importance of stable diplomatic and military cooperation in the U.S.-China relations, describing it as an essential part of the rebalance strategy. While the bilateral cooperation was the focus of the China discussion, the document raised concerns toward China's actions and intentions. Despite the acknowledgement of Chinese military modernization and the lack of transparency in government actions, these issues were discussed in a careful and diplomatic manner, without direct confrontation. In the QDR, China was not considered as an eminent threat to the U.S., nor as a challenger of regional hegemony, even as the U.S. had concerns for China's long-term intentions.

The *National Security Strategy* (NSS) of 2010 acknowledged the rise of China and its spreading influence, embracing and welcoming a peaceful and prosperous rise. Here, the engagement approach was supported by the integration strategy. In addition, the Obama administration firmly discussed the responsibilities of China as an influential member of the international system. The China responsibility theory focused on the expectations of burden sharing that China should participate in. The 2010 NSS thoroughly discussed the responsibilities that were expected of China in an optimistic tone, embracing and aspiring China's inclusion to the community of capable nations.

The administration seemed reluctant to directly discuss sensitive issues in its documents. As for the 2010 NSS, the Obama administration did explicate global

concerns, yet carefully avoided direct accusations, especially when such an issue could be closely linked to China. For example, when discussing governments that restrict citizens' access to information, the NSS referred to hostile or repressive governments, rather than to specific nations. The document did not discuss disagreements in the U.S.-China relations or mention China when discussing sensitive topics, such as global human rights violations.

The essay in the Foreign Policy by the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in October 2011 announced the rebalance strategy, commonly known as 'the Pivot', to Asia. The article was a direct and realistic approach to answer the regional challenges, especially the assertiveness of China. Out of the publications of the Obama administration observed for this thesis, the publication by Clinton was the most realistic and transparent document, initiating the China challenge. Nevertheless, the emphasis of the China discussion was on building a constructive bilateral cooperation, rather than in the tensions caused by China. Overall, the essay approached China from a diplomatically neutral perspective, carefully avoiding accusations, confrontations, or implying attempts of containment. While discussing the potential of China's behavior and its implications, the document emphasized on China self-sabotaging its own potential by undermining international rules.

In his remarks to the Australian parliament in November 2011, President Barack Obama articulated the U.S. intentions of the rebalance strategy to Asia-Pacific. The remarks discussed the same opportunities and concerns articulated in Clinton's article, yet in a vague manner, avoiding direct accusations. The bilateral relations with China were addressed to with diplomatic neutrality, with a focus on cooperation. However, the remarks articulated regional concerns, such as communism or adversarial military modernization in general, but as seemingly was the custom of the Obama administration, without identifying the sources of such issues. However, these concerns were applicable to China, and especially the military modernization of China was relatively directly discussed in other documents, such as the 2010 *Quadrennial Defense Review*.

The article by Clinton and Obama's remarks both indicated that the U.S. had implemented an approach of strategic hedging towards China. With the intention of strengthening the relationships with U.S. alliances and partnerships in Asia-Pacific, as

well as increasing its own presence in the region, the U.S. had taken realist approaches to answer the China challenge. The means were not entirely offensive and especially not provocative but have resulted in China taking reciprocal actions. When the administration had shifted from an engagement strategy to the rebalance strategy, simultaneously it reflected a gradual change in the China discourse from the responsibility theory to a China threat theory. While the threat projection was not direct, the administration acknowledged the challenges and tension caused by China more frequently. However, in the following documents, China's assertiveness and actions were generally discussed in the same careful and discrete manner as before.

This was the case in the *Defense Strategic Guidance* of 2012. The DSG continued the careful observation of China's action in Asia-Pacific, avoiding direct confrontation of issues involving China. However, the gradually prevailing threat perception arose when China was directly described, for the first time in the Obama documents observed for this thesis, as an adversarial nation challenging the power of the United States. For an Obama document, such a realist and direct notion was rare. However, for the rest of the document, the China discourse remained optimistic and reflective, and the eventual focus of the discussion was on bilateral cooperation.

The 2014 *Quadrennial Defense Review* continued the reflective tone of the previous QD. However, it projected a more cautious approach, reflecting the uncertainty the U.S. has towards China's intentions and recognizing the potential threats it poses. Nevertheless, the document remained optimistic, emphasizing the importance of bilateral communication to reduce misunderstandings. With the power transition in the leadership of China from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping in 2012, the administration hoped to establish stronger cooperation and deeper Chinese participation in overcoming regional challenges. Despite the minimal threat perception, the main U.S. objective according to the 2014 QDR was to support the further integration of China into regional multilateral organizations by effectively engaging and supporting its transparent actions.

Gradually, the optimistic discussion towards China's peaceful rise in the documents of the Obama administration shifted towards realism. The 2015 *National Security Strategy* implied that the U.S. was supporting its engagement strategy with the rebalance strategy. By announcing its strategy to (indirectly) hedge China by strengthening the U.S. military relations with the surrounding nations and increasing its own regional

presence, the U.S. was answering to the challenge posed by the rising China. This contributed to the formation of a China threat perception. For example, the 2015 NSS condemned the threats posed by the Chinese military modernization in the South China Sea and the Chinese espionage to the U.S. intellectual property. In this document, the U.S. administration was taking on a realist approach to the global challenges, and especially those initiated by China, instead of retaining to its diplomatically neutral discourse. However, this was occasional. The overall China discourse focused on the opportunities China accumulated. Even though partially retaining to realism, the overall tone focused on positive outcomes, cooperation, and China's integration to the international community.

Behind the engagement and integration strategies were notions of China's responsibility theory (Jin 2011.) Despite the looming threat perception in specific fields, such as cyber security, the Obama administration maintained its attention in constructive cooperation and embraced the inclusion of China into international organizations. Therefore, the responsibility theory was evident in the Obama documents: the U.S. appealed to China in global contributions and participation in burden sharing, like for example, in the 2010 *National Security Strategy*. In addition, the administration portrayed more willingness to cooperate with China and embraced the opportunities its rise provided. With the engagement strategy, this meant that one of U.S aims was to ensure that while China grows, so should its contribution to the U.S.-led international community. (Jin 2011.)

Seemingly from the administrative reports, the Obama administration embraced the notions of the China responsibility theory, as an integration 'controlled' by the U.S. would contribute to the secure and stable international order. However, the likes of Ikenberry (2012) argue, that China's fully integration to the U.S.-led international order seemed unlikely. The values and ideologies of the Chinese government contradict strongly those pursued by the U.S. and liberalism. The opposition of the U.S. values, such as democracy and human rights, contributed to the tensions in bilateral relations, and gradually the optimism in the Obama documents seemingly transforms to a sterner and more realistic approach. Nevertheless, the documents of the Obama administration retained diplomatic discretion.

Despite the prevailing optimism in the Obama documents directed at the bilateral relations, some academics argue the U.S. is deliberately, yet indirectly, challenging

China. According to Zhang Zhexin, the engagement and rebalancing efforts of the U.S. in Asia-Pacific in fact contributed to the assertiveness of the rising China. These efforts were interpreted as containment efforts, leading China to take actions of its own, for example strengthening its position in the South China Sea or initiating the Belt and Road Initiative. (Zhang 2019, 3.)

China's growing assertiveness contributed to what Yan Xuetong calls a 'theory of superficial friendship' where the two superpowers have created an illusion of cooperation – of partnership – to cover the fluctuating relationship. (Yan 2010, 263.) The disagreements that arise have been concealed under the illusion of constructive, strategic partnership. However, the Obama administration did recognize the competitiveness of China, and as reflected in the administrative documents, the U.S. aimed to manage this competition with a mixture of engaging, rebalancing, and hedging China strategically.

An important part of the bilateral relations was the economic cooperation. In accordance with the China's responsibility theory, China was required to open its markets to foreign companies, ensure more political freedom and advance democracy, increase its military transparency, and provide diplomatic assistance towards issues of global concern, such as nuclear proliferation or environmental issues. However, alongside with 'the Pivot', and questioning China's responsibilities, the responsibility theory was challenged. (Jin 2011.) Especially after the announcement of the rebalance strategy, the U.S. appealed to China to fully integrate to the economic international system, with the objective of sharing common prosperity.

The Obama documents revealed, for example through cyber security discussions, that the 'China Threat' theory was showing signs of gradual return as a China discourse in the U.S. foreign policy already before the Trump administration. While in the earlier report, the U.S. was optimistic that China would contribute to the global responsibilities, it was evident in the later Obama documents that the U.S. had adopted a more realist stance. The rebalancing strategy and strengthening regional alliances implied that more pressure was placed on China to comply with the international rules. China's reluctance to do so contributed to the threat theory, as was witnessed during the Trump administration.

7.1 The Trump Administration

While the Obama administration remained diplomatically discrete in its China discourse, the Trump administration abandoned the cooperation-focused strategies of the previous administration. Instead, the Trump administration bluntly declared a competition-based strategy to meet the China challenge. Based on offensive realism, the general approach of the administration was to directly discuss the bilateral relations and the global affairs as the U.S. administration sees it: China, by exploitation and through unfair practices, was challenging the hegemonic position of the United States. In its documents, the administration described its own discourse as a transparent attempt to articulate China's actions and to ensure the U.S. allies and partners saw the malign and aggressiveness of China's intentions.

The Trump administration replaced the engagement strategy with a strategy of containment. Despite the notions of welcoming a cooperative China, the Trump documents focused on projecting an image of a threatening China. The containment strategy was supported by concepts of strategic hedging or plain isolation attempts. Containment was not proclaimed as an official strategy. However, the actions of the administration reflected containment attempts. Basing its strategy on realism, the administration conducted multiple documents concerning China, and straightforwardly discussed the impact of its actions on the national security of the United States. Unlike the Obama administration, the Trump administration maintained a provocative and accusive tone in its China discourse, abandoning notions of diplomacy, and focusing on risqué discussion. Seemingly, the Trump administration neglected the cultural factors in international relations: the direct and accusing approach of the U.S. was not necessarily embraced by the Chinese government, like in the case of Trump speculating the origin of the Covid-19 pandemic (whether accidental or intentional) or calling it the 'Chinese virus'.

After the inauguration of Trump, the Sino-U.S. relations seemed to get a promising start (Trump 2017). However, despite portraying an image of building bilateral understanding and trust with China, the 2017 *National Security Strategy* was a direct declaration of China as a threat to the U.S. in all domains. Based on realism, the 2017 NSS confronted China and the challenges its actions pose globally. Therefore, the document focused on articulating the shift from bilateral cooperation to competition.

Additionally, the threat perception was evident: China was described as an aggressive nation with a goal of global hegemony and the replacement of U.S. values and international norms with its own. The 2017 NSS set the tone for the following documents concerning China and acted as a foundation for the U.S. approach to China and the Indo-Pacific region.

The 2018 *National Defense Strategy*, which came to replace the *Quadrennial Defense Review*, emphasized the effect China has on the current global leadership position of the United States. The document discussed the U.S. preparedness to defend its hegemony, and reciprocally containing China's assertiveness. The NDS reflected the power transition theory by justifying the U.S. leadership while attempting to contain or restrict the spread of China's influence.

The Trump administration reflected a threat assessment of China from a point of provocation and accusation, projecting China in a negative perspective. China was described not only as the enemy of the United States, but as a challenger of the international system. Nevertheless, the document articulated the need for reciprocal understanding in bilateral military relations. This seemed contradictory to the proclaims of countering China's actions and implement containment by applying the hedging strategy by strengthening regional alliances and partnerships.

The 2019 *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* (IPSR) continued the China threat assessment. The report focused on China's action in the Indo-Pacific, and how the U.S. is prepared to defend the U.S.-led international order from Chinese influence. In the document, China was described as an aggressive, threatening, and assertive revisionist power challenging the liberal international system by spreading its malign influence and propaganda. By challenging the U.S. hegemony, China had become the number one national security threat for the United States. According to the theory of securitization and in the light of realism, Trump administration projected China as a threat to national security and throughout the IPSR (and other documents) looked for means to justify the projection.

The administration continued its realist approach to the challenges posed by China. For example, the document accused China of; causing tensions and instability in Indo-Pacific; using extortion and intimidation to bind regional nations into unfair

agreements; and pursuing a reshaped international community to match the ideologies of the Chinese Communist Party. The tension was multiplied by both the U.S. and China reciprocally announcing tariffs, travel restrictions, or other means to hinder the processes of another. According to the IPSR, the strategic competition between the two superpowers demanded the U.S. to implement containment – or disengagement – strategies to protect its leadership position.

The juxtaposition continued in the 2020 strategic report, the *U.S. Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China*. The document had a clear positioning of 'us' and 'them', with the United States continuing to justify its hegemonic position by promoting a threat perception of China. Additionally, by appealing to its allies and partners, the U.S. tried to isolate China regionally. Unfortunately, for the sake of the U.S. as well as regional nations, isolating China was impossible due to interdependence. In one way or another, all nations were interlinked to China, and therefore, could not completely abandon relations with it without harming their economies. Therefore, U.S. could not rely on its allies and partners to join in containment efforts, despite the detailed strategic approach to control China's assertiveness.

The bilateral relations remained competitive to the end of the presidency of Trump. During his final month in January 2021, the administration published the *U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific*. The document followed the outlines of the previous reports by the Trump administration observed for this thesis: further isolating China from the allies and partners of the United States. The strategic framework described China's actions as exploiting, challenging, dominating, damaging, asserting, and compelling. The China threat perception appeared to be the main theme in the document, and the main objective was to counter China's malign rise.

The documents by the Trump administration all followed a similar pattern: basing its assumptions on realism, the administration portrayed China's rise as a threat for the U.S. national security, for regional stability, and for global prosperity. As an international theory, realism argues that all nations constantly seek power and, therefore, were not content with the status quo. (Mearsheimer 2018.) Thus, for China to pursue regional hegemony was only a natural consequence of the global affairs. According to offensive realism, due to the power competition, a conflict between China and the United States is inevitable. Therefore, a natural reaction from the U.S. is to

defend its leadership position by constraining and containing China's rise. (Mearsheimer 2018.) This is well reflected in all the documents of the Trump administration. For example, in the 2019 *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, where the U.S. explicated its defense strategy against China's regional expansion, or the *U.S. Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China*, in which the U.S. built an image of a threatening China and appealed to the U.S. allies and partners to resist China and its unfair practices.

The threat perception, or the formation of the China threat theory (Jin 2011), was the main theme in the documents of the Trump administration. According to Buzan (2010), when the U.S. projected China as a strategic competitor and reflected an image of an aggressive hegemonic challenger, they in fact contributed to China's unpeaceful rise. From a realist perspective, it is therefore only a natural consequence for China to respond more provokingly to the accusations, leading to an endless cycle of reciprocal containment efforts from both sides. In its administrative documents, the Trump administration consistently projected negative perspectives of China and appealed to U.S. allies and partners to adjust their relationships with China accordingly, like the United States has: a relationship based on realism and competition. In documents such as the 2017 *National Security Strategy* or the 2018 *National Defense Strategy*, the U.S. articulated actions necessary to contain and control China's rise, and to ensure it will not threaten to replace the U.S. regional or global leadership position.

The fear of China growing strong enough to challenge the U.S. hegemonic position was evident in the Trump documents for a couple of reasons. First, the fact that the Trump administration issued documents specifically aimed at China, such as the *U.S. Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China*, which articulated the need for a containment strategy. Second, the regionally focused reports, like the *U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* or the *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* reflect the hedging strategy: these documents appealed to the networks of allies and partners to counter Chinese practices. Finally, the documents concerning the national security and preparedness of the U.S. bluntly projected an image of a threatening and aggressive China, which actions were harmful to the security and prosperity of the United States. Hence, in the documents, the Trump administration was consistently articulating for the increase of its preparedness to counter China's assertiveness and prevent its hegemonic pursuits.

The documents especially discussed the concerns toward the spread of Chinese ideology. The values and ideologies promoted by China counter the prevailing ideologies maintained by the Western powers. According to He Kai, China's rise poses challenges on the existing international order, which will gradually result in a conflict between the hegemon and the rising power. Unlike Trump, Obama had a more liberal approach in his engagement strategy, which was based on the hopes that global economic interdependence will prevent China from aggressive behavior and disturbance of the international order. (He 2017, 133-135.) However, China's unwillingness to accept and the eagerness to alter the international norms and values to its favor contribute to a 'Power transition theory'. According to this theory, a rising power will not comply to the constricting international regime maintained by the ruling power, but aims to change this unjust system, which eventually, at least in many cases, has led to a great war. (Friedman 2011.)

The China discussion in the Trump documents reflected the fear of a power transition: the administration identified China's actions as attempts to replace and challenge the U.S. in multiple fields. Therefore, the aspects in which China was discussed projected the attempts to contain or restrict China's actions and appealed to other nations to do the same.

Graham Allison (2019) refers to this situation as the Thucydides' Trap: when the rising power is challenging the hegemonic position of the existing power, tensions are inevitable. According to his research, in the past 500 years, 16 times a rising power has challenged the existing hegemon. Of these 16 times, 12 have resulted in war. (Allison 2019.) Therefore, from the perspective of realism, a conflict between the U.S. and China is considered likely. The Trump documents indicated concerns towards both Taiwan and North Korea, which according to Allison (2019) could potentially function as the initiators of a Sino-U.S. military conflict. Especially the mainland's unification attempts with Taiwan, which have turned more aggressive by the year, matched with the increasing U.S. military regional presence and defense cooperation with Taiwan increases tensions in the region.

As the Trump administration projected China as a threat to the national security of the United States, the administrative documents reflected concern towards China's military

modernization and global expansion. Therefore, the Trump administration discussed China's assertiveness by emphasizing the threats it posed. Seemingly, the documents were justifications on why others should see China as a threat to global security and prosperity. The theory of securitization explains this phenomenon. According to Vuori (2008) and Buzan (2010), through suggesting, requesting, and explaining, an administration justifies national threats, and their actions towards it. For example, the Trump administration used means of provocation, declaration, and accusation to identify China as a threat, without necessarily justifying its claims based on China's actions. In the documents, it was the mere existence of China that alone jeopardized the stability of the international order. Seemingly, the administration of Trump realized this, and therefore, articulated plans of action to contain China's malign behavior.

The securitization theory suggests that the political elite can project anything as a national threat without necessarily having to provide concrete proof: the accusation is based on verbal justification by the political elite. (Vuori 2008.) For example, the Trump administration seemingly relied on accusation of and assumptions on Chinese intentions, focusing on the creation of a threatening image of China's capabilities in the future, rather than basing its proclamations on events that have taken place. Sure, the administration discussed Chinese military modernization, China's actions at the South China Sea, the Belt and Road Initiative, and other actions that China was participating in in a realistic manner. However, the reports tended to create colorful connotations of the motives behind Chinese actions, therefore, portraying China as a national threat. The reports did not necessarily offer much reason for this justification: China was a revisionist challenger, and, according to the reports, that alone was a reason why it should be contained.

8. Conclusion

There is a drastic difference in how the Obama and Trump administrations perceived China and its role in the international community. The general administrative discourse concerning China underwent a change from optimistic and friendly cooperation to a struggle to coexist while entangled in a strategic competition. However, the shift from engaging with China to confronting and containing it had already gradually begun during the Obama administration. During the following Trump administration, the competition for the leadership in different domains became so intense it affected both countries' foreign policies. Tensions caused by the strategic competition resulted in increasing distrust on both sides. Despite the differences, being the world's most consequential bilateral relationship, the maintenance of open communication in the U.S.-China relations has become more important than ever.

The relationship between the U.S. led by the Obama administration and China during the power transition from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping in 2013 reflected notions of peaceful coexistence. The Obama administration encouraged China's rise and emphasized the importance of a constructive cooperation. The liberal notions were prevailing: with integration and engagement, China would become a responsible member of the international system, contributing to the prosperity of all nations. On the outside, the bilateral relations encouraged openness and (potentially superficial) friendship: the strong interdependency was seen to prevent serious conflicts and the Obama administration was considerate and respectful of the Chinese culture, and therefore careful in its actions. The illocutionary intention was to maintain a neutral image of China.

However, closing on the final years of the Obama administration, the administrative documents began to discuss China's strength, actions, and influence with more concern. The administration openly discussed global concerns revolving around China, such as human rights issues. The discussion, however, clearly avoided establishing a connection between the issue *and* China and tried to remain politically neutral. Directly, the Obama administration advocated an optimistic, friendly, and peaceful relationship. The illocutionary intentions reflected in the documents, however, remained indirect, suggesting a transition to a more superficial relationship.

Despite this diplomatic politeness, the China discourse during the Obama administration experienced a gradual transition from promoting liberalism through cooperative diplomacy to publicly questioning and raising concerns of China's intentions. The narrative of the discussion turned more accusive with a realist perception of the global situation.

However, the extent of the concern toward China's intentions during the Obama administration was minimal in comparison to the following Trump administration. Quickly after settling into the White House, the Trump administration's China discourse turned from a promising partnership to rivalry, containment, and confrontation. Seemingly, the Trump administration had abandoned the approach of diplomatic courtesy practiced by the Obama administration. Basing their strategies on realism, the administration perceived China's rise as an aggressive motion to challenge U.S. leadership position and, therefore, applied methods of containment to control China's spreading power. Consistently, the Trump administration appealed to foreign nations on confronting and isolating China from the international system – an opposing strategy from that of the early Obama administration. Additionally, the documents conducted by the Trump administration reflected direct illocutionary intentions: the administration chose specific terminology to clearly portray China from a negative perspective.

For Trump, China was a revisionist challenger, which exploited the international system in its own favor, trying to overshadow the might of the United States. Therefore, the strong American initiative of maintaining superiority ('Make America Great Again') with more confrontational methods, such as the trade war and the technological embargos, which lasted to the end of Trump's presidential term, contributed to the bilateral tension. Additionally, the intense accusations and provocations through media platforms by President Trump damaged the official diplomatic relationship with its bluntness, and by portraying China as America's enemy in this personal policy.

Naturally offended by the public confrontation, from which the Chinese often steer away from, China responded to the public accusations reciprocally, yet in a formal manner. The Chinese government, potentially motivated by the media turbulence caused by President Trump, has become blunter in its global ambitions. However, the Trump administration responded to China's booming assertiveness by strongly defending its leadership positions and creating a threatening image of a power-seeking China.

Portraying China in such a perspective clearly functioned as a securitization attempt of the Trump administration: the more the public was concerned of the intentions of China, the easier it was to justify aggressive China policies. For example, with the accusive speculations on the origins of the Covid-19 or the Chinese technological espionage, the Trump administration reflected an image of a China as a national security threat and remained doing so until the end of Trump's presidential term in January 2021.

The succeeding Biden administration was left with an estranged relationship with China. However, President Biden, who acted as the Vice President to President Obama, could have the potential to return the relationship to similar stance of cooperative coexistence, as it was during Obama's presidency. The competition, however, will prevail even if the Biden administration could increase trust in the bilateral relations. Nevertheless, the U.S. administration should be cautious of China's growing global influence, as while the United States is trying to get its house back in order after the Trump administration, the Chinese government is still patiently biding its time.

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